

Experiences and perceptions of young adults in friends with benefits relationships: A qualitative study

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Abstract: Friends with Benefits Relationships (FWBRs) involve ongoing sexual activity occurring between partners who do not identify the relationship as romantic. Although preliminary research suggests that FWBRs may be common, little is known about how young adults experience these relationships. In the current study, semi-structured interviews were completed with 26 young adults with FWBR experience. Positive aspects of FWBRs included appropriateness for their life situation, safety, comfort and trust, gaining confidence and experience, closeness and companionship, freedom and having control, and easy access to sex. Negative aspects of FWBRs included getting hurt, ruining the friendship, and the relationship becoming complicated or awkward. FWBRs were characterized by limited direct communication between partners. Participants perceived little or no risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) within their FWBRs although 44% reported having additional sexual partners during their most recent FWBR and a third reported inconsistent or no condom use. A majority (77%) of the participants believed that a sexual double standard exists in which women are judged more negatively than men for participating in FWBRs.

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Introduction

Friends with Benefits Relationships (FWBRs) are defined as relationships between friends who engage in sexual activity without defining the relationship as romantic (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). Those involved in FWBRs report approximately equivalent amounts of friendship activities (e.g., going out together with a larger group of friends) and sexual activities suggesting that FWBRs do, in fact, combine aspects of both platonic friendships and sexual relationships (VanderDrift, Lehmler, & Kelly, 2010).

Although it is unlikely that the phenomenon of FWBRs is new, research on this relationship type has emerged primarily within the last decade. FWBRs appear to be common among college and university students, with approximately 50% to 60% of those surveyed reporting at least one FWBR

experience (Bisson & Levine, 2009; McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007; Puentes, Knox, & Zusman, 2008; Williams, Shaw, Mongeau, & Knight, 2007). There is speculation that these relationships may be more common among today's youth and young adults than in previous generations. Bogle (2007, 2008) argued that there has been a shift from the predominant dating script of the 20th century to the hook-up script which comprises many forms of casual dating relationships including the FWBR.

Risks within FWBRs

Bisson and Levine (2009) asked 125 university students to identify potential disadvantages of FWBRs. Participants referred to the development of unreciprocated feelings, damage to the existing friendship, and the generation of negative emotions as potential disadvantages. However, they were asked about hypothetical disadvantages of FWBRs and

not those specific to their own personal experiences. Thus, it is not clear at present whether these disadvantages are commonly experienced by young adults and, if so, how they make sense of their FWBR experiences.

In an internet-based survey of 279 individuals with current or prior FWBR experience, Patterson and Price (2009) found that 44% reported having additional sexual partners while they were involved in their most recent FWBR and only 40% within this group had disclosed this to their FWBR partner. Furthermore, these participants reported being less likely to use condoms within an FWBR than in the context of a one-night stand. VanderDrift, Lehmiller, and Kelly (2010) surveyed 246 individuals reporting current FWBR involvement and found that a greater level of commitment to the friendship component of their FWBR was associated with less consistent use of condoms. The results of these two studies suggest that the pre-existing friendship and associated levels of trust experienced within FWBRs, combined with a lack of disclosure about additional partners, may contribute to less frequent use of condoms.

Positive aspects of FWBRs

The high numbers of young adults engaging in FWBRs suggests that many of them place a high value on these relationships and may anticipate or experience positive outcomes from them. In addition, Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnik, and Neumark-Sztainer (2009) found that young adults reporting casual sexual experience were not at greater risk for negative psychological consequences than those without casual sex experience. To date, research has only explored the perceived positive aspects of FWBRs in a limited way. In response to an open-ended question asking what the general advantages of FWBRs are, a sample of university students identified lack of commitment, access to sex, and trust in their partner as potential positive aspects (Bisson & Levine, 2009). However, this sample included individuals with and without FWBR experiences and did not ask about the individual's own experiences. As a result, it is unclear whether the described advantages are rooted in speculation or actual personal experience. Lehmiller, VanderDrift, and Kelly (2011) explored motives for initiating FWBRs, but limited respondents' choices to two

options: emotional connection and sexual motives. A majority of participants endorsed sexual motives and approximately one third identified emotional connection as a motive for initiating a FWBR. Little is known about the wider range of positive aspects individuals experience throughout their FWBRs.

Communication within romantic relationships

The quality of communication within romantic relationships has been found to be related to greater relationship satisfaction and more consistent use of safer sex practices (e.g., Emmers-Sommers, 2004; Noar, Carlyle, & Cole, 2006). Minimal research has explored communication within FWBRs. Bisson and Levine (2009) found that only a small percentage of undergraduate students in FWBRs talked explicitly with their partners about the relationship.

