

2021

## Motivations, Expectations, Ideal Outcomes, and Satisfaction in Friends With Benefits Relationships Among Rural Youth


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### Recommended Citation

Letcher, A., Carmona, J., Ramsay-Seaner, K., & Scott Hoffman, M. (2022). Motivations, Expectations, Ideal Outcomes, and Satisfaction in Friends With Benefits Relationships Among Rural Youth. *Journal of Counseling Sexology & Sexual Wellness: Research, Practice, and Education*, 3 (2), 58-69. <https://doi.org/10.34296/03021050>

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## Motivations, Expectations, Ideal Outcomes, and Satisfaction in Friends With Benefits Relationships Among Rural Youth

### Cover Page Footnote

This research was supported by a grant from the Research and Scholarly Support Fund, South Dakota State University.

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Characterized by repeated sexual contact with a known partner without the expectation of commitment, friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs) are increasing among youth. Yet, less is known about the motivations for, or satisfaction in, FWBRs especially among youth from rural areas. Youth from rural communities reported on their experiences in FWBRs. Findings indicated that youths' major motivation for FWBRs was sexual satisfaction, although gender differences emerged. Sexual motivation was associated with relationship satisfaction. The majority of youth wanted to maintain their friendship following the FWBR, and most described the experience as satisfying. Implications and future directions are discussed.

*Keywords:* friends with benefits, rural youth, relationship satisfaction

## Introduction

Increasing in popularity among high school and college students, friends with benefits relationships (FWBRs) consist of a sexual relationship between friends that lacks a romantic commitment (Bisson & Levine, 2007). The literature is mixed on youth's satisfaction with FWBRs. Youth, defined as individuals between the ages of 15-24 (United Nations, 1987), have reported greater sexual risk behaviors (Letcher & Carmona, 2014; VanderDrift, Lehmler, & Kelly, 2010), depressive symptoms (Grello, Welsh, & Harper, 2006), and substance use (Fielder & Carey, 2009) when engaging in FWBRs. However, a growing body of research suggests youth also report positive experiences in these casual relationships (Weaver, MacKeigan, & MacDonald, 2011). Additionally, the majority of research on FWBRs has focused on college students from highly populated areas (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Snapp, Lento, Ryu, & Rosen, 2014), yet there is evidence that casual sexual activity may differ in rural versus urban environments (McGinty et al., 2007) and based on stage in the life cycle (DeLuca, Claxton, Baker, & van Dulmen, 2015).

Given the disparity in outcomes related to participating in FWBRs, it may be useful to explore youth's motivations for, and expectations when, entering a FWBR. Possibly, one's ultimate satisfaction with the relationship is related to their initial reason for establishing the relationship. It is also possible that their satisfaction is related to how they hope the relationship will ultimately end, among other factors. The current study explores the relationship between motivations, expectations, ideal outcomes, and satisfaction with the FWBR experience among an understudied population: rural youth, including both high school and college students.

## Positive Sexuality as a Guiding Framework

Positive sexuality is rooted in the belief that individuals have the ability to define and understand sexuality, including their beliefs and experiences, from a strengths-based, empowerment perspective (D. J. Williams, Thomas, Prior, & Walters, 2015). Moreover, it posits that the development of

### Acknowledgment

This research was supported by a grant from the Research and Scholarly Support Fund, South Dakota State University.

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sexual health and sexual satisfaction is a process that encompasses many contexts including mental health and cultural influences and occurs throughout the lifespan (Murray, Pope, & Willis, 2017). Adolescent sexuality is often approached from a sex-negative perspective which highlights the potential risks of sexual activity including teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STI) transmission (Fava & Bay-Cheng, 2013). Despite this sex-negative approach and the commonality of abstinence-based sex education that also tends to emphasize sexual risk, American adolescents continue to engage in sexual activity. Therefore, it is imperative that counseling professionals adopt a positive sexuality framework when working with adolescents as a sex-negative approach does not prevent sexual intercourse, but may inhibit informed sexual decision making.

### Casual Sexual Relationships

Dating practices and relationship statuses continue to evolve among youth. Recent studies indicate an increasing acceptance of casual sexual relationships such as FWBRs, hookups, one-night stands, and booty calls, among others (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013). FWBRs are a unique subset of casual sexual relationships as they involve sexual activity; however, FWBRs are more likely to involve emotional intimacy and repeated sexual interactions over time (Bisson & Levine, 2007; Lehmillier, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2010). Although casual sexual relationship types do overlap, subtle differences exist which can lead to important implications. Because of higher levels of emotional intimacy in FWBRs compared to other casual relationships, youth may be more trusting of their FWB partner (Matthews, 2013). As a result, youth in FWBRs may be at increased risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) as they view their partners as less risky (Matthews, 2013). The sexual risk is especially salient as 25-40% of youth report that their FWBRs are not exclusive (Lehmillier et al., 2010; Weaver et al., 2011). Youth have also reported feeling more comfortable exploring and experimenting with their sexuality with a friend rather than a committed romantic partner, which may improve self-esteem and overall well-being (Weaver et al., 2011). The uncommitted, yet moderately intimate nature of the FWBR may allow for the freedom to experiment without fear of ruining a long-term relationship.

