Alet’s Make a Trip Together®: an Exploration Into Decision Making Within Groups of Friends

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an exploratory interpretative study of decision making within groups of friends. Eighteen groups were observed and interviewed while making leisure decisions. Emerging findings highlight the functions related to friend parties and their decision-making process. A conceptualisation with four major decision-making steps (i.e., suggestion, discussion and evaluation, organization, and post-experience evaluation) is suggested, which departs from traditional models such as the EKB model. Further, the major issues of conflict and role distribution are discussed. An original typology of groups of friends closes the paper.

INTRODUCTION

Group decision making has benefited from substantial consideration in many disciplines (social psychology, law, political sciences, etc.). In marketing and consumer behavior, many studies have been conducted on family decision making. The focus was first on couples (Davis and Rigaux 1974; Davis 1976; Green et al. 1983; Nichols and Snepenger 1988) while children were later included (Darley and Lim 1986; Howard and Madrigal 1990; Thornton, Shaw, and Williams 1997). Organizational buying behavior is another domain such as the groups have been investigated as decision-making units (DMU’s; Dwyer, Schurr, and Oh 1987; Webster and Wind 1972).

A group involves members who share something in common: “two or more persons who are interacting with one another in such a manner that each person influences or is influenced by each other person” (Shaw 1976, p. 11). According to Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel (2001), groups may have a normative, a value-expressive, or an informative influence on decision making. Three dichotomies are suggested: primary versus secondary; formal versus informal; and aspirational versus dissociative groups. Primary groups are regarded as “a social aggregation that is sufficiently intimate to permit and facilitate unrestricted face-to-face interaction” (p. 397) and are characterized by a high level of cohesiveness. In contrast, secondary groups are more occasional, “more sporadic, less comprehensive, and less influential in shaping thought and behavior” (p. 397). Formal groups have a defined structure with (most often written) rules, a known list of members and requirements for membership, while informal groups have a loser structure and are likely to be based on friendship ties or common interests. Finally, aspirational groups refer to parties with which the individual aspires to associate by adopting its norms, values, and behavior whereas, in contrast, s/he will try to avoid any association with dissociative groups.

Group decisions may be defined as decisions “made by two or more individuals who have the inclination and ability to influence the outcome and who are subject to a constraint or constraints preventing them from making independent decisions” (Cofiman 1987, pp. 229-230). A distinction can be made between three types of DMU’s for consumer goods and services: singles, families (couples with or without children), and friend parties. A lot of decision-making models incorporate friends as part of the social environment, which impacts on decisions and purchases in terms of information, norms, and socialization. As reference group, friends exert a major influence on most aspects of consumer behavior and, more particularly, on the decision-making process (DMP; Frenzen and Nakamoto 1993; Peter and Olson 1994). They provide information, reward or punish the decision maker for something s/he has done, and influence the decision maker’s values and self-concept. Those three classical roles of friends have been well documented. However, few studies have focused on the group of friends as a DMU in itself (how friends make decisions together; what are the major characteristics of friend DMU’s…). Gitelson and Kerstetter (1994) have considered the DMP of travel parties visiting friends and relatives and the particular influence of the latter on the decisions made during the vacation stay. In a sociocognitive study of group DMP’s among the members of a sorority, Ward and Reingen (1990) concluded that social structure influences individual cognitive structure. Finally, Campbell (1998) has investigated decision-making processes between friends from a gender perspective. However, those works do not focus on friends as a DMU.

The first goal of this paper is to fill this gap by exploring decision making among friends. A group of friends can be defined as a set of persons sharing a mutual feeling of affection or sympathy which is not based on blood ties, nor sexual appeal. This is in line with Price and Arnold’s (1999) definition of friendship as “a voluntary, personal relationship, typically providing intimacy and assistance, in which the two parties like each other and seek each other’s company” (p. 39). Similar to what has been done for families, the objective is to understand how decisions are made within the group of friends, which role(s) each group member plays, how conflicts are solved, etc.

Friend parties may be involved in two major decision domains. The first involves “inside” decisions which arise out of a need recognition by one or more members of the group. Those decisions may include convenience goods such as cigarettes or alcohol, durables such as a car or an apartment; but most decisions actually pertain to services and leisure activities: travel and vacation, restaurants, sport and cultural activities, evening or night out parties. In contrast, other decisions are triggered by “outsiders” which require the group to make a decision. Those “outside” decisions may include school tasks or activities related to youth movements, charities, or sororities. Of course, the DMP is not likely to be the same for those two types of decisions. This is why this paper will focus on the first decision domain (i.e., decisions involving a friend party held together spontaneously and not externally controlled) and, more particularly, on leisure decisions. Friend parties indeed represent large markets for the travel, movie or catering industries.

