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Customer engagement in idea contests: Emotional and behavioral consequences of idea rejection

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Abstract

Idea contests are well-accepted and cost-efficient approaches to tap the creativity of customers. At the same time, idea contests enable customer engagement, defined as voluntary resource provision beyond financial patronage. However, although much research has been devoted to the factors that motivate consumers to participate in such contests, research that investigates how idea *rejection* as a stressor affects future engagement behavior is comparatively rare. This research draws on cognitive dissonance literature combined with stress appraisal theory to explain rejection-induced emotional and behavioral consequences. Study 1 assesses the different effects of company appreciation of customer engagement (i.e., idea acceptance vs. rejection) in an experimental setting and tests emotional reactions to rejection as a stressor, as well as the moderating effects of firm acknowledgment. Study 2, which was organized as a randomized field experiment, is devoted to assessing differences in firm acknowledgment versus individualized firm feedback in a real-world setting. Taken together, the studies show that the way rejection is communicated is important. The findings have important theoretical and managerial implications for service management and for stimulating customer engagement through idea contest initiatives.

KEYWORDS

consumer stress, customer engagement, emotions, field experiment, idea contest, idea rejection

1 | INTRODUCTION

To improve customer relationship practices and to generate long-term profitability, many service firms pursue strategies aimed at proactively engaging customers, that is, facilitating customers' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral resource contributions to the firm beyond customers' purchase behavior (Harmeling et al., 2017; Moriuchi, 2019; Van Doorn et al., 2010; Vivek et al., 2012). Customer engagement comes in different observable forms such as customer referrals, word-of-mouth, and suggestions for improvements (Behnam et al., 2021; Chung et al., 2018; Delbaere et al., 2021; Dose et al., 2019; Pansari & Kumar, 2017). However, there is agreement that customer engagement—as a broader concept—involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements (Hollebeek, Sharma, et al., 2022; Hollebeek, Sprott, et al., 2022; Mirbagheri & Najmi, 2019), with customer engagement being defined as "a consumer's positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional and behavioral activity during or related to focal consumer/brand

interactions" (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 151). At the same time, researchers tend to agree that customer engagement *behavior* has the strongest influence on downstream variables such as firm value (Beckers et al., 2018; Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

To facilitate customer engagement though, firms increasingly implement task-based engagement initiatives, such as idea contests, aimed at actively and intentionally making customers contributors to various firm activities—often by offering some kind of reward (e.g., prizes, badges) (Harmeling et al., 2017). With idea contests, firms invite customers to submit new product and service ideas and solutions over a fixed period to both complement internal innovation efforts and to engage customers (Fombelle et al., 2016). Hence, participating in idea contests is a form of customer engagement (Blut et al., 2020; Harmeling et al., 2017; Leclercq et al., 2018), with cognitive (i.e., reflection of ideas and brand identity), emotional (i.e., attachment to ideas), and behavioral (i.e., eventually submitting the idea) components. Idea contests therefore have the potential to strengthen existing customers' commitment to the offering firm while simultaneously attracting new consumers that feel stimulated to contribute ideas (Piezunka & Dahlander, 2019).

Importantly, idea contests, like most task-based engagement activities, have an outcome-based structure, that is, participants compete for pre-announced prizes (e.g., monetary rewards, badges) and are only rewarded for their engagement activities if the firm decides to eventually adopt their service or product idea. Due to this very nature of idea contests and the variety in quality, newness and strategic fit of customers' new service and product ideas, firms inevitably reject most of the submitted ideas (Fombelle et al., 2016; Piezunka & Dahlander, 2015). For example, in a recent McDonald's burger contest among my McDonald's app users, three winning burgers were chosen out of 200,000 submissions (McDonald's, 2020). Hence, most participants were exposed to rejection. While rejection is a likely outcome, stress theory suggests that rejection can be perceived as a stressor (Hawk et al., 2019), potentially affecting future engagement behavior. Understanding how customers respond emotionally and behaviorally when their idea is rejected, however, is important, as rejecting ideas may negatively influence future engagement initiatives and consumer–firm relationships (Fombelle et al., 2016; Leclercq et al., 2018; Van Doorn et al., 2010).

