Digimums' online grocery shopping: the end of children's influence?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper investigates children's influence on their mothers' online grocery shopping. As virtual shopping does not provide instant gratification, the authors explore how children between the ages of 7 and 11 are involved in the online purchasing process (before, during and after the purchase) with their digital mothers (*digimums).*

Design/methodology/approach – We collected qualitative data from 27 separate semi-structured interviews of mothers and their children.

Findings – Children's influence during the online buying process can be active, passive and/or proactive. The online buying process contributes to children's online socialisation: They learn the importance of the shopping list, prices, discounts, brands etc. This makes them more reasonable, and they think about which influence strategy to use. They become smart shoppers. Younger children often use affective influence strategies, while older ones use rational arguments.

Research limitations/implications – The contribution of this study lies in its insights into children's roles in and influence over their mother's online shopping process. The findings extend knowledge about children's influence by adding the notion of proactive influence where children use an intended approach to anticipate their mother's needs for grocery shopping and take initiatives. They are more aware of their responsibility, which leads them to use less impulsive requests and to become a smart shopper using more rational arguments to explain their requests. Online socialisation at home might take the physical form of using digital devices (i.e., scanning) and entering the credit card code, which contributes to the children's learning. The paper's limits lie in its specific context (France).

Practical implications – This paper suggests that online stores should make their websites more attractive to children in order for online shopping to be more pleasurable. They could design their website to encourage cooperation between children and their mothers and therefore indirectly contribute to children's online socialisation (e.g. quizzes about consumer skills).

Societal implication – Children's well-being is crucial: E-retailers could prevent children from staying on their e-commerce site for too long, for instance, by giving an automatic warning after 30 minutes.

Originality/value – Online buying virtualises children's relationship to objects, and the screen acts as a kind of filter. This makes their influence strategy less emotional and corporeal and more rational (*smart shopper*).

Keywords: Children's influence, Digimums, Online buying, Proactive influence strategy, Smart shopper, Online socialisation

Paper type – Research paper

Introduction

Children play a major role in influencing family purchasing (Mikkelsen, 2006; Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007 and Drenten, 2008): Research shows that children influence 80% of family food purchasing (Hunter, 2002). They make up three markets: a primary market (as the consumer), an influencing market and a future market (McNeal, 1992). According to Drenten (2008, p. 832), "*approximately two-thirds of parents include children in their food shopping visits, and nine out of ten parents make purchase decisions specifically because a child likes the item*". However, while these results apply to offline stores, few studies have investigated children's influence on online shopping.

The digitisation of the economy has generated many changes for both retailers and consumers. The development of e-commerce has made it easy to buy online and has changed families' attitudes towards physical stores (Belch *et al.*, 2005). In France, e-commerce accounted for €72 billion in sales in 2016, an increase of 14.6% in one year, according to a study carried out in 2016 by the FEVAD (a French trade association grouping together companies that are engaged in selling online). Internet shoppers spend an average of €2,000 online annually, and this sum has almost doubled over the past six years. While the average value of a shopping basket has fallen (from €75 to €70), purchasing frequency has increased by 21% to an average of 28 purchases per year. In France, more that 25% of households, or 5.7 million people, used a drive-through service in 2016 (Nielsen TradeDimensions). Do these changes in the commercial landscape affect the way parents and children shop (e.g. influence strategies)?

While the supermarket was an unavoidable location for food shopping before the advent of the internet, there are now many questions regarding how the internet has changed the buying-decision process (Belch *et al.* 2005). In France, shopping is still overwhelmingly a task for mothers (Barth and Anteblian, 2011), but they are increasingly buying online rather than in physical stores. French families (particularly mothers) with

children represent 80% of purchases (in value) in "click & drive" grocery stores (where consumers collect their purchases by car after ordering online) but only 35% of spending in physical stores. Such consumers are known as *digimums, digital mums* or *connected mums.*

In the commercial space, research has highlighted children's active role and the influence they have on their parents (Ayadi and Cao, 2016). Children visit stores from an early age. The youngest (5–9 years) prefer stores and supermarkets, whereas the oldest (10–12 years) like speciality stores (e.g. toys, sports goods) (John, 1999). Inside the store, they can influence decisions because they are present and especially because they are aware of their ability to "*trick parents into buying something*" (Muratore, 2002, p. 7). While digitisation has had an impact on behaviour, research into children's influence on family purchases has not focused on this change. While the time spent in the store has decreased (Vanheems and Collin-Lachaud, 2011), few studies have investigated whether children play a role in influencing their parents' online buying.