METHODOLOGY

A naturalistic interpretive approach (Erlandson et al. 1993) seems to be the best option to explore the DMP of friend parties in all its complexity. It avoids some drawbacks of both survey and experimentation methods when studying group processes (see Chebat 1983; Kim and Lee 1997). The study was carried out in two parts. First, the actual vacation DMP of three groups of friends has been followed for a whole year in the framework of a broader project on vacation decision making (Decrop, 1999). They were interviewed in depth three times before and once after the summer
**EMERGING FINDINGS**

**Functions of groups of friends**

Different functions may be related to groups of friends. Data analysis and interpretation reveal one generic function, social integration, and three specific functions: having fun (“fun and play”), sharing opinions and emotions (“sit and talk”) and experiencing new things (“see and learn”). Of course, there is no boundary between those three functions which often come across together and have an important influence on decision making.

First and foremost, groups of friends play a major *socialisation and integration role*. For many informants, friends are vital and the best way to live a valuable social life. Having no friends is seen as a void such as illustrated by the following quotation:

*Hugues (M, 28, mechanist):* You know, my friends are really important; my life wouldn’t be the same without my friends.

You see, I know some guys who have no friends so to say, you see, guys who only live for their couple, things like that, and I believe that they really miss something…

This aspiration after friends can be connected with Maslow’s (1970) social needs of companionship, belonging and love. Being part of society is important for most consumers and friendship clearly helps this.

*Fun and play.* In many situations, the group is seen as a source of relaxation and pleasure. Having fun and playing enhance the affective nature of the relationships on which most groups of friends are grounded. Sharing similar hobbies and passions, living new and varied experiences, and feeling big thrills are leading motives. This hedonistic function is typical for younger groups of friends and is in line with the experiential nature of the leisure activities in which friends are involved (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982).

*Sit and talk.* The group is considered as the best place for sharing positive emotions or confessing problems and disillusionments. In three older groups of friends without children, the group even acts as a surrogate family. Those highly cohesive groups with a longer “history” are characterized by a need to relive the relationship they experienced before or they would have lived within a family. The group clearly serves an affective function which tends to be authentic and disinterested, such as explained by this retired woman: “What we are looking for… That’s friendship, brotherhood, exchange… As we don’t have any children, we like to see other people and, if possible, people who have children and little children.”

*See and learn.* A last emerging function is to acquire knowledge, to discover and learn new things. The group of friends fulfills a more cognitive and utilitarian role: there is a well-defined benefit in participating in group relationships and (most of the time cultural) activities. The simple pleasure of being together is not enough. This function is more relevant for adult and opportunistic (see later) groups of friends.

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**TABLE 1**

Major Characteristics of the Interviewed Friend DMU’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Size</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Family situation*</th>
<th>Decision domains</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25-50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>25-50</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>S+MNC</td>
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<td>&lt;25 M/F</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>&gt;50 M/F</td>
<td>MC+MNC</td>
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<td>5</td>
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<td>&gt;50 M/F</td>
<td>MC+MNC</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>13-14</td>
<td>25-50</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&lt;25 F</td>
<td>S</td>
<td></td>
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<td>25-50</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>MC</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>25-50</td>
<td>M/F</td>
<td>S+C</td>
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<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>&gt;50 M/F</td>
<td>MC</td>
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<td>S</td>
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<td>M/F</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&lt;25 M</td>
<td>S</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Legend: S=single; C=non married couple; MC=married with children; MNC: married without children
The previous functions are much in line with Saint Arnaud’s (1974) early typology of interpersonal relationships of warmth, cooperative and heuristic relationships. The warmth relationship can be connected with the “sit and talk” function. People strike up a friendship in order to satisfy their need to love and to be loved. The cooperative relationship pertains to individuals looking in others for a specific ability/skill, which will allow them to change their environment. Group members strive to enhance their knowledge and cognitive arousal. The more flexible nature of the group of friends prevents them from being caught in a structure which is too patronizing such as their family. This is much in line with the “see and learn” function described above. Finally, groups of friends may be bonded by a heuristic relationship, which bolsters discovery and newness. In this type of relationship, individuals try to understand the deep meaning of their own experience, the experience of their selves or of their environment, which may be related to the “fun and play” function.