Gender and FWBRs

Some researchers have found that men were more likely to report FWBR experience than women (e.g., Richey, Knox, & Zusman, 2009) whereas others have found no gender differences in FWBR participation (Bisson & Levine, 2009). Consistent with gender stereotypes, men have reported stronger sexual motives for participating in FWBRs than women and expressed a greater desire for the relationship to remain casual, whereas women identified stronger emotional connection motives and were more likely to report a desire for the relationship to transition into a romantic relationship (Knight, Mongeau, & Eden, 2008; Lehmiller et al., 2011). However, in contrast to gender stereotypes emphasizing men's desire for impersonal sexual activity, men have been found to reject emotionless sexual scripts in favour of alternatives that allow for greater levels of connection and emotional intimacy between partners (Epstein, Calzo, Smiler, & Ward, 2009; Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2007).

Rationale for the current study

Empirical knowledge of FWBRs is growing, but still limited. Existing research exploring people's experiences of FWBRs as well as the communication and safer sex behaviour patterns within FWBRs is limited by an over-reliance on self-report questionnaires that do not explore the individual's subjective, personal experiences of

FWBRs. Thus, the purpose of the current study was to conduct interviews with young adults with FWBR experience in which the interviewee's experience would be explored in detail. Our primary objective was to more fully explore the positive and negative aspects participants identified as they discussed their FWBR experiences. A secondary objective was to obtain information on communication and safer sex behaviours within FWBRs.

Methods

Participants

Following approval from the St. Francis Xavier University Research Ethics Board, the participants for this study were recruited from announcements made by the first author in a variety of classes at this primarily undergraduate university in Atlantic Canada. Individuals over the age of 18 with FWBR experience who were interested in participating were instructed to contact the first author by e-mail for a more complete explanation of the study and to schedule an interview time. Eligible participants were then interviewed on a first-come, first-served basis. Interviewees included 26 adults (16 female, 10 male) ranging in age from 18-24 years. Participants who were enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course received course credit for participation and all other participants were invited to enter a draw for a \$50 gift certificate.

Measures

Participant characteristics and FWBR experiences

Participants completed a brief demographic questionnaire that included general background information (e.g., age, current relationships status) and more detailed information about their FWBR experiences. Based on an adaptation of the questions used by Patterson and Price (2009), participants were asked how many FWBRs they had experienced, how consistently safer sex practices were used within their FWBRs, and how positive or negative their overall experiences were within their FWBRs. Response options to the latter question ranged from (1) very positive experience(s) to (6) to very negative experience(s). Participants were next asked to think about their most recent FWBR partner and to answer a series of questions specific to that particular relationship, i.e., the age they were when they became

sexually involved with this partner, how long the sexual relationship lasted, and the frequency of sexual activity with that partner. Separate items asked whether they had vaginal, anal or oral sex with this partner and, if so, whether and how often, condoms (or dental dams in the case of oral sex) were used. Response options to the latter ranged from (1) never used to (5) always used. Respondents' perceptions of their risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI) from this partner were assessed on a scale that ranged from (1) no risk to (5) very high risk. Frequency of sexual interactions with this partner while under the influence of alcohol was assessed on a scale that ranged from (1) never to (5) always. Finally, they were asked whether they were involved with any other sexual or romantic partner during this FWBR. If they were, they were asked whether their friend-with-benefits (FWB) was aware of their additional sexual partners and whether safer sex practices were employed with these additional partners.

Semi-structured interview

The interview protocol included several broad questions designed to allow the participant to tell his/her own story plus a number of prompts within each area that invited participants to elaborate on their initial observations. The interview structure allowed for flexibility; for example, as the interviewer became aware of the language each participant used to describe their relationship or relationship partner (e.g., friend with benefits, fuck buddy, etc.), it was possible to adopt that preferred terminology. Table 1 presents the introductory questions, the subsequent primary questions, and an example of a prompt used with each of the primary questions.

Procedure

After arriving at the first author's laboratory at a mutually agreed-upon time, each participant was asked to read and sign the Invitation to Participate and Consent Form. Each participant was then individually interviewed by the first author in a private interview room and the interviews were recorded on a digital recorder to aid in transcription. Following the conclusion of the interview, participants were asked to complete the demographics/FWBR scale and seal it in an envelope. Each participant was then verbally encouraged to ask any questions they had about the study and invited to contact the primary researcher

Table 1 Interview protocol**Introductory questions**

When you hear the term "Friends with Benefits Relationship," what does that term mean to you?

