

Happily Ever After? Outcomes of “Friends with Benefits” Relationships

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Outcomes of “friends with benefits” relationships

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Abstract

Movies and television often portray friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs) developing into romantic relationships. However, real-life FWBRs do not often have such happy endings. We collected data from a survey of a large sample of college students ($n = 557$) regarding opinions and experiences of both traditional romantic relationships and FWBRs to address two research questions. What are the outcomes of FWBRs and how do individuals react emotionally to FWBRs after they end? Our results indicated that most FWBRs were likely to damage the friendship, rather than develop into romance. Reports of feelings about FWBRs in retrospect suggested that emotional reactions to FWBRs are negative in comparison to emotional reactions to traditional relationships.

Introduction

In the Hollywood Movie Friends with Benefits, two characters, Jamie and Dylan, both busy professionals, begin a casual relationship, agreeing to have sex without commitment or emotional entanglement. Their relationship becomes more complicated when Jamie begins to have romantic feelings for Dylan, which he does not reciprocate. Still, the movie has a happy ending: Dylan decides he cares for Jamie after all and the two begin a romantic relationship.

This paper compares the reality of friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs) to people's expectations about those relationships. Do most friends with benefits partners, like Jamie and Dylan, end up in a traditional romantic relationship? And how do individuals react to their FWB experience? We examine these two issues: the outcomes of FWBRs and individuals' reactions to them.

One of the most important implications for these research questions is the question of federal policy about sexual education. For instance, during President George Bush’s presidency, federal policy actively advocated against sexual relations outside of marriage (including FWBRs). Furthermore, these questions may concern parents who are concerned about the prevalence and consequences of FWBRs.

Literature Review

Prior research suggests that FWB relationships are unlikely to end in romantic relationships. Afifi and Faulkner (2000) found that 56% of those who engaged in FWBRs “reported that the friendship did not develop into a romantic relationship following the sexual act”. Bisson and Levine’s research in 2009 generated somewhat different estimates of the outcomes of FWBRs. They found that most FWBRs “either reverted to a traditional relationship or ended completely”, and that only about 10% became romantic relationships. Compared to Afifi and Faulkner, Bisson and Levine predicted FWBRs resulting in romantic relationships at a much lower rate. Afifi and Faulkner and Bisson and Levine’s studies both predict that FWBRs will not end in romantic relationships.

Previous studies report that friends with benefits relationships have a positive overall impact on partners’ relationship and that partners tend to react positively to the relationships. Afifi and Faulkner reported that 67% of those who engaged in sexual activity with a friend “perceived that the sexual contact increased relational quality”. Still, they noted that “some participants reported considerable relational damage from the behavior”. Other research about individuals’ emotional reactions to FWBRs has suggested that reactions are primarily positive. Owen and Fincham (2011) found that “young adults reported more positive than negative

reactions to their FWB experience”. Overall, despite qualifications, previous studies report that FWBRs have a positive impact on relationship quality and positive reactions for individuals involved.

Our Study

In this paper we address two research questions:

RQ1: What are the outcomes of friends with benefits relationships?

RQ2: How do individuals react emotionally to friends with benefits relationships after they end?

We question whether representations of FWBRs in popular culture, like the movie Friends with Benefits, accurately represent the outcomes of and emotional reactions to FWBRs. Furthermore, we compare our findings about outcomes and emotional reactions to FWBRs to existing research. Our results challenge existing evidence for the prevalence of positive emotional reactions to FWBRs,

Method

Research Design

Our study compared people’s beliefs about FWBRs to the actual experiences of people who had been in FWBR relationships. Since the purpose of this research was not to examine causal relations around FWBRs, we used a nonexperimental design. Also, for ethical and practical reasons, it would have been impossible to randomly assign participants to relationship conditions. Because of the descriptive nature of our research and the impossibility of an experimental design, our study was nonexperimental.

Survey Design

Student groups drafted, distributed, and tested sections of the survey for reliability. The most reliable items from their scales for various constructs (for example, feelings toward partner), were included in the final survey.

Data Collection

To collect our data, students in a research methods class at a large undergraduate university distributed our survey to their friends and acquaintances (they were required to do so to earn course credit). Using a snowball sample allowed us to collect a large number ($n=557$) of responses to the survey at minimal cost. It also avoided to some degree issues with self-selection that other studies on FWBRs have had. For instance, some studies rely on volunteers to report about their FWBR experience. This self-selection could create a bias in favor of FWBRs, since individuals who had bad experiences with FWBRs would be less likely to come forward and share their experiences in a survey or interview.