**The process of group decision making**

The process of decision making among friends is quite complex and varies a lot from one group to the other and from one situation to the other. Therefore, it is almost impossible to come to an overall scheme with isolated and structured decision-making variables. However, a few typical steps emerge from the data analysis.

**Suggestion** is the first typical step: someone suggests an idea or an activity and submits it to the group through a phone call or as soon as the group meets. It should be noted that all members do not need to be present at this stage. It often happens that the initial suggestion spreads all over the DMU through the grapevine: A informs B, who informs C and so on. Daydreaming and fantasies prove to be important in friend decision making, especially at the outset of projects. The first ideas often pertain to dreamt activities or ideal vacation destinations that are spontaneously elicited without considering potential inhibitors.

The second step is much more complex as it involves **discussing the initial suggestion and finding a solution** that suits most group members. Each member reacts to the proposition either by a direct agreement, by reminding of particular constraints, or by proposing amendments to the proposition. Sometimes, the decision is made very quickly whereas in other cases, a longer time elapses between the first discussion and the final decision as each member reflects on the proposition, and considers individual contingencies (such as time and money resources) before making a final decision:

**Ludivine (F, 22, student):** Well overall, when we decide about something, be it an evening out or skiing, it doesn’t take a lot of time. Someone launches an idea and we use to discuss it during four hours; but sometimes it’s hard. We speak about it and if everyone is ready for it, we meet again after… [...] Yes, then everyone thinks about it apart and gives his decision. And after that, it goes quickly. A more concrete idea has just been put on the table and we try to implement the project with those who are interested…

While groups of friends tend to be optimistic and idealistic in the first discussions and evaluations (they are still daydreaming), they become more realistic over time as the commitment to choice grows. This is in line with Mansfield’s (1994) adaptation of Rodman’s (1963) value stretch model. Plans are moving from a preference or ideal level (dream) to an expectation level (reality) as the time period before the activity shortens. Sometimes, expected decision aspects are even replaced by second-rate choices (but not under a certain tolerance level) or spare solutions. The intervention of contextual factors is the major reason for this shift: contextual facilitators (e.g., time resources) are first considered while contextual inhibitors (e.g., money) are taken into account later (Um 1990). As it will be discussed in the next section, conflicts often occur at this stage because it is seldom possible to conciliate all members’ wishes and constraints (budget, timing). Finding a solution that suits most members is the critical stage of the DMP, such as illustrated by the following example:

**Jacqueline (F, 49, teacher):** […] That’s sometimes complicated: the dates, there are some people for whom it doesn’t fit… There is also the financial issue because not everybody likes to spend a lot of money in travel. So, finally, when all those conditions are met, eh… That’s ok but it’s not always obvious… It’s not always easy to come to an agreement.

Once decisions are made, the roles in **organizing the activity** are distributed, most of the time according to a well-established scheme. Lesser involved members use to delegate most tasks to one or more members who act on behalf of the others. Information search is not very extended in the groups of friends of this sample. It is limited to finding relevant information about alternative solutions for the suggested idea or activity. Most often, only involves the person who came up with the initial suggestion or the organizer(s).

After the activity, members **evaluate its performance.** At this point, a distinction should be made between the evaluation of the consumed product or service, on one hand, and the evaluation of the group process, on the other hand. This second dimension seems to prevail over the first one: many groups keep meeting again, sometimes on a regular basis, although they are dissatisfied with some activity choices. Again, friendship appears to be stronger than the individual satisfaction and dissatisfaction of group members.

Of course, suggestion, evaluation and organization stages often intermingle and do not always follow the same sequence. Scheidel and Cromwell (1964) already contended that group interactions do not fit a linear sequence. Very often, a member suggests an idea and the other members agree or disagree with it. They also extend or revise it in such a way that the initial idea is modified over time. When the idea reaches its ultimate state, it looks like a summary of all the agreements and amendments generated during the discussion. In conclusion, decision making in groups of friends departs from traditional models such as the EKB model (Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell 1973). Differences may be explained by two major factors: interpersonal constraints within the DMU and the affective basis of most groups of friends.

