



Review

Sexual double standard in friends with benefits relationships: A literature review

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this literature review is to address the complexities of friends with benefits relationships and explore underlying theories regarding the impact of sexual double standards in these relationships. The experience of women's sexuality within casual relationships is heavily influenced by gender norms and the persistence of sexual double standards. These standards subject women to negative evaluations for engaging in behaviors deemed acceptable for men. While some literature suggests that friends with benefits relationships can empower women, others highlight how sexual double standards may limit women's participation and enjoyment in these relationships. By adopting a feminist theory perspective, this literature review aims to critically assess sexual double standards in friends with benefits relationships, shedding light on both empowering and constraining aspects of these relationships. Additionally, by providing historical context and empirical data, the review allows for future research in this field to address literature gaps, attempt to deconstruct gender expectations in this non-traditional relationship, and provide theoretical support for gender equality movements.

Introduction

Friends with benefits relationships (FWBR) are a type of casual relationship, usually defined by friends who are sexually involved numerous times while not having a romantic commitment to each other (Hughes et al., 2005; Williams & Adams, 2013). FWBR are different from traditional relational components, like standard friendships or romantic entanglements (Shimek & White, 2015). What distinguishes FWBR from other types of relationships is a) their recurrence, being more frequent than other casual relationships but less frequent than a serious relationship, and b) the possibility of no sexual exclusivity (Lehmiller et al., 2014; van Raalte et al., 2022; Williams & Adams, 2013). Although some studies claim that most people in FWBR tell their closest friends that they are in that relationship, it is also an entanglement usually characterized by its private nature (Hughes et al., 2005; van Raalte et al., 2022; Williams & Adams, 2013). Another specific characteristic reported is the “invisible contract”. This “contract” addresses the expectations and “rules” of the relationship, such as its privacy, being honest with each other, and (non) exclusivity (Erlandsson et al., 2013; van Raalte et al., 2022). The rule regarding honesty is viewed as fundamental in FWBR, especially when it is necessary to communicate the development of

romantic feelings with the partner, or with someone outside of the FWBR (van Raalte et al., 2022). However, having multiple partners outside of the FWBR is not always the case, and while some partners feel comfortable with that arrangement, others prioritize monogamy as an important rule to follow in FWBR (van Raalte et al., 2022). Therefore, we can acknowledge that while some rules may be widespread, they ultimately rely on the desires and needs of the partners involved.

Motives to start FWBR

This type of relationship is getting more popular, especially among young adults, and most often casual sex occurs between friends rather than with strangers (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Grello et al., 2006). Additionally, overall, most people reported good experiences in FWBR and would participate in one again (Erlandsson et al., 2013). But why do people engage in these relationships? Some possible reasons are due to its accessibility, safety, being easier to understand their partner's feelings, trust, being able to still engage in friendly activities with their FWB partner, and not having to be exclusive (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Erlandsson et al., 2013; Letcher et al., 2022). Additionally, studies conducted in Canada and the USA appeared to not show any significant

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gender differences in the reasons, expectations, and levels of sexual satisfaction in a FWBR, the main function of this type of relationship being to satisfy sexual needs and meet those needs without a romantic commitment (Gusarova et al., 2012; Lehmillier et al., 2011; Wentland & Reissing, 2014; Williams & Adams, 2013; Williams & Jovanovic, 2015).

