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Effects of Gender and Psychosocial Factors on "Friends with Benefits" Relationships Among Young Adults

Jesse Owen · Frank D. Fincham

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Abstract Friends with benefits relationships (FWB) are a blend of friendship and physical intimacy outside of a committed romantic relationship. This study examined young adults' ($n = 889$) engagement in, and reactions to, a FWB relationship in the past year based on their gender, psychological distress, alcohol use, and relationship attitudes. Men (54.3%) were more likely than women (42.9%) to report at least one FWB relationship and both men and women reported that FWB relationships were associated with more positive emotional reactions than negative ones although this difference was larger for men. Greater alcohol use was related to engaging in a FWB relationship and this relationship was stronger for women. Further, thoughtfulness about relationship decisions moderated the relationship between alcohol use and engaging in FWB relationships, and again this moderation effect was stronger for women than men. Young adults with more psychological distress and who felt constrained in the FWB relationship were more likely to report negative emotional reactions. Implications for psychoeducational programs and future research are offered.

Keywords Casual sex · Friends with benefits · Romantic relationships · Psychological well-being

Introduction

"Friends with benefits" (FWB) is a new relational style that blends aspects of friendship and physical intimacy (prevalence rates range from approximately 33% to 60%; Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Bisson & Levine, 2009; Glenn & Marquardt, 2001; Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; Puentes, Knox, & Zusman, 2008). Similar to traditional friendships, FWB relationships include mutual understanding, support, companionship, and bonding through activities (Sprecher & Regan, 2002). The physical intimacy aspect of FWB ("with benefits") is more similar to a romantic relationship (e.g., sexual activities); however, there are no labels or implied commitments of a romantic relationship (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). FWB are most closely related to hooking up or casual sex where physical intimacy, ranging from kissing to sexual intercourse, occurs on one occasion without the expectation of future physical encounters or relational commitment (Fielder & Carey, 2009; Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006; Owen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Fincham, 2008; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000).

The dual desire for physical and emotional connection without commitment can motivate young adults to start FWB relationships and they report that this element is advantageous (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005). However, FWB can complicate friendship through the development of a deeper emotional bond and connection (Glenn & Marquardt, 2001). Also, FWB relationships are associated with moderate levels of intimacy and low levels of passion and commitment in comparison to other committed relationships (Bisson & Levine, 2009).

Conceptual Model to Explain Friends with Benefits Relationships

Stanley, Rhoades, and Markman (2006) offered a model to explain the risks related to how relationships start and transition. They suggested that sliding (e.g., less thoughtful decision making processes) through relationship transitions, such as into sex, cohabitation, or pregnancy, without making an explicit decision

J. Owen (✉)
Education and Counseling Psychology Department, College of Education, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292, USA
e-mail: jesse.owen@louisville.edu

F. D. Fincham
Family Institute, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, USA

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to take such steps, puts relationships at greater risk for problems. In contrast, individuals who do make more conscious and clear decisions about relationships are at lower risk for negative psychological and relational outcomes. For instance, Pearson, Stanley, and Kline (2005) noted that feelings of infatuation and desire to be in a relationship, while normative, can inhibit individuals' ability to make clear decisions about relationships, such as clarifying the expectations for the relationship or recognizing signs that the partner may not be compatible. It can be argued that young adults who are more thoughtful about their relationship decisions and who have a clear vision of what they want in a romantic partner may avoid FWB relationships.

A variety of factors may contribute to young adults not making thoughtful decisions about starting a FWB relationship, such as social pressure (see Fielder & Carey, 2009). However, one of the most reliable and robust predictors of casual sex behaviors is alcohol use, wherein young adults who may want an intimate relationship consume alcohol which leads to lower inhibitions and altered decision making processes, increasing the likelihood of being physically intimate (e.g., Desiderato & Crawford, 1995; Grello et al., 2006; Owen et al., 2008; Paul et al., 2000). Additionally, psychological distress is another common factor related to both decision making ability (e.g., Dunn, Stefanovitch, Buchan, Lawrence, & Dalgleish, 2009) and casual sex (e.g., Owen et al., 2008). For instance, a prospective study showed that psychologically distressed young adults were more likely to hook up in the following year (Longmore, Manning, Girodano, & Rudolph, 2004), which is consistent with cross-sectional data showing an association between hooking up and psychological distress (e.g., Grello et al., 2006; Paul et al., 2000; Owen et al., 2008). Thus, making thoughtful relationship decisions may be inhibited by alcohol use or psychological distress. However, few studies have examined moderators of the association between such risk factors and casual sex. Accordingly, we examined if young adults' thoughtfulness about relationship decisions moderated the relationship between alcohol/psychological distress and engaging in FWB relationships.

