Girl Talk

The new rules of female friendship and communication

Research commissioned by Diet Coke

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Preface: The nature of friendship

By Kate Fox[1]

Homo sapiens is a social animal. As a species, we are designed to live in small, stable, close-knit tribes or communities. In modern Western cultures, since the industrial revolution, there has been a significant rise in social isolation – in the fragmentation of traditional communities and kinship networks. More of us are living alone, often in big cities, working long hours and experiencing a profound sense of alienation and insecurity. But the need for social bonding, the 'tribal' instinct, is a deep-rooted part of human nature, hard-wired into the human brain by our evolutionary heritage, and there is convincing evidence that individuals in post-industrial societies are striving to re-create these community bonds, forming 'neo-tribes' and 'pseudo-kin' relationships.

These new social support networks are often based on shared interests or values, rather than kinship or local ties, but they effectively mimic the traditional kin/community networks. This trend, which I have called *The New Collectivism*, is particularly evident among young people, who are increasingly pre-occupied with a need for security and a sense of belonging – an intense, albeit often unconscious, longing for more primitive, pre-industrial patterns of social ties, interdependence, cooperation and social cohesion.

This longing may perhaps be even more acute among young women than young men, as the female of the human species is, if anything, even more 'social' than the male. Studies consistently show that women are more proficient than men at all forms of communication – verbal and non-verbal – more socially skilled, better at spotting and 'reading' the nuances in people's reactions and behaviour and generally more interested in people and relationships. This is evident even among new-born babies, before social conditioning could possibly have any effect. Baby girls, from as young as a few hours old, are more attracted to faces, while baby boys are more interested in looking at shapes and patterns – and baby girls maintain eye contact two or three times longer than boys.

The nature of human friendship reflects the fact that for almost all of our evolution as a species we were hunter-gatherers. With division of labour, men hunted, women gathered. As far as evolution is concerned, modern industrial societies only happened in the last ten seconds or so on the evolutionary clock and really do not count. Human brains and behaviour are shaped by millions of years as hunters and gatherers and the basic wiring is still the same as it was in the Upper Palaeolithic period – the Stone Age.

Male bonding was absolutely essential for hunting. Hunting requires teamwork, which requires cooperation and, above all, trust. Male bonding was all about building that trust. This was also essential for warfare – our ancestors were fighters as well as hunters. Men who were not necessarily related to each other had to form bonds that were strong enough for them not only to hunt together

1 Author of *Watching the English: The hidden rules of English behaviour*. Hodder and Stoughton, 2005.

effectively but also to trust each other with their lives in tribal warfare – and ultimately to die for each other if necessary.

Females, as gatherers and with responsibility for bearing and raising children, also had a critical need to build cooperation and trust with other females. A woman in childbirth or with young babies was highly vulnerable and in need of protection and support – cooperation with other females, both in gathering food and in childcare, was essential to survival. Female bonding in hunter-gatherer societies was mostly of a more ad-hoc, informal, less organised type than the male variety, conducted alongside other tasks such as gathering fruits and roots, preparing food, looking after children etc., rather than as a separate, ritualised activity. And while trust was essential, it was perhaps somewhat less of a dramatic life-or-death matter than trust among male hunters and warriors. Female friendship – based on cooperation, reciprocal helping and sharing of day-to-day tasks – and child-minding, providing care and support around childbirth, during illness and at other 'weak' or defenceless times, required a different kind of trust: not so much 'I will risk my life for you' as 'I will care for you'.

Although we no longer face the same dangers or lead the same harsh lives as our Stone Age ancestors, all the same bonding instincts are still in place, and friendship is still a vital part of our lives – perhaps increasingly so in this age of urban alienation and anomie. Despite significant blurring of the distinctions between male and female roles in modern society, 'male bonding' and 'female bonding' are in still in some ways quite different. Male bonding tends to be more formal and organised – every known human society has some form of men-only clubs or associations, special (often secret) male-bonding organisations or institutions from which women are excluded. Female bonding tends to be done more quietly and informally than the male variety, without all the fuss and bother and setting up of fancy clubs. Women just bond: we don't seem to need all the props and trappings, pomp and ceremony, sports and secrecy and silly names and funny handshakes. All women need for bonding is a couple of chairs and a pot of tea – maybe not even that.

The similarities between male and female friendships are, however, more important than the differences. For both sexes, friendship always was, and still is, a form of reciprocal altruism that assimilates non-kin to kinship roles. In other words, it is a kind of give-and-take sharing and trust-building by which people who are not related become honorary brothers and sisters.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the SIRC study both male and female respondents emphasised trust and loyalty, always 'being there' for each other and 'being oneself' as the principal and most vital elements of friendship. This is the kind of unconditional acceptance, allegiance and support that is normally associated with family, but that we also expect from our 'honorary' brothers and sisters, our friends.

It has perhaps become a bit of a cliché to say that 'friends are the new family' – and although there is some truth in this statement, it is a bit too glib and not entirely accurate. Friends have always been a kind of family – friendship has always been about treating non-kin as though they were blood relatives. There is nothing new in this: we have been doing it since the Stone Age.

Introduction

The gender in the ascendent

> *"You can be what you want these days I think women can just choose"* [1]

The current generation of 25-35 year old women have reaped many of the rewards of battles won by their mother's generation. At the start of 2007, post *Sex in the City* and *Bridget Jones*, they are talking the talk and walking the walk – voting with their feet and delaying marriage, motherhood and mortgages. With more opportunity, more freedom, more choice and higher disposable incomes, they live their lives confident in the knowledge that they are equal to men – if still not always in practice.

Better educated, more motivated and driven, they change jobs, homes, interests, lifestyles and make/break and collect friends as they go. These circles of friends provide support networks – security and a source of refuge – but also an escape, a place to be themselves and have fun. The now rather tired adage that 'friends are the new family' applies to this generation perhaps more than any other. As we will see, however, the results of our research suggest that friends are no longer *just* the new family and the functions that friendships play are increasingly complex.

For women friends play many roles, helping them to define themselves at particular stages in their lives. Women aged between 25-35 in particular value their friendships a great deal – investing time, commitment and emotion in them and expecting the same in return. More women of this generation have been to university or college. This, and the end of 'jobs for life',[2] mean that they have both the need and opportunity to build up large social networks which fulfill different aspects of themselves. The complement might include: the circle of closest 'count-them-on-one-hand' friends, work friends, Sunday lunch friends, 'activity' friends, the life-coach friend, the drinking buddy, the shopping friend, the once-in-a-blue-moon friend, the old school friend, the gay male friend ...

These 25-35 year old women are also reacting against both the 'have it all' mantra and the Bridget Jones stereotyping of their slightly older 'sisters'. As we will see, our research also shows that this generation, despite being inclined to "drive around to find a copy of *Heat*" (as one participant put it), are reticent when it comes to naming inspirational women in our celebrity-obsessed culture. Indeed, when we asked our female focus group participants and national poll respondents to identify high profile women they admired, from a list including Hillary Clinton, Margaret Thatcher, Condolezza Rice, Judy Dench, Dawn French and Jordon, a significant number chose 'none of the above', preferring instead to count their mothers, female friends or colleagues as role models.

Our research indicates that this is a mainly a generation of smart, independent and driven women who do not – and don't want to – fit into marketeer's boxes.

1 All unattributed quotes are verbatim extracts from the focus groups and interviews.
2 The Office for National Statistics reports that 25 year olds today are on average likely to have had four jobs, compared with only two in 1987.

Women in their mid twenties to mid thirties – Some facts and figures

- According to the National Statistics Office (NSO) women are having children later. The average age at childbearing for women born in the late 1970s onwards is projected to be 29. The average childbearing age for women born in the 1940s was 23.8.
- Women are also having fewer children. Family size has decreased from 2.03 children for women born in the mid 1950s to a projected 1.75 children per family for women born in the mid 1980s
- The number of women gaining two or more GCE A Levels increased from 20% to 45% between 1991-2 and 2004, in comparison with an increase from 18% to 35% among males during the same period.
- According to the Labour Force Survey (2004) 20% of women aged between 25 and 34 had a degree of equivalent, compared with 15% of 35-44 year-olds and 8% of women aged 16-34. 22% of men aged 25-34 had a degree or equivalent.
- In the same survey, 10% of women aged 25-34 had no qualifications, and 29% had no GCSE grades A-C or equivalent.
- NSO data show that men and women continue to follow very different employment paths in the UK. Many more women are involved in part-time work than men, and men are twice as likely to be employed in skilled trades or in senior management positions. However, the wage gap between men and women is becoming smaller, with women's average hourly pay at 83% of men's in 2005, compared with 74% in 1985.
- According to the ASHE Survey 2004, the average wage of women aged 22-29 was £10.00, compared with £6.22 for women aged 18-21 and £12.48 for women aged 30-39. The average wage for men aged 22-29 was £10.66.
- The average wage of women with degrees working part-time was £13.47, compared to £5.67 for women with no qualifications.
- According to Inland Revenue Statistics for 2002, the median income for women aged 25-29 was £17,200; for women aged 30-34 the median income was £18,700. Men in the same age groups earned £20,100 and £25,800 respectively.
- The average disposable income for women in 2002-3 was £114 per week, compared with £203 per week for men.
- In 2002-3 the median gross individual income for women aged 20-24 was £162 per week compared with £225 per week for 25-29 year olds and £213 per week for 30-34 year olds. Women aged between 25 and 35 represented the age groups with the highest amount of gross individual income.
- According to the Labour Force Survey (2004), 75% of women aged 25-39 are economically active. This figure has steadily increased since 1992 (when it was approximately 68%).
- In the same period unemployment rates for women aged 25-34 have steadily decreased from approximately 10% in 1992 to approximately 4% in 2004.
- According to the Census for England and Wales (2001), 13.7% of women aged 25-34 are White; %18.6 are Asian or Asian British; %20.0 are Black or Black British, and %18.4 are Chinese.
- According to the General Household Survey (2002-3), approximately 8% of women aged 25-44 lived alone, compared to roughly 15% of women aged 45-64 living alone.
- In 2002, the divorce rate for women aged 25-29 was 29.2 per thousand. For women aged 16-24 the divorce rate was 23.9, and for women aged 30-34 it was 27.6 per thousand of the married population.

The research process

Diet Coke commissioned the Social Issues Research Centre to unpack some of the defining characteristics of the current generation of 25-35 year old women with a view to unravelling patterns of friendships and communication – the special nature of *Girl Talk* and its many functions.

It was clear from the outset that we were not going to be able to make sweeping generalisations about this generation of women, characterised as they are by their diversity. While they have much in common, having been born in the 1970s and experiencing their formative years in the 'touchy feely' era of the 1990s, they are also very much *individuals*.

Social scientists, however, seek to identify the often unspoken 'rules' that underlie what may appear on the surface to be highly diverse patterns of everyday behaviour. Through this process it is possible to discover unifying, and perhaps timeless, factors that are mostly hidden from view or just taken for granted.

We set out to ask what, in this supposedly 'feminised' culture, are the rules of female communication in the mid Noughties, especially in the context of friendships and social networks? What are the defining features of such friendships? What are the rules for women's work friendships? What roles do secrets and gossip play? What are the defining characteristics of women's patterns of social communication? Do women, in fact, have a 'secret language'? And where do men figure in this picture?

To address these questions we ran a series of focus groups – two with just women and one with both women and men. We also conducted individual, face-to face interviews to explore further, specific issues raised in the groups. Having analysed this qualitative material thoroughly, we designed survey questions and commissioned YouGov to conduct a poll of 2,500 nationally representative UK citizens in late December 2006.

The process has generated 'real-life' accounts of women's friendships and patterns of talk and an accurate measure of the extent to which these are indicative of what is happening in the country as a whole. It has revealed that although today's young(ish) women are characterised for the most part by their diversity, there are some very strong common threads. Are women united in a Noughties equivalent of 'sisterhood' by the timeless 'gossip reflex'? What is *Girl Talk*? What do the new rules of friendship look like? This report provides some answers.

The Findings

The nature of women's Friendship

"It's the friends you can call up at four am that matter."
Marlene Dietrich

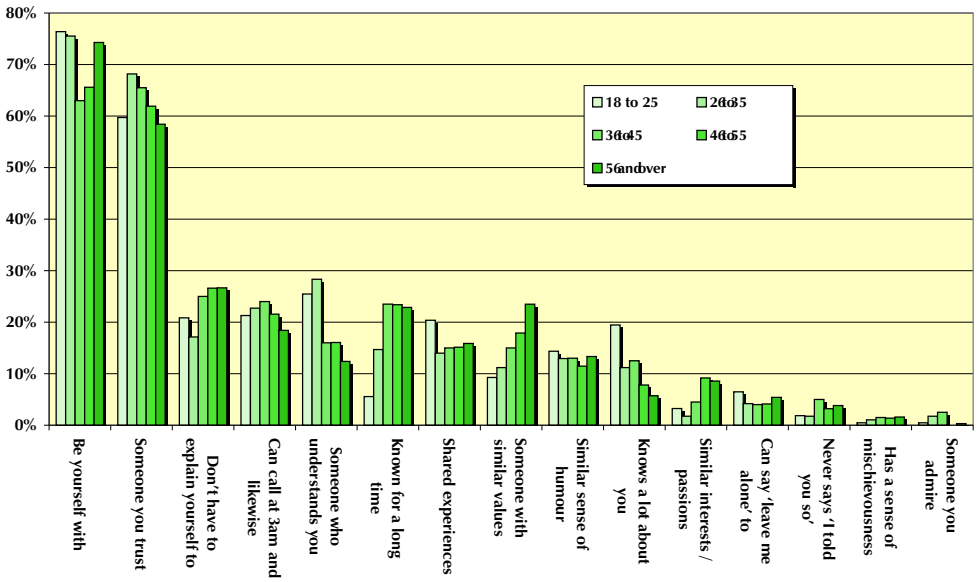
"An honest answer is the sign of true friendship."
Proverbs 24:26

What defines someone we value as a close friend? Our survey asked respondents to select the key defining factors. 'Someone you can be yourself with' came out on top for women, with 71% selecting this ahead of 'someone you trust' (63%) and 'someone you don't have to explain yourself to' (24%).

Men, interestingly, selected 'someone you trust' (61%), 'someone you can be yourself with' (60%) and 'somebody you've known for a long time' (31%).

