Exploring adolescent development skills through Internet usage: a study of French 11–15 year olds

Wided Batat

Business Administration Department, Poitiers University, Poitiers, France

Abstract

In order to develop a better understanding of teenage consumers, who represent the most highly sought after market segment for researchers and marketing practitioners in France, it is important to explore their competencies as consumers. This ethnographic research explores the consumption skills of teenage consumers using the new technologies. By examining how teenagers particularly in the age group of 11–15 year olds define a competent consumer and how they perceive themselves as competent consumers, we should be able to understand the better consumption behaviours they exhibit, the purchase decision they make and the limitations they feel they must overcome to become fully competent consumers. This study begins by exploring teenage social activities and how they engage with and use digital products as part of their subculture. Broad concepts of competence are then discussed from a psychosociological perspective and a marketing perspective. Next, teenage perceptions of what it means to be a competent consumer are explored and what are the behaviours associated with a competent consumer. Findings of this study showed that teenagers are not mere followers of marketing strategies. They develop consumption skills in relation to their experiences, their peers and media, which are more often linked to their consumption learning. The study importantly suggests that nowadays teenagers are active participants and producers of their cultural consumption processes.

Introduction

Today's teenagers particularly in the age group of 11–15 year olds are 'early adopters' of new technologies (Rogers, 1995). The changing media landscape has become a battleground for adolescents' share of voice. The 'YouTube' generation uses many forms of media simultaneously and can average over 6 h a day using the various forms (Hempel and Lehman, 2005). Consequently, authors suggest that today's teenagers are more competent than their parents in dealing with media and digital products (McDonell, 1994; Tapscott, 1998), as their consumption learning is based on practising social and entertainment activities via digital equipments and media that enable them to develop consumption skills (Batat, 2006). However, adolescents are either competent or vulnerable consumers, depending on their age, gender, family, social background, consumption experience and other influences on their daily lives (Tufte, 2003).

In order to develop a better understanding of teenage consumers, who represent the most highly sought after market segment for researchers and marketing practitioners in France, it is important to explore their competencies as consumers of media and new technologies. This study explores the consumption skills of teenage consumers using the new technologies, through qualitative data in order to understand the behaviour and likely characteristics of different teenage consumption skills.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, an ethnographic research design was considered to be the most appropriate methodology to address the research objectives. By examining how teenagers in the age group of 11–15 years define a competent consumer, and how they perceive themselves as competent consumers within their own normative framework of using new technologies, we should be able to understand better the consumption behaviours they exhibit, the purchase decisions they make and the restrictions that they, in their perception, must overcome to become fully competent consumers. In order to examine these issues, this study begins by exploring adolescents' social activities and how they engage with and use digital products as part of their 'teen' subculture. We then discuss the broad concepts of competence from a psychosociological perspective and a marketing perspective. Finally, we explore teenage perceptions of what it means to be a competent consumer.

The teenage digital culture

Adolescents constitute one of the fastest growing Internet populations. They spend more time online than adults and surpass all

other age groups in their use of chat, instant messaging and other new forms of electronic communication. Lardellier (2006) argues that the teenage digital culture is fun (on the Net, as part of a network, sending SMS or just chatting), personalized (one rarely lends one's mobile phone, it has become an 'extension' of one's own body), dynamic (unlike a book, which is stable and unchanging, the Net offers the advantage of being so flexible), fast-moving (no waiting) and reticular (it operates within a network).

The Internet is an interpersonal communication that plays the most important role in the daily life of teenagers, who are going through a period of intense socialization. Therefore, the Internet offers a means for teenagers to build themselves a world of relational independence within the family as opposed to a basic social approach. Indeed, consuming is always a complex social phenomenon, especially with regard to adolescents (Benn, 2004). This may not be surprising given that adolescence is characterized by trying out new behaviours (Hall, 1996), learning consumption skills (Roedder-John, 1999), displaying conspicuous consumption (Ahava and Palojoki, 2004) and learning social meaning (Ward, 1974; Roedder-John, 1999). There is a wealth of research on the main agents involved in the socialization and learning process of teenage consumers such as peers, schools, family and mass media (Roedder-John, 1999). However, a question of contemporary interest is the impact of the Internet as a socialization agent and how teenagers use new technologies to develop consumption skills and become competent consumers in the modern society.

Consumption competence

Today's adolescents are becoming consumers at an earlier age than previous generations. The rapidly changing pace in our society, in relation to technology and information processing, makes it possible for them to experience purchasing and consumption at a much faster rate than their parents. Companies are also becoming more aware of adolescents as important customers today, but also as brand loyal customers in the future. Adolescents are influenced by marketing and opinions differ whether adolescents should be viewed as competent or victimized consumers (Ekström, 2005). Some argue that children and adolescents learn to be consumers, while others emphasize a need for protection. However, it is important to make clear the concept of competence in marketing.

