

Responding to the 98%: face-enhancing strategies for dealing with rejected customer ideas

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Abstract Although companies receive a staggering amount of ideas from consumers, only a small fraction of the ideas are actually usable, with as many as 98% being rejected. This research examines the influence of firms' responses to consumer-generated ideas on consumers' self-perceptions of face and their tendency to return in the future with more ideas. Specifically, we examine the impact of firm response to consumers' rejected ideas. The results show that consumers respond to a rejected idea with an increased of face threat, leading to a decrease in future idea sharing. However, the presence of face enhancement reduces these negative effects. Recognizing managers' dilemma, we identify three buffering responses that may drive perceptions of face enhancement and thus buffer the negative repercussions of face threat from rejecting consumer ideas: (1) considering consumers' past experiences (success/failure) with submitting ideas, (2) creating a unique group identity, and (3) offering an excuse. We also show the impact of a public versus private firm acknowledgment of consumer ideas on both consumers' perceptions of face and future idea sharing behaviors.

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Consumer idea sharing behavior has become an increasingly popular trend in which consumers provide firms with ideas about how to improve their offerings. Although companies receive an enormous amount of consumer ideas, only a small fraction of them are actually usable, with a 98% rejection rate (ideastorm.com). After consumers submit ideas, the firm's acknowledgment, or lack thereof, can influence consumer–firm interactions and have lasting implications for future consumer idea sharing behaviors. Given the importance of the relationship between consumers and firms, as well as the ever increasing number of ideas consumers generate across different venues, understanding how to respond appropriately to consumers whose ideas are not adopted is crucial. This research examines the influence of a firm's response to such ideas on consumers' self-perceptions of face and their future idea sharing. Specifically, we examine the impact of firm responses to consumers' rejected ideas. While Bayus (2013) examines how firms' actions can influence future behaviors of consumers whose ideas have been implemented, and Luo and Toubia (2015) examine how to increase the quality of submitted ideas, scant research has examined the much larger group—consumers whose ideas are never used. We show that a firm's acknowledgment (or lack thereof) influences consumers' perceptions of face threat and face enhancement and their future idea sharing. We demonstrate that an acknowledgment that directly rejects an idea increases consumers' face threat and reduces the likelihood of future idea sharing. We identify specific buffering techniques firms can use to reduce such negative effects.

The increase in consumer idea generation can be exciting but equally burdensome because managers must determine the feasibility of ideas, whether to respond, and, if so, how to respond without damaging the relationship. Unlike innovation research that examines one-time ideation challenges during a limited time (e.g., Bullinger et al. 2010; Jeppesen and Lakhani 2010), firms in these communities ask participants to repeatedly submit new ideas (Bayus 2013). As firms work to create a dialogue with consumers who volunteer ideas through knowledge-creating forums, a key issue is how their acknowledgment of an idea may influence future consumer cocreation.

Firms have made it easier for consumers to submit ideas and become a part of the cocreation process (Bolton and Saxenayyer 2009; Hoyer et al. 2010; Vargo and Lusch 2004; Von Hippel 1986). Many firms use websites, blogs, social media channels, and online forums (Manchanda et al. 2015), referred to as *market research online communities* (MROCs) (Barber 2010), to channel ideas. MROCs allow consumers to submit ideas ranging from incremental changes to major innovations. Both Dell and Starbucks are well known for their continuing efforts to create large communities, in which thousands of new product and service ideas are generated (Bayus 2013; Luo and Toubia 2015). However, an unavoidable outcome of these communities is that only a small fraction of ideas submitted are actually implemented (Bayus 2013; Magnusson et al. 2003). For example, of the more than 23,875 ideas generated in Dell's IdeaStorm community, only 549 have been implemented as of September 2015 (ideastorm.com).

Such MROCs also provide opportunities for firms to respond. Dell's IdeaStorm assigns statuses to ideas as follows: acknowledged, under review, already offered, not planned, archived, partially implemented, and implemented. Lego Ideas has a special tab in the comment section for "official" Lego updates on idea progression. As the goal is to generate repeated idea submissions (Bayus 2013), it is critical to understand how to manage firm responses to these ideas. Thus, we examine how firms can respond to rejected ideas in a manner that buffers negative impact and encourages consumers to return with more ideas.

We propose that a firm's response, or lack thereof, after idea submission plays a key role in future consumer–firm interactions. Results show that a simple acknowledgment (compared to no response) significantly increases future idea sharing (23% increase in the lab; 16% increase in the field). We further identify *face* as the underlying mechanism. We define face as the positive social value a person successfully claims for him- or herself through his or her self-presentation to others (Goffman 1967). This value includes the person's public image, reputation, and status claimed during social interactions with others. In the rich context of consumer idea generation, scant research has examined when and how an individual, group, or firm can threaten or enhance the face of another (Van Ginkel 2004).

When an individual or a firm fails to offer face-saving acknowledgment, the other partner may leave the interaction unsatisfied (Van Ginkel 2004). In our context, a firm's failure to adequately address face concerns when a consumer submits an idea may hamper future idea sharing behavior. Results show that directly rejecting an idea (compared to offering a noncommittal response) reduced future idea sharing by 59%. Face-threatening acts are "acts that by their very nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee or the speaker" (Brown and Levinson 1987, p. 65). Prior research has focused almost exclusively on face-threatening acts and ways to reduce the threat of these situations. We expand this literature by highlighting the power of both face-enhancing acts and face-threatening acts. Defining *face enhancement* as interactions that build or enrich one's desired face (Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998), we argue that if a firm can effectively include a face-enhancing response when rejecting an idea, the negative impact of face threat can be reduced. Thus, this study acknowledges the call to investigate how people respond to self-threats (face threat) and self-affirmations (face enhancement) in the presence of others, such as in online environments (Sherman and Cohen 2006). We also address the actions and approaches that firms can take to stimulate participation in idea-generating activities (Hoyer et al. 2010).

Furthermore, recognizing the dilemma faced by managers who can't realistically use every consumer idea, we identify three potential buffering responses that can drive perceptions of face enhancement and thus reduce the negative repercussions of face threat: (1) considering consumers' past experiences with submitting ideas (success/failure), (2) creating a unique group identity, and (3) offering an excuse. For instance, when an idea was rejected, if the firm offered an excuse, future idea sharing increased by 21%, and creating a group identity increased future idea sharing by 31%. Given that many ideas are shared publicly in MROCs, we also show the impact of a public versus private firm acknowledgment of consumer ideas on both consumers' perceptions of face and future idea sharing behaviors. In a field experiment, we show that a public firm acknowledgment increased actual future idea sharing behavior by 143%.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

While prior research has focused on the value consumers can bring to the innovation and idea generation process (Magnusson et al. 2003), the value in consumer idea sharing may be in the enduring conversation. By responding to consumer ideas, firms can create more opportunities for future idea creation (Hoyer et al. 2010). To sustain and nurture lasting engagement, firms need to look beyond simple repurchase behavior (Van Doorn et al. 2010) and extend the dialogue with consumers to enhance the relationship. Although firms clearly

want to attain high quality and usable ideas from customers, the simple act of giving ideas is a signal of relationship strength and an act of engagement in itself, regardless of the quality of the ideas (Sullivan 2010). While many firms use their loyal customer base to drive innovation, perhaps the most pressing question is how to respond to consumers who voluntarily participate but do not have their ideas used. The risk of discouraging such consumers' future contributions to innovative ideas is high (see Web Appendix 1 for a full literature summary on customer idea sharing).

Face theory

Introduced to social science literature by Goffman (1967), *facework* refers to the communication strategies an individual uses to enact self-face and sustain, support, or contest another individual's face (Brown and Levinson 1987), and it is an ideal paradigm for our study because of the conversation that ensues when a consumer volunteers his or her ideas. Goffman (1959) describes face as something that can be threatened, maintained, or enhanced and conceptualizes facework within the broader area of impression management (Brown and Levinson 1987). When individuals' self-perceptions of face are threatened, they often engage in impression management (Argo et al. 2006; Schlenker 1980). Extant research argues that individuals engage in complex intra-self-negotiations to project a desired impression. For example, research in marketing has shown that individuals engage in impression management by donating to charity (White and Peloza 2009), changing coupon usage (Ashworth et al. 2005), misrepresenting the amount spent on purchase (Sengupta et al. 2002), and avoiding purchasing products associated with out-groups (Berger and Heath 2007). We propose that the need to maintain and enhance one's perception of face is the underlying mechanism behind these impression management behaviors.

In personal interactions, the goal is to protect one's own face, with the expectation that others will do the same. People are motivated to preserve face and behave in certain ways when their face is threatened. People often share things in an effort to present themselves in a positive, rather than negative, manner (Barasch and Berger 2014). Adverse communications, such as a firm rejecting an idea, may threaten personal perception of face (Chen 2013). The question arises whether one's face can be threatened or enhanced in a virtual, online environment, in which face-to-face interaction is not possible. We adopt Parks and Floyd's (1996) view that computer-mediated communication frees interpersonal interactions from restrictions of physical presence and creates opportunities for new, genuine personal relationships and communities (Belk 2013). Goffman's (1959) work on impression management has been extended to the online realm in which websites allow consumers to self-present to the virtual world and enact brand

relationships (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001; Schau and Gilly 2003).

