

***How competent are teenagers aged 11-15 in using new technologies within their consumption experience?  
An exploratory research on consumer behaviour***

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**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 teens' competencies as consumers. This qualitative research explores the consumption skills of teenage consumers using the new technologies. By examining how teens aged 11-15 define a competent consumer and how they perceive themselves as competent consumers, we should be better able to understand the consumption behaviours they exhibit, the purchase decision they make and the limitations they feel they must overcome to become fully competent consumers. The present research begins by exploring teens' 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 psycho-sociological perspective and a marketing perspective. After then, we explore teen's perceptions of what it means to be a competent consumer and what are the behaviours associated with a competent consumer.

**Keywords**

Teenage consumers, Consumption competence, experience, socialisation agents, observation

## **Introduction**

Today's teenagers aged 11-15 are 'early adopters' of new technologies (Rogers, 1995), while they live in a digital world surrounded by communication technologies and leisure activities. Adolescents all over the world turn to the new media with the same curiosity, enthusiasm and will to master the technology (Lee and Conroy, 2005). The Internet and the mobile phone have become a central force that fuels the rhythm of teenage daily life. There has been significant growth over the past five years in the number of teens who play games on the Internet, get news and shop online. In addition, the changing media landscape has become a battleground for the adolescents' share of voice.

The 'YouTube' generation uses many forms of media simultaneously and average over six hours a day using the various forms (Hempel & Lehman, 2005). Consequently, authors argue that today's teenagers are more competent than their parents in dealing with media and digital products (McDonnell, 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). For these adolescents, consumption is seen as a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings (Belk, 1981; 1982; 1988), hedonic responses, and aesthetic criteria. Indeed, Holbrook & Hirschman (1982) argued that the value created through consumption depends on the meaning that products acquire for the users or for their reference groups. However, modern-day adolescents are either competent or vulnerable consumers, depending on their age, gender, family, social background, consumption experience and other influences on their daily lives (B. 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 teens' competencies as consumers. This qualitative research explores the consumption skills of teenage consumers using the new technologies by providing rich, expressive responses from adolescents which allow for the opportunity to understand the behaviour and likely characteristics of different teenage consumption skills.

The exploratory research design has been considered to be the most appropriate method to address the issues raised. The main thrust of this study involved 20 French schoolchildren aged 11-15 both boys and girls for 6 months (from January to June 2006). This study was delimited to the schoolchildren population enrolled at Sainte Marthe Chavagnes secondary school in the city of Angoulême (south west of France). By examining how teens aged 11-15 define a competent consumer and how they perceive themselves as competent consumers within their own normative framework of using new technologies, we should be better able to understand the consumption behaviours they exhibit, the purchase decision they make and the limitations they feel they must overcome to become fully competent consumers. In order to examine these issues, the present research begins by exploring teens' 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 psycho-sociological perspective and a marketing perspective. After then, we explore teen's perceptions of what it means to be a competent consumer and what are the behaviours associated with a competent consumer.

### ***The teenage digital culture***

Adolescents constitute one of the fastest growing Internet populations. This group of consumers spends more time online than adults and surpasses all other age groups in their use of chat, instant messaging and other new forms of electronic communication. While psychologists and family counsellors research debate the social and psychological impact of technology and the Internet on children and adolescents, consumer behaviourists have generally not ventured far into this domain. Yet, the Internet provides many new issues and interesting opportunities for marketers.

The importance of a greater understanding of the teenage subculture within the digital context is highlighted by the effect on both products appropriation and their symbolic dimensions. The concepts of identity, culture, language, relationship with one's body, time and space have been turned upside down by the digital revolution. Above all, this culture is based around a set of actions and terms that express to what extent technical ingeniousness has become second nature for "self-expression" (chat and blog), downloading (P2P) and Playing (online).

All these terms represent a culture underpinned by embodiment in a material form, where the tools are technologies that create a dynamic relationship or something even deeper to share such as values shared by members of the teenage community. Lardellier (2006) argues that the teenage digital culture is fun (on the Net, as part of a network, sending SMS or just chatting), personalised (one rarely lends one's mobile phone. It has become an actual 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). Of all the different types of using the Internet, it is interpersonal communication that plays the most important role in the daily life of teenagers, who are going through a period of intense socialisation.

According to Orban (2005), young people tend to express themselves more personally and more emotionally about their lives than adults. 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 & Palojoki, 2004) and learning social meaning (Ward, 1974). There is a wealth of research on the main agents involved in the socialisation and learning process of teenage consumers such as peers, schools, family and mass media (Moschis & Churchill, 1978; Roedder-John, 1999). However, a question of contemporary interest is the impact of the Internet as a socialisation agent and how teenagers use new technologies to develop consumption skills and become competent consumers in the modern society. This electronic technology is different to traditional mass media because of its interactive ability that is, the possibility of users interacting with a machine, virtual communities and individuals, globally (Hoffman & Novak, 1996; Shih, 1998). Thus, their consumption experience of the Internet is different to traditional media and the Internet can act as a powerful socialisation medium for teenage consumers.