From a positive sexuality framework perspective of human sexuality, it is important to consider contextual influences (e.g., political views, religious beliefs, family values, etc.) that may impact youth's experiences (Murray et al., 2017). While the general public has become more accepting of sexual activity outside of a committed relationship (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012), it is possible that variation exists among particular subsets of the population based on characteristics commonly found among those in rural communities. Known for more politically con-

servative views regarding sexual activity (Lichter & Brown, 2011), individuals from rural communities may be less tolerant of casual sexual relationships such as FWBRs, especially among youth. Greater gender role stereotyping is found in rural areas (Pew Research Center, 2018), which may lead to different sexual expectations for youth depending on gender. Also, individuals from rural areas tend to report more church attendance (Wallace, Forman, Caldwell, & Willis, 2003), which has been associated with fewer FWBRs among youth (McGinty, Knox, & Zusman, 2007). Given the research, the expectation of limited FWBRs among rural youth may be a logical conclusion; however, previous research provides an inconsistent report on the actual prevalence of FWBRs among rural youth. While McGinty and colleagues (2007) found significantly more FWBRs among urban youth than rural youth, others have reported that rural youth participate in FWBRs at rates similar to estimates of urban youth (Letcher & Carmona, 2014). Thus, cultural factors, such as gender role expectations and conservative beliefs, may theoretically influence engagement in FWBRs among rural youth. But, the literature exploring the motivations for FWBRs among this marginalized population is unclear because of the limited number of studies.

### Motivation for FWBRs

From the limited literature on youth's motivation for participating in any type of casual sexual relationship, youth report sexual pleasure (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Lehmillier et al., 2010; Lyons, Manning, Longmore, & Giordano, 2014), peer influence (Lyons et al., 2014; Snapp, Lento, et al., 2014), being under the influence of substances (Fielder & Carey, 2009; Owen & Fincham, 2010), and seeking a long-term relationship (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Owen & Fincham, 2010) as common motivators. Overall, sexual pleasure is the most cited reason for engaging in any casual sexual relationship, including FWBRs or hookups (Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2014). Although these studies explored motivations, none separated participants based on urban or rural residency limiting the understanding of differences in motivation based on community type. More research is needed to identify whether rural youth seek FWBRs for different reasons than their urban peers, as the research on rural youth is limited. It should also be noted that the varying operational definitions of casual relationships in previous studies may have influenced the results in those studies.

For example, some researchers have used "casual sexual relationships" or "hookups" as a general term for any sexual activity with an uncommitted partner (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013), while others have provided participants with exclusive definitions for specific subtypes of casual sexual relationships such as, one-night stands and FWBRs (McGinty et al., 2007; Wentland & Reissing, 2014). Primary distinctions between sub-types include the length of time the part-

ners have known each other prior to the sexual interaction and whether or not the sexual interaction occurred more than once. A hookup or one-night stand more often indicates a one-time sexual interaction with an acquaintance (Owen & Fincham, 2010), whereas FWBR suggests multiple sexual contacts with a known partner over time (Lehmiller, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2012; McGinty et al., 2007). Distinguishing between types of casual sexual relationships can have important implications as the motivations for engaging in a FWBR may differ in comparison to seeking a one-night stand. For example, it is possible that youth may be more likely to initiate a FWBR, rather than a hookup, in order to transition into a long-term relationship with that friend considering the likelihood of moderately high intimacy levels in the already existing friendship (Bisson & Levine, 2007). Thus, more research is needed to investigate potential differences in motivations based on type of casual sexual relationship.

### Satisfaction in FWBRs

A majority of the research on FWBRs among youth is correlational (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013), which may contribute to the disparity in findings related to satisfaction with the experience. For example, one study found female college students were more likely to report feelings of guilt following a casual sexual experience in comparison to males (Campbell, 2008). Grello and colleagues (2006) noted that those with the most regret following a casual sexual experience also reported more depressive symptoms than those reporting no regret. Yet, others have reported relatively high ratings of satisfaction among young adults in their FWBRs (VanderDrift et al., 2010). A recent study comparing satisfaction levels between committed partners to those in FWBRs found higher levels of satisfaction among the committed partners; however, satisfaction was still high among the FWBR group (4.82 on a 7-point scale) (Lehmiller et al., 2012). Similarly, the majority (85%) of youth in one study described their FWBRs as “mostly positive” or better (Weaver et al., 2011). Therefore, evidence suggests that while some individuals may experience feelings of regret about sexual activities in uncommitted relationships, that experience is not universal.