Face threat and face enhancement

Most research on face has focused on face-threatening behaviors and how to reduce face threat (Cupach and Carson 2002; MacGeorge et al. 2002). However, research clearly differentiates face enhancement and face threat as distinct constructs (Zhang et al. 2011). For example, a firm's use of a consumer's idea could enhance his or her face. Not using the idea may not enhance face or necessarily induce face threat; in some situations, a consumer may view the rejection of an idea not as a threatening act but as acceptable in terms of social expectations. Similarly, the absence of a face threat is not equal to face enhancement (Zhang et al. 2011). Face threats in a social interaction include being embarrassed, criticized, or disrespected (Brown and Levinson 1987). Prior research has recognized that social interaction is enhanced when people mutually cooperate to maintain face (Brown and Levinson 1987). Face-enhancing acts are those that build or enrich one's desired face and include actions such as praise, compliments, and approval (Brown and Levinson 1987; Ting-Toomey and Kurogi 1998). Also referred to as positive face giving (Folger et al. 2001), face enhancement actions give positive support to others (Tynan 2005).

Role of face threat and face enhancement in idea sharing

People use feedback as a method for impression management gains or as a motive to control how they appear to others (Morrison and Bies 1991). Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that almost all verbal activities can influence an individual's self-perception of face. To reduce the potential face threat of rejecting an idea, one possible managerial strategy is to offer a buffering acknowledgment, which we define as an acknowledgment that intends to limit or eliminate the possible face threat resulting from consumer–firm interactions.

While some ideas receive responses, other ideas receive no firm response at all. In the PlayStation idea community (<http://share.blog.us.playstation.com/>), for example, a frequent question is whether PlayStation even reads all the ideas. Silence (a lack of acknowledgment) can be perceived as a threat to face simply because the individual is expecting an acknowledgment (Sifianou 1997). Face-threatening acts can result in relational devaluation, which occurs when one person believes that another does not view the relationship as important, close, or valuable as he/she does (Cupach and Carson 2002). Thus, we propose that a firm's acknowledgment of

an idea (or lack thereof) influences consumers' perceptions of face threat and face enhancement.

Ashford and Cummings (1983) claim that people desire to receive feedback. Research has shown that feedback can alter behavior, resulting in enhanced future performance (Ilgen et al. 1979) and increased goal attainment (Ammons 1956). Lacey and Morgan (2009) argue that consumers are more willing to share specific information when the firm values the relationship. An acknowledgment of an idea allows consumers to believe that the firm values the relationship.

H1a: Firm acknowledgment influences face threat, face enhancement, and future idea sharing.

We expect that a firm's specific type of acknowledgment influences future idea sharing and that face is the mechanism through which this occurs. Thus, we examine the extent to which self-perceptions of face threat and face enhancement influence future idea sharing. Self-affirmation theory suggests that individuals have a "psychological immune system" that activates protective adaptations when they perceive a threat (Gilbert et al. 1998; Sherman and Cohen 2006). Thus, in the case of a threat, such as a threat to face, they will respond in a way that defends and restores self-worth (Steele 1997). Consumers who experience a face threat will be less likely to share ideas in the future. Furthermore, the outcomes of face threat are often more serious than a failure to achieve face enhancement. As Zhang et al. (2011) note, some individuals may not care to enhance face through extra effort on their part, but everyone has a desire to limit or eliminate face-threatening acts to maintain effective social functioning. Thus, we propose that the face threat associated with a rejected idea will lead to fewer idea sharing behaviors in the future, and that the negative impact of a rejected idea on future idea sharing behaviors is mediated by face threat.

H1b: Face threat has a negative influence on future idea sharing.

H1c: Face threat mediates the impact of firm acknowledgment on future idea sharing.

We further explore how, in the presence of a face-threatening act, a perception of face enhancement can reduce the negative influence of face threat on idea sharing. After a face-threatening act (idea rejection), if conditions permit individuals to psychologically adapt, they will try to restore face through face enhancement. Individuals require opportunities to buffer the negative effects of the face threat caused by having their ideas rejected. Sherman and Cohen (2006) argue that when individuals perceive a face threat, they first assess the severity of the threat and then attempt to restore or enhance their face to increase social fitness. Thus, people who perceive a face-threatening situation often attempt to resolve it in a way

that defends their self-perceptions of face (Menon and Thompson 2007). From this logic, we propose that in the case of a threatening rejection, face enhancement can reduce the negative impact of the face threat. The provision of a buffering response can help the individual respond to the threat in a less biased or defensive way (Sherman and Cohen 2006).

H1d: Face enhancement reduces the effect of face threat on future idea sharing.

Noncommittal versus direct acknowledgment Firms often acknowledge consumer ideas in a noncommittal way. Specific acknowledgment conveying information about how the firm used an idea may not always be feasible because of logistics or high costs. Morrison and Bies (1991) assert that people want to receive positive feedback, even when such feedback lacks informational value, and will likely construe ambiguous information as positive. A simple acknowledgment that the idea was received may lack informational value, but it may allow a consumer to believe that the firm values the idea and, thus, be face enhancing. The acknowledgement helps lessen the face threat that might occur if the idea is rejected or not responded to at all. A noncommittal acknowledgment leaves message decoding up to the recipient (Sifianou 1997).

Conversely, firms often provide a direct acknowledgment (MacGeorge et al. 2002). We define a direct acknowledgment as one that clearly informs consumers about whether their idea was used or not. We propose that a direct acknowledgment of a rejected idea is more threatening than a noncommittal one and thus has a greater potential to influence future idea sharing. Pomerantz (1978) shows that conversations have a preferred structure, such that agreement (rather than disagreement) is the preferred acknowledgment of an idea. We argue that when a firm plans to use a consumer's idea (a form of agreement), a direct acknowledgment will be more face enhancing. Conversely, if the firm is not going to use the idea (a form of disagreement), a direct acknowledgment indicating disagreement will threaten face more than a noncommittal one.

H2a: Compared with no acknowledgment, a noncommittal acknowledgment of an idea decreases face threat.

H2b: Compared with no acknowledgment, a direct rejection acknowledgment of an idea increases face threat.

Buffering negative effects of rejecting ideas In practice, firms implement few consumer ideas for many reasons (e.g., idea quality, feasibility, cost, technological limitation, resource constraints). How can firms buffer the negative effects of idea rejection? We argue that firm acknowledgments can buffer a rejection of an idea and thus avoid a negative impact on consumers' face perceptions. We test three potential buffers:

consumers' past experiences, creation of a group identity, and offering of an excuse.

First, consumers' past experiences can influence the formation of present attitudes and behavioral outcomes (Zeithaml et al. 1993). Past experience functions as the basis for the development of both objective and subjective knowledge (Duhan et al. 1997). It also has a strong influence on future decision making (Cox and Rich 1964). As such, a consumer's past idea sharing experience (i.e., having an idea used or rejected) may influence his or her face threat and face enhancement with subsequent ideas. Specifically, if a consumer's idea was implemented in the past, this may buffer the negative effects of having a subsequent idea rejected.

H3: When a consumer's current idea is directly rejected, a consumer whose idea was used in the past experiences less face threat and more face enhancement than a consumer whose idea was rejected in the past.

The second buffering managerial response we propose is the creation of a group identity. Goffman (2009) argues that when an individual's perception of face is threatened, a negative social classification (i.e., stigma) of the self also occurs, leading him or her to try to rescript this identity. However, social identification allows the individual to personally experience the successes of the group (Foote 1951) and partake vicariously in accomplishments beyond his or her power (Katz and Kahn 1966). Social identity literature suggests that the distinctiveness and prestige of a group can increase the tendency of individuals to identify with organization-based groups (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Nambisan and Baron (2007) argue that idea-generating forums are more than simple communities to generate positive suggestions, noting that consumers can develop strong social identities by belonging to such forums (see Sawhney et al. 2005). These communities create opportunities to be part of distinct, prestigious groups. Firms often create group identities by bestowing members with unique titles. For example, Lego gives community members badges (identities) such as pioneer, autobiographer, socializer, trailblazer, and luminary. Microsoft created an "MVP" (most valued professional) program in which consumers who play the role of product support specialist earn their MVP title. We argue that firms can also create such a group identity for consumers who offer ideas, in which the use of any group member's ideas is credited to the whole group. By acknowledging this group identity membership, the firm can lessen potential threats to consumers' face from rejected ideas.

H4: Creating a group identity with a direct rejection acknowledgment reduces face threat, thereby buffering the negative impact of face threat on future idea sharing.

The third buffering acknowledgment is the offering of an excuse for the rejection. For example, some online communities tell idea givers that all ideas that fail to make a minimal support threshold from community members will go unimplemented (Lego; <https://ideas.lego.com/>). Other firms tell consumers that an idea might not be implemented because of firm policy (Apple; apple.com/legal/intellectual-property/policies/ideas.html). Prior research has argued that people want to feel intellectually competent (Waring 2007). Therefore, a threat to that perception may seem to be a face-threatening act. Offering an excuse for the rejection of an idea may allow consumers to feel intellectually competent because such reframing helps them maintain face (Van Ginkel 2004). Folkes and Whang (2003) argue that explanations create more awareness of situational constraints on behavior, and Holtgraves (1992) argues that face threat can be reduced if an excuse is presented. Therefore, if a firm offers a buffering excuse for the rejection, consumers are more likely to consider situational constraints and to become more aware of the firm's lack of control over the decision to implement the idea (Folkes and Whang 2003).

H5: Offering a buffering excuse with a direct rejection acknowledgment reduces face threat, thereby buffering the negative impact of face threat on future idea sharing.

