



Case Report

Maybe don't say "maybe": How and why invitees fail to realize that they should not respond to invitations with a "maybe"[☆]

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ABSTRACT

People often invite others to join them for social activities. Upon receiving an invitation, an invitee might respond to the inviter with a tentative "maybe." We examine whether invitees accurately gauge an inviter's preferences when they contemplate replying with a "maybe" (vs. "no"). Across six experiments (five preregistered), we show that invitees often overestimate the likelihood that an inviter would prefer a "maybe" response over a direct "no," because they underestimate how much more disrespected an inviter feels upon receiving a "maybe" (vs. "no"). We also demonstrate that these mispredictions arise, in part, due to motivated reasoning. Invitees think that replying with a "maybe" (vs. "no") aligns with what an inviter would find desirable, in part because a "maybe" response serves the invitee's own interests more than a direct decline does. Finally, we illustrate that partly due to their flawed predictions, invitees are more likely to respond with a "maybe" (vs. "no") even though an inviter would prefer greater decisiveness. The findings contribute to the emerging social psychology of invitations.

Imagine that a friend has an extra ticket to an upcoming concert. Your friend invites you to join them, but you are not sure if you can make it. You contemplate whether to respond with "maybe" or "no." You realize that saying "maybe" will allow you to keep the possibility of attending open, even though you eventually might not, and you end up convincing yourself that your friend would prefer a "maybe" over a definitive "no." Accordingly, you reply with a "maybe." However, this response leaves your friend in limbo, making them feel disrespected that you prioritized maintaining your own flexibility over providing them with clarity. Contrary to your beliefs, your friend would have much preferred that you simply declined with a direct "no."

We are interested in the psychology of invitations. Specifically, we examine invitees' predictions about an inviter's preferences—and how those predictions align with the inviter's preferences—when invitees consider replying to an invitation with a "maybe" (vs. "no"). We

demonstrate that invitees often overestimate the likelihood an inviter would prefer a "maybe" response over a "no," largely because invitees fail to appreciate the extent to which inviters feel more disrespected by a "maybe" than by a "no." Moreover, we illustrate that these miscalculations stem, in part,¹ from motivated reasoning. Invitees think that responding with a "maybe," rather than a "no," is preferable in the eyes of inviters, partly because a "maybe" response better serves invitees' own interests by keeping their options open. Lastly, we show that, due in part to invitees' flawed predictions, they are more likely to respond with a "maybe" than inviters would prefer.

Our research makes five contributions. First, we add to the emerging literature on invitations (Givi et al., 2025; Givi & Kirk, 2024). Despite invitations being a staple of social lives, only recently have social psychologists started studying them. We address what inviters and invitees think about an invitee responding with "maybe" to an invitation.

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¹ We use qualifier words such as "in part" throughout the article to acknowledge that motivated reasoning is likely not the only psychological mechanism driving our findings.

Second, we strengthen the self-other decision-making literature (Liu & Min, 2020) that focuses on prediction errors. We show that invitees can err in their predictions regarding inviters' preferences. Although preference prediction errors have been demonstrated in other contexts (e.g., gift-giving), there is minimal work examining such mispredictions in the invitation domain. Third, we advance the literature on motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990), particularly in the case of self-other decision making (Polman, 2012). We identify motivated reasoning in a new context and provide evidence of it in multiple ways, thus generating tools for studying motivated reasoning processes. Moreover, whereas much prior work has examined implications of motivated reasoning for self-related evaluations (e.g., how much credit one deserves), we document a case in which it influences individuals' predictions about the preferences of others. Fourth, and more broadly, we illustrate that individuals sometimes prefer communicating vaguely in order to preserve optionality, which can lead them to err in predicting the preferences of those who receive their communications. This same idea may be applicable in other contexts, such as a romantic partner with cold feet responding vaguely when asked "what are we?" by their partner. Fifth, we offer additional testimony regarding the role of emotions in preferences (Loewenstein et al., 2001). We establish disrespect as a key affective outcome in the context of invitations.