Satisfaction in FWBR

Partners in a romantic relationship seem to have greater satisfaction, both in sexual and other aspects, compared to people in FWBR (Lehmillier et al., 2014). This may occur because romantic relationships are more likely to have better sexual communication, including talking about desires and sexual boundaries, and, consequently, sexual communication is usually linked to sexual satisfaction (Lehmillier et al., 2014). Additionally, sexual satisfaction in FWBR is influenced by how the partners interpret their experience in the relationship, and Williams and Jovanovic's (2015) study concluded that when they are motivated by simplicity (i.e., just wanting sexual activity), they experience greater sexual satisfaction. Regarding gender differences in the quality perceived in this type of relationship, there appears to be no consensus. On the one hand, studies conducted in the USA and Canada reported that women are more likely than men to have negative experiences, to feel uncertain, and to avoid FWBR, while others report that both men and women have mostly positive experiences in this type of relationship (Gusarova et al., 2012; Letcher et al., 2022; Owen & Fincham, 2011; Weaver et al., 2011; Williams & Jovanovic, 2015). In addition, a study conducted in Spain by García et al. (2014) concluded that women show more positive emotional reactions than men in these relationships, which may be a result of modern transformations in gender norms. However, the literature seems to focus more on the experiences of heterosexual cisgendered persons rather than LGBTIA+, non-binaries and non-straight.

Sexual double standards

A double standard exists when certain principles or expectations are applied differently to different groups, individuals, or situations, and can be present in different contexts such as relationships, work, and social life. The sexual double standard refers to the idea that women's sexual behavior is judged more negatively than men's (Marks & Fraley, 2007; Weaver et al., 2011). Sexual double standards are present not only in the judgment of women's sexual behavior, but also in how women think about sexuality, their sexual agency, and any expression of sexual desire. It's a multidimensional social construct, in which its nuances are manifested culturally, through direct and indirect communication of social norms. For example, in many languages, there are a lot more words to characterize sexually active women, most of them derogatory, as opposed to sexually active men (Adams & Ware, 1989; Ramos et al., 2005; Sutton, 1995).

Research about sexual double standards has shown a change in this construct over the years. While earlier studies found that women who, for example, were sexually active or had casual sex were considered less desirable, more inappropriate, and having less self-respect than men who performed the same behaviors (Fromme & Emihovich, 1998; Oliver & Sedikides, 1992; Sheeran et al., 1996), several factors contributed to the progressive mindsets towards gender equality over the years. Factors such as changes in societies, with women gaining increased visibility in the workforce, more permissive sexual norms, improved access to health resources, and shifts in courtship patterns characterized by greater autonomy and less family supervision (Reiss, 1967). Moreover, with the emergence of policies that support women's autonomy in various contexts, such as contraceptive methods and the right to abortion, as well as the efforts of social movements, there is a noticeable shift (Crawford & Popp, 2003). This shift not only fosters greater autonomy but also begins to foster societal acceptance of the possibility for women to explore their sexuality in a more free, visible, and "fearless" manner (Vance, 1984).

Nowadays, some aspects of sexuality are deemed as more acceptable, both for men and women (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Endendijk et al., 2020). However these changes have not completely eradicated sexual double standards, given how men and women are still viewed differently regarding sexuality (Bordini & Sperb, 2013; Crawford & Popp, 2003; Endendijk et al., 2020). Thus, more recent studies have shown that sexual double standards are, in fact, still present, even though the gender differences are not as notorious and the influential factors may have changed (Crema & De Tilio, 2021; González-Marugán et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2020). Present-day double standard judgments are directed towards women who have multiple sexual partners, engage in threesomes, are unfaithful to their spouse, actively express their sexuality, and are in nontraditional relationships (Crema & De Tilio, 2021; Endendijk et al., 2020; Jonason & Marks, 2009; Marks & Fraley, 2007; Smith, 2010). Women who engage in those behaviors are usually seen as less dominant, less successful, and with higher social and emotional rejection in comparison to men who engage in the same behaviors (Marks & Fraley, 2007; Milnes, 2010; Smith et al., 2008). This disparity highlights how societal norms and expectations shape perceptions of sexual behavior differently for men and women.