To this end, we provide at least three contributions to the current literatures on customer engagement (Brodie et al., 2011; Pansari & Kumar, 2017), idea contests (Piezunka & Dahlander, 2019), and stress theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). First, we focus on idea rejection as an understudied stressor in the postengagement phase by drawing on cognitive dissonance and stress appraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Most research on customer engagement is concerned with its emergence (e.g., Chung et al., 2018; Feddema et al., 2020; Moriuchi, 2020; Siuki & Webster, 2021), and to a lesser extent with its potentially negative consequences caused by firm reactions to customer engagement (e.g., Hollebeek, Sharma, et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2019; Van Doorn et al., 2010), which can be perceived as stressful in the case of rejection. For example, Blut et al. (2020) showed that in the context of service co-production, customer participation can lead to role stress, so there is reason to believe that customer engagement can be perceived as stressful as well. Second, we study the role of participant emotions as appraisal when confronted with idea rejection. The basic tenet of the customer engagement literature rests on the assumption that customer-firm interactions have transformed from a pure transaction focus to an engagement focus. While a transaction focus utilizes rather hard facts such as customer lifetime vale, engagement is characterized by emotional bonding (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Hence, understanding how emotions in a postengagement phase are triggered by idea rejection is therefore a novel contribution. Third, we investigate how firms' communication efforts influence customers' postengagement emotions and future engagement behaviors. According to Piezunka and Dahlander (2019), about 88% of participants in idea contests[1] receive no feedback, not even an explicit rejection. However, customers spend valuable resources (e.g., time, mental and physical effort, money) to develop new service or product ideas and rejecting ideas, especially without feedback or appreciation, implies devaluing their engagement. Hence, understanding how firms should communicate idea rejections and provide feedback is important to minimize negative rejection-induced influences on customer-firm relationships and future engagement (Harmeling et al., 2017).

To achieve these contributions, we study the effects of idea rejection as a stressor on customer emotions (i.e., anger, delight), future engagement behavior toward other customers (i.e., positive and negative word-of-mouth), and future engagement behavior toward the firm (i.e., feedback giving and future participation intention). Specifically, by drawing on cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1962), and the appraisal theory of stress (Smith & Lazarus, 1993), we assume that rejecting customer ideas is perceived as stressful and engenders anger while simultaneously reduces delight typically associated with idea contests. We also investigate whether acknowledgment (vs. no feedback) (Study 1) and individualized feedback (vs. average acknowledgment) (Study 2) influence the magnitude of emotional and behavioral outcomes. We test our predictions in one experimental study and one randomized field experiment (including a prestudy and a post hoc analysis of alternative explanations), offering several implications for the limited research on the intersection of customer engagement and stress.

2 | BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 | Customer engagement in new product and service development

Customer engagement refers to consumers' positively valenced brand-related cognitive, emotional, and behavioral activities and many firms benefit from an engaged customer base (Hollebeek et al.,

[1]We would like to note that Piezunka and Dahlander (2019) studied open innovation communities which were not all characterized by a customer-firm relationship. They also exclusively focused on newcomers, that is, first-time idea contest participants.

2014; Hollebeek, Sharma, et al., 2022). For example, according to Pansari and Kumar (2017), engaged customers bring 37% more annual revenue to their primary bank than customers who are actively disengaged. Similarly, Ho et al. (2020) showed that customer engagement is associated with increased firm performance. Hence, firms strive to stimulate engagement among customers with a "deliberate effort to motivate, empower, and measure customer contributions to marketing functions" (Harmeling et al., 2017, p. 312).

Customer engagement can come in different forms such as providing online reviews, giving referrals, inform social media followers, or display other forms of customer citizenship behavior (Feddema et al., 2020; Giakoumaki & Krepapa, 2019; Moriuchi, 2020; Van Doorn et al., 2010). In idea contests, customers predominantly bring knowledge stores and creativity resources to the fore. Customers who contribute to idea contests typically possess experiences with the company's product portfolio and are willing to provide substantial need knowledge (Füller et al., 2014). Thus, in these situations, customer engagement spans cognitive (i.e., reflection of ideas), emotional (i.e., bonding with ideas), and behavioral (i.e., submitting ideas) facets, in line with the three-dimensional conceptualization of customer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2014), but from a firm perspective, the behavioral component of submitting an idea is most visible.