1. Invitations

Individuals often make social plans by asking others if they would like to engage in an activity. That is, plans are often the byproduct of an invitation from one individual to another, whether that invitation be informal (e.g., via a text message) or formal (e.g., through an invitation platform such as Evite). The nascent literature on invitations has unveiled several findings. Inviters consider invitation declines more acceptable when these are tied to lack of money versus time (Donnelly et al., 2021). Invitees overestimate the negative social ramifications of declining invitations (Givi & Kirk, 2024). Potential self-invites display a lower propensity to request inclusion in plans than is desired by those organizing them (Givi et al., 2025). Individuals often think about what activity to do, how long to do it, and how often to do it, when predicting others' social interaction preferences (Liu & Kwon, 2022). Also, individuals prefer to be guests (who receive invitations) rather than hosts (who extend them; Kovacheva et al., 2024).

One blind spot in this literature is the lack of research on responding with "maybe" to an invitation. There is work on the use of "maybe" in one's requests of others (Zürm et al., 2021), but not in replies to invitations. Yet, there is much evidence that invitees often respond to invitations with "maybe." Relevant message board posts (pandaking1213, 2018; samlir, 2018) and popular press articles (Bernstein, 2010; Conochan, 2020) abound. Also, many invitation technologies (e.g., Evite) offer invitees the opportunity to respond by indicating "maybe." Why do invitees consider a "maybe?" Arguably, for two reasons. Either they are uncertain they *can* accept, or they are uncertain they *want* to accept. For generalizability, we address both cases.

2. Motivated reasoning and disrespect

Invitees and inviters have competing interests when an invitee is faced with the decision of whether to respond with "maybe" or "no." From the invitee's perspective, it is often in their best interest to reply to an initial invitation with "maybe." This is because a "maybe" allows them to maintain flexibility, keeping the option open to later decide between "yes" and "no." In contrast, an immediate "no" typically shuts the door on the possibility of participation. Conversely, from the inviter's perspective, it is often more advantageous to receive a "no" rather than a "maybe." A "maybe" leaves the inviter in a state of uncertainty,

hindering their ability to develop a course of action and make decisions on important matters, such as whether to extend the invitation to someone else, how to arrange transportation, and when to schedule the activity. In contrast, a "no" provides clarity, enabling the inviter to make such decisions.

Given that individuals regularly assume both roles—inviter and invitee—and that the competing interests in these roles are rather apparent, one might assume that invitees fully appreciate the inviter's perspective on the benefits of a "no" over a "maybe." However, we suggest that, due to motivated reasoning, invitees often misjudge this dynamic when forecasting.

Motivated reasoning refers to the tendency to process information in ways that align with one's desires and preferences (Kunda, 1990). Individuals overestimate their own contributions to successes (Campbell & Sedikides, 1999), seek out information that confirms their beliefs (Derreumaux et al., 2022), and generate more rebuttals to information that contradicts their preferences (Jain & Maheswaran, 2000). Indeed, motivated reasoning accounts for a variety of psychological phenomena (Donovan & Priester, 2017; Peters & Gawronski, 2011; Sedikides & Gregg, 2008).

We propose that motivated reasoning plays a role when invitees predict an inviter's reaction to a "maybe" (vs. "no"). According to motivated reasoning, when predicting how an inviter would feel about a "maybe," invitees overestimate how appealing inviters find this response. Given that it is in the invitee's best interest to say "maybe," they may rationalize that inviters also find "maybes" appealing. Specifically, motivated reasoning may lead invitees to overlook how much more disrespected inviters feel when given a "maybe" rather than a direct "no."

We argue that disrespect plays a key role in this context, as it influences both inviters' preferences and invitees' predictions. Disrespect involves a lack of regard for others (Miller, 2001; Wojciszke et al., 2009). An invitee's decision to say "maybe," motivated by self-interest but undermining the inviter's best interest, represents such disregard. In prioritizing their own benefit over that of the inviter, the invitee disregards the inviter's needs. Given that disrespect arises from the tension between the perspectives of both parties—stemming from their divergent interests—we propose it is central in shaping inviters' preferences and invitees' forecasts. Notably, discussions of "maybe" responses outside academic contexts further highlight the relevance of disrespect (Anonymous, 2022; Nahar, 2018).

In summary, according to motivated reasoning, invitees will underestimate the extent to which inviters feel more disrespected by a "maybe" relative to a "no." Given that emotions strongly predict preferences (Loewenstein et al., 2001), this underestimation will lead invitees to overestimate the likelihood that inviters prefer a "maybe."

3. Hypotheses

Formally, we offer the following:

H1. Invitees often overestimate the likelihood that an inviter prefers the invitee respond with "maybe" rather than "no" to an invitation.

