

Negotiating a Friends with Benefits Relationship

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Abstract Friends with benefits (FWB) refers to “friends” who have sex. Study 1 ($N = 125$) investigated the prevalence of these relationships and why individuals engaged in this relationship. Results indicated that 60% of the individuals surveyed have had this type of relationship, that a common concern was that sex might complicate friendships by bringing forth unreciprocated desires for romantic commitment, and ironically that these relationships were desirable because they incorporated trust and comfort while avoiding romantic commitment. Study 2 ($N = 90$) assessed the relational negotiation strategies used by participants in these relationships. The results indicated that people in FWB relationships most often avoided explicit relational negotiation. Thus, although common, FWB relationships are often problematic for the same reasons that they are attractive.

Keywords Friends with benefits · Friendship · Romantic relationships

Introduction

A clear distinction between friendships and romantic relationships has long been accepted in academic social science, popular culture, and lay understandings of human relationships. Recently, however, evidence of a new type of

relationship has been identified that neither fits the traditional definition of a friendship nor a romantic relationship, yet has characteristics of both. This relationship has become known as “friends with benefits” (FWB). FWB relationships are commonplace among American college students (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Mongeau, Ramirez, & Vorell, 2003) and have received much attention in popular media (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005).

Existing research has concentrated on documenting the existence and prevalence of FWB. The current study investigated why people engage in sexual activity with a friend, how sex with a friend affects relationship dynamics, and communication patterns in FWB relationships.

Preliminary Definitions

Definitions of a friendship have typically excluded romantic love and sexual contact to differentiate friendships from romantic relationships. For example, friends like one another whereas lovers love one another (Brehm, Miller, Perlman, & Campbell, 2002), friendships involve an “attraction of the spirit and not the body” (Werking, 1997, p. 30), and friendship is a “non-sexual relationship of two people, based upon shared experience and characterized by mutual personal regard, understanding, and loyalty” (Armstrong, 1985, p. 212). Each of these definitions specified that friends are not sexually intimate. Further, friendship and romantic relationships also differ on exclusivity. Romantic relationships, as opposed to friendships, involve a desire for exclusiveness (Brehm et al., 2002).

Nevertheless, friendships and romantic relationships are more similar than different (Sprecher & Regan, 2002). Both types of relationships involve interdependence, trust, enjoyment of the other’s company, engaging in shared activities,

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and mutual acceptance. Exclusivity, romantic love, and sexual desire and activity distinguish the two types of relationships according to some scholars, but these criteria are not universally accepted or universally applicable.

FWB combines the psychological intimacy of a friendship with the sexual intimacy of a romantic relationship while avoiding the “romantic” label (Hughes et al., 2005; Mongeau et al., 2003). Sexual activity with a friend distinguishes FWB from both “hook-ups” characterized by a single occurrence of sex between people who are acquaintances or strangers without the expectation of developing a relationship (Paul & Hayes, 2002; Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000) and traditional romantic relationships. Labeling FWB as a friendship is consistent with the fact that these individuals are not romantically committed and do not share a romantic love for one another. But, consistent with romantic relationships, these people engaged in repeated sexual activity, which has traditionally been linked to a romantic relationship but not friendships.

Research has found that a considerable percentage of university students have engaged in sexual activity with a friend, and prevalence rates have ranged from 49 to 62% (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Mongeau et al., 2003; Reeder, 2000). The current study sought to replicate these findings regarding the prevalence of FWB among college students.

Previous research has also found that sexual activity can make friendships more complicated, difficult to manage, and create increased pressure for involvement (Pogrebin, 1987; Sapadin, 1988). Nevertheless, to our knowledge, no one has sought to determine why individuals choose to engage in sex with a friend and the perceived advantages and disadvantages of FWB. To address these omissions and to extend the literature, the follow questions are investigated here.

RQ1: What are the reported advantages (if any) of a FWB relationship?

RQ2: Why do individuals engage in FWB relationships?

RQ3: What are the reported disadvantages (if any) of a FWB relationship?

RQ4: Why do individuals choose not to engage in FWB relationships?

