

# Dynamics of female best friendship dyads: implications for consumption practices

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## **Dynamics of female best friendship dyads: implications for consumption practices**

Friendship and more particularly, female friendship is little approached by marketing studies. Yet, this interpersonal relationship has a growing importance in contemporary western society. Adopting a socio-anthropological perspective, the purpose of this paper is to explore the characteristics of female best friendship dyads in comparison to men's and group friendship, and to show its possible implications for consumption practices. We are focusing on a particular population, unmarried young women (aged between 18 and 30 years) as, since they are not yet in the logic of family construction, friendship is a priori more central in their lives. Based on 35 phenomenological interviews, we show that this relationship is exceptionally intimate, emotional and can grow into a family-like relationship. Consumption may not be the center of the relation, but the best friend shapes one's attitudes and tastes in the long term, ie. it has a long term undirect influence on consumption.

*Key words: female friendship, consumer practices, co-construction*

*Track: Consumer Behavior*

## **1. Introduction**

*Girls*, *Big Little Lies*, *Orange is the New Black*, these are only some examples of movies and series that celebrate female friendship. Friendship between women have invaded all kind of medias during recent decades. Yet, this phenomenon has triggered little interest in marketing research. In this paper, we propose to study female friendship, more precisely female dyadic friendship. Indeed, our first results show that there are at least two main categories of female friendship: the group-based one in one hand, and the dyad-based one in the other hand. Although the latter has a less obvious and measurable influence on consumption, it seems that it has a great and deep impact on construction of one's consumption behavior. Our objective is to determine key characteristics of female dyadic friendship and to explore how these characteristics influence consumer practices. Our research adopts the perspective of the Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), according to which consumption is a complex social and cultural phenomenon. Furthermore, this study is part of a thesis project that examine the role of consumption in female friendship.

Firstly, we propose an understanding of female dyadic friendship through exploring sociological factors that appears to be determinants of the relation. Then, we describe the data and the methodological process; and we interpret major results that emerged from the study. Finally, we present some of the theoretical and managerial implications of our findings.

## **2. Theoretical background**

### *2.1 Gender*

When trying to distinguish peculiarities of female dyadic relation from other kinds of friendship, three major aspects can be identified as the most determining sociological factors. One, whose poles are masculine and feminine, concerns gender belonging. The second opposes the dyadic relation to the group relation and the third is based on age, more particularly on the concept of life-cycle.

Studying particularities of friendship between women, necessarily leads to its comparison with men's friendship. This approach is justified all the more as, historically up to recent times, friendship was regarded as essentially masculine. An idealized figure of men's friendship imposes at all eras: from the friendship that unites the apprentice to his master in ancient Greece to the chivalrous fellowship of medieval Europe (Vincent-Buffault, 1995). Male friendship takes then the form of a virile, often gregarious

relationship based on sharing physical activities (Dolgin, 2001). Sociological studies, however, reveal some nuances to this stereotyped representation. Men who united by friendship also build their relationship on dialogue, shared sensitivity and intimacy, but more rarely and in a less pronounced way than women (Aries & Johnson, 1983). Contrary to male friendship, female friendship doesn't have positive historical patterns. In fact, "traditional" female sociability was perceived negatively and associated with "chatter, the rivalry of women, cackling" (Vincent-Buffault, 1995). Yet, today's ideal friendship is characterized by intimacy, trust and caring for each other (Sapadin, 1988), traits that are associated predominantly with women. Sociologists show that friendship between women is indeed, an intimate, confidential, consensual and emotional-based relationship, and it tends to exist in a dyadic form (Felmlee, Sweet, & Sinclair, 2012). Under the apparent differences, the fundamental nature of the relationship seems similar in both types of friendship. As an ideal-type, friendship should be based on intimate discussions. Furthermore, sharing and appreciation of the other's company would constitute the essential elements of friendship for both sexes (Sapadin, 1988; Wallin & Goedecke, 2016).