However, only few studies advanced a customer engagement view on idea contests and looked at how these contests affect customer-firm relationships and future engagement. Among these few examples are the studies by Fombelle et al. (2016), Leclercq et al. (2018), and Piezunka and Dahlander (2019). Fombelle et al. (2016) studied market research online communities and found that consumers respond to a rejected idea with an increase of face threat, leading to a decrease in future idea sharing. Leclercq et al. (2018) draw on gamification literature and show, among others, that prior customer engagement moderates the negative effect of losing a contest on customer experience. Piezunka and Dahlander (2019) also studied idea rejection but found that participants in crowdsourcing settings valued the bonding with the firm although their idea was rejected. This sparsity of empirical research also explains the limited engagement of scholars at the intersection of idea contests as forms of customer engagement and stress. Hence, research on idea rejection is in a nascent stage overall and, to the best of our knowledge, no research has explored idea rejection as a potential stressor as well as its effect on postrejection customer engagement. Table 1 provides a nonexhaustive overview on published research on idea rejection in idea contests.

2.2 | Customer engagement appreciation—Met-expectations and stress appraisal

In the context of idea contests, customer engagement is embedded in a sequence of activities. First, the firm announces a contest and initiates or enables customer engagement. In the second phase, customers participate in the contest and display high levels of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement that involves developing ideas, contrasting them to the company product and service portfolio, and even building prototypes at their own costs. The final phase is characterized by the firm's decision on which idea to put forward and by the firm's strategy of communication with customers (e.g., showing appreciation of customer engagement vs. lack of feedback). We argue that firms' appreciation of customer engagement in idea contests (i.e., customers' reflection of ideas, attachment to ideas, and submission of ideas), in turn, affects future customer engagement behavior, reflected in customer voice (i.e., positive and negative word-of-mouth), feedback giving, and future participation intention—even in the case of idea rejection.

Customer voice is defined as informal communications targeted toward other consumers about the usage and characteristics of goods and services and/or their sellers (De Matos & Rossi, 2008). Feedback giving includes the provision of customer knowledge to the company to identify and even solve company problems (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Finally, future participation intention is defined as "the individual's decision whether to enter a subsequent contest" (Hofstetter et al., 2018, p. 497). We next explain how these outcomes are affected by receiving rejection notices by drawing on expectation confirmation theory (R. L. Oliver, 1980), which helps to explain the emergence of cognitive dissonance, and stress appraisal theory (Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

Consumers engage in idea contests with expectations about the contest (R. L. Oliver, 1980; R. Oliver et al., 1997). These expectations can be *outcome-related* (e.g., winning the contest) or *process-related* (e.g., getting firm acknowledgment/appreciation, firm feedback). For most customers engaging in idea contests, winning the contest is the desirable outcome, but at the same time unrealistic given the typically large numbers of participants. Hence, even more important are expectation concerning the way they were treated (i.e., process-related expectation). When process-related performance does not meet customer expectations (i.e., when expectation violations occur; Sundar & Noseworthy, 2016), the negative disconfirmation of expectations leads to dissatisfaction and cognitive dissonance (e.g., R. L. Oliver, 1980; Parasuraman et al., 1994).

Especially dissonance triggers an unpleasant emotive state of discomfort and stress (Festinger, 1962). Consumer stress refers to consumers' perceived psychological strain in consumption activities (Berry et al., 2015) which can be triggered by endogenous (i.e., firm-related stress such as idea rejections) as well as exogenous events (i.e., environmental changes or shocks such as COVID-19). In this sense, the outcome of participating in an idea contest is a potential endogenous stressor (i.e., an event or stimuli that can cause experiences of stress) which can be either positive (e.g., when winning the contest) or negative (e.g., if firms ignore customer ideas or reject them with no notice) (cf. Lazarus et al., 1985; Leary, 2015). Importantly, being in a state of discomfort and stress provides motivation to change one's attitudes or to engage in dissonance-reducing processes. An important mechanism to reduce dissonance is behavioral change which implies departing from behavior that caused the dissonance (Harmon-Jones, 2004). In case of idea contests, if

TABLE 1 Notable literature on idea and open innovation contests with a focus on idea rejection.

