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## Exploring friends with benefits: a review of research and insights from the Polish context

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## **Exploring friends with benefits: a review of research and insights from the Polish context**

### **Summary**

#### **Introduction and purpose**

"Friends with benefits" relationships (FWBR) are becoming increasingly common. Defined as friendships involving sexual activity without romantic commitment, FWBRs blur the boundaries between friendship and romance. Many individuals involved in such relationships establish their own rules, and one surprising trend is the frequent observance of sexual exclusivity. Research on the prevalence of FWBRs has focused largely on students in the USA, but there is limited data on FWBRs in Poland, where they appear to be rising in popularity, influenced by dating sites and population migrations. Studies indicate that men, residents of larger cities, and less religious individuals are more likely to participate in FWBRs. The aim of this article is to gather the most up-to-date information on "friends with benefits" relationships.

#### **Material and methods**

A review of studies available on the PubMed platform (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>) was conducted, including articles with free full-text access that used the keywords: "friends with benefits relationship", "friends with benefits," "FWB," and "FWBR."

#### **Conclusions**

FWBRs offer a unique dynamic where individuals can avoid the emotional commitments and negative traits of traditional romantic relationships. However, these relationships also present challenges, such as differing expectations between the partners and the societal stigma that

may be associated with them. Men tend to focus more on the sexual aspect of FWBRs, while women emphasize the emotional connection, leading to potential mismatches in expectations. Despite this, both men and women generally perceive FWBRs as having more benefits than drawbacks. Notably, women are more likely to avoid entering into similar relationships in the future, suggesting some dissatisfaction with the emotional dynamics over time.

**Key words:** friends with benefits; friendship; interpersonal relationships; sexual partners

## **Introduction**

"Friends with benefits" relationships (FWBR) are traditionally defined as friendships devoid of romantic feelings, in which regular sexual interactions occur between the partners [1,2]. Despite the relatively simple definition, many researchers emphasize that FWBRs are a complex and varied phenomenon in terms of rules, motivations of participants, and the course of the relationship [1,2,3,4,5]. The main feature that distinguishes FWBRs from other types of casual sexual relationships is the combination of elements typical of friendships (mutual support, emotional closeness, trust) and romantic relationships (repeated sexual contact) [1,2]. It is important to note that the foundation of an FWBR is friendship, with sexual interactions serving as an addition (benefit) [1,2,4].

## **Objective**

The aim of this article is to gather the most up-to-date information on "friends with benefits" relationships, referring to both global data and data collected from the Polish population.

## **Methods**

A review of studies available on the PubMed platform (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/>) was conducted, including articles with free full-text access that used the keywords: "friends with benefits relationships", "friends with benefits," "FWB," and "FWBR". The authors aimed to use articles no older than 10 years; however, in some cases, this was not possible.

## **Relationship rules in friends with benefits relationships**

In theory, the assumptions of FWBRs seem simple, but many researchers highlight that participants often struggle with the complexity of combining friendship with a non-romantic sexual relationship. This is particularly evident among those who plan to maintain the friendship after the FWBR ends [1,6,7,8]. For a long time, interpersonal relationship researchers have believed that the behavior of individuals in relationships is driven by relational rules, which provide structure and serve as guidelines for partners regarding expected attitudes and behaviors [1]. The rules established at the beginning of a relationship are often renegotiated as the relationship progresses, and breaking these rules can lead to emotional and relational consequences [1,6,10].

Although FWBRs are not typical romantic relationships, some studies have provided evidence of the existence of relational rules within certain FWBRs [1,6]. Based on analyses, researchers have identified seven categories of rules in FWBRs:

1. Negotiations – arrangements concerning how the relationship will function from the very beginning.
2. Sex – primarily sexual exclusivity or lack thereof, and the type of contraception used.
3. Communication – honesty about feelings and intentions regarding the relationship, and frequency of contact.
4. Secrecy – whether or not to keep the relationship secret.
5. Duration – anticipated length of the relationship and rules for ending it.
6. Emotionality – mainly the absence of jealousy and romantic feelings (e.g., in many FWBRs, partners agree not to spend the night together to prevent the development of romantic feelings).
7. Friendship – prioritizing characteristics of the friendship aspect of the relationship [6,11,12,13].

Given the above, it is clear that FWBRs are highly diverse—individual rules differ depending on the participants' preferences and relational goals [1]. Individuals who plan to transition from FWBRs to romantic relationships communicate with their partners in a way that emphasizes emotional engagement and intimacy, while those who wish to maintain a friendly sexual relationship communicate without expressing romantic interest [1,3].

Paradoxically, some researchers point out that individuals in FWBRs rarely set specific relational rules or assume that their partner shares the same expectations and goals, which

often leads to misunderstandings [14,15]. However, newer studies indicate that the vast majority of people (80%) establish relational rules in FWBRs [1].