The sexual script theory, by Simon and Gagnon (1986), alludes to sexual behaviors being formed through societal context and expectations, and are greatly influenced by factors such as culture and gender. The traditional sexual script assigns men the role of initiators and women that of sexual gatekeepers, perpetuating the notion that sexual encounters are imposed on women, viewing them as passive participants without desires (Crawford & Popp, 2003). This dynamic has significant implications, as it not only restricts women's agency but also contributes to the double standard that justifies the sexual assault of women with more sexual partners and more initiative in dating or engaging in physical contact (Muehlenhard, 1988; Muehlenhard & MacNaughton, 1988). Even so, it is possible for the sexual scripts to be evolving beyond traditional concepts of gender and sexuality. That is especially true in relationships that challenge these concepts, such as the case with FWBR, although there are still traces of traditional scripts that are difficult to dispel, as we have noted (Milhausen & Herold, 2002; Weaver et al., 2011). This complex interaction between individual motivations and societal restrictions highlights the need for a better understanding of women's experiences with casual sex, within the broader context of gender expectations and sexual freedom. Thus, feminist theory proves to be fundamental for the exploration of these concepts.

A feminist theory perspective into FWBR dynamics

Female sexuality has been the subject of scrutiny, both scientific and moral, for decades, and has consequently become a central concern in feminist advocacy (Mottier, 2008). In the 1960s, Radical feminists focused primarily on the consequent oppression of women of relations with men, condemning any kind of intimate and sexual relations with them, and interpreting them as ways of perpetuating traditional gender norms (Nogueira, 2017). In the 1980s, a division of ideologies arose among feminists who framed sexuality primarily as a place of danger and oppression for women and those who saw sexuality in a more ambivalent way, also considering it a place of pleasure and liberation (Cossman et al., 2003). This dichotomy of feminist perspectives adds to the complexity of the issue of women's sexuality, transforming the struggle for their sexual rights not only a fight against violence, but also a fight for sexual pleasure.

The fights for women's sexual agency led to the possibility of them exploring their sexuality not only outside of the marriage, but also outside of a "traditional courtship". As previously stated, since the 90s, the context of amorous/sexual encounters has changed dramatically, since casual sex has become a more frequent option among young people and has been, in recent years, a research topic (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Owen & Fincham, 2011; Owen & Fincham, 2012).

When discussing gender norms in casual relationships, research has

shown a general belief that men have greater sexual freedom and are therefore able to engage in casual sex and have more sexual partners in comparison to women, without suffering as many social consequences as them, which is a form of sexual double standard (Grello et al., 2006; Milhausen & Herold, 2002). But does that mean that women are not as interested in casual sex as men are? Research suggests that women have various motivations for engaging in such encounters. Weaver and Herold's (2000) study show that, for women, physical pleasure is often the primary reason for participating in casual sex, similar to men. Additionally, women reported engaging in casual sex to boost their self-esteem, gain experience with new partners, and foster positive feelings about their bodies (Weaver & Herold, 2000). Despite these diverse motivations, societal norms based on the traditional sexual script, including the fear of judgment and the potential consequences such as STIs and unwanted pregnancies, can inhibit women from freely expressing their desires for casual encounters (Kimmel, 2012; Weaver & Herold, 2000).

So, can friends with benefits be an empowering experience for women or are they sabotaged by the sexual double standards present in society? In this literature review, we are interested in understanding how research has depicted women's experience in FWBR and the impact that sexual double standards have in these relationships. By exploring the concepts of friends with benefits and sexual double standards from a feminist theory perspective, we provide an important theoretical framework for detailing the gendered aspects of FWBR. Thus, allowing a more nuanced analysis of societal expectations and power dynamics, as well as highlighting the experiences of women involved in these relationships and how they are perceived.

Methods

The aim of this review study was to investigate the scientific literature on sexual double standards in friends with benefits relationships. State-of-the-art are reviews of the literature aim at identifying which aspects of a specific topic have been studied and how the research has been conducted and, for that, a search was made in the databases PsycArticles (APA), PsycINFO (APA), SCOPUS (Elsevier) and SocINDEX with Full Text (EBSCO). Since there was an interest in studies that employed the term sexual double standard, we used the keywords sex*, double, standard*, friend*, with, benefit* in English and Portuguese, which should be in the title, abstract or keywords of the articles. Considering the objective of our study, the selection was made only for original articles fully available online that suggested, in the abstract, that one of their focuses of investigation was the sexual double standard and/or friends with benefits relationships. In total, 23 articles were selected for this critical review. This text intends to provide a view over this complex debate, based on this literature and showing the several topics that have been tackled and discussed, allowing for an understanding of the complexity and entanglements of these debates. These topics will be presented as tropes in this discourse, that is, motifs that are repeated and become central in the scientific debate (Roth, 2008). So this text revisits such tropes in order to highlight them as central, in a re-reading of the inter-relations of the literature on FWBR with the wider debate on gender and sexuality.

