

Social Psychology

# How to Cancel Plans With Friends: A Mixed Methods Study of Strategy and Experience

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Being cancelled on is inevitable. However, maintaining friendships is important and cancelled plans may evoke feelings of disappointment. To prevent this, we examined ways to go about cancelling plans that would not negatively impact friendships. Our study examined what people consider appropriate and inappropriate reasons and the best methods to cancel plans. A variety of close-ended and open-ended questions regarding what participants believed was a reasonable excuse for cancelling and the worst excuse for cancelling was asked. Participants were also asked about how cancelled plans made them feel. Among 1,192 people (72.5% women; 71.8% White), the majority of the participants wanted advanced notice and/or a quick call/text when plans are being cancelled. Health or family reasons were among the most reasonable excuses. Conversely, excuses regarding a better offer, such as finding something better to do, were among the most unacceptable reasons to cancel plans. Over 80% of the sample reported feeling annoyed when they found out that an excuse to cancel was a lie. Honoring commitments is essential to maintaining friendships, which is associated with better health and well-being. When breaking commitments, the best way to go about it is to cancel in advance and have honest and reasonable excuses which serve to maintain friendships that are a fundamental part of life and satisfy the need to belong.

People have a fundamental need to seek out and maintain close relationships with other people, including friends. One way to fulfill this need is through spending time with friends. However, people inevitably disappoint one another—even with the best of intentions, people transgress against each other by cancelling opportunities to connect with friends. Left missing is an understanding of how to cancel in a way that saves face and/or maintains a relationship (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Wilson et al., 1991). The current study provided a descriptive account about how people cancel plans with friends and the best (and worst) ways to do so.

### The Fundamental Need to Belong

Humans have a fundamental need to seek out and maintain close relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People reap the benefits of these close relationships. For example, the presence of high-quality social relationships is consistently associated with better health and well-being across the lifespan (House et al., 1988; Kiecolt-Glaser & Newton, 2001; Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017; Umberson

& Karas Montez, 2010). This is especially the case with friends (Chopik, 2017; Giles et al., 2005; Larson et al., 1986). In order to maintain relationships with others, it is important for friends to spend time together and invest in their relationship (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). A great deal of investment is necessary. In a study that attempted to quantify the amount of time it takes for two people to become friends, Hall (2019) estimated that it likely takes over 300 hours spent together to move from being mere acquaintances to being good friends. The author attributed the large investment of time to a simple explanation—it takes time and experiences to grow close to others and form intimate relationships. In other words, maintaining friendships involves making plans with friends—plans that are mostly comprised of shared leisure activities (Larson et al., 1986).

The bonds we form with others are thought to, at least partially, rely on an expectation of reciprocity and mutual benefit (Clark & Mills, 2012; Oh et al., 2020). Insights from the Investment Model have made a number of predictions about what contributes to commitment, or the intention to remain in a friendship (or any relationship) with someone.

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Specifically, the Investment Model postulates that commitment arises primarily from three sources—satisfaction with a friendship, the amount of investment people have made and will make moving forward, and whether the alternatives to a friendship (either other relational partners or being alone) might be more appealing (Impett et al., 2001; Rusbult, 1980, 1983). The Investment Model has many of its intellectual roots and intersects with other relationship frameworks, such as interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978) and social exchange theory (Clark & Mills, 1979)—both of which have implications for how friends influence each other and evaluate the state of the friendship based on what they are putting into and getting out of a friendship.

### The Inevitability of Disappointment

Unfortunately, as vital and beneficial as human connection and socialization are, disappointment is inevitable. Feeling disappointed, along with its accompanying higher-order feeling of disillusionment, has important personal and social consequences that can jeopardize both our individual standing and our friendships if they are the source of disappointment (Maher et al., 2020). In a study that sought to identify the largest contributors to disappointment, Carroll et al. (2007) found that people feel most disappointed if a negative outcome is unexpected and negatively reflects their self-image or what is important to them personally. One such circumstance that coalesces many of these concerns is when a friend cancels an opportunity to socialize with people. Because friends are important to people and being cancelled on constitutes an unexpected negative outcome, it stands to reason that disappointment could arise and affect people's evaluations of themselves and their relationships.

Indeed, even the act of cancelling likely evokes some self-reflection on the part of the person doing the cancelling. For example, politeness theory posits that people seek to maintain two “faces”—one that desires and seeks out approval by significant others (a “positive face”) and one that desires and seeks out autonomy and to not be impeded by others (a “negative face”; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Wilson et al., 1991). Forging and breaking of plans necessarily recruits both faces—the desire to form social connections and gain approval (i.e., saving face when they need to be cancelled) with the acknowledgment that people are also autonomous agents with conflicting priorities and cancelling helps people pursue those other priorities. This balance of faces becomes especially important when cancelling plans with a close friend versus an acquaintance—portraying a good and thoughtful impression while cancelling may be important when we want to maintain the closest of our friendships.