**Conflict and consensus in friend parties**

The members of a given friend DMU may have very different backgrounds resulting in different motives, expectations, and preferences. Moreover, group life, intimacy and promiscuity are sources of tension. In many decision situations, those personal and interpersonal constraints do not matter that much and a general consensus emerges quite easily after the initial suggestion. No extensive discussion is needed even though some members have to sacrifice some of their wants and wishes. Participating in the group is more important than the particular alternative that will be chosen. This may be related to altruism and “groupthink” (Janis 1983). One consistent finding about groups is that group consensus changes individuals’ opinions and preferences (Moscovici 1985): ‘when a group is cohesive and in strong agreement about a decision, the opinions and preferences of the individuals in the group change to conform more to the preferences of the group as a whole. The members are so committed to the group that they use it as a basis for their own opinions, suspending their own critical thinking in favor
of the group’s opinions […]. And because individuals value their membership in the group and feel a strong sense of commitment, they conform quite easily” (Ellis and Fisher 1994, p. 28). So groupthink may lead to more extreme or poorer decisions because members suspend their critical faculties in favor of consensus. The group is more concerned with agreement and consensus than with the quality of the decision to make. This finding is confirmed by a lot of data chunks.

However, other decision-making situations are punctuated with conflicts, which may leave (sometimes enduring) marks on the group structure and on future decision making. From the data, a distinction can be made between two types of conflicts as whether they involve structural or organizational problems. First, structural conflicts are triggered by factors external to the friend party. Being part of several DMU’s at the same time leads to conflictual situations. The informal structure of the group of friends may be confronted with a more formal structure, which leads to “orientation problems” (Bales and Stroudbeck 1951). Most of the time, this type of conflicts is solved by adapting the formal norms to fit the informal nature of the group of friends. For example, a group of friends once decided to participate in a scouting staff. This institutional type of group involves rigid rules (i.e., planning and organizing activities for the children, looking for places for the camps, keeping accounts for the group…) which depart from the group of friends’ informal norms (having fun, sharing emotions, learning new things…). In this case, the conflict was solved by the staff members holding their preparation meetings in a bar. Structural conflicts also occur because statuses and roles may differ in the two types of groups. For example, Madeleine avoids her friends to become members of her social association because this would mean that she should command them, which could lead to conflicts. Again, this is an example of a norm or value conflict between fun, pleasure, friendliness on the one hand and rigor, order and discipline on the other hand. Value conflicts arise when the DMU members show fundamental differences in their goals resulting from different personality traits, product involvement, values, definitions and motives (Kirchler 1995).

Second, organizational conflicts occur when members are not happy about the way group activities take place. Following Kirchler (1995), one could speak about preference conflicts: members share the same motives and involvement in the decision domain but have different assessments about the attributes and alternatives involved in the choice. Distribution conflicts also occur when the costs and benefits are perceived to be distributed unequally across the members of the DMU. Some friends complain that they do not or are not likely to benefit from activity choices as much as other members. Those distribution conflicts may be related to equity theory in social psychology (Oliver and Swan 1989; van Raaij and Francken 1984). If unresolved, a distribution conflict may result in dissatisfaction.

Because conflicts lead to unstable situations, strategies are developed in order to solve them and to come to a final decision. Three major strategies are emerging from the data analysis and interpretation: avoidance, negotiation and vote. Avoidance means that group members strive to avoid any conflict in order to save friendship ties. If the suggestion does not fit some members, the project is directly abandoned or those members willingly leave the group decision process. The initial project will not be revised. Delegation (letting another person decide for oneself) is another important phenomenon related to the avoidance of conflicts. Negotiation is a more complex strategy, which happens more frequently in the observed groups. After the project has been submitted to the group, each member gives his/her opinions and constraints, and negotiations take place in order to try to conciliate the different views. The objective is not to come to the best possible decision but to an acceptable solution for everyone (“one sees if it suits everyone”). The initial project sometimes undergoes significant changes as far as new suggestions are made, and constraints are acknowledged. There is a shift from an optimizing rule to a satisfying one. Each member makes some effort in order to come to a compromised solution and tries to please others while defending his/her own interests (“give and take”). In a few cases, divergent opinions and preferences cannot be reconciled through negotiation. The group then comes to vote to make a final decision.

The use of a particular strategy appears to be a function of factors such as the group size and cohesiveness, the involvement of the members in the decision process, the constraints that need to be considered, or the expected consequences of the decision. However, nine of the interviewed groups use to negotiate when making decisions.