Results

This section presents the findings from our critical review of the literature on two interrelated topics: friends with benefits relationships and sexual double standards. A total of 23 articles were selected for our review, with an equal focus on each topic - 11 articles on FWB relationships and 12 on SDS. The majority of these studies were conducted in the United States and involved young adult participants. Most of the articles employed quantitative research methods, providing statistically robust data on the prevalence, attitudes, and implications of FWB relationships and SDS.

This critical review will be organized into key topics identified in the selected articles, such as societal norms, power dynamics, relationships expectations, emotional labor, intersectionality, sexual agency, and stigma and judgment. These topics will be discussed through a feminist lens to critically examine the influence of societal norms on gender and sexual behavior, and to highlight the intersections between personal relationships and broader cultural expectations.

Societal norms

A study conducted by Wesche et al. (2021) showed that women tended to feel psychologically worse than men after a casual sexual relationship. The reasons behind this gender difference were attributed to men's sexual pleasure being more valued than women's in this context, in addition to the sexual double standard (Wesche et al., 2021). Furthermore, compared to women, men appear to have a bigger desire to have casual relationships with different partners in the future, due to the bigger social acceptability of men having multiple partners, as opposed of women (Hawkins et al., 2023). Thus, the consequences of sexual double standards may impact how women experience their casual relationships, given that they are expected different behaviors and desires than those of men.

The perpetuation of double standards is often ingrained in individuals from an early age, with parents, the education system and the media playing a crucial role in shaping these perspectives. It can be present as early as middle school, where young girls are negatively labeled for showing interest in the topic of sexuality while boys are socially rewarded for having (or saying they had) sexual experience (Eder et al., 1995; Orenstein, 1994). In addition, since younger adolescents endorse more traditional SDS norms, due to a bigger pressure to adhere to gender norms, the interventions aimed at addressing this issue should be implemented early to be most effective (Endendijk et al., 2022). Moreover, the family environment can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes and condition individuals with biased and/or outdated ideas, such as that girls sleeping with their boyfriends makes them promiscuous and irresponsible (Martin, 1996). However, media's influence has, over the years, a bigger influence on the sexual development of adolescents, in comparison to their family's influence (Endendijk et al., 2022). Media, such as sexually oriented teen television shows, are associated with the endorsement of sexual double standards in younger audiences, such as perceiving their female peers to be less sexually active than their male peers, and girls being viewed as sexual gatekeepers who should submit to the boy's sexual desires (Dajches et al., 2021; Endendijk et al., 2022).

In addition, societal norms guided by the sexual double standards have proven to have an impact on women's health, self-identity and sexual satisfaction. For example, it is less socially acceptable and even inappropriate that a woman is prepared for a sexual encounter, by having a condom with her (Hynie & Lydon, 1995). Thus, double standards can discourage women from taking sexually responsible actions, lowering the risk of sexually transmitted diseases, as well as unwanted pregnancies. Furthermore, women regularly experience a sense of dissonance, caused by being perceived as sexual objects while also being insulted for expressing their sexual desires, leading to a negative sexual self-identity (Katz & Farrow, 2000). Given that sexism and judgment are obstacles to women's sexual pleasure being regarded as important as men's, the shame women experience due to the existing sexual double standards harms their sexual freedom and its urgent to be addressed (Rudman et al., 2013).