Gender may also influence engagement in FWB relationships. For instance, men tend to seek multiple partners and are more reluctant to commit (e.g., Mahalik, Good, & Englar-Carlson, 2003; Stanley, 2002), which could make FWB relationships attractive. Consistent with this view, there is some evidence to suggest that men are generally, but not invariantly, more likely to engage in FWB relationships as compared to women (Bisson & Levine, 2009; McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, in press; Puentes et al., 2008). Moreover, gender may also moderate how other psychosocial factors influence young adults' decision to engage in FWB relationships. Grello et al. (2006) found that men who were less, and women who were more, psychologically distressed were more likely to engage in casual sex; however, this finding has not always been replicated (e.g., Owen et al., 2008) and there is a lack of evidence examining how gender may influence the association between other predictors (e.g., alcohol use, relationship decision making, etc.) and engagement in FWB relationships.

Reactions to Friends with Benefit Relationships

Emotional reactions to FWB relationships may have a central role in understanding these experiences. Friendships and romantic relationships are commonly associated with psychological well-being (e.g., Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, in press; Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989; Corrigan & Phelan, 2004; Waite et al., 2002), whereas engagement in ambiguous romantic relationships (e.g., hooking up) has been associated with psychological distress (Grello et al., 2006; Owen et al., 2008). However, it is unclear whether the friendship aspect of FWB will protect individuals from the deleterious effects of relational ambiguity that come from engaging in physical intimacy with a friend.

Additionally, the degree to which gender differences impact young adults' emotional reactions to FWB relationships is currently unknown. Owen et al. (2008) found that approximately 50% of men and 26% of women had a positive emotional reaction to hooking up; approximately 26% of men and 49% of women had a negative reaction. Thus, these findings support, in part, gender role theories. However, this study did not account for the degree to which men and women experienced positive or negative emotional reactions. In any event, it is not known whether young adults have more positive than negative emotional reactions to their FWB relationships.

Stanley et al. (2006) argued that some relationship events, such as physical intimacy or lack of perceived alternative partners, can increase pressure to stay in a relationship—commonly referred to as constraint commitment. Constraint commitment can motivate individuals to stay in a relationship even when they are not satisfied with it (cf. Stanley & Markman, 1992). Previous research has found that young adults expect more intrinsic traits, such as humor and warmth, from their romantic partners than from their friendships (Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Thus, some individuals who view their friend as not intrinsically attractive enough for a committed relationship may be drawn to the lack of exclusivity in a FWB relationship, despite their partner's desire to be in a committed relationship—leaving this partner feeling constrained in the relationship. Consequently, young adults who feel more constrained in their FWB relationships are likely to experience more negative and fewer positive emotional reactions about their situation.

Beyond emotional reactions, young adults may also hope that their FWB relationship will progress into a committed relationship. For instance, Regan and Dreyer (1999) found that women were more likely than men to engage in casual sex encounters to increase their chances of being in a committed relationship. This hope could motivate them to stay with a partner that does not want an exclusive relationship. For instance, Bisson and Levine (2009) found that less than 10% of FWB relationships developed into committed relationships. Indeed,

some young adults engage their partner in discussions to help alleviate commitment ambiguity (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005). However, it not known whether gender is related to hope for and discussion of a committed relationship in response to the FWB experience.

Hypotheses

This study investigated two sets of hypotheses regarding young adults' FWB relationships. The first set pertained to demographic and psychosocial predictors of engaging in FWB relationships. We expected that men would be more likely to engage in FWB relationships as compared to women (Hypothesis 1) and that higher alcohol use and psychological distress would be related to a higher likelihood of engaging in a FWB relationship (Hypotheses 2 and 3). Additionally, we posited that young adults' thoughtfulness about relationship decision making processes would be related to less engagement in FWB relationships (Hypothesis 4). We also predicted that young adults' thoughtfulness about relationship decisions would moderate the relationship between alcohol and FWB status (Hypothesis 5) such that alcohol use would be less of a risk factor for engaging in FWB relationship for young adults who were more thoughtful about relationship decisions. In these models (Hypotheses 2–5), we examined whether gender moderated the associations between psychosocial predictors of engaging in FWB relationships. However, we did not make specific predictions given the limited empirical data available on this topic.

