

«My best friends»: What influences on consumption practices? a qualitative study

Abstract

How do best friends influence each-other in their consumption practices? This is the question that our article aims to answer. Friendship, and particularly female friendship is seriously under researched by marketing scholars. We attempt to fill this gap by studying interpersonal influences in female best friend dyads and their influences on consumption. To do so, we rely on marketing, sociological, and anthropological literature and conduct a qualitative study. Our method consists of phenomenological interviews and consumption diaries, with a total of 30 informants. We focalize on a particular age group: young (18-30 years old), unmarried women without children. Our study reveals the existence of four main influences between best friends: co-construction, mimicry, prescription, and conversion. These influences do not always act as expected based on western beliefs on friendship. Practitioners should therefore consider the particularities of best friend influences and offer services/products tailored to them.

Keywords: consumer practices, female friendship, best friendship, interpersonal influences.

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INTRODUCTION

For a long time, consumer behaviour research has had the individual as the essential focus of its investigations - giving "the impression that mainstream consumption research has not moved far from an individually focused paradigm" (Askegaard and Linnett, 2011, p. 383). However, in recent years, micro-social research focusing on 'interconnected consumers' - members of small-scale social unions (dyadic, triadic or otherwise) - has gradually been launched. For marketing, the challenge of this new perspective is important. Interpersonal relationships do have varied and consequential effects on consumer behaviour (Liu et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2012a; 2012b). These influences within relationships are found to be most important when they come from close friends (Cavanaugh, 2016), as the strength of the relationship, the degree of intimacy and homophily between partners are key determinants of information exchange between consumers (De Kreyzer et al., 2019).

Despite these findings, few of these works have taken friendship as a field of study, which may be surprising since friendship is a relationship that is particularly present in collective imaginations and representations where it is constantly narrated and staged, as in the series *FRIENDS*, which has met with great popular success. Currently, friendship is conceived as the example of a fulfilled interpersonal relationship and friendship is commonly presented as a complementary, or even competing, model to the historically dominant -socially and culturally- relationship that constitutes the heterosexual couple (Duée and Nabli, 2011; Roseneil, 2011). The model of adult life, which has long been built around the couple and the family, is in fact changing significantly today. Western women are marrying later and later and are also having their first child later and later (in France, the average age of first childbirth is 30 in 2022, compared to 24 in the 1970s). Yet this phase of adult life, without children, is conducive to the development of friendships (Bidart, 2010). Although this is an important societal phenomenon, the friendship relationship remains little studied in marketing - and its influences on consumption, in particular, are insufficiently known. Therefore, we propose to enrich the work on interpersonal relationships and consumer behavior (such as the couple or the mother/daughter relationship) by introducing a relationship that seems to us to be taking a considerable place nowadays: friendship. We will take as a framework of study the model of friendship that seems to us the strongest the so-called "best friends" model that exists essentially in dyadic form (Felmler et al., 2012).

We study this friendship relation in a particular age group that seems to be neglected by researchers studying consumer behaviour. Indeed, the behaviour of the adolescent consumer is now well documented (e.g. Gentina et al., 2012), the female consumer within a couple (Khemakhem, 2005), as a mother in the family unit (Mcneil and Graham, 2014) or in the mother-daughter dyad (Ruvio et al., 2013) is also well documented, but the pivotal stage between these two periods suffers from a lack of scientific work. It lies between the young person's departure from the family unit of origin and the construction of their own family as an adult. The boundaries remain unclear, so we delimit them artificially: the study concerns women between the age of 18, the age at which higher education or the first job begins, and 30, the average age of birth of the first baby among French women (Insee, 2022). Moreover, this stage of the life cycle seems to be conducive to friendships (Héran, 1988) due to the number of friends and the frequency of meetings (Bidart, 2010).

We have focused on 'in vivo' friendship relationships, leaving aside virtual friendship relationships, as the form of friendship that seems to interest researchers most at present is that which exists on social networks (friending), as numerous research studies on relationships during the Covid-19 pandemic confinements have shown that online relationships are not equivalent to physical relationships (e.g. Völker, 2023).

For this analysis, we propose a new angle of approach by taking as a starting point the nature of the relationship. Marketing research on interpersonal influences focuses on the situation of consumption (Liu et al., 2019; Gorlin and Dhar, 2012), their mechanism (Simon et al., 2016), the type of product (Reingen et al., 1984) or even the type of relationship (Cavanaugh, 2016). However, these researches never analyze the characteristics of the relationship within which the studied influences operate. While it has been shown that influences between people who have a strong bond with each other are also stronger (Granovetter, 1973), the nature of the relationship in question has never really been taken into account in the analysis of influences. We therefore pose as a problem to be explored: how are influences between best friends (between women who are in a strong, dyadic, mutual relationship), different from influences that occur in other strong, dyadic relationships? Banerji et al. (2020) propose that the answer lies in the mechanisms and deep nature of the friendship relationship. Our proposal is therefore to start from the characteristics of the "best friends" relationship based on the literature and then resonate them with the behaviors and types of influences that a study of consumption practices in the field reveals. More precisely, the objective is to understand how the specificities of the "best friends" relationship allow the implementation of particular types of influences and to understand how these differ or resemble the dyadic relationships already studied.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Interpersonal influences

