

Friends with benefits in adolescence: A study using the Theory of Planned Behavior

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Friends with benefits in adolescence: A study using the Theory of Planned Behavior
Abstract (English)

Objectives: Most studies on adolescents and casual sex are a-theoretical. The objectives were: 1) to describe the Friends with benefits experience of adolescents, and 2) to examine factors associated to the intention to have such a relationship using the Theory of Planned Behavior. **Methods:** A sample of 345 high schools students (50% female; mean age = 16.5 years) from four schools completed a questionnaire. Included were variables of attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioral control, intention, and additional variables. Comparisons were made according to gender, Friends with benefits experience, and lifetime sexual experience, and a regression analysis was used to predict intention of engaging in Friends with benefits relationships. **Findings:** Thirty percent of adolescents had the intention to engage in Friends with benefits relationships in the next three months. As many girls as boys previously had one, but more boys reported having the intention. Intentions did not differ when considering lifetime sexual experience. A three steps logistic regression concluded that the predictors of a positive intention were regrets of not having a Friend with benefits, reporting previous experience of Friends with benefits relationships and positive attitudes toward the experience. Being regretful of having such a relationship was related to not having the intention. **Conclusions:** Such results can inform the content of sexual health education programs which have to help adolescents make informed sexual choices. Discussions of attitudes and possible regrets of not having certain types of sexual relationships would be useful to add to the curriculum.

Key words: Adolescence, Sexuality, Sex education, Models, Psychological.
Adolescente, Sexualidade, Educação Sexual, Modelos Psicológicos.

Introduction

Greater acceptance of casual sex and a larger number of non-romantic sexual partners have been documented in recent cohorts in the United States (1). Such shift may have cultural origin and may not be found in every population. No data on such social trend is available in Canada; however a survey showed that adults between 18 to 35 years old reported engaging in various forms of casual sex relationships (2). Generally, adolescents mention permissive sexual attitudes and behaviors toward non-romantic sex, even if sexual relations occur in a romantic context for a majority of adolescents. A representative survey of 14 to 17 years old Canadian adolescents reported that 38% were involved in casual sex (3). During adolescence, friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs), defined as a sexual experience with a friend without the expectation of a long term relationship or romantic commitment (4, 5) are the most frequent type of casual sex partners in comparison to hookups (sexual contact that occurs only once or on very few occasions between strangers or casual acquaintances and excludes commitment (6)).

Conflicts around involvement in casual sex may arise between adolescents and adults who have more traditional views. There are indeed negative aspects associated with FWBRs, in particular sexual risk taking such as condomless sex (5) and problems in psychosocial adjustment (7). However, FWBRs also have positive aspects, such as limiting the number of sexual partners (8) and generating positive feelings among most adolescents and young adults.

An understanding of adolescents' perceptions, experiences, and decisional process of engaging in FWBRs would be useful to inform the content and implementation of sexual health education programs (9, 10). There have been few studies on adolescents and FWBRs, and most are a-theoretical. It was deemed important to refer to theoretical models to further the understanding of such behavior. As attitudes are a preponderant factor in outcomes such as dating relationships and sexual contacts (10, 11), and are often at the core of sexual education programs, we have chosen to use the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (12) to better understand involvement in FWBRs. This socio-cognitive model considers social influences and seems appropriate because peer influence is important in adolescents' decisions regarding romantic and sexual relationships. It further represents an alternative to the analysis of youth sexuality through the notion of risk and focuses on factors affecting the decision process. TPB and similar models have been used to study hookup relationships (13-15).

The core TPB model postulates that behaviors are mostly determined by intentions, which are influenced by three main beliefs: *attitudes* (positive or negative personal evaluations of the behavior), *subjective norms* (one's perception of other's opinion toward the behavior in question), and *perceived behavioral control* (ability to do the behavior; related to self-efficacy). Ajzen and Fishbein (12) suggest adding variables to the model. Four variables could explain the variance in intention to engage in FWBRs and thus were added. To further the study of social influences on the decision process of adolescents to engage in FWBRs, the perception of *group norms* (beliefs about what other youths would do) will be considered. Indeed, adolescents' desire of becoming independent from their parents increases the importance they give to peers and, therefore,

makes them more vulnerable to peers' opinions or behaviors (16). *Anticipated regret* of action and of inaction addresses an emotional aspect that was mentioned as a shortcoming of the TPB model and will be added to the model. Because *prior behaviors* act as a referent for future behaviors *prior FWBR experiences* need also to be considered in the analysis. Gender and sexual orientation will also be considered as sexual scripts such as a casual sex can vary according to these variables (4, 17, 18).