The second set of hypotheses examined reactions to FWB relationships. We hypothesized that men would report that a FWB relationship was associated with more positive emotional reactions as compared to negative emotional reactions whereas women would report more negative emotional reactions about their FWB relationships compared to positive (Hypothesis 6). We also posited that young adults who reported higher alcohol use, psychological distress, and constraint commitment would have more negative and fewer positive emotional reactions to FWB (Hypotheses 7–9). Finally, we examined whether the reaction of hoping for and discussing the possibility of the FWB relationship progressing to a committed relationship would be related to gender (Hypotheses 10 and 11).

Method

Participants

Initially, we recruited 1207 students from a large southeastern university in the U.S. We excluded 301 participants who were in committed romantic relationships over the past 12 months, two participants who did not indicate their gender, five participants who were over 25 years old (since the study was focused on young adults), and 10 participants who did not respond to the question about engaging in a FWB relationship in the past year. The final sample included 889 participants, which included 341 men and 548 women with a median age of 19 (range, 17–25). The majority of the participants identified as Caucasian (70.5%), 14.6% identified as African American, 11.8% identified as Latino/a, 2.7% identified as Asian American, and 0.3% identified as Native American.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through an introductory course on families across the lifespan that fulfills a social studies requirement and therefore attracts students from across the university. In the Fall semesters of 2008 and 2009, students were offered multiple options to obtain extra credit for the class, one of which comprised the survey used in this study. Ninety-eight percent of the class decided to participate in the study. They completed informed consent and were told how to access the on-line survey. They were given a 5-day window in which to complete the survey. All procedures were approved by the university IRB.

Measures

Friends with Benefits Relationship Definition

Participants were provided with a definition of FWB: "Some people say that a friends with benefits is a friendship in which there are also physical encounters, but no on-going committed relationship (e.g., not boyfriend/girlfriend)." Based on this definition, how many "friends with benefits" relationships did you have over the past 12 months?" This definition was adapted from previous studies (cf. Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005). The average number of FWB relationships over the past 12 months was .98, median = 0, range, 0–15. We dichotomized the number of FWB into "Yes, I had a FWB relationship in the past 12 months" ($n = 420$; 47.2%) and "No, I did not have a FWB relationship in the past 12 months" ($n = 469$; 52.8%).

Emotional Reactions

We adapted the emotional reaction to hooking up measure used by Owen et al. (2008) for the current study. Participants who reported having a FWB relationship were asked: "In general, how do you feel about your friends with benefits relationship?" In Owen et al. (2008), participants identified the presence (yes/no) of four positive and five negative emotions. In the current study, we balanced the number of positive emotions (i.e., happy, desirable, adventuresome, pleased, and excited) and negative emotions (i.e., awkward, disappointed, empty, confused, and used) to be five of each. Further, the participants identified the degree to which they felt each emotion on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very Much*). Higher scores indicate more positive and negative emotional reactions,

respectively. Because positive and negative emotion tend to be distinct systems, each with its own neural processes (e.g., the amygdala in negative affect, Irwin et al., 1996; the dopaminergic pathways in positive affect, Hoebel, Rada, Mark, & Pothos, 1999), they cannot simply be viewed as a bipolar dimension with endpoints defined as positive and negative (Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1999). The Cronbach alpha for positive and negative reactions to FWB relationships were .86 and .84, respectively.

Constraint Commitment

We adapted items from the Commitment Inventory (Stanley & Markman, 1992) to assess constraint commitment in participants' most recent FWB relationship. Specifically, we utilized four items: "I feel trapped or stuck in this relationship," "I stay because I do not want to lose the friendship," and "I would have trouble finding a suitable partner if this relationship ended," and "I am waiting to see if my FWB partner really wants a committed relationship." All items were rated on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*A lot*) with higher scores indicating more constraint commitment. The Cronbach alpha for the current study was .70.

Hope for and Discussion of a Committed Relationship

We developed two questions to assess hope for, and discussion of, a committed relationship. The questions were: "Thinking about your most recent FWB: Did you ever hope that it will progress into a committed relationship?" and "Did you and your partner ever discuss progressing into a committed relationship?" Participants were provided with the response options of "Yes" or "No."

Psychological Distress

We utilized the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) to assess psychological distress. The CES-D has 10 items that are rated on a four-point scale, with higher scores indicating more distress. The CES-D is a commonly used measure of depressive symptoms and has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity estimates in numerous studies (see Cole, Rabin, Smith, & Kaufman, 2004). The Cronbach alpha for our sample was .79.