The topic of interpersonal influences has long been of interest to marketing researchers (Park and Lessig, 1977) but most of them reason in a dual way (e.g., Krumme et al., 2012) by distinguishing between informational influence on the one hand, and normative influence on the other (e.g., Bravo et al., 2006). These influences within relationships turn out to be more important when they come from close relatives (Cavanaugh, 2016) and are moderated by the respective roles played by each in the relationship. Thus, within distinguishable dyads, where partners occupy specific roles and/or have constraints (e.g. a married couple), the influences are different from those of indistinguishable dyads where partners are equal and occupy similar roles (Bagozzi, 2012), which seems a priori to be the case of a dyad formed by best friends.

The nature of the relationship

The nature of the relationship between two people influences the exchange of information between them (Chen, 2017). The closer the relationship, the more influential it is, in terms of consumption in particular.

Messages from acquaintances (as opposed to strangers) are considered more credible (Harrison-Walker, 2001), have a greater influence on consumers' expectations (Anderson and Salisbury, 2003), purchase decision, and attitude and judgment towards the brand (Godes and Mayzlin, 2004). Certain characteristics of the relationship such as its strength, the credibility of the source and the homophily between the partners are crucial in the exchange of information between consumers (De Kreyzer et al., 2019).

The strength of the relationship is determined, among other things, by the importance attached to it and its degree of intimacy. The concept of homophily refers to the similarity that members of a dyad may have in certain attributes - when the similarity relates to socio-demographic variables, it is called demographic homophily and when it relates to values, preferences, lifestyle or experiences, it is called perceived homophily (Gilly et al., 1998). People who are similar are more likely to interact. Products used by similar people are assumed to be suitable for oneself (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2008). As for credibility, it is strong if the source is considered expert and trustworthy. Expertise can be defined as 'the extent to which a speaker is perceived as being able to make correct claims' and trustworthiness refers to 'the extent to which an audience perceives the claims made by a communicator to be those that the speaker considers valid' (Pornpitakpan, 2004: 244). Trust (related to reliability) has a positive influence on the exchange and sharing of information between individuals (Chai et al., 2011). Various studies show that Western friendship, especially as it exists between women, has all these characteristics (strength, credibility, homophily) that can enhance mutual influence.

Friendship

The conception of friendship is not homogeneous in all societies - it differs according to gender, age, life cycle and social class (Bidart, 2010). But some characteristics can be more or less generalised. Friendship can be defined in the West as loyalty, caring, honesty, truthfulness and reciprocity (Spencer and Pahl, 2006), which essentially unite unrelated people (Pahl and Spencer, 2004). This last point, the liberal nature of a chosen relationship, is a strong mark of this Western conception. Privacy and self-disclosure are also important elements of Western friendships (Castaneda and Burns, 2008). Allan (2003) also emphasises the egalitarian nature of the relationship. Friends are supposed to be equal in terms of power and emotional, symbolic and material exchange. Friendships therefore tend to develop between people who have common social backgrounds, interests and lives (Pahl, 2011).

The figure of the best friend acts, in our representations, as the ideal-type of this relationship, which is also embodied in a concrete way in the social sphere. Thus, most psychosocial studies identify three levels of friendship: casual relationships, close friends and best friends. These levels are strongly and positively correlated with levels of interpersonal commitment (Policarpo, 2015) and investments in time and emotional commitment (Hall and Davis, 2017). The more intimate a relationship is, the more emotional and material resources it provides and, generally, the longer it lasts (Hall, 2012). In fact, most of the characteristics of friendship (listed above: loyalty, caring, honesty, truthfulness, and reciprocity) are most evident in relationships with close or best friends (Hruschka, 2010).

Friendship between women is a particularly intimate relationship, characterised by self-disclosure and thus, a high propensity for discussion (Baumgarte and Nelson, 2009). In addition, female friends have high expectations of trust, emotional support (Felmlee et al., 2012) and displays of affection (Argyle and Henderson, 1984). In order to meet these expectations, the friendships maintained by women are most often dyadic (David-Barrett et al., 2015).