Moreover, if this influence exists, little is known about the shape it takes. In other words, if children still influence their mum when they are shopping online, when and how does it occur? This study investigates children's influence in digimums' online buying process – before, during and after the decision process. We aim to understand how children influence online grocery shopping by digimums in families with children aged between 7 and 11. Firstly, our study expands the literature on children's influence on parents' purchasing by providing insights into how this occurs in online shopping. Secondly, it will help e-retailers to design their website and product assortment by taking into account how children influence their mothers. Thirdly, we offer societal implications with regard to designing e-commerce sites to support children's (online) socialisation.

The paper focuses on grocery shopping, as food is the sector where children exert the most influence (McNeal, 1992; Hunter, 2002; Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007; Drenten, 2008). In France, click and drive is the main channel for purchasing food online, which is why we choose it for this study.

Literature review

Digimums: who are they?

Aged between 25 and 49, digimums are diligent internet and e-commerce users (particularly of click & drive stores) who have at least one dependent child and frequently surf the Web. They make up 17% of the French population over the age of 15. In 2011, Médiamétrie (a French company specialized in the measurement of audience and the study of audiovisual media and digital uses) calculated that there were nearly 9 million digimums in France. They use technology in their daily lives to communicate, obtain information, consume online and voice their opinion about the products and services that concern them as mothers. They are described as being "hyper-connected". They seek more independence and increased performance in their personal and professional lives. They go out to work, are under constant pressure and want to save time (LSA, 2012). The label of digimums is replacing the label of "housewife under 50" (in 2012, 64% of this segment comprised digital mums). This new target is complex and diverse.

Web Media Group and KR Media have set up a quarterly barometer to study the cohort's attitudes and behaviours and have established four digital mum profiles: the *practical digital mum*, the *shopping digital mum*, the *social digital mum* and the *social and shopping digital mum.* The "practical digital mum" (18% of digimums) is a mother who often uses the Web, especially to obtain information. The "shopping digital mum" (28% of digimums) is a mother who carries out administrative tasks online and does everyday shopping (food, as well as everyday products and services). The "social digital mum" (30% of digimums) is a mother who uses social networks extensively to obtain information but does less shopping on the Web than the "shopping digital mum". Finally, the "social and shopping digital mum" (24% of digimums) is a mother who is often online, uses social networks (to give and obtain information) and frequently makes purchases online, not just everyday shopping.

Each of these profiles increasingly shops online and spends less time in physical stores, which modifies their consumption habits. The new trend of online family grocery shopping raises the question of children's influence on the family buying process.

Children's influence on their mother's shopping in commercial spaces

Because of the lack of study of a child's influence on his/her mother's online shopping, the aim of this section is to present a state of the knowledge about the child's influence in physical stores.

Several studies have examined children's influence in stores (Atkin, 1978; Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2008). Rossiter (1978) conceptualised two kinds of children's influence on the family's decision making: passive and active. According to Rossiter, passive influence concerns decisions in which the child's (real or imagined) needs are taken into account, without the child attempting to exercise any influence. Active influence involves situations in which the child directly influences the purchasing decision. In the literature, passive influence is often described as indirect, while active influence is described as direct (Belch *et al.* 1985; John, 1999; Thomson and Laing, 2003; Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007).

It goes without saying that the supermarket can be a stressful place for parents with children. Because of their different objectives, parents tend to be fast and efficient, while children attempt to influence and play a role in the decision making (Nicholls and Cullen, 2004).

Although children attempt to influence the purchase of products that are not just for them, they do so more often for products that concern them directly, such as cereals, juices, snacks, school products, clothing, toys, mobile phones and children's magazines (Belch *et al.*, 1985; Chavda *et al.*, 2005; Martensen and Gronholdt, 2008).

With regard to food, children seem to have a lot of influence (*e.g.* Belch *et al.*, 1985; John, 1999). For example, they have the most influence on the choice of prepared meals, easy-to-prepare food and unhealthy foods (Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007). Moreover, families with influential children make less healthy food choices (De Bourdenaudhuij and Van Ost, 1998). Numerous authors (*e.g.* Isler *et al.*, 1987; Johnson, 1995; John, 1999)

have stressed that stores are places for family interaction and that children actively participate in and even initiate discussions and conflict. Children themselves sell products to their parents by using influence strategies (Palan and Wilkes, 1997; Wilson and Wood, 2004).

According to Nørgaard *et al.* (2007), children also take part in "support activities" (*i.e.* activities that facilitate shopping). For example, they read from and hold the shopping list, push the trolley, locate the products, find the shortest queue, put the groceries on the belt at the checkout and fill and carry the shopping bags.