Is cancelling plans a big deal between friends? On the surface, many people might say ‘no’ or, at the very least, that it depends on a few different factors. But in looking at the ingredients for what makes two people friends, many of the characteristics often boil down to a sense of responsiveness to and investment in another person (Carnegie, 1937/2010). People tend to agree on the idea that friends should

be accountable to each other and honor commitments. For example, in a cross-cultural study in the U.S., U.K., Italy, Hong Kong, and Japan, participants from these different countries tended to endorse many of the same statements when asked about whether there are unifying “rules” governing friendship (Argyle & Henderson, 1984). These rules involved providing keeping commitments, whether these are telling a friend something in confidence, repaying debts, or striving to make them happy when in each other's presence. Worth noting, people also tended to agree on the factors that contribute to friendships *dissolving*. Most prominent among the many factors is a general disrespect regarding a friend's time and an unreciprocated sense of commitment.

Being cancelled on likely results in a variety of different emotions (e.g., anger, sadness) with a variety of different intensities. After all, being cancelled on is an unwelcome negative event that has implications for both individuals (e.g., their daily activities) and their relationship (e.g., if a friend is consistently unreliable, this could negatively affect a relationship). Many people might consider being cancelled on to be a form of rejection or social exclusion (Harterink et al., 2015). Cancelled plans likely take on all shapes and sizes as well. This may include a variety of things such as a friend cancelling plans after the other cleared their schedule for them, a romantic interest not showing up to dinner—leaving the other alone and embarrassed in public, or being unresponsive with digital communication regarding a scheduled social event (Koessler et al., 2019). Being cancelled on necessarily entails an asymmetry in effort invested, which is one of the components in the Investment Model's explanations for why people stay in relationships (Rusbult et al., 1998).

Beyond the observation that cancelling and being cancelled on happens, there is very little descriptive work on what the typical practice looks like and how people might go about it to salvage their reputations and relationships. Most of the theoretical work on rejection (a relevant action to cancelling on someone) has focused on romantic/sexual advances and impersonal relationships (e.g., organizational settings, patient/client settings). At heart though, people do not like rejecting other people, primarily because they do not want to hurt their feelings (Joel et al., 2014). Further, people are loath to provide reasons why they reject people, particularly if those reasons are personal and unsavory for the person they are rejecting (Folkes, 1982). Of course, there are likely wrong ways and right ways for rejecting someone. For example, in studies examining how people can best deliver bad news (e.g., Jablin & Krone, 1984), flattering people with praise initially before the bad news often increases the likelihood that people clearly understand the message being conveyed and consider the message to be more personable (e.g., being rejected for a job). Likewise, being too direct with a rejection can leave people feeling confused and treated too impersonally. Thus, people probably expect their friends to give them at least some excuse (rather than merely cancelling with no context) that is somewhat considerate and courteous of them and their friendship (instead of impersonal cancellations). Such an

observation is also consistent with how people communicate rejection in other contexts, such as romantic relationships (Kim et al., 2020). For example, declining sexual advances in a way that is reassuring to a partner conveys that the rejector is responsive; the same is not true when sexual advances are declined in hostile, assertive, or deflecting ways (also see Gable & Impett, 2012; Impett et al., 2010 for a relevant discussion of approach and avoidance motivation).

But rejecting romantic advances and job applicants are a fundamentally different setting than having already established plans with a friend and then cancelling on them. Cancelling plans involves an initial commitment to spend time with a friend and then later renegeing on those plans (which is different than what the interpersonal rejection literature has focused on to date). Despite some theory and intuition suggesting a right and a wrong way to go about cancelling plans with friends, several unanswered questions remain about how to do so effectively, specifically. Are some excuses and strategies helpful in maintaining a strong friendship? Are there some reasons for cancellations that are unforgivable? How upset do people get if a close friend versus an acquaintance cancels on them? How important is it for them to reschedule? Do people perceive some reasons for cancelling as more legitimate than others? For example, *comparative* rejection, in which one person rejects another in order to invest in another relationship, has been shown to be more painful and threatening to belongingness compared to other forms of rejection (Rajchert et al., 2019). In the current study, we took an exploratory approach to examine how people would prefer to be cancelled on by a friend, the negative emotions they feel when being cancelled on, and their criteria for good and bad reasons to be cancelled on.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 1,192 respondents from a coordinated data collection effort between university undergraduates (82.6%) and respondents from Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk; 17.4%). MTurk participants were recruited in parallel with the university undergraduate sample to increase the demographic diversity of the overall sample. Undergraduate students were awarded course credit; MTurk participants were compensated \$.50. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 80 ( $M_{age} = 22.20$ ,  $SD = 7.70$ ). Participants were mostly women (72.5%), followed by men (27.0%); .2% non-binary and .3% missing on gender). The racial/ethnic breakdown of the sample was 71.8% White, 9.9% Asian, 8.3% Black/African American, 4.3% multiracial, 3.9% Hispanic/Latino, and 1.8% other races/ethnicities.<sup>1</sup>