Power dynamics

Power imbalances happen when one individual exerts control or influence over the other, usually in the course of a relationship. This phenomenon can be displayed in multiple ways, such as communication. In the case of FWBR, communication seems to be a fundamental part of

the relationship and since the relationship is based on friendship and trust, the partners involved usually feel more comfortable communicating their feelings with each other as opposed to a casual encounter between two strangers (Bisson & Levine, 2009). Even though women generally experience more constriction in expressing their needs, desires, and boundaries, in comparison to men in casual relationships, friends with benefits appear to be an exception (Brugman et al., 2010; Currier, 2013; Wade, 2017). Some research proposes that, unlike other types of relationships, FWBR could allow women to express their sexual desires more freely, having been reported as a relationship with a higher level of feminine desire and pleasure (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Jovanovic & Williams, 2018). This could be due to the safety and familiarity experienced within the context of friendship (Bay-Cheng et al., 2009; Jovanovic & Williams, 2018). In addition, the sexual double standard may not be as impactful due to the private nature of the FWBR, protecting women from the judgment regarding their sexual behaviors, thus giving them more power and a stronger feeling of control in those relationships. Thus, FWBR may represent a type of relationship where the power dynamics between men and women are close to equal. Moreover, Jovanovic and Williams' (2018) study shows that, in the case of FWBR, there is an overall opinion that men and women have a similar power in their entanglement, arguing that perhaps because FWBR doesn't have such a defined script of expectations, women are more likely to feel comfortable taking the lead and feel more in control. Since feminist views help identify and address these power differentials, they provide a useful theoretical base to explore how gender norms may influence the power dynamics in FWBR and if they could be a way of achieving more equitable power relationships.

Relationship expectations

Regarding expectations in FWBR, although some women are more likely than men to discuss the possibility of the relationship becoming serious, this desire is not generalizable to most women (Grello et al., 2006; Gusarova et al., 2012; Lehmillier et al., 2011; Owen & Fincham, 2011). Overall, emotional complications seem to occur in both men and women with equal prevalence, going against the social expectation that women are more likely than men to develop romantic feelings in a casual relationship (Amaro et al., 2022; Gusarova et al., 2012). Once again, friends with benefits seem to fight against gender stereotypes that modern feminist issues have been trying to deconstruct.

Emotional labor

Feminists have garnered increased awareness of women's emotional labor in the last few years, acknowledging how "women anticipate and manage the needs of others", not only in relationships, but also within the spheres of work and home (Hartley, 2018). Quirk et al. (2014) found that because men are less likely to express insecurity, due to gender norms, they report fewer feelings of deception in FWBR. This leads to women having more emotional labor, as it is expected of them to express their feelings more, to check up on how the relationship is going, to ask for their partner's reinsurance, and overall to be responsible for initiating difficult conversations (Quirk et al., 2014). Thus, there are persisting gender norms present in FWBR that may subtly influence and constrain these relationships.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality refers to the interconnected nature of social categorizations, such as race, class, gender, and other forms of identity, and how they overlap and intersect, leading to unique and complex experiences of discrimination and privilege (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality originated from feminist theory and recognized that social categories are not experienced in isolation but are interconnected and that individuals may experience various forms of

oppression and privilege simultaneously. As previously addressed, sexual double standards are a highly cultured issue, and some research has addressed the influence of ethnicity and social class (Espin, 1997; Fullilove et al., 1990). For example, the stereotypical portrayals of Black women's (hetero)sexuality are shaped by oppression based on both race and gender, and when they resist oppression in one realm, they often find themselves vulnerable to reinforcement of the other (Fasula et al., 2012). On the other hand, Black men navigate the intersections of racial inequality and gendered privilege, adding to the complexity of the dynamics (Fasula et al., 2012).

Thus, by studying sexual double standards in friends with benefits relationships, it is fundamental to use an intersectional perspective in order to understand the contradictions of dominance, privilege and equality in modern relationships (Fasula et al., 2012; Letcher et al., 2022; Olmstead, 2020).