Context likely also plays an important role in determining one’s satisfaction with the FWBR experience. For example, the perspectives of close peer groups may have an impact on satisfaction with FWBRs for both adolescents and young adults. In one study, college students who perceived peer disapproval of their FWBR reported more negative experiences in their relationship than those who perceived peer approval (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005). Similarly, DeLuca and colleagues (2015) compared the satisfaction in casual sexual relationships between college students and non-college students. College students whose peers approved of their sexual activity reported higher levels of satisfaction than non-

college students whose peers approved.

Finally, a consistent finding in research with youth of varying ages is that the ability to meet sexual needs without the time and drama associated with establishing a long-term relationship is a satisfying aspect of FWBRs (Lyons et al., 2014; L. R. Williams & Adams, 2013). Fulfillment of sexual desires is the most consistent motivator for casual sexual activity and has been associated with youths’ ratings of satisfaction in casual relationships (Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2014). Still, more research is needed to understand the circumstances in which FWBRs are considered satisfying, and if the same associations are found among rural youth.

### Gender Differences

Research is mixed on gender differences among youth in the prevalence of FWBRs. Gender differences serve as another contextual consideration; however, it should be noted that the literature is limited as much of the research focuses on cis-gender individuals in heterosexual relationships (Olmstead, 2020). While some studies report that males are more likely to participate in FWBRs than females (Eisenberg, Ackard, Resnick, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2009; Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Grello et al., 2006; Owen & Fincham, 2010), others have noted no differences (Bisson & Levine, 2007; McGinty et al., 2007; Letcher & Carmona, 2014). However, recent studies suggest that gender differences may be more nuanced. For example, males appear more motivated to participate in casual sexual relationships due to pressure from friends or peers than females (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Snapp, Lento, et al., 2014). Although a significant number of individuals report positive casual sexual experiences (Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2014; Weaver et al., 2011), females tend to report more regret in comparison to males (Campbell, 2008; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Owen & Fincham, 2010), as well as lower overall satisfaction with the FWB encounter (Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2014). Additionally, males report higher numbers of casual sexual partners (Eisenberg et al., 2009; Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006; Lyons et al., 2014), and more concurrent partners than females (McGinty et al., 2007; Lehmiller et al., 2010).

Both males and females have highly endorsed engaging in FWBRs and other casual sexual relationships for sexual pleasure (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Yet, males have emphasized the sexual nature of the encounter more than females (Lehmiller et al., 2010), and evidence suggests females are more likely to engage in casual relationships to enhance an emotional connection or begin a long-term relationship (McGinty et al., 2007; Lehmiller et al., 2010; Owen & Fincham, 2010). Researchers have noted the consistent double standard that exists between males and females related to sexual behavior such that society may view engagement in casual sexual relationships as more acceptable for males than females (Conley, Ziegler, & Moors, 2012; Crawford & Popp,

2003; Lyons, Giordano, Manning, & Longmore, 2010). Additionally, gender differences may be especially pronounced among rural youth as the endorsement of traditional gender roles is more common in rural communities (Pew Research Center, 2018). Continued investigation of gender differences within FWBRs is essential to understanding potential changing norms and contextual factors that may influence the sexual experiences of youth.

### Current Study

The purpose of the current study was to investigate the motivations, expectations, ideal outcomes, and satisfaction in FWBRs among a sample of youth from rural areas. Much of the current literature addresses prevalence of FWBRs among college students and has provided important insights into this distinct type of casual sexual relationship. However, less is known about the major motivations for engaging in FWBRs, especially among youth from less populated areas, as well as those outside the college campus (Claxton & van Dulmen, 2013; Lehmillier et al., 2010). Thus, participants for the current study include youth from small communities in the Midwest whose motivations, expectations, ideal outcomes, and satisfaction in FWBRs may be unique in comparison to those in previous studies.

To investigate the experiences of rural youth in FWBRs, participants were asked to complete a series of self-report questionnaires describing their casual sexual experiences. Based on previous research (Lyons et al., 2014; VanderDrift et al., 2010), researchers expected that the most common motivators for engaging in FWBRs would be to obtain sexual pleasure and to initiate a long-term, romantic relationship. Next, both religious attendance and conservative sexual views have been linked with less FWBRs among youth (McGinty et al., 2007), and both are more common in rural environments (Lichter & Brown, 2011). However, as societal views of premarital sexual activity have become more accepting (Pampel, 2016), researchers expected that FWBRs will still occur among youth from rural communities. Finally, youth report that engaging in sexual activity without the commitment of a long-term relationship is a major benefit of a FWBR (Lyons et al., 2014); therefore, researchers expected that motivation due to sexual pleasure would be related to satisfaction in the FWBR.