Role distribution

The distribution of roles within the DMU is an important aspect of group decision making. All classical roles involved in group decision making (i.e., initiator, influencer, decider, buyer and user) can be found in friends’ DMU’s. However, in most cases, the distribution of roles is limited to a dichotomy: the organizer and the participants. One person, the organizer, combines the roles of initiator, decider, buyer and practical organizer while the other members of the group satisfy themselves with participating:

Marcel (M, 65, retired): No, everything goes very well, suggestions are made which are appreciated or not [by the group members]. But it’s very good to get comments because often, there are things we haven’t thought about… Pay attention that not everybody decides; only those who have responsibilities or are more interested take actually part. There are never really big conflicts, I would say. Yes, because everybody knows what he must do, we know how it works. People who are more involved care for everything and the others are happy with this…

Again, for most members, choosing the activity is not as important as being together. Usually the organizer is the member who is the most involved in the decision domain (e.g., someone who is fond on travel) and/or in sustaining friendship ties. S/he is also called the “driving force” of the decisions by the informants themselves. In contrast with families, there is no traditional role distribution due to generational or gender differences. The organizer could be paralleled with a kind of leader of the group. However, leadership is not connected with dictatorship as the member who is considered as the leader does not make all decisions alone and often denies his/her leading status in order to respect group norms. S/he bolsters the whole DMP and avoids the group breaking up. This is not far from Ellis and Fisher’s (1994) identification of four functions related to the leader of a group: advancing the purpose of the group, inspiring greater activity among members, administrating procedural matters, and building group cohesiveness. The leader is not a person who imposes his/her opinions and preferences on the group but someone who acts as a mediator or a gatekeeper in order to make sure that plans become concrete (that dreams become reality) and that the solution suits everyone, as illustrated by the following quote:

Hugues (M, 28, mechanist): Well, there is never someone who imposes his decision because it must suit everybody. You see, we discuss in such a way that we are sure that it fits everybody,
that it pleases everybody, otherwise it doesn’t work. I mean, if there were someone in the band saying: “tonight, we do that, that way” and all that, we would laugh at him because, well, your friend party, that’s not a question of dictatorship but of pleasing everybody. There are some concessions from everybody. Yes, concessions, or people who trust the opinion of two or three members of the group and who agree in doing whatever we do. But you never have a guy who manages the group, oh no...

**EMERGING TYPOLOGY OF GROUPS OF FRIENDS AS DMU’S**

To summarize this paper, a empirical distinction between three types of structures is proposed: the surrogate family, the experiential band and the opportunistic group. The surrogate family is the most conventional group type because it is characterized by a set of norms and habits firmly anchored in the group, which both help defining the group itself and its friendship ties, and influence the DMP. Those norms give a structure to the group’s life and an orientation to the group’s decisions. This type of group involving older consumers proves to be more formal and more stable. Cohesiveness is high as members do know each other very well, the role(s) they have to play and the way the group works. Rituals are developed to enter the group: one has to prove others that one is deserving friendship and worth incorporating the group (“groupworthy”). In one group, the term “little trainee” is even used to qualify a new member who “has to prove himself” before becoming a full member, as if there were a trial period.

The experiential band is a more circumstantial type of group, where norms and rules are changing according to circumstances and situations (e.g., the decision domain at hand or the members who are involved in the decision process). Being together to have fun and living strong experiences is the prevailing drive of that type of groups. As a consequence, decision roles and strategies may vary whereas there is no compromise about the basic norms related to friendship. Friendship ties are strong and the socio-affective relationship is of paramount importance, even though, as contrasted with traditional groups, they are not enough to give the group a stable structure. This is the most frequent type of groups in this study.

In contrast with the two first types, there is no fixed set of roles and norms in the opportunistic group, which makes this third type a more precarious and less stable type of group. Sometimes members even find it hard to justify the roots of the group’s ties. Although friendship lies at the core of the group, friends play a second role in comparison with the partner or the family, or with the decisions and the activity to make. Therefore, group cohesiveness is weaker: togetherness is limited to people gathering at one place in space and time because of a common interest. The group serves a more utilitarian than affective function. As a result, activity choices may prevail over being together, which is in contrast with the two previous group types.