What other terms have you heard used to describe friends with benefits relationships?

Where have you heard discussion of friends with benefits relationships before?

Primary Questions

(1) Tell me about your own personal experiences of friends with benefits relationships.

Prompt: What do you think influenced your decision to explore a Friends with Benefits Relationship with him/her?

(2) How did you feel about your relationship with him/her after it became sexual?

Prompt: Do you feel that your relationship with him/her changed once sexual intimacy began? How did it change?

(3) Tell me about safer sex practices, such as the use of condoms, in your Friends with Benefits Relationship.

Prompt: How did you feel about discussing (or not discussing) safer sex practices with him/her?

(4) Tell me about all of the ways your experiences with friends with benefits relationships have been positive for you.

Prompt: Why do you feel that was positive?

(5) Tell me about all of the ways your experiences with friends with benefits relationships have been negative for you.

Prompt: Why do you feel that was negative?

(6) Tell me about discussing your Friends with Benefits Relationship with someone other than your partner.

Prompt: How did they react when you told them?

if they wished to request a copy of the study results. Finally, they received a debriefing form providing information on the study, links to community resources, and relevant empirical references.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by the study authors and by undergraduate research assistants. Student transcribers were trained by the first author and required to sign a confidentiality agreement. NVivo software was used to assist in data storage, organization and coding. Once verbatim transcription of the first five interviews (2 female and 3 male) was completed, each of the authors independently began thoroughly reviewing this "slice" of data to explore initial ideas and themes to pursue, as recommended by Richards (2009). Following this, all three authors met to discuss the emerging themes and came to a consensus about the initial themes to be coded. Coding was then revised regularly throughout the process of coding the remaining interviews, with decisions about new codes or decisions to collapse existing codes agreed upon by at least one author in addition to the first author. Interviewing was considered to be complete when theoretical saturation occurred; that is, when no new themes emerged from the data (Chamberlain, 1999).

Results**Participant characteristics**

On average, participants were 19 years old (see Table 2). Twenty-four participants identified as heterosexual and two as bisexual. All 26 participants (16 female, 10 males) reported having experienced sexual intercourse, with 1 ($n=3$) to more than 40 ($n=2$) previous intercourse partners. Their previous FWBRs experiences ranged from 1 (54%) to more than 30.

Table 2 Participant characteristics

Variable	<i>M (SD)</i>	Range
Age	19.1 (1.55)	18-24
Number of lifetime intercourse partners	7.6 (10.2)	1-40
Number of lifetime FWBRs	3.31 (5.8)	1-30
Age at most recent FWBR (years)	17.96 (1.8)	15-21
Length of most recent FWBR (months)	8.78 (11.6)	25-48

Note: $n = 26$

Rating of all FWBR experiences

Participants were asked to think about all of their FWBRs and indicate how positive or negative those experiences were for them overall on a scale from (1) very positive experience/s to (6) very negative experience/s (6) with a midpoint of 3.5. The majority of participants (85%) indicated a response below the

midpoint on the scale ($M=2.7$, $SD=1.4$) indicating, on average, a slightly positive response. The ratings of four participants (one male and three females) were above the midpoint, suggesting a more negative evaluation of their experiences.

Most recent FWBR experience

When asked about their most recent FWBR experience, participants reported that, on average, they were 18 years old when the relationship began and that this relationship lasted for 8 months. All but one participant indicated that penile-vaginal intercourse had occurred with this partner. A majority (62%) indicated that condoms were consistently used with this partner, 23% indicated that condoms were used most of the time intercourse took place, and individual participants indicated each of the following: condoms were never used, condoms were sometimes used, and condoms were used about half of the time. One participant reported engaging in anal sex with this most recent FWB and that no protection had been used. With regards to oral sex, 73% indicated that oral sex took place with their most recent FWB; 84% of these participants indicated never using any protective barriers (i.e., dental dams, condoms) for this activity, and the remaining 16% indicated that protective barriers were used either some of the time or half of the time. When asked about alcohol use in this relationship, more than half reported that alcohol was consumed "occasionally" or "sometimes" within the context of this relationship and an additional quarter of the participants reported that alcohol was "often" or "always" involved. Almost half of the participants (44%) reported that they were involved with additional sexual partners during their most recent FWBR and fewer than half of these participants had made their FWB aware that they were sexually active with other partners. In spite of these findings, when asked about their perception of STI risks with their FWBR partner, 92% indicated that there was "no risk" or "low risk".

Interview

Interviews varied in length from 19 to 68 minutes with an average length of 42 minutes. Although the participants were in some cases involved in more lifetime FWBRs than they discussed in the interview based on their questionnaire data, 35 FWBR experiences were discussed in total during

interviews; 18 participants described one FWBR, seven described two and one described three.