## 2.2 Age and "life cycle"

In addition to gender, age — linked with life-cycle — is considered as the most determining variable for sociability (Maisonneuve, 2004). Not only the time spent with friends decreases as the years pass, but the structure of one's friendship network and the role of friends in one's life change (Héran, 1988). There are indeed three key stages in the evolution of adult sociability: "youth is the privileged time of friendships, maturity is that of working relationships, old age is that of kinship relations" (Héran, 1988, p. 9).

However, according to a study of sociability in France (Héran, 1988), age does not influence the number of friends reported in surveys. Older people report having an average of three friends - as much as younger people (Héran, 1988). The differences lie in the frequency and modalities of interactions between friends, for friendship takes more time and has a more central position in young people's life (Bidart, 2010). Young adults are indeed in privileged situation: studies, free time and celibacy characterizing this life period facilitate the establishment and the maintenance of friendships (Godechot, 2000). Besides a greater availability, friendships of youth present some structural particularities. The sociologist Bidart (2010) identifies three types of friendship network based on sociability and electiveness. "*Contextualized networks*", associated with young people, are closely related to the meeting context and are revolved around common activities

associated with respective groups. Also, young people tend to choose friends outside their family (Pahl & Pevalin, 2005), but with whom they have a great proximity in terms of lifestyle (Bidart, 2010). Young adulthood is generally seen as a period of transformation both in professional and personal life (Cavalli, Aeby, Borloz, & De Carlo, 2006). Indeed, several stages of the life-cycle, that is the different stages that structure the life in terms of sociability, occurs during this period. In fact, marriage as well as the birth of the first child are crucial thresholds for sociability. At these different phases of social life, we can observe a decrease of the number of “activities practiced with friends and in the frequency of these” (Bidart, 2010, p. 67).

### *2.3 Group/Dyad*

Beyond gender and age, social structure is considered in the literature as a differentiating factor of friendship. This dyad / group differentiation is present in studies in the field of human and social sciences, but it is little applied in research on friendship. However, we retained it because it seems relevant for it corresponds to our observations.

The dyad – the relationship between two individuals – is the smallest relational unit, and as such, is considered as the basis of social life (Simmel, 1908/2013). The study of dyads is therefore crucial for research on interpersonal relationships (Sears, 1951 cited by Chapelle, 2004). In a dyadic perspective, researchers were mainly interested in foundations, origins and causes of the relationship. Vicinity, which is the geographic proximity, age and gender homophily, as well as resemblance in lifestyle seem to be the factors that bring closer individuals. However, these are factors which can facilitate and reinforce the relation, but do not explain it and its foundation (Maisonneuve, 2004). The “group of friends” has been studied as a network, a “reference group” and as a “primary group”, but the links of friendship within this kind of relation are poorly analyzed. Yet, a study (Bidart, 2010) draws attention on some particularities of young people’s friendship groups. Young people tend to use the term “friend” in a generous way and in reality, their groups are particularly fuzzy. Friends and “others” coexist in groups and generally gather around common activities. Furthermore, Simmel (1908/2013) claims that dyads can be very intense emotionally but also very unstable; and the intensity of interactions and bonds between friends forming a group decreases when the number of group members increases.

### **3. Research method**

Since age is determining for social practices, we focalize on a specific age group. Young adulthood identified as a period especially propitious for friendship relations and as a

period of transition (Cavalli et al., 2006), seems interesting for our study. Life-cycle, even more than age, is decisive for friendship practices: the marriage and the birth of the first child has a strong restructuring influence on them (Bidart, 2010). Furthermore, young adulthood is a favorable period for consumption's fulfillment due to purchasing power's growth and active social life. Thus, our participants present a homogeneity on age and life-cycle. All of them are unmarried and they do not have children, which implies that they are not yet in the logic of a family construction. A total of 35 young women (aged 18-30 years) were recruited to take part in our research.