Children influence the family's in-store decision-making process in different ways during its various stages (Belch *et al.*, 1985; Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007), but this influence seems more important during initiation and choice. Children who initiate the need influence other stages more than other children (Belch *et al.*, 1985). According to Haselhoff *et al.* (2014, p. 31), "*children constantly influence their parents, actively and passively. Children can act as initiators, idea generators, influencers or information collectors during shopping, whereas parents can be considered as the decision-makers*". By the age of 9, more than half of children's influence attempts result in a purchase in retail stores (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2008). In the store, children make 15 purchase requests on average. The success rate for these requests, depending on the type of product, ranges between 40% and 80% (McNeal, 1992). In the context of child/parent interactions in a food retail environment, Buijzen and Valkenburg (2008) proved that attempts by children to influence purchases increase until the beginning of primary school (6 years old) and decline around the age of eight. In parallel, as children get older, they are more likely to be involved in the purchase decision process, especially through discussions initiated by the parent, which often leads to a product purchase. In particular, parents initiate purchase communication with their child less often than the child does, but this results more often in a purchase than children's purchase influence attempts do. Moreover, older children are able to view things from the parent's point of view, and thus, they use clever arguments that are likely to conform to the parent's expectations. They are better able to persuade and negotiate (John, 1999; Martensen and Gronholdt, 2008). An increase in the frequency of parent-child shopping does not result in greater resistance on the part of the parent (Ebster *et al.*, 2009). Gender also seems to

play a role. Boys have less influence on parents' purchase decisions than girls do (Atkin, 1978; Lee, 1994). High-income parents are more inclined to let their child influence the purchase decision than low-income parents are (Buijzen and Valkenburg, 2008; Ebster *et al.*, 2009). Ebster *et al.* (2009) had shown that several factors influence the number of requests that children make for in-store purchases: the child's freedom of movement, product visibility, and the child's developmental stage. Moreover, the number of purchases following a child's request depends on the suitability of the good, the parent's household income, the price of the good and the verbal form of the child's request.

The strategies implemented depend on several factors, including age and product category. On this last point, the likelihood of parent-child conflict increases from clothes to toys to food (Nicholls and Cullen, 2004). Negative strategies are more likely to result in the parent refusing the child's request, whereas positive strategies are more likely to result in acceptance (Nadeau and Bradley, 2012). Parents will be more sensitive to a child's purchase requests when they are formulated as appeals ("Can I…?") rather than observations ("Look, there is…") or demands ("I have been good, so I should…") (Ebster *et al.*, 2009).

Marshall (2014) found relatively little conflict and more cooperation between children and their parents. The child's influence on the purchase thus results more from what Coffey *et al.* (2006) called "four-eyed, four-legged" influence, that is, a child-parent partnership rather than pester power. Finally, parents are more likely to accept their children's requests if they consider the child to have more expertise in the area (Muratore, 2002).

Children/teens, internet and online prescription

Although there have been studies on overall influence and influence at the point of sale, researchers have paid little attention to children's influence on online shopping. Studies either concern teenagers and not children or do not specifically cover the influence of children on their parents' purchasing but rather Web use, online shopping (Thaichon, 2017), online socialisation and the impact of the internet on teenagers' influence on family purchases (Kaur and Merdury, 2010, Durand-Megret *et al.*, 2012).

Tuukkanen and Wilska (2015) described children as "digital natives". Studies indicate that children use the internet not only to interact socially and learn but also to play, search for information and be entertained. In France, a study carried out by IPSOS (a French institute that specializes in conducting surveys) in 2015 revealed that children between 7 and 12 years old are spending more and more time on the internet: on average, five and a half hours per week. The internet is a tool they use to watch videos, play online games, download apps and search for information.

Tuukkanen and Wilska (2015) built a typology of the perceived effects of online environments as opportunities and risks in children's everyday lives. The different categories are: learning and socialisation, sense of community and empowerment, antisocial behaviour and threat to security.

With regard to children's own online buying, Thaichon (2017) reported that six out of ten children in the USA shop online. In the UK, children spend £64 million a year online without their parents' authorisation. In addition, children's online shopping level is influenced by age, parental guidance and peer influence (comments and feedback from their friends on social networking sites) (Thaichon, 2017).