Researchers also predicted that youth's expectations for how the FWBR would end, and how youth would want the FWBR to ideally end, would influence ratings of satisfaction. First, because the inherent nature of FWBRs is repeated sexual contact without commitment, researchers predicted that those individuals who ideally wanted, and expected, the FWBR to end in continued sexual contact would report high levels of satisfaction with the relationship. Second, those individuals who ideally wanted and expected their FWBR to end in a traditional, long-term relationship would report

low levels of satisfaction as previous research suggests only a small portion of FWBRs transition into a more serious relationship (Bisson & Levine, 2007).

Finally, the following gender differences were expected as rural areas tend to conform to traditional gender roles (Pew Research Center, 2018). As found previously (Lehmillier et al., 2010), researchers expected males to endorse sexual pleasure and peer pressure as motivators for FWBRs significantly more than females. Due to the cited double standard regarding females' sexual behaviors (Conley et al., 2012; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Lyons et al., 2010), researchers expected that females would report participating in FWBRs for emotional needs and to initiate a long-term relationship more often than males, and researchers expected males to report greater overall satisfaction in their FWBRs than females.

## Methods

### Participants

High school and college students between the ages of 15-23 years were recruited to participate (N = 100). The U.S. Census Bureau defines urban communities as having a population of 50,000 or more (United States Census Bureau, 2013). However, to avoid potential spillover effects, researchers reduced the eligibility criteria in this study to a population of 30,000 or less. All youth met the eligibility criterion of residing in a hometown with a population of 30,000 or less. See Table 1 for demographic characteristics of the sample.

Table 1  
Sample Demographics (n = 47)

Variable	%	M (SD)	Range
Age in Years		19.6 (1.7)	16-23
Gender			
Female	61.7		
Male	38.3		
Ethnicity			
White	89.4		
Native American	6.4		
Other	4.2		
Marital Status of Primary Caregiver			
Single, never married	2.1		
Married	80.9		
Divorced	10.6		
Other	6.4		
Hometown Population		6,691 (7,841)	30-25,000
# of FWB Partners		2.5 (2.2)	1-11
Age of 1st FWB		17.5 (1.9)	13-21

Note. FWB = Friend with benefits

## Procedure

Youth were informed of the study through newspaper ads, flyers, classroom presentations, and in-person recruitment during a campus tour of the university. Interested and eligible youth between the ages of 18 to 23 years completed a consent form, while assent and parental permission were obtained from interested and eligible youth between the ages of 15 to 17 years. Youth completed an assessment battery of self-report questionnaires lasting approximately 30 minutes. Compensation included \$15 for high school youth and \$20 for college youth due to additional questionnaires completed by college students. All procedures in this study were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

## Measures

A demographic questionnaire was administered to characterize the sample. The questionnaire captured participant age, gender, ethnicity, academic history, and employment status. Youth had the option of identifying as "male," "female," or "other" with the ability to specify their gender identity if choosing the "other" option. Additionally, the form queried the marital status, employment status, and academic history of primary caregivers.

The operational definition of FWB provided to participants was: A sexual experience with a friend without the expectation of a long-term relationship. Because validated instruments specifically focused on FWBRs do not exist, the Friends with Benefits Questionnaire was developed and modeled after measures used in previous studies (Bisson & Levine, 2007; Fielder & Carey, 2009; Garcia & Reiber, 2008). The Friends with Benefits Questionnaire consisted of 13 descriptive items that measured the frequency, types of sexual contact, motivations, expectations, ideal outcomes, and satisfaction in FWBRs. For example, participants indicated the types of sexual contact they engaged in, including kissing/making out, genital touching, oral sex, vaginal intercourse, and anal intercourse (Bisson & Levine, 2007). Motivation for engaging in FWBRs included response items on physical/sexual needs, emotional needs, peer pressure, intention for a long-term relationship, and unintentional participation (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Participants responded yes or no to indicate whether the item served as a motivator in their relationship. Additionally, respondents were asked how they expected their FWBRs to end, as well as how they would ideally want the relationship to end (Garcia & Reiber, 2008). Options for both circumstances (expectation and ideal) included friendship, a long-term relationship, further FWB activity, or no more contact. Finally, a 5-point Likert scale ranging from highly satisfying to highly dissatisfying was used to rate participants' overall satisfaction in FWB experiences. A copy of the full questionnaire is available upon request.