Sexual agency

Over the years, more women have engaged in casual sex and most of their casual sex experiences involve non-coital sexual behavior in a non-committed relationship, rather than one-time sexual intercourse with someone they have just met (Weaver & Herold, 2000). Furthermore, as women may feel more self-affirmation than men during casual relationships, this may contribute to the idea that some casual relationships may be a way to contradict sexual double standards (Vasilenko et al., 2012). Additionally, some studies report that, unlike other types of sexual relationships, women are just as likely to have a FWBR as men (Bisson & Levine, 2009; Furman & Shaffer, 2011). This may be because the second biggest reason for women not having casual sex is being afraid of being physically harmed and being in a non-committed relationship with someone they know, such as being in a FWBR, increases their sense of safety (Jovanovic & Williams, 2018; Weaver et al., 2011; Weaver & Herold, 2000). This sense of safety is not only limited to physical safety: in FWBR, people tend to feel less at risk for STIs, and pregnancy, and consider this type of relationship less emotionally risky in comparison to other types of relationships (Jovanovic & Williams, 2018).

Stigma and judgment

Judging people based on their sexual activity is fairly common and there has been evidence of a double standard, reinforced mostly by men, against casual relationships in comparison to other types of relationships (Gentry, 1998; Sprecher & Hatfield, 1996). As FWBR do not conform to traditional norms, individuals involved may face stigma or judgment from others who adhere strictly to heteronormative values. Heteronormativity refers to the assumption that heterosexuality is the norm and often involves a set of expectations regarding monogamous, long-term, and emotionally committed relationships. Additionally, heteronormativity is also associated with toxic masculinity and certain expectations for men, for example, the social pressure to engage in casual relationships, to have multiple sexual partners, and to never be emotionally attached to their casual partners (Amaro et al., 2022; Jovanovic & Williams, 2018). Even though casual sex has become more prevalent, people in noncommitted sexual relationships are still more negatively judged compared to people in other types of relationships and are considered more immoral, unlikable, insecure, poorly adjusted, and overall less desirable to start a relationship with (Amaro et al., 2022).

Opinions towards casual relationships can be influenced by various factors. Older people, as well as religious individuals, are more likely to be less permissive when compared to younger and non-religious individuals (Allison & Risman, 2013; Le Gall et al., 2002). Although throughout the years the gender difference in attitudes towards casual sex has been decreasing, men tend to be more permissive than women, as well as LGBT+ people tend to be more permissive than heterosexual people (Allison & Risman, 2013; Oliver & Hyde, 1993; Peterson & Hyde,

2011). Additionally, benevolent sexist beliefs about women, such as that women should be protected by men, are related to more negative views towards casual sex (Danube et al., 2014).

This stigma is a highly gendered issue, given that women in casual relationships are judged more negatively than men in casual relationships (Amaro et al., 2022; González-Marugán et al., 2021; Mark & Miller, 1986). Additionally, for men these experiences are expected in some contexts (such as university) and frowned upon if not performed (Jovanovic & Williams, 2018). In the university context, for example, it appears that this heteronormative narrative and unequal sexual expectations persists, even if not personally identified by everyone (Amaro et al., 2022). As for women, society has certain expectations regarding their sexuality in order for them to protect themselves and not damage their reputation (Goffman, 1963; Hillier et al., 1998). Some expectations are that women should hold higher standards in comparison to men, look for committed relationships, limit their number of sexual partners; control their desires, and not openly address their sexual motivations (Jovanovic & Williams, 2018; Kimmel, 2012). Thus, it is possible that women disregard their sexual desires and silence their free sexual expression due to a fear of criticism and social punishment (Amaro et al., 2022; Gómez-Berrocal et al., 2022). As previously mentioned, assumptions are also made about men's sexual behavior and desires. In a study conducted by Milhausen and Herold (1999), women described sexually experienced men as predatory and promiscuous, and sexually experienced women as psychologically impaired (with lower self-esteem, e.g.), as well as promiscuous. Inverse sexual double standard is defined by men with more sexual partners being viewed negatively, such as potentially dangerous and prone to being insistent and manipulative (Milhausen & Herold, 1999; Milhausen & Herold, 2002). Those negative attitudes towards men with more sexual experience may stem from the greater awareness of harassment, sexual violence, and risky behavior, agreeing with radical feminists' views, who presuppose man's sexuality as a threat to women's safety (Mottier, 2008). While inverse sexual double standards can lead to several consequences in both men's and women's sexuality and are relevant to our overall subject matter, our primary concern is to delve into the intricacies of the sexual double standard itself.