Hill *et al.* (2013) identified segments of adolescent internet users and shoppers. The first is internet conquerors (greatest amount of time spent online, less online shopping, their parents allow them to make purchases with their permission, but they do not have a significant influence over family purchasing). The second is virtual pragmatists (less online shopping enjoyment, the lowest level of internet use, least likely to make purchases online with their parents' permission or to influence online decisions for the family or for themselves), and the last is recreational shoppers (the highest level of online shopping enjoyment, purchase influence and ability to shop online with their parents' permission).

As highlighted by Vanheems and Collin-Lachaud (2011), digital technologies might be a new place for interaction between family members and could, therefore, be considered a new source of social connection.

With regard to socialisation, the internet is considered a socialisation agent for children; it provides them with more power than before because they are more skilled at using online tools (Hill and Beatty, 2011) than their parents, who might have poor

internet consumer skills (Thomson and Laing, 2003). This gap reverses the socialisation process: digital natives teach parents internet consumption skills, which strengthen the children's power (Thaichon, 2017).

Teens use the internet as a source of information to influence their parents (Thomson and Laing, 2003; Durand-Megret *et al.*, 2012). Teens are influenced by information from the Web, and this influence is positively related to their role in family purchase decisions (Kaur and Merdury, 2010). The internet is changing family decision-making processes (Belch *et al.*, 2005). Most studies in this area have focused on consumption-targeted teenagers (Thomson and Laing, 2003; Lueg *et al.*, 2006, Durand-Megret *et al.*, 2012). According to Belch *et al.* (2005, p. 570), "*74% of U.S. parents who purchased on-line stated that they allowed their children to participate in the process. Furthermore, 42% of U.S. parents purchasing on-line followed advice from their children who suggested web sites from which their parents should purchase*." Durand-Megret *et al.* (2012) examined how the internet changes family decision making and focused on teenagers (13–17 years old) in particular. These authors highlight new phases in the decision-making process (pre-choice), including remote relations (sending purchase requests, sending links, asking for advice etc.) and front-of-screen relations.

There have been few studies of children and online stores. According to Boulay *et al.* (2014), physical stores are more popular than online shopping with 6- to 12-year-olds. Reasons include the broader product range, the possibility of trying products and instant gratification (children can enjoy the product directly after the purchase). However, children do not perceive online purchasing positively because the gratification is not instantaneous, the choice is limited, prices are perceived to be higher, and delivery time can be a drawback.

All these results have to be questioned in the context of children's influence on their parents' online buying, particularly for click & drive, as this format is becoming increasingly popular. Does this trend provide new insights into the mother-child dyad in relation to decision making? The box below illustrates how retailers view the dyad.

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Methodology

As observed by Nørgaard *et al.* (2007), parents and children have differing views of children's influence during various stages of the buying process. It is therefore essential to collect data from both populations. To understand children's influence during the online buying process (before, during and after), we chose to study the mother-child dyad. Within the typology described in the literature review, we chose to target "shopping digital mums", defined as mothers who often buy online. We recruited mothers using the snowball method. We first met a mother who agreed for us to interview her child and asked her whether she could introduce us to other parents with children aged between 7 and 11. We chose children at the "analytical stage" (aged 7–11), as described by Piaget (1989). At an earlier age, children are still too young to understand situations not related to direct actions (John, 1999), as their ability to carry out cognitively complex activities is limited (Piaget, 1989). After this age, "preadolescence" begins. We also chose parents who already buy through grocery click & drive stores. We picked the grocery sector, as most studies of children's influence on the buying process are related to the food sector; food is clearly identified as a product category over which children exert influence (McNeal, 1992; Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007 and Drenten, 2008), mostly with respect to products related to them, such as juice and cereal.

As our study is explorative and we are attempting to understand the online buying process and children's influence, we used a qualitative approach with separate in-depth interviews with 27 mothers and their child aged 7–11. The interview guide included five major themes: (1) mother's (or children's) online buying experience and behaviour; (2) process followed and influences on online grocery buying for family and children; (3) child's presence and role before, during and after online buying; (4) perceptions of mother's (or child's) internet expertise, knowledge and behaviour; (5) discussion, influences and behaviour throughout the buying process.

Interviews with the mothers lasted 45 minutes on average, whereas interviews with children lasted around 25 minutes. We recorded and transcribed all the interviews and analysed the data manually and separately.

We built an analytical framework to analyse the data by following the *grounded theory approach* (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The authors read all the transcripts multiple times. This first step allowed for the general orientations or categories to emerge from the data. In the second step, we divided the text into paragraphs, each of which had a specific meaning (Miles and Huberman, 2000). We then regrouped each similar unit of meaning (paragraphs) into the same general category. Finally, the coding process consisted in attributing all units to their categories and subcategories. After re-reading several times the units of data classified into each category, we provided a designation of each category: This is called 'theorisation' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). We compared our categories with each other to check for differences. Wherever our interpretation differed, we asked a colleague to analyse the data until we reached a consensus. To respect our respondents' anonymity, we refer to them only by their gender and age (cf. Table 1).