Public versus private acknowledgment We also consider how the public (vs. private) nature of an acknowledgment can influence perceptions of face. Prior research suggests that the more public the behavior, the more concerned a person will be about how he or she appears to others. Community research indicates that public recognition validates the relationship (Muniz and O'Guinn 2001). Rousseau's (1775/1992) long-held perspective maintains that people feel pride in their accomplishments when publicly recognized. Public recognition has a more positive effect on a person's self-concept than recognition given in private (Ashford and Cummings 1983). Conversely, individuals who are publicly embarrassed tend to go out of their way, at high costs, to hide the facts that caused the embarrassment (Brown 1970; Goffman 1959). The socially observable nature (public vs. private) of token support for a cause influences future prosocial behaviors (Kristofferson et al. 2014). Thus, the impact of a firm's acknowledgment may be weaker if given in private (e.g., via e-mail) rather than in public. Online environments offer varying levels of public viewing. Some forums are readily viewable by everyone and have high visibility, while others tend to be private and thus have low visibility. We assert that a public forum has a higher risk of face threat or, conversely, the possibility for higher face enhancement.

H6: A firm response offered in a public forum (high visibility) has greater influence on face than the

same acknowledgment given in a private forum (low visibility).

Overview of studies

To test our hypotheses, we conducted five studies (see Table 1 for results summary). Studies 1a, 1b, 2, and 3a are experiments that simulate communities. Study 3b is a field experiment with a live MROC in which real retail customers generate their own unique ideas and comments, extending our findings with actual consumer behaviors. In Study 1a, we examine the effects of noncommittal and direct rejection acknowledgments on consumers' idea sharing. Study 1b extends these findings by examining the impact of past experience with submitting ideas. Study 2 examines two possible buffering acknowledgments: group identity creation and the offering of an excuse. Studies 3a and 3b test the impact of firm acknowledgments shared in a public setting (high visibility) and through a private channel (low visibility) on idea sharing.

Study 1a: impact of firm acknowledgment on future idea sharing

Design and procedure

To test H1 and H2, we conducted an online experiment with 195 respondents recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk). Research has shown that MTurk responses are similar in quality in terms of critical metrics such as rejection rates, statistical power, and distributions to responses provided by populations typically sampled in the laboratory (Barone and Jewell 2014; Goodman et al. 2013). Respondent ages ranged from 18 to 54 years ($M=29$), 60% were women, and almost 90% had completed at least "some college." Employing a between-subjects design, we randomly assigned respondents to one of three conditions in which we manipulated firm acknowledgment (no firm acknowledgment, noncommittal acknowledgment, and idea not used acknowledgment). We first guided respondents through a scenario-based online banking experience in which they had difficulty determining where to click to submit their online bill payment. Respondents were then told that they decided to log in to the online bank community to post their idea on how to improve the site. Next, in each of the three conditions, respondents were directed to a community web page and were told that within 24 hours of posting their idea, they returned to the consumer service website and logged on. Below this paragraph was a view of their idea posted online with one of the manipulated acknowledgments (all manipulations in Appendix 1). After reading the acknowledgment (or no

acknowledgment), respondents evaluated their experience. Those in the no acknowledgment condition were still shown their idea posted in the community along with other consumer comments. We did not manipulate consumer comments in this (same neutral comments in all conditions) or any of the other studies; rather, we focused on the impact of firm responses, holding other consumer responses constant.

In line with Diamantopoulos et al. (2012), we measured all constructs using multiple items. We measured consumer future idea sharing with a three-item scale (e.g., "In the future, I will give ideas to this firm again") (Netemeyer et al. 2005). We measured perceived face enhancement with a four-item scale (e.g., "The bank's response to my idea made me look good in the eyes of others" and "The bank's response to my idea showed that my abilities were evaluated highly") and perceived face threat with a three-item scale (e.g., "The bank's response to my idea embarrassed me" and "The bank's response to my idea showed disrespect toward me"; see Appendix 2). Both face scales were based on previous research (Cupach and Carson 2002; Zhang et al. 2011) and extensively pretested.

To test alternative constructs, we included self-esteem (five-item scale; Heatherton and Polivy 1991) and both internal (two-item) and external (two-item) attribution (Fincham and Bradbury 1992). Wilcox and Stephen (2013) argue that in an online environment, social networks with strong ties can enhance self-esteem, and thus it is a strong competing theoretical concept for this study. Attribution theory is the study of perceived causation (Folkes 1984; Kelley and Michela 1980). Prior research has shown that individuals tend to take credit for success (internal attribution) and deny responsibility for failure (external attribution) (Bradley 1978). Finally, we included face sensitivity (five-item) (Fenigstein et al. 1975) as an individual difference measure. Some individuals have an innate tendency to be more sensitive or aware of face-threatening or face-enhancing activities. These control measures have all been well tested in prior studies. We measured all items with seven-point Likert scales; all scales showed strong reliability (see Table 2 and Appendix 2).

Validity checks

Exploratory factor analysis Our face scales are grounded in scale development literature but were modified for our specific research context. As such, we further developed and refined the measures, pretesting them to determine their reliability and discriminant validity. We first conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on our focal variables (principal axis factoring with an oblique rotation): face threat, face enhancement, and future idea sharing. This revealed a clear three-factor solution (see Table 2; see Web Appendix 3 for EFA pooled across all studies). An iterative estimation procedure with oblimin rotation showed that the three factors explained 85% of the total variance. Using eigenvalues greater than 1 as a cutoff also lent

Table 1 Overview of studies

	Study 1a	Study 1b	Study 2	Study 3a	Study 3b
Purpose	Tests the impact of directly rejecting an idea versus a noncommittal response on face threat and face enhancement.	Tests the impact of past experience on having an idea either rejected or accepted.	Tests the buffering impact of creating a group identity and offering an excuse.	Tests the buffering impact of creating a group identity and offering an excuse in high v. low visibility conditions.	Tests the power of a more neutral reply in a public versus private setting with actual customers.
Method	Online Experiment	Online Experiment	Online Experiment	Online Experiment	Field Experiment
Context	Bank	Bank	Bank	Deli	Deli
Analysis	PLS	PLS	PLS	PLS	Regression
Sample size (n)	195	111	200	330	130
Hypotheses					
H1a Acknowledgment influences face threat, face enhance, & future idea	✓	✓	✓	–	–
H1b face threat reduces future idea	✓	✓	✓	–	–
H1c face threat mediator	✓	✓	✓	–	–
H1d face enhance reduces face threat	✓	✓	✓	–	–
H2a noncom decreases face threat	✓	–	–	–	–
H2b rejection decreases face threat	✓	–	–	–	–
H3 past experience	–	✓	–	–	–
H4 group identity	–	–	✓	✓	–
H5 excuse	–	–	✓	✓	–
H6 public vs private	–	–	–	✓	✓
Implications for research and practice	Firms should respond to customer ideas, at minimum, with a noncommittal response.	The firm should consider the customer's prior idea submissions when formulating its response.	Creating a group identity or providing a valid excuse can reduce negative effects of directly rejecting customer ideas.	In a public forum, noncommittal responses are better than direct rejection. Rejecting an idea publicly amplifies the negative effect.	Providing noncommittal acknowledgements in a public (v private) forum encourages more future ideas.

– not tested, ✓ = supported

support to our approach. All items loaded on appropriate factors, the lowest being 0.62 and the highest being 0.98. The coefficient alpha for the face threat scale was 0.83; the average inter-item correlation was 0.88. The face enhancement scale had a coefficient alpha of 0.97; the mean inter-item correlation was 0.81. Future idea sharing had a coefficient alpha of 0.98; the mean inter-item correlation was 0.97.

Confirmatory factor analysis We next ran a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to confirm that all our constructs, including the control variables, behaved as expected (see Table 2). The fit statistics demonstrate that the hypothesized model fits the data well ($\chi^2(231)=427.20$, $p<.01$; CFI=.96; NNFI=.91; RMSE=.066). Measurement factor loadings were all positive and statistically significant ($p<.001$), providing evidence of convergent validity. All scales had Cronbach's alpha levels of 0.70 or above, and average variance extracted (AVE) exceeded 0.57 on all constructs, demonstrating good reliability. AVE exceeded the squared interconstruct correlations, indicating strong discriminant validity between all constructs (Fornell and Larcker 1981). Furthermore, the correlations were corrected for attenuation (Kenny 2011), thus demonstrating a more conservative test of our CFA (see Table 2).

Assessment of common method variance and potential multicollinearity Although several methods can account for common method bias, Podsakoff et al. (2003) advocate the use of latent variable models. Thus, we directly measured the potential presence of common method bias, modeling it as a latent construct and allowing the indicators of the constructs of interest (core and control variables) to load on this one factor, as well as their hypothesized constructs. The results reveal that common method bias accounts for only 10% of the variance, which is below the 20% threshold and thus is not a major concern.¹ We also tested for potential multicollinearity among face threat, face enhancement, self-esteem, internal attribution, external attribution, and face sensitivity. A simple bivariate correlation matrix indicated that while the relationship between several variables was significant, the coefficients were all below 0.65. The variance inflation factors (VIF) ranged from 1.02 to 2.10 ($M=1.75$), substantially less than the VIF of 10 or more indicative of multicollinearity (Neter et al. 1985). Thus, it does not appear that multicollinearity factors into our results.

Methodology

We employed the PLS-SEM algorithm in SMARTPLS (Ringle et al. 2015), which enables simultaneous testing of hypotheses with multi-item measurement (Fornell and Bookstein 1982; Hennig-Thurau et al. 2007). PLS-SEM is

¹ We reran all the reported models in the paper with these latent factor scores, and results were consistent.

based on a series of ordinary least squares regressions and is not sensitive to small sample sizes, which is particularly beneficial in medium and complex model setups as is the case in this study. Reinartz et al. (2009) substantiate this argument in their simulation study, which shows that PLS-SEM has higher levels of statistical power than its covariance-based counterpart; thus, it is appropriate for our studies. In evaluating and reporting the results, we followed the guidelines in Chin (2010) and Hair et al. (2013).