Terms, definitions, and sources of information

When participants were asked about other terms that they had heard used to describe FWBRs, "fuck buddy" was the most common example. Some participants used the terms "friend with benefits" and "fuck buddy" interchangeably but, for others, "fuck buddy" carried a more negative connotation. A male participant described "fuck buddy" as "an inappropriate term" and a female stated that it was more a demeaning way of saying "friends with benefits". Seven participants referred to this type of relationship partner as a *friend* (with a special emphasis on "friend"). Other terms mentioned included, "special friend", "friends, no strings attached", "that kinda friend", "hook-ups", "booty call", "casual sex", "a play buddy", "F squared", and "bang buddies".

Although specific definitions of FWBRs varied among participants, a majority indicated that FWBRs involved ongoing/repeated sexual activity and were characterized by a lack of commitment. A female participant defined a FWB as "...someone who's just a friend, like, it's never going to be anything more. Like, you guys just hang out a lot and occasionally you guys'll hook up." A female said, "To me, it means that it is someone that you are comfortable with and are able to, like, go to the movies with...but also have, like, intimate relations with but you are not committed to them."

Each participant was asked where they had previously heard discussions or seen depictions of FWBRs. The most commonly identified source of information was friends or peers (85%), followed by television with just over half of participants either referring to specific shows that depict FWBRs (e.g., *Jersey Shore*) or more generally to particular genres of shows (e.g., reality TV). A female participant said, "...reality TV shows are all about hooking up with your friends that you live with.... MTV definitely has all of those innuendos and stuff... like, it's okay to have friends and have the benefits (laughs)." Roughly one third referred to movies, with some people identifying specific films and

others referring to genres, such as romantic comedy, where such relationships are sometimes depicted.

Our analysis of the interview data yielded seven themes and 15 sub-themes that are summarized in Table 3 and documented individually below.

Theme 1: FWBRs do have their benefits

A primary objective of this study was to explore the positive aspects of FWBRs. All participants identified positive aspects of FWBRs. When describing the positives, participants tended to draw a comparison to more traditional romantic relationships and indicate that FWBRs offered the best of both worlds or offered the positive aspects of a traditional relationship (e.g., sex, companionship, intimacy) and those of a casual sexual relationship (e.g., fun, freedom, casualness, and independence) while avoiding the negative aspects of the more traditional romantic relationship (e.g., drama, commitment, complications, worry, hurt, strings, and messiness). A male participant said it most succinctly, "...it's kind of like having your cake and eating it too, you know what I mean? I guess for, like, someone that is interested only in sex and not the relationship."

Current life context can feel appropriate for FWBRs

Most participants (85%) described FWBRs as being tempting or appropriate for their age, stage of life, or context. Commonly, participants said that being a young adult in a university setting made these relationships more accessible or appealing. While in this context, many participants described feeling that they were too young to be focused on a serious relationship or described the "college life" as a time when people are supposed to have fun.

When you are in university you want to live the "university life" and, like, you have to concentrate on school, but yet you want to have a good time and you don't want to, like, worry about, like, that person in the back of your mind, like, you still want a relationship, but not, kinda thing, so the friends with benefits thing would be more appealing to probably most people. (female)

Some participants alluded to an expectation that the appeal of FWBRs would decrease after university or as they aged. A female participant stated, "I'm obviously not going to want that kind of relationship

Table 3 Major themes and sub-themes related to FWBR relationships

Theme	Sub-themes
Theme 1: FWBRs have their benefits	Current life context can feel appropriate for FWBRs FWBRs afford safety, comfort and trust FWBRs boost confidence and provide experience FWBRs provide closeness and companionship FWBRs give a sense of freedom and control FWBRs provide easy access to sex
Theme 2: FWBRs also have some downsides	Unequal feelings between FWBRs partners may carry risk of getting hurt emotionally FWBRs can ruin friendships FWBRs can become awkward and complicated
Theme 3: One has to understand the inherent rules and scripts for FWBRs	FWBRs are not expected to be exclusive to one partner Traditional relationship-type behaviours are not expected in FWBRs FWBRs are expected to be secret and rarely disclosed Despite expected scripts for FWBRs people may have their own personal rules
Theme 4: The sexes are not always "equal" in FWBRs	There is a sexual double standard in FWBRs; women are viewed more negatively FWBRs are challenged by traditional gender roles
Theme 5: Open communication or lack of communication determine success of FWBRs	N/A
Alcohol consumption can initiate or facilitate BWBRs	N/A
Safer sex behaviour is important but variable in FWBRs	N/A

when I'm older." When questioned as to why, she said, "I think it's because I'm going to want to be more settled down and stuff and the idea of nothing coming out of that type of relationship would just seem like a waste of time."