Influences in different types of dyads

Although the best friend relationship has not yet been addressed by research on interpersonal influences, other consumer units, such as the couple and the mother-daughter dyad (teenage daughter or young adult), have been the

focus of numerous studies. These studies show that interpersonal influences vary within each type of relationship. The members occupy different roles and the influences vary depending on whether they come from the daughter or mother (mother-daughter dyad), husband or wife (couple) (Wolfe, 1959). For example, in the case of the mother-daughter dyad, in a shopping context the mother's influence on the daughter is on the price and suitability of the outfit (Decoopman & Gentina-Dancoine, 2013) while the daughter's influence on the mother is on the style of the outfit (Kestler & Paulins, 2004). Similarly, the influence of spouses is more or less strong depending on their degree of specialization in the field concerned (Davis and Rigaux, 1974), but also on their professional status (women who do not work outside the home have less influence) (Lee and Beatty, 2008). Confrontations are likely to arise when these influences are exercised within the couple (Berrada, 2011) but also in the mother-daughter dyad (Oulad-Tarada, 2012).

The above presented researches highlight the specifics of relationship-related consumption influences; they often analyze the consumption context but do not really show how the relationship characteristics induce consumption influences. We therefore align our research in this trajectory by drawing on this literature but propose to establish more strongly the link between relationship characteristics and the resulting consumption influences.

METHODOLOGY

The relationship between the dyad and consumption implies not only examining individual consumption resulting from the interaction between friends, but also the existence of consumption practices specific to the dyad itself, i.e. highlighting a phenomenon that is not the simple sum of the consumption practices of each member of the dyad. In the friendship dyad the influence is largely pre-reflexive and therefore the phenomenon of imitation does not proceed from the transmission of information as an essential mode. This implies to be attentive to the practices and justifies the ethnographic approach. To this end, we have constructed a study, the methodology of which we present below.

Sample

Our informants have a homogeneous profile in terms of age (18 to 30) and life cycle. They are not married but sometimes live in a couple; they do not have children (however, some of them have a best friend who already has children). In total, 30 French girls of different professional status (half of them are students and half of them are young professionals) participated in our study.

Research design

Two methods were used to produce the data: phenomenological interviews based on a semi-structured interview guide (n = 23) and event-based design (Du, 2012) auto-ethnographic diaries (n = 7) which were kept for one month. The average duration of the interviews, which were fully transcribed, was 56 minutes. They focused on best friend consumption practices and experiences in various consumption situations: joint consumption with the best friend and individual consumption, with a focus on interpersonal influences. Following Kaufmann's (2016) recommendations, the meetings with the participants were more like a discussion around our research topic than an interview. Indeed, by triggering a conversational dynamic, the participants more easily opened up. The interviews focused on the participants' concrete experiences, asking them, for example, to tell us about the last time they had gone shopping together with their friend(s). This allows them to provide a more complete and detailed description (Thompson et al., 1989). The structure of the interviews can be found in Appendix 1. Participants were recruited through various channels: personal network, at the university among students, online on social networks. Then the "snowball" technique was used in order to have more participants.

The auto-ethnographic study was carried out by means of diaries in which the informants described their shopping experiences with their friends immediately after they had been carried out. Recruiting participants for the autoethnographic study proved to be a challenge. Keeping an autoethnographic diary for a month is an exercise that requires much more mental investment and time from participants than an interview. For example, at the beginning of the study, 30 girls agreed to participate, but in the end, only 7 returned their diaries. In total, we received descriptions of twenty-three shopping experiences that conformed to the instructions we gave them (Appendix 2).

Table 1
Profile of the participants in phenomenological interviews

Participant's code	Age	Profession/Activity	Family situation
P1	25	Commercial	in couple
P2	26	Data analyst	in couple
P3	25	In civic service	in couple
P4	28	PhD student	in couple
P5	27	Salesperson	in couple
P6	20	University student	in couple
P7	27	Archeologist	single
P8	26	School teacher	single
P9	19	University student	in couple
P10	20	University student	single
P11	20	University student	in couple
P12	25	Etiopath	in couple
P13	21	University student	single
P16	22	University student	in couple
P17	18	University student	in couple
P18	23	University student	in couple
P19	28	Gallery assistant	in couple
P20	22	University student	single
P21	23	In civic service	single
P22	25	Pharmacist	single
P23	25	Agricultural engineer	in couple

Table 2
Profile of the participants in the diary study

Participant's code	Profession/Activity	Recrutement
J1	Salesperson	Personal network
J2	University student	online
J3	University student	online
J4	University student	online
J5	University student	online
J6	University student	online
J7	University student	in class

Analysis

The analysis work began with the data from the phenomenological interviews. Following Spiggle's (1994) recommendations, we adopted a two-phase analysis: first a thematic analysis, then an interpretation phase. We began by analysing each interview separately in search of themes related to our problem, and then the themes from all the interviews were compared by looking for similarities and differences. For the treatment of the diary narratives we followed the same procedure. This thematic analysis phase was followed by the conceptualisation phase, the aim of which was to find the "underlying logics" of the identified behaviours. We went back through all our interviews and narratives to re-read them. During this re-reading we tried to look at the results from above (Paillé and Mucchielli, 2016). The creation of categories consisted of grouping or dividing themes to establish the appropriate categories.