Results

In this PLS analysis, we aimed to understand the impact of both a direct rejection and a noncommittal acknowledgment (when compared with no acknowledgment at all) on future idea sharing, thus testing H2a and H2b (see Table 3 for a summary of results). Therefore, we dummy-coded the conditions and analyzed their effects on our dependent measure, future idea sharing, compared with no acknowledgment. As proposed (H1), we tested whether face threat and face enhancement mediated the effect of the response on future idea sharing. We conducted step-by-step analyses (See Fig. 1) of two structural models to provide a thorough picture of our results and to test our hypotheses (see Klamer et al. 2013). In step 1, we focused only on the simple model of our two acknowledgments' impact on future idea sharing mediated by face threat (model 1). In step 2, we introduced face enhancement as the second mediator to demonstrate its effect on future idea sharing (model 2). This PLS-SEM follows the general mediation recommendations of Baron and Kenny (1986) and Preacher et al. (2007) and the PLS-SEM-specific suggestion of Hair et al. (2013). We used the bootstrapping procedure and selected 90 cases, 5000 samples, and the no-sign-change option to assess the significance of the path coefficients (Hair et al. 2013).

Model 1 The Model 1 results show the relationships among direct rejection acknowledgment, noncommittal acknowledgment, and future idea sharing (without face enhancement). Model 1 has an R^2 of 0.29 for this study's key dependent measure (future idea sharing), providing support for the predictive validity of the model (Hair et al. 2013). For the direct effects, the results show that directly rejecting an idea significantly increased face threat ($\beta_{ft_ideareject}=.24$; $p<.001$) and decreased future idea sharing ($\beta_{fidea_ideareject}=-.27$; $p<.001$), compared with no acknowledgment. Conversely, offering a noncommittal response significantly reduced face threat ($\beta_{Ft_noncom}=-.33$; $p<.001$) and increased future idea sharing ($\beta_{fidea_noncom}=.17$; $p<.001$), compared with no acknowledgment. Face threat had a negative direct effect on future idea sharing ($\beta_{fidea_Ft}=-.26$; $p<.01$). Finally, the indirect effects of idea reject ($\beta_{ideareject}=-.06$; $p<.05$) and noncommittal ($\beta_{Noncom}=.09$; $p<.05$) were both

Table 2 Descriptives

Constructs	Mean	Std Dev	Ave	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
Study 1a and Study 1b: Descriptive statistics and disattenuated correlations											
1. Face enhancement	3.66/4.06	1.98/1.82	.90/.88	.97/.97							
2. Face threat	2.66/2.79	1.57/1.58	.66/.72	-.50**/-.59**	.83/.88						
3. Future idea sharing	4.52/4.62	1.97/2.01	.93/.93	.78**/.76**	-.51**/.66**	.98/.98					
4. Self-esteem	4.26/2.46	1.24/1.42	.77/.81	-.10/- .13*	.61**/.52**	-.20**/-.17	.94/.96				
5. Face sensitivity	2.21/4.14	1.35/1.41	.60/.67	.06/- .08	.11/.11	.12/- .14*	.23**/.24*	.85/.89			
6. Internal attribution	4.22/4.64	1.74/1.58	.77/.86	.71**/-.40**	-.38**/-.51*	.53**/.24**	-.10/- .07*	-.10/- .01	.87/.92		
7. External attribution	4.44/4.55	1.28/1.31	.57/.66	.30/.30**	.04/.04	-.02/.25**	-.04/- .04	-.08/- .14	.46**/.43**	.70/.77	
Study 2: Descriptive statistics and disattenuated correlations											
1. Face enhancement	4.18/3.60	1.79/1.52	.89/.82	.97/.95							
2. Face threat	2.42/2.84	1.37/1.31	.70/.69	-.67**/-.64**	.87/.83						
3. Future idea sharing	4.39/3.63	2.07/2.02	.95/.96	.80**/.76**	-.61**/-.59**	.98/.99					
4. self-esteem	2.18/2.22	1.22/1.26	.72/.74	-.17**/.12**	.53**/.56**	-.20**/-.14*	.92/.93				
5. Face sensitivity	3.63/3.39	1.02/1.06	.69/.66	.13**/.06	.22*/.20*	.15*/-.13*	.25**/.25**	.82/.86			
6. Internal attribution	4.43/3.56	1.63/1.67	.75/.79	.63**/.44**	-.56**/.24**	.61**/.39**	-.08/- .09	.11/.08	.65/.87		
7. External attribution	3.89/4.42	1.15/1.72	.59/.65	.15*/.35*	-.02/- .05	-.03/.22*	-.03/- .04	.20/- .13	-.11/- .14	.85/.83	
Study 3a: Descriptive statistics and disattenuated correlations											
1. Face enhancement	4.48	1.73	.84	.95							
2. Face threat	2.40	1.45	.73	-.63**	.88						
3. Future idea sharing	4.94	2.02	.93	.79**	-.66	.97					
4. Self-esteem	2.29	1.36	.78	-.20**	.66**	-.32**	.95				
5. Face sensitivity	4.07	1.57	.63	.10	.07	-.03	.16**	.82			
6. internal attribution	4.76	1.15	.69	.69**	-.51**	.61**	-.22**	.02	.82		
7. External attribution	4.79	1.32	.60	.31**	-.20**	.20**	.05	.05	.25**	.72	

Cronbach alphas reported on the diagonal; ** $p < .001$, * $p < .01$

Table 3 PLS model comparisons
results: Studies 1a, 1b, 2, 3a

	Model 1 Path coefficients	Model 2 Path coefficients
Study 1a- (No response, Noncommittal, reject)		
Idea reject → Face threat	.24*** <i>t</i> =2.79	.19* <i>t</i> =2.08
Noncommittal → Face threat	-.33*** <i>t</i> =3.76	-.16 <i>t</i> =1.63
Idea reject → Future idea sharing	-.27*** <i>t</i> =2.61	-.23*** <i>t</i> =2.82
Noncommittal → Future idea sharing	.17*** <i>t</i> =2.04	-.02 <i>t</i> =.29
Face threat → Future idea sharing	-.26** <i>t</i> =3.05	-.06 <i>t</i> =.74
Idea reject → Face enhance		-.11 <i>t</i> =1.50
Noncommittal → Face enhance		.45*** <i>t</i> =5.68
Face enhance → Face threat		-.39*** <i>t</i> =4.09
Face enhance → Future idea sharing		.57*** <i>t</i> =8.29
R2 (Future idea sharing)	.29	.50
Study 1b- Past Idea Rejected Compared to Past Idea Used		
Past idea used → Face threat	-.24*** <i>t</i> =2.65	-.08 <i>t</i> =.98
Past idea used → Future idea sharing	.15* <i>t</i> =2.15	.03 <i>t</i> =.38
Current idea reject → Face threat	.38*** <i>t</i> =4.83	.14 <i>t</i> =1.75
Current idea reject → Future idea sharing	-.23** <i>t</i> =2.69	-.06 <i>t</i> =.79
Face threat → Future idea sharing	-.44*** <i>t</i> =5.60	-.08 <i>t</i> =.99
Past idea used → Face enhance		.29*** <i>t</i> =3.51
Current idea reject → Face enhance		-.43*** <i>t</i> =5.43
Face enhance → Face threat		-.55*** <i>t</i> =6.26
Face enhance → Future idea sharing		.72*** <i>t</i> =8.81
R2 (Future idea sharing)	.36	.63

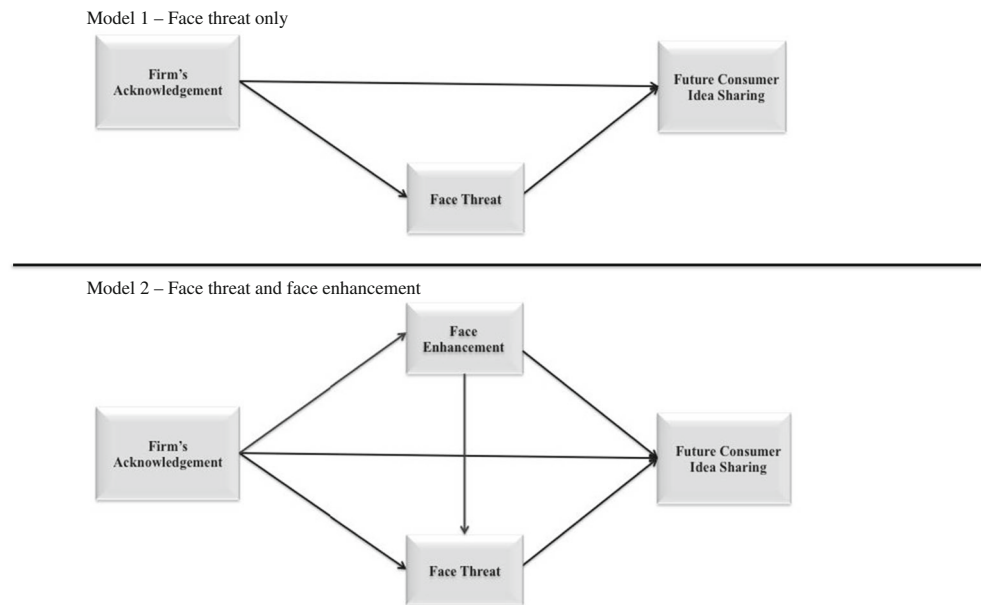
****p*<0.001; ***p*<0.01; **p*<0.05; *ns*=*p*>0.05

Table 3 (continued)