Women over 35 were less inclined to value 'someone who understands me' as an important defining aspect of friendship – perhaps having worked through their existential identity crises at an earlier stage in life, as shown in see Figure 1.

Figure 1. What is your definition of a close friend? (women only)



It is the broad and, for the most part, 'inexplicable' emotional factors (trust, understanding and being able to just be yourself) over and above any others (shared interests/values) which women appear to value most in their close friendships. The issue of trust was particularly of importance for women in the 26-35 age group.

Many of our focus group participants talked about a kind of 'shorthand' to define this closeness. One female participant observed of her own close friends:

> *"On the phone with them, because you've known them for so long I find that we end up sort of cutting our conversation by about 10 minutes just because half of what we're saying, we're kind of thinking it and we know what the other person's thinking – so you kind of don't bother saying it and you reach the same conclusion ... You could have said about 20 minutes worth of stuff but you kind of just both knew what you were thinking."*

Research by anthropologists has also indicated that it is the elusive and emotive aspects of friendship, the parts which help us to shape our identities in relation to others, which are most important in the longevity of a friendship: "…friendship is essentially concerned with the validation of different parts of the partners' personalities and ... it proceeds only when such validation is available … individuals form relationships in an attempt to validate various aspects of their personality, behaviour or view of the world." [3]

Further discussions in our focus groups reinforced the fact that women value close friends as being non-judgemental – people we are able to be ourselves with:

> *"You're being yourself right – just "here's me…flop!" and they'll go 'great!'"*
>
> *"You know you can tell them absolutely anything, and they're not going to judge you."*
>
> *" ... no 'I told you so' – none of that"*
>
> *"I suppose I find that it's almost like a relationship – a best friend. It's that closeness that you will share anything with them, and it's that spark… and also that you can sit and say nothing at all, almost that you know what the other person is thinking."*
>
> *"We call each other 'the Wife' – she nags me like a wife, she treats me like a wife – she is the wife!"*

Our very close friends – for both women and men, but most importantly for women – are simply the people who are there for us, who we trust not to judge us. More light heartedly, a brain storming session in one of our female-only focus groups suggested that close friends are like a good film or CD:

- you go and see them and they take you away from all the crap
- you don't get bored with them ... you can play them 5 years later and they're still really good

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3 Duck, S.W. 1978. The basis of friendship and personal relationships. In: *Current Anthropology.*19(2). Page 400.

- you can leave them for a while – and you know that they're always going to be there
- there's still something new to find – no matter how long you've known them
- they make you smile, and …
- ... you never forget the lyrics / script

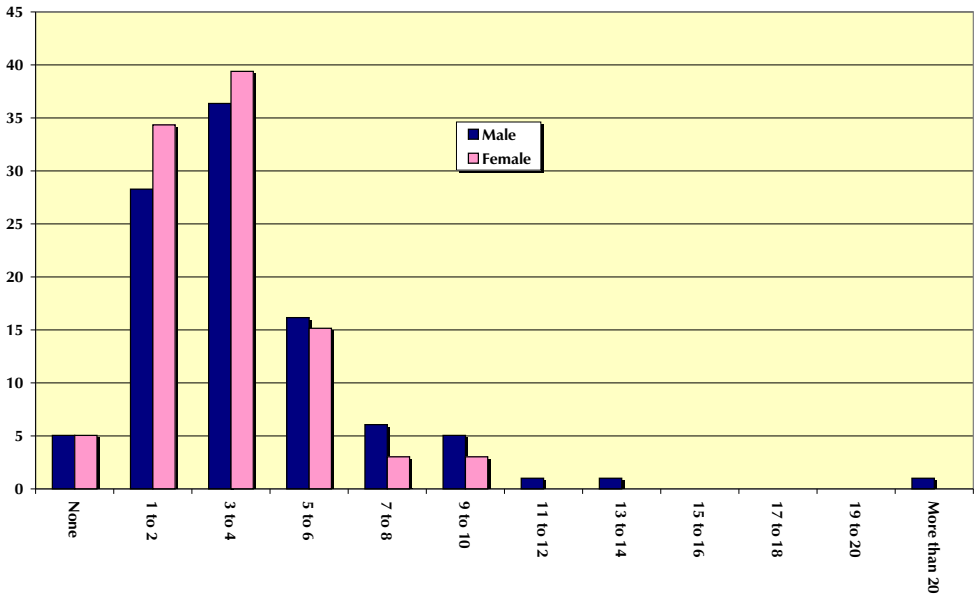
So what do women's circles and networks of friends look like?

Women and their friends

The close/best friend

The notion that women have a smallish circle of close friends supplemented by wider social networks of family, friends and acquaintances, was very much supported by our research. As Figure 2 below based on the poll data shows, between one to four very close friends seems to be the norm, supplemented by a wider social circle. On average, men had 3.98 close friends while women had slightly fewer – 3.24 Younger women (18-35) had the most close friends on average (3.48) while those over the age of 45 had fewer (3.11).

Figure 2. How many close friends do you have?



Our focus group participants also tended to the view that the number of their 'very close / best' friends could be counted on one hand.

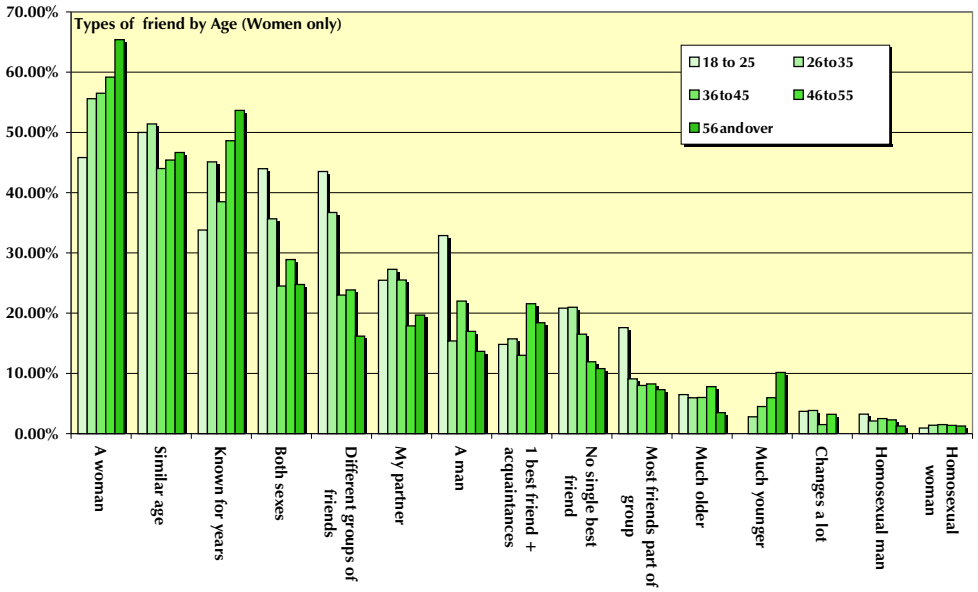
> *"I've got people who I would call acquaintances, friends and mates...I've got a selection of very good friends and then I've got mates who I see randomly now and again."*

"I can count my good friends on one hand really…and then I've got a bigger social circle"

"I think as you change and get older you have different circles of friends, rather than just one best friend"

In our poll women between the ages of 26-35 were most likely to report that their 'closest friend is a women', of 'similar age' who they've 'known for years'. Interestingly, however, although the percentage responses were quite low, it was this age group who among the women respondents were most likely to report 'having lots of different friends but no single best friend' and also that 'the friend I am most close to changes a lot'. Considering women of this generation are at their most mobile socially, economically and geographically, it is of little surprise that their friendships are perhaps less set in stone than the 'best friends' needed by younger generations and the longer standing, but perhaps fewer friendships, enjoyed by older women, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Your closest friend...? (women only)

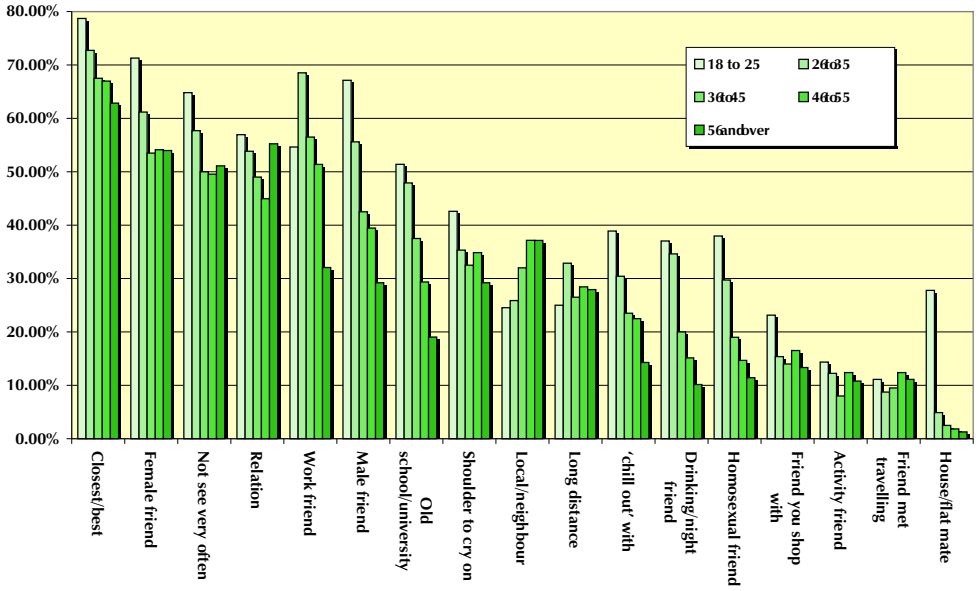


We all, it seems, also have lots of different types of friend. Women are slightly more likely to identify a close or 'best' friend (72%) than men (66%). The most interesting comparison comes across the age ranges of women, as shown in Figure 4 below. The youngest cohort (18-25 year olds) reported the highest number of male friends (67%), a percentage which declines steadily across the age range. Interestingly for our research, it is the 26-35 year old women who report the highest percentage of 'work' friends (69%) and 'long distance' friends (33%). Younger women (18-25) are more likely to have flatmates and male gay friends.

The issue of women's work friendships is discussed in more detail later in this report. It is worth noting here though that discussion in our focus groups suggests that the 25-35 year old cohort of women, if they are in employment, are more

likely than any other age group to count many of their current friends as work friends.

Figure 4. Types of friend (Women only)



The opposite sex friend

Evolutionary psychologists suggest that opposite sex friendships may be an evolved strategy by which men have gained sex, women have gained protection and both sexes have gained information about the other. There was a broadly held view in our focus groups and interviews that for certain purposes – activities, drinking, fun, etc. – male friends were favoured over girl friends. It was also the case for both sexes that having platonic friends of the opposite sex was seen as a good way of gaining an 'insider's' perspective. For women, friendships with men were also viewed as a way of escaping from the sometimes 'over-analysing' nature of female friendships.

> *"I was just trying to think if there is anything I would go to a man about that I wouldn't talk to a woman about…I think it would just be for a man's perspective on something emotionally"*

> *"I think what I look for in my friendships with men is just escapism from that…psychological mush that I think women have … so when I go and see a male friend I think 'Ah, excellent we don't have to go down that route of analysing this and that'"*

> *"In a way it is almost easier to have a close friendship with a man sometimes because with women, they've got all these extra things in their heads, and when you say something to them, you're thinking, is she really saying that or what's she actually saying, whereas the man, they will take the words and what you say."*

Some women in our focus groups explained that their male friends were quite 'feminine' while for others it was about enjoying being one of the lads and, for a few, being more comfortable in this role:

> *"I've probably always got on better and easier with blokes than I have with women."*

> *"I just can't be bothered with it, you know – I'd much rather have a laugh and just chill out with the guys…I don't want all that bitchiness, I don't want people talking about each other behind their backs."*

> *"If I'm going out with my female friends I feel that I have to look really good, if I'm going out with my male friends I don't feel I have to look so good."*

In our female only focus groups a distinctive theme emerging was how a lot of women prefer to be seen to be 'one of the lads', as opposed to being a 'girly girl' (as one participant put it). Indeed, many of the women – perhaps inadvertently – reinforced the stereotype of 'other' women (i.e. not *them*) *as* being bitchy and back stabbing. This was contrasted with the female focus groups' very candid discussions about women being 'naturally' wary of other women, even friends. Indeed, our focus groups, with a few pairings of close friends in among strangers, were an intriguing example in themselves of the unspoken boundaries, non-verbal communication and subtle nuances of women's communication strategies.

> *"Girls can sometimes be a bit standoffish about meeting new girls."*

> *"I think that it's instinctive that women sort of see each other as competition possibly"*

Social science research has suggested that when men and women discuss friendship they emphasise the behaviour that corresponds to their cultural notions of what men and women are like. Men focus on shared activities, and women focus on shared feelings.[4] Interestingly, this same research also reflected on how some women choose to reconstruct masculine ways of talking as 'gossipy' and typically 'female'. Both these stereotype-reinforcing tendencies were certainly played out in some of our focus group discussions.

The old contention that women and men cannot be 'just' friends also arose spontaneously in the focus group discussions. Opinions on this topic were varied, but it did seem – from the women's perspective at least – that it is more often the boys who over-step the mark:

> *"I've had quite a few close male friends and in the past, but a couple of them tried to take it that step further and ended up ruining things… My closest male friends are actually ex-boyfriends, and I think that that has kind of got the trouble out of the way."*

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4 Walker, K. 1994. Men, women and friendship: what they say, what they do. In: *Gender & Society.* 8(2): 249

"I had the same thing actually with a boy that I grew up with. We were born like a week apart, and we were always really great friends, up until about 2 months ago when he phoned me up, and he was sober ... and I was just like that's really sweet, but what can you say? He knew I was seeing someone, I don't know why he did it really ... you can't really go back now either, you know, 'Let's still be friends'"

"I have to say that I don't have that problem because I'm gay. And I can be friends with men, without them coming on to me, thank God. I think that in most relationships between men and women, that we are animals right – at some point there's going to be some element of 'oh yes we're of the opposite sex aren't we?'"

The gay male friend

Women are more likely to have a gay friend (usually just one) than men, and younger women are more likely to have a gay friend than older women. Madonna and Rupert Everett, Will and Grace – there is still some Kudos to be gained as a 'fag hag' – a term used in the focus groups without any pejorative associations. It also seems that for some women a gay male friend combines the ideal attributes of a true friend.