FWBRs afford safety, comfort, and trust

Eleven (42%) participants identified safety as a benefit of FWBRs. This perception of safety seems to be related to two separate issues: less risk of being emotionally hurt by a partner and safety by virtue of being with a friend instead of a stranger. A female participant stated, "Because he was my best friend, I don't think there was the risk of getting hurt. There's still a bit of a risk, but it isn't as bad". A male explained that there is less concern "...about being picked up at the bar or going home with a stranger. You know where you can go that's safe and have someone you can trust." Approximately one third of participants specifically mentioned comfort or trust as positives of FWBRs. When discussing her FWB, a female said that she felt "...secure around him. I just, like, I could talk to him about things and nothing was awkward between us." A male participant commented:

I was in the mood for a physical interaction that night, so I turned to her because I was most comfortable with her, and she said the same thing because we had the history we were more comfortable with each other.

FWBRs boost confidence and provide experience

Ten (38.5%) participants indicated that their FWBR experience(s) helped to boost their confidence, such as by making them feel attractive. A female participant said, "...it's sort of this reassurance that I'm wantable". Another female stated, "...having sex boosts my confidence in how I look. Like, I know that I'm having sex, so I can get some, therefore, I'm hot (laughs)." A male commented that, for men, FWBRs can provide "...bragging rights...it's cool to say, like, I can get sex without being in a relationship." Roughly one third of participants described their FWBR experience(s) as a context in which they could learn, gain new experiences, and explore.

...you want to experience sexual things and you'd rather do it with a best friend

and have no attachments than figure out later on, like, when you're in a relationship and you don't want to do things for the first time because it might ruin your relationship... we were exploring, I guess. You know, just figuring things out. (male)

Another male commented,

...it's beneficial because you can kind of go out there and see what you like in another person. You don't have to settle down or have a relationship...go out and find out what you like. Test out some different waters.

FWBRs provide closeness and companionship

Eight participants (31%) discussed FWBRs as an effective way of combating loneliness by providing companionship or comfort. For instance, a male participant noted, "...it was positive because I know that she's been lonely and I've been lonely at the same time, so it was good...to kind of get those frustrations and feelings out together." A female described a post break-up FWBR experience that helped to fill the void at a time when she was not ready for a more committed relationship:

... it helped me in a way 'cause I was, like, just out of a relationship.... It was nice... the feeling of just having another person to make me laugh. I guess kind of, like, filled the void that I was feeling and just kind of helped me move on 'cause I could see that I wasn't just gonna be alone...it was really good timing as far as that went (laughs).

Some felt that the sexual relationship had increasing closeness with their FWB. A male said of his FWB, "...I guess we were just closer and we could talk about, well, about anything. We actually became better friends." A male who went on to become romantically involved with one of his FWBs stated,

...on a more personal level I gained a sort of privilege and respect of getting to know that person on a deeper level.... I think that's a positive thing—getting to know these people on a deeper and deeper level.

Another male described his FWBR experience as, "pretty much based around bonding." He elaborated, "We were together in a friends-based relationship and then we had the sexual relationship, which just tightened our bond and then we were just best friends."

FWBRs give a sense of freedom and control

Seven (27%) participants identified perceptions of greater freedom as a positive aspect of their FWBRs. A female participant said, "...it gives you the freedom to do what you want but you still have that person." As a male participant put it, "... I won't be afraid to go out to a party and get completely wasted and make a fool of myself and not have to face the consequences of a girlfriend being like 'wow, you're an idiot.'"

Five participants (19%) described experiencing a sense of control in an FWBR as a positive. A female participant described wanting to feel in control by being the one to "call the shots" and a male said, "I like them because I have control over the situation." Participants identifying control as a positive aspect of FWBRs tended to contrast FWBRs with more traditional romantic relationships in which they felt that they had less control.

FWBRs provide easy access to sex

Five participants (19%) highlighted the readily available sexual partner that FWBRs provide and emphasized the purely physical benefits. A male stated, "It offers, like, steady and casual sex... pretty much easy access to sex." Another male also emphasized the physical aspects when he stated, "...the only thing I can think of are just the physical benefits, and, like, gaining experience. Like, what else are you there for?" These participants sometimes used terms like "back-up plan" and "fall-back option" when describing this benefit of FWBRs.