## Results

### Participant Characteristics

For analysis, only youth reporting a FWBR were included in the final sample ( $n = 47$ ). Participants identified as either female (61.7%) or male (38.3%); no other gender identities were indicated. A majority identified as White (89.4%). On average, youth were 19.6 years old ( $SD = 1.7$ ) and reported a population of 6,691 ( $SD = 7,841$ ) in their hometown. Hometown populations ranged from 30 to 25,000. Youth reported a history of one to eleven different FWB partners, and ranged in age from 13 to 21 years old during their first FWB encounter.

### Motivation and Satisfaction in FWBRs

Slightly less than half (48.9%) of the youth described their FWBRs as satisfying or highly satisfying (i.e., rating of a 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale). Endorsement of satisfying experiences was greater than endorsement of unsatisfying or highly unsatisfying experiences (21.2%). As predicted, the fulfillment of physical and sexual needs was the most common motivation for engaging in FWBRs, as reported by 85.7% of youth (see Table 2). Contrary to predictions, only one fifth (20.5%) of youth reported engaging in FWBRs to establish a long-term relationship. Interestingly, peer pressure was the least likely motivator (10.5%). Multiple regression analyses were conducted to investigate the relationship between motivations, expectations, and ideal outcomes related to participating in FWBRs and satisfaction with FWB activity. A Bonferroni correction was applied to significance levels due to the number of models (3) analyzed with  $p$ -values of .01 considered statistically significant ( $.05/3 = .01$ ). In the first model, motivation responses of yes/no (independent variables) were dummy coded with no serving as the reference group. As predicted, youth motivated by physical/sexual needs ( $b = 1.45$ ,  $SE = .49$ ,  $p < .01$ ) reported higher levels of satisfaction in their FWBR compared to youth who participated in FWBRs for other reasons. No association was found between emotional needs, peer pressure, desire for developing a committed relationship, or unintentional FWB activity and satisfaction.

While not statistically significant, trends toward significance were found in the data. Trends are reported due to the small sample size and reduced statistical power. Although trend data should be interpreted with caution, they may provide support for continued study with higher powered samples. A trend toward significance was found for youth who engaged in FWBRs because others were engaging in these relationships. Youth reported lower levels of satisfaction when motivated by what others were doing ( $b = -1.05$ ,  $SE = .50$ ,  $p = .04$ ). The model fit trended toward significance [ $F(6, 31) = 2.35$ ,  $p = .05$ ], and the total variance explained by the model was 31%.

Table 2  
 Motivation, Expectations, Ideal Outcomes, and Satisfaction in FWBRs among Sample

Variable	n (%)	n (%) Males	n (%) Females
<b>Motivation for FWBRs<sup>a</sup></b>			
Physical/Sexual needs	36 (85.7)	15 (93.8)	21 (80.8)
Emotional needs	20 (46.5)	4 (23.5)	16 (61.5)
Others are doing it	6 (15.8)	3 (18.8)	3 (13.6)
Peer pressure	4 (10.5)	2 (12.5)	2 (9.1)
Committed relationship	8 (20.5)	2 (12.5)	6 (26.1)
Unintentional	8 (20.0)	2 (12.5)	6 (25.0)
<b>Expect FWBRs to End</b>			
Friendship	28 (63.6)	12 (66.7)	16 (61.5)
Committed relationship	8 (20.0)	1 (5.9)	7 (30.4)
More FWB activity	6 (15.4)	3 (17.6)	3 (13.6)
No more contact	9 (22.0)	4 (23.5)	5 (20.8)
<b>Ideal Outcome in FWBRs</b>			
Friendship	32 (72.7)	16 (88.9)	16 (61.5)
Committed relationship	15 (36.6)	3 (17.6)	12 (50.0)
More FWB activity	2 (5.0)	0	2 (8.7)
No more contact	1 (2.6)	0	1 (4.5)
<b>Satisfaction in FWBRs</b>			
Highly satisfied	7 (14.9)	2 (11.1)	5 (17.2)
Satisfied	16 (34.0)	6 (33.3)	10 (34.5)
Neutral	14 (29.8)	6 (33.3)	8 (27.6)
Unsatisfied	9 (19.1)	4 (22.2)	5 (17.2)
Highly Unsatisfied	1 (2.1)	0 (0.0)	1 (3.4)

Note. <sup>a</sup>Participants were instructed to "check all that apply"

### Expectations and Satisfaction in FWBRs

The majority (63.6%) of youth expected their FWBRs to end in friendship. Youth were least likely to expect their FWBRs to end in more sexual activity (15.4%; see Table 2). The relationship between youth's expectations for how the FWBR would end and their level of satisfaction with the relationship was again explored using multiple regression analysis with independent variables dummy coded, and no used as the reference group. A trend toward significance was found for youth who expected their FWBRs to end in no more contact with youth reporting lower levels of satisfaction in the relationship ( $b = -1.26$ ,  $SE = .54$ ,  $p = .02$ ) than those expecting to maintain some type of contact. The model fit was significant [ $F(4, 34) = 5.27$ ,  $p < .01$ ], and the total variance explained by the model was 38%. Contrary to predictions, satisfaction was not related to any other expectations including friendship, forming committed relationships, or more sexual activity.