Objectives

The purpose of this article are: 1) to describe FWB experiences, feelings, and outcomes among a sample of adolescents, and 2) to examine factors associated with the intention to have a FWBR using the TPB model. We hypothesized that gender, sexual orientation, attitudes toward FWBR, subjective norms around FWBR, perceived behavioral control (PBC), prior FWB experience, anticipated regrets of action and inaction, and group norms will influence the intention to have a FWBR in the next three months.

Methods

Participants

We collected data in 2013 using a self-administered questionnaire in four schools. The (ANONYMOUS) Committee for Research Ethics Concerning Human Subjects approved a derogation of parental consent. The school limitations restricted us to a transversal design. The final sample size comprised 345 students (50% female), ranging from 14.8 to 18.5 years of age ($M = 16.5$, $SD = 0.71$) mostly from grade 10 (62%), and grade 11 (33%).

Measures

Sexual experiences.

Sexual attraction was measured with the following instructions and possible answers: “People are different in their sexual attraction to other people. Which best describes your feelings?” 1 (*I’m not sexually attracted to anyone*), 2 (*Only by people from the same sex*), 3 (*Mostly by people from the same sex*), 4 (*By both sexes*), 5 (*Mostly by people from the opposite sex*), 6 (*Only by people of the opposite sex*) and 7 (*I’m not sure/I don’t know yet*). The measure was dichotomized 0 (*Heterosexual*) for the category 1 and 6, whereas other categories were coded 1 (*Sexual minorities*).

Lifetime sexual experience was measured using an aggregate of two items concerning sexual intercourse and oral sexual experience: 0 (*Not sexually active*), and 1 (*Sexually active*).

Friends with benefits relationships.

A Friend with benefits relationship (FWBR) was defined as two friends who are having sexual contacts once or on many occasions without presenting themselves as forming a couple. Sexual contacts included breast and genital fondling as well as oral, vaginal, and anal sex. Prior FWB experience (FWBE) was measured by one dichotomised item: “In the past 12 months, did you have a FWB relationship?” 0 (*No*) or 1 (*Yes*). Adolescents also identified how many FWBRs they had, how old they were during the first relationship, what type of sexual contacts they had (i.e., genital touching, gave or received oral sex, and sexual intercourse), if they used a condom, and how the relationship ended (i.e., never saw him/her again, just friends, romantically involved, and other). We also assessed if the participants knew friends who previously engaged in FWBRs.

We measured feelings after the experience (i.e., regret and satisfaction) using two items on a five-point Likert scale. Regret was measured by asking: “How did you feel after your last FWBR?” with a response choice ranging from 1 (*Extremely regretful*) to 5 (*Not regretful*). Satisfaction was: “How did you feel after your last FWBR?” with a response choice ranging from 1 (*Not satisfied*) to 5 (*Extremely satisfied*).

TPB variables. The source of the following items and variables can be found in XX (*erased for anonymous treatment*). All items were dichotomised, unless otherwise specified.

Participants’ *intention* to engage in a FWBR was evaluated by one item on a five-point Likert scale: “In the next three months, if you have the opportunity, would you have the intention to have a FWBR?” 1 (*Very improbable*) to 5 (*Very probable*). The results were dichotomised 0 (*Improbable*-response 1 and 2) and 1 (*Probable*-response anchors 3, 4, and 5). *Attitudes* toward FWBRs were assessed by 16 items on a five-point semantic differential scale inspired by interviews made by our team and other publications (e.g., Pleasant/Unpleasant). A mean score was calculated ($\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 2.86$). *The subjective norms* were measured by two items on a four-point Likert scale: “In general, I think that my parents (or other adults important to me) would be shocked by learning that I had a FWBR.” and “I would be judged negatively by my friends if I wished to have a FWBR.” A mean score was calculated ($M = 2.47$). *The perceived behavioral control (PBC)* was measured by one item “I could easily have a FWB” on a four-point Likert scale.

Anticipated regrets around having or not a FWBR were measured by two items on a five-point Likert scale: “Would you have regrets in the future for having engaged in a FWBR?” and “Would you have regrets in the future for not having engaged in a

FWBR?” The data were coded to create three conditions: 1 (*Improbable*), 2 (*Neutral*), and 3 (*Probable*). *Group norms* were measured by one item on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 4 (*Strongly agree*): “I think that, even if they have the opportunity, few of my friends would have a FWBR.”