Authors	Sample/method	Dependent variable(s)	Mediator/moderator variable(s)	Main results	Rejection considered	Customer engagement focus	Emotions considered
Fombelle et al. (2016)	Five studies (four studies in relation to communities, one study as a field experiment)	Face threat and Face enhancement	Direct communication of rejection (MOD, yes/no)	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.	Yes	No	No
Leclercq et al. (2018)	Three laboratory ($N = 160$, 160, 160) and one field experiment ($N = 97$)	Customer engagement toward co-creation activity; customer engagement toward co-creation community	Customer experience (MED); Loosing contest (MOD)	The results show that win/lose decisions weaken the benefits of gamification and, in the case of losing a competition, have negative impacts on customer experience and engagement.	Yes	Yes	No
Piezunka and Dahlander (2019)	Field data involving crowdsourcing of 70,159 organizations that receive ideas from 1,336,154 contributors	Newcomer's willingness to continue to interact with the organization	Rejection with explanation (MOD)	We find that receiving a rejection has a positive effect on newcomers' willingness to submit ideas in the future. This effect is stronger if the rejection includes an explanation and is particularly pronounced if the explanation accompanying the rejection matches the original idea in terms of linguistic style	Yes	No	No
This study	One laboratory ($N = 401$) and one field experiment ($N = 202$)	Future customer engagement behavior: Positive word-of-mouth, negative word-of-mouth, future participation, feedback giving	Emotions: Anger and delight (MED); appreciation (MOD)		Yes	Yes	Yes

firms ignore customer ideas or reject them with no notice, that is, when they show no appreciation of customers' engagement efforts in their communication, these consumers most likely will be left with cognitive dissonance and, subsequently, are less likely to participate in future idea contest of the seeker firm, provide fewer suggestions of improvement, and less positive customer voice (e.g., Buckley et al., 2004; Leary et al., 2006).

To this end, we posit that idea contest participants' behavioral responses to being rejected (i.e., perceiving cognitive dissonance) deviate from those triggered by winning the contest (i.e., no cognitive dissonance). Consequently, we posit that expectation violations caused by receiving a rejection affect future customer engagement behavior such that customers express less positive word-of-mouth, more negative word-of mouth, are less eager to provide suggestions and feedback to the company and have a lower likelihood of future participation after being exposed to idea rejection.

H1: Being rejected (compared with getting accepted) in a one-time idea contest leads to (a) less positive word-of-mouth, (b) more negative word-of-mouth, (c) less feedback giving, and (d) less future participation intention.

2.3 | The mediating roles of anger and delight as stress coping mechanisms

Engaging in idea contests affect cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements (Hollebeek et al., 2014). Similarly, *reactions* to idea contest outcomes (i.e., losing or winning) involve cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components. Whereas our first set of hypotheses dealt with behavioral reactions (e.g., word-of-mouth, feedback giving, future participation), our second set of hypotheses deals with customers' emotional responses, defined as "mental states of readiness that arise from cognitive appraisals of events or one's own thoughts" (Bagozzi et al., 1999, p. 184). We use stress appraisal theory to explain how such emotions emerge (Smith & Lazarus, 1993).

Stress appraisal theory posits that individuals appraise situations and events in terms of the level of stress related to those events and consequences for their physical and psychological well-being. Importantly, emotions arise from the cognitive appraisal of an event rather than from the event itself and determine the level of stress attached to a situation. Stress appraisal theory further proposes that psychological stress induced by an individual's appraisal of an event leads to either positive (e.g., joy, relief) or negative (i.e., anger, fright) emotions, depending on whether the event is perceived as beneficial or harmful (Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Emotions can be further categorized into positive-activating (e.g., enjoyment, pride, hope), positive-deactivating (e.g., relief, relaxation), negative-activating (e.g., anxiety, anger, shame/guilt), and negative-deactivating (e.g., boredom, hopelessness, disappointment) (Pekrun, 2006). In the context of idea contests, we turn to activating emotions, namely delight (positive-activating) and anger (negative-activating) because they are more likely to affect future customer engagement behavior. Customer delight is conceptualized as an emotional response, which results from surprise and positive levels of performance (Christ-Brendemühl & Schaarschmidt, 2020; Finn, 2005). Anger is a negatively valenced emotion, similar to fear, but is also considered an approach-related emotion, similar to joy (Welpe et al., 2012).