RESULTS

Interpersonal relationships, as discussed above, have many effects on consumption behaviour (Cavanaugh, 2016; Liu et al., 2019; Simpson et al., 2012a; 2012b). The nature of the 'best friend' relationship (strong temporal and emotional commitment, intimacy, honesty and trust) is particularly suited to the exercise of various influences. We have identified four main types of influence: "co-construction", "mimicry", "prescription" (a preferred term to recommendation which relates more to an information transmission model) and "conversion". One or more types may be present within the same relationship. These influences, whether unidirectional or reciprocal, even contribute to shaping the identity of the best friend dyad to some extent. Their purpose seems to be the same: to achieve a homogeneity within the dyad that is sufficiently strong for the relationship to approach the fusional ideal that underlies the friendship imaginary.

Co-construction

Our informants are at a specific moment in their lives, they are "young adults" who are constructing themselves "as autonomous individuals" (Cicchelli, 2001), hence their particular permeability to discourse on the ethical, environmental, health and even philosophical implications of consumption patterns in industrial society. Moreover, they have sufficient resources (temporal and cognitive) that allow them to engage in such processes. They co-construct common interests (related to hobbies or consumption practices) among best friends over time through regular conversations and contacts.

Best friends play a particular role: they advise each other and give examples of other ways of consuming. It is a two-way process: one does not tend to adopt entirely the habits of the other, but the intimate dialectic of their relationship gives rise to a new consensus that leads to a common reconfiguration of consumption patterns. The co-construction of an ecological mode of consumption thus involves, for example, the gradual adoption of habits such as zero waste, composting, or the manufacture of organic cosmetics.

"It is little by little, she is also in quite a lot of everything natural, but more on the zero waste. There, we pass on tricks, things we have seen on the right, on the left. That's where we're going to influence each other more: "Oh, well, I found this toothpaste" and it's at that level (...) It's things that we each started to do a little bit on our own; to be more mindful, and then we'll talk about it, "Oh, well, I took such and such a decision", and then we'll start talking, "Oh, I'm doing it this way, I'm doing it that way". At the moment, she has started to compost, so she explained to me, she showed me, and like that little by little..." (P16).

They are interested in consumer practices that are constantly changing (zero waste, veganism or organic food). Due to the changing consumer environment and the general climate of mistrust towards companies, finding relevant information on new products, trends and recommendations seems to be a difficult task for them. In these circumstances, the best friend, perceived as a reliable source of information due to the confidential and trusting nature of the relationship, and with whom they share the same values (perceptual homophily), plays an important advisory role. In terms of engaging in new consumption practices, the dyad provides a mutually supportive framework that enables friends to take their approach further. In this sense, the relationship becomes a source of encouragement and motivation.

"We often discuss because as these things are in constant movement, it is not necessarily easy to find information. We have discussions, I take this and that, etc. And we often discuss the things we test and if we find it practical and good or not." (P7).

Co-construction also concerns shared passions. H el ene (P18) tells us how she and her best friend began to take an interest in Japanese culture together. Their interest in Japan started with the common reading of manga and grew over the years until it became a real passion that now extends to several cultural aspects (cooking, literature, music, etc.). This shared passion fuels their conversations, triggers common leisure activities and gives a perspective to their relationship when they prepare a trip to Japan. Indeed, by co-constructing common interests, the friends nourish their relationship and ensure its sustainability. Shared activities, exchange of advice and emotions strengthen the friendship and the likelihood of the relationship surviving is greater when friends share many common interests and hobbies (Roberts and Dunbar, 2011).

Mimicry

The imitation observed is carried out, between friends, either by conviction or by desire. Imitation by conviction results from a rational decision by the consumer who is spontaneously convinced of the virtues (effectiveness, quality, etc.) of a product/service. It is often the result of the observation and recognition of these virtues, through a friend, without any promotional discourse coming from her (ideological, aesthetic, etc.) or from a third party (commercial). This widespread phenomenon has immediate and direct consequences on consumption, specifically it leads to purchase. Imitation by desire, on the other hand, is an act that can be considered irrational because it is the subjective dimension (aesthetic, symbolic, emotional, etc.) of a product that convinces the consumer, and not a reasonable critical examination of the good/

service in question. This consumption is triggered by an impulsive desire to possess a product or benefit from a service. Yet no one would imitate the purchase of an average person in front of them at the checkout! Again, it is the perceived trust and homophily that allows for the existence of powerful mimicry between best friends and suggests to Nita (J7) that she should pick up the same moisturising lip gloss as her friend, just before going to the checkout: *"We all look around the shop together first, then separately. We then meet up to show each other what we have found, Mathilde tells me that she has found some kind of moisturising gloss, I then ask her how much it costs, and I decide to get one for myself too"* (J7).