### *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 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, we need to clarify the concept of competence in marketing and especially in the teenage consumer behaviour track.

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 Alba and Wesley, 1987 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 competencies in the role of consumer, and we attempt to fit our data within the broader conceptualization of the notion of consumption as perceived by teenagers. Indeed, it is interesting to look at adolescents' own perception of competencies because we may be able to understand how to struggle some of the consumption-related issues that are associated with teenage consumers such as impulsive shopping, managing money, making decisions...etc.

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 and have the self-confidence to ensure that these resources are used effectively and the self-control to refrain from acting on undesired impulses and to regulate behaviour in order to ensure a positive outcome. By better understanding of how teenage consumers define the behaviours associated with a competent consumer, we can better understand 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 programs that from a public policy perspective might help teens avoid some of the potentially crippling financial and psychological issues that appear to be affecting this generation of consumers.

### **This study**

Modern-day adolescents are competent or vulnerable consumers depending on their consumption experience and other influences on their daily life. Consequently, it seems essential to question whether teenagers aged 11-15 have the necessary competence to play their role as consumers accordingly. We were interested in exploring informants' perceptions about 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. This qualitative research explores the consumption skills of teenage consumers using the new technologies by providing rich, expressive responses from adolescents that allow for the opportunity to understand the behaviour and likely characteristics of different teenage consumption skills. The primary research objective for this study was to define teen's perception of what it means to be a competent consumer and what are the behaviours associated with the competent consumers.

### **Method**

In a business or marketing context, the exploratory research based on both interaction and observation is used to uncover, interpret and understand the consumer's point-of-view and the hidden rules of environments. Whereas, focus groups and surveys rely on self-reporting and memory out of context, the exploratory approach provides a holistic view of consumers and a deeper understanding of their behaviours. Indeed, adolescents do not interact with products

and services in isolation; they are affected by changing family patterns and unseen factors. Therefore, this exploratory research is the best means for getting at these unspoken cultural and social patterns that shape consumer behaviour. By allowing the informant to communicate their own perspective and to observe their actions over an extended period of time, we are equipped to take individual, social and cultural differences seriously and, thus to make interpretations that account for, rather than ignore, these particularities.

The exploratory research appeared to be the most appropriate method to address the raised issues. The main thrust of this research involved 20 French schoolchildren aged 11-15 both boys and girls for 6 months (from January to June 2006). Indeed, this age group represents the period of Formal Operation which is the final stage in Piaget's progression of cognitive development, with the complete logical capabilities of an adult coming to fruition. Piaget and others identified a new type of egocentrism that emerges in Formal Operational children, and it explains a lot about the kind of behaviours and attitudes commonly associated with young teenagers. In addition, teenage consumers aged 11-15 are one of the fastest-growing markets, with more of their own money to spend and more influence over familial decisions than before.

This study was delimited to the schoolchildren population enrolled at Sainte Marthe Chavagnes secondary school in the city of Angoulême (south west of France). By visiting the school of the teenage consumers, we have been able to observe the 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 secondary school in order to involve them in the study and to help us meeting the teenagers both girls and boys. This approach allowed us to interact with some adolescents and integrate their peer group. A convenience sample of 10 adolescents (6 girls and 4 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 4 girls and 6 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 workshop sessions of one hour each with our teenage target. 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 authorisation to use the multimedia room in order to meet the participants and to observe their Internet practises while they are 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 exploratory method based on observation and interaction in a social context was an opportunity that is not attainable by any other research method.

### **Data analysis**

The data collected from the workshop observations was analysed using the Ritchie and Spencer (1994) *framework analysis* method. This framework analysis is recent and, 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 familiarises him- 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 the socialisation agents involved in the teenage learning process and the behaviours associated with the competent consumers and areas for improvement as competent 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.

### ***Behaviours associated with the competent consumers***

Before delving into teenage consumers' perceptions of their own consumption competence, we wanted to ascertain their perceptions of what it means to be a competent consumer. This suggests that there was some sort of prescription in their mind of what it meant to be a competent consumer in this digital and modern society. 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 a 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, we asked them to evaluate their own competence as consumers in this digital society. We evaluated their descriptions of others and themselves 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 due, 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 my spending, 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”* (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 if I’m interested in 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 that we have met agree with this *“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. This 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 develop 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 and 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 for example 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 was 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 websites, 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 unconsciously 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 internalising 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, allowing adolescents to share via blogs, discuss, influence and learn interactively rather than merely observing and modelling 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 this allows them to select information and make their own decisions. In addition, 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 & 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:

Most of the adolescents both girls and boys feel they are competent 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 needed 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's 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 websites 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, adolescents take into account this symbolic dimension, but they always try to control their consumption by shopping goods they need and not brands in order to avoid the 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 because 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 since they are free to create an individual product by combining several elements. By the way, digital products such as mobile phone 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 that are paying attention to the teacher, to annoy them*" (Thomas, 14). Coupled with WAP it makes the mobile playful and powerful communicator, as both voice and text enable information to be obtained while mobile or stationary. Dominique Cardon (2005)<sup>1</sup> argues that the *Citizen-user* of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) has different

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internetactu.net/>



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 specially the digital generation of today's teenagers, underlining the active, symmetric, and participative aspects of their techno-commitment. Indeed, for teenagers, the use of ICTs is deeply rooted in the 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 is equal to consumption competence" in the same way as adults' define it, which is a banned behaviour. At a time when social norms around digital content don't always appear to conform with 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 are 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 guest. That's why, teenagers are aware of the Internet risk, and they try to be very careful in their dealing with ICTs especially with Internet and chat rooms. Therefore, Internet risks 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 don't know.