The rules in FWBRs related to sex are particularly noteworthy. Scientific studies consistently show that most people in such relationships expect sexual exclusivity (on average, 70%) [1,2,11]. The reasons for this phenomenon are not yet fully understood, but researchers consider three possible explanations:

1. Safe sex practices – FWBRs often involve sex without condoms, so sexual exclusivity may reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections.
2. Relational and emotional reasons – the desire to transition from an FWBR to a traditional romantic relationship.
3. Ease of finding a partner – a perception that FWBR partners are easier to find and are more sexually active in the relationship [1,16,17].

### **Prevalence of friends with benefits relationships in the world and in Poland**

FWBRs likely emerged at the end of the 20th century, in the 1970s and 1980s, linked to the sexual revolution and the spread of liberal views on sexuality in society [2,18,19,20]. The prevalence of FWBRs is most often assessed among students in the USA due to the relative popularity of this phenomenon in academic settings [2]. Numerous independent studies have shown that about 50-60% of respondents have participated in this type of relationship at least once [11,14,21,22,23], making the data obtained seem reliable. However, it is important to note that these studies were limited to young, college-aged adults, so the results cannot be generalized to other age groups, making it impossible to determine the prevalence of FWBRs across the entire population.

There are only a few Polish-language studies addressing FWBRs [2,24,25,26,27]. The earliest reports on this topic can be found in the literature from 2009, which indicated that the prevalence of FWBRs in Poland was marginal [26,27]. Later publications [2,24,25] broadly analyzed this phenomenon but did not include studies on its prevalence in the Polish population. However, it cannot be definitively stated that FWBRs are exceedingly rare in Poland—globalization, increasing sexual liberalism in our culture, population migrations (which contribute to the exchange of cultural patterns), and the growing popularity of dating websites and apps influence human relationships. As a result, it can be concluded that the prevalence of FWBRs in the Polish population is a fascinating topic for further research.

## **Characteristics and motives of people engaging in friends with benefits relationships**

Researchers have frequently tried to characterize individuals who enter FWBRs, though most studies focus on U.S. college students, which limits the generalizability of findings [7,9,21,22,23,28]. These studies suggest that men, urban residents, and less religious individuals—those typically holding more liberal views on sexuality—are more likely to engage in FWBRs [7,9,21,22,23,28]. One study [22] found that people who prefer casual social encounters and focus on sexual pleasure are more likely to engage in FWBRs. However, this finding contrasts with the earlier mentioned expectation of sexual exclusivity in most FWBR participants [1,2,11].

Some studies have also found that FWBRs occur among teenagers [7,28], single professionals in their 30s focused on their careers [7,22,27], and even seniors [29]. Each of these age groups likely has distinct motivations for entering FWBRs:

1. Teenagers: For teenagers, FWBRs may offer a way to gain early sexual experience and form closer relationships with the opposite sex. Given the trend of decreasing age at sexual initiation [30], the prevalence of FWBRs in this age group could rise over time.
2. College Students: FWBRs allow students to experiment sexually and relationally, as well as better understand their sexuality, helping them define their expectations for future relationships [21,31].
3. Single Professionals in Their 30s: In this age group, FWBRs primarily serve to meet sexual needs without the time or desire for commitment to traditional romantic relationships [7].
4. Seniors: Older adults often experience loneliness [32], and FWBRs provide an opportunity to form close relationships without the pressure of a formal romantic relationship, which can feel like a radical change in their lives.

Researchers have also explored the motives behind FWBRs. Lehmiller and colleagues [29] divided these motives into sexual and emotional categories. In their study, 60% of respondents cited sexual reasons, while 35% pointed to emotional reasons. The majority (77%) reported that at least one of these motives was crucial to their decision to enter an FWBR.

Hughes and colleagues [11] conducted a broader analysis of FWBR motives and identified five categories (from most common to least common):

1. Avoiding the emotional commitment of a romantic relationship.
2. Wanting to experience FWBR due to its unique nature.
3. Desiring sexual contact with a friend.
4. Seeking a relationship less complicated than a traditional one.
5. Wanting to strengthen emotional bonds with a friend.

Findings from other studies on FWBR motives largely align with these categories [6,14,28,31]. It is also worth noting that in one study focused solely on women, respondents indicated that their motives for engaging in FWBRs included lack of time for traditional relationships due to career demands and negative experiences in past relationships [6]. For those with negative relationship experiences, FWBRs offer tangible benefits with relatively little emotional investment, providing comfort and security. Additionally, many participants value that their sexual partner is a trusted person, giving them a sense of safety and allowing for greater sexual exploration [2,6,14].