Analytic Strategy

Descriptive statistics and correlations were first performed using IBM SPSS 22. To examine our hypothesis regarding the ability of the TPB model to predict the intention to have a FWBR, a three steps hierarchical logistic regression was performed entering gender in Step 1, followed by the original core TPB variables in Step 2 (attitudes, subjective norms, and PBC), and the additional variables (prior FWBRE, anticipated regrets, and group norms) in Step 3. No multivariate outliers were found with the analysis of the Mahalanobis distance scores and the assumptions of normality, linearity and homoscedasticity were satisfied. Missing variables varied from 0% to 10.4% and 22% of the cases for testing the TPB model were missing. Missing data were handled using the *Full Information Maximum Likelihood* method implemented in *Mplus 7.0* prior to the analysis of the TPB model.

Findings

Descriptive Analyses

One adolescent out of five (22%) reported having a FWBR in the past 12 months and 36% had the intention to have one in the next three months. The majority of adolescents reported knowing friends who had a FWB, and this prevalence was higher among those who previously had a FWBR (92%). More than half of the sample (57%) thought that having a FWBR would be easy if they wanted to, and 56% thought their

friends would have a FWB if they had the chance. Moreover, 33% thought their friends would negatively judge them and 61% believed their parents would be shocked to know they had a FWBR. In addition, 13% would regret not having a FWB, whereas 25% would regret having one.

Among the adolescents who reported a previous FWBE, 56% had one FWB partner, 24% had two, and 20% had three or more. The majority of them (97%) experienced genital touching and about half (49% to 63%) had oral sex or intercourse. For most of the participants, the first FWBE happened when they were 15 years old (72%) with a partner of the opposite gender (99%). During their lifetime, forty-nine percent used a condom during every sexual intercourse with their FWB partner; conversely, one fifth (22%) never did. Following their FWBR, two thirds remained only friends without sexual contacts (69%), whereas 8% and 9% respectively became romantic partners or never saw their FWB partner again. Related to adolescents' feelings after their last FWBR, 14% reported being "a lot satisfied", 17% were "not satisfied at all", while the majority was "a little satisfied" (69%). Yet, half of the adolescents reported "not feeling regretful" after their last FWBR (49%), whereas respectively 28% and 22% felt a "little" or "a lot regretful".

Variables related to FWBRs (attitudes, subjective norms, friends involved, intention, PBC, anticipated regret, group norms) were compared according to gender, FWBE, and lifetime sexual experience using *t*-tests and chi-square statistics. When comparing heterosexuals and sexual minorities on the factors associated with FWBRs, none of the *t*-tests and chi-square was significant. This variable was not considered in further analysis. As shown in Table 1, as many girls as boys previously had a FWBR and

knew friends who also had such experiences. More boys mentioned that they have the intention of having a FWBR in the next 3 months, shared positive attitudes toward FWBRs, would regret of not having a FWBR, and would not regret having one. Boys also felt less negatively judged by their parents and friends (subjective norms) and more thought that their friends would have a FWBR (group norm). Table 2 illustrates that adolescents with prior experience of FWBR (vs. no experience) were more inclined toward FWBRs and perceived having peers and parents more favorably inclined as well. Finally, Table 3 shows that sexually active adolescents not only knew more friends involved in FWBRs, but thought that more friends would like to be involved in FWBRs and felt they could easily have a FWBR. Attitudes, subjective norms, intentions, and apprehended feelings of regret regarding FWBRs did not differ when considering lifetime sexual experience.

Prediction of Intention to Have a FWB

Bivariate correlations were performed prior to the analysis of the TPB model. Table 4 shows that all the predictors were correlated as expected to intention of having a FWBR. *Mplus* was used to execute a three-step hierarchical logistic regression with data entered according to the TPB model (see Table 5). The complete model explained 27.2% ($R^2 = 0.27$) of FWBE intention variance. In Step 1, Gender significantly contributed to the model $\chi^2(1, 318) = 10.26, p = .001$ and explained 4.2% ($R^2 = 0.04$) variance in intention. The model with the added core TPB variables (Step 2) significantly explained an additional 22% ($R^2 = 0.26$) of variance in intention, $\chi^2(3, 318) = 45.73, p < .001$, with attitudes being the only significant variable ($OR = 3.34$). In Step 2, gender, subjective norms, and PBC did not predict intentions. In Step 3, entering the additional variables

explained an additional 1% of the variation in intention and this change was significant, $\chi^2(6, 318) = 29.99, p < .001$.