"... unless he's gay, which is why it's so easy to make friends with a guy because you have all the fun and you're affectionate just like you are with a woman and you don't have to worry about the consequences or them getting confused and I do think that that comes into effect."

"I don't know why it is but most of my male friends are gay and I don't know how that happened, I really don't, but they nicknamed me the 'fag hag' because (laughter) *literally everyone who I kind of met and got on with and had a laugh with tended to be gay."*

Gender stereotypes?

The prevalent cultural stereotype that men bond through shared activities (sport, drinking, etc.) while women bond through shared intimacy and conversation, was evident in our research. As Figure 5. below shows, more men report having a drinking/night out friend, work friend and 'activity' friend than women. Overall, however, both women and men seem wary of conforming to stereotype, although they inadvertently often do so.

Intriguingly, our focus groups showed not only a preference among a lot of women for the straight-talking, no nonsense friendship seen to be available with men, but also a wariness of other women outside their circle of trusted friends.

Certainly, friendship types and values change across the generations of women. Some social theorists would argue that differing positions of women (and men) in the work force, in marital roles and in parenthood create different sets of opportunities for, and limits on, friendship building, and are the main source of difference. [5]

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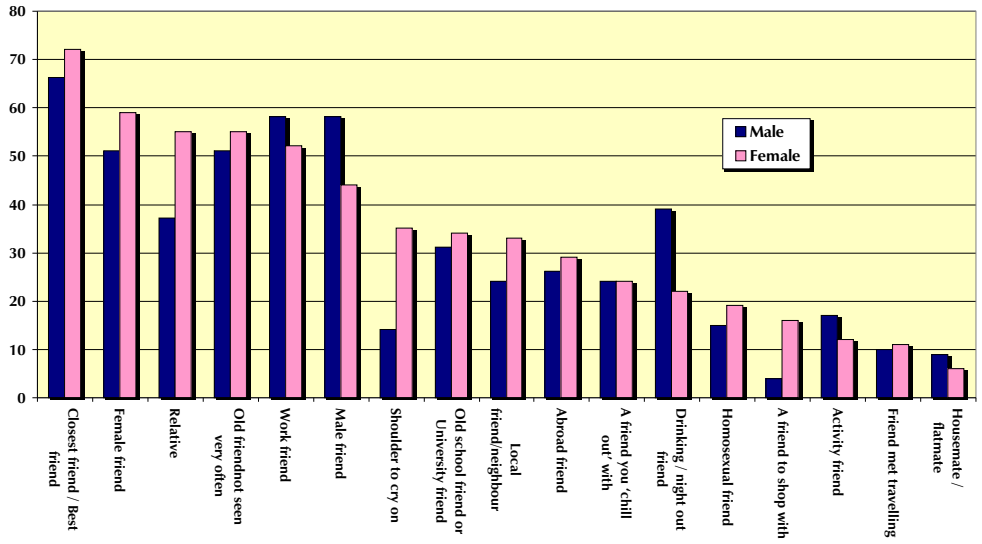
5 See, for example, Fischer, C.S & Oliker, S,J. (1983) A Research Note on Friendship, Gender, and the Life Cycle. *Social Forces*, 62, 1. 124-133

Figure 5 Which 'types' of friend do you have? (by gender)



There were also some interesting differences between women and men in terms of how long they had known their closest friend. We can see from Figure 6 that men tended to have slightly longer enduring friendships than their female counterparts. Women are over-represented in the shorter time periods – from 1-2 years up to 7-8 years – and under-represented in some of the longer time categories. The average length of close friendships was 19.27 years for men and 17.98 years for women. The length of relationships was, of course, considerably shorter for both men and women in the younger age groups compared with those in the older age categories. The average length of friendship for women under the age of 36 was 10.23 years, compared with 21.74 years for women over that age.

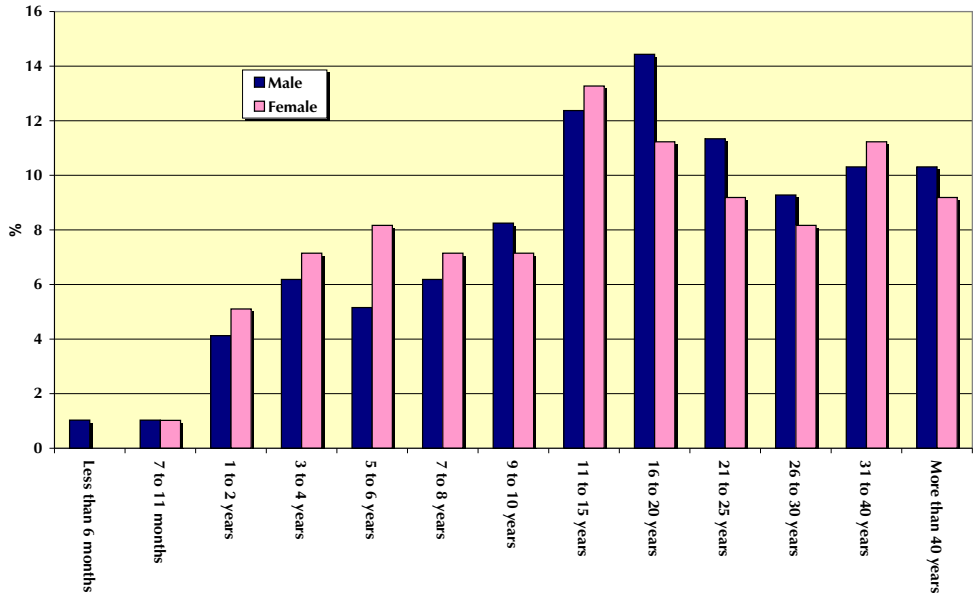
Interpretation of these differences is difficult and women in the focus groups were either unaware of such variation or unable to explain it fully. It is probably the case, however, that the data do not reflect the fact that women are more prone to 'losing' friends. Rather, their choice of 'closest' friend changes more over time than that of men – they adapt more to changing life circumstances and are better able to establish new close ties with others at work or elsewhere.

Generations of women

Generational differences were discussed at length in our focus groups, with a high degree of consensus that the current generation of 26-35 year old women generally have more opportunities to establish larger and more diverse networks of friends than did their mothers, and certainly their grandmothers.

> *"Our generation – people are marrying later, they need more friends and social networks because you don't have that all-encompassing, time-consuming family to take up all your time so you just need to have a bigger social network."*

Figure 6. Length of close friend relationship.



"... it's kind of not putting all of your eggs in one basket, so it's better to have a wider social network than just your husband and your family in that respect."

"My Mum didn't get married until she was 31. I think and she's got so many friends, all over the world. She's got far more friends than I've got, far more ... By the time she was my age she'd lived in three different countries and all sorts of stuff so…I think it was quite different because she didn't start having children until she was 33."

"My Mum didn't do the things that I have done (in order) to make friends. She didn't really work, she didn't go to university – where I've met most of my friends. She got married very young at 20"

(On a divorcee Mum) …"(she has a) *whole new social network, and now she's got a much busier social life than I ever have had – she's just really enjoying herself."*

Making friends

Figure 7. below shows where or when most women have met close friends. Overall our poll responses suggest that nearly one third of women and men had met most of their close friends through work. School was the main source for around 23% while 13% had met through through a hobby or special interest.

Within the 26-35 year old women age range, 27% had met close friends through work, 39% at school and 32% at college or university. A further 10% had met close friends through other friends (see Figure 8. below).

Figure 7. Where friends met, by gender

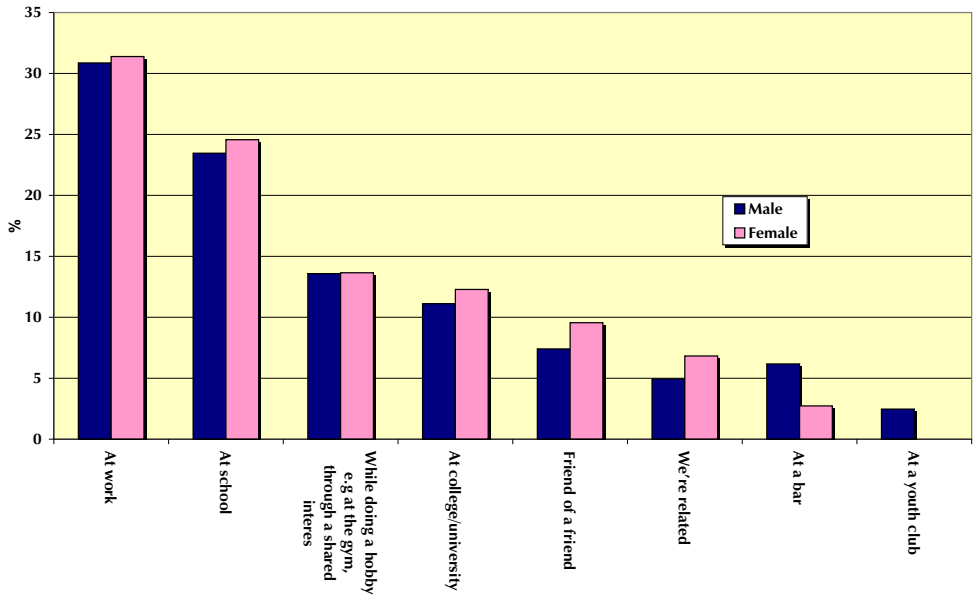
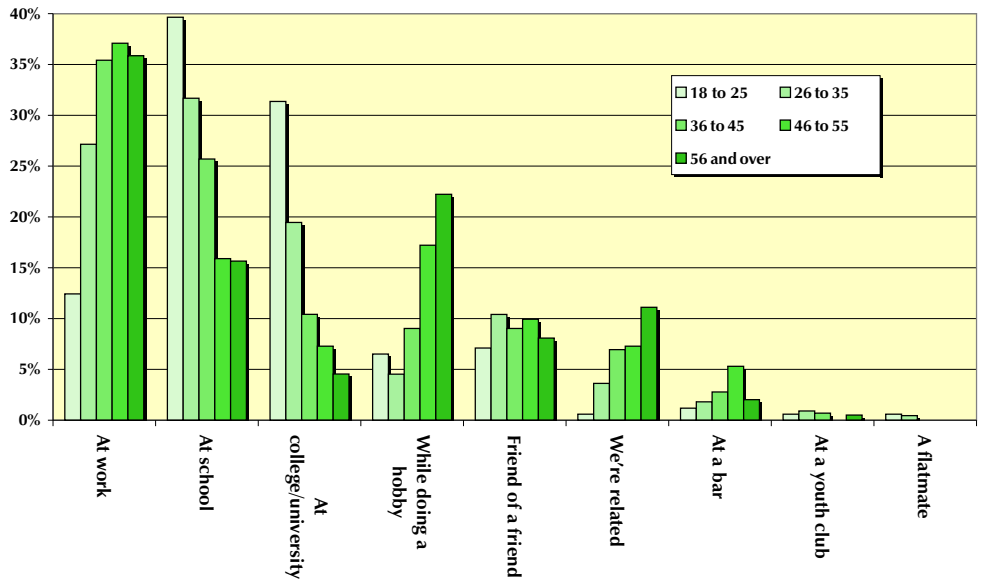


Figure 8. Where did you meet most of your close friends? (women only)

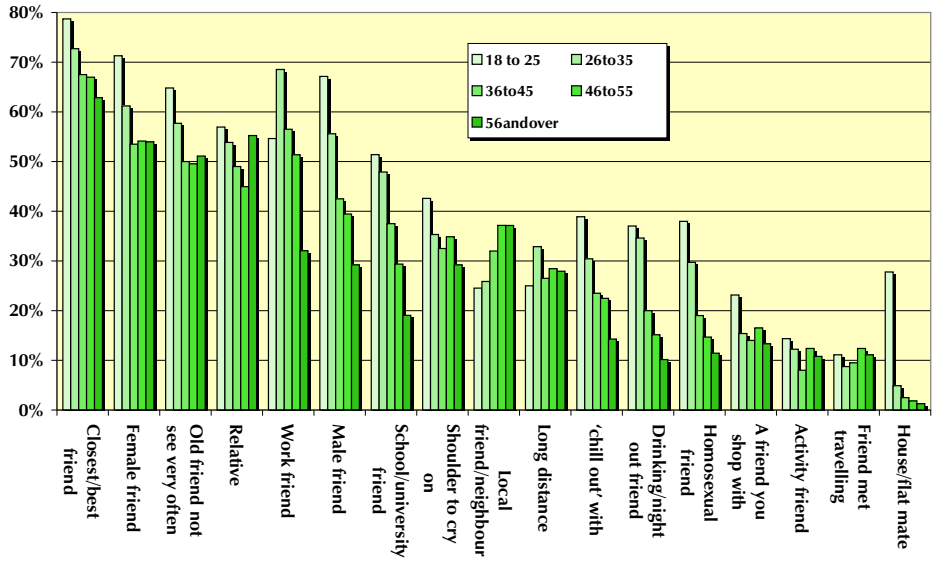


The workplace

Friendships at work were important for both men and women. Among women, however, such friendships were particularly highlighted by the 26-35 year olds. We can see from Figure 8 below that for this age group they were the second-most important type of friendship after 'close/best friend'. It is also the case, as we saw in Figure 9 below, that the work environment is the second-most important place for making new friends. Younger women tended more towards 'old school friend'

or 'female friend' as their current friends while older women tended towards relatives and local friends rather than people with whom they worked.

Figure 9 Types of friendship (women only)



The importance of work friendships to the generation of 26-25 year old women was very evident in our focus groups and interviews with participants in this age group.

> *"My work friendships are very important friendships and obviously I see so much more of my work mates than anybody else – that's very important. But in a way, because of that, it's almost lower key because it's someone that you actually spend the day sitting with not really communicating with, apart from those times when everything slows down, and suddenly you realise you've spent an hour and half talking about something you really shouldn't have been! 'Were the windows open? What about the other people in the building?'"*

> *"There are always going to be people who are only your friends when you're at work, which doesn't mean to say that you are any less of a friend to them… it's different backgrounds and lifestyles I suppose isn't it?"*

> *"You tend to have little 'pacts' … At our work it's the 'fag shed' people, 'the pub' people, and like, 'the people who don't go out'."*

This emphasis on work friendships among 26 to 35 year old women is understandable. It is at this age that work and careers take on a more central significance in life with some of the 'experimentation' of younger years now over. While it is true that we all now live in an age where 'jobs for life' are firmly in the past, and an ability to adapt and move on are key elements of success in the real world for this generation of women, the need for social bonds in the workplace is equally evident. Being part of a 'group within a group', sometimes perhaps a mildly rebellious one, seems to be very much a part of this pattern of bonding.