H2. Invitees often underestimate the extent to which inviters feel more disrespected when receiving a "maybe" compared to a "no." This misperception mediates invitees' overestimation of an inviter's preference for a "maybe" response.

We have proposed that motivated reasoning partially drives invitees' mispredictions. We outline next the relevant four hypotheses (H3a–H3d). First, when asked about their preferred response to an invitation, invitees will prefer to reply with "maybe" (vs. "no") more frequently than inviters would desire. After all, if replying with a "maybe" serves the interests of the invitee rather than the inviter, and if

this self-interest helps to lead invitees to misjudge how favorably inviters view a “maybe” relative to a “no,” then a divergence will emerge between invitees’ and inviters’ preferences. Second, following the same logic, invitees’ own preferences will be related to their predictions about inviters’ preferences. Formally, we hypothesize:

H3a. Invitees prefer to say “maybe” (vs. “no”) more often than inviters desire.

H3b. Invitees’ preferences for saying “maybe” (vs. “no”) are positively associated with their predictions regarding inviters’ preferences.

Third, explicitly adopting the inviter’s perspective prior to making a prediction about the inviter’s preference will enhance the accuracy of invitees’ predictions. By assuming the inviter’s perspective, invitees are more likely to recognize that inviters disfavor receiving a “maybe.” They will more fully appreciate the benefits a “no” offers to inviters. This realization will override motivated reasoning that might otherwise bias invitees toward thinking a “maybe” is preferable. Indeed, prior work demonstrates that perspective taking can reduce motivated reasoning (McCrudden et al., 2017).

Formally, we hypothesize:

H3c. Invitees become more accurate in predicting inviters’ preferences between a “maybe” and a “no” after first adopting the inviter’s perspective.

Fourth, in cases where invitees are uncertain about their ability to participate and thus consider responding with “maybe,” the attractiveness of the activity associated with the invitation is likely to influence their predictions about the inviter’s preferences. As the perceived desirability of the activity increases, so too should the appeal of responding with “maybe,” leading invitees to be more likely to convince themselves that the inviter would prefer a “maybe.” This is consistent with broader findings in the motivated reasoning literature where desirability manipulations influence judgment and decision making (Kunda, 1990). Formally, we hypothesize:

H3d. Invitees are more (vs. less) likely to think inviters prefer a “maybe” (vs. “no”) when the invitation involves an activity the invitee finds desirable (vs. undesirable).

We turn next to a downstream consequence. When making decisions that involve another person, individuals’ predictions about the preferences of that person affect their ultimate choices (Liu et al., 2019). For example, gift-givers often base their selections largely on what they think the recipient would prefer (Givi et al., 2023). In the current context, we have hypothesized that invitees overestimate the extent to which inviters prefer a “maybe” (vs. “no”). Following this logic, such overestimations will likely lead invitees to say “maybe” more often than invitees would prefer. Formally, we hypothesize:

H4a. Invitees respond with “maybe” (vs. “no”) more frequently than inviters would prefer.

H4b. Invitees’ predictions regarding inviters’ preferences for receiving a “maybe” (vs. “no”) are positively associated with their behaviors in terms of saying “maybe” (vs. “no”).

4. Pilot experiment

Our theorizing is predicated on the idea that inviters and invitees have competing interests when an invitee is weighing saying “no” versus “maybe.” We suggest that invitees have a stronger preference for the “maybe” response compared to inviters, because a “maybe” allows an invitee to keep their options open, whereas a “no” allows an inviter to move forward with a plan of action. We tested these ideas in a pilot experiment (Supplemental Materials). We randomly assigned participants to either the invitee or inviter condition. In the former, they read a vignette wherein they received an invitation from a friend and were

unsure if they could accept, so they debated whether to say “maybe” or “no”; in the latter, they read the same vignette but from the inviter’s perspective.

We tested 297 U.S. Prolific workers. They indicated which response they would prefer (“no” or “maybe”) and explained why. We coded their explanations for: (i) mentioning a “maybe” would allow the invitee to keep their options open (e.g., “Telling <name> maybe keeps the option open...”) and (ii) mentioning a “no” would allow the inviter to move forward with a plan (e.g., “...a straight answer will enable me determine what to do next...”). Invitees (83%) were more likely to prefer the “maybe” response compared to inviters (46%), $\chi^2(1, N = 297) = 43.99$, $p < .001$, $\phi = 0.39$; $CI_{95\%} = [27\%, 47\%]$. In addition, 50% of invitees mentioned keeping their options open, and 47% of inviters mentioned moving forward with a plan. That is, without any prompting to make these considerations salient, approximately half of participants raised them. In summary, this pilot provides preliminary support for our theorizing, in particular H3a.

5. Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we tested H1-H2. About half of participants assumed the role of invitee and predicted whether an inviter would prefer they respond to an invitation with “maybe” or “no.” They also predicted which response would make the inviter feel more disrespected. The others assumed the role of inviter and reported their own preference and feelings. We additionally manipulated whether the invitee debated between “maybe” and “no” because they were not sure if they *could* attend or *wanted* to attend.²

5.1. Method

We recruited 408 U.S. Prolific workers and excluded four for failing an attention check, leaving 404.³ We randomly assigned them to a condition of a 2 (role: invitee vs. inviter) $\times$ 2 (reason: can vs. want) between-subjects design.

All participants began by listing a friend’s name. Those assigned to the invitee condition then read a vignette. It was Monday, and their friend had an extra ticket to the soft launch of a new restaurant on Saturday evening. Their friend’s partner was unable to attend, so the friend texted the participant to ask if they would like to join. In the “reason–can” condition ($n = 103$), the participant was unsure whether they could go and debated whether to respond with “maybe” or “no.” In the “reason–want” condition ($n = 97$), the participant was unsure whether they wanted to go and debated between “maybe” and “no.” Participants then indicated what they thought their friend would prefer them to say (“no” or “maybe”). Next, they stated which response they thought would make their friend feel more disrespected ($1 = \text{definitely no}$, $7 = \text{definitely maybe}$).⁴

Participants assigned to the inviter condition completed the same steps, except from the inviter’s perspective. They read a vignette in which they had an extra ticket to the restaurant’s soft launch. Their partner was unable to attend, so they texted their friend and asked if they would like to join. In the “reason–can” condition ($n = 101$), their

² We used this manipulation for generalizability purposes and did not expect it to interact with the role manipulation.

³ We obtained ethical approval from the first author’s institution. We present sensitivity power analyses in Supplemental Materials. We report all variables and decided ahead of time on the sample sizes and exclusion protocol. We based sample sizes on relevant prior research (Givi & Kirk, 2024). We placed all stimuli, data, and analysis code at (https://osf.io/7fazw/?view_only=23a28c8e3bb84812b35efa1345351d28).

⁴ In this experiment as well as in Experiment 2 and SM1, we also included a measure of frustration, which produced mixed results across the three experiments (Supplemental Materials).

friend was unsure whether they could go, whereas, in the “reason–want” condition ($n = 103$), their friend was unsure whether they wanted to go. Participants then indicated what they would prefer their friend to say: “no” or “maybe.” Next, they stated which response would make them feel more disrespected ($1 = \text{definitely no}$, $7 = \text{definitely maybe}$). An attention check and demographic questions followed in all conditions.

5.2. Results and discussion

We conducted a logistic regression on the invitation response preference and an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on disrespect, with role, reason, and their interaction as independent variables. As expected, in neither analysis was the interaction significant (interaction $ps > 0.468$; all invitee vs. inviter simple effect $ps < 0.001$). We thus report the results below collapsed across the reason conditions.

Consistent with H1, invitees (65%) overestimated how likely inviters (34%) were to prefer a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 404) = 36.82, p < .001, \phi = 0.30$; $CI_{95\%} = [21\%, 40\%]$ (Fig. 1). Consistent with H2, invitees ($M = 3.21, SD = 1.90$) underestimated the extent to which inviters ($M = 4.29, SD = 1.59$) would feel more disrespected with a “maybe” (vs. “no”), $F(1, 402) = 38.97, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.088, CI_{95\%} = [0.74, 1.43]$, and this difference mediated (Hayes, 2017) the effect of role on invitation response preference (Fig. 2).⁵

These results support H1–H2. Invitees overestimated the likelihood that an inviter would prefer them to respond to an invitation with “maybe.” Further, this overestimation stemmed from invitees underestimating the extent to which inviters feel more disrespected when receiving a “maybe” compared to a “no.”