Participant Demographics

Altogether, we gathered responses from 557 undergraduate students at a large northeastern research university. The respondents were 51% female and 49% male. Sixty percent of participants were between 20-21 years old, and 95% of the participants were between 18-23 years old (all were 18 or older). While demographic data on race and education level was collected in the survey, it was not available for analysis.

Survey Procedures

We created an online survey using Qualtrics survey software. Students in the research methods class distributed the survey through a link to the survey page, which was self-administered by the respondents. The length of the survey depended on participants' response to two filter questions. We asked “Are you currently in, or have you ever been, in a traditional romantic relationship?” and “Are you currently in, or have you ever been, in a friends-with-benefits (FWB) relationship?” The participants who had never been in either type of relationship answered 70 questions that didn't address relationship experiences. The respondents who had only experienced a FWBR or had only experienced a traditional relationship answered 44 additional questions about their relationship experiences. Respondents who had experience in both FWB and traditional relationships answered a total of 157 questions, including ones about their experiences in each type of relationship.

Measures

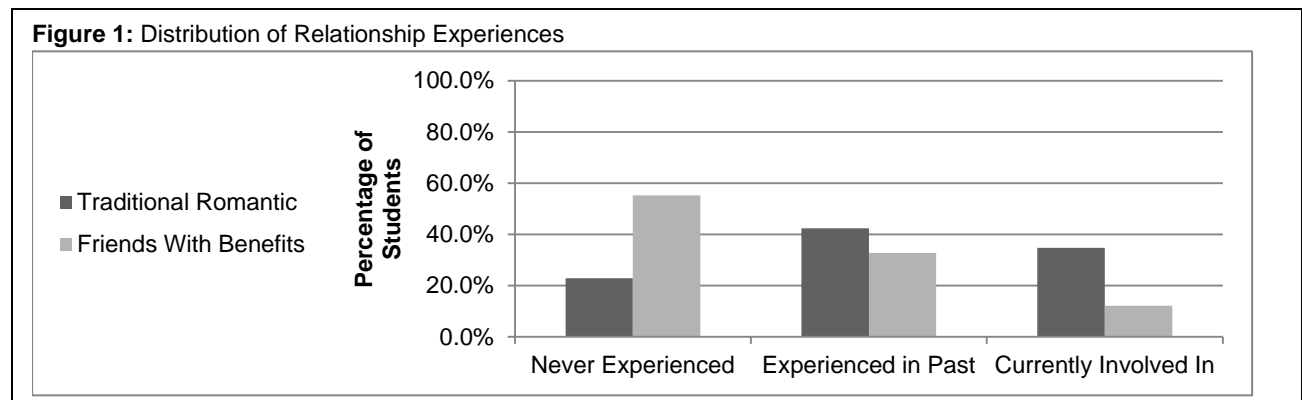
Almost all items on our survey were scalar, and most scalar questions used a Likert scale. With the exception of open-ended questions about the length of FWBRs, length of traditional relationships, sexual histories, and a question about gender, participants responded to all items on our survey using scales. The majority of scales were five-item Likert scales. Some of the non-Likert scales had ranges of frequencies for response options. For instance, an item asking about the length of a relationship had response options on a scale from “less than one week” to “more than two years” Using mainly Likert scales allowed us to more easily quantify and manipulate participants' responses,

Filtering of Data

We removed several cases from our data set. One participant reported having 350 sex partners, which we viewed as implausibly high. Similarly, other participants that reported having “felt up” 234 partners and had 1000 mutual partners had their responses removed from the dataset.

Results

Altogether, we gathered 554 responses to our survey (after filtering). Overall, the proportion of individuals in our sample who had experienced FWBRs was consistent with previous studies’ findings. Approximately 45% of participants in our study had either been in an FWBR in the past or was currently involved in one. Other studies’ estimates of the prevalence of FWBRs for college students have been around 50% or above.