Study 1

Method

Participants

A total of 125 undergraduates (65 women and 60 men) from communication courses at a large mid-western university participated in the study. The participants ranged in age

from 18 to 40 years ($M = 20.26$, $SD = 2.56$). All participants received extra credit or course credit, depending on the instructor’s wishes, in exchange for their participation. The research was IRB approved.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were informed that the research involved opinions regarding FWB. Participants were provided with a definition of FWB, asked if they thought people could have sex while being just friends, and if they were currently in a FWB relationship. FWB was defined as “when people who are ‘just friends’ have sex.” All participants responded to four open-ended questions: (1) the major benefits (if any) of FWB; (2) the disadvantages (if any); (3) why the participant believed individuals engaged in FWB; and (4) why the participant believed some individuals do not. Specific questions completed by those who reported engaging in a FWB relationship followed. If participants had FWB, questions asked about the frequency of the sexual activity, the type of sex that occurred in this relationship (e.g., kissing, touching genitals, oral sex, and sexual intercourse), relationship outcomes (e.g., remained FWB, just friends, became romantically involved, and no longer involved), and the sex of the partner. Multiple responses were allowed.

To derive response categories for the open-ended responses, the first author read all responses and identified characteristics that emerged and created categories for coding. The categories for the advantages of FWB included avoiding commitment, having sex, trust and safety, staying single and non-exclusivity, explicitly specifying no advantages, becoming closer to the friend, resulting positive emotions, and other. The categories for the reasons to engage in FWB were the same as the advantages, but an additional category labeled opportunity-convenience emerged and was added. The categories generated to classify the disadvantages of FWB included becoming serious, harming the friendship, negative emotions generated, a lack of commitment, negative consequences of sex (e.g., pregnancy, STD), no disadvantages, and miscellaneous-other. The categories for the reasons to avoid FWB were the same as the disadvantages except that a morality-religious category was added.

After categories were generated, the first author and a second rater independently coded all responses. Intercoder reliability was determined by the percentage of agreement and Cohen’s kappa was calculated for each question category since multiple responses were possible. The mean percentage for raw agreement was 91% and the mean kappa was .84. The kappa for each category is shown in Table 2. All disagreements were resolved by discussion and post-resolution data were reported.

Results

A majority (60.0%) of participants reported having had a FWB relationship at some point in their life (40 men, 35 women), and over one-third (36.0%) were currently engaging in sex with “just a friend” (17 men, 10 women). No sex differences in prevalence were observed; lifetime FWB, $\chi^2(1) = 2.14, p = .14$; current FWB, $\chi^2(1) = 3.10, p = .08$. Descriptive results related frequency of sex, type of sex, partner sex, and relationship outcome are summarized in Table 1.

In terms of attitudes towards FWB, over half (61.8%) believed one can be “just friends” after having sex. Of the participants who had had a FWB relationship, 81.1% (34 men, 26 women) believed one can be just friends after having sex and 14 participants (five men, nine women) believed one cannot remain friends, $\chi^2(1) = 30.76, p < .01$. In contrast, only 32.7% of participants (eight men, eight women) who had not had a FWB relationship believed one can remain friends while 67.3% (12 men, 21 women) believed that one cannot be just friends after having sex; sex difference, $\chi^2(1) = 9.20, p < .01$; FWB experience by belief difference, $\chi^2(1) = 29.28, p < .01$. Thus, men and those who had FWB relationships were proportionally more likely to believe that people can stay friends after sex.

Table 1 Descriptive results for FWB participants in Study 1

Question	Percent
<i>Frequency of sex</i>	
Only once	18.7
Occasional	52.1
Ongoing/Frequent	29.3
<i>Type of sex</i>	
Oral sex only	2.7
Genital touching only	1.3
Intercourse only	22.7
All but Intercourse	8.0
All types	56.0
Some other combination	9.3
<i>Sex of FWB partner</i>	
Opposite	98.7
Same	1.3
Both	0.0
<i>Relationship outcome</i>	
Stayed FWB	28.3
Stayed friends, stopped sex	35.8
Became romantic	9.8
Relationship ended	25.9

Advantages, Disadvantages, and Reasons for FWB

The frequencies of commonly listed advantages and disadvantages are shown in Table 2. Many participants reported multiples responses, so each coding category was treated as a separate variable and counted as present or not present. The overriding theme regarding the advantages of FWB concerned having sex with a trusted other while avoiding commitment. The most frequently reported disadvantage of a FWB relationship was that one person might develop feelings for the other and this might not be reciprocated. Other frequent responses included the potential loss of the friendship and the generation of negative emotions such as jealousy or hurt feelings.