Alcohol Use

We used three items to assess alcohol use. The first question, "Within the last 30 days, on how many days did you have a drink containing alcohol?", was rated on 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never drank all 30 days*) to 7 (*20–30 days*). The median number of days drinking was 3–5 days ($M = 3.83$, $SD = 1.83$). The second question, "How many drinks containing alcohol did you have on a typical day when you were drinking?", was rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never drank*) to 6 (*10 or more*). The median number of drinks was 3 (*3 or 4 drinks*) ($M = 2.93$, $SD = 1.37$). The last question, "How often in the last 30 days did you have five or more drinks on one occasion?", was rated on 9-point scale ranging from 1 (*Never happened*) to 9 (*More than 10 times*). The median number of times participants had drank five or more drinks on one occasion was "one time" ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 2.49$). These items are commonly used in measures of alcohol use (e.g., Saunders, Aasland, Babor, de la Fuente, & Grant, 1993) and in the prediction of casual sex behaviors (e.g., Owen et al., 2008). These items were highly correlated ($rs = .74$–$.78$), so we created a composite score. The Cronbach alpha for Alcohol Use in the current sample was .87.

Relationship Awareness Scale (RAS)

We assessed participants' view of risk factors in relationships through a scale developed for purposes of the current study. Items were generated to reflect the earlier described Stanley et al. (2006) perspective on thoughtfulness regarding relationship decisions, awareness of and ability to deal with warning signs in a relationship, and confidence in being able to maintain a relationship. The confidence items were adapted from Stanley, Rhoades, and Williams (2007). We also used items designed to assess participants' longer term vision of their romantic relationships because of the central issue of lack of commitment in FWB relationships.

The original scale had 28 items rated on a four-point scale ranging from 1 (*Totally Disagree*) to 4 (*Totally Agree*). We factor analyzed the 28 items using principal axis extraction with oblique rotation (i.e., anticipating that the factors would be correlated). We retained factors that had eigenvalues over one. For factor loadings, we retained items that loaded over .4 on a subscale with no cross loadings (>.4) on the other subscales. Twelve items were not retained in the factor analysis due to loading on factors with one or two items and these subscales had eigenvalues lower than one. This resulted in the retention of four factors, eigenvalues and percent of variance explained, were 6.70 (23.92%), 2.11 (7.52%), 1.86 (6.64%), and 1.50 (5.36%), respectively. Table 1 shows the items for the four subscales and their factor loading scores. All subscales had four items. The first factor, Confidence about Relationship Skills (Confidence), generally describes individuals' perceptions of their relationship skills and confidence to have a long lasting relationship (alpha = .83). The second factor, Awareness of Relationship Risk Factors (Awareness), describes individuals' awareness about relationship risk factors (alpha = .80). The third factor, Thoughtfulness about Relationship Decisions (Thoughtfulness), assesses individuals' thoughtfulness about the development of a relationship (alpha = .68). The last subscale, Long-term Vision (Long-term Vision), describes individuals' clarity about the traits and type of person they would like to be involved with in a long-term relationship (alpha = .80).

Table 1 Summary of factor analysis for Relationships Awareness Scale

Subscales and items	Factor loadings
Factor 1: Confidence about relationship skills	
1. I believe I will be able to effectively deal with conflicts that arise in my relationships	.55
2. I feel good about the prospects of making a romantic relationship last	.75
3. I am very confident when I think of having a stable, long term relationship	.82
4. I have the skills needed for a lasting stable romantic relationship	.64
Factor 2: Awareness of relationship risk factors	
5. I am able to recognize early on the warning signs in a bad relationship	.72
6. I know what to do when I recognize the warning signs in a bad relationship	.53
7. I am quickly able to see danger signals in a romantic relationship	.76
8. I can tell when I'm "sliding" into a bad relationship decision rather than deciding	.45
Factor 3: Thoughtful relationship decisions	
9. With romantic partners, I weigh the pros and cons before allowing myself to take the next step in the relationship (e.g., be physically intimate)	.46
10. It is important to make conscious decisions about whether to take each major step in romantic relationships	.54
11. It is important to me to discuss with my partner each major step we take in the relationship	.53
12. It is better to "go with the flow" than think carefully about each major step in a romantic relationship (reverse-coded)	.59
Factor 4: Long-term vision	
13. I have a clear vision of what I want my marriage (or other long term romantic relationship) to be like	.60
14. I know exactly what I'm looking for in a potential husband/wife/partner	.80
15. I am very aware of my own relationship expectations and how these can influence my future marriage (or other long term romantic relationship)	.49
16. I know exactly what to avoid in a potential husband/wife/partner	.51

Results

Table 2 provides descriptive statistics for the variables in the current study. As noted earlier, we had two sets of hypotheses. The first set examined variables associated with engaging in a FWB relationship whereas the second set pertained to young adults emotional reactions to FWB relationships.