	Model 1 Path coefficients	Model 2 Path coefficients
Study 2- Buffering impact of group identity and excuse		
Group identity → Face threat	-.28*** <i>t</i> =4.17	-.04* <i>t</i> =.42
Excuse → Face threat	-.26*** <i>t</i> =4.02	-.09 <i>t</i> =.21
Group identity → Future idea sharing	.13* <i>t</i> =2.09	-.11 <i>t</i> =1.81
Excuse → Future idea sharing	.08 <i>t</i> =.20	-.05 <i>t</i> =.94
Face threat → Future idea sharing	-.46*** <i>t</i> =7.48	-.16* <i>t</i> =2.47
Group identity → Face enhance		.46*** <i>t</i> =8.94
Excuse → Face enhance		.30*** <i>t</i> =5.41
Face enhance → Face threat		-.53*** <i>t</i> =6.38
Face enhance → Future idea sharing		.69** <i>t</i> =10.83
R2 (Future idea sharing)	.27 Idea rejected Path coefficients	.54 Noncommittal Path coefficients
Study 3a- Impact of public vs Private response and group identity		
Group identity → Face threat	-.04 <i>t</i> =.57	-.10 <i>t</i> =1.50
Public response → Face threat	.16* <i>t</i> =2.37	-.14* <i>t</i> =2.21
Group identity → Face enhance	.34*** <i>t</i> =4.96	.18** <i>t</i> =2.43
Public response → Face enhance	.07 <i>t</i> =.88	-.01 <i>t</i> =.86
Group identity → Future idea sharing	.00 <i>t</i> =.98	-.05 <i>t</i> =.66
Public response → Future idea sharing	-.01 <i>t</i> =.19	.04 <i>t</i> =.66
Face threat → Future idea sharing	-.29*** <i>t</i> =5.61	-.36*** <i>t</i> =4.34
Face enhance → Face threat	-.45*** <i>t</i> =4.87	-.47*** <i>t</i> =7.35
Face enhance → Future idea sharing	.58*** <i>t</i> =9.93	.47*** <i>t</i> =6.89
Interaction effect: public response/Reject → Future advocacy	-.04 <i>t</i> =.58	-.01 <i>t</i> =1.70
R2 (Future idea sharing)	.56	.50

****p*<0.001; ***p*<0.01; **p*<0.05; *ns*=*p*>0.10

Fig. 1 PLS Model 1 and Model 2: direct and indirect effects



significant (see Table 4 for a summary of indirect effects). Together, these results lend support to H1a–H1c and H2a and H2b.

Model 2 In step 2, we added face enhancement to the model (see Model 2). The R^2 has a value of 0.50 ($\Delta=.21$) for future idea sharing, again substantiating the model's predictive validity (Hair et al. 2013). For the direct effects, the results show that rejecting an idea did not significantly influence face enhancement ($\beta_{fe_ideareject}=-.11$; *ns*), while a noncommittal response did significantly increase face enhancement ($\beta_{fe_noncom}=.45$; $p<.001$). In addition, face enhancement both increased future idea sharing ($\beta_{idea_fe}=.57$; $p<.001$) and decreased face threat ($\beta_{ft_fe}=-.39$; $p<.001$). Finally, the indirect effect of idea rejection through face enhancement was not significant ($\beta_{ideareject}=-.07$; *ns*), while the indirect effect of noncommittal through face enhancement was significant ($\beta_{noncom}=.25$; $p<.01$).

When assessing the joint role of face enhancement and face threat (Model 2), we need to compare the results with the PLS path model estimates without face enhancement (Model 1). While the direct effect of a rejected idea on face threat ($\beta_{ft_ideareject}=.19$; $p<.05$) remains significant, the direct effect of face threat on future idea sharing is no longer significant ($\beta_{idea_ft}=-.06$; *ns*). In addition, the indirect effect of idea rejection through face threat on future idea sharing is no longer significant ($\beta_{ideareject}=-.01$; *ns*). Finally, when examining the change of the noncommittal acknowledgment when adding face enhancement, we find that the impact of a noncommittal acknowledgment on both face threat ($\beta_{ft_noncom}=-.16$; *ns*) and future idea sharing ($\beta_{idea_noncom}=-.02$; *ns*) is no longer significant. Similarly, the indirect effect of noncommittal through face threat on future idea sharing is also not significant ($\beta_{noncom}=.01$; *ns*). Together, these analyses support H1d. See Web Appendix 2 for individual cell means.

Discussion

Study 1a's results show that a firm's acknowledgment can influence face threat, face enhancement, and idea sharing (H1a). When a firm receives a consumer idea, a simple, noncommittal acknowledgment can help preserve or even enhance face (H2a). A firm acknowledgment directly informing consumers that their idea was not going to be used left them little room to save face and was considered face threatening (H2b). We also find that face threat decreases future idea sharing (H1b) and mediates the effect of firm acknowledgment on idea sharing (H1c). Finally, we find that an increase in face enhancement reduces the negative impact of face threat on future idea sharing (H1d).

Study 1b: the buffering effects of past experience

As Bayus (2013) argues, a central goal of online idea communities is to encourage consumers to return in the future with more ideas, and thus someone submitting an idea in the present may have already submitted ideas in the past that were already either used or rejected. Study 1b aims to understand the impact of consumers' past experiences with giving ideas and receiving feedback from the firm on how they respond to feedback on a current idea.

Design, procedure, and methodology

This study was an online experiment with 111 respondents recruited from MTurk with demographics similar to the prior studies. We replicated the same base scenarios as in Study 1a (noncommittal acknowledgment, idea not used acknowledgment). In addition, we created two levels of experience (submitted an idea in past that was used by firm and submitted an idea in

Table 4 PLS direct and indirect effects: Studies 1a, 1b, 2

IV	Mediator	DV	Model 1			Model 2		
			Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect	Direct effect	Indirect effect	Total effect
Study 1a - Indirect effects Idea reject →	Face threat →	Future idea sharing						
	Face enhancement →		-.24***	-.06*	-.30***	-.23***	-.01	-.24
	Face threat →		.17***	.09*	.26***	-.23***	-.07	-.30
	Face enhancement →					-.02	.01	-.01
Study 1b - Indirect effects Past idea used →	Face threat →	Future idea sharing	.15*	.11*	.26*	.03	.01	.04
	Face enhancement →					.03	.21***	.24***
	Face threat →		-.23**	-.17***	-.40**	-.06	-.01	-.07
	Face enhancement →					-.06	-.31***	-.37***
Study 2 - Indirect effects Group identity →	Face threat →	Future idea sharing	.13*	.13***	.26***	.11	.01	.10
	Face enhancement →					.11	.32***	.21***
	Face threat →		.08	.12***	.20**	.05	.01	.04
	Face enhancement →					.05	.21***	.16**
Excuse →	Face threat →	Face enhancement →						
	Face enhancement →							
	Face threat →							
	Face enhancement →							

past that was rejected by firm). Employing a between-subjects design, we randomly assigned respondents to one of four conditions in which we manipulated firm acknowledgment. The procedure in Study 1b mirrored that of Study 1a. After going through the online banking experience and submitting their idea to the online community, respondents were shown one of four manipulated acknowledgments. We used PLS-SEM to estimate the main conceptual model.

We used the same measures for Study 1b as in Study 1a. In addition to face sensitivity (Fenigstein et al. 1975), we added another trait-based control variable, consciousness of face, in the form of fear of losing face or gaining face (Zhang et al. 2011). To ensure our constructs were behaving consistently, we reran all the validity checks from Study 1a (EFA, CFA, and common method). All results were consistent (see Table 2).

Results

In this study, we aimed to understand the impact of past consumer experience with idea rejection or use (see Table 3 for a summary of results). Following Bagozzi et al. (1991), we dummy-coded both past experience (past idea: not used = 1, used = 0) and current use of idea (idea not used acknowledgment = 1, noncommittal acknowledgment = 0) as our two exogenous variables.² We tested the same two sequential models as in Study 1a. We also included age, face sensitivity, and consciousness of face as covariates.

Model 1 Model 1 demonstrates the structural model estimation and evaluation of the relationships without face enhancement. Model 1 has an R^2 of 0.36 for future idea sharing. Having an idea used (vs. rejected) in the past had a significantly reduced face threat ($\beta_{Ft_pastused} = -.24; p < .001$) and significantly increased future idea sharing ($\beta_{idea_pastused} = .15; p < .05$), consistent with H3. Having an idea rejected (current) also significantly increased face threat ($\beta_{ft_currentideareject} = .38; p < .001$) and reduced future idea sharing ($\beta_{ft_currentreject} = -.23; p < .01$), compared with noncommittal acknowledgment. Face threat also had a significant, negative impact on future idea sharing ($\beta_{idea_ft} = -.44, p < .001$). To assess whether face threat mediates the impact of acknowledgment type and past experience, we tested the significance of the indirect effect to confirm mediation using PLS (see Table 4 for a summary of indirect effects). The effect was confirmed (H1c); face threat significantly mediated the effect of both past experience ($\beta_{pastused} = .11; p < .05$) and current idea rejected ($\beta_{currentreject} = -.17; p < .001$).

Model 2 We next ran the same base model with the addition of face enhancement as a mediator. The predictive validity of the model increased ($R^2 = .63, \Delta = .27$). Past ideas used significantly

² We also tested the impact of no past experience, and the results were consistent with Study 1a. Space limitations prevent us from reporting this replication here.

increased face enhancement ($\beta_{pastused}=.29, p<.001$). Similarly, having a current idea rejected significantly reduced face enhancement ($\beta_{currentreject}=-.43, p<.001$). Face enhancement significantly increased future idea sharing ($\beta_{fe}=.72; p<.001$) and reduced face threat ($\beta_{fe}=-.55; p<.001$). Finally, the indirect effects of both past idea used ($\beta_{pastused}=.21; p<.001$) and current idea rejected ($\beta_{currentreject}=-.31; p<.001$) through face enhancement were significant, indicating mediation.