This fear of judgment, both in men and women, is very present in FWBR, since one of the risks reported by people who participate in those relationships is a "bad reputation" (Erlandsson et al., 2013). However, research has shown that for women that fear may be more evident, as they tend to define FWBR less as a sexual interaction and more of an emotional context, in an attempt to prevent being stigmatized (McGinty et al., 2007). Feminist theory reshapes societal attitudes not only towards FWBR (and casual relationships, in general), but most specifically, towards women in FWBR, fighting for their right to sexual freedom and preventing them from suffering consequences such as sexual harassment, losing friends, and experiencing shame and isolation due to the sexual double standard (Goffman, 1963; Hillier et al., 1998).

Gaps in the current literature

Sometimes categorized as the "now you see it, now you don't" phenomenon, sexual double standard in literature has been reported differently as it is influenced by data-gathering methods (Crawford & Popp, 2003). Bordini and Sperb (2013) warn about the possible inappropriateness of using quantitative methods when investigating sexual double standards, given it is such a social and time-influenced issue. Additionally, they address their concerns about the use of outdated scales that don't separate social perception from personal acceptance to measure this phenomenon, as well as propose the use of mixed methods and a more varied sample of participants as more reliable options for up-to-date research on the topic (Bordini & Sperb, 2013). So, even though some early research argues that the sexual double standard is disappearing or that the prevalence isn't as notorious as one may believe, there seems to be a lack of qualitative interpretation of those results, as

well as appropriate methodology (González-Marugán et al., 2021; Mark & Miller, 1986; Marks & Fraley, 2007; Sprecher et al., 1997). In addition, contemporary sexual double standards are built culturally and socially, in a multidimensional way that can be lost with the use of experimental studies (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Gómez-Berrocal et al., 2022; González-Marugán et al., 2021). Thus, it is fundamental to incorporate interpretative and qualitative methodology in the study of sexual double standards, as a way to analyze the phenomenon in its social context, considering the experience of the participants instead of hypothetical storylines.

Regarding FWBR, most of the research explores the context of heterosexual relationships of cisgender individuals (no studies with trans* people have been found) and of mostly university students (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Gusarova et al., 2012; McGinty et al., 2007; Owen & Fincham, 2011). Thus, it is assumed that the information collected about this type of relationship is poorly generalizable and fails to represent minorities and diversity in the sample. To explore FWBR considering the social contexts in which they operate, future studies should recognize the need for a more diverse population in their sample. That specifically implies having a more intersectional approach, in the matters of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, and social status.

Furthermore, as casual relationships become more common, it is important to take into consideration with what intent they are initiated, how the relationship is influenced by gender norms, what women experience in this relationship, and how it develops over time (Garcia et al., 2012; Machia et al., 2020). Specifically, there is a current gap in the literature that fully addresses the sexual double standard in friends with benefits relationships, as it is a relatively new area of research. Not only is it important to depict how the double standard is expressed in these relationships, but also the impact it has on women who believe that there is a culturally rooted social construct that influences how they experience their sexuality (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

Conclusion

Friends with benefits are diverse and complex relationships. Historical changes and social movements have contributed to the evolving perceptions regarding non-traditional relationships such as FWBR. However, some judgments appear to persist to this day. When examining attitudes towards FWBR on a broader scale, certain stereotypes are revealed, often marked by negative judgments towards both the relationships and the individuals involved. Influenced by factors such as age, religion, sexual orientation, and gender, these attitudes seem to be deeply ingrained in society.