Psychologists such as Bandura (1977) and Schunk (1982) define competence as an achievement of personally or socially desired outcomes determined by an individual's ability to use two kinds of resources, those that are unique to the environment and those that are unique to the individual. Therefore, competent individuals have a sense of self-confidence in their abilities to obtain valued outcomes and exercise self-control and self-regulation. Without both a sense of self-confidence and self-control, an individual may be much less likely to attempt to master the challenges of a situation. In marketing, authors such as Filser (1993) talk about consumer expertise which is defined as the ability to perform product-related tasks successfully. These tasks include information search, interactions with salespeople, choice and decision-making and the various task involved in actually making a purchase, e.g. handling money, dealing with credit terms . . . etc. Based on this general discussion of competence and consumer expertise, we examine adolescents' perceptions of their own con-

sumption competencies, and we attempt to fit our data within the broader conceptualization of the notion of consumption competencies as perceived by teenagers.

We propose that a competent consumer is ultimately seeking to achieve successful consumption outcomes and that in order to do so must use both environmental and knowledge-based resources. She or he must also have the self-confidence to ensure that these resources are used effectively and the self-control to refrain from acting on undesired impulses as well as to regulate behaviour in order to ensure a positive outcome. By understanding how teenage consumers perceive themselves as competent consumers, we can better identify the consumption-related problems teenage face. Regarding the consumer policy perspective, there may be the possibility of developing certain interventions, e.g. legislation or educational programmes that from a public policy perspective might help teenagers avoid some of the potentially crippling financial and psychological issues that appear to be affecting this generation of consumers.

The study

The author was interested in exploring adolescents' perceptions of consumption skills as well as discussing with them their actual consumption habits and behaviours in order to build a full picture of informants' perceptions of themselves as consumers.

Research questions

The primary research objectives for this study were: (i) to understand in greater depth the learning process of French teenage consumers; (ii) to explore how this may be influenced by different family and social agents as well as their environment; and (iii) to define teenagers' perception of what it means to be a competent consumers.

Method

In a business or marketing research context, ethnography is used to uncover, interpret and understand the consumer's point-of-view and cultural environments. Whereas focus groups and surveys rely on self-reporting and memory out of context, ethnography provides a holistic view of consumers in the context of their daily lives (Desjeux, 2006). Indeed, adolescents do not interact with products and services in isolation; they are affected by changing family patterns and unseen cultural factors.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, ethnographic research was considered to be the most appropriate methodology to address the research objectives. For 6 months (January–June 2006), the researcher observed and interviewed 20 male and female French schoolchildren, who were aged 11–15 and enrolled at Sainte Marthe Chavagnes elementary school in the city of Angoulême (south west of France). By visiting the school, we have been able to observe the participants in their environment. This has provided a rich context for investigating and understanding the role of new technologies in their skills construction process. Informants for the study were located in their school through two different processes. First, our project was presented to the teachers and the head director of the elementary school in order to involve them in the study and help us to meet the

teenagers of both genders. This approach allowed us to interact with some adolescents and integrate their peer group. A convenience sample of 10 adolescents (six girls and four boys) was obtained in this manner, and our initial observations and interactions suggested that there were new factors emerging, which caused us to seek additional informants through a snowball sampling technique. Using this process, initial informants provided names of friends for the researcher to contact. In total, an additional four girls and six boys were obtained in this manner. Thus, the total sample is comprised of 20 informants aged 11–15 (10 boys and 10 girls). In order to obtain more data about teenage consumers, we organized 48 video ethnographic workshop sessions of 1 h each with our teenage targets. Through these workshop sessions, we proposed different thematic sessions on leisure activities, social and family life, consumption practices and shopping. The head director of Sainte-Marthe Chavagnes School gave us the authorization to use the multimedia room in order to meet the participants and to observe their Internet practices while they were in their peer groups. Much of our specific interest was in understanding teenagers' perceptions of their own competencies as consumers or shoppers and what it means to be a competent consumer. Thus, the workshop sessions were designed with this in mind. To begin with, however, the initial set of questions was simply geared to motivate informants to talk about their leisure activities their consumption and shopping in general by recalling a recent consumption experience.

The adolescents were asked to talk about their leisure activities, their consumption, and also to take pictures of consumption items they valued most. The pictures were developed after the second workshop session. To aid the discussion on choice, use and consumption of new technologies and consumption competencies, the teenagers were asked to make comments on their pictures. Once they were comfortable discussing the topic of consumption, social context and leisure activities, we began to delve more thoroughly into the specifics of consumption competence. This ethnographic method with participant-observation in real-life settings provided us with insights that are not attainable by any other research method. Indeed, the objective of this study is to provide a detailed understanding of how French schoolchildren learn and display consumption competences in real life.