Prior research involving expectation-confirmation theory has further shown that positive outcome-expectation disparity (i.e., the outcome exceeds expectations) results in positive emotions such as delight (R. Oliver et al., 1997; Rust & Oliver, 2000), while negative outcome-expectation disparity (i.e., the outcome falls below expectations), results in anger (Marikyan et al., 2020). During idea contests, participants might perceive positive feelings, such as enjoyment of performing artistic and creative acts (Franke & Piller, 2004) or pride in being the originator of positively evaluated designs (Dabholkar & Bagozzi, 2002). Especially for contest newcomers, these feelings are associated with delight. The outcome of the idea contest (winning or losing), however, can create different emotions, depending on individuals' appraisal of the outcome (i.e., the stressor). Especially expectancy violations are influenced by emotional states such as anger (Ask & Landström, 2010; Crolic et al., 2022). We reason that compared with winning the idea contest, losing it (i.e., receiving a rejection notice) will be typically perceived as a negative stressor, which increases anger and reduces delight. We further propose that these emotions, due to their activating nature, have effects on future customer engagement behavior as follows.

H2: The effect of the idea contest outcome (being rejected vs. being accepted) on customer voice (i.e., positive and negative word-of-mouth), feedback giving, and future participation intention is mediated by customer emotions such that being rejected (vs. being accepted) positively affects anger (and negatively affects customer delight), which in turn negatively (positively) affects customer voice, feedback giving, and future participation intention.

2.4 | The role of firm acknowledgment

Our third set of hypotheses pertain to how firms should communicate rejection decisions to limit participants' negative emotional responses. Communication literature suggests mainly three types of inadequate firm behavior: (1) ignoring customer inquiries, (2) rejecting customer inquiries, and (3) handling customer inquiries in an unprofessional manner (e.g., Davidow, 2003). In the first case, a firm does not attend to the inquiry so that customers do not receive any response at all (e.g., Clark et al., 1992; Davidow, 2003; Piezunka & Dahlander, 2015). According to Piezunka and Dahlander (2019), for idea contests, about 88% of participants do not receive a formal response. Concerning the second case, in the context of idea contests, rejection is the norm rather than the exception and is hence an unavoidable outcome. Thus, firms have almost no option to as to formally reject customers (apart from ignoring customers' engagement). Finally, by appropriately handling rejections, firms have

the potential to restore customer engagement that might be damaged after communicating a rejection. In other words, while firms have less possibilities to avoid expectation violations for the outcome (unless they would give every participant a prize), they can manage customers' procedural expectations by appreciating customer engagement, providing feedback, or communicating decision motives (Fombelle et al., 2016; Piezunka & Dahlander, 2019).

Firms generally can manage the delivery of negative information by setting the timing and medium of delivery as well as the amount of feedback they provide (Ptacek & Eberhardt 1996). In idea contests though, computer-mediated feedback of results is most common, as participants are typically spread all over the world (Füller et al., 2014). Also, participants expect rather immediate feedback and are not used to wait long for their final decision. Thus, firms only have limited options to influence timing and medium of the rejection notification, but they have control over the content. Firms often provide noncommittal responses due to high costs associated with more acknowledgeable responses (Fombelle et al., 2016). These costs involve personnel, identifying details of customer ideas, and developing appropriate rating schemes. While a simple acknowledgment—even without much informational value—does not involve huge costs, it signals firms' appreciation of contest participation (Piezunka & Dahlander, 2019), and thus, customer engagement. In contrast, a noncommittal response creates more negative feelings as decoding of the message is left to the customer (Fombelle et al., 2016; Sifianou, 1997). Together, we propose that a simple acknowledgment (compared with no acknowledgment) will be perceived favorably by contest participants and has the potential to reduce rejection-induced emotions.

H3: Receiving firm acknowledgment (compared to not receiving acknowledgment) in an idea contest moderates the effect of rejection on (a) delight and (b) anger such that the effect on anger is weaker and the one on delight is stronger.