Theme 2: FWBRs also have some downsides

Consistent with the positive aspects identified, every participant was also able to identify negatives associated with FWBRs. One female participant described FWBRs as, "like committing adultery on yourself by not committing to someone". She said, "...I just wanted to do it to make myself feel older" and she described feeling "empty" and "dirty" following the experience. A male, one of the only

participants who had had open discussion with his FWBR partner before having sex, said it felt "... like a business arrangement." He added, "...that was the worst sex of my life...it felt like prostitution or something; it was completely devoid of any kind of meaning."

Unequal feelings between FWBRs may carry risk of getting hurt emotionally

The most common negative identified by almost all participants (92%) involved the risk of the FWBR becoming a one-sided relationship in which one partner developed deeper feelings without the other partner reciprocating. A female participant said, "...you know people will end up feeling attached and stuff like that, so I guess it could be a negative because of that. You know, it never really works." A male added, "...usually it changes... it becomes a one-sided relationship." With this risk in mind, three participants said that it is wise to try not to get attached or emotional in an FWBR. A female advised, "...try to guard your heart, I guess, and try not to fall for the person." When asked by the interviewer how this could be done, she laughed and replied, "I honestly don't know or else I would have done it." A majority of the participants alluded to "red flags"—indicators that FWBRs might have differing expectations for the relationship. They generally referred to indirect signs that might signal differing intentions. Several participants described a partner's desire for "date-type" activities or wanting to spend a lot of time together outside of sexual activity as red flags. Others referred to wanting to sleep over, initiating cuddling/hand-holding and acting jealous as red flags.

FWBRs can ruin friendships

Thirteen (50%) of the participants identified the risk of possibly ruining a friendship by adding a sexual component. When asked about their own FWBR experiences, half of the participants indicated that once a sexual component was added to a pre-existing friendship, their relationship had changed. In some instances the change had a negative effect on the relationship. A male stated that, "it kind of changed ... I wouldn't call her up one-on-one anymore."

FWBRs can become awkward, complicated

The possibility of the relationship becoming more complicated than one expects was mentioned by

slightly less than half of the participants. This sometimes referred to one person developing deeper feelings and sometimes referred to ambiguity about how the relationship was supposed to work. A female participant referred to FWBRs having, "a lot of grey areas" and male said, "...it's hard to have no-strings sex.... I mean, it's easy to come up with all the disaster scenarios". Approximately one third of participants discussed feelings of awkwardness they experienced in their FWBRs. Most of the references to "awkwardness" either referred to the friendship becoming strained once the relationship became sexual or trying to figure out the terms of the relationship after the sexual component of the relationship had ended. A female participant described the ambiguity in her FWBR after the sexual part of the relationship ended: "...you don't know if you should talk to them or if they should talk to you, or like, what's going on... no one really knows what to do." As one male suggested, "... it's not necessarily a bad idea, but it has lots of complications, and it's a bit of a minefield."

Theme 3: One has to understand the inherent rules and script for FWBRs

Most participants articulated implicit rules for FWBRs. Although ambivalence was expressed towards some of these rules, there was considerable similarity across participants. Also consistent across many participants was a lack of direct discussion of rules with their FWB.

FWBRs are not expected to be exclusive to one partner

A majority of participants (65%) identified lack of exclusivity as an FWBR rule. An expectation related to this theme was that one is not supposed (or allowed) to become angry or jealous about a partner's lack of exclusivity. A female said, "...if they started to date someone else, like, that person technically wouldn't have a right to get mad about it." However, this rule, more than any other, seemed to involve greater ambivalence and uncertainty. A male participant demonstrated considerable ambivalence when he stated,

...I wouldn't get mad at a girl if she was out kissing another guy or something at a party, but I, I'd probably get, like, pretty upset if she went and fucked someone, like, while

we're, like, fuck buddies...it's just like a slap in your face. Not that you're dating but it's just, like, uh, I forgot, like, maybe I can't get mad at her. Should I get mad at her? Like, am I allowed to get mad at her for doing that?

Traditional relationship-type behaviours are not expected in FWBRs

Within this theme, mentioned by 7 participants (35%), numerous behaviours (e.g., cuddling, hand-holding, public displays of affection, staying the night, etc.) were identified as FWBR faux-pas because they were too similar to the behaviours typical of a committed romantic relationship. Rules were viewed as ways to decrease the likelihood that someone would become attached. For instance, a female participant said, "I never spend the night. I don't think it's right because I think someone will get attached if you are spending a lot of time together." A male stated,

...for your end, you're supposed to be like, "Oh, it's just a fuck," and that sort of thing...you sleep together, you leave, because if you cuddle, or you kiss, or you watch a movie together... anything that falls under, really spending quality time together, then it aids in the development of feelings.