6. Experiment 2

In preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/9xyy-8q6y.pdf>) Experiment 2, we addressed remaining issues from Experiment 1. Specifically, in Experiment 1, we did not inform participants about key contextual details: the timeline in which the invitee would follow up with a definitive answer if they initially said “maybe,” the extent to which the inviter preferred attending the event with the invitee rather than another person, and the likelihood that a “maybe” would ultimately become a “yes” or a “no.” It is possible inviters and invitees make different assumptions about these aspects, contributing to their

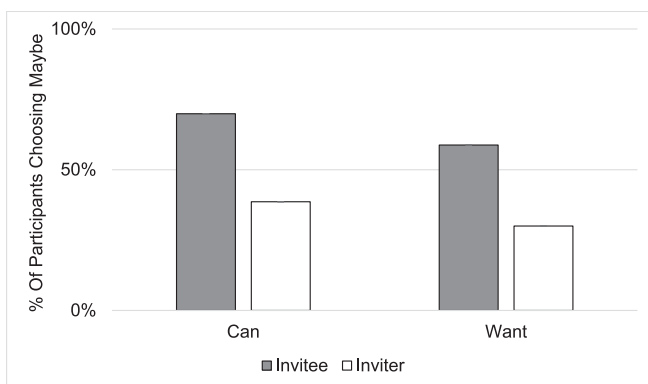


Fig. 1. Experiment 1 – Invitees mispredict inviters' invitation response preferences.

⁵ Although the sequencing of this mediation model follows our conceptual framework and is logically sound, this mediation model is one of several potential models, including others in which different constructs would serve as mediators. Yet, a reverse model with the dependent variable and mediator flipped is conceptually implausible.

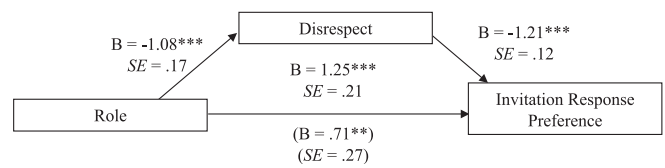


Fig. 2. Mediation analysis in Experiment 1.

Note. Role coded as: 1 = invitee, 0 = inviter. Values indicate unstandardized regression coefficients. Value in parentheses indicates results when we included role and disrespect in the regression. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Indirect effect = 1.25, $CI_{95\%} = [0.81, 1.84]$.

divergent responses. Accordingly, in Experiment 2, we specified these aspects.

6.1. Method

We recruited 301 U.S. Prolific workers and excluded five for failing an attention check, leaving 296. We randomly assigned them to the invitee ($n = 150$) or inviter ($n = 146$) condition.

Participants assigned to the invitee condition read the following vignette. It was Thursday and a friend, Alex, had an extra ticket to the soft launch of a new restaurant on Tuesday evening. Alex's partner was unable to go, and Alex had several good friends they could ask, with one of these friends being the participant. So, Alex texted the participant and asked if they would like to join. The participant was unsure whether they could go because they might have prior plans with another friend on Tuesday night. This other friend would find out on Sunday whether they would be scheduled to work on Tuesday night. The vignette specified that either the friend or one of their coworkers would be chosen to work, so there was a 50% chance the friend would be scheduled to work and a 50% chance they would have the evening off and able to follow through with the plans with the participant. Thus, the participant debated whether to tell Alex “maybe” or “no,” with the “maybe” response specifying that the participant would let Alex know by the end of the weekend. Participants then indicated what they thought Alex would prefer them to say (“no” or “maybe”) and responded to the same disrespect measure as in Experiment 1. Participants in the inviter condition completed the same steps, except from the inviter's perspective.

6.2. Results and discussion

As per H1, invitees (63%) overestimated how likely inviters (42%) were to prefer a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 296) = 13.79, p < .001, \phi = 0.22$; $CI_{95\%} = [10\%, 33\%]$. Consistent with H2, invitees ($M = 3.37, SD = 2.06$) underestimated the extent to which inviters ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.94$) would feel more disrespected with a “maybe” (vs. “no”), $F(1, 294) = 16.84, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = 0.054, CI_{95\%} = [0.50, 1.41]$, and this difference mediated (Hayes, 2017) the effect of role on invitation response preference (Fig. 3).

The results provided further support for H1 and H2, respectively. Once again, invitees overestimated the likelihood that an inviter would

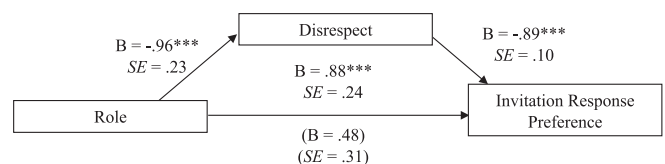


Fig. 3. Mediation analysis in Experiment 2.