Data analysis

The data collected from the workshop observations was analysed using the Ritchie and Spencer (1994) *framework analysis* method. The *framework analysis* method, in contrast to grounded theory, was explicitly developed in the context of applied policy research. Applied research aims to meet specific information needs and provide outcomes or recommendations, often within a short timescale.

The *framework analysis* depended on the manual coding, charting and mapping of the idea emerged in the fieldwork. *Framework* comprises five stages. Initially the researcher familiarizes himself or herself with an overview of the range and diversity of material which has been gathered and sets the material in context as a whole. Secondly a thematic framework is identified. During this stage, the key issues, concepts and themes are further explored and the framework model is developed by drawing upon *a priori* issues, emergent issues as highlighted by the observations and the

researcher and analytical themes emerging from the recurrences of particular experiences. Thirdly, the data collected from the interviews is systematically indexed. Charting is the fourth aspect of this data analysis method, which involves compiling charts for each subject area with headings and sub-headings drawn from the index. This allowed comparison between the themes and issues as dictated by the respondents. The transcripts were also referenced to allow each source to be detected. Finally, the key characteristics are drawn together to interpret the overall data. This is known as mapping and interpretation. The information was used to find associations between the salient issues and was governed solely by the original research questions to be addressed. The associations are mapped in the confines of the data and alternative explanations were sought and uniformly appraised against the actual data.

Findings

The key findings for this study illustrated (i) the learning process of teenage consumers; (ii) socialization agents involved in the teenage learning process in relation to new technologies and media consumption; (iii) behaviours associated with competent consumer and areas for improvement as competent consumer; and (iv) the consumption knowledge possessed by teenage consumers. These findings will now be explored using themes identified in the data. Excerpts from the informant interviews are used to illuminate the emergent themes.

How do teenagers learn to be consumers?

There is a wealth of research on how children and adolescents learn to be consumers. Traditional learning theories of socialization adopted a perspective that assumes that exposure to the socializing agents, such as media, directly influences attitudes (Livingston, 2002; Buckingham, 2005). Therefore, the learning process and the consumer values are learned from a very early age through interaction with friends, family, schools and adults. In our society, the Internet is viewed by teenagers as a social place, where diverse communities grow like micro-organisms (Rheingold, 1993). Thus, it seems probable that the Internet's ability to provide access to rich and diverse information may enhance a young consumer's learning process. Tapscott (1998) suggests that adolescents today learn through a process of discovery and participation. The issue, which informs our understanding of consumer consumption experiences, is a description of how teenagers learn from the Internet. The findings suggest that adolescents learn in a number of ways through their interaction on the Internet, and several themes emerged.

Learning through 'trial and error'

Learning through trial and error is the foundation for all teenage consumption learning progress (Lachance and Beaudoin, 2003). Therefore, knowledge is gained through experimentation by learning from the past mistakes instead of learning from instruction.

> 'I don't use instruction to learn more when I'm logging on the Internet, because I have the habit of exploring by myself and try things out, I just click on anything that I felt might be relevant in my search process and learn as I experiment new things.' (Thomas, 15)

Multi-tasking

Our results concur with previous research (Lee and Conroy, 2005), which notes that adolescents, nowadays, have the ability to execute more than one task at the same time. They are usually engaged in several activities simultaneously while surfing the Internet as opposed to doing one thing at time.

> You know, when I'm on the Internet, I'm always playing online and doing something else at the same time like chatting or seeking information about products that I want to purchase . . . Internet is the best tool to gain time because you don't loose your money and you meet friends. (Claire, 14)

Observational and mutual learning

Observational learning occurs when an observer's behaviour changes after viewing the behaviour of a peer. Teenage consumers can be affected by the positive or negative consequences called 'vicarious reinforcement or vicarious punishment' (Bandura, 1986) of a peer's behaviour. The observing consumer will react to the way the role model is treated and mimic his or her behaviour. However, a distinction exists between an adolescent observer's 'acquiring' a behaviour and 'performing' a behaviour. Through observation, the teenage observer can acquire the behaviour without performing it. The teenage observer may then later, in situations where there is an incentive to do so, display this behaviour. Therefore, teenage consumers' learning process by observation involves four separate processes:

1 Attention (this process is influenced by characteristics of the model, such as how much one likes or identifies with the model); I'm always observing my parents and my peers to learn more about my own consumption, when I was child, I was so interested in what my mom bought such as brands and food and now I buy the same brand of milk as my mom did. (Simon, 15)
2 Retention (observers must not only recognize the observed behaviour but also remember it at some later time);
3 Production (observers must be capable of producing the act); and
4 Motivation (observers will perform the act only if they have some motivation or reason to do so).

