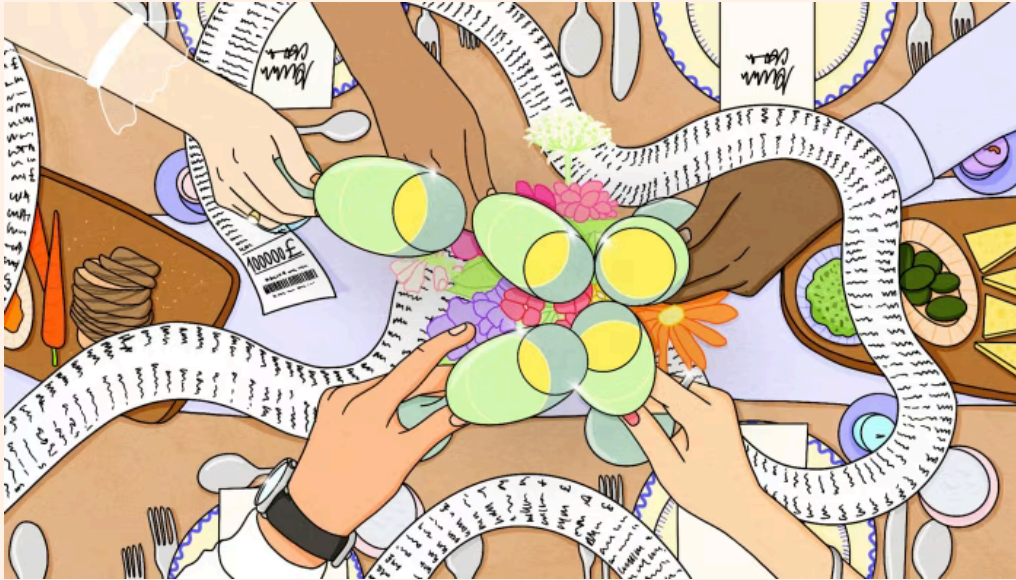


Personal Finance

Are you suffering from 'friendflation'?

Weddings, dinners, weekends away: maintaining social connections is becoming increasingly expensive



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Sarah's excitement about her friend's hen do weekend swiftly dissipated when she saw the price tag — £2,500 for a shared room in an Airbnb overseas.

She baulked. A bank worker, in her early 20s, Sarah attempted to voice her concern to the bride-to-be, who responded by advising Sarah to put it on a credit card. After all, she was earning well, right?

Sarah, not her real name, was mortified to have to bow out of the trip. She began questioning the financial expectations we place on friends, asking: is this “normal” now?

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What Sarah experienced was the effect of what is sometimes called “friendflation”: the growing cost of maintaining social connections and participating in our friends’ lives.

It’s particularly relevant at this time of year. It’s mid-August and wedding season is at its peak. While the cost for those [getting married](#) has ballooned in recent years, so too has the cost of being a friend to the happy couple.

£779

The average cost per person of attending a hen or stag weekend in the UK

The average cost of being a UK wedding guest — including travel and accommodation — has hit £450, according to a survey by lender Creditspring. For 25 to 34-year olds, that figure rises to £700, with one in five spending £1,500 per celebration. In the poll of 2,000 UK adults, half said they had felt forced into attending a wedding they could not afford.

If you have to attend the stag or hen do, expect a much bigger bill — as Sarah can testify. The average hen or stag weekend now costs £779 per person — rising to £1,200 if it's overseas, according to research by Aviva. Some estimates from 2008 put the figure at just £100.

This is far from just a British phenomenon. One US survey found that most people now consider friendship itself to be “expensive”. Six per cent of Australians say they have “broken up” with an expensive friend, unable to keep up with increasingly extravagant get-togethers and dinners.

One survey of Americans by Self Financial in 2025 found that nearly four in five have felt financial anxiety when hanging out with their friends. In the same poll, 43 per cent said they found it “difficult” to have significantly wealthier friends. It's particularly acute for those in their 20s and 30s, when friends are getting married or celebrating milestone birthdays.

Naturally, we love our friends, and we should love celebrating them. There's no price for human connection. Yet friendflation touches on something particularly delicate: inequality *within* the middle class, and the very real insecurities that can arise for those on the lower-earning end of their well-to-do peer group. It touches on the way that money quietly permeates our friendships, and the creeping demands of our social budgets.

So, how — and why — did friendship get so expensive?

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Socialising is as old as humanity itself, but the format has radically evolved; especially in the past 30 years. This has come amid a wider shift seen in how the “affluent class” (the top 20 per cent of earners) spend their money since the early 2000s, says Professor Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, author of *The Sum of Small Things*.

“The 2008 recession really changed the path of how upper-income groups were spending. It became much more experience-driven,” she says, captured in a boom in everything from eating out and holidays to cultural expeditions. This category of inconspicuous (ie, non-material) consumption also came “loaded with social and cultural capital”, she says.

43%

Proportion of Americans who find it ‘difficult’ to have a wealthier friend

Since our friends are generally our best social allies, the splurge on experiences has essentially translated into a splurge on friendships. Consumption has become a tool to express intimacy and identity; as a result, we now expect our friends to invest more in seeing and celebrating us than we ever did.

Lindsey Stanberry, who runs a newsletter about personal finance called The Purse, recalls how hanging out with friends in her youth was a simpler, cheaper affair. “When I was in my 20s . . . we didn’t go on these big flashy birthday trips or go out for fancy cocktails,” she says, now in her 40s and living in New York. In the same vein, a hen or stag do in the 1980s normally involved a close-knit dinner. They now tend to entail multi-day getaways crammed with activities, often in foreign destinations.