FWBRs are expected to be secret and rarely disclosed

The theme of secrecy or discretion emerged in more than half (57%) of the interviews, ranging in extent from telling no one outside of the dyad to being selective about who one chooses to disclose to. This desire for discretion seemed to reflect two distinct motivations. The primary motivation appeared to be the fear of peer judgment: "I keep it under wraps to cover my reputation" (female).

Despite expected rules for FWBRs people may have their own personal rules

Nine (34.5%) of participants identified having multiple FWBs at once or many over time as behaviours that could warrant negative evaluations. In regards to having multiple FWB partners at once, a female participant stated that "...it's not even about the reputation that it would give me, it's about the way I feel...you feel like it's dirty." Another female added "...if it's the same person sleeping with, like, multiple people for short periods of time, like, I couldn't help,

I don't think, but judge them for what they're doing." Five participants said that having a FWB while also in a committed relationship was wrong or that they would not engage in such a relationship if they were in a committed relationship. And another female added, "I've always had a rule that I do one, one at a time and if I do meet somebody that I'm interested in, then I cut off the other, umm, thing."

Despite consistency across individuals for rules or expectations for FWBRs, the participants also conveyed a sense that there is often a gap between the rules and reality. A female said, "I mean, there is a baseline, but I think, like, everybody can kind of manipulate it a little bit because they're not set in stone. I mean, like, each relationship kinda has their own rules." A male added, "There's no written constitution."

Theme 4: The sexes may not always be "equal" in FWBRs

There is a double standard in FWBRs; women are viewed more negatively

Twenty participants (81% of the female participants, 70% of male participants) described a double standard in which women are viewed more negatively than men for their participation in FWBRs. A male stated, "There's always a perception for, like, a guy it's just another notch in your belt, and the girl's termed, like, a slut, or whatever...." Female participants often expressed frustration with the double standard. As a female asserted, "I don't think it should be perceived that way. I think that men and females should both be seen in the same light.... He shouldn't be congratulated where she's put down."

FWBRs are challenged by traditional gender role expectations

Some participants discussed FWBRs in the context of traditional gender roles in which men are expected to be sex-driven and less emotional. A male described the pressure to live up to this role, "...the guy has to be the tough one, right? And he can't have this emotional, like, side to him." Women were perceived by several (mostly male) interviewees as being more likely to become emotionally attached to a FWB. The only female to describe this, flatly stated, "...girls always end up getting attached...." She went on to say, "I see it more in girls' situations that they're the ones getting hurt and, like, they're the ones that really do have the feelings."

Theme 5: Open communication or lack of communication determine success of FWBRs

A majority of participants described direct, open, honest communication as the best precaution to take in an FWBR to prevent negative outcomes. However, few of these participants had themselves engaged in in-depth direct communication with their own FWB(s). In fact, a majority of participants said that they relied exclusively on indirect means of communication, such as behavioural indicators (e.g., attempts to initiate cuddling). When direct discussion did occur it was usually after the partners had already engaged in sexual activities and the most frequent topic was negotiating relationship status. A male participant indicated that "we went and just kind of, like, sat down and were like 'what's going on?'" However, it was apparent that this discussion was sometimes very superficial. A female stated, "...the one verbal thing that happens is 'just sex, right?', and then it's done." It was common for participants to describe assuming that they and their FWB had similar understanding of the relationship and similar expectations, without any direct communication to support this assumption. As a female put it, "we both kind of knew...there wasn't formal discussion about it I guess, but it was, a lot of it was implied, I think." Several other participants agreed that things are often not communicated directly, but often there is a perception of "an understanding". A female participant offered a possible explanation for why there is so little discussion in FWBRs, saying, "...you don't know if you want to take it to the next level." She went on to say,

...you're technically not serious because you are "friends with benefits"...they're like, "Oh, this girl's too serious if she talks to me about that kind of stuff"...it's basically just making you vulnerable, which no one really wants to feel...it sucks to feel vulnerable, and if you bring it up, then you do.

Theme 6: Alcohol consumption can initiate or facilitate FWBRs

There were no questions in the interview protocol regarding alcohol use and FWBRs; however, roughly one-quarter of participants, nevertheless, linked alcohol consumption to initiation of a FWBR:

"somebody that I'm friends with, we're comfortable with each other, we've known each other, get hammered (laughs), and it happens..." (female). Another female said, "... it was just kind of, like, well, we were friends and you know you get a drink and then it kinda happens and you like it after a few drinks and it goes from there."