Participants had lower rates of experience overall for FWBRs. Figure 1 displays the distribution of students’ experiences for each relationship type. About 23% percent of participants reported never having been in a traditional romantic relationship, 42% had been in a traditional relationship in the past, and about 35% were currently in traditional relationships. In comparison, about 55% percent of participants reported never having been in a FWBR, 33%

had been in a FWBR in the past, and about 12% were currently in a FWBR. Interestingly, as shown in Figure 2, the proportion of students who had only been in a traditional relationship was approximately equal to the proportion of students who had been in both types of relationships at some point.

Figure 2: Relationship Experiences

Experience of Relationship Type	Proportion of Respondents
Neither	16.4%
Only Traditional	38.8%
Only FWB	6.5%
Both Traditional and FWB	38.2%
Total	100% (n=554)

Expectations versus Experience of FWBRs

Popular opinion and popular culture, along with personal experience, shape people’s views about FWBRs. We examined what people believe about the outcomes of FWBRs so that we could compare it to the reality of individual’s reports.

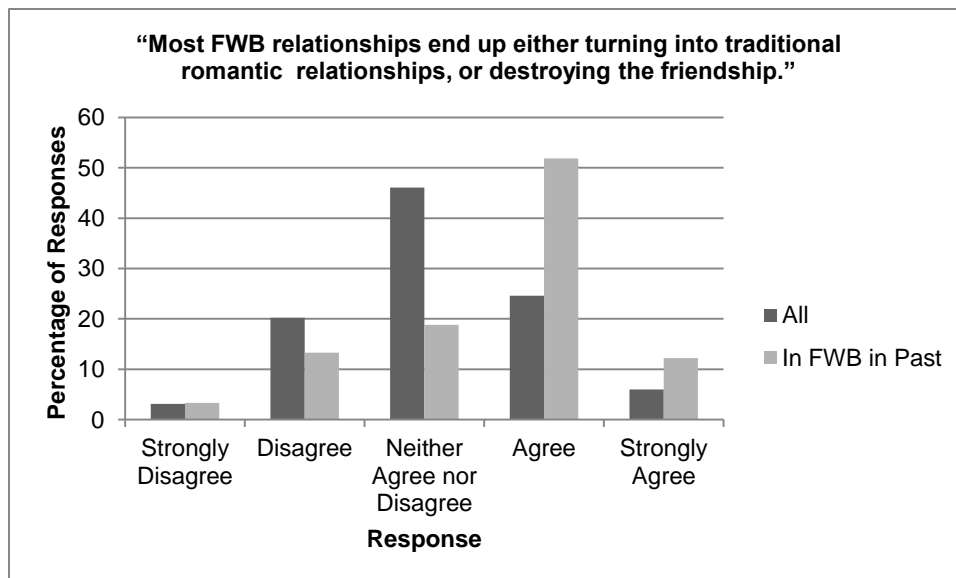
Expectation versus Experience of Outcome of Relationship

Do people believe that real life FWBRs end as happily as ones in Hollywood? As a whole, students who responded to our survey were ambiguous in their views of the outcomes of FWBRs. We asked respondents to give their views on the statement “Most FWBRs end up either turning into traditional romantic relationships, or destroying the friendship.” Almost half of the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Similarly, the proportion of respondents who said they agreed with the statement, 24.6%, was close to the proportion of respondents who said they disagreed with the statement, 20.2%. Figure 3 displays the

symmetric nature of the distribution. Essentially, people’s expectations of the outcome of FWBRs did not trend strongly in either direction.

However, the subset of our sample that had been in a FWBR in the past had a very different opinion about the outcomes of FWBRs. As shown in Figure 3, approximately 60% of those respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that FWBRs either turn into traditional romantic relationships or destroy the friendship. Only about 16% of this group of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement “Most FWBRs end up either turning into traditional romantic relationships, or destroying the friendship.” This trend suggests that in reality, FWBRs do change the nature of FWB partners’ relationship. Still, since this question did not ask respondents to differentiate between the development of a romantic relationship and the destruction of the friendship, actual beliefs about which outcome is most likely were unclear.