Consumer's moral consciousness:

Conspicuous consumption is relevant for young people, and they are a group which is adept at reading signals represented in their consumption choices. Teenagers told us that the competent consumer is always looking for the ethic dimension in a good deal. Therefore, competent consumer has to be ethically and politically engaged with his 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 was 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. Ethic can be a subjective term, but in its truest sense for teenagers 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.

Ecological consciousness:

One of the relevant areas that teenage consumers have to improve is their ability to consume and participate to protect the environment and make it sustainable. This awareness about the environment where 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 environment's 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 cares 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.

Being a responsible consumer also means having the ability to resist to marketers influences. In order to do so, getting information, evaluating and comparing the options, looking for the best price-quality ratio and the awareness about the environment' protection are some of the characteristics of a competent and a responsible consumer.

## **Discussion**

This study presents a first look at how teenage consumers aged 11-15 both girls and boys perceive a "competent" consumer and their own perceptions of themselves as "competent consumers" in this very high technological context they live in. The interpretive findings revealed that both male and female adolescents have a pretty clear image in their minds of what means to be a competent consumer, and their definition of the competencies needed to play the role of consumers is different from adult consumers' definition. Indeed, this was the main important point and the focus of our investigation. This study identified key types of consumption competencies as perceived by the teenage consumers and the socialisation agents involved in their consumption learning.

This exploratory research suggests that for these adolescents aged 11-15 there was relatively little evidence of either active self construction as competent consumers, in terms of their consumption activities in this digital society where they are growing up using new technologies and new media in order to develop consumption skills and share new consumption experiences with their peers. This group of adolescents clearly has some agency but is not learning consumption competencies independent of the family, the peers and the

media. Moreover, a new socialisation agent such as Internet has appeared in their social life and their consumption learning is mostly based on practising leisure activities in a technological context. Indeed, the Internet can also be viewed as a virtual social system that allows adolescents to share their interests, to learn interactively and to express their opinions.

Essentially, it is through interacting with Internet that adolescents learn its potential, with each new interaction allowing them to build upon their previous consumption experience. Thus, the interactive nature of the Internet appears to be facilitating a new mode of active socialisation unexplored in the young consumer's behaviour. By the way, as other socialisation agents, the family appears to be an important source of consumption learning depending on the area of consumption. Therefore, teenage boys argued that their fathers are the reference in new technologies purchases because they are more competent than their mother. In contrast, teenage girls agreed that their mothers still be the first source of information in cloths shopping. In addition, trial and error is another way of acquiring consumption knowledge for both girls and boys.

In answering the question of how teenage consumers aged 11-15 define a competent consumer and how they perceive themselves within their own normative framework of new technologies' usages, we argue that these teenagers define the competence in different ways from adult. Indeed, these adolescents feel themselves as competent consumers as they use the new technologies to improve their consumption skills. In addition, they are always seeking new ways to consume and to overcome the limits of their lack of budget and consumption experience. Therefore, the main focus of this study was to identify the use of individual and environmental resources in behaviours that the teenagers described as being hallmarks of competent consumers.

Specific results indicate that adolescents revealed competency in some aspect of consumption, shopping and using new technologies. However, there was a paradox between adult's perception of consumption competence and teenage consumers' own. 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 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. 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 image and retail brands found at the mall and had clear likes and dislikes. Otherwise, there are some areas where teenagers feel themselves vulnerable consumers, because of their lack of experience. Therefore, their first source of information remains the family and peers (real and virtual). Teenagers are also struggling to form an identity and 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 consequently result in 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 & Fournier, 1998). In their work, they identified eight paradoxes consumers face when encountering and using technological products. Among these eight characteristics, we were interested in the competence \ incompetence paradox which demonstrates that technology can facilitate feelings of efficacy. However it can also induce feelings of ineptitude and ignorance (Winner, 1994).

## **Conclusion**

The consumption skills emerge within the teenagers’ experience of the purchase and the use of new technologies in their entertainment activities (playing video games) as well as their social activities (chatting on the Internet). Consequently, today’s adolescents are growing up in a postmodern society where the impact of rising levels of education can also be seen in the growth rate in participation in alternative leisure time activities which can enhance production skills required in the postmodern economy. The insights gained from this study suggest that we need to do better job in educating adolescents with regard to the consumption and use new technologies. Educators can 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. By the way, the findings of this study lead the marketers to take into account the abilities developed by teens aged 11-15 in terms of consumption and usages in order to construct a new learning about this target and to create marketing strategies based on the *Co-Construction* of knowledge with the young consumers *via* the *knowledge marketing* approach (Curbatov, 2006).

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