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Findings

From our data analysis, four main categories emerged that related to mothers' reasons for buying online, children's influence strategies, the online buying process procedure and children's online socialisation.

Digimums' reasons for buying grocery online: freedom, convenience and time saving

The main reasons digimums put forward for doing their grocery shopping online relate to freedom, convenience and time saving. Indeed, most of the mothers we interviewed do their shopping online primarily for practical reasons. As one child said: "*We now go to the supermarket less and less. My mum does the grocery shopping online,*

and we have a delivery once a week. You know, it's quicker this way" (Girl, 11).

Moreover, not going to the store frees up valuable time for digimums to spend with their family. Most of the mothers who were interviewed mentioned this as a motivating factor. They argue that they are busy, and the internet allows them to buy from home at any time of the day, which gives them more time to spend with their children. "*I work all day, and the only time I can do the shopping is after work or on the weekend* […] *Frankly, I prefer spending this time with my kids as I don't see them a lot: On a typical day, I get home at 6 p.m. I have to prepare the meal, prepare the bath, and then we eat together and they go to bed because they have school the next day. So, in fact, we only spend a few hours together in a day. Let's say around two to three hours! I prefer spending these two hours with my kids rather than in the supermarket!*" (Mother, 37).

Online buying also gives mothers more freedom; they can buy whenever they want, even if the store is closed. They control their time and their spending, and avoiding an unpleasant but necessary activity gives them more freedom.

According to mothers, children play a major role in online buying because they can suggest products or brands: "*I really hate doing grocery shopping. I find it boring, and I often have no idea what to buy. If I do the choosing myself, it's always the same things, but my son suggests new things. He is more motivated than me* [laughs]" (Mother, 37 years). The mothers argue that, in the physical store, they are stimulated by the products' visual and physical presence. This is relevant in the light of Nicholls and Cullen's (2004) findings that supermarkets are stressful environments for mothers. However, in front of the screen, such stimulations are weaker. Thus, they feel they need more help from their children, who find, suggest or choose products. "*When I am with her, I can see and stay with her to help her* […] *choose because sometimes she doesn't know what to buy, so I help her* [silence] *It's quicker this way. I like it, and it's funny sometimes*" (Boy, 9). Therefore, online grocery shopping produces cooperation within the family, and all the family members are invited to provide suggestions and help choose the products.

Children's influence strategies: (a)synchronic demands, smart shopping and idea suggestions

Shopping from home is considered more convenient, and parents are more likely to please their children when at home, as the latter often use positive strategies, such as asking politely and justifying their needs. Moreover, many working mothers find a way of pleasing their children during online shopping by accepting requests to appease their guilt for being at work all day. Children consider this as an opportunity to suggest their favourite products and brands: "*I prefer staying at home. It's more convenient with the computer because we don't need to go out to do the shopping, and it's easier for me to choose stuff* [laughs]" (Boy, 8).

We observed that children's demands could be made before (shopping list creation), during (while eating, putting the groceries away or unpacking the shopping) and after the online buying process (renewing a purchase, choosing another brand). Their influence can be active if they help their mother draw up the shopping list and take part in the online buying process. Even if the children are not involved in creating the shopping list or the shopping process, they exert a passive influence, as mothers consider their children's needs and preferences even when they are not there: "*When I buy online, I always have F. in mind. So, I tend to buy him something…not necessarily something expensive, but something*" (Mother, 39). This is consistent with Rossiter's (1978) findings regarding children's active and passive influence.

Our results indicate different strategies used by children to influence their parents' final choice. These influence strategies are related to emotion (kissing, hugging) and rationality (price, need): "*Sometimes, my brother and I give our mum a hug and ask her for the things we want*" (Girl, 9). Surprisingly, they do not 'make a scene' as an influence strategy, as they are not looking for instant gratification. Rather, they make their influence felt by expressing their opinion or needs. Online buying becomes less conflictual as there are fewer impulsive requests, and the dyad cooperates, as the product is not in front of them (smart shopper). Children often use their mother's online behaviour to argue for what they want: "*Sometimes I just tell my mum that before* [the cake] *cost €3, and now it is only one euro something, so she agrees* […] *you see, when*

there is a price crossed out, it means it's a promotion, and it means you pay less money, so it's not expensive" (Girl, 9).