Prescription

By prescription, we mean the recommendation of a product by a consumer whose experience and knowledge give credibility to the discourse. Our study allowed us to differentiate five types of prescription: intimate, informational, for a special occasion, by expertise and a prescription that allows a change in the consumer universe.

The intimate prescription is a direct result of the highly confidential nature of the relationship between best friends. The possibility of confiding in each other and of evoking the most intimate considerations in the discussions leads them to share advice on subjects that require a strong trust, in terms of consumption, it is most often about health problems (e.g.: skin problems) or intimate products (e.g.: menstrual cup). *"It was Clémence who made me buy mine [the menstrual cup], she's the one who told me about it, who advised me, who gave me the website, who told me "go for it!"* (P3). However, this privilege of access to the other's private sphere also has an instrumental aspect: there is a strong expectation of advice, opinions, shared experiences and support from the best friend. *"As we both have sensitive skin [...] if something works we talk about it and then we try it afterwards, to see if it works for us too or not [...] For example, I know that she has sensitive skin and that she is trying to stop taking cortisone, so I talked to her about coconut oil and it's true that she tested it"* (P5).

An almost purely informational influence also finds its place in the dyad, not surprisingly. It is not an influence related to the deep character of the relationship. However, it is important to emphasise that it is not only about female products and services, as the media and advertisements may lead us to believe. The regular meetings and exchanges between best friends on a daily basis give rise to exchanges on various phenomena with a consumer dimension (culture, sport, food etc.).

The best friend is present at important events in life. In terms of consumption, this translates into assistance with special purchases, such as a wedding dress. Usually the two people who accompany the purchase of the wedding dress are the mother of the bride and the best friend. The role of the best friend in this symbolic procedure shows her privileged place. This is both a privilege, because ordinary friends are not so intimately associated with the important events, and an obligation, which is a matter of loyalty, the indispensable character of the friendship bond. The best friend is an honest advisor, and the trust placed in her and the shared tastes mean that her opinion can be relied upon without fear.

"She booked an appointment in a rather chic wedding store in Le Mans, she tried on 4-5 dresses and I helped her choose the one that was the most beautiful, so of course it was emotional, a real princess dress. She hesitated, so we went back to validate her choice, because she hesitated between two dresses, and she was afraid not to choose the right one, I told her that she did, but she hesitated, so we went back a second time. Finally the first choice that was made was the right one. And the second time there was her mom too." (S6).

A source of information is traditionally considered credible if it is expert and reliable (Pornpitakpan, 2004). Friends who are highly competent in a field are considered 'experts' and their advice is taken very seriously and accepted without question. In our study, two types of expertise emerged: the first concerns in-depth knowledge of a field or product, and the second concerns knowledge of a geographical location. One of our participants turns to her best friend to choose an aloe vera product, because she *"is just a big fan of aloe vera and I've been saying for a while that I could buy some, but I would ask for advice on which one to buy"* (P7), it would also save her the time and mental effort spent on choosing the right product.

The influence between best friends changes when they go outside their usual context. The knowledge of the local environment, especially if it is another country, influences their choices: the one who does not know the environment follows the suggestions of the other without much hesitation. Aurélie (P2), whose friend has Bolivian origins, talks about her holiday in Bolivia: *"She took us to Bolivian shops, to very smart shops, if you want to get used to it, in fact, you have to follow what Maria tells you [...] she really guided us [...] Maria told us that we had to drink coffee in such and such a cafe, and in fact we didn't drink any other coffee than in the cafe Maria told us about"*.

The influence of the best friend is even stronger if it allows for the modification of the habitus, even if this wish is not always conscious. It is a question of changing one's 'social capital' with the help of the best friend, who in this case plays a guiding role in order to first become familiar with and finally acquire new codes of behaviour and ways of living. The change in the 'social universe' naturally implies a change in the consumer universe. For example, Ines, who came from a modest background, began to discover a new world when she became financially independent and left the family home for good. Her new best friend, as she refers to her, guides her in this new world: *"Karine is very, very close to fashion, her*

house is always super fashionable and so she makes me discover a lot of things and I follow the movement a bit... there are things that I would never have bought before and now that I work and I have more means I let myself be tempted (...) I don't have money problems (any more) to buy them.) I'm not (any more) afraid if I wear heels, a nice jacket, a nice top, nice trousers, a bit of make-up, I feel good and I'm comfortable like that (...) For social networks it's the same, if it wasn't for Karine I think I would never have come on Instagram and Pinterest. She told me "Ines, you like doing that, you'd like it and all that". It's true that my upbringing meant that I was always forbidden to use Facebook, networks... so I never wanted to do it and then when I was shown how it was and everything..." (P23).