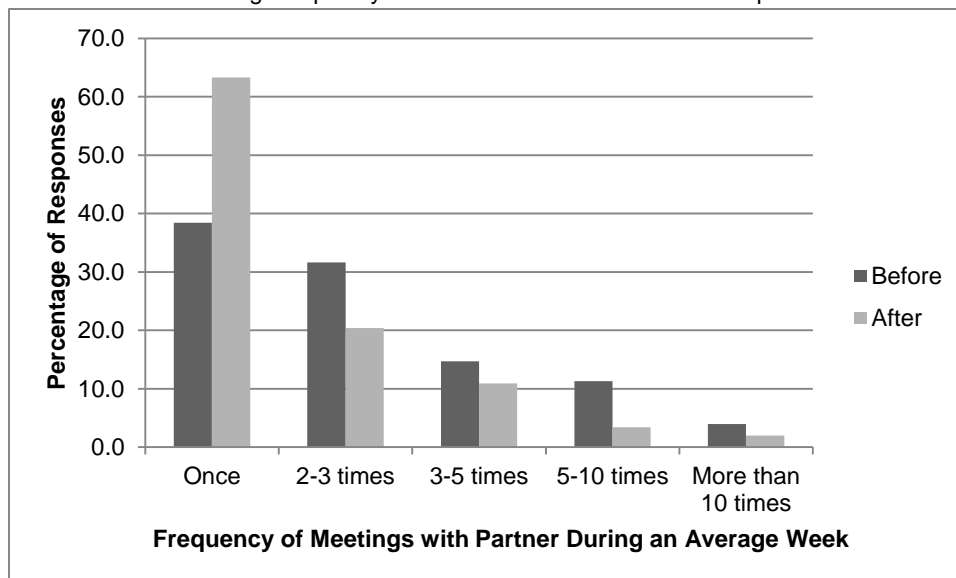
Figure 3: All Individuals vs. Former FWB individuals Views of FWB Outcomes



Nonetheless, responses to other questions gave insight as to whether individuals formerly in FWBRs believe that relationships turn romantic or destroy the friendship. Examining these individuals’ responses provided evidence for the negative outcome: it seems that FWBRs are more likely to destroy the friendship than become romantic.

We believe that FWBRs likely had a negative impact of the friendship of FWB partners based on frequency of meetings between partners before and after the relationship. We asked individuals formerly in FWBRs to report how often they met with a partner in an average week before and after the relationship. As shown in Figure 4, after the FWBR, the proportion of partners who met more than once a week declined significantly while the proportion of partners who met once a week rose from 38.4% to 63.3%. Contradicting prior research, the decline in time spent with FWB partners after the relationship ends leads us to believe that the friendship has been damaged by the FWBR (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000).

Figure 4: Decline in Meeting Frequency with FWB Partner after Relationship



Individuals’ reports of their romantic feelings before and after further support our finding that FWBRs are less likely to end in romantic relationships than to damage the friendship. Overall, the proportion of respondents who reported having feelings for their partner declined between the beginning and the end of a FWBR. Before the relationship, about 43% of respondents reported romantic feelings for their partner and 45% reported having no romantic feelings. After, about 31% of respondents reported romantic feelings for their partner and 67% reported no romantic feelings.

Figure 5: Romantic Feelings Before and After FWBR

Response	Before	After
Strongly Disagree	15.8	24.2
Disagree	29.2	33.4
Neither Agree Nor Disagree	11.1	10.6
Agree	33.3	26.7
Strongly Agree	10.5	5
Total	100% (n=180)	100% (n=180)

Because of the decline in time spent together and the decrease in romantic feelings after an FWBR, we believe that the reality of FWBR is that they are unlikely to result in romantic relationships and are likely to damage or destroy the friendship between those involved.

Expectation of Emotional Reactions versus Experienced Emotional Reaction

Though several previous studies have described individuals’ positive reactions to FWBRs, a majority of students in our study predicted that people would feel better about themselves in traditional relationships. As shown in Figure 6, about 70% of respondents said that they would feel better about themselves in traditional dating relationships, while only about 7% said they would feel better about themselves in a FWBR. Participants in our study

predicted that they would react better emotionally to traditional relationships, and our results confirmed their predictions.

Figure 6: All Respondents' Opinions:

“Which type of relationship makes you feel better about yourself?”

Response	Percent of Respondents
Definitely FWBRs	0.9
Probably FWBRs	6.0
Neither	22.5
Probably Traditional dating relationships	35.2
Definitely Traditional dating relationships	35.4
Total	100% (n=554)

To compare how often individuals who had been in both types of relationships reported feeling good about themselves in traditional relationships versus in FWBRs, we conducted a paired sample t-test. Individuals in traditional relationships reported feeling good about themselves significantly more ($M=4.31$, $SD=0.76$) than individuals in FWBRs ($M=3.30$, $SD=1.15$). $t(143)=8.996$, $p=0.000$. The more negative pattern of feelings in FWB versus traditional relationships confirms the prediction made by all respondents, and seems to contradict the results of earlier studies.