2.5 | Acknowledgment versus individualized firm feedback

Given that some form of acknowledgment reduces cognitive dissonance (Cooper, 2019), firms that intend to provide feedback (and thus displaying appreciation) could choose between standard acknowledgments targeting the average customer or valuing customer participation and engagement by providing individualized feedback (Aoyagi, 2010). Notwithstanding, there is a tradeoff between standardization and individualization (Sahni et al., 2018). On the one hand, providing individualized responses is a function of available resources, especially when large numbers of participants are expected (Hawkins et al., 2008). On the other hand, as customers may complain about poor communication and display higher negative word-of-mouth intentions, individualized rejection emails should be perceived more favorably and are likely to reduce process-related cognitive dissonance. We surmise that compared to standard acknowledgments, individualized feedback consisting of detailed evaluations of the submitted ideas will reduce participants' rejection-induced cognitive dissonance related to the process. Hence, anger should unfold to a lesser degree while delight should be less dampened with individualized feedback emails. Thus:

H4: Individualized rejection communication (compared with standardized acknowledgment) will lead to (a) higher levels of delight and (b) lower levels of anger.

Individualized feedback further entails the possibility to provide detailed reasons for rejection (i.e., showing customer engagement appreciation) (DeJeu, 2022). These reasons, in turn, can stimulate attribution of failure (Folkes, 1984; Kelley & Michela, 1980). For example, it is known that anger increases the tendency to hold others responsible for negative outcomes (Keltner et al., 1993). In addition, service failure literature proposes that reactions to service failures are not solely the result of the mere knowledge about the incident; moreover, they are the result of customer's controllability and attribution of this failure (Albrecht et al., 2019).

In the context of negative event outcomes (e.g., being rejected in an idea contest), the element of blame becomes important for peoples' emotional balance (Bougie et al., 2003; Lazarus, 2001). For example, anger tends to be triggered if concrete external sources, such as a person, a firm, or circumstances can be blamed for a negative experience or outcome. Blame attribution is closely linked with the concept of responsibility. In situations of unclear responsibility, individuals tend to attach responsibilities for the occurrence to someone else (Robbennolt, 2000). This "shifting away" of responsibilities secures individuals' self-concepts and prevents them from enduring cognitive dissonance due to own failure. Conveyed to idea contests, with no detailed information of reasons for being rejected (i.e., standard acknowledgment), participants can attribute responsibility to other actors, for example, fellow contest participants, the jury, or the company, which does not threaten their self-concept. Thus, when no threat to the self-concept is present, participants' evaluation of the company should not change. In contrast, individualized rejection notices contain more information about an outcome and provide enriched possibilities of blame attribution (Kelley & Michela, 1980).

With individualized emails that contain detailed information about the selection process, the responsibility of the outcome is also clearly attributable as external, but still can vary in the extent of consensus (Kelley, 1973). The consensus principle suggests that people are more likely to attribute blame (i.e., responsibility) to an external party, when multiple individuals are affected the same way (Albrecht et al., 2019). Idea contest participants should know they face multiple "competitors." Thus, to a certain degree, participants can change their attitudes and accept that rejection is an outcome for many participants (i.e., social expectations). Thus, from a blame attribution perspective, customers that receive a rather direct individualized information that their idea was not chosen because of the presence of multiple good ideas will shift responsibility to the firm, which again secures their self-concept. In contrast, in situations

where participants have the feeling that they are the only one who are faced with a specific outcome (i.e., low consensus), they are more likely to attribute negative events to *internal* causes ("Obviously, I am the only one who did something wrong"), and place less blame on the contest provider (i.e., the firm). Thus, in consequence, their self-concept is threatened which results in stronger emotional responses and subsequent behaviors.

In sum, we expect postcontest customer engagement toward other customers and toward the firm to be stable for unspecified feedback (i.e., acknowledgment). In addition, we expect reactions to individualized feedback (compared to standard acknowledgment) to be generally more favorable, but, in line with blame attribution theory, we further expect differences between situations where consensus is communicated (i.e., blame attribution toward firm is possible) versus where no consensus is communicated (i.e., participant has the feeling to be the only one who received a rejection).

H5: Individualized feedback that causes felt consensus will to a lesser extent result in a change of customer outcomes than feedback that causes no consensus.