The study was not pre-registered. We sought to maximize the amount of data that we could collect. Thus, there was no formal sample size planning determination, stopping rule, or a priori power analysis. We tried to collect as large a sample as possible to give us a wide range of open-ended experiences regarding cancelling plans. We occasionally ran paired-sample *t*-tests comparing some of the closed-ended questions against each other (i.e., comparing cancellations from acquaintances, close friends, and friends) and one-sample *t*-tests to test whether the mean of a closed-ended question was significantly above or below the midpoint (for descriptive purposes). A sample size of 1,192 gave us enough power to detect an effect of  $d = .12$  with 99% power at  $\alpha = .05$ .

A copy of the data is available on the OSF website (<https://osf.io/vxnrk/>).

### Measures and Procedures

Participants responded to a survey on social behavior. After the consent form, the first page of the study said, "the purpose of this study is to examine how and why people cancel plans with a friend. Specifically, we're interested in the etiquette (e.g., appropriate norms) of cancelling plans." A copy of the .qsf file for the survey is available on the OSF website (<https://osf.io/ewpjn/>).

### Close-ended Questions

Participants responded to eight Likert-type questions about their general assessment regarding cancelled plans. These items are presented in the upper-half of [Table 1](#). These items were generated from a group discussion between the last author and two students about the possible negative emotional responses and considerations someone might have to be cancelled on. We focused on what we considered to be the main negative emotions someone would likely have based on previous literature on related experiences (social rejection/ostracism; Hartgerink et al., 2015); however, we acknowledge that the responses queried in these questions are not an exhaustive treatment of the emotions and reactions of people who experience cancellations. Many of the questions asked change in the specific reaction or emotional response and use different response scales. We discuss this point further in the Discussion and caution readers from over-interpreting our materials as being a comprehensive assessment of people's reactions to being cancelled on.

Close-ended questions focused on how much advanced notice should be given (two questions), whether it is important to reschedule the plans (one question), and the implications of cancelling plans for a friendship (5 questions;

<sup>1</sup> In comparing the two data sources, MTurk participants ( $M = 35.24$ ,  $SD = 10.85$ ) were older than subject pool participants ( $M = 19.46$ ,  $SD = 1.96$ ),  $t = 42.50$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $d = 3.25$ ; MTurk participants (43.7% women) had a more balanced gender distribution than the subject pool participants (79.0% women);  $\chi^2(1) = 107.18$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, a Chi-squared test revealed that they were relatively similar in terms of race/ethnicity  $\chi^2(8) = 13.15$ ,  $p = .107$  (e.g., 79.1% White among MTurk participants, 70.7% White among subject pool participants).

the cancelling itself, if it later emerged that the excuse was fake, and how upset they would be if a casual acquaintance, good friend, or best friend cancelled on them). We were interested in assessing the conditions under which people would feel more or less upset. For example, the temporal distance of the cancellation seemed important because cancellations that were more temporally distant might be less emotionally charged than more proximal cancellations (Christensen-Szalanski, 1984; Kassam et al., 2008; Loewenstein, 1996). We asked for both an objective (i.e., time-based) measure of the time at which it would be most annoying to cancel and a more subjective measure of how much notice people feel they should receive.<sup>2</sup> We also assumed that interpersonal distance/closeness would likely be an important factor in how people would respond to interpersonal transgressions, like cancelling (Weidman et al., 2020). Thus, we asked about reactions to being cancelled on by friends varying in their level of closeness.

### Open-ended Questions

Three open-ended questions assessed how participants preferred friends to go about cancelling plans with them, what they would consider a reasonable excuse to cancel plans, and what they would consider an inappropriate excuse to cancel plans. The questions are reproduced in the bottom panel of [Table 1](#).