**CONCLUSION: GROUPS OF FRIENDS, A SPECIAL CASE**

It has already been stressed that groups of friends are usual DMU’s for particular products and services such as leisure activities. Groups of friends are typical because they are based on informal friendship ties, which are less stringent than love and blood ties. Moreover, any member of a group of friends is simultaneously involved in other DMU types. As a result, group decision making in the friend parties of this sample dramatically differs from group decision making in their families. First, most decisions involve all members of the friend party and not a subgroup of it; these are syncretic or joint (as opposed to autonomic) decisions. Second, communication tends to be less extensive. The observed groups of friends do not gather on such a regular basis as their family does, which makes decision making (i.e., sharing ideas, information, making plans) not so “easy.” Decision timing and the predictability of choices are affected as well. Moreover, personal and situational factors may strongly vary within the DMU, making it very troublesome to find compromising solutions. Problems of conflicting time schedules, budgets or interests may lead to very late decisions and to the emergence of a leader who takes the bull by the horns and triggers major decisions. This does not imply that the other members are not consulted before final decisions are reached, but in the end, the leader makes choices on behalf of the group. In contrast with family DMU’s, unilateral decision making does not result in frustration and angry moods for two major reasons. First, friends are just willing to sacrifice all their wishes for letting someone else organize things and do all the work for them (i.e., they delegate the organization). Second, individual preferences are upset as for most informants belonging to the group is the major objective. The content of the activity (e.g., vacation) is far less relevant:

**Patrick (M, 45, attorney)**: Well every year, it is a group boss who decides: “I would like to take you there, does that interest you?” In general, we say yes even though it is a place where we did not think of going. I would even say, it’s, it’s because we would not go individually that we accept to go in group because the work is done, thus that’s it. For example, I would not willingly go to Scotland even though all the good things they say about it... well about the weather etc. ...about the sights.

**Michèle (F, 43, employee)**: It is actually due to the weather [laugh].

**Patrick**: But since the group is going to Scotland, it is the opportunity to go to Scotland, well there you go.

This finding indicates that it is not wise to predict choice on the basis of individual preferences as far as groups of friends are concerned. “Groupthink” (Janis 1983) may lead members to revise their individual preferences in order to keep friendship ties alive.

Decision making in groups of friends is far from being effective in the sense that the group fulfills tasks in order to achieve well-defined objectives. Decision making often lasts long and timing is difficult. Moreover, a lot of plans are abandoned or postponed due to a lack of involvement or resources (time, money or material conditions). Many collective fantasies come across: members dream of plans but when they have to act, they suddenly become aware of several constraints which lead them to leave or change plans. However it should be reminded that achieving some specific goal is not the only group objective. An equally (and sometimes even more) important objective is to maintain or strengthen the group itself. Cartwright and Zander (1968) give a few examples of the functions related to group maintenance: keeping interpersonal relations pleasant, arbitrating disputes, providing encouragement, giving the minority a chance to be heard, stimulating self-direction or increasing the interdependence among members. Groups of friends first strive to preserve the affective ties between members. The paramount objective is to meet again and to spend a nice time together whatever the decisions taken. This perspective explains why the DMP’s, distribution of roles and decision strategies are simplified. There is a major difference between formal and informal groups: a formal structure such as a family needs efficiency and
productivity (optimal decisions) to justify its existence whereas in an informal structure such as a friend party, group cohesiveness prevails and satisfying decisions are enough.

This research has explored the way groups of friends make decisions together. Friends prove to be major players in a broad range of decisions. In a lot of cases, friends act as a reference group which may help triggering a DMP, such as illustrated by this young woman: “I did not plan to go, but after talking to my friends, they told me ‘listen, make an effort, ask your parents for some money, do something, leave a few days.’” But sometimes friends serve more than information and social comparison purposes; they act as a DMU in itself, which has been neglected by the literature so far. Of course, this research has just scratched the surface of a fascinating iceberg. This exploratory study of decision making within groups of friends calls for other studies. More particular decision-making aspects should be investigated, such as decision strategies, influence tactics, the distribution of roles,… In addition, it would be worthwhile to look into the interconnectedness of different decision levels, including personal and interpersonal factors, individual and group preferences/decisions,… (Ariely and Levav 2000).

From a managerial point of view, a good understanding of decision making by groups of friends is of the utmost importance. Indeed, a good knowledge of who does what in the group and of how the group evolves toward a decision is helpful for marketing strategy and especially for positioning and communicating products that specifically target party of friends.

REFERENCES


Webster, Frederick E. and Yoram Wind (1972), *Organizational Buying Behavior*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.