As a socio-anthropological research, our study explores consumer practices in female best friendship dyads through a qualitative methodology. It was judged to be the most appropriate, allowing us to explore a subject that is little discussed by marketing studies and lies in intimacy. Data were collected using phenomenological, semi-structured and, in some cases, non-directive interviews. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, but some of them, due to geographical distance, were conducted online. They were recorded, and transcripts were produced. On the interview transcripts a thematic analysis was carried out manually. "With the thematic analysis, the thematization is the central operation of the method, namely the transposition of a given corpus into a certain number of themes representative of the analyzed content and this, in relation to the orientation of research (the problematic)" (Paillé & Muchielli, 2012, p.236).

#### **4. Major Results**

Four key characteristics, describing the relation of female best friendship dyad, emerged from the analysis of our results. It is an intimate, cohesive relationship between two people attached by a strong emotional bond and can be viewed as a "fictive-kinship". Each of these four elements (intimacy, cohesion, fictive kinship, strong affect) has a specific influence on current consumer practices in the dynamics of dyads.

**Intimacy** emerges as a determining element in female best friendship dyads. It implies a strong tendency for discussion which is central in the relation. Discussions handle subjects of personal dimension, whose revelation requires great confidence in the other person. These subjects are typically related to problems concerning one's love life, health, and major life events like pregnancy. Accomplishment of intimacy in the dyad is being reinforced by a high level of trust manifested by friends towards each other. There is a certitude that the other will be there in case of need. According to the concept of the "typical-rhythm" of friendship relations (Bidart, 2010), friends get closer and cross "thresholds" over time. One of the thresholds that favors the deepening of the bond is "access to the private sphere", which

includes "the family unit" and the home. The level of intimacy characterizing the bond of best friendship is manifested by a preference for indoor activities. Stay at home and discussing is one of the principal activities of female best friends. This intimacy of best friends impacts the nature of consumption-related information exchanged between them. Interrogations concern private issues, such as health or physical appearance, with following suggestions about specific products and treatments. Furthermore, the intimacy manifested through consumer advices concerns products with a high dimension of privacy, like menstrual cup and contraception technique. These products are also strongly associated to femininity.

**Cohesivity** is another key element emerging from our results. It refers to the intense and inseparable bond connecting female best friends. Paul Wright (1982), sociologist, claims that women have a holistic perspective on friendship: "a friend is a friend". It means that if a friend is considered as "good", "she tends to be regarded as "good" with respect to all or most facets of the relationship" (Wright, 1982, p.13). Thus, female best friends tend to share all aspects of their lives and becoming "fusional". Besides, "communal orientation" is considered as a key aspect of feminine identity. Women partly define themselves in terms of a web of social relations they have (Barthelmebs, 2012), and as so, are likely to engage in shared consumption related activities (Gainer, 1995). Aligning with its "fusional" character, our findings reveal a phenomenon of co-construction of shared interest in friendship dyads which can result in having common favorite brands/stores, shared preference for particular consumer movements (organic food, veganism, zero-waste etc.) or for a leisure activity. Like other fusional dyads, such as the mother-daughter dyad (Oulad Tarada-Regany, 2012) best friends can co-construct their identity through particular shared activities.

« **Fictive kinship** » emerges from our results as a key character of female best friendship dyads. The concept of "fictive kinship" is traditionally used in anthropology where it describes the relation of friends who are referring to each other "with kin terms, such as brother, sister, father, or aunt" (Hruschka, 2010, p.47). It also has been adopted by researchers in the field of consumer behavior (Oswald, 2003) as "alternative family" which is an extended category including friends and co-workers. The "fictive kinship" of best friends expresses itself in two ways: becoming family symbolically and passing time together like a family. Friends can become "officially" family members by being the witness on each other's wedding or by becoming the godmother of their best friend's child. An unformal friendship this way is converted into a formal relation. Even when the relation is not formalized, friends can be considered as family members: they can be systematically invited to family events, such as birthdays or Christmas eve. Participation in these private events indicates that they are also accepted by and integrated in the family of their best friend. The way female best friends

spend time together shows some similarities with the way families are living together. Firstly, they do not seem to need to “do something” when they are together. Hanging around, while doing “nothing” or simple every day activities that do not require necessarily the presence of the other, like cooking or household chores, characterize female best friendship dyads. Secondly, these friends tend to be spontaneous about spending time together. As they do not need to have an “organized program”, the activities they engage in can be random and impulsive. In terms of concrete marketing issues, this can be observed as a widening of the family-oriented consumer practices. For example, while friends are taking a more and more important place in one’s social life despite the traditional extended family, they tend to be included in the family economy or even replacing it.