Learning through self experience

Relevant work on experiential learning was already conducted by Kolb (1976, 1981). His famous model consisted of four elements: concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts and testing in new situation. Kolb and Fry (1975) argue that the learning cycle can begin at any one of the four points, and it should really be approached as a continuous spiral. However, it is suggested that the learning process often begins with a person carrying out a particular action and seeing the effect of the action in this situation. Following this, the second step is to understand these affects in the particular instance so that, if the same action were taken in the same circumstances, it would be possible to anticipate what would follow from the action.

Learning through virtual communities

Social networking technologies have many positive uses. They are an ideal environment for teens to share what they are learning or to build something together online. Social networking tools such as blogs give teenage consumers meaningful ways to use and improve their consumption skills. These young consumers considered that regular interaction with friends on the Internet and others in their virtual community influenced their own attitudes and behaviours. Indeed, purchase choices are based on recommendations and advices obtained via the Internet. Some adolescents noted that they based their purchase decisions solely on advices from virtual friends.

Learning through multiple sources

Adolescents gathered information from multiple sources, indicating flexibility and the resolve to source different viewpoints for information regarding a particular issue.

> Today, we have the possibility to multiply our sources of information before purchasing products. Indeed, we can check on the Internet, ask our peers, check on different websites and blogs. (Charlotte, 15)

Behaviour associated with competent consumers

Most of adolescents judged their parents as being competent consumers because of their experience. However, there were some areas, where their fathers seem to be more competent than their mothers, such as the new technology area and the digital products. 'My dad is a good source and reference for me when purchasing computer and video games. In contrast, my mom doesn't care about computers and digital products. She prefers to shop clothes with my sister' (Mathieu, 13). By the way, adolescents – especially girls – argued that their mothers are competent shoppers and that this is a good example of consumption to follow. Some of the teenagers chose themselves or a friend as representative of a competent consumer. After the adolescents identified and described competent consumers, they were asked to evaluate their own competence as consumers in this digital society. Their descriptions of others and themselves were evaluated to identify key aspects that the teenage consumers perceived to be associated with consumption and shopping competence.

Good managing of their Pocket Money

One of the key hallmarks informants associated with a competent consumer was engaging in behaviours that lead to good monetary decisions. Adolescents identified a set of behaviours related to the good management of pocket money. Indeed, they are more likely to have financial worries than younger children. 'I have to be careful with my pocket money, if I want to spend it when I'm with my friends . . . It's not like my young brother, who does not care about managing money, because he is not interested in sharing time with his friends and spending his money in cinema and fast-food. . . . In addition, it's my mom who buys video games for him . . . it's so cool . . . !' (Thomas, 15). This is, of course, due to the intense focus on the self that comes to full flower during adolescence. Teenage consumers have things they want to buy, places they want to travel, and experiences they want to savour, and they are understandably focused on making sure their parents can afford them. However, adolescents today are aware about the

limitations imposed by money and they need to develop more restraint with how they spend their pocket money. 'I need to have more control over that I buy, what I spend my pocket money on. I don't do that most of the time' (Théo, 15). Adolescents also specifically mentioned managing money, in the sense of saving money as an indication of a competent consumer. 'Each time I receive money from my parents or my grandparents, I usually put a small amount of cash aside as saving[s]' (Mathieu, 13). Parents are also involved in this learning process by giving less pocket money to their children, who may learn through their experience about the importance of setting limits on spending and making reasoned choices. 'My mom gives me only 10 euros per month, she says that it's the best way to be careful with my money and learn how to manage it. . . . I agree with her, because if she gives me 40 euros, I'll spend all my pocket money in anything, no matter whether I'm interested in the goods or not . . . I think that with. this education I could be a competent consumer, who is more likely to avoid financial worries than the others!' (Audrey, 14). By the way, by saving money for their children, parents are not only making their children's prospects of success more likely, they are also bestowing upon their children one of the best gifts they can give (Ross, 2005). And the teenagers agree with it. 'My parents save money for me. It's a good thing for the future. I think that today, parents have to save money for their children, it's so hard to find a job and life is so expensive in France' (Thibaut, 14). And they are involved in this earning process, because the saved money could help adolescents to consider investments for longer-term goals such as a college education or a driver's license. 'Each time I receive any money, I usually deposit it into a current or savings account. It is my mom, who teaches me how to save the rest of my pocket money . . . and I agree with her' (Claire, 14). Therefore, money management skills are developed from the ideas, attitudes, and spending habits learned at home, school, on the Internet and in the marketplace. Teenage consumers, who learn good pocket money management skills, are more likely to become adults, who make sound financial decisions, avoid excessive debt, and manage income and expenses to reach their financial goals.