### Ideal Outcomes and Satisfaction in FWBRs

Similar to expectations in FWBRs, the majority (72.7%) of youth wanted their FWBRs to ideally end in friendship while 36.6% of youth hoped their FWBRs would ideally transition into a committed relationship (see Table 2). Few

youth wanted their FWBR to end in more FWB activity (5.0%), and having the FWBR end in no more contact was the least desirable outcome among youth (2.6%). The same procedure was applied for the multiple regression analysis to investigate the relationship between youth's ideal FWBR outcome and satisfaction. Youth who, ideally, wanted their FWBRs to end in no more contact also reported significantly lower levels of satisfaction in the FWBR experience ( $b = -3.24$ ,  $SE = 1.24$ ,  $p = .01$ ) compared to those who did not want to cease contact. The model fit approached significance [ $F(4, 34) = 3.02$ ,  $p = .03$ ], and the total variance explained by the model was 26%. Contrary to expectations, satisfaction in FWBRs was not related to ideally wanting the relationship to end in friendship, a committed relationship, or more FWB activity.

### Gender Differences

As expected, females were more motivated to engage in FWBRs to fulfill emotional needs than males ( $\chi^2 = 5.97$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Also confirming hypotheses, females were more likely to expect ( $\chi^2 = 3.68$ ,  $p = .05$ ) and want ( $\chi^2 = 4.49$ ,  $p < .05$ ) their FWBRs to end in committed relationships compared to males. Additionally, females were less likely to want their FWBRs to end in just friendship ( $\chi^2 = 4.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Con-



trary to expectations, no difference in overall satisfaction in FWBRs was found between males ( $M = 3.3$ ;  $SD = 1.0$ ) and females ( $M = 3.4$ ;  $SD = 1.1$ ;  $t = -.4$ ;  $p > .05$ ).

### Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to explore the motivations and expectations for engaging in FWBRs among a sample of rural youth. Ideal outcomes and satisfaction associated with these casual sexual relationships were also explored. Understanding youth's anticipated experiences and reasons for engaging in FWBRs may assist those who work with young populations in providing effective services to ensure the sexual health and safety of youth. Context, such as the social norms unique to rural communities, perceptions of peers, and gender role expectations are additional important considerations when working with youth. Sexual interaction with partners becomes more common as youth age, but satisfaction with the sexual experiences may be reduced if youth do not have realistic expectations for the relationship.

Varying motivations for participating in casual sexual relationships have been cited previously (Garcia & Reiber, 2008; Lehmillier et al., 2010), with the most common being the fulfillment of physical/sexual needs (Bisson & Levine, 2007). As hypothesized, youth in the current sample reported similar motivations. Meeting physical needs was the most often cited reason for FWBRs, followed by fulfilling emotional needs, and transitioning into a long-term romantic relationship. As FWBRs become more accepted in society, it is possible that youth may view these relationships as legitimate alternatives to committed relationships in meeting their sexual needs even in more conservative environments such as rural communities. Interestingly, youth were not highly influenced by peers to participate in FWBRs; peer pressure was the least commonly endorsed motivation.

It is possible that the youth's ability to experiment sexually with a partner and satisfy sexual urges may be influenced more by personal needs rather than peer expectation. The limited emphasis on peer pressure may also be due to the nature of rural communities. Cliques are less common in smaller schools (McFarland, Moody, Diehl, Smith, & Thomas, 2014), and because clique membership has been associated with peer influence (Adler & Adler, 1995; Henrich, Kuperminc, Sack, Blatt, & Leadbeater, 2000), it is possible that youth in the current sample experienced less pressure to conform overall. More research is needed to explore potential differences in the experiences with FWBRs among rural youth due to peer influence.

Researchers expected youth's motivation for participating in FWBRs to be related to their satisfaction in the relationship such that those motivated by physical/sexual needs would report higher overall satisfaction with the relationship. This hypothesis was confirmed. And, slightly less than half of youth reported that their experiences in FWBRs were ei-

ther satisfying or highly satisfying which may suggest that the experience was fulfilling. While some studies have found feelings of guilt and shame associated with casual sexual relationships, especially among women (Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000), the youth from this sample indicated more overtly satisfying (48.9%) than overtly unsatisfying (21.2%) feelings for both males and females similar to findings in more recent studies (Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2014; Weaver et al., 2011). It is possible that the stigma associated with casual sex is continuing to decrease, even in more conservative rural areas, leading youth to focus more on the personal satisfaction of needs rather than the opinions of others. Meeting personal needs may also be more satisfying as youth who reported participating in FWBRs because others were doing it showed a trend toward lower satisfaction in their experiences.