Our results show that female best friends cultivate deep **affection** toward each other. Although, it is not surprising as affectivity is recognized as a universal character of friendship relations (Hruschka, 2010). In fact, affection seems to be particularly salient for our participants when describing the relation with their best friend. Affectivity is manifested by a high emotional involvement in friendship practices. Female best friends are thoughtful and attentive of the other’s preferences when it comes to choosing a shared activity or offering a gift. According to Belk (1979), gifts exchanged between individuals mirror the vision of what one has of the relation. Thus, gifts offered in female best friendship dyads represents the uniqueness of the relation and the prominence one gives to it. This assumed uniqueness is often expressed through homemade presents, which work as symbols of offering a “piece of themselves” to their friend. In some cases, we observe a ship from the conception to the design of the gift. There, the symbolic charge doesn’t set in the gift itself but rather in the attention given to its design, which can be viewed as proof of good understanding of the other. It is realized, for example, by *DIY* (Do It Yourself) boxes that are commercialized and that contains ingredients and tools that enable people to assembly their “homemade” gift. We observe the primacy of the relationship on the balance of exchanges in female best friendship dyads, which is due to their strong affective bond. According to the concept of reciprocity which implies that “individuals expect their favors to be reciprocal”, individuals usually hasten to render these favors (Hruschka, 2010). However, it would seem that friends are less concerned about the balance of favors and economic exchanges between them than with strangers. It is apparent when paying drinks, inviting the friend in restaurants or offering gifts.

#### **4. Implications**

The key theoretical contribution of our research is that it investigates a highly underexplored relation in marketing: female dyadic best friendship. Firstly, it provides an

understanding of this relationship by revealing its key characteristics. Secondly, it shows the way in which these characteristics influence consumer practices. Female best friends have a strong influence on each other's purchases by sharing intimate advices, concerning both intimate issues and intimate products. They tend to co-construct a preference for a specific consumer culture, a brand and a leisure activity. Spontaneity characterizes their shared activities and they express their affection through personalized gifts, where economic value is not priority. From a managerial view, our results have implications for both products and services. Companies should involve consumers more actively in the design of a product/service and create opportunities for personalization. For instance, they could enable consumers to include their individual choices and tastes to the design and the creation of a product and allow to add elements that unite a particular best friend dyad. There might be more opportunities for companies in the segment of products destined to best female friends, as consumers can participate in both its design and its making. Companies should offer products that are related to the universe of "DIY"; raw materials (tissues, pearls, etc.) and preconceived "DIY" kits. Service providers need to emphasize consumer participation in service design. They should offer opportunities for the personalization of services; events, wellness activities, subscriptions. These create shared memories for best friends. There seems to be a point that should be developed: participation of best female friends in the realization of service. For example, a cooking course destined to best friends, implies both the design stage (choice of the type of the cuisine) and the realization stage (cooking together). Furthermore, female best friends consume together services with high added-value, such as holidays, restaurants, spa and wellness activities. Companies should offer exclusive experiences in these segments, as female best friends have a tendency to invest in services that are as unique as their relation — and to spend money accordingly. Generally, companies should emphasize the symbolic dimension of their products and services to allow consumers to associate it with their friendship. Female best friendship dyads reveal to be a stable segment. Thus, companies should try to impose as associated to this relation, whether they offer services (restaurants, pubs, travel agencies, events agencies etc.), or products (cosmetics, clothes, etc.).

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