## Results

### Evaluating Cancellations: Preferences for Advanced Notice, Desire to Reschedule, and Comparing Cancellations by Level of Closeness

The results for the close-ended items are presented in the right-most panel of [Table 1](#). Participants preferred to receive a moderate amount of notice when being cancelled on. They found it annoying if they were given very little notice (i.e., the day of, morning of, or just minutes before). Participants were relatively split on whether formal rescheduling of cancelled plans was necessary. The majority of participants said that cancelling plans would not affect their friendship but later learning that the excuse used was fake would be upsetting. Overall, people reported rela-

tively low levels of distress (i.e., being upset) when various social actors cancelled on them. However, they were most upset when a best friend cancelled on them relative to a good friend ( $d = .28, p < .001$ ) or an acquaintance ( $d = .98, p < .001$ ). Having a good friend cancel was more upsetting than having an acquaintance cancel ( $d = .78, p < .001$ ).

### How to Go About Cancelling Plans and the (In)Appropriate Ways to Do So

One of the primary goals of the study was to characterize the preferred ways to be cancelled on and the good and bad excuses for doing so. Participants' spontaneous responses to the three open-ended questions were coded to achieve this goal. We adopted a content coding approach to examining the frequency of different themes that emerged in the spontaneous responses to the open-ended questions (Morgan, 1993; Smith, 2000; Woike, 2007). Specifically, the corresponding author read through 20% of open-ended responses to each of the three questions separately to develop the features (i.e., codes) which would subsequently be used to code all the responses. Saturation was reached relatively quickly within the first 10% of responses of the entire data set. All responses were coded to yield more accurate estimates of the relative frequencies of each feature. We then developed a coding scheme that characterized the vast majority of responses.

Two research assistants then used the coding scheme identified and coded the presence (1) or absence (0) of a particular characteristic in each response for 200 randomly chosen responses to establish reliability and discussed any disagreement or confusion following the calculation of kappa. The two coders were reliable (kappa ( $k$ ) = .95) and then proceeded to code the remaining entries. Coders noted whether a particular response was either gibberish or blank. These responses were treated as missing, such that the percentages presented below reflect the frequency a feature is mentioned out of eligible (i.e., non-missing) responses. This approach yielded a large amount of usable data for how people should go about cancelling and a small amount of missing ( $N = 1134$ ; 58 exclusions), what a good excuse is ( $N = 1065$ ; 127 exclusions), and what

<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, we regret not providing objective and subjective assessments of annoyance and preferences and not asking participants to provide more context of what they might have meant by "a moderate amount" of time as a preference. Worth noting, the more time-discrete annoyance question and the preferences question were nearly uncorrelated ( $r = -.093, p < .001$ ). We acknowledge that the preference for cancellation question may have been too vague for participants to consistently answer or, at the very least, the interpretation of this question is difficult to ascertain. Likewise, we asked participants how much a cancellation would "affect" their friendship. Although our assumption was that cancellations would negatively affect friendships and their longevity, this item likewise might have been too vague with respect to how cancellations can affect friendships (e.g., end the friendship, make things awkward, make the friendship stronger if it involved an important disclosure).

**Table 1. Measures in the Current Study**

Close-ended Questions	Scale range	M	SD	Median	% at the midpoint and above
How much notice do you think your friend should give when cancelling plans?	1(none at all)-5(a great deal)	3.08	0.70	3(a moderate amount)	86.1%
Imagine that they will eventually tell you about cancelling the plans for something a week (i.e., 7 days) from now. When would you find their canceling to be the most annoying? What if they told you today, 3 days from now, the day before, the morning of, or a few minutes before?	1(today), 2(3 days from now), 3(the day before), 4(the morning of), 5(a few minutes before)	4.38	1.14	5(a few minutes before)	89.7%
How important would it be for them to reschedule their plans with you (if possible)?	1(not at all important)-5(extremely important)	2.82	0.93	3(moderately important)	66.0%
How much would their cancelling affect your friendship?	1(not at all)-5(a great deal)	1.63	0.81	1(not at all)	11.6%
How offended would you be if you later discovered they made up a fake excuse (e.g., were sick when they were not)?	1(not at all)-5(a great deal)	3.59	1.07	4(a lot)	83.1%
How upset would you be if a casual acquaintance cancelled plans with you?	1(not at all)-5(a great deal)	1.85	0.84	2(a little)	17.0%
How upset would you be if a good friend cancelled plans with you?	1(not at all)-5(a great deal)	2.55	0.95	3(a moderate amount)	51.5%
How upset would you be if a best friend cancelled plans with you?	1(not at all)-5(a great deal)	2.85	1.17	3(a moderate amount)	60.4%
<b>Open-ended Questions</b>					
Imagine that a friend is expecting to cancel plans with you for some reason. How would you prefer that they go about doing it?					
What would you consider a <u>reasonable</u> excuse to cancel plans with you?					
What would you consider an <u>inappropriate</u> excuse to cancel plans with you?					