Researchers also predicted that youth expectations and ideal outcomes in FWBRs would relate to satisfaction. Hypotheses were not confirmed; however, an interesting relationship with the role of friendship emerged. Youth most commonly expected, and ideally wanted, their FWBR to end in friendship suggesting that maintaining the friendship component of the relationship was important. Previous researchers have suggested variation in FWBRs such that experiences can be categorized in to one of seven types, including a true friends category (Mongeau, Knight, Williams, Eden, & Shaw, 2013). In the true friends type, couples have an established friendship that includes love, intimacy, and trust, and view their friend as a safe sexual partner. There is an expectation that the friends will interact in other contexts outside of the FWBR (Mongeau et al., 2013). Given the expectation of a future friendship found among the majority of youth in the current sample, possibly youth in rural communities are more likely to fit the true friends typology. Another explanation could be that this level of intimacy and trust may be influenced by the youth's rural context. In smaller communities, the number of available romantic partners is limited and students often grow up with the same small group of peers from grade school through high school. Therefore, establishing a FWBR with a partner one does not know well may be unlikely given the lack of alternative partners.

Also, youth's satisfaction with FWBRs was preliminarily linked to their expectations. Youth who expected, and ideally wanted, their relationships to end in no more contact reported less satisfaction than youth with other expectations and desires; although, levels did not reach statistical significance. Thus, youth may not only desire future contact with their FWB partners but may also report less enjoyment if they anticipated no more interaction. However, additional research with higher powered samples is needed to support this preliminary finding. Previous work has suggested that the 'friends' component of FWBRs may be the most important aspect of the relationship as youth in prior studies have reported greater interest in the friendship versus the physical

aspect (Lehmiller et al., 2010).

While FWBRs have become more common among youth, gender differences in the motivations and expected/ideal outcomes were found. The researchers predicted endorsement of traditional gender roles among this sample of rural youth leading to the expectation of males reporting greater satisfaction in FWBRs than females. However, no difference was found between the two genders in the sample; both males and females reported above average satisfaction in their FWBRs. Although gender differences in satisfaction did not emerge, slight differences in motivation were found. Females were more likely to be motivated by emotional needs than males, while males were more motivated by sexual needs which is more consistent with traditional gender roles. Females were also more likely to desire their FWBR to transition into a long-term relationship compared to males. Possibly, the relationship was still viewed as satisfying because the needs of both partners were met due to the true friends-nature of their relationships. That is, physical needs were fulfilled through the sexual interaction, and emotional needs were fulfilled through the previously established friendship. More research is needed to confirm a causal relationship between motivation and satisfaction, however.

Lastly, an additional concern related to FWBRs is the potential long-term effect of participating in sexual relationships without commitment. For example, there is a strong correlation between the quality of romantic relationships experienced during youth and the later quality of adult romantic relationships (Karney, Beckett, Collins, & Shaw, 2007; Meier & Allen, 2009). Similarly, experiencing dating violence with an adolescent partner has been related to experiencing victimization in later adult relationships (Halpern, Oslak, Young, Martin, & Kupper, 2001). Therefore, experiences in early relationships likely impact the success of future relationships. While FWBRs may provide youth with an opportunity to experiment sexually, it is unclear whether their ability to develop intimacy and an understanding of commitment will be hindered in later adult relationships. However, youth's expectations for their FWBR to end in friendship may indicate that some level of intimacy and commitment is being established which may transfer to their adult relationships.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

The current study contributes to the literature on casual sexual relationships in multiple ways. First, this study sample included high school students in addition to college students. Previous studies on FWBRs have targeted college-aged students as casual sexual relationships appear to be especially common at this life stage; however, a growing body of work suggests that FWBRs are increasingly common among older and younger demographics (Lehmiller et al., 2010; Letcher & Carmona, 2014; L. R. Williams &

Adams, 2013). Also, the current study utilized a sample of youth from rural, Midwestern communities, which is an under-studied population who may have unique motivations and expectations when participating in FWBRs. Finally, research on the prevalence of FWBRs is more abundant than research focused on the motivations for these relationships. Of those studies examining motivations, many use qualitative methods (Hughes et al., 2005; Lyons et al., 2014; Weaver et al., 2011; L. R. Williams & Adams, 2013), which provide great depth in the exploration of individual experiences, but are less generalizable.