Children are aware of their passive influence and the fact that their mum buys products they like: "*when I don't ask her to buy me stuff, she buys it anyway to please me*" (Girl, 9). At the same time, mothers notice changes in the way their children influence them: "*it allows her to think about the shopping. When we buy over the internet, she takes time to think, and she compares the websites* […] *for instance, the less expensive one. She takes her time and doesn't ask me to buy things spontaneously*" (Mother, 49).

When asked directly, mothers said their children do not influence their choices during online buying because they know their children's preferences, or if they disagree, it is easier to say no. "*Really, it's not the same as in the store. If I say no* [at an offline store], *he makes a scene, and I have to buy something. Here, if I say no, it's no. And if he persists, he gets punished!*" (Mother, 40). However, they do, in fact, tend to accept their children's suggestions in order to please them. While discussing the decision process, we realised that children do influence their parents, albeit indirectly. Several mothers do not realise their child's influence. They ask children "*about their opinion on products that concern them* […] *to make sure they are going to eat what I buy*" (Mother, 39) but do not consider the children as part of the buying process. Most of the children we interviewed attempt to influence their parents when they buy online, and the mothers often accept their choices if they are reasonable. "*Afterwards, on the internet, he acts on purchases that concern him, specifically things like books, clothes, toys… things like that.* […] *For grocery products, he asks me directly when he is here: 'I need this'…'I need that', and in that case, I add what is missing*" (Mother, 45).

Online buying process: from shopping list creation to co-decision making

The shopping list is essential for almost all parents to avoid forgetting items. The shopping list is often co-written by mothers and their children: "*In my family, it's like a ritual. I wait till everyone is at home on Friday night and ask them to help me fill in the*

shopping list. We always start with stuff from the fridge and then complete it with other food in the pantry. We finish with L.'s and C.'s favourite things. You know, biscuits, sweets and so on, but not too much! It's a rule that we finish with their needs because otherwise, they won't help me with other 'boring' stuff! [laughs] […] *Last time, L. reminded me to get some window cleaner, which I always forget!*" (Mother, 42). We observed different ways of drawing up the shopping list: Sometimes, the website is used to remember forgotten products, supermarket brochures are considered helpful, and the list is often extended as products run out during the week.

Children do not consider online shopping to be disruptive, as they have always known this channel. They find it easy to use and sometimes enjoy taking part in the purchasing process with their parents. Generally, children said they are not interested in influencing their mother's online purchases of products that are not for them. However, they help to choose other items for the family using what their mothers taught them in the previous stage. Children can be asked to help choose items for the whole family: "*I help my mum choose because sometimes she doesn't know…so I help her, and it's quicker that way*" (Boy, 8).

However, for children, the final decision is not necessarily made in front of the screen. Several mothers do their buying when the children are asleep or busy playing, as children find the website unattractive or uninteresting: "*he's not always here to show me what he wants because if he doesn't use the keyboard himself, he gets bored… As I know his habits, and as his desires rarely change from week to week, I buy him what he likes. If I have any doubt, I call him, and he tells me what he wants*" (Mother, 42).

Sometimes mothers suggest items without the children asking for them: "*In fact, I'm lucky because he is incredibly reasonable; he doesn't ask for a lot and is not aggressive. And as he is the youngest child, I often find it hard to say no to him* [...] *sometimes it's even me who makes the suggestions! Last time, I told him, 'You can buy a drone; that would be nice, wouldn't it?*'" (Mother, 42).

Online buying: a socialisation process occurring at home but not necessary in front of the screen

Mothers felt that they discussed shopping with their children more while online than offline and that this discussion starts before and while they write up the shopping list and continues in front of the screen and after the purchase. They argued that they are often in a hurry at the store, whereas at home, they have more time to chat. For instance, they would explain why they prefer retail brands to national brands for some products and vice versa. When parents cannot answer their children's questions about consumption (*e.g.* explaining the meaning of protein), they often look for it directly on the internet. For food shopping, nearly all the mothers discussed the online shopping list with their children. They teach children how to use the list and explain to them how they shop, why they buy something and when it is worth buying products (*e.g.* during sales or promotions). By doing so, they teach children the role of prices and discounts and other aspects. One mother told us she had never taken her 9-year-old child to the supermarket. With regard to alternative evaluations, children give their point of view about products and give their mother advice.