Note. All means for the close-ended questions significantly differed from the mid-point of the scale ( $ps < .001$ ).

a bad excuse is ( $N = 1192$ ; 0 exclusions).<sup>3</sup> A full description of the content coding scheme development and execution can be found in the supplementary materials (and on the OSF site).

The resulting features for each open-ended question, exemplar responses, and their frequencies are provided in

[Table 2](#). Participants could mention multiple ways to cancel (e.g., just wanting to be sent a simple text to cancel (Simple Call/text) and wanting to reschedule (Reschedule)) or a good/bad excuse as having multiple components. Thus, the percentages across features do not sum to 100% to allow for multiple features in each response.

<sup>3</sup> Upon completion of data collection, open-ended responses were randomly assigned an identification number (for later re-merging following coding) and migrated to a separate file for coding purposes. Their order was scrambled prior to the provision for the initial coding and subsequent coders. This separation and scrambling was purposely done so the coding was not unduly influenced by having only data from one source and to keep the coders blind to other characteristics that the participants provided (and their demographics). After codes/features were generated, the data were merged back into the main data file and replaced the text responses (so they could be publicly shared).

**Table 2. Open-ended Coding for Cancelling Etiquette**

Imagine that a friend is expecting to cancel plans with you for some reason. How would you prefer that they go about doing it?		
Feature	Definition	% mentioned
Advanced Notice	Mentions wanting to be given advanced notice "...Just as long as they give enough notice..."	59.1%
Simple Call/text	Mentions wanting to be told over some medium, meant to be quick/immediate "Through text is the fastest"	48.0%
Honesty	Mentions wanting an honest/forthright portrayal for why they are cancelling "...I would want them to be honest with why that can't come..."	28.6%
Reason	Mentions needing to have a legitimate reason "...have them tell me why they are cancelling plans..."	27.7%
Rescheduling	Mentions something about rescheduling or making plans for the future "...maybe make another time to meet..."	12.3%
Expressing Remorse	Mentions wanting an apology or saying sorry "Ideally they'd...seem somewhat disappointed or apologetic as well"	10.1%
Consideration of Canteee's Plans	Mentions a sensitivity so that they can make alternative plans with their time "...let me know as soon as possible so I can make other arrangements"	9.8%
Conversation	Mentions actually wanting to talk on the phone and have an extended conversation about it "I would like it if they call me because it's personal and it shows they care about me, too"	8.3%
What would you consider a <u>reasonable</u> excuse to cancel plans with you?		
Feature	Definition	% mentioned
Health	Mention something about having a physical illness or health-related concern "Anything health related"	49.4%
Family	Mention something about childcare or a family concern (e.g., family member's health) "That a family member is sick and in the hospital"	49.4%
Work/business	Mention something about work or an obligation that made them busy "Having to work or something to do with their kids"	42.2%
Unexpected	Mention something that would be considered unexpected or a non-specific emergency "They had an emergency come up"	24.8%
Physically/emotionally not well	Mention something about feeling tired or not feeling well (non-illness related) "They felt tired"	17.9%
Important	Mention something that is non-specifically important (scenarios not coded as 'Unexpected') "Something important came up"	8.7%
Money	Mention money as a barrier to hanging out "can't afford it"	1.1%

What would you consider an inappropriate excuse to cancel plans with you?

Feature	Definition	% mentioned
Better Offer	Mention they received a more attractive offer from another party or activity "They found something better to do"	53.3%
Feelings	Mention that they do not feel like socializing or lack interest "They don't feel like it"	18.1%
Lying	Mention of dishonesty or lying when cancelling "Lying about work or home life"	13.5%
Poor Planning/Sleeping	Mentioning poor planning, forgetting, or oversleeping "Woke up late or forgot about it"	6.5%
Ostensibly Inappropriate	Mention that an excuse can often be so bad that it is worthy of ridicule "I had to wash my hair"	6.5%
Romance	Mention attending a date instead "Met someone and have a date instead"	6.4%
Money/Practicality	Mention money as a barrier to hanging out or another practicality "I don't have a ride" "...that they are broke..."	4.0%
Being Mean	Mention of being ostensibly mean about cancelling, such as communicating that they do not like the cancellee "...don't want to be around me..."	3.7%
Change of Mind	Mention changing their mind about hanging out "Just because they changed their mind"	1.8%
No Excuse Provided	Mention that no excuse is provided for why they are cancelling "No reason at all"	1.3%

*Note.* % mentioned is calculated by summing the number of occurrences of a feature and then dividing by the total number of eligible entries that feature could appear in (see supplement for more details) and multiplying by 100. Participants could mention multiple features in their responses. Thus, percentages do not sum to 100%.