Conversion

Our society, more than ever before, is witnessing the emergence and continuation of new ideological movements that are associated either with one-off acts (e.g. #metoo) or with radical lifestyle changes (e.g. veganism). The field of friendship is not left out of these trends. When the best friend holds a militant or quasi-militant discourse for a particular cause that is close to her heart (e.g. ecology, zero waste, animal welfare, etc.), she exerts an intentional and normative influence on her friend's practices (especially consumption). She tries to convert her, explicitly or implicitly, to the cause in question. This is where we find the particularity of conversion: it implies the adoption of certain values which then guide consumption. The sharing of values, one of the pillars of the friendship relationship, seems indispensable to the concept of perceptual homophily, which sees a risk of extinction of the friendship if the worldviews of two friends diverge too much.

If the options are clearly expressed and are the subject of partisan discourse, then it is an explicit conversion. Cynthia (P21) clearly insists that her best friend should adopt zero waste:

"Sylvie [one of her best friends], I really talked to her a lot, I really insisted that she do it.

- She wasn't up for it at first?

- At the beginning, she gave me a lot of arguments: "Yes, but I don't have the time, the children and all that"... But it doesn't take that much time, just organisation, so we really argued about it."

Sometimes the friend is more cautious and tries to act in an implicit way. Instead of using a legitimising discourse, she advances by the force of the example given, by the capacity of attraction inherent in a practice. Jade now shops at a local farmers' market since she discovered this practice with her friend Isabelle (P19). In this case, Isabelle did not need to develop an argument or explicitly refer to an ideological or moral frame of reference to convert her friend: the practical demonstration was enough. This type of less radical, potentially less conflictual conversion therefore puts the relationship at less risk.

DISCUSSION, FUTURE RESEARCH AND IMPLICATIONS

Discussion

The phenomena of interpersonal influence between girlfriends listed above are apparently contradictory to the Western conception of friendship. Indeed, the best friend dyad is conceived in our culture as an 'indistinguishable' dyad (Bagozzi, 2012) whose members a priori occupy similar roles (unlike the couple or the mother-daughter dyad). However, the observation of the mechanisms of influence highlights a role asymmetry within this relationship. Indeed, although best friends influence each other, they mainly exert influences related to their respective roles, like the members of the distinguished dyads. Thus, the egalitarian and reciprocal characteristics attributed to friendship do not hold true in terms of interpersonal influence, particularly in the area of consumption. The phenomenon of expert prescription, or even conversion, illustrates this aspect. The two main interpersonal influences identified in the literature (normative and informational) therefore act in the dynamics of dyadic female friendship.

In the same friendship it is possible to find a change in the type of influence according to the products and knowledge of each one. This fits in well with the aspect of exchange between friends who can sometimes and in certain areas be in prescription and in others in conversion or in mimicry. The scope of these influences also overlaps with the sociological characteristics of female friendship described above. The high degree of intimacy between friends allows for the development of interpersonal influences that relate to specific consumer products. This is the case, for example, with advice on personal hygiene, underwear or health problems. These influences are all the stronger because they are based on a representation of dyadic friendship based on honesty and truth.

Indeed, one of the particularities of the best friend relationship is the obligation to establish a very strong trust compared to other types of relationships (Hruschka, 2010), notably to the mother-daughter relationship where trust can exist but is not mandatory.

The fundamental role of trust must be placed in the current context of consumers' growing distrust of the company

and traditional marketing tools (Nielsen, 2015). Our results corroborate, from this perspective, Hayes et al.'s (2016) observation that consumers have more trust in people with whom they have strong ties. Thus, trust in the friend appears to enable safer and less suspicious consumption. Furthermore, best friend trust concerns intimate areas that allow for an exchange of information not found in most marketing strategies. Whether it is a question of taboos, confidential subjects or the desire to ensure a reliable and disinterested source of information, the friendship offers, in this respect, a framework of consumption perceived as reliable and privileged.

Our results indicate that this trust is not without consequences in terms of consumption. It acts, among other factors, on the phenomenon of word-of-mouth, which is present in prescription but also in co-construction and conversion. Word-of-mouth is more effective between acquaintances than between strangers (Hayes et al., 2016), its effectiveness increases with the strength of the relationship, the level of credibility of the source and the level of homophily between the partners (De Kreyzer et al., 2019). Of course, there are other strong interpersonal relationships, however, we doubt that word-of-mouth can be as effective there as it is in the best friendship.

Indeed, what best distinguishes the couple relationship and the mother-daughter dyad from the relationship of the best friendship is homophily. Socio-demographic homophily cannot exist in either the mother-daughter relationship (generational difference) or the heterosexual couple (gender difference). Perceived homophily can exist in these relationships, but this is not the rule (e.g. perceived homophily between mother and teenage daughter?).

As De Bruyn and Lilien (2008) argue, a product that is suitable for a homophile is considered suitable for oneself. In the case of the best friend dyad, homophily joins the characteristics of trust and intimacy that make the influences present within this relationship particularly strong.