Theme 7: Safer sex behaviour is important but variable in FWBRs

A majority of participants reported consistently using condoms during sexual activity with their FWB, and about one third reported inconsistent use of condoms or never using condoms. Those who reported inconsistent condom use sometimes explained that they relied on the birth control pill for contraception, knew their partner's sexual history, or knew the partner for a long time and therefore trusted them. Eleven participants commented on the relative importance of safer sex practices across different relationship types. Of these participants, two indicated that condoms are important in all relationships. Three participants indicated that condoms were more important for one-night stands or hook-ups than FWBRs and three indicated that condoms were more important in any type of casual sexual relationship in comparison to traditional romantic relationships.

Future intentions with respect to FWBRs

When asked whether they would consider becoming involved in another FWBR in the future, about one third of participants would definitely or probably consider another FWBR, one third said they were unsure and that it would depend on the person and one third would definitely or probably not consider another such relationship.

Discussion

The goal of the current study was to explore young adults' experiences in FWBRs with a particular emphasis on understanding positive and negative aspects of their FWBR experiences. In the current study, the vast majority (85%) of participants indicated that, overall, their FWBR experiences had been positive for them. They further identified a variety of positive aspects of FWBRs. This could suggest that these experiences were part of the

sexual and relationship development of these young adults during emerging adulthood. Indeed, many of the participants commented that FWBRs were appropriate for their situation and age and a number referred to their suitability to the "college life" characterized by new experiences and unencumbered by serious commitments. The frequent opportunities for social interaction available for students who live on-campus and the availability of alcohol during social events could make these casual sexual relationships more accessible to these students. Indeed, several participants spontaneously linked alcohol consumption with the commencement of their FWBR experiences.

Participants also readily identified negative aspects to FWBRs, most commonly describing unequal attachments between partners with one partner getting hurt. Open and honest communication was frequently mentioned as a way to safe-guard against negative outcomes such as emotional hurt. Further, many participants positively described the trust and comfort experienced with their FWB. Yet, open communication rarely occurred within interviewees' own experiences and, consistent with Bisson and Levine (2009), the majority described a reliance on indirect signals with little or no direct communication taking place with their FWB.

The lack of communication between FWBR partners in this study is concerning as it likely increases their sexual health risks. Based on the demographic information obtained from the participants, 44% reported being involved with another sexual partner at the time of their most recent FWBR and less than half of those participants had informed their partner of their extra-dyadic sexual involvement and about a third of participants reported inconsistent or no condom use. Yet, almost all participants indicated that they felt that they were at little or no risk for STI.

A majority of participants perceived a sexual double standard in which women would be judged more negatively for FWBR participation than men. It is possible that the sexual double standard still exists even within a relationship typology that, in many ways, contradicts traditional notions about relationships. However, recent evidence for the continuance of the double standard is confusing at

best, with some studies supporting the perseverance of the double standard (Kreager & Staff, 2009) and others finding mixed support (Milhausen & Herold, 2001). In a recent discussion of the current status of sexual script theory McCormick (2010) concluded that the sexual double standard is beginning to erode, but that "A diluted version of the sexual double standard remains in force" (p. 93). Thus, it is likely that sexual scripts are currently evolving away from traditional notions of gender and sexuality, but that vestiges of the traditional scripts are well-established and, therefore, slow to dissipate, even in less traditional relationship types like FWBRs.

Limitations and directions for future research

The results of the current study must be considered with several limitations in mind. Individuals who had negative FWBR experiences may have been less likely to volunteer to participate in a study in which they would be interviewed about those experiences. In addition, all interviews were conducted by a female interviewer. Both male and female participants may have responded to some questions differently if they were interviewed by a male. Finally, although participation was open to any individual over the age of 18 with FWBR experience, the campus-based recruitment methods resulted in primarily young, undergraduate students participating, with all but two participants identifying as heterosexual and only one same-gender FWBR experience described.

Future research is needed that explores the variables, both at the level of the individual and of the relationship, that predict whether FWBRs are experienced positively or negatively. In addition, although concerns about being judged and perceptions of a gender double standard were raised by participants, little is known about the role gender plays in FWBRs or the judgments people have about others' FWBR participation. This could be explored using methods to circumvent social desirability biases, including implicit methods as recommended by Sakaluk and Milhausen (2011) or divided attention tasks such as those used by Marks (2008). Future studies could compare a sample of university students to an age-matched group of peers not in university to explore whether there are different frequencies of FWBR experience. Finally, it may be fruitful for

researchers to conduct longitudinal studies, perhaps by collecting diary data, to explore the evolution of FWBRs over time.

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