The most important predictors of having the intention of engaging in FWBR in the next 3 months were anticipating to “probably regret” not having a FWBR ($OR = 4.15$) and prior FWBR experience ($OR = 4.00$), and feeling “neutral” about not having a FWBR ($OR = 3.02$). Positive attitudes ($OR = 1.84$) and anticipating to “probably regret” having a FWBR ($OR = 0.35$) were also significant predictors. This means that participants anticipating to “probably regret” or to feel “neutral” about regretting not having a FWBR in the next 3 months were more likely to have the intention to engage. Similarly, those with previous FWBE (vs. no experience) were more likely to have the intention to have one. As for the attitudes, for every increased unit on the attitudes’ score the chance of having the intention was 1.84 times higher. Finally, participants who expected to “probably regret” having a FWBR in the future were less likely to have the intention of having a FWBR.

Discussion

Many adolescents were involved in the past year (22%) or planned to be involved (36%) or knew someone who was involved in a FWBR (71%). FWBE is thus a reality they experience and are exposed to during adolescence. When involved, most report having positive experiences. There was indeed absence of regret for 49% of adolescents and satisfaction for 83%. However, some had more negative feelings following FWBRs (22% reported “a lot of regret”). Constant condom use in Québec adolescents during a FWBR (49%) was also lower than during a hookup (70%) (13), which indicates that familiarity with the partners is related to higher risk-taking.

Most adolescents had generally neutral or slightly negative attitudes (2.86/5) toward FWBR meaning that some adolescents have ambivalent opinions. Girls reported more negative attitudes than boys. The same proportions of boys and girls engaged in a FWBR during the last year, but more boys had the intention of repeating the experience in the next 3 months. Such an inclination could be related to the fact that their network (peers, parents) was perceived as more approving.

The core variables of the TPB model were not sufficient to explain the intention to have a FWBR during the next 3 months. In the final model, four variables contributed to the explanation of the intention: feeling regretful of not having a FWBR (or feeling neutral), previous FWBE and positive attitudes toward FWBRs. Feeling regretful of having a FWB was associated with not having the intention. This model applies to boys as well as to girls. Many of the participants in this sample reported more than one FWBE during the previous year, which reinforces the idea that past experience plays an important role. Regrets of inaction seem quite present during adolescence and the idea of missing such an opportunity of a FWBE is a motivation for many. Finally, our results indicate that for those adolescents, their own perceptions and attitudes dominate, and parents or friends' beliefs about the behavior did not play a role in the prediction of intention.

A limit of the model tested is that such behavior may not be rational and may rather be decided on the spur of the moment. Other variables such as personality variables should be included in future models. Although sexual arousal and sensation seeking were not associated with hookup (15), they have not been tested for FWBRs. The main limitations of this study are the non-probabilistic sample, which prevent any

generalization, and not including the actual behavior in a prospective design. Thereby, no causal relation can be inferred.

Despite these limitations, our findings can inform sexual education programs, counselors, and parents. Discussion on attitudes toward FWBR, especially some possible contradictions in perceptions (risky vs. advantageous) and gender differences, could help relieve the perceived social pressures to have non-romantic sex during adolescence. Such prevention efforts could also focus on empowering adolescents, in particular girls, in negotiating condom use in casual sex (19). The pressure to sexual and relational experimentation could also be discussed.

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Table 1
Comparison of gender on factors associated with FWB experiences

Variables	Girls		Boys		<i>t</i> or χ^2	<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		
Attitudes	166 (51)	2.65 (.77)	162 (49)	3.07 (.83)	-4.73^a	< .001
Subjective norms	169 (50)	2.73 (.79)	166 (50)	2.21 (.77)	6.12^a	< .001
Friends involved						
No	49 (29)*		48 (29)*		0.00 ^b	.986
Yes	122 (71)*		120 (71)*			
Intention						
Improbable	119 (73)		85 (55)		10.42^b	.001
Probable	45 (27)		69 (45)			
PBC						
Disagree	67 (40)*		75 (46)*		0.97 ^b	.325
Agree	99 (60)*		89 (54)*			
Regret of action						
Improbable	41 (26)		78 (51)		25.45^b	< .001
Neutral	61 (39)*		51 (34)*			
Probable	55 (35)		23 (15)			
Regret of inaction						
Improbable	120 (76)		86 (55)		16.42^b	< .001
Neutral	26 (17)		42 (27)			
Probable	12 (8)		29 (19)			
Group norms						
Disagree	72 (44)		113 (69)		22.01^b	< .001
Agree	93 (56)		50 (31)			
Prior behavior						
No-FWB	134 (79)*		131 (78)*		0.04 ^b	.850
FWB	36 (21)*		37 (22)*			

Note. ^a = *t*-test ^b = Chi Square * = Adjusted residual lower than 2

A Bonferroni-type correction was applied for inflated Type I error. $\alpha = 0.006$