The exercise of influence does not cause conflict in the best friend dyad. In this respect it is also different from other types of strong dyadic relationships. Research shows that for example between mother and daughter (Oulad-Tarada, 2012) or between spouses (Berrada, 2011) the influences of the members can cause conflicts. A possible explanation could be rooted in the foundation of the relationship. Indeed, friends are chosen relationships (Pahl, 2004). Their unity therefore is neither natural (as in the mother-daughter dyad) nor "official" (as in the couple), so the relationship must be maintained permanently and preserved from conflict.

Managerial Implications

Girls, Sex and the City, Pretty Little Liars or Faking It, these successful television series are newly featuring and promoting female friendship. The sign BFF, for Best Friends Forever, has entered the codes of communication - insisting, beyond the idea of a very strong friendship, on the permanence of the feeling and thus suggesting a horizon of certainty, assurance and trust. This status of BFF, displayed on Instagram, is highly valued.

Generally speaking, the advertising use of friendship can be effective in creating an emotional connection with the target audience. By showing friends interacting and sharing life moments, brands can evoke an emotional resonance with consumers. Ads that use friendship as a communication axis can convey positive values, such as trust, loyalty and fidelity, authenticity and inclusion. All values that are important to strengthen the brand's reputation and image by halo. Furthermore, ads that feature friends sharing positive experiences with a product or brand can encourage consumers, through identification with these experiences, to make recommendations. Brands can also consider the psychological closeness between friends as claimed by them - as an identity. As the friends in each dyad have relationships that they consider exceptional and can expect the co-consumed brands to echo their relationship, it may be necessary for these brands to think in terms of "dyadic identity". This implies, in the B to C logic, a particular personalization of the relationship with each dyad that materializes its entitativity and uniqueness.

Brand attachment is often thought of in an exclusively individual framework, thus neglecting the fact that it can also be the effect of social interactions between people who are strongly linked. Our research points to the need to consider attachment in a dyadic framework. Several new questions need to be investigated: Does this attachment result in an identical commitment of the two friends? What happens when the relationship between the friends weakens or when the dyad disappears? Can it endure, in a nostalgic mode? How are individual actions reconciled with those developed within the dyadic framework?

Another marketing leverage identified in our research consists of exploiting the particularities of the influences within the best friend dyad. This leverage is based on another fundamental characteristics of this relationship: the very strong trust between the friends. From this perspective, some managerial recommendations can be put forward. Conversion is one of the strongest influences to emerge from our research. Exploiting this effectively means first and foremost identifying the best friend as one of the strongest normative vectors for holistic behaviours such as diets, zero waste and local consumption. The idea is to use the trust that exists between friends to promote this particular 'cause'. Prescription is a word-of-mouth phenomenon, so it's a spontaneous way of disseminating information about a product, and in most cases

it's a strategy opposed to methods of dissemination designed and controlled for mass advertising purposes. Prescription is based on a relationship with a person in whom we have a deep sense of trust and proximity, and this person cannot, by definition, be consciously enrolled in a marketing strategy. The use of prescription by the marketer must therefore be seen, on one hand, as a constraint to be integrated into the development of strategies and, on the other hand, as a leverage to be used with caution. The "imitation by conviction" type of influence is based on the proximity (in terms of homophily and intimacy) of best friends. This proximity gives access to the private sphere and means that products consumed in private (beauty products, hygiene products, kitchen products, etc.) can be seen in an exclusive space. What's more, these products are potentially suitable for them (high level of perceived and social homophily between best friends). This suggests that it is important to emphasise the visual identity of the products and, when designing the packaging, to focus on the visual message to be conveyed. Products that are easily recognisable at first glance by their design transform the place where they are used daily into a place of *in vivo* exposure. As for the phenomenon of co-construction of leisure activities and modes of consumption, marketers who want to target best friends should first encourage co-construction, and then facilitate its development. During the incentive phase, the aim should be to get the best friends interested in a particular leisure or consumption activity. Assuming that the proposed service succeeds in becoming the basis of sociability and that the friends co-construct a shared preference for it, the next step is to facilitate the co-construction phenomenon. The aim is then to anchor this service or mode of consumption in the dyad's habitus and associate it with their identity. First of all, we recommend creating specific offers aimed at building the loyalty of best friends (for example, duo commitments in sports brands), but also systematically addressing the commercial rhetoric to the dyad, and not individually to each of its members.

Future research and limitations

Although our research was conducted before the Covid-19 crisis, we see the need to place our study in the perspective of the current health situation. Thus, future research should consider the impact of the current pandemic on friendship and friendship patterns, including changes in consumption. Friendships are non-familial intimacies, elective affinities, born of coincidence, and are lodged in the interstices of more clearly defined social positions, outside the broad sphere of contractual relationships. These special bonds are based on a series of privileged moments - shared actions and confidences, the joy of reunion, moments of fusion. Friendships need physical proximity to flourish. Yet friendships are essential to well-being: they allow us to support and help each other, long before we have fun together. True friends are our 'refuges', people with whom we can share the joys and difficulties of life.