During the online buying process, children learn skills such as how to use the list and shop online. The website becomes an educational space where parents can teach or be observed by their children, which contributes to their socialisation: "*My mum lets me use her computer, and I always type on the keyword, and I like to see what she does, the products and things like that*" (Girl. 10 years). Through this learning, children become more independent as they are allowed to put the product they want straight into the shopping basket. Children's influence then becomes proactive as they use an intended approach to anticipate mother's needs for grocery shopping and take the initiative to complete the purchase list. Even though mothers could control what is added to the shopping list, they tend to accept the items and do not consider their children to be 'exaggerating'. For instance, they would use a scanning device provided by the retailer to scan any products that have run out and thereby add them to the online shopping list without the presence of – or even asking – their mothers. Additionally, some mothers

allow their children to complete the purchase by entering the credit card numbers because they think it helps to make them more responsible.

Sometimes they discuss which website to use. We observed two different possibilities. First, some mums use the same website for the sake of convenience, because of easy accessibility, routine or loyalty. Others choose different websites depending on current promotions: "*well, as we receive a lot of brochures, I tend to choose the online store depending on the promotion. Sometimes it isn't worth it to save only a few euros because the store is far away, but as Auchan and Intermarché are the same distance, I choose the best one in terms of promotions!*" (Mother, 39). Interestingly, the child does not play a role or is not interested in the website; however, he/she is interested in comparing items such as prices on the website and in the brochure: "*I will say, 'Look mum, this one is less expensive in this brochure than the other one in this other brochure!'* […] *because mum says we should be careful. Money doesn't grow on trees*" (Boy, 9). By doing so, the purchasing process becomes more thoughtful and realistic. It is seen as a more lifelike extension of younger children "playing shop".

One interesting result was older children's online information search skills: "*Yes, well, he sees adverts on TV; he might check the prices on Amazon, make purchasing simulations or find out about the product to see if he can get it at a knockdown price*" (Mother, 40). They also get information indirectly from peers who use social media (e.g. on Instagram) to post a photo of a new item.

.....

Insert Table 2 about here

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Discussion

The retail environment is moving from *bricks and mortar* to an online format, which raises questions about the role children play in the family purchasing process. This study highlights the fact that children still influence the buying process online, albeit differently than in an offline environment. During the online process, children learn the

importance of the shopping list, prices, discounts, brands etc. Consequently, they are more reasonable and think about which influence strategy to use for each product type. Even if we do not consider it impulse buying, the study highlights that the situation falls somewhere between planned and unplanned buying. The children do not necessarily see the product but sometimes ask for it if they have seen their peers with it. Unlike previous studies, this paper highlights one main difference between physical and online buying. In physical stores, children are physically immersed in the store, and their reactions are based on emotional reactions and physical actions (Ayadi and Cao, 2016). For instance, they push the trolley, put the groceries on the belt and so forth (Nørgaard *et al.*, 2007). Online, the screen provides a virtual relationship to objects. The screen acts as a "medium" that "filters" their "corporeality". As a result, their reactions are less emotional and physical, and they use different strategies to appropriate this new buying process. They argue more logically (smart shopper). Indeed, they have access to more product information and more time to search for information (internet, social network, peers and brochures) and use it to negotiate with their mothers by using her arguments to obtain the product they want.

Our results highlight that children – especially older ones – find shopping websites unattractive, boring and "no fun". This finding complements the study by Boulay *et al.* (2014), which showed that young children prefer physical stores.
Our results have theoretical and managerial implications.

Implications for theory

The online buying process starts before the shopping list is drawn up by mothers and their children. The online shopping process involves information search, website comparison, price comparison sites etc. Both mothers and children seek advice from each other, making their interaction more cooperative (Marshall, 2014) than conflictual (Ayadi and Cao, 2016) or "pester power". It is easier for children to influence online buying, as they tend to be more logical, more thoughtful and less impulsive in this situation than at an offline store. Children's influence is more reasonable; they use rational arguments that

they were taught by their mother. Younger children tend to influence purchases of products such as food and toys, whereas older ones influence products such as clothes and shoes. Both use positive strategies to influence parents: Younger children use emotion (sweet talk), whereas older children use more rational arguments (price comparison, explanation).

This research shows that online prescription is both active (i.e. direct requests) and passive (*i.e.* indirect influence, such as previous discussions about their wishes). This confirms the results of previous studies of physical stores (Rossiter, 1978; Cook, 2003; Ayadi and Cao, 2016). Moreover, this study found that the influence could be proactive, in that children anticipate the absence of an item (for instance, by using an online shopping list) and remind their mothers of other products. They become 'partners' and contribute to the online decision process.