Prediction of FWB Status

To test our first hypothesis regarding gender differences in the prevalence of FWB relationships in the past year, we conducted a chi-square test with the full sample. There were statistically significant differences between men and women in the prevalence of FWB relationships, $\chi^2(1, N = 889) = 10.90, p = .001$. Over half of men (54.3%) and slightly under half of women (42.9%) reported at least one FWB relationship in the past year. Thus, these results supported Hypothesis 1.

Table 3 shows the univariate correlations between the variables in the current study. As seen in the table, alcohol use was significantly related to engaging in a FWB relationship, supporting Hypothesis 2. However, psychological distress was not significantly related to FWB status; thus, there was no support for Hypothesis 3. Young adults who reported more thoughtful relationship decisions were less likely to engage in a FWB relationship, supporting Hypothesis 4.

To see if these relationships would emerge in a multivariate context, we conducted a binary logistic regression with FWB as the dependent variable. We only included predictor variables that demonstrated a significant univariate relationship with FWB status (i.e., alcohol use and thoughtful relationship attitudes) and we entered gender as a control variable. We also tested if these predictors were moderated by gender. Moreover, we tested whether young adults' thoughtful relationship attitudes moderated the relationship between alcohol use and FWB status (Hypothesis 5). Overall, the model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(5, N = 889) = 113.69, p < .001$. Table 4 shows the regression coefficients, odds ratio, and 95% confidence interval for the odds ratio. Alcohol use, but not thoughtfulness, was significant in the model, suggesting that this variable accounted for unique variance in the prediction of who engaged in FWB relationships. There was a significant gender × alcohol use interaction, suggesting that the association between alcohol use and engaging in a FWB relationship was stronger for women as compared to men (i.e., the odds of engaging in a FWB relationship was 32% higher for women for every one SD increase in alcohol use). The interaction between alcohol use and thoughtful relationship decisions was also significant, (supporting Hypothesis 5). That is, the odds of engaging in a FWB relationship increased 138% for every one SD increase in alcohol use; however, the odds were reduced to 42% for every one SD increase in alcohol use and higher thoughtfulness scores. However, the above findings need to be interpreted in

Table 2 Descriptive information for friends with benefits variables

General variables	Men $n = 341$	Women $n = 548$
FWB relationship (% Yes)	54.3%	42.9%
Psychological distress (CES-D)[a]	1.74 (0.48)	1.82 (0.51)
Alcohol use[b]	3.90 (1.83)	2.94 (1.58)
Confidence[c]	3.57 (0.77)	3.23 (0.60)
Awareness[c]	3.08 (0.72)	2.82 (0.61)
Thoughtfulness[c]	3.08 (0.70)	3.11 (0.58)
Long-term vision[c]	3.22 (0.76)	3.05 (0.63)
FWB experience variables	$n = 185$	$n = 235$
Positive reaction to FWB[c]	3.69 (0.82)	3.45 (0.93)
Negative reaction to FWB[c]	1.98 (0.91)	2.39 (1.00)
Hope for committed (% Yes)	24.8%	39.5%
Discussed committed (% Yes)	44.3%	56.7%
Constraint commitment[c]	1.84 (0.82)	1.94 (0.93)

Notes: For superscripts a–c, the numbers reflect the Means and SD. The absolute ranges for variables were: a = 1 to 4, b = 1 to 8, c = 1 to 5. Confidence, Awareness, Thoughtfulness, and Long-term Vision were subscales from the RAS

terms of a significant three-way interaction involving gender, alcohol use, and thoughtfulness. This interaction showed that the degree to which thoughtfulness moderated the relationship between alcohol use and engaging in a FWB relationship was stronger for women than men (i.e., the difference between men and women in odds ratio for the moderation effect alcohol x thoughtfulness was 31%).