> I have learned how to manage my pocket money since my childhood. And now, I feel so confident in my dealing with money . . . it will be so useful for the future decision-making, i.e. to buy a care. (Claire, 14)

Making good decisions

Teenage consumers identified a set of behaviours related to making good decisions, one of which was getting the best deal or value with respect to a specific purchase. For some adolescents, this meant spending the least amount of money for a purchase. But for others, it was a consideration of both price and quality, as evidenced in the following interview excerpts. In addition, some of those adolescents consider that it's so relevant to follow the optimized way in seeking information about products or services before the purchase. Therefore, teenage consumers are always looking for multiples sources of information before buying something. The study showed that purchase information seeking is not just a private and isolated process, but also can be a public and shared process via web sites, blogs and peers' recommendations.

> Comparison shopping for quality, value, price, etc. is something I do for practically every purchase, large or small. I can

get more information on the net and some specific purchase websites. (Charlotte, 15)

Using Internet and blogs to improve their consumption skills

Teenage consumers integrate the Internet into their daily lives unconsciously and to a much higher intensity than many adults. Those adolescents, who were born with a mouse in their hand and a screen computer as a window to the world, view the Internet as essential in the sense of being always online and real time available. By internalizing this technology as part of their lifestyle, its use becomes an instinct in their behaviour. And with this instinct comes a new set of beliefs and expectations about nowadays contemporary teenage consumption. Thus, it seems probable that the Internet's ability to provide access to rich and diverse information, and its ability to reach across communities may enhance a young consumer's learning process.

The Internet has created a new learning culture, which is social in nature and allows adolescents to share via blogs, discuss, influence and learn interactively rather than merely to observe and imitate behaviour and attitudes. Moreover, there is a feeling of empowerment (Buckingham, 2005), because this technology allows teenagers more freedom of choice, often without constraints of parental supervision, and, subsequently, to select information and make their own decisions. In addition, the Internet encourages teenage consumers to construct their own knowledge by integrating different bits of information from several sites and blending these with their previous knowledge – suggesting that individuals construct their own meaning and make sense of the information in their own unique way. Such learning is intrinsically motivated by a desire to experience 'flow' a sense of relaxation and control, a time passing activity, which is enjoyed and fun (Hoffman and Novak, 1996). This form of participatory learning through construction and discovery, adds another dimension to how adolescents learn consumer skills in today's interactive environment.

Dealing with salespeople

The fourth area of improvement noted by the teenagers is the interaction with salespeople. Teenagers were far more comfortable dealing with salespeople, when they are with their peers than when they are alone. However, before going to the shopping centre, they collect information on products they want to purchase on the Internet. In this way, they automatically feel more confident, more convinced of their choice and able to resist salespersons' pressure.

> 'There is no doubt I have come across a salesperson, who has tried to use pressure tactics. I did not fall for it. My shopping goal was to purchase items that will best suit my needs, not help the salesperson meet their sales quota' (Simon, 15).
> 'Like, I just won't look at salespeople, and if they ask me if I need help, even if I do I'll say no' (Audrey, 14).

Seeking appropriate assistance and advice

The teenage consumers argue that there are different sources of assistance and advice involved in their consumption learning. Therefore, they associated consumption competencies with more

than just using one's own judgement about a product or a service. 'I seek out my brother or my best friend's opinion, because they are more aware of digital products than I am. They have a good game sense'. Teenage consumers indicated that the competence is exhibited, when they use others as an additional source of information in order to assist the research specially the decision making process.

> I always take into account information on video games from different sources. It's so useful for the decision-making process. There are some friends, who are experts in the video games field . . . They are really a good source for advices. I feel so confident, when I ask them for information about the game that I want to buy. (Thomas, 15)

Comparison shopping

Adolescents both girls and boys feel they are competent by underlining their shopping skills in the video games field for boys and clothing for girls. The reason that justifies this consumption competence is the comparison shopping, which can provide teenage consumers the required skills to be better comparison shoppers\consumers and get more value for their money when making purchases. Indeed, there are some criteria, such as price, quality, offers on the Internet, shopping centre, etc., to take into account before starting shopping. This process is called comparison shopping and it is an excellent tool to use, when adolescents set out to spend their money on a good or service.