While the national poll did not measure directly the number of work friends that women had, it was clear from the focus group discussions that it many cases it was relatively few – just two or three or, in some cases, only one. The rest were most often described simply as 'colleagues' or 'other people at work'. It was clear, however, that these few 'true' work friends were essential in providing a sense of place in the office, shop or factory. They provided entry into a wider social world of people who, while not defined as actual friends, were 'connected' through one's friends.

In many ways these in-groupings within the working environment mirror the cliques that are typically formed in school and college, and serve exactly the same purpose. They also enable a degree of influence and power that results from being an 'insider'. While none of the women in our focus groups openly said that making friends at work was a Machiavellian way of progressing further up the career ladder than would have been the case had they remained 'outsiders', there was a tacit consensus that strong work friendships of this nature not only provided a sense of social well-being but were also part of the more general business of 'getting ahead'.

There was also a sentiment emerging from the focus group discussions that friendship networks at work, by increasing group solidarity, also led to improved motivation and performance. While some managers might view chatting among friends at work as 'time wasting', there may be some distinct but unrecognised benefits deriving from the bonds that are created and maintained through such behaviour.

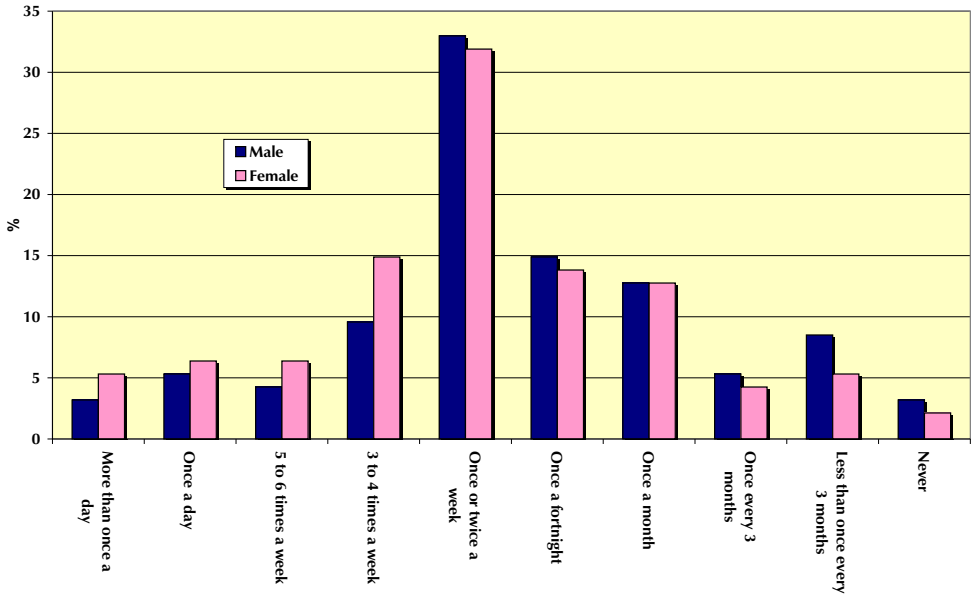
While women's work friendships, particularly those in the 26-35 age range, were a very important aspect of their lives, the *nature* of those friendships was little different from other types of relationship. The friend at work might be also be a 'close' or 'best' friend. He, or more commonly she, might also be older, younger, gay, long-standing or a relatively recent 'new' friend. What makes work friends 'special' is the time and place in which the interactions take place. While some work friends might also be people with whom one goes shopping or for a drink, it is the work-time and workplace that gives them a distinctive characteristic even though the underlying 'rules' of friendship might be the same (see section on rules of friendships below).

Keeping in touch

Friendships, of course, need not only to be established but also need to be maintained. We posed a number of questions in the focus groups and in the national survey which addressed this issue. It was clear that while women do not necessarily need to see each other much more frequently than men – on average 1.80 times per week for women and 1.78 times a week for men – they keep in touch more in other ways.

From Figure 10 we can see that women are on the phone to their friends more often than men – they are over-represented in the more frequent categories on the left of the chart. Men, on average, talk with their friends by phone 1.75 times per week. For women, the frequency is 2.23 times per week. Younger women under the age of 36 were the most frequent callers (2.48 times per week) compared with women over 35 (1.94 times per week).

Figure 10. Keeping in touch with friends by telephone



The nature of phone calls between friends also seemed to have quite special characteristics:

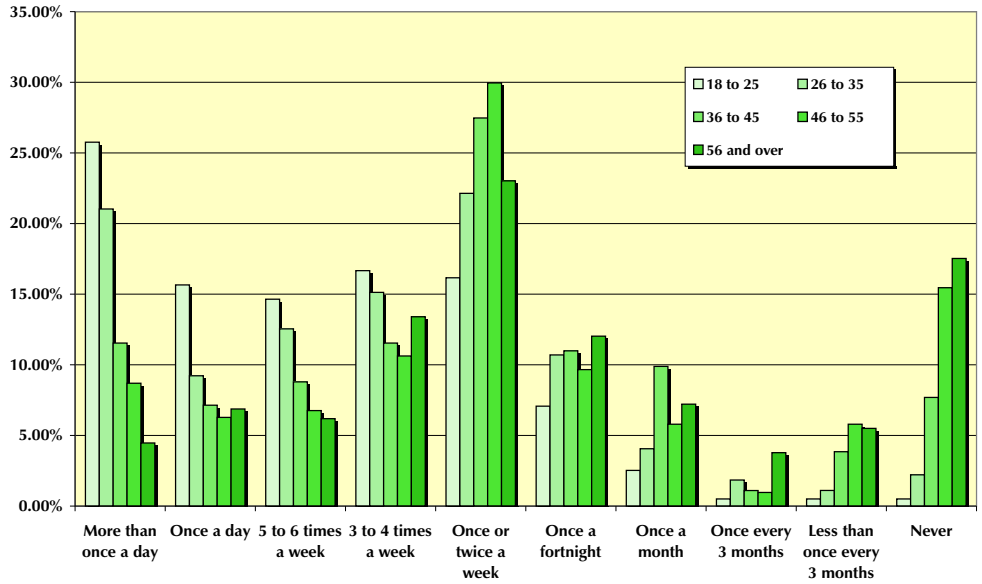
> *"On the phone with* [good friends] *because you've known them for so long I find that we end up sort of cutting our conversation by about 10 minutes, just because half of what we're saying, we are kind of 'thinking' it. We know what the other person's thinking so you kind of don't bother saying it and you reach the same conclusion at the end of a five second pause. You could have said about 20 minutes worth of stuff but you kind of just both knew what you were thinking."*

In other cases, however, long gaps in contact between women friends can result in what seems to amount to telephone overload:

> *"I must admit when one of my friends has a boyfriend I love it because I don't hear from her for ages! Although I do think the world of her, its great because she is such high maintenance – she'll be on the phone for an hour or so, and I just don't have the time for that."*

A similar picture emerged for keeping in touch by email or text messages, with women again being the most frequent users of such channels of communication. Of those who used text/email, women did so 3.41 times per week compared with 2.84 times for men. Here, however, there were big differences between the ages, as shown in Figure 11. Friendships that are maintained 'electronically' in this way are very much the preserve of the younger women. Women in the youngest age group (18-35) sent texts/emails on average 5.19 times per week, compared with 2.47 times for women aged over 56. Women in the 26-36 age category sent texts/emails on average 4.27 times per week.

Figure 11. Keeping in touch by text/email



The new rules of women's friendships

"Friendship is constant in all things
Save in the office and affairs of love."

William Shakespeare – *Much Ado About Nothing*, Claudio

The idea that there are rules which guide friendships was seen as rather strange by some of our focus group participants and interviewees. But once they had a little time to consider the idea there was no shortage of illuminating comments and insights. Social rules, of course, are rarely visible in everyday human behaviour, but they are very much there despite our lack of conscious appreciation of them. We usually only become aware of them when they are broken – we recognise that something isn't right or that some social gaffe has been committed.

Social psychologists pay great attention to rule breaches in order to understand better what is routinely keeping social interaction orderly and predictable. They govern, for example, levels of intimacy between friends – what topics can or cannot be discussed and even how close we position ourselves when we talk with them. As friendships develop and change, rules permit different kinds of interaction. They put our relationships on a 'different footing'. At a trivial level, this might be evident in how we address another person, or whether we invite them to our homes.

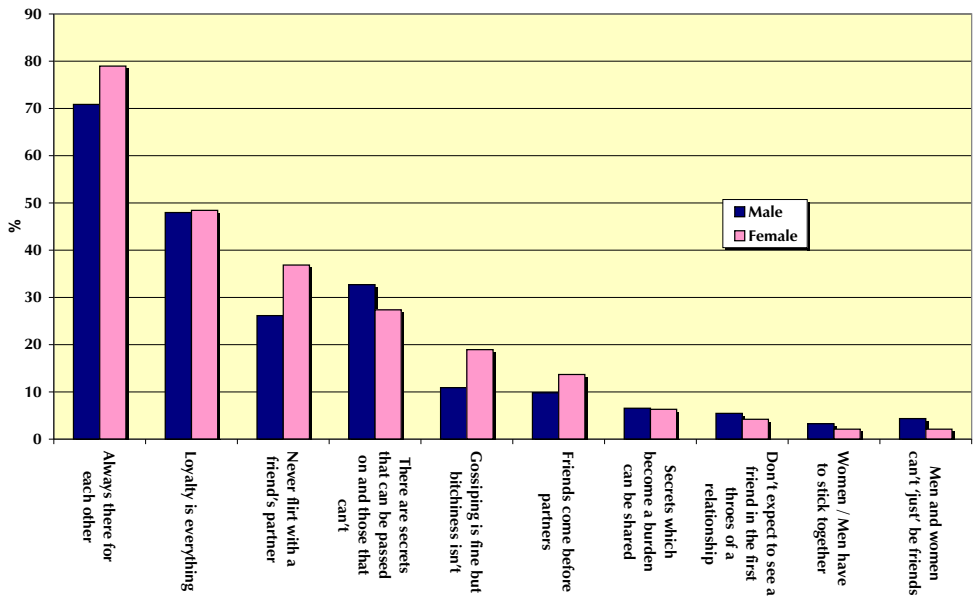
The focus group discussions ranged widely over what really defined friendships in this way. The following is a summary of those elements (or most interesting insights) raised by women in these quick-fire brainstorming sessions.

- Being there for one-another – though thick and thin
- Non-judgemental: no "I told you so!"
- Blow-out caveat: it's okay to say "I'm knackered"
- Being able to be yourself: the 'flop factor'
- Friendship 'shorthand': why say in 20 minutes what you could say in 10, or on the other hand, why not?
- Being able to move on / let go with no hard feelings
- Gender loyalty counts – you can be 'one of the boys' but know the limits
- Sort out your boundaries with male friends early on: a flirt might help you bond but ...
- Ideally have a gay male friend: the best of both worlds
- Don't be seen to be a gossip: but be good at it. For "no one likes a gossip" read: "no one likes a *bad* gossip" (especially at work)
- Know your secrets 1: Only secrets which are a burden can be told.
- Know your secrets 2: It's easier to keep a secret once you've told someone – a secret told is a secret with value
- Deny your gender stereotype: express a distain for gossip
- Deny your celebrity gossip knowledge

What comes out strongly from this distillation of the discussions is the sense that while friends must be dependable they must also use particular forms of language and communication. The 'non-judgemental' element, for example, is very much to do with how a woman expresses her opinions about a friend's behaviour or lifestyle. It is all a matter of learning what we normally call 'tact'. There is also, it seems, the need for a bit of conspiratorial denial. Women friends who gossip can decry other people's gossip, even while they are gossiping about them. And while it is fine to step out of the confines of gender stereotypes now and again, perhaps by being a bit of a 'ladette', women still expect gender loyalty and support for an unwritten sense of sisterhood.

In the national survey we proposed a more limited set of questions to explore further the unwritten rules of friendships. Here we found some small but interesting differences between men and women, as shown in Figure 12.

Figure 12. The unwritten rules of friendship, by gender



Women tended to feel more strongly than men that friendship was a matter of 'being there for one another'. They were also rather more adamant than men that flirting with a friend's partner was a taboo area. They were, however, also more strongly of the opinion that friends come before partners – your friend may have a husband, but you are still her friend – and that is more important.

There was also a marked difference between the sexes in attitudes to gossiping – that essential ingredient of all friendships whether men like to admit it or not. Here, women drew a distinction between gossip and bitchiness. Men, on the other hand, seemed less aware of the difference.

Girl talk: Women's secret – or not so secret – language

The theories

Robin Lakoff [6] was one of the first feminist academics to put forward a theory of a distinct, socialised 'women's language' in the 1970s. Lakoff's key indicator for 'girl talk' is the use of tag questions. Here an otherwise imperative, declarative statement such as "she's really funny", which is generally a 'male' statement, becomes "she's really funny – isn't she?" The female form is questioning, more uncertain and arguably 'weaker' than the typical male construction. Lakoff also argues that women's language compared with that of men is marked by the greater use of 'hedges' ("sort of", "kind of"), polite forms ("I would appreciate it if ..."), 'wh-' imperatives ("Why don't you open that door?"), etc.

More radical feminists have criticised Lakoff's work because it is seen as justifying a form of women's subjugation on the basis of their 'inferior' language style – one that is less sure and even incompetent. Deborah Tannen, a linguistics Professor at Georgetown University, on the other hand has suggested that conversations between men and women are actually 'cross-cultural' – men and women speak two different 'genderlects'.

Tannen[7] suggests that masculine and feminine ways of speaking are two distinct cultural dialects, as opposed to inferior or superior ways of speaking the same language. The differences that she identifies include women's desire for *connection* as opposed to men's for *status.* Women's preference and skill is in *rapport* talk, compared with men's in *report* talk. Some critics of this approach point out that in reality people's ways of speaking are often most dependent on the gender of the person they are speaking with, rather than their own genderlect.