The reasons provided for why one might or might not have FWB closely approximated those for the advantages and disadvantages. The reasons for having FWB centered on having sex while avoiding commitment. One additional theme listed by 30.2% of participants was that FWB were convenient and that these relationships were ones of opportunity.

Similarly, the reasons why one would not have FWB were highly similar in content and frequency to the disadvantages list in Table 2. Participants who did not engage in FWB saw value in keeping friends and romance separate. Also, 16.7% of participants listed religion or morality as a reason to avoid FWB.

Discussion

The current data replicated the results of Afifi and Faulkner (2000) and Mongeau et al. (2003) showing that FWB relationships are common among college students. In the current survey, 60% of participants had had at least one FWB relationship in their life, and approximately one-third had a current FWB. The sex in the FWB relationship most often involved sexual intercourse and was not a single occurrence. Almost all the FWB occurred within cross-sex friendships, and when these relationships ended, they most often either reverted to a traditional friendship or ended completely. Few FWB (approximately 10%) evolved into romantic relationships.

Attitudes about FWB were strongly associated with first-hand experience. The overwhelming majority of participants who had had a FWB thought that people could have sex and stay “just friends.” By contrast, those who had not experienced FWB were much more likely draw a distinction and believe that friends do not have sex. The causal order likely works both ways with a person’s beliefs impacting behavior, and beliefs also reflecting personal experience.

The research questions addressed the advantages and disadvantages of FWB and the reasons why people have

Table 2 Frequently listed advantages and disadvantages of friends with benefits

	Frequency	Categorical %	Overall %	<i>k</i>
<i>Advantage category</i>				
No commitment	74	59.7	35.6	.87
Have sex	69	55.6	33.2	.95
Trust person	26	21.0	12.5	.93
Stay single	13	10.5	6.3	.80
None	11	8.9	5.3	1.0
Become closer	9	7.3	4.3	.88
<i>Disadvantage category</i>				
Develop feelings	81	65.3	42.4	.85
Harm friendship	35	28.2	18.3	.92
Cause negative emotions	34	27.4	17.8	.86
Lack of commitment	16	12.9	8.4	.88
Negative consequences of sex	12	9.7	6.3	.95

Note Categorical percent was calculated by the variable frequency over total participants. Overall percent was calculated by the variable frequency over total frequency ($N = 124$).

FWB and why they do not. There was substantial overlap in responses to the questions regarding advantages and reason for FWB. The primary advantages of a FWB involved having sex with a known and trusted other without expectations for commitment or exclusivity. That is, FWB were perceived as providing a relatively safe and convenient environment for recreational sex, and this was apparently why college students had a FWB.

The chief disadvantages centered on the idea that sex might complicate the friendship. This was reflected in concerns that non-reciprocated romantic feelings might evolve, that the friendship could be harmed, and that feelings might get hurt. These disadvantages were seen as central reasons to avoid FWB, but two other themes emerged as reasons for eschewing FWB. Some participants reported that sex with commitment was desirable, and thus avoided FWB out of a preference for sex within a romantic relationship. Some participants found the idea of FWB morally repulsive. These individuals, however, reflected a minority opinion.

Relational Negotiation Strategies

Relational negotiation refers to direct verbal exchanges aimed at reaching agreement about the expectations, rules governing, and status of an interpersonal relationship, and relationship negotiation strategies are the goal-direct, communicative means to those ends. The initial findings regarding FWB relationships suggested that a common concern in FWB

relationships was that sex might complicate the friendships and raised concerns about unreciprocated romantic attachment. Thus, FWB relationships evoked questions about the roles in the relationship, relationship status, relationship expectations, and the communication in these relationships. A common way to reduce relational uncertainty is to seek information through talk with a partner, and the intimacy associated with friendship should make direct verbal exchange a likely option in reducing uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 2002). To our knowledge, no research exists on what issues must be dealt with in FWB relationships concerning the state of the relationship. Therefore, a first research question for Study 2 was posed.