This competence allows teenage consumers to buy for bargains by comparing the prices of similar items or brands or comparing the prices at different stores or on the Internet. To get the best value, adolescents compared not only the price, but also the quality on the Internet web sites and the stores.

> I'm always comparing video games before buying. It's a necessary step, because I can't buy a game before seeking offers on the Internet websites and also at different stores . . . I know it takes me a lot of time, but it is so useful, i.e. to compare prices. If I am comparing a single item at two different stores, it's simple. The item with the lower price is likely to be the better deal. However, it could be more difficult, if the price is different depending on the number of items I purchase.

Controlling impulsive purchasing

The lack of impulsive behaviour was mentioned as an indicator of consumption competence. This impulsive purchasing behaviour is related to teenage lack of self-esteem. 'I shop, therefore I am' has become the stereotype of modern consumerism. In addition, consumer goods play an unceasingly stronger psychological role in teenagers' live because they can and do function as material symbols of who persons are and who they would like to be. However, while adolescents take this symbolic dimension into account, they always try to control their consumption by shopping for products they need and not for brands to avoid any impulsive behaviour. Although self-discipline is the best way to control spending, too many adolescents are caught in a cycle of impulsive spending, especially for entertainment and digital products, that seems to have a life of its own beyond the limits of self-discipline, as the teenage consumer is always seeking new technologies and new video games in order to be the first one

(the pioneer) and the only one, who purchases the game before his peers.

Innovation by consumption and usage

Teenagers are always seeking new ways to use the new technologies. It seems to be one of the most important characteristics of the competent consumer, because it's a value for them, as they are very proud to show their creative usages to their peers. Consequently, teenage users are not only consumers but also producers, as they are free to create an individual product by combining several elements. Digital products such as mobile phones are actually used as a part of the process of creating an environment in both public and private spaces. Indeed, there are constant references to this environment being used to create moods, emotion and fun by using the text messaging. 'In class, we have a small game; we beep the one[s] that are [not] paying attention to the teacher, to annoy them' (Thomas, 14). Coupled with WAP, it makes the mobile phone a playful and powerful communication tool, as both voice and text messaging allow for information to be obtained while being mobile or stationary. Dominique Cardon (2005) argues that the *Citizen-user* of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has different characteristics from those of mass media consumers: the reader, the listener, the TV viewer, etc. The possibility of communicating, producing, and exchanging by using ICTs invites us to define people, who use them, especially the digital generation of today's teenagers, by underlining the active, symmetric, and participative aspects of their techno-commitment. Indeed, for teenagers, the use of ICTs is deeply rooted in social life; it would be over-simplistic to consider that their impact is just a question of cost, functionalities or simplicity of interfaces. This is why the notion of appropriation by usage in order to develop new and creative usages to impress peers plays such an important role in the analysis of what teen consumers mean by consumption competencies.

Ability to transgress

One of the relevant areas that teenage consumers have to integrate in their consumption is their ability to transgress and break the rules when using media and shopping on the Internet. This ability to overcome boundaries is considered as a consumption competence by teenagers. In contrast, adults consider this performance as a transgression that should not be a part of adolescent's behaviour. Indeed, teenagers do not define the aspect of 'transgression as equal to consumption competence' in the same way as adults' define it, which is as a forbidden behaviour. At a time, when social norms around digital content do not always appear to conform to the letter of the law, many teenagers are aware of the restrictions on copyrighted material, but believe it's still permissible to share some content for free. 'I download video and games, and I don't care about copyright. It's so easy to use the peer-to-peer file-sharing networks to get my music. . . . It's so unrealistic to expect people not to do it' (Charlotte, 15). Therefore, at the age of 11–15, many adolescents want to experience even more independence and they are more likely to be interested in online activities such as pornography, sharing files and most relevant activities, which include downloading music, movies and games without paying.

In my opinion, the competent consumers have to use the Internet and websites such as eMule to download games, music and movies instead of buying expensive video games . . . It's so stupid to pay for goods that we can get on the Internet without paying . . . That's a relevant competence for today's adolescents, because we are born in a digital society . . . We are luckier than our parents. (Mathieu, 14)

Internet risks consciousness

With the widespread availability of computers and mobile phones, adolescents' playground is the world, and a few keystrokes can quickly bring them in contact with a variety of unsavoury and unwelcome guests. That's why, teenagers are conscious of the Internet risks, and they try to be very careful in their dealing with ICTs, especially with Internet and chat rooms. Therefore, Internet risk awareness is considered as one of the relevant characteristics of the competent consumer, who uses media to shop and communicate online. Teenagers argue that people should understand basic privacy rules and should be aware that they can never give out information about themselves, especially the credit card number of their parents, or to get together with anyone they meet online. In addition, teenagers emphasized that they should never exchange photographs with people they do not know.