Beyond these academic explanations of differences between men's and women's ways of speaking – which often descends into 'men are from Mars, women from Venus' territory – our research was interested in investigating the area of the *unspoken* areas of communication. In particular the idea that women have a 'secret language'. A raised eyebrow, a knowing look, an affectionate hug or touch on the arm – the non-verbal cues that serve to include others in an in-group of mutual understanding.

> *"It is non-verbal: a look, a nod, a bit of wink."*

Following discussion of these issues in the focus groups, we asked our poll respondents to identify the main 'alternative' or non-verbal methods of communication that women use. The responses are summarised in Figure 13 below. Here we can see that women were significantly more aware than men of the 'knowing look' that is a central feature of Girl Talk. They also noted the use of body contact – even just a touch on the arm – that distinguishes their style of communication from that of men.

Men did seem to be aware of these tactile differences, but were less able to pin them down. Hence, twice as many males selected the 'other unspecified change in

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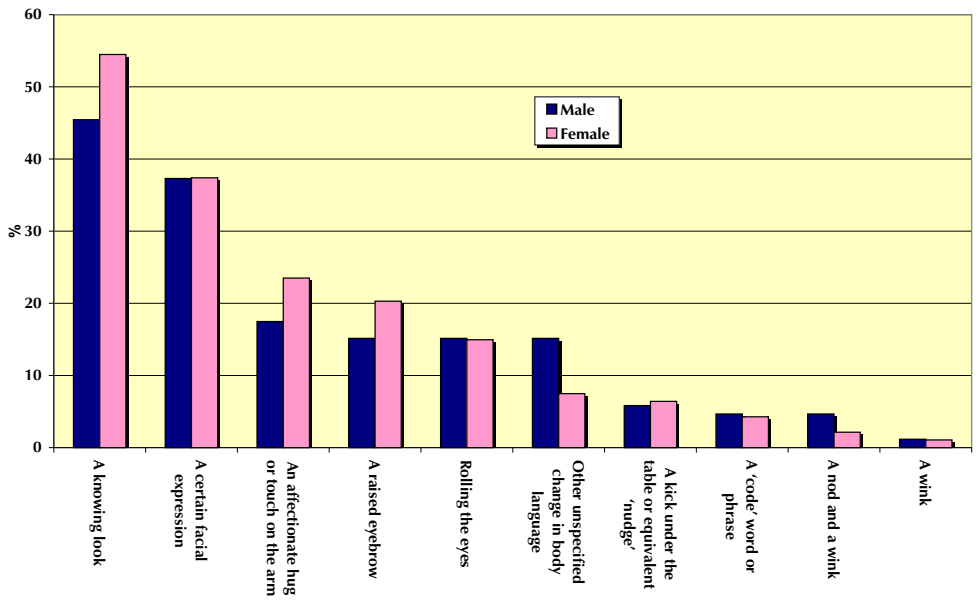
6 *Language and woman's place*. With R. Scherr. Harper & Row, 1975, *Talking power*. Basic Books, 1990

7 *You Just Don't Understand: Women and men in conversation*. Quill, 2001

body language' option than did women Twenty one percent of males also selected the 'don't know' option, compared with only 8% of females.

Figure 13. 'Alternative' forms of communication, by gender



It is clear that while Girl Talk may not exactly be a 'secret' language, it is something that men understand very poorly. In the focus group that included men, none were able to offer any specific insights into the differences between the sexes. Women, on the other hand, were very much more aware of the subtle distinctions.

> *I think that women feel the need to advertise their friendships quite a lot, it's this exaggerated view of going to the toilet together…* (Laughter) *It's this "look everybody, isn't she marvellous and we're so close" whereas with blokes its more or less the reverse...*

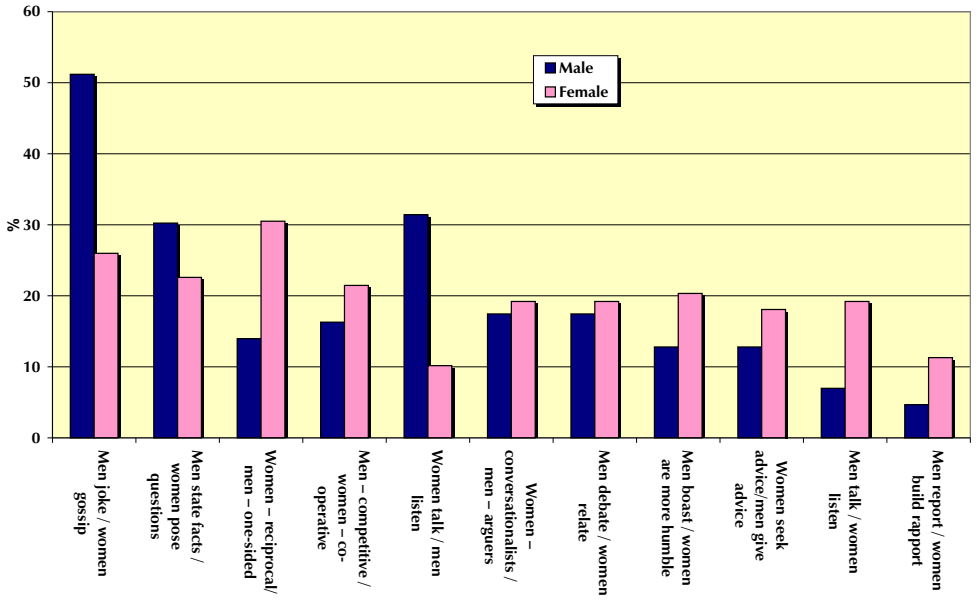
There is, of course, the male equivalent of this phenomenon – Man Talk. This, however, relies much less on subtle non-verbal aspects or 'coded' features. As we noted above, men's talk tends to be more to do with making factual statements in what is generally seen as a 'dominant' or 'straight' manner. While men, like women, might use the odd 'nod or a wink', particularly when talking about women, they rely less on expressive facial gestures to communicate meaning. Their conversations are, therefore, are more 'transparent' than those of women. The frequency of body contact between male friends, at least in Britain, is also much lower than among women. Similarly eye-contact (and mutual eye-contact in particular) between men is less frequent and held for shorter durations than between women

While men failed to appreciate the importance of non-verbal features of Girl Talk, there were also large differences between men and women when it came to identifying the conversational aspects of male and female communication. Figure 14 below shows responses obtained in the poll when people were asked to select the statements with which they agreed the most. The item 'men joke/women

gossip' was a clear favourite for the male respondents but clearly not for the females – 51% versus 26%.

There was an even bigger gulf between the sexes when it came to considering the statement 'women are good at reciprocal communication/men are good at one-sided communication'. Here 30% of women agreed, compared with only 14% of men.

Figure 14. Conversational differences between men and women, by gender



There was also an amusing difference between males and females on the two questions 'women talk/men listen' and 'men talk/women listen'. Gender solidarity was evident here with 31% of males, versus 10% of females, thinking that it was men who did the listening, while 19% of females, versus 7% of males, thought that it was women who were the listeners. Being a 'good listener', of course , is a positive quality and one which both men and women attribute more to themselves than to people of the opposite sex. In such ways are enduring, but relatively minor, gender conflicts fostered.

It was, however, over the issue of gossip that the gender divide was most evident. But what is 'gossip', and how does it differ from 'normal' conversation or telling a joke? Is the term used, mainly by men, simply as a pejorative description of how women talk? Or does gossip serve some wider function? We explored this area further, together with the related topic of secrets, in the focus groups and in the national poll.

Girl talk: Gossip and secrets

"Whoever gossips to you will gossip about you."
Spanish proverb

"Gossip is what no one claims to like – but everyone enjoys."
Joseph Conrad

"There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about."
Oscar Wilde

Gossip or chat?

The term 'gossip' today generally has a negative quality. But this was not always the case. The word comes from the Old English *godsibb* – literally meaning godparent – but was applied to familiar friends, especially a woman's female friends who assisted her around the time of the birth of a child. So, from *godsibbs*, good women friends, we inherit the term *gossips* – still usually women, of course, but the underlying notion of 'friends' has been somewhat diluted. Gossiping, however, remains very much a central part of female to female bonding.

What distinguishes gossiping from other forms of verbal exchange is, as we will see later, an element of secrecy – a sharing of confidences. There also needs to be one or two alleged 'facts' in gossip that, in turn, can lead to endless speculation or conjecture. The phrase "Mrs Jones was in the coffee shop" contains a fact but no opportunity for speculation. It is not gossip. The phrase "Mrs Jones was in the coffee shop with her neighbour's husband", however, presents all sorts of opportunities for conjecture and, therefore, is 'good gossip'.

While gossiping (or what men describe as 'chatting' when they do it) can happen anywhere, the workplace was seen by working women as being a very significant arena for such activity. Conforming perhaps to stereotype, the office tea break was identified as the best place for a gossip, particularly by older women, as shown in Figure 15. The canteen was also seen as being a suitable location for such activity.

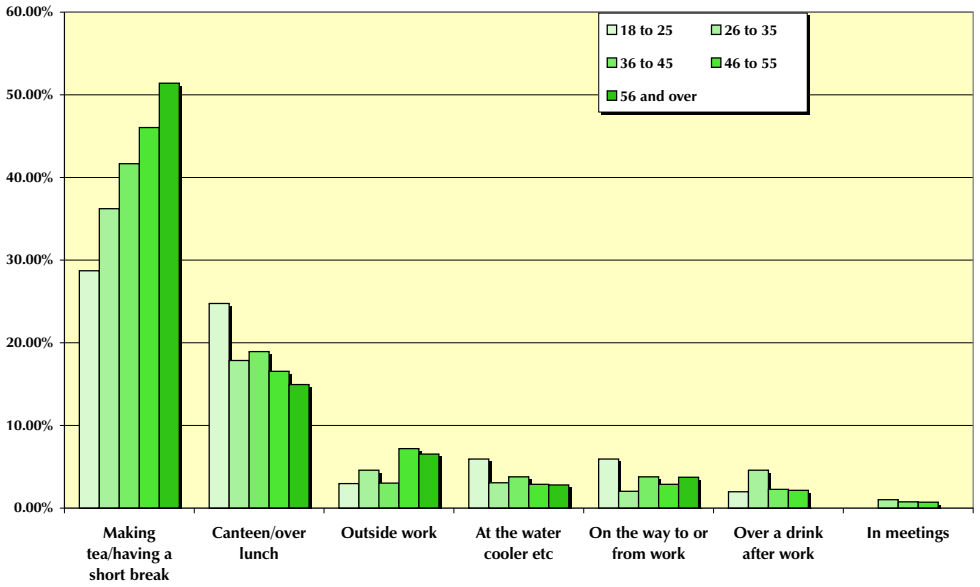
"When people want to talk about other people they'll go to the hallway or do it at lunchtime or in the pub after work or something like that."

"You've got to be careful [when gossiping] but of course everyone does it to some extent."

"I have two friends ... and gossip is part of their being."

The poll reinforced the idea that gossip is very much a face-to-face activity, with over 60% of women reporting that they preferred this channel over phone calls or text and email messages.

Figure 15. Gossiping at work, by age (women only)



'Bitching'

The subjects of gossip highlighted in the focus groups were, predictably, most often people who were disliked by the gossipers – often described as 'bitching':

> *There is a lot of bitchiness that goes on at work – a whispered "did you hear what she did?" and that's just the way women talk.*

The poll confirmed that this aspect of gossip was frequently to be found across the country, as shown in Figure 16. Here respondents were asked to select those topics they had gossiped about in the past seven days. We can see generally that younger women have more topics for gossip than older women – they selected more options in the poll. And while 'bitching' is top of the list, discussing mutual friends comes a respectable second – suggesting that gossip is far from being a negative process.[8]

Work gossip, including chat about one's boss, is also a very substantial topic of conversation, especially for the 26-35 year old age group. 'Celebrity' gossip, often based on reports in newspapers and magazines and what has been shown on the television, also featured quite significantly. This kind of gossip has special importance for women because it is linked to gender role modelling – basing one's style, appearance, mannerisms, etc. on other women who are objects of admiration. Through celebrity gossip women make implicit comparisons between themselves and 'famous' people – what they would or would not do in their circumstances (real or imagined).

The topics of gossip/chat at work are illustrated in Figure 17. Here we can see some very significant differences between male and female respondents.