Mirroring Study 1a, we again compare the two models. As H1d predicted, when we add face enhancement to the model, the positive impact of having an idea used in the past on both face threat ($\beta_{ft_pastused}=-.08; ns$) and future idea sharing ($\beta_{fidea_pastused}=.03; ns$) becomes non-significant. Similarly, the significant effects of current idea rejected on both face threat ($\beta_{currentreject}=.14; ns$) and future idea sharing ($\beta_{currentreject_futureidea}=-.06; ns$) become non-significant when we add face enhancement to the model. The direct effect of face threat on future idea sharing is also no longer significant ($\beta_{ft}=-.08; ns$). Finally, both indirect effects through face threat are no longer significant ($\beta_{pastused}=.01; ns; \beta_{currentreject}=-.01; ns$).

These results lend support to the long-held belief that past experiences can influence future experiences. These results show that if an idea is rejected in the present, a consumer's past experience can help buffer the negative impact of the rejection.

Study 2: buffering face threat of rejecting ideas

Studies 1a and 1b demonstrate that a firm's direct rejection of an idea can influence consumers' perceptions of face and their future idea sharing intentions. In practice, firms are unable to implement most consumer ideas. In Study 2, we test two possible managerial responses to buffer these negative effects: group identity creation (H4) and offering of an excuse (H5).

Design and procedure

Study 2 was an online experiment with 200 participants recruited from MTurk with demographics similar to the prior studies. To test H4 and H5, we examined the effects of both creating a group identity and offering consumers an excuse for why their idea is not implemented. We employed a 2 (excuse vs. no excuse) \times 2 (group identity vs. no group identity) between-subjects design. In this analysis, we used the baseline response of idea not used for all conditions. Thus, we aimed to understand the buffering impact of both types of firm responses on a rejected idea. We again used the same measures and reran all the validity checks as in Study 1a (EFA, CFA, and common method). All results were consistent (see Table 2).

Our group identity manipulation aimed to create a special group of recommenders that was unique and distinct. While from a broader standpoint this also might cause consumers to feel liked or respected by the company, prior research has tested this type of

manipulation as a social identity measure, and thus it is well established (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Sawhney et al. 2005). Second, we operationalized an excuse as the reason the firm could not implement the ideas; specifically, we used "a lack of economic resources" as the firm excuse. This excuse allows consumers to think that the rejected idea was not due to the merit of the idea itself, but because the firm lacked the ability to implement it. We also pretested two additional excuses ("a lack of human resources" and "a lack of technological ability") and found no significant differences among the three. Thus, to simplify the design, we chose one excuse (see Appendix 1).

Results

To test the impact of both creating a group identity and offering an excuse on consumers' perceptions of face threat and face enhancement, we created two dummy variables for excuse (vs. no excuse) and group identity (vs. no group identity). We again used PLS to estimate two sequential models, in line with the previous analyses (see Table 3 for a summary of results). We also included age, face sensitivity, and consciousness of face as covariates, as in Study 1a.

Model 1 Model 1 has an R^2 of 0.27 for future idea sharing. Creating a group identity (compared with no group identity) significantly reduced face threat ($\beta_{ft_group}=-.28, p<.001$) and significantly increased future idea sharing ($\beta_{fidea_group}=.13, p<.05$), in support of H4. Offering an excuse significantly reduced face threat ($\beta_{ft_excuse}=-.26, p<.001$) but no direct effect on future idea sharing ($\beta_{ft_excuse}=.08, ns$), offering partial support for H5. Face threat also significantly reduced future idea sharing ($\beta_{fidea_ft}=-.46, p<.001$). Next, to confirm the mediating impact of face threat on our two independent variables, we tested the significance of the indirect effect using PLS. The effect was confirmed; face threat significantly mediated the effect of both group identity creation ($\beta_{group}=-.13; p<.05$) and offering of an excuse ($\beta_{excuse}=.12; p<.001$), in further support of H1c.

Model 2 We again ran the same base model with the addition of face enhancement as a mediator. The predictive validity rose as the model increased ($R^2=.54, \Delta=.27$). Group identity creation significantly increased face enhancement ($\beta_{group}=.46, p<.001$). Similarly, offering an excuse significantly increased face enhancement ($\beta_{excuse}=.30; p<.001$). Face enhancement significantly increased future idea sharing ($\beta_{fe}=.69; p<.001$) and reduced face threat ($\beta_{fe}=-.53; p<.001$). Finally, the indirect effects of both group identity ($\beta_{group}=.32; p<.001$) and excuse ($\beta_{excuse}=.21; p<.001$) through face enhancement were significant, indicating mediation (see Table 4 for a summary of indirect effects).

When comparing the two models, when we add face enhancement to the model, the negative impact of creating a group identity on face threat is weaker but still significant ($\beta_{ft_group}=-.04; p<.05$). However, the direct effect of group identity on future idea sharing is no longer significant ($\beta_{fidea_group}=-.11;$

ns). The significant effects of excuse on both face threat ($\beta_{ft_excuse} = -.09$; *ns*) and future idea sharing ($\beta_{fidea_excuse} = -.05$; *ns*) become non-significant when we add face enhancement to the model. The direct effect of face threat on future idea sharing is weak but still significant ($\beta_{ft} = -.16$; $p < .05$). Finally, both indirect effects through face threat are no longer significant ($\beta_{group} = .01$; *ns*; $\beta_{excuse} = .01$; *ns*), further supporting H1d.

Discussion

Study 2 examines two possible buffering acknowledgment strategies for unused ideas. The unique group identity buffered the negative effects of telling consumers that their idea would not be used (H4). Furthermore, offering an excuse also functioned to buffer the negative impact of rejecting an idea (H5). While consumers' perceptions of face threat mediated the effects in isolation, the addition of face enhancement reduced its negative effect (H1).

Study 3: effect of acknowledgment visibility on idea sharing

In Studies 3a and 3b, we test H6 (high vs. low visibility of acknowledgment) and extend our previous findings using a simulated online community experiment (Study 3a) followed by a field study with a live retail MROC (Study 3b). Study 3b allowed the participants to generate their own unique ideas and comments, which were then submitted to the live MROC.

Study 3a: simulated MROC experiment

Design, procedure, and methodology We conducted an online scenario experiment with 330 participants recruited from MTurk. We sought to explore how firm acknowledgment and acknowledgment visibility influence face perceptions and idea sharing intentions. In the high visibility condition, the firm acknowledgment was posted in a publicly viewed online community. In the low visibility condition, the firm acknowledgment was e-mailed directly to the consumer and thus only viewed by the idea giver. We also added our group identity buffering responses. Using a 2 (high visibility=1; low visibility=0) \times 2 (idea not used=1; noncommittal=0) \times 2 (group identity=1; no group identity=0) between-subjects design, we randomly assigned participants to one of eight conditions.

The procedure in Study 3a mirrored that of previous studies, but we used a new setting, a small deli. Participants were first invited to take part in a consumer online forum for a New York-style deli. They were then told that the forum featured an area in which consumers could post ideas to improve the food and services offered by the deli. Participants then logged in to the deli's website and submitted a suggestion that the deli offer free Wi-Fi service. They were then told their idea was shared publicly and posted to the site so that many other consumers could

read and see their idea. Next, they were directed to a screen on which they either saw their idea in a public thread with other consumer comments and the firm's acknowledgment embedded (public: noncommittal – no Group; public: idea not used – no group; public: noncommittal – group; public: idea not used – group) or saw their idea and associated threads with the firm's acknowledgment displayed as a separate e-mail from the firm (private: noncommittal – no group; private: idea not used – no group; private: noncommittal – group; private: idea not used – group). Participants completed the same measures as in prior studies (items referenced “deli” instead of “bank”). The measures in Study 3a mirrored those of Study 1b. We reran all the validity checks as in Study 1a (EFA, CFA, and common method). All results were consistent (see Table 2).

Results To test the impact of our three manipulations (public firm response [vs. private], group identity [vs. no group], and direct rejection acknowledgment [vs. noncommittal acknowledgment]) on consumers' perceptions of face threat, face enhancement, and future idea sharing, we estimated a PLS model (see Table 3 for a summary of results). For ease of explication, we ran two separate models to examine the effects of our key manipulations on both direct rejection and noncommittal acknowledgments.³ We also included age, face sensitivity, and consciousness of face as covariates, as in Study 1b.

Consistent with our prior studies, we find that the impact of creating a group identity on face is consistent for both types of acknowledgments: increasing face enhancement (idea rejected: $\beta_{fe_group} = .34$, $p < .001$; noncommittal: $\beta_{fe_group} = .18$, $p < .01$) and reducing face threat (idea rejected: $\beta_{ft_group} = -.04$, *ns*; noncommittal: $\beta_{ft_group} = -.10$, *ns*). We also find consistent results for the positive impact on face enhancement (idea rejected: $\beta_{fe} = .58$, $p < .001$; noncommittal: $\beta_{fe} = .47$, $p < .001$) and negative impact on face threat (idea rejected: $\beta_{ft} = -.29$, $p < .001$; noncommittal: $\beta_{ft} = -.36$, $p < .001$) on future idea sharing, as well as the negative impact of face enhancement on face threat (idea rejected: $\beta_{fe_group} = -.45$, $p < .001$; noncommittal: $\beta_{fe_group} = -.47$, $p < .001$).

We next examined the effect of a public (vs. private) acknowledgment on face for our two models. For the direct rejection acknowledgment, responding in public (vs. private) increased face threat ($\beta_{ft_public} = .16$, $p < .05$). Conversely, for a noncommittal acknowledgment, responding in public (vs. private) reduced face threat ($\beta_{ft_public} = -.14$, $p < .05$). In both models, the public \times group interaction was non-significant (idea rejected: $\beta_{public \times group_futureidea} = -.01$, *ns*; noncommittal: $\beta_{public \times group_futureidea} = -.04$, *ns*). Together, these results support H6.