Consumer's moral consciousness

The competent consumer has to be ethically and politically engaged with consumption by engaging in fair trade. Indeed, teenage consumers are looking for products, which best fit with their own values. In addition, they are interested in the social and environmental dimension of the companies behind the brands they buy. 'For me, the competent consumer has to be an ethical consumer, who buys in respect to his values. . . . For example, people, who are adept of McDonald's fast food, aren't competent, because in France we are against the war in Iraq, where the US is engaged and McDonald's is American . . . That's why I don't eat their hamburger . . . In addition, it's not a safe food . . . There is also another example of products and brands that I don't buy such as Nike, because their products were made by poor children in Asia' (Mathieu, 13). For teenagers, ethical purchasing is one of the most important characteristics of the competent consumer in today's societies. Ethics can be a subjective term, but in its truest sense for teenagers it means without exploitation of humans, animals and the environment in addition of the political engagement of the country, where the product and the brand were made. Being a responsible consumer also means having the ability to resist to marketers' influences.

Ecological consciousness

One of the relevant areas that teenage consumers have to improve is their ability to consume and participate in protecting the environment and making it sustainable. Awareness about the environment, in which they live, is considered by teenagers as a consumption competence. Indeed, teenagers are interested in what is happening today and they are very sensitive about the environmental changes. Therefore, they try to behave in a way that protects their environment by reducing waste, using electricity, water and gas only when it's necessary, using less paper and encouraging their families and their peers to do so as well. 'I'm always paying attention to current issues related to environmental protection in the media. You may get some more hints on how to live in an environmental friendly way . . . I also use Internet resources to search for more information . . . It's so important to protect our environment by changing our consumption behaviour, this is one of the main important areas to improve if you want to be a competent and a good consumer who caries about the future of his children' (Thomas, 15). The teenage consumers argued that the competent consumers have to construct and develop their anti-marketing and anti-advertising spirit in addition of the other consumption skills.

Discussion

The interpretive findings revealed that both male and female adolescents have a pretty clear image in their minds of what it means to be a competent consumer. Their definition of the consumption competencies is quite different from adult consumers' definition. Specific results indicate that almost all adolescents revealed competencies in some aspects of consumption, shopping and using new technologies. However, there was a paradox between adult's perception of consumption competence and teenage consumers' own definition. Indeed, today's adolescents use media and new technologies in order to improve their consumption skills. They are always seeking new ways to consume and to overcome their limits as well as restricting laws. No matter if it's allowed or not, these adolescents want to be competent consumers by acquiring goods – in particular video games, music and movies on the Internet without paying anything for them. In this context, teenagers consider themselves as being more competent consumers than their parents and adults in general in dealing with new technologies.

Clearly, our teenage consumers were aware of store images and retail brands found at the mall and had clear likes and dislikes. Otherwise, there are some areas, where teenagers perceive themselves as vulnerable and incompetent consumers because of their lack of consumption experience. Therefore, their first source of information remains the family and peers (real and virtual). Teenagers are vulnerable consumers because they are also struggling to form an identity and they are not confident as adults in terms of their self-image. In addition, the online features can be perceived as benefits that the Internet offers to consumers. At the same time, these characteristics may breed dependency and may therefore lead to negative consequences for online users. Thus, usage of technology such as the Internet may require teenage consumers to face and cope with the contradiction of the Internet causing them harm and benefiting them at the same time – the so called 'paradox of technology' (Mick and Fournier, 1998). In their work, they identified eight paradoxes consumers face when encountering and using technological products. Among these eight characteristics, an interesting focus on the competence-incompetence paradox demonstrates that technology can facilitate feelings of efficacy. However, it can also induce feelings of ineptitude and ignorance (Winner, 1994).

Conclusion

The findings of this study illustrate a specific group of teenagers' consumption of digital products within their leisure activities. Therefore, teenagers aged 11–15 are not only consumers but producers as well. Moreover, the enquiry showed that teenagers are not mere followers of marketing strategies and that they develop consumption skills in relationship to their experience, their peers and the media, which are more often associated with their consumption learning.

Our study suggests that nowadays, teenagers are active participants and producers of their cultural consumption processes and that these states of behaviour can also be seen in the consumption of electronic entertainment technologies. In answering the question of competencies and savvy teenagers, our ethnographic investigation gives evidence about the process of skills' development within the leisure activities of French schoolchildren aged 11–15. Hence, teenagers' perception of the competence that they must have to be able to consume lies first and foremost on skills associated with preventive behaviours, good managing of their pocket money and using Internet and blogs to have a better consumption process. The insights gained from this study suggest that professionals and educators should educate adolescents with regard to the consumption and use of new technologies. Educators can hereby play a vital role, especially those who teach in the areas of family and consumer sciences. Therefore, legislators will need to act accordingly to protect the vulnerable youth segment.