3 | STUDY OVERVIEW

We study emotional and behavioral responses to cognitive dissonance created by being rejected in idea contests, which is a potential stressor in the company-customer relationship. We conducted the studies in the context of idea contests because this is a customer engagement situation that is characterized by much voluntary customer involvement (i.e., effort, time, energy) and it affects cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements of customer engagement (Harmeling et al., 2017). Furthermore, idea rejection is a stressor to which participants have to respond emotionally and behaviorally. To test the formulated hypotheses, we conducted two main studies. Study 1 was designed as an online experiment, while Study 2 was designed as a randomized field experiment. Study 1, which aimed to test H1–H3, shows that being rejected (compared with winning) has detrimental effects on emotions and subsequent customer engagement behavior toward the firm and towards other customers. As discussed, we distinguish customer behavior toward the company (i.e., feedback giving, future participation) from customer behavior toward other customers (i.e., positive and negative word-of-mouth). Study 2 aims at increasing the external validity by using a field study of real customers and tests for differences between simple acknowledgment and individualized firm feedback (H4–H5). Table 2 provides an overview of the aims, samples, and contexts for the two main studies. Figure 1 displays the conceptual model that includes both studies. We begin with reporting a pretest to increase confidence in idea contests being examples of customer engagement.

4 | PRETEST: IDEA CONTESTS AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Our research rests on the assumption that voluntary participation in an idea contest is a form of customer engagement as it involves consumers' resource provision to the company beyond financial patronage; a feature that has been highlighted by various authors

TABLE 2 Study overview.

	Study 1	Study 2
Purpose	Analysis of consequences of idea rejection and firm acknowledgment	Increasing external validity by conducting real-life idea contest
Experimental design	2 (idea rejection vs. idea acceptance) x 2 (firm acknowledgment vs. no acknowledgment)	3 rejection types – Standard acknowledgment – Individualized feedback with blame attribution "Jury" – Individualized feedback with blame attribution "Merchant"
Context	Chocolate bar contest	Burger contest
Company	Fictitious	Local merchant
Prestudies/pretests	Pretest with $N = 46$ crowdworkers (clickworker)	Face validity tests with 10 researchers Pretest with $N = 60$ MTurk workers
Sample type	Crowdworker (Germany)	Customers of local merchant (Germany)
Method	Online experiment Scenario-based after-idea suggestion task	Randomized field experiment Real-life idea contest with local merchant: Pre and postcontest assessment of variables
Sample	$N = 401$	$N = 222$ (t1) $N = 103$ (t2)