The features relating to how to cancel plans focused on the practical elements of the process of cancelling, such as providing advanced notice and taking the cancellee's plans into consideration, communicating over some medium (either text, call, or in-person), and providing recompense for cancelling (e.g., apologizing, providing a reason). The most frequent things mentioned by participants were that they would like advanced notice about the cancellation (59.1%) and to be told in a relatively quick way (a brief communication via call or text to quickly/immediately convey that they need to cancel; 48.0%). Participants also wanted a forthright or honest explanation (28.6%) that represented a good reason why they were being cancelled on (27.7%). Only a small minority of people spontaneously reported wanting to reschedule or talk about future plans (12.3%). Finally, few participants wanted a formal apology (10.1%), wanted cancellations to take into account their opportunity for other activities (9.8%), or to talk beyond a short phone call or text about the cancellation (8.3%).

Participants were asked to provide what they thought would be a reasonable excuse someone could use to cancel plans with them. The features often centered on personal- (e.g., health, emotions), family-, or work-related barriers to fulfilling plans. There were also elements of unexpected or unanticipated events being barriers to fulfilling plans. Approximately half of the sample said that health- (49.4%) or family-related excuses (49.4%) are the most appropriate. Work- or obligation-related excuses were also seen as appropriate by about 40% of the sample. Having an emergency or something unexpected come up was spontaneously mentioned about 25% of the time (only some of the time did this unexpected feature include the aforementioned reasons). General feelings of fatigue or non-specific wellness were nominated by 17.9% of the sample. Finally, merely saying something is important (not overlapping with the other features; 8.7%) or a social event being too expensive (1.1%) were mentioned with rare frequencies as good excuses.

For bad excuses for cancelling, most of the features centered on a transgression against the cancellee, such as pursuing more rewarding social events or romantic opportunities (and communicating this to the cancellee), not being interested in socializing, lying, and being mean. Other excuses were more self-focused, such as the canceller being poor at planning and changing their mind about socializing. In terms of what constitutes an inappropriate excuse, the most frequently mentioned excuse was that they received a better offer for a more attractive social event (53.3%). A lack of interest (18.1%) or an outright lie (13.5%) were also spontaneously offered as inappropriate excuses

to cancel. Poor planning, laughably inappropriate (i.e., a catch-all category meant to capture otherworldly or ridiculous excuses) reasons, and cancelling plans for romance-related reasons (e.g., pursuing a romantic interest instead) were mentioned rarely (~6.5% of the sample). Finally, money- or practicality-related concerns, being mean toward the cancellee, having a change of mind about hanging out (not because of more attractive social events), or just never providing an excuse at all were mentioned by participants but ultimately were rare (< 5%).<sup>4</sup>

## Discussion

The current study examined how people would prefer friends to cancel plans, their negative emotions to being cancelled on, and the best ways to go about it. Overall, people did not find cancellations too upsetting, even from close friends. However, there were some common opinions for the best way to go about cancelling plans. Specifically, people thought friends should be given advanced notice, often through a quick call/text, and be truthful about the excuse for cancelling. The most common good excuses centered around health, family, and work commitments. The worst excuses were those that involved friends having a better offer than socializing with the cancellee. The current study is among the first to explore the wide variety of norms around cancelling plans.

### Need to Belong and Keeping Plans

Maintaining relationships with others is important to humans (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In order for friendships to last, people must spend time together and invest in those relationships (Hall, 2019; Le & Agnew, 2003; Tran et al., 2019). It would be understandable to be upset about cancelling plans given that this would signal an asymmetry in investment in a friendship. When explicitly asked how upset they would be if they were cancelled on by a good or best friend, the modal response for participants was that they would be moderately upset. The level of investment did appear to matter: being cancelled on by a best friend (presumably a relationship that people have invested a great deal in) was more upsetting than being cancelled on by a good friend or a casual acquaintance. Thus, although disappointment and frustration as a result of being cancelled on is likely inevitable, there is a hierarchy regarding the conditions under which it might be more upsetting. In this way, being cancelled on by close others may be more upsetting because it more clearly violates the norms

<sup>4</sup> Although not the subject of the current study, while exploring the data, we found some support for Felmlee et al. (2012)'s observation that women were more disapproving than men regarding cancelling plans. Women reported being more annoyed with cancellations with little notice given, thought it was important to reschedule plans, were more offended if the excuse was a lie, and were more upset if a good or best friend cancelled on them. There was some countervailing evidence though: men wanted more advanced notice, thought that cancelling was more likely to affect their friendships, and were more upset when a casual acquaintance cancelled compared to women. There were also some gender differences in the open-ended features. However, the gender differences among both the closed- and open-ended items were all relatively small ( $|.06| < r_s < .17$ ,  $ps < .031$ ). A full copy of these results can be requested from the corresponding author or explored in the available data set.



of friendship and could resemble a form of social rejection (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Hartgerink et al., 2015).