To further examine individuals' emotional reactions to FWBRs, we conducted two more sample t-tests to compare how often individuals reported liking traditional relationships versus liking FWBRs and how likely they would be to engage in such a relationship again. Individuals in traditional relationships reported liking the relationship more ($M=4.28$, $SD=0.84$) than individuals in FWBRs ($M=3.28$, $SD=1.13$), $t(151)=7.565$, $p=0.000$. Individuals in traditional relationships also reported being more likely ($M=4.48$, $SD=0.64$) to become involved in such a relationship again in than individuals in FWBRs ($M=3.46$, $SD=1.148$). Individuals' liking of

traditional relationships more than FWBRs and their greater likelihood of being involved in traditional relationships again provides further evidence that emotional reactions to FWBRs are negative in general – people liked them less and were less likely to say they would engage a FWBR again.

Since individuals in FWBRs report feeling good about themselves less often, liking the relationship less often, and being less likely to engage in this type of relationship again less often than individuals in traditional relationships, we believe that respondents’ expectation that people would feel worse in FWBRs is valid.

Discussion

Findings

Our study addressed two questions:

RQ1: What are the outcomes of friends with benefits relationships?

RQ2: How do individuals react emotionally to friends with benefits relationships after they end?

We found that friends with benefits relationships were likely to have a negative outcome, damaging the friendship of those involved. Our findings corroborated other research which has suggested that FWBRs are not likely not result in a romantic relationship (Afiki & Faulkner, 2000; Bisson & Levine, 2009).

Additionally, our results indicated that individuals’ emotional reactions to FWBRs are more negative than emotional reactions to traditional relationships. Overall, we believe that emotional reactions to FWBRs tend to be negative, rather than positive (as suggested by earlier research).

Finally, we found that participants’ opinions of FWBRs were less accurate regarding outcomes, but fairly accurate regarding emotional reactions. Participants did not predict that FWBRs would change the relationship of FWB partners. According to reports on past FWB experiences, FWBRs do change the relationship of FWB partners. Participants did predict that individuals in FWB relationships would be less likely to feel good about themselves than individuals in traditional relationships. Participants’ opinions about the outcomes of FWBRs were not very accurate, but their opinions on emotional reactions to FWBRs corresponded to the reality to a degree.

Limitations

A serious limitation for the conclusions we draw above was the indirect nature of the questions we used to draw the conclusions. The items used to examine outcomes of relationship were indirect measures. First, the item “Most FWB relationships end up either turning into traditional romantic relationships, or destroying the friendship.” was a double barreled question. The item has two embedded statements: “Most FWB relationships end up turning into traditional romantic relationships” and “Most FWB relationships destroy the friendship”. Since the item was not split into separate statements, we used other measures to infer which of those two outcomes seemed to be most likely. The other measures—frequency of meetings with partner and romantic feelings toward partner before and after the relationship—were useful, but still indirect. Future studies should provide separate items for participants to rate their opinion of the likely outcomes of FWBRs.

Similarly, future studies should provide separate items for participants to describe the outcome of FWBRs in which they were involved. This study only asked participants whether

their relationship had ended because they or their partner wanted to date someone else. These items did not encompass all possible outcomes of an FWBR, which limited how informative the survey could be. Future surveys could provide more thorough response options for FWBR relationship outcomes, including: continued FWBR, began traditional (romantic) relationship, or ended FWBR. Another item could ask about feelings toward a former FWBR partner, with response options like not friends, friendship same as before FWBR, better friends than before FWBR, worse friends than before FWBR, and in romantic relationship.

The indirect measures used to draw conclusions about emotional reactions to FWBRs also limit the strength of the conclusions we make in this study. No survey question directly asked respondents to characterize their FWBR experiences as positive or negative. Again, conclusions were drawn using indirect measures: ratings of which relationship type made people feel better about themselves, which they liked better, and which they would be more likely to engage in again. While the indirect measures were useful, direct questions would allow for some assessment of construct validity.

A major limitation of the study was its research design. The sample, while large, was not randomly selected, which limits its generalizability to a larger population. Additionally, since the sample consisted of American college students, the results for this group cannot easily be generalized to the across ages or across cultures.