Note. Role coded as: 1 = invitee, 0 = inviter. Values indicate unstandardized regression coefficients. Value in parentheses indicates results when we included role and disrespect in the regression. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. Indirect effect = 0.83, $CI_{95\%} = [0.43, 1.35]$.

prefer a “maybe” response, due to invitees underestimating the extent to which inviters feel more disrespected when receiving a “maybe” compared to a “no.”⁶

7. Experiment 3

In preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/6k5w-bh92.pdf>) Experiment 3, we tested a motivated reasoning account. As noted in H3a and H3b, respectively, if motivated reasoning drives invitees’ mispredictions regarding inviters’ preferences, invitees’ preferences will differ from inviters’ (with invitees favoring the “maybe” response more strongly than inviters), and invitees’ preferences will be positively associated with their predictions.

7.1. Method

We recruited 200 U.S. Prolific workers (no exclusions). We randomly assigned them to the invitee ($n = 100$) or inviter ($n = 100$) condition.

Experiment 3 was similar to Experiment 1, except for the following. First, we only included the “reason-can” conditions. Second, we did not include the disrespect measure. Third, in the invitee condition, beyond indicating what they thought their friend would prefer them to say (“no” or “maybe”), participants reported what they would prefer to say (“no” or “maybe”; questions presented in random order).

7.2. Results and discussion

As per H1, invitees (65%) overestimated how likely inviters (39%) were to prefer a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 13.54, p < .001, \phi = 0.26$; $CI_{95\%} = [13\%, 39\%]$. In accord with H3a, invitees (75%) were more likely to prefer responding with a “maybe” than inviters (39%) were to prefer receiving a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 200) = 26.44, p < .001, \phi = 0.36$; $CI_{95\%} = [23\%, 49\%]$. In line with H3b, invitees’ predictions regarding inviters’ preferences were positively related to their own preferences ($r = 0.45, p < .001$).

These results afford further insight into what drives invitees’ mispredictions about inviters’ preferences. Consistent with a motivated reasoning account, invitees were more likely to prefer saying “maybe” than inviters were to prefer receiving a “maybe.” Further, invitees’ predictions concerning inviters’ preferences were positively associated with their own preferences.

8. Experiment 4

In preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/q6nh-gqcp.pdf>) Experiment 4, we re-tested a motivated reasoning account. Participants responded as both invitees and inviters, but we manipulated the order in which they did so. In the invitee-then-inviter condition, participants first acted as an invitee, predicting an inviter’s preference, and subsequently acted as inviters, indicating their own preference. In the inviter-then-invitee condition, participants completed the tasks in the reverse order.

For the first set of responses, we anticipated that invitees’ predictions would differ from inviters’ preferences, as in prior experiments. For the second set, however, we hypothesized that invitees’ predictions would be more accurate (H3c). In the inviter-then-invitee condition, adopting the inviter’s perspective first would mitigate the influence of motivated reasoning on invitees’ predictions. Having just assumed the role of the inviter, participants would be more likely to recognize that, despite any self-serving tendencies, inviters prefer invitees to respond with a “no”

⁶ We replicated these results in an experiment (Experiment SM1—Supplementary Materials) that closely mirrored the current experiment but introduced a longer delay between the initial invitation (Monday) and the invitee’s final response (Sunday), in the event the invitee initially responded with “maybe.”

rather than a “maybe.” Consequently, invitees’ predictions in the inviter-then-invitee condition would align with the preferences expressed by inviters in the invitee-then-inviter condition.

8.1. Method

We recruited 300 U.S. Prolific workers. We excluded one for failing an attention check, leaving 299. We randomly assigned them to the invitee-then-inviter ($n = 149$) or inviter-then-invitee ($n = 150$) condition.

All participants began by listing the name of a friend. Participants assigned to the invitee-then-inviter condition then read a vignette in which the friend they listed and two other friends were planning to buy tickets to an upcoming concert. Given that the participant (the invitee) was also a fan of the band, their friend texted them to ask if they wanted to join, noting that the friends wanted to buy tickets seated together. The participant was unsure whether they were able to go, so they debated whether to tell their friend “maybe” or “no.” Participants then indicated what they thought their friend would prefer them to say (“no” or “maybe”). Next, they completed the same steps, except from the inviter’s perspective. By contrast, in the inviter-then-invitee condition, participants completed these phases in the reverse order, first responding as an inviter and then as an invitee.