### **Expectations and actual outcomes of friends with benefits relationships**

Researchers examining expectations regarding FWBR outcomes have identified four potential scenarios:

1. Continuing the FWBR.
2. Ending the FWBR and starting a traditional romantic relationship.
3. Ending the FWBR but maintaining a traditional friendship.
4. Ending the FWBR and completely severing contact [4,6,14,29,31,33].

Several studies have found that participants' preferred options are either continuing the FWBR or transitioning into a traditional romantic relationship. In retrospective studies, each option was chosen by about one-third of respondents [4,29], while in longitudinal studies, 48% preferred continuing the FWBR and 25% preferred transitioning to a romantic relationship [33]. These findings are particularly interesting given that one of the assumptions of FWBRs is the avoidance of romantic feelings. This shift might result from emotional bonds forming during repeated sexual encounters, a phenomenon that warrants further investigation [2]. It's also noteworthy that men tend to prefer continuing the FWBR, while women more often hope

for a transition to a romantic relationship [8,28,29]. Completely severing contact after an FWBR is the least expected outcome [4,29,33].

However, the actual outcomes of FWBRs do not always align with participants' expectations. A longitudinal study found that only 17% of participants ended up in the FWBR scenario they had wanted [33]. The general outcomes of FWBRs are as follows:

1. FWBRs most often transition into a classic friendship or continue in their original form [11,14,33].
2. Despite the rarity of expecting to sever all contact after an FWBR, about one-quarter of such relationships end this way [11,14,33].
3. Ending an FWBR and starting a traditional romantic relationship occurs in no more than 15% of cases, making it the least likely scenario [11,14,31,33]. Some studies suggest that individuals who build a romantic relationship from an FWBR experience lower relationship satisfaction [8].

In several studies, participants who had been in FWBRs were asked about their future plans regarding such relationships. Similar proportions of people expressed willingness or unwillingness to engage in FWBRs again, with women less likely to choose the first option [8,13,28].

### **Positive aspects of friends with benefits relationships**

The positive aspects of FWBR have become the subject of recent scientific research—older publications primarily focused on the negative features of this type of relationship. Based on a review of the available literature, the advantages of FWBR can be presented as follows:

1. For many participants in this type of relationship, it combines the best features of casual sex, friendship, and romantic relationships, while allowing them to avoid the "negative" aspects of traditional relationships (e.g., greater emotional involvement) [13].
2. FWBR allows for the satisfaction of sexual needs with a trusted person, without greater obligations, which translates into emotional security as well as engaging in safe (in the participant's perception) sexual contacts [7,13,14,31].
3. FWBR allows for an increase in self-esteem and feelings of sexual attractiveness, reduces feelings of loneliness, and allows for the exploration and better understanding of one's own sexuality [13,14,31].
4. Participants in FWBR also indicate the ability to relieve stress as an advantage of this type



of relationship and view it as an opportunity to release sexual tension in the absence of a partner for a traditional relationship [7,13].

The number of advantages of FWBR thus appears to be wide and opens the field for further scientific analysis.

It is worth noting that the majority of individuals who have engaged in FWBR rate it positively, regardless of gender [8,13,31]. The phenomenon of FWBR is also better evaluated by those who have participated in this type of relationship compared to those who do not have such experiences [21].

### **Negative aspects of friends with benefits relationships**

The negative aspects of FWBR have been the subject of numerous scientific studies [7,13,14,21,24,31]. Based on a review of the available literature, the disadvantages of FWBR can be presented as follows:

1. Problems with open and direct communication between partners and ambiguity of relational rules.

As mentioned earlier, due to the atypical and individual nature of FWBR, open and direct communication should be the foundation of this type of relationship [1,6]. However, many researchers indicate that the majority of FWBR participants do not discuss relational rules with their partner and rely on indirect communication (the realm of assumptions) [13,14,15]. Newer studies [1] indicate, however, that a significant majority of FWBR participants establish the aforementioned rules at the beginning of the relationship. Therefore, accurately determining the prevalence of this problem among FWBR participants requires further research.

2. The risk of experiencing negative emotions.

- Some individuals participating in FWBR feel awkward and confused after the first sexual contact with their partner [6,9,13].

- Some researchers indicate that sexual contacts devoid of emotional involvement, which are typical for FWBR, may lead to a decrease in self-esteem [33]. This view contradicts the results of other studies [13,14,31], which again opens the field for deeper analysis in this area.

- Some individuals involved in FWBR fear falling in love with a friend without reciprocity

[7]—considering the previously discussed actual course of most FWBRs, this fear does not seem unfounded [4,6,14,29,31,33]. It is also worth noting that this aspect has been identified in many studies as the main disadvantage of FWBR and is among the most common reasons for the termination of this type of relationship [13,14,21,31].