Another limitation of the study’s design was that data relied on participants’ self-report. This methodology could have introduced issues with social-desirability bias and recall. Also, since the survey was self-administered and online, the conditions in which participants replied

could not be controlled. For instance, some participants in the study were witnessed taking the survey with friends reading along. These uncontrolled conditions could have created biases in the data. Future studies would want to consider the circumstances under which surveys are taken, and perhaps supervise the administration of the survey.

Opportunities for Further Research

More carefully conducted future research could provide more certain answers to questions about the outcomes of and emotional reactions to FWBRs. More detailed research on the outcomes of FWBRs would provide much richer data about the outcomes of FWBRs. For instance, such research could determine what proportion of FWBRs end on good terms versus bad, and what proportion of FWBR partners stay friends after the relationship. Similarly, more detailed research on emotional reactions to FWBRs would give more insight into whether individuals view such relationships as positive or negative experiences overall. Research on emotional reactions could also examine more closely the relation between emotional reaction, duration of relationship, and time since the end of the relationship.

Since research on FWBRs is relatively sparse, there are many other unanswered questions about such relationships that could be subjects for future research. For instance, what is the influence of social norms on the outcomes of and emotional reactions to FWBRs? How do people from different cultural backgrounds perceive FWBR experiences differently? How the intentions and opinions of individuals in FWBRs affect the outcomes of the relationship? FWBRs remain mysterious, and there much more to understand about the topic.

Significance

Popular portrayals of FWBRs are not necessarily accurate reflections of the nature and consequences of these relationships. The happy ending of the Hollywood film Friends with Benefits does not reflect the reality of most FWB relationships; most FWBRs do not become traditional romantic relationships.

These findings have implications for how FWBRs are addressed in sexual education in schools and by parents. What advice should we give teenagers about FWBRs? Are they likely to have positive experiences with FWBRs or negative ones? The results of this research also provide some real data about FWBRs. While editorial articles in the media condemn or celebrate FWBRs, few actually refer to the experiences of those relationships.

At the core though, this research addresses an essential question: What are the boundaries between friendship and romance, and what happens when those boundaries are crossed?

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Appendix

Codebook

Question	Label	Responses
FWB	Are you currently in, or have you ever been, in a friends-with-benefits (FWB) relationship?	1= Yes, currently 2= Yes, in the past; if so when (years and months ago)? 3= No, never
TraditionalDating	Are you currently in, or have you ever been, in a traditional romantic relationship?	1= Yes, currently 2= Yes, in the past; if so when (years and months ago)? 3= No, never
FWB_Changes	Most FWB relationships end up either turning into traditional romantic relationships, or destroying the friendship.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
B4RelationshipMeet_FWB	How often do/did you meet with your partner in an average week... Before the relationship started	1 = Once 2 = 2-3 times 3 = 3-5 times 4 = 5-10 times 5 = More than 10 times

AfterRelationshipMeet_FWB	How often do/did you meet with your partner in an average week... After the relationship ended (if applicable)	1 = Once 2 = 2-3 times 3 = 3-5 times 4 = 5-10 times 5 = More than 10 times
RomanticFeelingsB4_FWB	I had romantic feelings toward my partner before we were together.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree 6/System Missing = Not Applicable
RomanticFeelingsAfter_FWB	I had romantic feelings toward my partner after we stopped being together.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree 6/System Missing = Not Applicable
FeelGoodAboutSelf	Which type of relationship makes you feel better about yourself?	1 = Definitely FWBRs 2 = Probably FWBRs 3 = Neither 4 = Probably Traditional dating relationships 5 = Definitely Traditional dating relationships

FeelGoodAboutSelf_FWB	Our relationship makes/made me feel good about myself.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree 6/System Missing = Not Applicable
FeelGoodAboutSelf_Traditional	Our relationship makes/made me feel good about myself.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree 6/System Missing = Not Applicable
Like_FWB	I like being in a FWBR.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
Like_Traditional	I like being in a traditional dating relationship.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

WouldDoAgain_FWB	I would engage in a FWBR again.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree
WouldDoAgain_Traditional	I would engage in a traditional dating relationship again.	1 = Strongly Disagree 2 = Disagree 3 = Neither Agree nor Disagree 4 = Agree 5 = Strongly Agree