However, the results of the current study must be interpreted with caution given certain limitations. Although these preliminary findings fill a gap in the limited literature on FWBRs among rural youth, a small sample size prevented more sophisticated statistical analyses and limited statistical power to find differences. Statistical trends were reported to provide guidance for future studies, yet they must be viewed in context. Our sample was homogenous and may not be generalizable to other populations such as People of Color, as well as youth who identify as LGBTQ+, because all participants identified as either male or female, and sexual orientation was not queried. More research is needed to understand FWBRs from a more diverse perspective (Olmstead, 2020; Watson, Snapp, & Wang, 2017). Participants were assessed at one time point and asked to recall their previous FWBR experiences. Therefore, it cannot be determined whether one's motivation or expectations for the relationship directly predicts one's satisfaction with the experience. Additionally, participants did not disclose how their FWBRs actually ended, which may have influenced their overall satisfaction with the relationship. It is possible that the congruence between one's expectation for relationship termination and actual termination is a more salient predictor of relationship satisfaction. Finally, participants responded to surveys with predetermined motivations and expectations provided. Perhaps the most relevant variables were not included in the questionnaires. In future studies, allowing participants to report their own reasons for engaging in FWBRs, in addition to those provided, is recommended.

### **Implications for Youth-Serving Counselors in Rural Communities**

Casual sexual relationships, such as FWBRs, among youth have been of interest to researchers, policy-makers, educators, counseling professionals, and parents, with some expressing high levels of fear related to any type of youth sexual interaction (Schalet, 2004). A growing body of research, including the current study, suggests youth view these relationships as satisfying (Weaver et al., 2011), and it follows that if youth continue to report satisfaction with FWBRs, this relationship type may increase in popularity. Unfortunately, sexuality coursework is not a universal requirement among

counselors in training, and limited research has explored potential sexual biases among clinicians (Harris & Hays, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative that professional counselors who work with youth reflect on their attitudes and beliefs related to FWBRs. If professional counselors voice negative opinions or concerns related to this form of romantic relationship, they may alienate the youth that they work with and inadvertently impose their personal values.

A more effective strategy for ensuring the health and safety of youth may be to provide strategies for remaining safe in the context of casual sexual relationships. One potential avenue for providing information on safe relationship and sexual practices is through school-based sexual education programs. School counselors working in rural communities may consider advocating for comprehensive sexual education programming that features evidence-informed sexual decision making. Integrating information on safe sex practices regardless of relationship type (e.g., monogamous, FWB, hookup, etc.) may decrease the use of substances and increase prophylactic/contraceptive use among youth as they may view the information as more directly relevant to their current experiences (Starkman & Rajani, 2002).

However, casual sexual relationships are likely not part of the sexual education programming in rural schools, which are more likely to implement abstinence-based or abstinence-only curriculums (Kohler, Manhart, & Lafferty, 2008). In fact, rural youth are less likely to receive comprehensive sexual education, and more likely to receive no sexual education at all in comparison to urban youth (Kohler et al., 2008). Thus, professional counselors in rural areas who work with youth outside of the school system should be prepared to discuss sexual risk-taking behavior and effective sexual decision-making with youth and families. Additionally, counselors may collaborate with local youth organizations to offer community-based sexual education programming. If rural youth are not provided quality sexual education, they may be less likely to receive information on how to safely participate in casual sexual relationships and engage in higher risk sexual behavior (Kohler et al., 2008).

Within school-based or outside sexual education programming, it would be beneficial for professional counselors to provide youth with skills related to healthy relationship building including effective communication, boundary setting, and assertiveness. These skills align with social and emotional skills such as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2021), which have been associated with improved conflict resolution in relationships (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Researchers have also noted that adolescents are more likely to practice safe sex after participating in preparatory behaviors such as practicing how to communicate about condom use (van Empelen & Kok, 2006). Because FWBRs

have been associated with sexual risk behaviors such as less condom use, and earlier sexual debut (Letcher & Carmona, 2014), the development of social and emotional skills may promote more responsible sexual decision-making among youth when engaging in FWBRs.

## Conclusion

Despite the growing social acceptability of casual sexual relationships, research is limited on the nuances experienced within relationship types, especially for youth living in rural communities. The current study supported previous findings related to the influence of sexual and emotional needs on the decision to engage in FWBRs, as well as the gender differences in motivations and expectations for FWBRs. Youth emphasized a desire for continued contact with their FWB partner after the relationship ended, and a large portion of the youth were satisfied with their experience. Understanding the context in which rural youth engage in FWBRs is crucial for counselors as they develop and deliver effective services, which ultimately maintain the health and safety of this marginalized population.

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