8.2. Results and discussion

A 2 (condition: invitee-then-inviter vs. inviter-then-invitee; between-subjects) $\times$ 2 (scenario: first vs. second; within-subjects) mixed logistic regression predicting invitation response preference revealed a significant interaction (Wald $\chi^2 = 6.62, p = .010$; Fig. 4). As per H1, in the first scenario, invitees (49%) overestimated how likely inviters (35%) were to prefer a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 299) = 5.72, p = .017, \phi = 0.14$; $CI_{95\%} = [3\%, 25\%]$. Consistent with H3c, in the second scenario, invitees (37%) did not overestimate how likely inviters (36%) were to prefer a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 299) = 0.04, p = .844, \phi = 0.01$; $CI_{95\%} = [-10\%, 12\%]$.

The results provide additional evidence for the motivated reasoning account. After invitees adopted the inviter’s perspective, their predictions about inviters’ preferences became accurate. This intervention prevented motivated reasoning from emerging, resulting in a closer alignment between invitees’ predictions and inviters’ preferences.

9. Experiment 5

In preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/jyf2-2n2f.pdf>) Experiment 5, we again tested a motivated reasoning account. All participants acted as invitees, but we manipulated the desirability of the activity associated with the invitation. As noted in H3d, according to a motivated reasoning

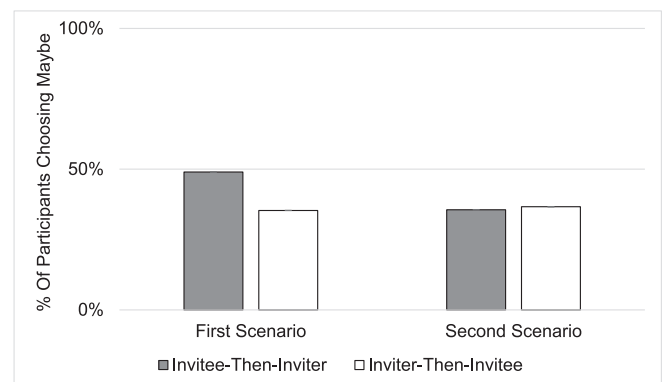


Fig. 4. Experiment 4 – Invitees do not mispredict inviters’ invitation response preferences after taking the inviter’s perspective.

account, invitees will be more likely to think that inviters prefer a “maybe” (vs. “no”) response when the invitees find the activity desirable as opposed to undesirable.

9.1. Method

We recruited 201 U.S. Prolific workers. We excluded 11 for failing an attention check, leaving 190. We randomly assigned them to the invitee–desirable ($n = 95$) or invitee–undesirable ($n = 95$) condition.

All participants adopted the perspective of the invitee and read a vignette that was similar to the invitee vignette from Experiment 2. In the “invitee–desirable” condition, the participant liked the cuisine of the restaurant, whereas in the “invitee–undesirable” condition, the participant disliked the cuisine (the vignette specified that the inviter did not know whether the invitee liked or disliked the cuisine). Participants then indicated what they thought their friend would prefer them to respond with “no” or “maybe.”

9.2. Results and discussion

In accord with H3d, participants in the invitee–desirable condition (76%) were more likely than those in the invitee–undesirable condition (36%) to think that inviters would prefer a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 190) = 30.81, p < .001, \phi = 0.40; CI_{95\%} = [27\%, 53\%]$. These results bolster a motivated reasoning account. Invitees were more (vs. less) likely to think that inviters prefer a “maybe” when the activity was something the invitee found attractive (vs. unattractive).

10. Experiment 6

In preregistered (<https://aspredicted.org/5d3n-fddc.pdf>) Experiment 6, we examined a downstream consequence of invitees’ mispredictions: their behaviors. We tested the hypothesis that invitees respond by saying “maybe” (vs. “no”) to invitations more often than inviters prefer (H4a), as well as the hypothesis that invitees’ predictions regarding inviters’ preferences for receiving a “maybe” (vs. “no”) are positively associated with invitees’ behaviors (H4b).

10.1. Method

We recruited 302 U.S. Prolific workers. We excluded two for failing an attention check, leaving 300. We randomly assigned them to the invitee ($n = 151$) or inviter ($n = 141$) condition. In the invitee condition, the procedure was identical to Experiment 3’s, except that, instead of indicating how they would *prefer* to respond (i.e., say “no” or “maybe”), participants indicated how they *would* respond (in addition to predicting the inviter’s preference). In the inviter condition, the procedure was identical to Experiment 3’s.