### 3. The risk of negative social judgment.

In the society of the USA, which has been the subject of many studies on FWBR, this type of relationship seems to be socially accepted to some extent [7,9,21,22,23,28]. In the case of Polish society, FWBR constitutes a kind of social taboo, which is a discouraging factor for starting this type of relationship and a source of fear of condemnation in social or family circles [24]. It is also worth noting the more liberal approach of society to sexual behaviors of men compared to women [13,24,29].

### 4. Different expectations of women and men regarding the course of FWBR.

According to a large number of studies, men are primarily engaged in the sexual aspect of FWBR, while women focus on the emotional and friendly aspects [23,24,28,29]. The expectations of both sexes regarding the future of FWBR also seem to be different, as discussed in detail in an earlier part of the article [4,6,14,29,31,33]. These discrepancies hinder the satisfaction of the needs of both parties and may lead to conflicts.

### 5. Negative health consequences.

The main health consequence of FWBR is the possibility of contracting sexually transmitted diseases [24]. Some studies [4] show that FWBR participants use condoms less frequently because they feel that a friend is a safe sexual partner. Other studies [1] show that FWBR participants use condoms more often than those in romantic relationships; however, they have more sexual partners throughout their lives. It should also be noted that the majority of individuals engaging in FWBR currently have only one sexual partner [1,2,11,24]. Therefore, one might perceive a certain predisposition to the occurrence of sexually transmitted diseases among those engaged in FWBR, although this appears to be ambiguous and requires further research.

## **Comparison of attitudes and functioning of women and men in friends with benefits relationships**

Many researchers attempt to identify differences in the functioning of women and men in FWBR; however, some studies suggest that this gender differentiation appears to be increasingly less noticeable [34]. Based on a review of the available literature, the differences

between women and men in the context of FWBR can be presented as follows:

1. Men more frequently engage in FWBR than women. This view is supported by the results of most studies [8,9,21,22,31], although some show a lack of such differentiation [14,23].
2. Men have more FWBR throughout their lives than women and often function in several such relationships simultaneously [14,23,29]. This is most likely a result of generally greater sexual activity among men, their more liberal approach to sexuality, the more liberal societal attitude towards male sexuality, which is associated with double standards regarding gender (men are perceived less negatively by society in the context of FWBR situations), and a greater tendency for men to engage in polyamorous relationships [6,23,33,37].
3. The motivation for entering into FWBR for men is most often sexual, while for women, it is emotional [28,29]. Men are more engaged in the sexual aspect of FWBR, while women focus on the friendly aspect [23]. Against these views are the results of several studies, where the differences between genders in this regard turned out to be statistically insignificant [29,35,36].
4. Men prefer that FWBR remain unchanged, while women want the relationship to evolve into a traditional relationship or, if that is impossible, into a classic friendship [8,15,28,29].
5. Both women and men believe that FWBR have more positive than negative aspects; however, women more frequently declare a desire to avoid such relationships in the future [8,21,28].

## **Summary**

Friends with benefits relationships (FWBR) are an intriguing phenomenon that has disrupted the perception of friendship, romantic relationships, and casual sex. Distinguishing between these three aspects can be difficult and often proves impossible for both parties in the relationship.

The topic of FWBR poses a challenge for researchers, as the results of studies in this area are often contradictory, primarily due to conducting research on too small or demographically homogeneous groups.

There is a need to deepen research on FWBR on a population scale to determine the prevalence of such relationships globally and in Poland, as well as to better understand various aspects of this phenomenon. However, based on the experiences of other researchers,

it should be noted that conducting research on FWBR in Poland may prove problematic due to the fact that this topic appears to be a social taboo.

A key issue also seems to be conducting more research on the motivations and experiences of FWBR participants, as well as deepening the understanding of differences between representatives of both genders in this area. The authors also highlight the need to examine this type of relationship among individuals with non-heterosexual orientations. An important area for future research on FWB relationships also seems to be comparing them with other forms of sexual need satisfaction, considering factors such as satisfaction level, risk of internal diseases, and stress levels.

#### **Author's contribution:**

Conceptualization: A.M., K.W.; methodology: A.M., K.W.; software: A.M., K.W., J.W., A.W.; formal analysis: A.M., K.W., J.W., A.W.; investigation: A.M., K.W., J.W., A.W., J.D., W.C.; resources: A.M., K.W., J.W., A.W., E.G.; data curation: A.M., K.W., J.W., A.W., E.G.; writing - rough preparation: A.M., K.W., J.W., A.W., J.D., W.C., E.G.; writing - review and editing: A.M., K.W., J.W., A.W., J.D., W.C., E.G.; visualization: A.M., K.W., A.W.; supervision: A.M., K.W.; project administration: A.M., K.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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