8 The psychologist Robin Dunbar has shown that only about 5% of gossip is to to do with 'negative evaluations' or 'bitching'. See his 1998 book: *Grooming, Gossip, and the Evolution of Language*

Figure 16. Topics for gossip in the past 7 days (women only)

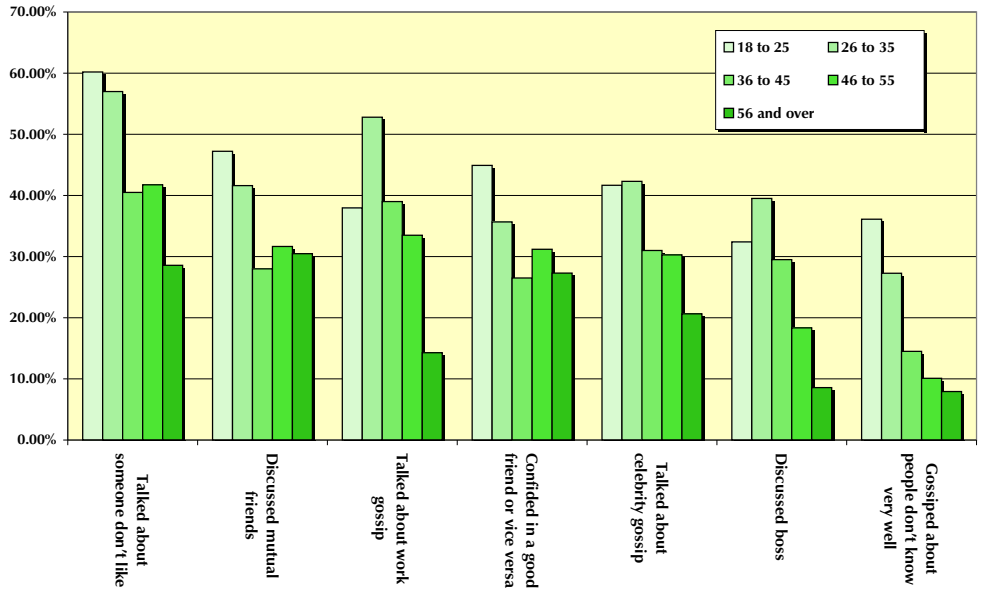
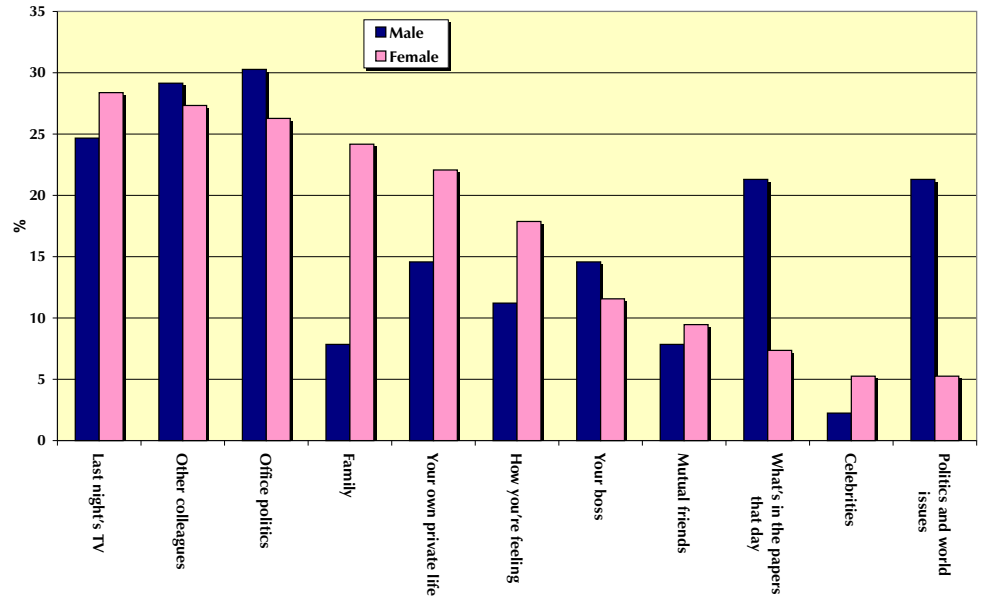


Figure 17. Topics of gossip/chat at work, by gender



While both men and women chat and gossip about what was on TV last night, other colleagues and office politics, women are much more likely to chat about their families, private lives and feelings. The emphasis is on emotional, rather than purely factual, issues. Chatting and gossiping about what is in the newspapers, or about politics and world issues, seems to be of relatively little interest to women. Such areas are part of the less 'feeling' and more fact-based communication among men.

While younger women, as noted above, have more topics for gossip than their older peers, women have more topics of conversation generally than men, as shown in Figure 18. Here we can see that women tend to include more than 3 topics in a single conversation more frequently than men. On average, women included 5.1 topics in their most recent conversation while men included 4.6

Women also chat/gossip with friends, on average, for a little longer than men each day (69 minutes on average for women, 63 minutes for men), as shown in Figure 19 below. We can see that females are over-represented in the '2 hours' and '3+ hours' categories, while men dominate the categories from less than 30 minutes to 1 hour. Within the sample of women, there were also some interesting age differences, with younger women in the 26-35 year old category tending to dominate the '2 hours' and '3+ hours' categories. They talked on average for 74 minutes per day.

Figure 18. Number of topics in last conversation, by gender

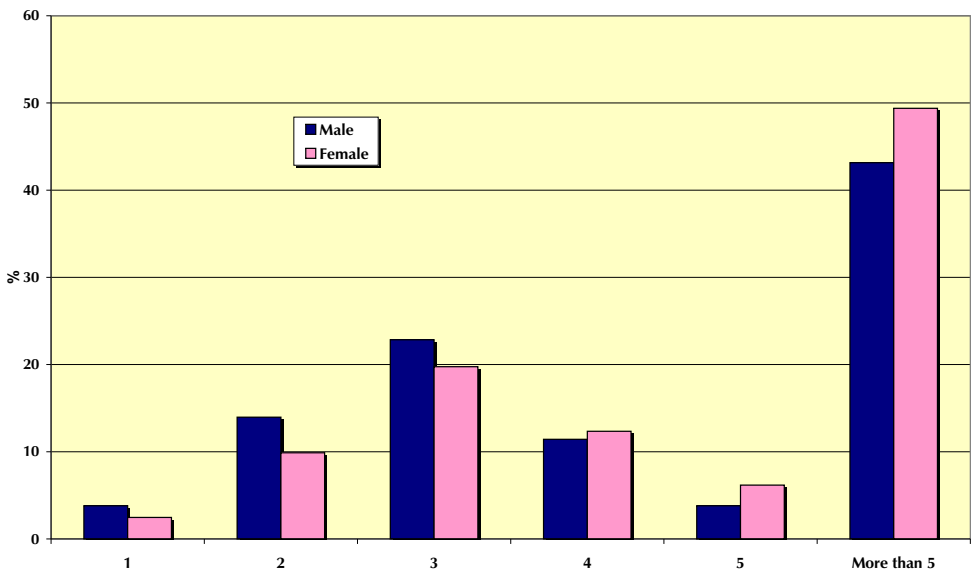
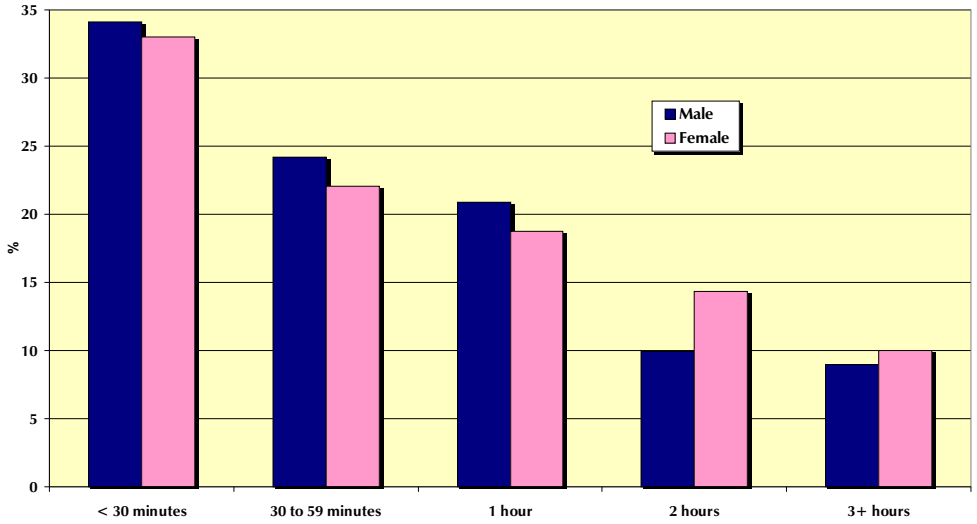


Figure 19. Time spent chatting/gossiping by gender



Functions of gossip

The real functions of gossip may stem from our evolutionary past. Carlin Flora[9], for example, argues that the best targets for gossip are the faces that we all know. We are, she suggests, born to 'dish dirt' and it is a way of determining who is trustworthy and who is not.

Evolutionary psychologists argue that as our human brains evolved in the Stone Age, anybody with a familiar face was a member of our 'in-group', a person whose alliances and enmities were important to monitor and track. Using early language skills allowed women to do this through what we now define as gossip, reinforcing in-group bonds while defining the out-group in terms of people we 'bitch' about. And while men were off developing the skills to enable them to succeed as hunters, women were quietly accruing greater language proficiency in their role as gatherers and carers. This legacy, perhaps, is now reflected in the 'women gossip, men provide information' divide, or at least men may like to think so.

There is also a sense in which gossip plays an important role in the process of networking – both within social circles and in the working environment. By sharing confidences, revealing aspects of ourselves and inviting others to reciprocate, women position themselves within spheres of influence. And this becomes increasingly important in the more competitive worlds in which today's generation of career-oriented women find themselves.

In the 1970s women in their mid twenties to mid thirties would probably have been in their second 'proper' job. Today, such women are likely to be in their fourth or fifth job, or even their second or third careers. Adjusting to the changes and upheavals that this involves is not easy. New work friendships have to be

9 *Seeing by Starlight*. Psychology Today, July-August 2004.

established and new alliances formed. Today's women may be better educated, more highly qualified and more multi-skilled, but that does not, in itself, guarantee career progress or the broader sense of personal fulfilment for which this generation of women *in particular* are striving.

Social communication skills, then, have become even more prized assets for working women. And what we might loosely call gossip is a central feature of these competencies. While simple exchanges of comments, opinions and information may serve to prevent one being isolated from the group or cast in the role of outsider, a true sense of bonding only comes about only through mutual sharing of feelings and tacit understandings which may often be expressed within a mildly conspiratorial framework – "I'm only telling you this because I value you as a person." Women understand this process and its value very well. Men may appear not to, but beneath the often monosyllabic exchanges on overhears at work or in the pub, the same social process is going on, whether they admit it or not.

This sense of 'conspiracy' reinforces our sense of inclusion within groups – it acts as a psychological membership card. The greater the sense of conspiracy, the greater the sense of inclusion. It is here that the role of 'secrets' becomes evident.

Secrets

"We use gossip as a bonding thing. If you've got something secret to tell someone, well ..."

"It's all a bit naughty ... It brings you closer to that person."

"The indication is that I value you so much that I can tell you this thing"

"But its also this 'Well I have this secret knowledge'."

"Yeah, you have the power."

"Exactly, its that kudos thing."

Discussion of gossip in the focus groups turned quite spontaneously to the topic of secrets with little or no prompting. There was a general consensus that 'proper' gossip actually relied on secrets and a sense of conspiracy among the gossipers. There was, however, also a dilemma here. If something is secret, you shouldn't tell any one about it. But if you can't tell anyone, then where is the basis for a good gossip? Much of the debate, therefore, was about what could or or could not be revealed, and to whom?

"No, I can't keep a secret ... I'm just a gossip really, but if I was gonna tell somebody it would probably be a specific female friend, knowing full well it wouldn't go any further."

"I think I put secrets like that in a different category [from other types of gossip]. *You know, if someone wants to tell me something that's fine ... If I'm talking to someone I don't think 'Oh god, I've got this secret in the back of my mind'... it's completely up to them. You know I don't want to get involved. I'm quite happy to listen, and I'm happy to be there for them, but I don't want to get involved at all."*

The general consensus was that there were different 'grades' of secret. Some could easily be shared with others, forming the subject for useful gossip. Others, however, should be kept out of gossip altogether, being shared, if at all, on a very discriminating basis.

> *"There's a difference between secrets and* **secrets**. *There are secrets that should be kept. If someone tells you something that's so personal to them, it doesn't matter if I'm in a serious relationship I would never go and tell him."*

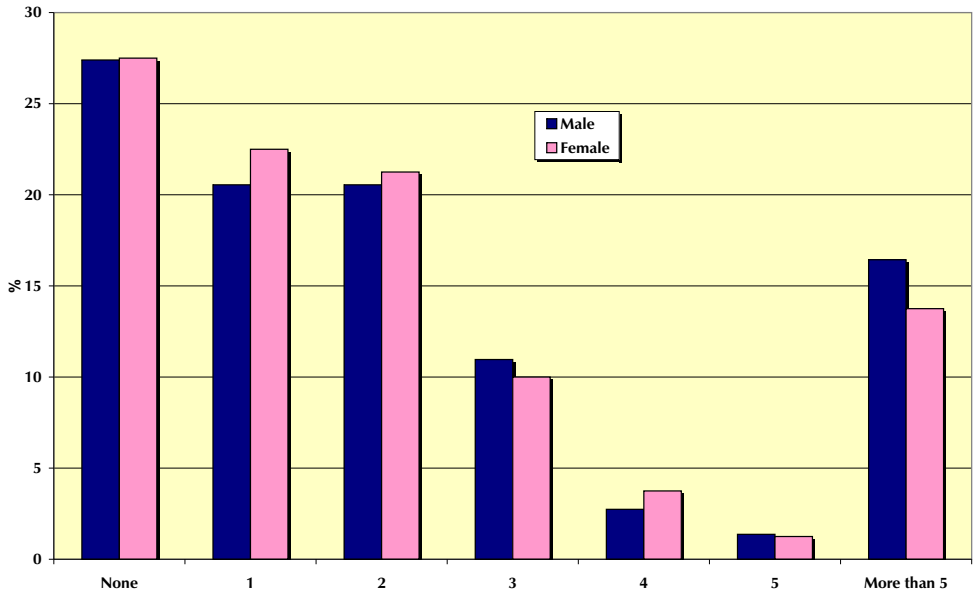
> *"You have really severe ones, where you're like 'mm mm'* (shakes head) *'never', and then you have other ones where you're like 'Oh, maybe I'll tell one person', and then you'll have lesser ones where you'll be like 'Oh, I did this and na na na…' and you might tell 3 people."*

> *"There are ones (secrets) that are quite serious, and you don't want to belittle it by gossiping about it."*

In the national poll we posed a number of questions relating to secrets based on what we had heard in the focus groups and interviews. How many secrets were people keeping, and how long do they keep them for?

There was little difference in the responses of men and women in this context, as shown in Figure 20. Here we can see the over a quarter of the population say that are keeping no secrets at all, while the majority say between one and three. Less than 15% of the population shoulder the burden of five or more secrets. The average for both men and women was about 2.

Figure 20. Number of secrets being kept, by gender



When it came to a question about how long respondents kept secrets we suspect that a little fibbing was apparent, given the focus group discussions. "I have never

told anyone the secret" said over three quarters of the national poll sample, while a mere 8% said 'over three months'. Perhaps they had failed to make the distinction between ***secrets*** and secrets.

Putting the question a little differently, we asked respondents to indicate if they agreed with the statement "I would never tell a secret I had been told not to tell." Around 70% of both men and women indicated that this was the case[10]. However, when faced with "There are different types of secret: Some I would pass on, some I wouldn't", about one third of both male and female respondents indicated their agreement. This just goes to show how important it is to phrase questions properly in polls and surveys, or to ask the same question in different ways, if the real picture is to be obtained. There are, indeed, secrets and ***secrets***.