RQ5: What questions arose concerning the relationship as a result of sexual activity in FWB?

Presuming that sex complicated relationships and created uncertainty, it follows that communication may have been required to negotiate new expectations and reduce uncertainty. In Study 1, one reason individuals reported having a FWB relationship was that the friend was trusted more than a strangers. Research on trust and trustworthiness has suggested that the perceived trustworthiness of another is positively related to willingness to communicate with that person (Christen, 2001). In contrast, Baxter and Wilmot (1985) reported that talking about a relationship topped the list of taboo topics for both platonic and intimate couples. Further, avoiding talk about the relationship is especially likely when partners differ in desired level of commitment. This led to the second research question:

RQ6: What types of relational negotiation strategies were used in FWB relationships?

Ward and Kahn (2003) found that men were more likely to avoid discussing important issues in intimate relationship. Thus, a final research question was posed:

RQ7: Were there sex differences in relational negotiation strategies in FWB relationships?

Triangle Theory of Love

One limitation of most previous definitions of friendship and romantic relationships is the tendency to use criteria that define relationships as categorical rather than as varying in degree. Taking into account both gradations in relational constructs and people's own understanding of the qualities of their relationships might allow for a more flexible conceptual approach conducive to understanding a non-traditional relationship type like FWB. Sternberg's (1986, 1987) triangle theory of love offers this type of flexibility.

Sternberg (1986, 1987) proposed three building blocks which determine different types of love and that are useful in distinguishing some types of relationships from others: intimacy, passion, and commitment. Intimacy includes feelings of warmth, understanding, communication, support, and sharing. Passion is characterized by physical arousal and desire. Finally, commitment includes decisions to devote oneself to a relationship and the desire to maintain the relationship. Intimacy, passion, and commitment are each one side of a triangle that describes the love individuals can share. Each side of the triangle can vary in intensity and can be visually depicted by the length of each side of the triangle.

Sternberg did not categorically differentiate friendships from romantic relationships, but rather, differentiated the two by the intensity of the three characteristics. Romantic relationships typically differ from friendships in that the former involved higher levels of passion and commitment than the latter.

FWB are a hybrid of friendships and romantic relationships. Using the Triangle Theory of Love, a traditional friendship is a relationship comprised of moderate to high levels of intimacy and low levels of commitment and passion. Alternatively, a romantic relationship is a relationship comprised of moderate to high intensity levels of intimacy, commitment, and passion. FWB have levels of passion consistent with romantic relationships, but lack the romantic commitment typical of romantic relationships. This reasoning was tested in Study 2.

Study 2

Method

Participants

A total of 90 undergraduates (47 women and 43 men) from communication courses at a large mid-western university participated in the study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 31 ($M = 21.28$, $SD = 1.90$). All participants received extra credit or course credit in exchange for their participation.

Target participants were those who had engaged in a FWB relationship on at least one occasion. Participants reported between 1 and 15 FWB partners ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 2.13$). Men ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 2.56$) reported more FWB partners than women ($M = 1.98$, $SD = 1.45$), $t(87) = 2.60$, $p = .01$. With regard to their current FWB, the average length of time the friends knew each other before having sex was slightly over one year ($M = 14.23$ months, $SD = 19.78$) and the FWB relationship had lasted an average of six months ($M = 6.04$, $SD = 7.48$), with the longest being four years.

Procedure and Measures

Participants were informed the research involved relational negotiation in FWB relationships. FWB was defined with the same definition used in Study 1. Once all surveys were complete, participants were debriefed on the nature of the study.

Participants completed a self-report survey containing open and closed-ended questions in which they indicated how they negotiated issues in their FWB relationship. Demographic information and the Triangle Love Scale (Sternberg, 1988) constituted the closed-ended questions. The open-ended section of the questionnaire sought to identify what relational negotiation strategies individuals used in FWB relationships.

The Triangular Love Scale consisted of three dimensions (intimacy, passion, and commitment) with 15 items for each. Sample items included “I feel close to my friend,” “I especially like physical contact with my friend,” and “I am committed to maintaining my relationship with me friend.” Participants rated their agreement with the statements on a 9-point scale, where 1 was “not at all” and 9 was “extremely so.” This instrument has been found to be both reliable and valid in previous research (e.g., Aron & Westbay, 1996; Whitley, 1993).