These results corroborate our previous results; creating a group identity positively influences face enhancement. Whether the idea is rejected or a noncommittal response is given, creating

³ We also estimated the two sequential (mediation) models for each main model, and patterns were consistent with previous results.

a group identity consistently buffers the negative impact of face threat. In support of H6, offering a response in public had a larger impact on face threat than the same response given in private, suggesting that a public response may reduce face threat if done correctly. We examine this finding further in Study 3b.

Study 3b: field study with a live MROC

Design, procedure, and methodology We employed a 2 (noncommittal vs. no acknowledgment) \times 2 (high visibility vs. low visibility) between-subjects design, in which we investigated the influences of firm acknowledgment and acknowledgment visibility on idea sharing. The purpose of this study was to test H6 in a field study with actual consumer behaviors. Because we had already shown the negative effects of face-threatening responses, we could not ethically risk alienating any actual consumers; thus, face-threatening acknowledgments were not an option, and as such we limited the scope to noncommittal acknowledgments. We invited 130 consumers of a local deli to peruse an online community website, similar to My Starbucks Idea, created specifically for this research. Participants were recruited through in-store intercepts while waiting in line. We created two unique and separate communities: one “private” (low visibility) and one “public” (high visibility) community. We pretested several noncommittal acknowledgments to increase variety and realism. Participants were able to log in to the community and post their own ideas and comments, as well as see the posts of other community members. This online forum was a fully functional MROC. Users could generate their own ideas and comments; however, as it was not the focus of this research, we did not evaluate the quality of the content posted. In the public community, the firm posted its acknowledgment of ideas on the community website, and in the private community, the firm e-mailed its acknowledgment directly to the idea giver. In both communities, peer consumers could post comments and vote on ideas. In total, 103 consumers accepted the invitation (79.2% response rate) and were randomly placed into one of the two communities in which all consumers posted at least one comment. For each community, half the consumers were placed in the no acknowledgment condition, and the other half were placed in the noncommittal acknowledgment condition. Consumers were then invited to post ideas and comment on peers’ ideas. Consumers could log off the community whenever they finished exploring the web page. A community manager monitored the page on a daily basis and controlled acknowledgments to consumers. While trolling, posting of unconstructive messages to incite a reaction (Bishop 2012), is always possible, it was not observed in either forum.

Within 2 days of their posting, consumers received a noncommittal acknowledgment publicly (posted in the comment threads) or privately (e-mailed to the consumer) or no acknowledgment. The noncommittal acknowledgment thanked consumers for the ideas but made no mention of whether the idea

would be used or not. Those in the public forum received a notice that their idea had received a response and were invited to log back in to the community to read the publicly posted follow-up response. Those in the private forum received an e-mail with the firm’s acknowledgment of their idea and were invited to log back in to the community to participate further. Within each community, everyone saw responses from peer consumers. After consumers viewed the public or private response, they were directed to another survey to measure their post-idea sharing attitudes. We invited consumers to continue engaging with the online community. This live MROC allowed participants to come and go as they pleased. We then measured future consumer idea sharing with the online community 1 month after consumers’ initial posts by summing the total number of comments each consumer contributed and the total number of votes the consumer cast for peers’ ideas.

Results We examined the effect of firm acknowledgment on future idea sharing in the community. We computed future idea sharing behavior as a count variable (total comments posted plus total votes cast) of consumers’ community activity after the firm acknowledgment (or no acknowledgment) of their idea. We estimated a Poisson regression model to predict future idea sharing behavior that included firm acknowledgment, acknowledgment visibility, and the two-way interaction between firm acknowledgment and acknowledgment visibility. Poisson regression is robust in accommodating the violation of heteroskedasticity and normality of distribution assumptions associated with modeling count variables (Coxe et al. 2009). The results reveal significant main effects of firm acknowledgment and acknowledgment visibility. First, a noncommittal acknowledgment led to a 16% increase in future idea sharing ($M_{\text{acknowledgment}}=2.13$, $M_{\text{no acknowledgment}}=1.84$) compared with no acknowledgment ($B=.34$, $p<.05$). Second, a noncommittal public acknowledgment led to 143% more future consumer idea sharing ($M_{\text{public acknowledgment}}=3.13$, $M_{\text{private acknowledgment}}=1.29$) than a noncommittal private acknowledgment ($B=.45$, $p<.05$), in support of H6. The two-way interaction between firm acknowledgment and acknowledgment visibility was not significant ($B=.44$, $p=.14$). Finally, we included face enhancement as a mediator. The indirect path through face enhancement was significant ($a_1b_1=.1822$, $.0276$ to $.4646$). We could not test our full model because of our agreement with the firm to avoid threatening consumers’ face.

We next conducted a 2×2 analysis of variance with firm acknowledgment and acknowledgment visibility as fixed factors and face enhancement as the dependent variable. The results indicate that firm acknowledgment ($M=4.75$) led to significantly higher face enhancement ($F(1, 102)=12.76$, $p<.001$) than no acknowledgment ($M=4.07$). The main effect of acknowledgment visibility was not significant ($F(1, 102)=.73$, $p=.40$). The interaction between firm acknowledgment and acknowledgment visibility was significant ($F(1, 102)=4.84$, $p<.05$). Consistent with H6, consumers who

received a firm acknowledgment had significantly higher face enhancement when the acknowledgment was shared in a public ($M=5.07$) rather than in a private forum ($M=4.47$; $p<.05$). We also tested the impact of peer consumer votes and found no significant impact on our outcomes.

Discussion

Studies 3a and 3b demonstrate that a response given in public can have greater impact on face. Study 3a demonstrates that rejecting an idea publicly amplifies the negative effect. Study 3b shows that a noncommittal public acknowledgment leads to higher face enhancement. We found that acknowledging consumer ideas increased future consumer idea sharing by 16% compared with when no firm acknowledgment was given. Further, a noncommittal public acknowledgment of ideas shared in online communities increased future consumer idea sharing by 143% compared with when firm acknowledgment was private. Study 3 allowed us to test the influence of public versus private acknowledgments of consumer ideas. Public firm acknowledgments led to higher face enhancement than private acknowledgments, and, replicating Study 1, firm acknowledgment (vs. no firm acknowledgment) influenced future behavior.

General discussion

Our research sheds light on the question of how a firm should respond after consumers voluntarily share their ideas to stimulate a lasting relationship that results in future idea sharing. Regardless of whether consumers' ideas are ultimately brilliant or worthless, the firm's response can have lasting implications for the consumer–firm relationship.

Prior research has shown that consumers feel closer to firms when they offer ideas (Liu and Gal 2011), but no research has examined the impact of the firm's response on future behaviors. Furthermore, whereas prior research has examined the future behaviors of consumers whose ideas were successfully implemented in the past (Bayus 2013), we examine consumers whose ideas have been rejected. We show that when consumers give an idea, the firm's acknowledgment can threaten or enhance their face and, ultimately, the likelihood of the consumer returning in the future with more ideas. We also show that a consumer's past experience (with having their idea used or not) influences the impact of a current idea being rejected. Past success appears to buffer the negative impact of having an (current) idea rejected. We examined two other potential buffering approaches firms can employ: First, creating a distinct and unique group identity can buffer consumers' face-threatening experience with having their ideas rejected, allowing consumers to take credit for the accepted group ideas even when their ideas are rejected. Second, offering an excuse also buffers the negative impact of having an idea rejected. We also demonstrate that a public acknowledgment

has a greater impact on future idea sharing than acknowledgments given in private. Finally, we tested our model with real consumers in a live business setting, adding to the study's external validity.

Theoretical implications

This research brings Goffman's (1967) face theory into the idea sharing literature. Prior research has focused on losing, maintaining, upholding, or saving face and the different strategies people use to maintain face (Van Ginkel 2004). We add to this body of work by showing that an acknowledgment can not only threaten perceptions of face but also enhance it. Depending on the firm's response (if any), we show that consumer perceptions of face are altered, affecting their future idea sharing behaviors. We also show that face threat mediates the impact of firm response on idea sharing intentions. We highlight how a firm's response can positively influence face enhancement and thus buffer the negative impact of face threat.

Liu and Gal (2011) demonstrate the importance of the simple act of soliciting feedback. We extend this work by examining how a firm's response to these ideas can influence future behavior. While encouraging consumers to reach out with ideas may be a powerful tool, how the firm responds may influence future customer behavior. As Bayus (2013) argues, the goal of online market research communities is sustained and repeated idea sharing behaviors. We demonstrate how an appropriate firm response can accomplish that goal.

We also extend prior work on social identity theory. A rich research stream shows positive outcomes of social identification (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Fombelle et al. 2012). This is the first study to examine how group identity creation can reduce face threat. We also extend prior research in the excuse literature (Holtgraves 1992) by showing that an excuse can reduce face threat. Finally, this research sheds light on the impact of public versus private behaviors. Extending the work of Brown and Levinson (1987) and Ashford and Cummings (1983), we show that firm responses given in public can affect face perceptions more than those given in private. Although it is well known that people feel pride when their accomplishments are publicly (compared with privately) acknowledged, this is the first research to show that a firm's response can have a larger (negative or positive) impact if given publicly.