Successful working women

Given the strong focus on work friendships that emerged from the qualitative research it seemed appropriate to examine women's views on what it took to succeed in what is still seen by many as a man's world. We conducted a series of short interviews with a mixed sample of females aged between 25 and 35 – all successful in their careers. Many of the responses emphasised the social aspects of work and the need for friendships and communication.

> *"Make some effort to be involved in world's social events – it's called networking and it shows those around you that you've got an interest."*
>
> *"Communication!"*

Others focused on the need to 'sell' oneself in the workplace:

> *"I think we have to be more proactive in drawing attention to our achievements and goals for fear of being overlooked or credit being ascribed to the wrong people."*

Others talked about the need for a degree of toughness:

> *"It doesn't do to be seen as too soft or emotional or sensitive in most job roles."*
>
> *"You've got to be hard – have no feelings and no family."*

This particular interviewee (a young medical GP) then relented a little and said:

> *"You just have to focus your feelings and learn to turn them off, depending on your surroundings. It's easier for a woman if she*

10 Note that respondents could select a number of items in this section of the poll questionnaire. The fact that 70% selected this statement does not mean that 30% disagreed with it – simply that it was not seen as being among the most important.

doesn't have a family, or at least has children later when the career is moving on."

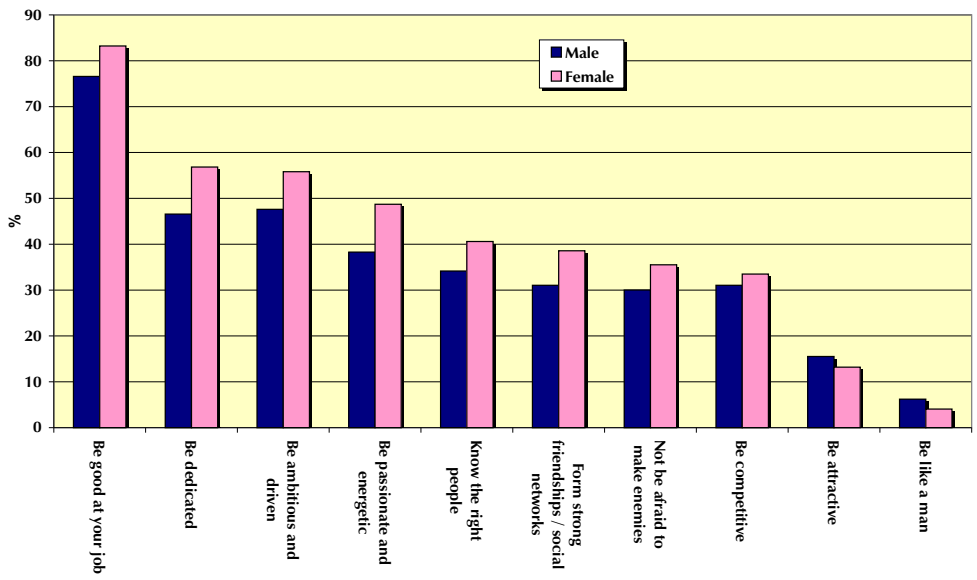
The issue of the tension between being successful at work and being a mother was evident in other comments from interviewees. There was a strong need for:

"... the ability to function in multiple roles as mothers, problem solvers and family managers. I think women are adept at taking a long term view and making long-term plans and can 'wait things out' more easily."

Among those in our small sample, however, there was a general consensus that avoiding or delaying childbirth made success in these terms much more achievable.

We included a question along these lines in the YouGov national poll. The results are summarised in Figure 21.

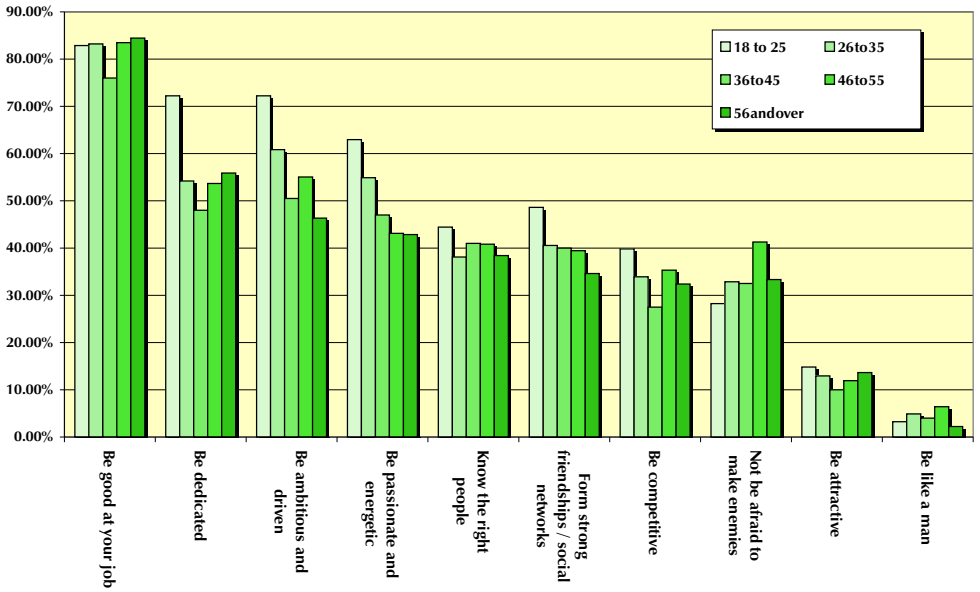
Figure 21. Qualities required by women to succeed in the workplace, by gender



The striking thing about this chart is that the bars for women are higher than those for men in all but the two smallest cases. In this part of the poll respondents could select as many required qualities as they felt were necessary. It is clear, then, that women generally feel that other woman need *more* qualities in order to succeed than do men. Males and females do not differ significantly in what they think those qualities *are*, just in the number that successful women require.

There were a few differences between women of different ages in this context, as shown in Figure 22 below. We can see here that is the youngest group (18-25) most strongly emphasise the need for dedication and ambition, along with passion and energy. They also stress more than any other age group the need to establish strong friendships and social networks in order to succeed.

Figure 22. Qualities required by women to succeed in the workplace, by age (women only)



The 26 to 35 year olds, however, are not far behind their younger contemporaries in these terms. What the data seem to reflect is the increasingly competitive world which women in their late 30s and 40s managed, at least in part, to avoid in their younger years. For today's early thirtysomethings, life has been hard so far. For the age cohort below them, the 18s to 25s, it looks as if it will be even tougher.

Role models

Each generation has its own role models – people who are seen as representing in one way or another the Zeitgeist of the age. Baby Boomers, for example, that 'lucky' generation now largely facing a comfortable retirement, may look back with nostalgia to the Rolling Stones, Twiggy and even Peter Sellers as embodying the virtues and vices that were the talismans of the Swinging Sixties – the days when terms such as 'competitive edge', 'multi-tasking' and 'human resources management' had yet to be invented. For today's young women, growing up in altogether less gentle times, the role models encapsulate both ambition and glamour – Abi Titmuss, Jordan and Jodie Marsh – reflecting an age in which being a 'celebrity' is seen as far more important than having less applauded but genuine talent.

When the discussion in our focus groups drifted onto the topic of celebrity gossip – a minor but still significant feature of women's chat – an interesting consensus emerged. Real role models were not so much the famous or glamorous faces that appear on the covers of magazines or are the subject of endless speculation in the tabloid gossip columns. Rather they were 'ordinary' people with whom our participants interacted on a daily basis.

> *"I feel my role models are definitely my best friends and I feel that they are my role models because they are just so amazing in all the*

different areas. They are really intelligent, they are really energetic, ambitious, fantastic girlfriends… you know you can emotionally bond with them…I'm just really fortunate with these girlfriends, I just find them incredible that they can be so wonderful in all the different areas."

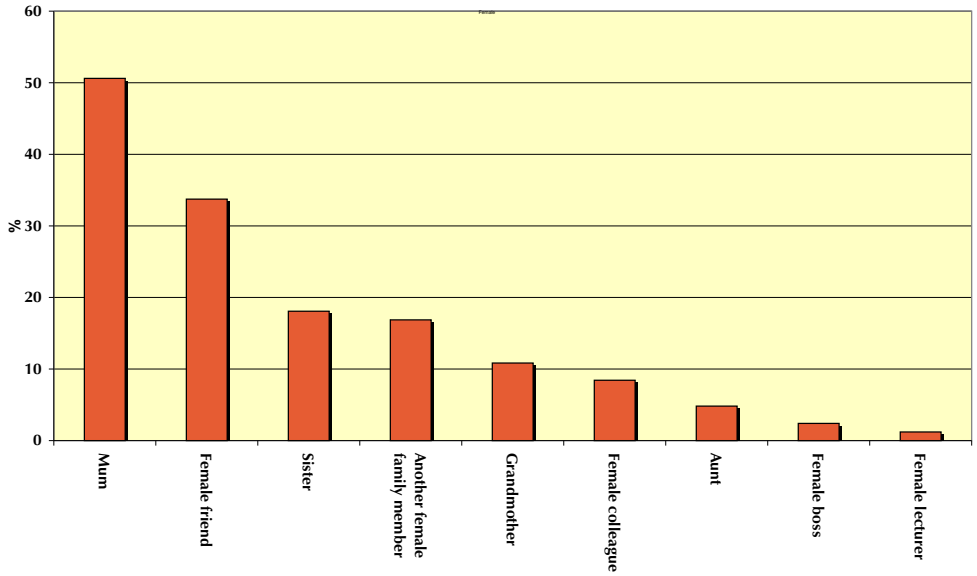
"For me, all my role models are people that I know or people who I've known – people I work with"

"No famous people. I'm the same…My Mum, peers at work who've worked hard from the bottom who I admire."

There were a few focus group participants who took the rather more conventional approach, offering names such as Patti Smith and Shami Chakrabarti, the head of the National Council for Civil Liberties. But there was little emphasis on pure celebrity or simple fame.

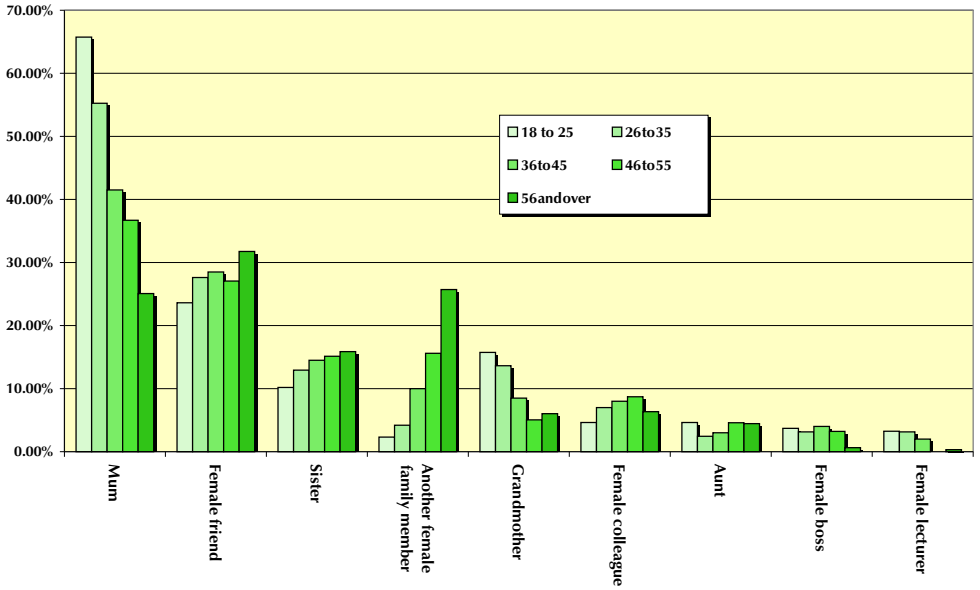
Bearing this in mind, we asked two separate questions in the national poll to explore these issues. Firstly, we provided a list that included friends and family members and asked respondents to pick just two that they admired most. The results are summarised in Figure 23. below. Here we can see that Mum is seen by women as by far the most significant subject of admiration, followed by female friends, sisters and other female family members.

Figure 23. Women's role models among family and friends.



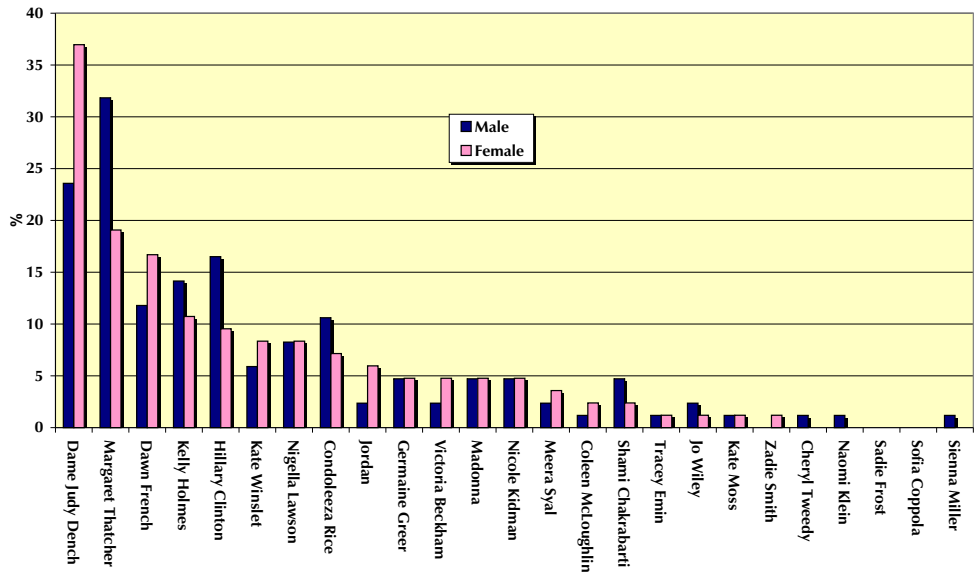
There were, however, some distinct differences between women of different ages in this context, as shown in Figure 24 below. We can see that Mums are the most important role model particularly for women aged under 35, with older women more likely to select a different female family member. Many of these older women, of course, will be mothers themselves and now direct their admiration elsewhere. For the those in their 20s and 30s, however, mothers still feature very strongly in their lives.

Figure 24. Women's role models among family and friends, by age (women only)



The second poll question in this section consisted of a list of well known women, drawn up after some intensive brainstorming with both males and females across the age ranges. Again, respondents could pick up to two names of people that they admired. Figure 25 shows the results for both male and female poll respondents.