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“It’s not that we didn’t [socialise] before,” says Currid-Halkett. “It’s just that it now has a much bigger price tag.” And the pressure even falls on what she describes as “upper-middle-income” groups.

In 1985, Britons’ non-essential spending, including leisure items such as recreation, holidays, dining and hobbies, stood at 14 per cent of households’ average income; by 2019, it had increased to 25 per cent, according to a [study](#) by the University of Portsmouth.

Currid-Halkett says the pandemic probably shifted our social spending further. It was a reminder that we wanted to be “living full lives”, she says, prompting people to double down on the value of social connection — often expressed through spending.

“It’s very hard to say ‘no’,” she adds. “Not to mention, those things are kind of fun to do.”

Such get-togethers are also far more visible than they were in the past. The rise of social media has meant that “inconspicuous” spending is not really inconspicuous anymore. A holiday with friends or a wedding can now be blasted across the internet as a sign of wealth and social capital.

“We live in a world where we see everybody’s highlights reel on social media,” says Washington-based financial therapist Bill Nelson. “We see the trip their friends are doing. We see all the good stuff.” This is probably driving our appetite to organise bigger and more expensive get-togethers, he says.

There is a more subtle change too — that, through social media, friendship itself has become more performative.

“Instagram doesn’t help. It just feels like *everyone’s* doing these things [with friends], so there’s that added pressure,” says Stanberry.

Jeffrey Hall, a communications studies professor at the University of Kansas, who directs the Relationships and Technology lab, suggests another driver of friendflation is the destruction of cheap “third spaces” — parks and open squares where people could once meet without spending money.

“There’s no question that this public concept of the third space [is] in decline,” he says. “There are very few places that you can congregate that don’t have some sort of entry fee.”

As a result, “people try to create friendship-like experiences that are expensive. So then it becomes normative to say I’m going to oblige my friends to go on this trip together,” he adds.

We now see friends “essentially obliging [others] to spend money to demonstrate their friendship or allegiance”.

Part of the growing money tension between friends may be linked to the explosion in university education, which has created a more fluid middle class with varied earning capabilities — and vastly different expectations around costs.

“Often when you [become friends], you’re in similar circumstances. But . . . as we go through our 20s, 30s, 40s, different choices start to really diverge our financial means,” says Ellie Austin-Williams, who is a personal finance advocate and host of the “Help Me, I’m Poor” podcast.

When the earning capabilities of our closest, oldest friends are not in line with our own, socialising or event planning can become a point of conflict.

While “the intermingling of the bohemian and the bourgeois has been around for centuries”, Currid-Halkett notes, it’s now more complicated by social activity having moved beyond the home and into “pay-to-play” environments. The new social norm has exacerbated differences in earning capabilities.

Friendflation is complicated further by our inability to communicate about money. Finance is what Hall calls one of the “unspoken” tenets of friendship. A recent study by the [Money and Pensions Service](#) found that 55 per cent of British adults don’t feel comfortable talking about their financial situation.

55%

Proportion of British adults who don’t feel comfortable talking about their financial situation, according to a study by the Money and Pensions Service

As a result, we struggle to signal when we feel something is beyond our means or feels like an unreasonable expense. Equally, if we decline an invitation, this can be seen as a rejection of our friend or the friendship, making friendflation something of a silent relationship killer.

“In the West, we’re comfortable with an equality-based model of friendship,” says Hall. “Our friendship thrives and grows because we never mention our differences. [So] people want to avoid that conversation because it maintains the perception that everyone’s on an equal playing field.”

It’s why even Hall has played along without complaint when his budget has been stretched beyond comfort, despite the “weird feeling” he’s been left with. “I remember specifically a bachelor party that was like, Jesus Christ, I am dropping a lot of money. Like, this is the entirety of what would usually be my going-out money for the month, and I’m using it for this weekend,” he laughs.

Friendships are often forged at university. But financial fortunes can diverge once graduates go their separate ways © (c) Jiawangkun | Dreamstime.com

Hall is ambivalent about whether we should tell our friends when the cost is too high, rather than making “polite excuses”. That’s because the illusion of equality is integral to a friendship bond, his research suggests.

Still, he’s been thinking lately about the potential merits of parity over equality in a friendship. Parity, he muses, might be more meaningful for friends, and offers a good guide when thinking about splitting the costs of socialising.

“[We should] think . . . How can we enact a level of support for our friends to make it fair and have greater parity,” he suggests. This may mean hosting events that reflect a level of generosity without imposing financial stresses on others. It also helps push wealthier friends to “consider what’s fun or what’s enjoyable from the perspective of the people who are uncomfortable paying that amount of money”.

Therapist Bill Nelson says transparency can help us bridge our gap of understanding when somebody pushes back on spending. “If I’ve learned anything . . . it’s that you have *no idea* what kind of financial shape your friends are in.”

A friend, for instance, might have a big house but be highly leveraged with a \$2mn mortgage and receive no pay for maternity leave if they’re self-employed.

“Don’t prejudge, don’t assume, and always lead with empathy when discussing financially related matters with friends, and you’ll be well on your way to a healthy financial relationship with them.”

Nelson adds that one way into the conversation can be to discuss financial headlines that might be relevant, before weaving your own experience in.

It may be true, as the adage goes, that money can't buy you friends. But, it turns out, it comes in pretty handy if you want to *keep* them.

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