Reactions to FWB Relationships

Next, we tested whether men reported more positive and fewer negative emotional reactions as compared to women (Hypothesis 6). To do so, we conducted a 2 (gender) × 2 (Emotional Reaction: Positive vs. Negative) analysis of variance, with Emotional Reaction being a within-subjects factor. This analysis only included participants who indicated that they had a FWB relationship over the past year. There was no significant between-subjects effect for gender, $F(1, 419) = 2.86$, $p = .09$. However, there was a significant main effect for Emotional Reactions, $F(1, 419) = 342.63$, $p < .001$, and a significant gender x emotional reaction interaction, $F(1, 419) = 19.06$, $p < .001$. For men and women, the differences between their positive and negative emotional reactions were large, $d's = 1.90$ and 1.09, respectively. These findings suggest that both men and women found FWB to be associated with more positive emotional reactions than negative, but these effects were more pronounced for men, providing some support for Hypothesis 6.

We next tested whether psychosocial factors were related to emotional reactions to the FWB experience. Due to the number of analyses conducted we utilized a *p*-value of .01 to determine significance. As shown in Table 3, alcohol use and negative emotional reactions were significantly associated with positive emotional reactions. Additionally, psychological distress, constraint commitment, and awareness of risk factors were significantly related to negative emotional reactions. To examine emotional reactions to FWB relationships in a multivariate context, we conducted a linear regression analyses for negative emotional reactions only (since there were no significant predictors of positive emotional reactions). In this analysis, we only

Table 3 Bivariate correlations for friends with benefits variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 FWB-yes	–										
2 Positive[a]	.08	–									
3 Negative[a]	−.11	−.38**	–								
4 Constraint	.05	−.07	.34**	–							
5 Alcohol use	.33**	.15*	−.10	−.01	–						
6 Psych distress	.05	−.09	.32**	.22**	.03	–					
7 Confidence	−.06	.02	−.02	−.07	−.02	−.02	–				
8 Awareness	−.01	.03	−.15*	−.11	−.07	−.18**	.45**	–			
9 Thoughtfulness	−.18**	−.04	.05	−.01	−.29**	−.08	.39**	.43**	–		
10 Long-term vision	−.03	−.04	−.02	−.06	−.10*	−.13**	.52**	.53**	.43**	–	
11 Discuss[a]	–	.09	.05	.23**	−.11	−.01	.04	.03	.08	−.03	–
12 Hope[a]	–	.06	.09	.35**	−.11	.05	.03	−.01	.06	.01	.28**

Notes: $N = 889$; a = $n = 420$ reflecting only those who reported that they had a FWB relationship in the past year. * $p < .01$, ** $p < .001$. Positive = Positive Emotional Reaction; Negative = Negative Emotional Reaction; Constraint = Constraint Commitment; Psych Distress = CES-D; Confidence, Awareness, Thoughtfulness, and Long-term Vision were subscales from the RAS. Discuss = coded 1 = yes discussed a committed relationship, 0 = no discussion; Hope = coded 1, yes I hope that the FWB relationship would lead to a committed relationship, 0 = no hope for a committed relationship

Table 4 Hierarchal logistic regression predicting friends with benefits status

	B (se)	Odds-ratio	95% CI odds-ratio
Gender	0.03 (.16)	1.03	0.76–1.41
Alcohol use	0.87** (.12)	2.38	1.89–3.00
Thoughtfulness	−0.06 (.11)	0.94	0.76–1.16
Gender × Alcohol	−0.38* (.17)	0.68	0.49–0.95
Gender × Thoughtfulness	−0.20 (.16)	0.82	0.61–1.12
Alcohol × Thoughtfulness	0.35** (.11)	1.42	1.14–1.76
Gender × Alc × Thought	−0.38* (.15)	0.69	0.51–0.93
Constant	−0.05 (.10)	0.95	

Notes: $N = 889$. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$; Gender was coded 0 = women, 1 = men. Alcohol and Thoughtfulness scores were standardized. Thoughtfulness is a subscale from the RAS

included predictor variables that showed a significant bivariate association with negative emotional reactions (i.e., psychological distress, constraint commitment, and awareness of risk factors). We also controlled for gender. The results of the model were statistically significant, $F(4, 405) = 26.18$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .21$. Both constraint commitment ($B = 0.33$, $SE = .05$, $\beta = .29$, $p < .001$) and psychological distress ($B = 0.43$, $SE = .09$, $\beta = .22$, $p < .001$) were significant predictors of negative emotional reactions after controlling for the variance in the other variables. Risk awareness was no longer a significant predictor of negative emotional reactions after accounting for the variance in the other variables, $B = -0.07$, $SE = .07$, $\beta = -.05$. There were no significant gender interaction effects in this model. Note these results were still consistent after controlling for positive emotional reactions. These results provide some support for Hypotheses 8 and 9, but not 7 (alcohol).