Figure 25. Most admired women, by gender



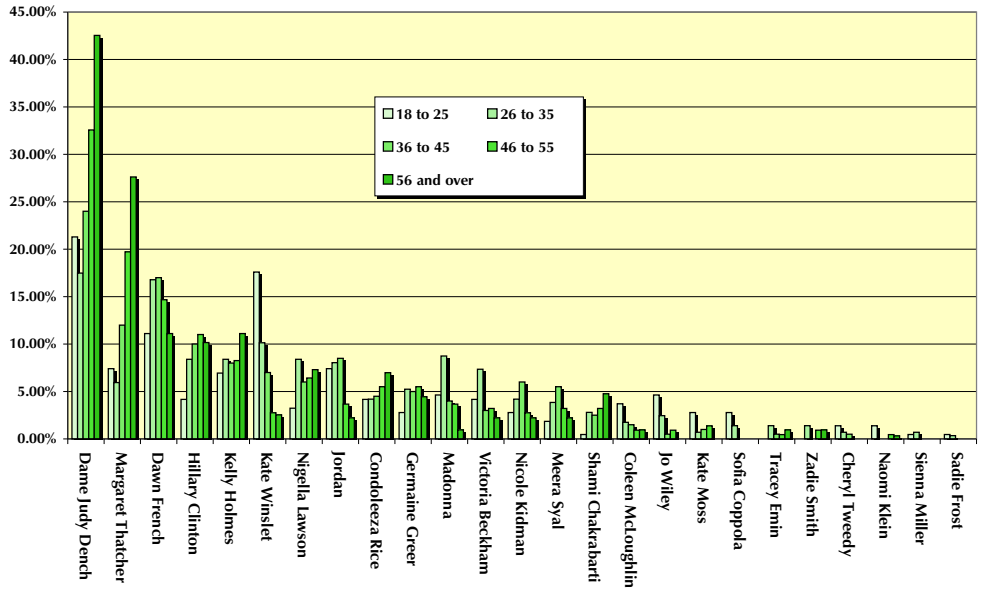
These results are very interesting and show quite marked differences between the responses of men and women. For men, Margaret Thatcher is the most significant role model, followed by Dame Judy Dench and Hilary Clinton. For women, however, while Mrs Thatcher still ranks highly, Judy Dench and Dawn French are much more preferred compared with men. In an age that seems almost obsessed

with diet, slimness and avoiding obesity, the choice of two quite large ladies may seem to be a refreshing sign.

Other political figures in the list, such as Condoleeza Rice, tend again to be favoured by men, along with sporting figures such as Kelly Holmes. In contrast, Kate Winslet, Jordan and Victoria Beckham appear to be rather more women's women than men's women.

These simple gender differences in preferences once again conceal substantial age variations among women, as shown in Figure 26. We can see that the top polling woman, Judy Dench, achieves her position primarily because of the votes of women over the age of 45. Women in the 26-35 age group are much less impressed. And they are particularly unimpressed with Mrs Thatcher as a role model. Their votes are much more evenly distributed across the top eleven candidates, with Madonna making a particular impression on this generation.

Figure 26. Most admired women, by age (women only)



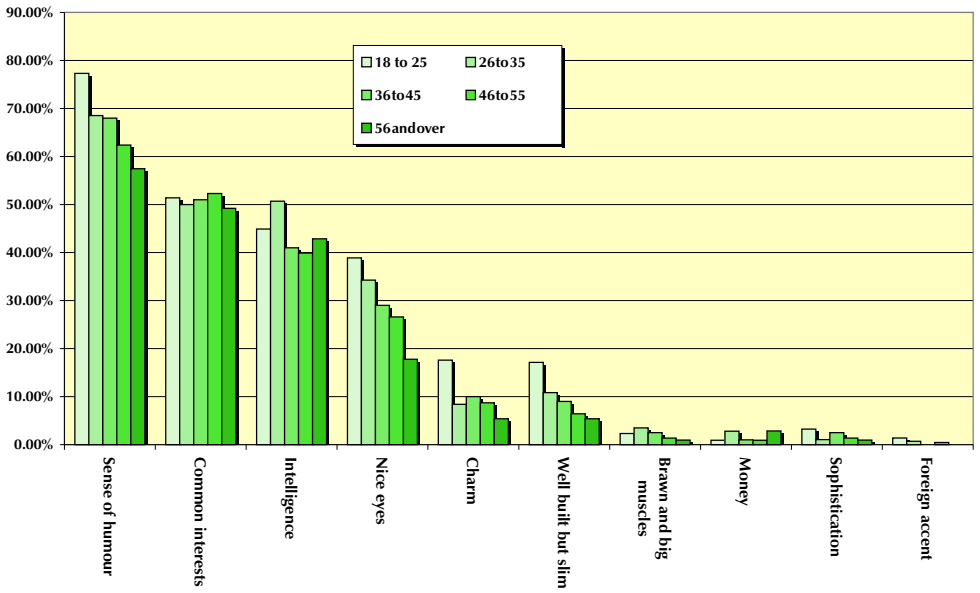
As we noted at the very beginning of this report, we expected to discover diversity as much as commonality among this group of women. And here we find it. Nigella Lawson ranks alongside Jordan, Victoria Beckham and Kate Winslet. The charm of Dawn French, however, still features significantly over this rather disparate collection.

The 'perfect' man?

As we have seen earlier in this report in the section on women's patterns of communication, there has been a strong sense that men do not really understand women's 'Girl Talk'. In the focus groups there was also a broader consensus that they also fail to appreciate what women really want from a relationship with a man and the male qualities that attract them. This is nothing new, of course. Women have probably always felt this way and the male counter that 'My wife doesn't understand me' is similarly timeless.

As a somewhat light-hearted conclusion to our national poll, we included a question to explore the qualities that women, and not men, felt were the hallmarks of a desirable male partner. The results were a little surprising, as shown in Figure 27.

Figure 27. Qualities that women look for in a man



A feature to note about Figure 26 is that the histogram bars for the younger women tend to be higher overall than for women in the older age groups. In the poll, women respondents could choose up to three qualities that they looked for a man. While those in the 18-25 age category tended to use all three, many older women felt that only two were needed, perhaps indicating less complicated desires.

The need for a sense of humour was the clear favourite for women of all ages, perhaps indicating that in a decade that has been characterised by 9/11, the London bombings, tsunamis and the Iraq war, a little light relief is urgently needed.

This was followed by being able to share common interests with a male partner and intelligence, particularly for the 26-35 year olds, was also seen as a most desirable quality. Nothing about physical characteristics so far. When we do get to these, it is not the six-pack that women look for but 'nice eyes' – something rather quaint and nostalgic.

'Charm', whatever that might consist of, seems desirable but not a major requirement. And being well-built but slim may help.Brawn and muscles, however, are a bit of no-no. Even money doesn't matter anymore. As for sophistication and a French accent – well, forget it!

Male readers may draw one of two conclusions from this part of the study. They may, in true masculine style, complain that women don't really know what they

want – they are "just saying that." Or, more sensibly, they might recognise that learning to be able to cheer women up, share in activities with them and display a bit of 'nouse' from time to time is the real way to 'pull'. All that time spent humping weights in the gym and affecting James Bond mannerisms has undoubtedly been wasted.

Summary and conclusions

Women's friendships

Women's friendships are characterised by relationships in which they can 'be themselves' and in which they have a sense of trust and mutual understanding. Women's friendships are also characterised by qualities such as 'not having to explain yourself' and 'can call at 3am'. Such friendships are the basis of social identity – understanding who one really is in the context of others.

Women typically have two or three close friends. In addition, women also have friends who are 'a shoulder to cry on', 'night out' and 'shopping' friends and 'long distance' friends.

While women's friends are most usually other women of a similar age, over half of 26-35 year old women have a close male friend, who is not their partner, and nearly a third have a homosexual friend. Many women find friendships with gay men easier than with heterosexual males.

Women in the 26-35 age group are more likely than women in other age groups to have several friends but no single 'best friend'.

Women's work friendships

For women in general, the workplace was the most common place in which close friendships were first established.

Friendships at work are of particular importance to women in the 26-35 age group, second only to 'best friend/closest friend' relationships. It is at this stage of their lives when such social bonds are required in order to adapt and progress in the increasingly competitive world of jobs and careers.

Establishing in-group bonds at work, rather than being a social 'outsider', not only has immediate personal benefits but also facilitates career development.

The rules of women's friendships

Women's friendships are established and maintained according to a set of unwritten rules. These include:

- Be there for one-another – through thick and thin
- Be non-judgemental – never say "I told you so!"
- In a good friendship It is okay to say "I'm knackered" when you don't want to talk
- You can be yourself at all times
- There is a friendship 'shorthand': why say in 20 minutes what you could say in 10, or on the other hand, why not?
- You can move on / let go with no hard feelings
- Gender loyalty counts – you can be 'one of the boys', but know the limits
- Sort out your boundaries with male friends early on
- Ideally have a gay male friend: the best of both worlds
- Never flirt with a friend's partner

Women's 'secret' language

Women and men have different styles of language – they use different 'codes'. The female code includes the use of 'tags' – a man would say: "She is funny"; a women would say "She's funny, isn't she?". Women also use more 'hedges' than men – e.g. "sort of", "kind of", etc.

Women also tend to use more non-verbal signals (body language) than men.These include the 'knowing look'; body contact, including affectionate hugs; raised eyebrows; etc. Men understand these signals very poorly, allowing women to communicate among themselves in semi-secret.

There are also significant differences between men and women in terms of conversational style. In particular, women view their conversations as being reciprocal, while those of men are seen as being more one-sided.

Three time as many women compared with men believe that 'men talk/women listen' while the opposite ratio is evident in the context of 'women talk/men listen'.

Women see themselves as building 'rapport' in conversations while men 'report' facts.

Gossip

For women, gossiping (what men call 'chatting') is an essential ingredient of female friendships. There are, however, rules. These include:

- Don't be seen to be a gossip, but be good at it.
- For "no one likes a gossip" read "no one likes a bad gossip" (especially at work)
- Deny your gender stereotype, express a distain for gossip
- Deny your celebrity gossip knowledge

Women tend to have considerably more topics for gossip/chat than men and younger women tend to have more topics than older women. These include talk about family and friends, TV programmes, office politics, etc but most significantly about private life and emotional feelings – things that men share much less often. The emphasis is on emotional rather than factual issues.

'Celebrity' gossip, while a relatively minor aspect of gossip/chat as a whole, is twice as frequent among women than men. It serves to aid role modelling – defining oneself with reference to well known figures that one admires.

While women's gossip/chat can occur anywhere, the workplace is a particularly popular venue – particularly at tea breaks or in the canteen. They also talk for longer than men in this way – often for 2 or more hours at a time.

Gossip creates for women an increased sense of bonding through the mutual sharing of feelings and tacit understandings – often within a 'conspiratorial' framework. This is particularly important in providing support for those in their mid twenties to mid thirties who are adjusting to increased work and career pressures.

Secrets

An intrinsic element of 'good' gossip is the 'secret' – something shared privately with only a 'chosen few'. This, however, creates a dilemma: if it is a 'real' secret then you can't tell anyone about it. A number of women admit to being 'hopeless' at keeping secrets while others distinguish between different types of secret to resolve the dilemma.

'Ordinary' secrets can be shared through gossip. 'Real' **secrets**, however, cannot be passed on unless the person from whom you obtained the **secret** may be hurt in some way if it remains secret.

Men and women do not differ significantly in the number of secrets they are keeping at any one time – most typically one or two. While three quarters of both men and women *say* that they never reveal secrets, with a mere 8% admitting to keeping secrets for three months, this is undoubtedly due to them not making distinctions between different types of secret. Over a third also believe that 'There are different types of secret. Some I would pass on, some I wouldn't'.

Success at work for women

Women recognise that their language skills can give them an edge over men at work. Many talk about the need for networking and communication in order to get ahead. Others emphasised the need for a degree of toughness in a 'man's world' and not being seen as too soft or emotional.

While men and women do not necessarily differ in what they think women need in order to succeed at work, women think that they need more qualities overall than men. They also feel that being able to multi-task, including juggling work and family commitments, is an essential skill in this context.

Being dedicated, ambitious and competitive, together with with having passion and energy, are seen particularly by younger women as pre-requisites for career success. This reflects the fact that the workplace is a highly competitive environment for women, and it is getting more so.

Role models

'Real' role models are most often not famous or glamorous people – they are family, friends or people around us. This is particularly the case for women, with 'best friends' being commonly referred to in this way. The most significant role model for younger women, however, is 'Mum'.

There are, of course, famous women who are are a source of inspiration for other women and, in many case, for men as well. There are, however, some interesting differences between the sexes here. For men, Margaret Thatcher is the most admired women, much less so for women who choose Dame Judy Dench in preference. They also show a greater fondness for Dawn French. Interestingly, neither of these women conform to the 'thin = glamorous' model of perfection. The Victoria Beckhams and Madonnas of the world come much lower down in this particular parade.

The perfect man

It is an enduring truth than men do not understand what women really find attractive in males or what they want from a relationship with them. Men, similarly, continue to feel that their female partners do not really understand them.

Our research shows quite conclusively that the stereotype of the 'perfect' man – well built, muscles, rich and sophisticated – is a myth. Overwhelmingly women are attracted to men with a sense of humour, who have interests in common with themselves, who are intelligent and, yes, have nice eyes, in that order

Men, please take note.

Conclusion

The 'Girl Talk' study has highlighted clearly the special nature of women's friendships, particularly in the context of work, and the unique patterns of

language and communication that create and sustain them. There is, indeed, a genuinely women's world, with subtle nuances and signals, to which men have little access and which they barely understand. While many women have men friends, the majority find true closeness only with others of their own sex.

Within these relationships the role of gossip and the conspiratorial sharing of secrets, as opposed to **secrets**, plays a fundamental role in cementing social bonds and providing a genuine sense of social identity. At work, the advantages are not just personal. Making friends, using one's communication skill, networking: all are needed in the competitive career worlds in which many women work. And while the workplace may still be a 'man's world' for many, women are generally better at these things than men. As women begin to realise these gifts more fully, perhaps we are about to witness a quite dramatic change – one in which the seemingly trivial business of gossip plays a surprisingly important part.