A set of 2 trained coders independently scored all responses using procedures similar to those reported in Study 1. The intercoder reliabilities were acceptable, with a mean percentage of raw agreement equal to 90.9% and a mean kappa of .91. All disagreements were resolved by discussion and post-resolution data are reported.

Results

The first research question sought to discover once sexual activity was introduced into a previously platonic friendship what questions arose concerning the relationship as a result of this sexual activity. Approximately half (48.9%) of the participants indicated that questions arose and the remaining participants indicated that questions did not arise. Of the participants that indicated that questions arose, the overriding theme involved uncertainty. Uncertainty about how to label the relationship, how to maintain the relationship, the future trajectory of the relationship, how they felt about the relationship, and if they could stay friends were listed. The frequencies of these responses are provided in Table 3.

The second research question asked about how these issues were negotiated. When asked about how the talk was initiated, the most prevalent response was that it was not initiated. A few participants used humor to initiate the discussion and fewer still talked about the relationship at the time of the first sexual activity. When asked about the content of the talk, responses included relationship expectations,

Table 3 Frequently listed responses in Study 2

	Frequency	Overall %	<i>k</i>
<i>Relationship questions</i>			
Title	15	25.9	1.0
Maintenance	13	22.4	.89
Future	12	20.7	.82
Feelings	6	10.3	1.0
Friendship	5	8.6	.75
<i>Discussion initiation</i>			
None	76	84.4	1.0
Joking	8	8.9	.93
First sexual activity	3	3.3	.85
<i>Discussion topics</i>			
Expectations	11	30.6	.95
Effects on relationship	7	19.4	.82
Justifying sexual activity	6	16.7	.82
Approval	5	13.9	.90
<i>Ground rule negotiation</i>			
None	66	73.3	1.0
Mutually agreed	10	11.1	.88
I set the rules, other agreed	4	4.4	.88
Talked	4	4.4	1.0

how sex would affect the relationship, justifying the sex, and verifying that the friend was agreeable to having sex. Each of these responses, however, were relatively infrequent. Participants were explicitly asked about ground rule negation and the vast majority (77.3%) indicated that there was none. Of those reporting rule negotiation, mutual agreement was most common. The frequencies of these responses are also listed in Table 3.

The final research question asked about sex differences in negotiation strategies. No statistically significant differences were observed.

Triangle Love Scale

On the Sternberg (1988) scale, a score of 1 through 5 indicates a low rating, 6 through 7 indicates a moderate rating, and 8 through 9 indicates a high rating. On these standards, the average intimacy score was moderate ($M = 6.44$, $SD = 1.66$), the average passion score was low ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.49$), and the average commitment score was low ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.66$). The means on the three dimensions were compared with paired *t*-tests. Intimacy was significantly higher than passion $t(89) = 11.42$, $p < .01$ and commitment $t(89) = 13.27$, $p < .01$, but passion and commitment were not significantly different from one another $t(89) = -0.19$.

These findings were compared to the results of Acher and Davis (1992) who had a sample ($N = 204$) of individuals in established romantic relationships (65% married, mean relationship duration, 9.5 years) complete the Sternberg (1988) scales. Scores on each of the three scales were higher in the romantic data; intimacy, $M = 7.23$, $SD = 1.50$, $t(292) = 4.01$, $\eta^2 = .05$; passion, $M = 6.10$, $SD = 1.77$, $t(292) = 6.53$, $\eta^2 = .13$; commitment, $M = 6.80$, $SD = 1.89$, $t(292) = 8.94$, $\eta^2 = .22$. As expected, examination of the effect sizes indicated that differences were most pronounced for commitment followed by passion, and the smallest differences were observed on intimacy.