References

Ahava, A.M. & Palojoki, P. (2004) Adolescent consumers: reaching them, border crossings and pedagogical challenges. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **28**, 371–379.

Bandura, A. (1977) Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behaviour change. *Psychological Review*, **84**, 191–215.

Bandura, A. (1986) *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive*. Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.

Batat, W. (2006) L'usage du téléphone mobile par les adolescents. In *Innovation Technologiques* (ed. by C. Ammi), pp. 300–313. Editions Hermès Lavoisier, Paris.

Benn, J. (2004) Consumer education between 'consumership' and 'citizenship': experiences from studies of young people. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **28**, 108–116.

Buckingham, D. (2005) *Constructing the media competent child: media literacy and regulatory policy in the UK*. [WWW document]. URL http://www.medienpaed.com/05-1/buckingham05-1.pdf (accessed on 16 April 2007).

Cardon, D. (2005) De l'innovation ascendante. [WWW document]. URL http://www.inetrnetactu.net (accessed on 3 March 2007).

Desjeux, D. (2006) L'expérience Vécue: un autre regard sur l'analyse du comportement du consommateur. *5ème Journées Normandes de la Consommation*, **6**, 2–22. 23 et 24 Mars. Cean.

Ekström, K.M. (2005) Rethinking family consumption-tracking new research perspectives. *Advances in Consumer Research*, **32**, 493–497.

Filser, M. (1993) *Le Comportement du Consommateur*, Précis Dalloz, Paris.

Hall, S. (1996) Introduction: who needs identity? In *Questions of Cultural Identity* (ed. by S. Hall), pp. 15–30. Sage, London.

Hempel, J. & Lehman, P.P. (2005) The MySpace generation. *Business Week*, **3963**, 86–96.

Hoffman, D.L. & Novak, T.P. (1996) Marketing in hypermedia computer-mediated environments: conceptual foundations. *Journal of Marketing*, **60**, 50–68.

Kolb, D.A. (1976) *The Learning Style Inventory: Technical Manual*. McBer, Boston, MA.

Kolb, D.A. (1981) Learning styles and disciplinary differences. In *The Modern American College* (ed. by A.W. Chickering), pp. 232–255. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA.

Kolb, D.A. & Fry, R. (1975) Toward an applied theory of experiential learning. In *Theories of Group Process* (ed. by C. Cooper), pp. 33–57. John Wiley, London.

Lachance, M.J. & Beaudoin, P. (2003) Adolescents' brand sensitivity in apparel: influence of three socialisation agents. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, **27**, 47–57.

Lardellier, P. (2006) *Le Pouce et la Souris: Enquête Sur la Culture Numérique des Ados*. Fayard, Paris.

Lee, K.C. & Conroy, D.M. (2005) Socialisation through consumption: teenagers and the Internet. *Australasian Marketing Journal*, **13**, 8–19.

Livingston, S. (2002) *Young People and New Media*. Sage Publications, London.

McDonell, K. (1994) *Kid Culture: Children as Adults and Popular Culture*. Second Story Press, Toronto.

Mick, D.G. & Fournier, S. (1998) Paradoxes of technology: consumer cognizance, emotions and coping strategies. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **25**, 123–143.

Rheingold, H. (1993) *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Addison-Wesley, Reading, MA.

Ritchie, J. & Spencer, L. (1994) Qualitative data analysis for applied policy research. In: *Analysing Qualitative Data* (ed. by A. Bryman & R.G. Burgess), pp. 173–194. Routledge, London.

Roedder-John, D. (1999) Consumer socialization of children: a retrospective look at twenty-five years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **26**, 183–213.

Rogers, E.M. (1995) *Diffusion of Innovations*. Free Press, New York.

Ross, C. (2005) *Saving for your children*. [WWW document]. URL http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3112942.stm (accessed on 10 May 2007).

Schunk, D.H. (1982) Effects of effort attributional feedback on children's perceived self-efficacy and achievement. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, **74**, 548–556.

Tapscott, D. (1998) *Growing up Digital: The Rise of the Net Generation*. McGraw-Hill, New York.

Tufte, B. (2003) Children, media and consumption. *Advertising and Marketing to Children*, **5**, 69–75.

Ward, S. (1974) Consumer socialization. *Journal of Consumer Research*, **1**, 1–17.

Winner, L. (1994) Three paradoxes of the information age. In *Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology* (ed. by B. Gretchen & D. Timothy), pp. 191–197. Bay, Seattle, WA.