Table 2

Comparison of prior FWB experience on factors associated with FWB experiences

Variables	No-FWB		FWB		<i>t</i> or χ^2	<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i>		
Attitudes	255 (78)	2.73	72 (22)	3.30	-5.36^a	< .001
Subjective norms	262 (78)	2.55	72 (22)	2.18	3.46^a	< .001
Friends involved						
No	91 (35)		6 (8)		19.23^b	< .001
Yes	173 (66)		67 (92)			
Intention						
Improbable	183 (73)		21 (32)		38.46^b	< .001
Probable	68 (27)		45 (68)			
PBC						
Disagree	129 (50)		13 (18)		23.68^b	< .001
Agree	128 (50)		59 (82)			
Regret of action						
Improbable	84 (35)		34 (49)		5.22 ^b	.073
Neutral	89 (37)*		23 (33)*			
Probable	66 (28)*		12 (17)*			
Regret of inaction						
Improbable	172 (69)		34 (53)		13.23^b	.001
Neutral	55 (22)*		13 (20)*			
Probable	24 (10)		17 (27)			
Group norms						
Disagree	131 (51)		53 (74)		11.28^b	.001
Agree	124 (49)		19 (26)			

Note. ^a = *t*-test ^b = Chi Square * = Adjusted residual lower than 2A Bonferroni-type correction was applied for inflated Type I error. $\alpha = 0.006$

Table 3

Comparison of sexual experience on factors associated with FWB experiences

Variables	Not sexually active		Sexually active		<i>t</i> or χ^2	<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i>	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)		
Attitudes	134 (42)	2.79	186 (58)	2.94	-1.60 ^a	.110
Subjective norms	135 (41)	2.61	191 (59)	2.36	2.68 ^{a*}	.008
Friends involved						
No	54 (40)		39 (20)		14.96^b	< .001
Yes	82 (60)		154 (80)			
Intention						
Improbable	88 (66)*		110 (63)*		0.33 ^b	.565
Probable	46 (34)*		66 (38)*			
PBC						
Disagree	74 (56)		62 (33)		17.52^b	< .001
Agree	58 (44)		128 (67)			
Regret of action						
Improbable	38 (31)		79 (44)		5.63 ^b	.060
Neutral	51 (41)*		60 (34)*			
Probable	35 (28)*		40 (22)*			
Regret of inaction						
Improbable	84 (66)*		116 (65)*		4.12 ^b	.127
Neutral	32 (25)*		33 (19)*			
Probable	12 (9)*		29 (16)*			
Group norms						
Disagree	61 (46)		122 (66)		12.81^b	< .001
Agree	73 (55)		64 (34)			

Note. ^a = *t*-test ^b = Chi Square * = Adjusted residual lower than 2A Bonferroni-type correction was applied for inflated Type I error. $\alpha = 0.006$

Table 4
Correlations between the predictors of the intention to have a FWB

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Intention	-								
2. Gender	.18**	-							
3. Subjective Norms	-.31**	-.32**	-						
4. Attitudes	.44**	.25**	-.50**	-					
5. Perceived behavioral control	.21***	-.05	-.17**	.28**	-				
6. Group norms	-.23***	-.26***	.34**	-.34**	-.18**	-			
7. Prior behavior	.35***	.01	-.19**	.29**	.27***	.19**	-		
8. Anticipated regret of inaction	.40***	.22***	-.30**	.45**	.07	-.22***	.18**	-	
9. Anticipated regret of action	-.30***	-.29***	.42**	-.48**	-.11	.26***	-.13*	-.21***	-

Note. * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$

Table 5
Binomial logistic regression analysis predicting intention (N = 318)

Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Step 1					.04
Gender	.76	.24	2.15	.001	
Step 2					.26***
Gender	.25	.29	1.29	.374	
Subjective Norms	-.34	.20	0.71	.099	
Attitudes	1.21	.24	3.34	<.001	
Perceived behavioral control	.54	.29	1.71	.062	
Step 3					.27***
Gender	.30	.32	1.34	.349	
Subjective Norms	-.17	.23	0.84	.440	
Attitudes	.61	.26	1.84	.020	
Perceived behavioral control	.46	.31	1.59	.138	
Group norms	-.18	.31	0.83	.561	
Prior behavior	1.39	.36	4.00	<.001	
Anticipated regret of inaction (neutral)	1.11	.36	3.02	.002	
Anticipated regret of inaction (probable)	1.42	.48	4.15	.003	
Anticipated regret of action (neutral)	-.21	.35	0.81	.549	
Anticipated regret of action (probable)	-1.05	.50	0.35	.035	

* = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$