Managerial implications

When consumers reach out to a firm with ideas or suggestions, it is crucial that the firm is prepared to respond in a meaningful way. The number of consumer ideas continues to increase due to the rise in popularity of blogs, wikis, and MROCs, highlighting the need for the current study. Even a single, small crowdsourcing event can generate thousands of ideas (Sullivan 2010). For example, Ford recently created a new

channel for encouraging consumer ideas (social.ford.com/your-ideas), on which consumers can post ideas for anything they want to see on a Ford. Procter & Gamble also encourages consumers and inventors to share ideas through its Connect + Develop program (pgconnectdevelop.com). Many managers are unsure of whether and how to respond to this influx of ideas. Firms have been successful garnering consumer comments and creating large communities around idea generation, but they may not yet realize their potential. Mismanagement of such communities could alienate valuable consumers.

This research also suggests how firms should respond. First, we show that a specific acknowledgment for a rejected idea is not the best method; rather, a noncommittal acknowledgment is more appropriate. While Dell responds to all of the posts, it may not be optimizing the community. Dell does give simple acknowledgments to indicate to consumers that they are reading all of their ideas. In addition, several of these milestones (e.g., acknowledged, under review) make no mention of whether or not the idea will be implemented. However, when Dell tells consumers that their idea is “not planned” it may have negative repercussions. It is also important for managers to be aware of consumers’ past experiences with giving ideas. Because the goal of these communities is repeated idea sharing behavior, there is a good chance that an individual currently giving an idea has already done so in the past. If the past idea was used, this could buffer the negative impact of the current idea rejection. Conversely, if the idea was rejected, a manager should think twice before directly rejecting another idea. A noncommittal response, while lacking informational value, will lessen the negative impact.

Second, firms can also buffer the negative impact of rejecting an idea by establishing group identities. Consider the Windows 7, “I’m a PC and Windows 7 was my idea” advertising campaign. Here, the campaign allows many users to feel that their ideas directly affected the development of the Windows operating system. Our research also demonstrates the buffering effect of offering an excuse. Allowing the individual to believe that the idea was rejected because of something external to the individual functions to buffer the negative impact on face threat.

Finally, we demonstrate that a firm acknowledgment in public has a larger impact on face and potentially on future idea sharing behavior than an acknowledgment given in private. A firm must be careful about what responses it posts in its online forums and communities. If the response is positive, or at least neutral, a firm can enhance the relationship with a public response. It also seems clear that a public face-threatening act response should be avoided. From a broader perspective, healthy and successful communities have active members (Bayus 2013), and thus firms should strive to create highly functional communities, to encourage consumers to return continuously with new thoughts and ideas.

Limitations and further research

Further research could extend our work to other media formats, exploring the implications of acknowledging consumer ideas by telephone, by mail, through social media, and in person. Online forums also offer additional avenues for research. Consumer face may be enhanced or threatened differently depending on the giver or source of the acknowledgment. In MROCs, ideas are evaluated not only by the firm but also by peer consumers. We did not examine the impact of other consumers’ comments. Criticism from peers could have a different effect on face than criticism from the firm. Similarly, the source of praise (firm vs. peer) could have different effects on the perception of face. Further research should also test the impact of deviant consumer behavior in these communities. While many communities have clear social norms and expectations for community behavior, consumers may push the limits. Harsh, angry, or rude criticism of others’ ideas may affect consumers’ perceptions of face differently.

One limitation of our field study was our inability to test both face threat and face enhancement. Because this study included actual consumers, we were unable to test face-threatening acknowledgments, or to directly reject ideas, to avoid alienating consumers. Further research could explore the effects of face-threatening and direct rejection acknowledgments to ideas shared in live online communities. It would also be valuable to test more boundary conditions of our results. Our findings highlight the negative impact of not responding to consumers’ ideas. Additional research could examine whether there are contexts in which no response is preferred. Finally, some face-saving responses from a firm may be expensive. Thus, research could link firm responses to customer profitability and also examine the quality or future success of the idea given. While our field study allowed consumers to generate and post their own unique ideas and comments, we did not evaluate the quality of the posts. Many firms now use consumers extensively for sources of new product ideas (Schreier et al. 2012) and receive large volumes of ideas, only a fraction of which turn into profitable products. Research could examine how idea quality changes the face implications of a firm response.

As consumers continue to gain access to powerful new media and information tools to interact with brands, firms can no longer act independently of their consumers. Our results show that firm acknowledgment of consumers’ ideas can influence consumer perceptions of face, which in turn can influence consumer future behavior. Firms must consider the psychological and behavioral consequences of their idea policies and acknowledgment practices, lest they risk alienating and destroying their relationships with consumers.

Appendix 1

Study 1a, 1b, 2, and 3a acknowledgments

Study 1a Firm acknowledgment	<p>1. Idea Not Used: We really appreciate your recent idea. Unfortunately, we will not be using your idea. Receiving ideas is critical to our continued ability to improve our services.</p> <p>2. Noncommittal: We really appreciate your recent idea. Receiving ideas is critical to our continued ability to improve our services.</p> <p>3. No Firm Acknowledgment</p>
Study 1b Past experience	<p>Current Response:</p> <p>1. Idea Not Used: same as study 1a</p> <p>2. Noncommittal: same as study 1a</p> <p>Past Experience:</p> <p>1. Idea Used in Past: Just as you have done before with your bank, you decide to share an idea with them, so you contact your bank's customer service department and suggest that they change the current layout. You are hopeful they will accept your idea since they accepted your previous idea.</p> <p>2. Idea Not Used in Past: Just as you have done before with your bank, you decide to share an idea with them, so you contact your bank's customer service department and suggest that they change the current layout. You are hopeful they will accept your idea since they rejected your previous idea.</p>
Study 2 Group identity	<p>1. Group Identity - Idea Not Used: We really appreciate your suggestion. Unfortunately, we will not be implementing your idea. Because of your recommendation, we have added you to our superstar recommenders group that is made up of a select few. Although we didn't use your specific recommendation, we have recently made changes to our website based on the recommendations of your group, the superstar recommenders. Suggestions from our superstar recommenders are critical to our continued ability to improve our services.</p> <p>2. Excuse - Idea Not Used: We really appreciate your recent suggestion. Unfortunately, we will not be implementing your idea. We currently do not have the economic feasibility to pursue your suggestion but hopefully in the future we will be able to look into it. Receiving suggestions are critical to our continued ability to improve our services.</p>
Study 3a	<p>1. Idea Not Used-Group Identity-Public: same as study 2 (posted publicly)</p> <p>2. Idea Not Used-Group Identity-Private: same as study 2 (posted privately)</p> <p>3. Idea Not Used-No Group Identity-Public: same as study 2 (posted publicly)</p> <p>4. Idea Not Used-NO Group Identity-Private: same as study 2 (posted privately)</p> <p>5. Noncommittal-Group Identity-Public: same as study 2 (posted publicly)</p> <p>6. Noncommittal-Group Identity-Private: same as study 2 (posted privately)</p> <p>7. Noncommittal-No Group Identity-Public: same as study 2 (posted publicly)</p> <p>8. Noncommittal-No Group Identity-Private: same as study 2 (posted privately)</p>

Appendix 2

Key constructs

Constructs	Item loadings Study 1a/Study 1b/ Study 2/ Study 3a
Key mediators and dependent measures	
Face enhancement	
The bank's response to my idea made me look good in the eyes of others.	.92/.93/.91/.90
The bank's response to my idea made me feel useful.	.96/.96/.95/.95
The bank's response to my idea made me feel liked.	.95/.96/.94/.96
The bank's response to my idea showed that my abilities were evaluated highly.	.95/.96/.93/.94
Face threat	
The bank's response to my idea showed disrespect towards me.	.82/.87/.81/.89
The bank's response to my idea embarrassed me.	.90/.90/.90/.92
The bank's response to my idea gave me less confidence.	.88/.92/.87/.90
Future idea sharing	
I will submit ideas in the future.	.94/.98/.99/.97
How likely are you to submit ideas to this bank in the future?	.98/.98/.99/.98
How likely are you to provide feedback to this bank in the future?	.98/.98/.98/.98
Covariates	
Self-esteem	
Because of the bank's response I am worried about whether I am regarded as a success or failure.	.89/.88/.75/.83
The bank's response made me feel self-conscious.	.76/.90/.87/.91
The bank's response made me worried about what other people think of me.	.88/.95/.93/.95
The bank's response made me feel concerned about the impression I am making.	.92/.94/.94/.94
The bank's response made me worried about looking foolish.	.92/.94/.92/.91
Face-Sensitivity	
I'm concerned about my style of doing things.	.72/.80/.79/.81
I'm concerned about the way I present myself.	.74/.86/.90/.88
I'm self-conscious about the way I look.	.80/.83/.90/.81
I usually worry about making a good impression.	.76/.85/.77/.83
I'm concerned about what other people think of me.	.76/.84/.62/.60
Consciousness of face	
Desire to gain face	
I hope people think I can do better than most others	na/.79/na/.82
I hope that I can talk about things that most others do not know	na/.77/na/.77
It is important for me to get praise and admiration.	na/.66/na/.77
I hope to let people know that I have association with some big names.	na/.69/na/.68

I hope that I have a better life than most others in others view.	na/.78/na/.78
Fear of Losing Face	
I always avoid talking about my weakness.	na/.76/na/.74
I try to avoid letting others think that I am ignorant even if I really am.	na/.78/na/.79
I do my best to hide my weakness before others.	na/.80/na/.84
If I work in an organization of bad reputation I will try not to tell others about that.	na/.65/na/.70
It is hard for me to acknowledge a mistake even if I am really wrong.	na/.65/na/.57
Attribution	
External	
The bank's response to my idea was due to the bank's policies.	.83/.92/.87/.87
The bank's response to my idea was due to the bank's circumstances.	.83/.88/.89/.87
Internal	
The bank's response to my idea was due to my suggestion.	.96/.97/.94/.92
The bank's response to my idea was due to my actions.	.96/.95/.93/.92

Notes: All items were measured using seven-point scales.

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