When overviewing research on sexual double standards within the context of these relationships, it becomes clear that judgmental attitudes towards women's sexual behavior persist. Thus, applying a feminist lens to this issue proves to have several benefits, since women have reported that sexual double standards still significantly impact their relationships and everyday life (González-Marugán et al., 2021). On the one hand, some feminists reject such relationships and view them negatively, as a way of retaliating against the sexual double standards present in casual sex (Williams & Jovanovic, 2015). However, the shift in societal attitudes over time, particularly in the context of gender equality, has also allowed women to have positive experiences in FWBR, such as feeling more comfortable, empowered, and without so much pressure imposed by society's expectations. Additionally, risks such as assault, harassment, or sexual violence, are many times reported by women as the main reasons for not engaging in casual sex with strangers (Herold & Mewhinney, 1993; Weaver & Herold, 2000; Williams & Jovanovic, 2015). Thus, friends with benefits relationships appear to provide women with an opportunity to express their sexuality in a relatively safe and enjoyable environment, since friendship is a central factor in the relationship (Lehmiller et al., 2011). This relationship seems to be a chance to challenge traditional gender roles and has been perceived as proof of a cultural change, that provides women with more sexual

agency than before (Jovanovic & Williams, 2018). Nevertheless, to assume that women who engage in FWBR have automatically sexual freedom and agency is immensely simplistic, considering that there is still a stigma about the open discussion of female sexuality, in addition to a discourse of “risk” that leads to a reticence in engaging sexual activity and a greater sense of responsibility (Jovanovic & Williams, 2018).

Given the complexity of the topic, this review encourages the study of FWBR following a contextual, dynamic, and intersectional exploration of women's perspectives and behaviors. The study of sexual double standards in FWBR does not only have theoretical implications, but also an ethical impact, that is, by trying to understand FWBR, it can contribute to a greater sexual autonomy of people, in particular women. It provides the opportunity to explore sexuality in an informed way, promoting the idea that sexual choices should be made based on consent and personal desire. In addition, analyzing the gender dynamics present in these types of relationships helps to deconstruct harmful stereotypes related to women's sexual behaviors. This contributes to a more equitable and egalitarian approach to sexuality and relationships. There is also the potential for a significant social impact, such as reducing the stigma surrounding these casual relationships. By understanding how these relationships are perceived and discussed, one can demystify the idea that they are harmful or morally reprehensible. As a result, people involved in friends with benefits relationships may feel less judged and stigmatized. Additionally, by exploring how the sexual double standard affects relationships, the study is a way to start conversations regarding healthy casual relationships, especially since they are associated with emotional costs (Anders et al., 2020; van Raalte et al., 2022). Since this is particularly true for women, research on this topic may empower women to make sexual decisions with greater confidence and lead to greater freedom of choice and a reduction in social pressure regarding their sexuality. Finally, it is important to mention the possible political impact since research in this area may provide important information for the development of public policies related to sexual education, gender equality and sexual rights. For example, it provides educators with the possibility to bring awareness of this type of relationship that is different from the social norm. Policies related to sexual rights and gender equality may also focus on the gender prejudice that exists in non-traditional relationships, such as friends with benefits, by acknowledging that women are treated differently than men in these contexts. That way, interventions regarding gender inequality, violence against women, and unequal power dynamics can also be approached taking into consideration casual relationships. Research on this topic can also be used as a basis for campaigns and movements that seek to promote gender equality and combat the sexual double standard.

The hard dichotomy of attitudes towards women's experiences is not only present in their sexual lives, but rather heavily carried along any chosen path, encompassing the tiring and conflicting expectations society imposes on women: to be sexy, but not too “easy”, to be feminine but not too enticing, to be attractive for men but to disregard their own pleasure (Amaro et al., 2022; Crawford & Popp, 2003). Thus, it is urgent to explore sexual double standards in modern relationships, such as friends with benefits, in order to bring awareness to women's current struggles regarding sexual freedom and this paralyzing fear of judgment.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Ana Simão Marques: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **João Manuel de Oliveira:** Writing – review & editing. **Conceição Nogueira:** Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

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