Finally, we tested gender differences in hope for and discussion of progressing the FWB relationship to a committed relationship. Supporting Hypothesis 10, a chi-square analysis for hope was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 405) = 9.02$, $p < .001$. For men, 24.8% hoped the FWB relationship would progress into a committed relationship; whereas 39.5% of women hoped that their FWB relationship would progress to a committed relationship. Similarly, for discussion of a committed relationship, $\chi^2(1, N = 382) = 5.56$, $p = .02$, there were statistically significant gender differences. Over half of women (56.7%) and slightly under half of men (44.3%) reported that they discussed progressing their FWB relationship to a committed relationship (supporting Hypothesis 11).

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to examine young adults' experience with friends with benefits relationships. We were interested in gender differences and psychosocial factors related to the likelihood of engaging in and reactions to FWB relationships. Similar to previous studies, we found that 42.9–54.3% of young adults had at least one FWB relationship in the past year with men reporting more engagement in FWB relationships than women. Further, men and women reported that their emotional reactions to their FWB relationships were largely more positive than negative; however, this disparity between positive and negative emotional reactions was larger for men ($d = 0.81$) than it was for women. These results complement previous research investigating the advantages and disadvantages of FWB relationships (e.g., Bisson & Levine, 2009), in showing that the perceived merits of FWB relationships appear to outweigh the perceived negative consequences for many young adults. Thus, the magnitude of positive emotional reactions about their FWB relationships, which clearly surpassed the negative reactions, may be one reason why young adults decide to enter these relationships. Furthermore, these results were in contrast to previous research on other casual sex behaviors (hooking up) that have typically found the experiences to be negative, especially for women (e.g., Grello et al., 2006; Owen et al., 2008).

Two factors emerged as most salient in the prediction of entering into FWB relationships: young adults' alcohol use and their thoughtfulness about starting a romantic relationship. Although our data did not allow us to draw firm conclusions about the directionality of effects, the association documented between alcohol use and engaging in FWB relationships complements previous research on hooking up and casual sex behaviors (e.g., Desiderato & Crawford, 1995; Paul et al., 2000). Moreover, women's alcohol use was a stronger predictor of engaging in FWB as compared to men, suggesting that alcohol use may have differential effects on young adults' decision to engage in FWB relationships. This is consistent with research that has found women's (but not men's) alcohol use can influence critical decisions during casual sex such as condom use (e.g., Scott-Sheldon et al., 2009). Nonetheless, alcohol use appears to be a robust predictor of engaging in ambiguous relationships and this most likely reflects its effect on individuals' capacity for making thoughtful decisions. In this regard, we found that the likelihood of engaging in a FWB relationship considering their general alcohol use was reduced after accounting for their thoughtfulness about relationships, and this association was stronger for women than men. In other words, while alcohol use was associated with a higher likelihood of engaging in FWB relationships for women, the degree to which they had thoughtful attitudes about relationships reduced that likelihood as compared to men.

These results were consistent with Stanley et al.'s (2006) sliding versus deciding theory. That is, young adults who reported that they think explicitly about their romantic partners and take proactive steps (e.g., discuss relationship transitions) when starting relationships were less likely to engage in FWB

relationships, even after considering their alcohol use. That is, higher levels of thoughtfulness seemed to protect against alcohol facilitating a FWB relationship. In contrast, alcohol use increased markedly the likelihood of a FWB relationship at lower levels of thoughtfulness. This moderating effect was especially pronounced for women as compared to men. Presumably, young adults, especially women, who express these relationship attitudes are protecting themselves from the relational ambiguity and complications that can emerge from FWB relationships.

Although young adults reported more positive than negative emotional reactions to their FWB experience, other psychosocial factors may relate to their negative emotional reactions. That is, none of the other variables in the current study were related to positive emotional reactions. Thus, how young adults interpret their positive emotional reactions to FWB relationships may be related to other factors that were not investigated in this study. Manning, Giordano, and Longmore (2006) observed that research on casual sex has a bias towards the dangers of these encounters, with less focus on the positive aspects. Since sexual activity is developmentally appropriate for young adults, future research should continue to balance the exploration of risk factors with other potential prosocial aspects of sexual behaviors. However, after controlling for their positive emotional reactions, young adults' negative emotional reactions to FWB relationships were associated with their level of psychological distress and the degree to which they felt constrained to be with their FWB partner. Three observations about these findings are apposite.