The most common response from the quantitative data was that people would like advance notice when being cancelled on by a friend and would find it annoying if they were cancelled on a few minutes before or the morning of. Such responses aligned well with the aforementioned research on the norms around forming and maintaining relationships (Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Carnegie, 1937/2010). Specifically, communicating early on about cancelled plans communicates a type of responsiveness to a relational partner's predicament; perceiving relational partners as responsive is thought to be one of the major contributors to successful relationships (Reis et al., 2004; Reis & Shaver, 1988).

Indeed, indicators of responsiveness were also seen in the good and bad reasons for why a friend would cancel: that reasonable excuses involve relatively serious considerations (e.g., health, family, work), require honesty, and occasionally require remorse. Having these elements present is consistent with observations from the literature on rejection communication, in which rejections are more clearly accepted when some consideration for the target of a rejection is made (Jablin & Krone, 1984). It also helps save face and maintain positive evaluations in the eyes of the cancellee (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Wilson et al., 1991). Outright deception or communicating that a cancellee holds a lower place in a social network are seen as inappropriate reasons for cancelling (Krems et al., 2021), consistent with research showing that honesty and mutual liking are positive traits we look for in friends and romantic partners (Anderson, 1968; Chandler, 2018; Eastwick & Finkel, 2009). Worth noting, some research would suggest that inappropriate excuses might be more rare, given people's reluctance to communicate antagonistic thoughts about people and reject them when given the chance (Folkes, 1982; Joel et al., 2014). The type of sensitivity found in good excuses for cancelling can also be seen in a separate but related literature on how to communicate bad news or reject friends and romantic partners. For example, in the context of rejecting sexual advances in romantic relationships, doing so in a way that affirms positive and affectionate relationship feelings for partners is associated with higher relationship satisfaction (Kim et al., 2018, 2020). In other words, *how* cancellations are made may be more important than *whether* cancellations are made. In general, cancelling strategies based on *approach* motivation (i.e., seeking rewards in relationship, such as positive affect) might affirm the importance of a relationship and promote relationship satisfaction (Gable & Impett, 2012).

### Limitations and Future Directions

The current study was a mixed method investigation that asked a large sample of people the methods and emotional reactions that they had to cancelling plans and being cancelled on. The results provided some intuitive results for the considerations that friends make and what they consider to be appropriate and poor etiquette around can-

celling plans. Nevertheless, there are limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the current study was cross-sectional in nature and relied on people's responses to being cancelled on and general attitudes toward cancellations. A more rigorous test would be to assess participants longitudinally as they experience interpersonal disappointments or transgressions (Dorfman et al., 2022). Doing so would enable us to more closely assess people's emotional responses to being cancelled on and if these responses vary based on the excuses provided to people. Similarly, experimental paradigms also exist that are meant to emulate experiences with interpersonal rejection and ostracism (e.g., cyberball, false feedback, manufactured social interactions; Ciarocco et al., 2001; Williams & Jarvis, 2006). Future research can develop similar paradigms to test the effects of being cancelled on and to see whether the psychological effects mirror those seen in other interpersonal rejection/ostracism circumstances.

Second, and related to the first limitation, having individuals spontaneously generate preferences for cancellations, reasons for cancellations, and emotional responses to cancellations invites a great degree of individual difference influences that were not modeled in the current study. Specifically, it is possible that people were drawing on their own recent experiences when asked about their emotional reactions to being cancelled on or the (in)appropriate ways of doing so, limiting the possible ways people could think about cancellations. Enduring personal characteristics might also affect people's responses to being cancelled on or their memories of previous cancellations. For example, people high in rejection sensitivity might perceive cancellations to be more upsetting and consequential to the future of their relationships (Downey & Feldman, 1996; London et al., 2007). Likewise, people with insecure attachment orientations may negatively "twist" relationship experiences, such that cancellations are remembered more negatively than when they first occurred (Feeney & Cassidy, 2003; Simpson et al., 2010).