Discussion

About half of the participants indicated that questions arose in their FWB relationship, and these questions involved uncertainty about what to call the relationship, the future of the relationship, and how to negotiate changes in feelings. Despite these uncertainties, however, participants reported little talk about the state of the relationship. Almost 85% indicated that no relationship talk was initiated and 73% indicated no discussion of relationship ground rules. Of the relatively few participants who explicitly established ground rules, the most prevalent theme involved third party concerns related to disclosing the relationship to others and establishing that they, unlike exclusively dating couples, were allowed to see other people. Specific strategies involved seeking compromise and arguing for one's own desired outcome. No significant sex differences in communication patterns were found, possibly due to the low frequency talk about the state and future of the relationship. While previous research has also reported that taboo topics are prevalent in relationships, the current findings suggest that this is especially true for FWB relationships.

Participants rated their FWB on Sternberg's (1988) Triangle Love Scale. On the average, FWB participants indicated moderate intimacy, and low passion and commitment with their friend. According to Sternberg, this indicates the majority of FWB participants experienced the liking type of love for their friend, suggesting that the individuals really were "just friends" at the time of sexual activity. When scores were compared to previous findings with romantic couples, scores on all three dimensions were lower, with the largest differences observed in commitment followed by passion.

General Discussion

This article reported the results of two studies of FWB relationships among midwestern college students. Study 1 replicated previous findings and found that FWB relationships are

currently common among college students in the U.S. These findings raise interesting questions regarding trends in prevalence over time. Since these relationships have not been studied until recently, it is unclear how long these relationships have been in existence. Speculatively, having sex with friends, although perhaps less prevalent in the past, has probably long existed, but the FWB label is likely a recent phenomenon.

Study 1 also investigated the self-reported advantages and disadvantages of FWB. Those who never had a FWB typically believed that friendship and sex are incompatible and some found the idea morally unacceptable. These beliefs contrasted sharply with the approximately 60% of participants who have had first hand experience with FWB. From the perspective of those with a FWB, sex with friends can and does happen. The primary advantage seemed to be recreational, non-exclusive sex with a known and trusted other. The primary disadvantages were concerns that sex will harm the friendship or create unreciprocated desires for romantic exclusivity. Thus, the findings revealed an irony that the primary reasons for FWB were also a primary disadvantage.

Given that the chief concern of those with FWB involved increased relational uncertainty, and that the people involved were friends, one might expect communication aimed at reducing relational ambiguity. This, however, was not the case and the findings of Study 2 suggest that little relational negotiation occurred in these relationships. This lack of communication likely exacerbates the potential problems with FWB reported in Study 1. The lack of talk about the relationship, however, was consistent with Baxter and Wilmot (1985) who reported that talking about a relationship tops the list of taboo topics for both platonic and intimate couples. In this regard, all three relationship types appear similar.

Parks (1982) challenged what he called the “ideology of intimacy,” which referred to the view that self-disclosure is necessarily healthy and that psychological intimacy is always the primary goal in interpersonal communication and relationships. Parks argued that examples of effective interpersonal communication relationships that were not based on intimacy and disclosure but instead on social necessity or efficiency were both plentiful and functional. Perhaps FWB relationships exemplify this sort of situation.

Nevertheless, participants’ responses to Sternberg’s (1988) love scale showed that FWB scored higher in intimacy than either commitment or passion. These scores were similar to previous findings based on friendships, and the scores were lower than those obtained from committed romantic relationships. The love scale findings were consistent with the label of friends for FWB, and also showed the general utility of the Sternberg theory in applying to a range of relationship types. The love scale findings were

also consistent with the current conceptualization of FWB as a hybrid relationship type, qualitatively different from traditional friendship and quantitatively different for romantic relationships.

A primary limitation in these data was the reliance on self-report data. This method raises concerns about recall and social desirability biases. Further, because only one partner of the dyad was responding, critical concerns, issues, questions, and rules may not have been reported and between-partner agreement could not be assessed. Nevertheless, the high levels of prevalence observed in the current data suggested that substantial underreporting may have been unlikely.

College students were used as participants, thus excluding younger and older populations. The next step is to use a non-college sample to clearly determine if relational negotiation occurs in these relationships or not, and if FWB is a phenomenon that extends beyond college years. Research with high school students would be useful to determine if FWB start in college or earlier in the life course.

Since FWB relationships have been understudied in social science research, it is hoped that the results of the studies reported here will serve as a foundation for further exploration. The prevalence of FWB, the challenges that FWB pose to previous understandings of relationship types, and challenges faced by those who have FWB provide reasons for the further study of FWB.

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