First, even though the direction of effects is unclear, our findings suggest that young adults' negative reactions to their FWB relationship may have contributed to their psychological distress whereas their positive emotional reactions did not. Alternatively, young adults who were more psychologically distressed were more likely to report negative reactions to their FWB relationship, suggesting that the experience did not benefit their mental health. Other factors that we did not assess may prove to be meaningful predictors or moderators associated with psychological distress, such as how they were treated by their partner. It is likely that such negative reactions may also relate to young adults' confusion about their feeling toward their partner/friend, how to maintain the relationship, and the future of the relationship (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Hughes et al., 2005).

Second, young adults' negative reactions were also related to feeling constrained in the FWB relationship. In this study, constraint commitment reflected young adults' perceptions that they: (1) felt stuck in the relationship, (2) have limited dating options, (3) worried about affecting the friendship, and (4) were waiting for a committed relationship. Accordingly, as young adults take an appraisal of their FWB relationships, their negative reactions were connected to these beliefs. Given that many FWB relationships do not result in a committed relationship (Bisson & Levine, 2009) and few young adults (especially men) hoped that it would progress into a committed relationship, it is potentially problematic that young adults may feel constrained to stay in the relationship when they are experiencing negative emotional reactions.

Lastly, we found that men and women differed in their hope for and discussion of a committed relationship with their most recent FWB partner. Women were more likely to hope for and discuss the possibility of a committed relationship, which is consistent with prior research (Regan & Dreyer, 1999). This may suggest that, compared to men, women are more likely to see FWB relationships as a step towards developing a committed relationship. However, the relative importance of this factor in females' decisions to engage in a FWB relationship remains to be determined.

Limitations and Implications

The current study should be interpreted in the light of several methodological limitations. First, the cross-sectional design limits our ability to draw conclusions about direction of effects. Second, even though our sample was large, all participants were drawn from a university course on families, which may introduce a selection bias. This bias was mitigated somewhat by inclusion of students pursuing a variety of majors. Similarly, the use of college students limits our ability to generalize the findings to the substantial minority of young adults who do not attend college. Third, all of the measures were self-reported, which may introduce common method bias. In addition, we only assessed one partner's view of the FWB relationship. Ideally, romantic relationship research examines the reciprocal interactions of partners. Similarly, we do not know if participants in this study were in FWB relationships with other participants. Thus, future research should employ dyadic assessments of FWB relationships. Fourth, participants rated their general emotional reactions to FWB relationships, but they rated other questions specific to their most recent FWB relationship; future studies may want to direct participants to respond based on their most recent FWB for all responses. Also, we did not have information about the type of physical intimacy involved in the FWB relationships. Finally, we did not have information about the duration of the FWB relationship or the time between the end of the FWB relationship and completion of the survey, both of which may have impacted the relationships with some of our predictors, such as psychological distress. Further, the other subscales of RAS, such as Awareness and Long-term Vision, may be useful to understand young adults' decision to end a FWB relationship that is not meeting their expectations.

Notwithstanding the limitations outlined, the present study helps shed light on an important phenomenon in emerging adulthood. With the advent of relationship education interventions for young adults (see Fincham, Stanley, & Rhoades, in press), the study provides information on how to understand the positive and negative elements of these relationships. In particular, our study

raises a serious question: since young adults rated their emotional reactions to FWB relationships as largely more positive than negative, what should be the implications for relationship education programs? The physical intimacy aspect of FWB relationships shares in the risk factors (e.g., STI, unplanned pregnancy) that accompany other casual sex behaviors (e.g., hooking up). At the same time, our study shows that FWB relationships may be seen and experienced as a viable relational style for many young adults.

As such, we suggest that relationship education programs may help young adults to be more conscious about the steps in starting a romantic relationship. Some young adults appear to have less clarity about relationship development, which means that they may slide into FWB relationships without considering the implications of doing so. For instance, they may actually want to be in a committed relationship as compared to the quasi-commitment or complete ambiguity in a FWB relationship. Thus, educators can assist young adults develop an understanding about the general progression of committed relationships and increase their awareness about their motivations for wanting to start a relationship or a FWB relationship. Further, educators can also highlight other risk factors that are associated with starting a FWB relationship and that may be a barrier to making thoughtful decisions (e.g., alcohol use). Finally, educators can assist young adults who are currently in FWB relationships explore their hope for a committed relationship. For some young adults, these relationships may be a viable way to learn about sexuality and have a positive experience. However, it is important that young adults are clear about their own desires and discuss the boundaries in their FWB relationship, such that they do not feel constrained to stay in a relationship that may not meet their expectations.

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