The pandemic situation has restructured friendships. Recent studies have shown that lockdown has led many people to 'sort' their relationships and refocus on certain people - their best friends (Ayers et al., 2021; Philpot et al., 2021). In other words, friendships have become fewer in number and, at the same time, more select. Among the notable facts, homophilic relationships were found to be the most strengthened during this period (Bidart, 2021).

Individual differences may nuance the interplay of influences within the best friend dyad. In particular, the consumer's agency-communion orientation (the tendency to focus on self or others) plays a moderating role when it comes to a friend's influence on consumption expenditure (Kurt et al., 2011). Furthermore, receptivity to normative influences also impacts consumption expenditure; receptive individuals tend to avoid shopping together with friends and to enjoy these activities less with friends who have differing tastes, in order to avoid feeling the social pressure exerted by these norms (Mangleburg et al., 2004). Studying these individual differences is an interesting direction for future research on consumption behaviour among friends.

Our research has certain limitations, mainly related to the construction of the sample. Indeed, our study would benefit from a wider and more varied sample of participants. We were forced to restrict our sample to one social class. Thus, almost all of our participants are middle class and are (or have been) in higher education. Many of our participants are still students. This could potentially introduce a bias, since it implies limited financial resources on the one hand and, on the other, the feeling and practice of friendship vary according to social class (Bidart, 1991). In addition, all our participants were women aged between 18 and 30, who were not yet married and did not yet have children. It would be interesting to study friendship in another age group, such as young parents as the birth of a first child leads to a restructuring of social relationships (Bidart, 2010). During this period, some friendships disappear while others are strengthened, which no doubt has consequences for consumption practices.

CONCLUSION

Marketing suffers from a lack of research on female friendship. Indeed, the topic has hardly been addressed in marketing despite the extent to which the phenomenon is growing in society. Yet, if 'friendships are flourishing like never

before' (Yalom and Brown, 2015), which is arguably not without consequences for consumption patterns, researchers need to follow this movement and document its implications for marketing.

After tracing the main characteristics of friendship in general, and female friendship in particular, by mobilising knowledge dispersed in disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, we studied the particularities of their implications in terms of consumption. The accounts of our informants clearly show the existence of a set of specific influences within this relationship. The four influences identified by our study (co-construction, mimicry, prescription and conversion) complement the literature on interpersonal influences on consumption behaviour.

Our research makes an important contribution by exploring a previously unexplored field in marketing. Although there is a rich literature on interpersonal relationships in marketing, recent works focus almost exclusively on social networks. However, online friendships are different from those that exist in real life. We study patterns of interpersonal influence outside of social networks, investigating how friendship is experienced in practice today.

We are interested in friendship between women, as well as how it is experienced within the female dyad, an area that to our knowledge has not yet been explored in the marketing context. In addition, consumer behavior research that focuses on friendship is very limited, and when it does, it focuses primarily on friendship among younger consumers, particularly adolescents. By exploring friendship specifically among young adults aged 18-30, we fill an important gap that has been neglected so far.

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Appendix 1

Parts of the phenomenological interviews

Parts of the interviews	Examples of questions
Presentation and theme of the interview	
Acquaintance	At the beginning of the discussions, the respondents were asked to introduce themselves. They talked about their family and professional situation, their studies and their hobbies.
Friendship and Female Friendship	We began the interview with a general, open-ended question, asking our respondents what friendship means to them. Then we asked them what female friendship was more specifically, and if there were any particularities to this form of friendship.
You and friendship	We asked respondents to describe their circle of friends, whether they differentiated between different types of friends, and to describe the evolution of these relationships, whether they had a best friend(s), and the specifics of that relationship(s).
Friendship practices	Time spent with friends and especially with best friend(s), how they communicate between meetings and activities when they are together.
Friendship and Consumption	During the interviews, the following topics were discussed by the participants: food shopping, shopping, vacations, birthdays, gifts, hobbies, restaurants, bars, parties. They told about the last time they went shopping with their friend(s). How the shopping or food shopping went, how they paid, how they chose products, where they shopped together.
Influences of friends on consumption practices	We asked our respondents if, in general, they think their friend(s) influence their consumption and if they influence their friend(s)' consumption.

Appendix 2

Instructions to diary study participants

Consumption diary
 period: 30 November - 23 December

- In your journal, write about and analyze your shopping experiences with your friends over the next month.
- Pay particular attention to the interactions you have with your friend during the purchasing experience.
- Be observant! To retain as many details as possible, write down your experiences on the same day in your notebook.
- Mail me your experiences of the week every Monday (10/12, 17/12 and 23/12)
- You can make your productions anonymous, by changing the mentioned names and by not specifying your identity on the document.