10.2. Results and discussion

In accord with H1, invitees (63%) overestimated how likely inviters (48%) were to prefer a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 6.47, p = .011, \phi = 0.15; CI_{95\%} = [3\%, 25\%]$. In line with H4a, invitees (80%) were more likely to say “maybe” than inviters (48%) were to prefer a “maybe,” $\chi^2(1, N = 300) = 33.07, p < .001, \phi = 0.33; CI_{95\%} = [22\%, 42\%]$.⁷ As per H4b, invitees’ behaviors were positively associated with their predictions regarding inviters’ preferences ($r = 0.51, p < .001$). These results

⁷ Some invitees recognized that inviters would prefer a “no” rather than a “maybe,” yet chose to respond with a “maybe” (accounting for the difference between the 63% and 80% reported above). This subset of inviters acknowledged the inviter’s preference but nevertheless responded in a way that served their own interests, consistent with the broader rationale underlying the motivated reasoning account.

demonstrate a downstream consequence of invitees’ misguided predictions. In part because of these flawed forecasts, invitees say “maybe” more often than inviters prefer.

11. General discussion

Our findings contribute to the emerging literature on invitations (Donnelly et al., 2021). We added to it by examining cases when invitees consider responding with “maybe.” We focused on inviters’ preferences between receiving a “maybe” and a “no,” along with invitees’ predictions, preferences, and decision making. In addressing the underlying processes, our research also connected to literatures on motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) and the role of emotions in decision making (Loewenstein et al., 2001). We documented the relevance of these processes in the invitation context. Finally, we identified a decision-making asymmetry. Invitees not only think that inviters would prefer a “maybe” more often than they do, but they also say “maybe” more often than inviters prefer.

The findings are practically relevant. Invitations are a regular part of life, as is saying “maybe” to them. We showed that invitees err when predicting inviters’ invitation response preferences, viewing “maybe” too favorably. Further, this is part of the reason invitees respond with “maybe” more often than inviters would prefer. Our findings imply that invitees should try to tame their optimistic views of the “maybe” response and instead consider saying “no” more frequently. One way to do so is by taking the inviter’s perspective before responding, as per the Experiment 4 results. Alternatively, invitees might respond with a “maybe,” while explicitly giving the inviter permission to treat their reply as a “no” if that better suits the situation.

We examined instances in which invitees say “maybe.” Future work could investigate other vague invitee responses that are similar to “maybe.” An invitee might say “yes” but acknowledge there is a chance they will cancel, or they might buy themselves time by foregoing responding until they can give a definitive answer. Follow-up work might also consider additional mechanisms. Invitees sometimes fixate on the social rejection aspect of declining invitations (Givi & Kirk, 2024), a tendency that might be relevant to the current research and is consistent with a motivated reasoning account. Since it is in their best interest to say “maybe,” invitees might exaggerate the hurtfulness of a “no.” Future work could also dig deeper into the reason (i.e., can vs. want) that an invitee provides for saying “maybe,” as an invitee’s reasoning can impact inviters’ reactions (Donnelly et al., 2021). Finally, as our samples included only U.S. participants, our findings would need to be replicated across diverse cultural contexts.

Open science practices

Link to all stimulus materials, data, and analysis code: https://osf.io/7fazw/?view_only=23a28c8e3bb84812b35efa1345351d28

Link to Experiment 2 preregistration: <https://aspredicted.org/9xyy-8q6y.pdf>

Link to Experiment 3 preregistration: <https://aspredicted.org/6k5w-bh92.pdf>

Link to Experiment 4 preregistration: <https://aspredicted.org/q6nh-gqcp.pdf>

Link to Experiment 5 preregistration: <https://aspredicted.org/jyf2-2n2f.pdf>

Link to Experiment 6 preregistration: <https://aspredicted.org/5d3n-fddc.pdf>

Link to Experiment SM1 preregistration: <https://aspredicted.org/tj99-x878.pdf>

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Author note

We placed all stimuli, data, and analysis code at (https://osf.io/7fazw/?view_only=23a28c8e3bb84812b35efa1345351d28).

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Julian Givi: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Colleen P. Kirk:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Daniel M. Grossman:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Constantine Sedikides:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have no competing interests.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2025.104814>.

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