Throughout the buying process, children learn about online consumption, acquire new consumer skills (e.g. how to create a shopping list, how to find better prices, how to buy online) and adapt their influence strategies. Moreover, online buying contributes to their socialisation, as they learn these new skills. Although this study is qualitative, the authors observed gender-based factors: Even if gender makes no difference for the very young, older girls (10–11 years) are more patient and have a greater influence on their mother than boys do. This was observed in previous studies (Atkin, 1978; Lee, 1994). In terms of influence strategy, our results highlight that younger children (7–9 years) use affective strategies (hugs, kisses) more often, whereas older ones (10–11) would rather use rational strategies (smart shopper). In summary, the results extend our knowledge about children's influence in the retail sector by highlighting new insights related to the concept of smart shopping, proactive influence and online socialisation (Cf. Table 2).

Managerial and societal implications

This research has implications for online stores.

The study showed that children feel bored in front of the screen. Therefore, online stores should focus on making their websites more attractive and online shopping a pleasure. The website could also be designed for socialisation; both children and parents

could learn about product-related topics (*e.g.* "*did you know...*?" type questions) to explain a consumer skill. By doing so, the retailer will develop a form of partnership with the dyad by contributing to the children's online socialisation.

Shopping that is considered a "chore", such as food shopping, is often – and sometimes exclusively – done online. This is why e-retailers need to adapt to the dyad's needs and behaviour. The site needs to be both fun and sales-oriented in order to be more interesting for children. For instance, it could propose games related to the store that pit adults against children. As peers also play a role in the purchasing process, these games could also be extended to include friends online.

However, in order to ensure children do not spend too much time on e-commerce sites, their well-being has to be the focus. E-retailers could contribute to this by providing automatic warnings after the user has been on the same page for 5 to 10 minutes. Similarly, as the digital devices that retailers provide make scanning extremely easy, retailers could provide parental control codes to prevent children from making too many 'unnecessary' purchases.

Our study also highlights the importance of brochures sent by post, which act as useful sources of information. Retailers could continue to send them out and provide QR codes to give direct access to the product via the online store.

The limits of the paper lie in its small sample size and specific context (France). Future research could investigate children's influence by age, gender and parental role by using a bigger sample. The study could also be replicated in other countries to find similarities and differences and to discover whether culture plays a role in how children influence their digimums' online shopping behaviour.

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Chronodrive, a click & drive store of a French food retailer, uses children in its advertising. For example, one advert says, "*My mum told me that my scenes at the checkout are over*", and is illustrated by a girl of about 5 years old looking rather upset. In another, a serious-looking boy wearing glasses says, "*My mum told me that shopping by mobile phone is very cool*". The slogan is "The Chronodrive generation".

The term "generation" raises questions. Does it suggest a new era for food shopping? A new generation with more peaceful relationships and strategies of influence?

The retailers go even further by providing a scanner called "IZY" that can be used directly at home. Here, children play the role of an adult to explain to adults how to use the device. Parents (and children) only have to scan products using the barcode from a pack they already have at home to create their shopping list. The idea is that once a product is (almost) finished, the mother scans it to add it to the shopping list for the next purchase. Ultimately, the mum only has to make the payment. In one advert, we see a mother scanning nappies and smiling at her daughter after seeing that she has also added the products.

The fact that *Chronodrive* repeatedly uses children in its advertising provides a strong clue as to their place in family decision making. The advert suggests that their influence is still present but is different. The advert communicates on three levels via the "cute" aspect of the child, the shared experience (a form of collaboration with parents), the future, renewal, but also the fact that online shopping is child's play.

Box 1: <u>The child's place, according to Chronodrive</u>

Table 2 Online socialisation process and influence strategies for children aged 7–11

Theme	Learning skills	Characteristics
Influence strategy	(a)synchronic demands (active/passive)	Children might ask for the product before, during or after the purchase.
	Smart shopping (proactive)	Online buying become less conflictual as there are fewer impulsive requests, and the dyad cooperates. The child uses the mother's arguments to influence her. Children use an intended approach to anticipate their mother's needs for grocery shopping and to take initiative.
	Expressing ideas or needs (active)	Digimums looking for advice. Suggestions from children are welcomed. Both ask for advice (cooperation).
Socialisation process	- How to use the list and how to shop online - Why they buy these types of products (e.g. retailer's brand) - When it is worth buying products (e.g. during sales) - The role of price and discounts - How to find better prices (comparing websites) - How to shop online	The socialisation process occurs at home but not necessarily in front of the screen. The online socialisation process might take the form of physical action (i.e. deliberate use of digital device to scan a product) without the presence of the mother.