Beyond individual difference characteristics, there are a host of context or situation-dependent features as well. We elected to explore people's thoughts about an ambiguous "friend" that cancels on them. Of course, doing so was stripped of contextualizing information that is present in people's friendships. For example, cancellations with friends do not occur in a vacuum and there is often a long-shared history between friends. As a result, the typicality of the cancellee is likely relevant (e.g., do they often cancel? What excuses do they often use?). More formal analyses can also uncover whether closeness between friends (or the plans themselves—was it the friend's wedding or a coffee meeting?) shifts the bar for what is considered an optimal cancellation strategy (e.g., would a person cancelling a vacation with their best friend based on an inappropriate excuse hit harder than an acquaintance using an inappropriate excuse to cancel plans to meet up with a larger, mostly unacquainted group locally?). Also unmeasured here is how people would evaluate their friends and the possibility of a cancellation if they had full knowledge of the circum-

stances of a situation. For example, would friends want to hang out with each other if one friend felt they “had a better offer” to hang out with someone else? This technically would not be considered a cancellation, although the evaluation of a friendship hierarchy is still being made (Krems et al., 2021). Are there certain situations—and even friendships—where friends are obligated to provide excuses or not? Future research can model individual differences in people’s responses to cancellations and their tendencies to and strategies for cancelling on others, as well as situational characteristics that might affect these relationships.

Third, we were relatively limited in our coverage of the emotional reactions and responses people might have had to being cancelled on. We focused on three particular emotions—feeling annoyed, upset, and offended. Of course, these three questions only captured a sliver of the variety of responses people could have. For example, they might feel relatively indifferent to having a friend cancel on them. Likewise, there are plenty of situations that make people feel relieved when plans are cancelled. Because we went in with the assumption that being cancelled on was a negative experience—and our group discussion to generate these items reflects that—we likely missed a more accurate characterization of this experience. We hope that future research will use more established scales to capture the many different ways that people experience cancellations. Related, we were agnostic to whether one excuse was inherently better or worse than another; we strictly described their relative frequencies. It is important to not evaluate the appropriateness of an excuse based on how commonly it appeared. For example, providing no excuse for cancelling was extremely rare, but it might be considered to be among the most inappropriate excuses a friend could offer. Likewise, would people prefer that a friend cancels for an honest reason that is ostensibly distasteful (i.e., they have a better offer) or that the friend keeps the reason vague, so that their feelings and the friendship are spared (Brown & Levinson, 1987)? A way to formally evaluate the appropriateness of these excuses would be to have an independent group of participants rate the features found in [Table 2](#) based on how appropriate or reasonable they are. Future research can pursue this valuable direction and even standardize instruments to assess the practice of cancelling plans.

Fourth, our sample comprised entirely of two convenience samples, mostly from an undergraduate student subject pool. Many of the results from the current project can characterize non-student samples’ experiences with cancellations, but the exact responses and distribution of responses here might not generalize to other samples. Although our MTurk sample included some middle-aged and older participants, future research should more deliberately sample participants across the lifespan, from different racial/ethnic groups, and those living in different countries—all characteristics that might predict variation in how people perceive norms around cancellation and rejection in friendships (Lou & Li, 2017; Maiolatesi et al., 2022; Wolfgramm et al., 2014). Related to this point, we focused relatively narrowly on cancellations within the context of

friendships, and our results cannot speak to other contexts (e.g., professional commitments, medical appointments/procedures, other leisure events [e.g., sporting events, romantic plans]). Future research can examine if the descriptive information found in the current study can characterize dynamics in other settings.

## Conclusion

This study found that, when being cancelled on, most people want an honest excuse with advanced notice via a quick call/text. The best excuses were health-, family-, and work-related and the worst excuse was having a better offer. Although people did not report strong feelings of distress when asked about being cancelled on, their stronger reactions to more emotionally close friends cancelling on them and their preferred cancellation experiences were consistent with current relationship theories and research (e.g., being honest and responsive to relational partners and friends; Argyle & Henderson, 1984; Chandler, 2018; Reis et al., 2004; Rusbult et al., 1998). Future research can more deliberately test questions about causality, process, context, and individual differences by developing laboratory paradigms and measuring individual difference characteristics.

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## Author Contributions

WC conceptualized the idea, analyzed the data, and interpreted the results; SC, JT, and AT drafted the manuscript; JO and WC provided critical feedback. All authors approve the content of this paper.

## Competing Interests

The authors report no competing or conflicts of interest in the execution or publication of this project. WC is an associate editor at *Collabra: Psychology*. He was not involved in the review process of this article.

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## Data Accessibility Statement

The data and study materials can be found at: <https://osf.io/vxnrk/>

This study was not pre-registered.

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### Supplemental Material

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