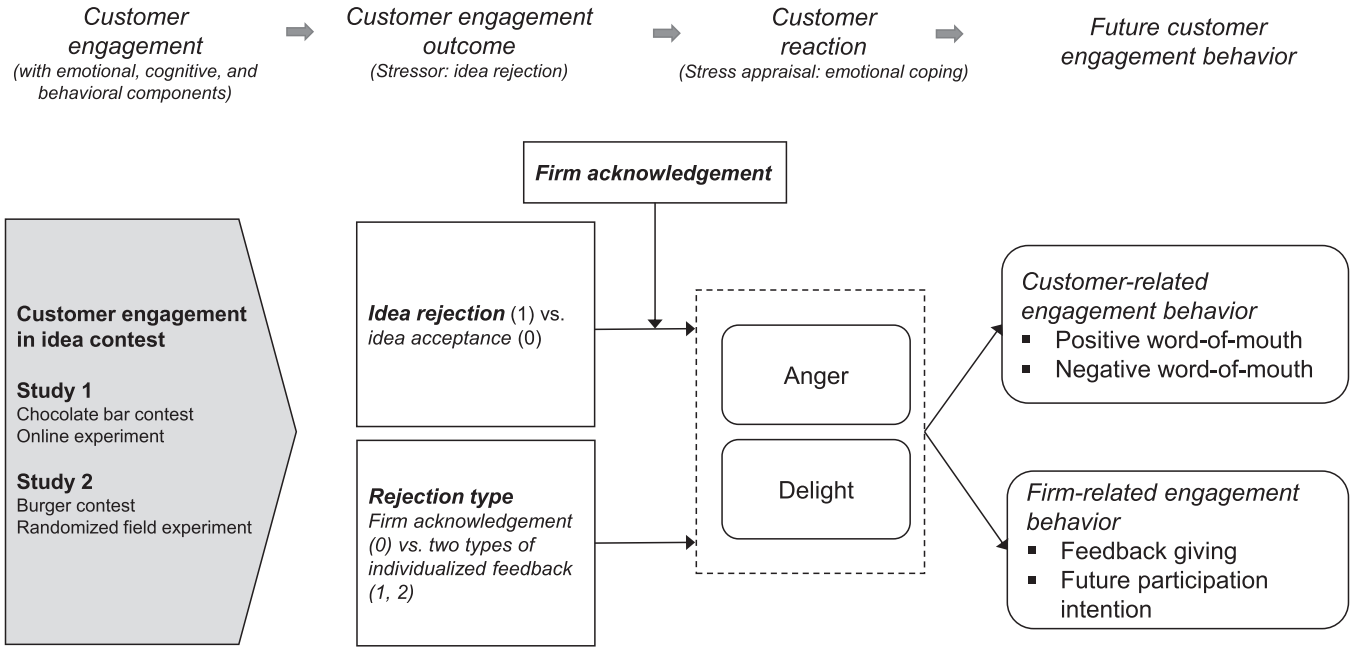

FIGURE 1 Conceptual model.

(e.g., Harmeling et al., 2017; Kumar & Pansari, 2016; Van Doorn et al., 2010). To further increase confidence in this assumption, we conducted a scenario-based pretest using an experimental two-factor between-subject design. Specifically, participants were confronted with one of two scenarios (see Supporting Information: Appendix A). Scenario A describes a typical relationship with an Indian restaurant. Scenario B is extended by a description of an idea contest the Indian restaurant is undertaking. We recruited 150 participants from the platform Amazon Mechanical Turks (MTurk) that had a 95% Hit-approval rate on at least 500 tasks (Peer et al., 2014) and randomly assigned them to either scenario A or B. We excluded eight participants from our analysis because they failed to answer attention check questions which resulted in a final sample of 142 participants (40.1% women, M_{age} = 35.02 years). We measured three customer engagement dimensions (cognitive, affective, and behavioral) with 10 items adopted from Hollebeek et al. (2014) on a 7-point Likert scale ("1" = *fully disagree* to "7" = *fully agree*) which showed reasonable reliability (Cronbach $\alpha_{cognitive}$ = .69; Cronbach $\alpha_{affective}$ = .80; Cronbach $\alpha_{behavioral}$ = .69).

To test for differences across the three customer engagement dimensions, we conducted an multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) with our experimental manipulation (control vs. idea contest) as independent variable and customer engagement (i.e., cognitive, affective, behavioral) as dependent variable. In line with our assumption, the results revealed one-tailed differences between the control condition and the idea contest condition for cognitive ($M_{control}$ = 5.47, $M_{ideacontest}$ = 5.76, $F(1, 140) = 3.29$, $p < 0.05$), affective ($M_{control}$ = 5.59, $M_{ideacontest}$ = 5.87, $F(1, 140) = 3.16$, $p < 0.05$) and behavioral ($M_{control}$ = 5.35, $M_{ideacontest}$ = 5.85, $F(1, 140) = 10.70$, $p < 0.001$) customer engagement.

5 | STUDY 1: EFFECTS OF BEING REJECTED ON EMOTIONS AND FUTURE ENGAGEMENT BEHAVIOR

With Study 1, we test our basic prediction that rejecting customer ideas in idea contests affects future customer engagement behavior toward other customers (i.e., positive word-of-mouth, negative word-of-mouth) as well as future customer engagement behavior towards the company (i.e., feedback giving, future participation). We also test the mediating roles of anger and delight as well as the moderating role of firm acknowledgment.

5.1 | Study design, procedure, and participants

To be able to develop emotions from being rejected, participants had to be involved in tasks that simulate real idea contests. To this end, we programmed an online idea contest for chocolate bars, in which participants could choose one out of four types of chocolate (i.e., white, whole milk, dark, dark with 80% + cacao), and many other options, which extend those typically known from configurators. We chose chocolate bars because they are well-known and designing them does not require specific design capabilities or domain-specific knowledge. In a scenario description, we told participants that the winner concept will be introduced to market later.

We recruited participants via the German crowdsourcing platform Clickworker, a service similar to MTurk, for two reasons. First, firms that are interested in getting external ideas may use crowdsourcing platforms to get easy access to individuals willing to

contribute ideas (Leimeister et al., 2009). Second, survey participants recruited via crowdsourcing platforms such as MTurk have proven their trustworthiness as a reliable source for scientific research as results display similar quality levels as conventional online surveys (e.g., Peer et al., 2014). We offered a compensation equaling $2.50 per task. After having provided their chocolate bar idea, participants were asked to put themselves into one out of four scenarios (randomized between-subject design). The four scenarios varied in the idea being accepted versus rejected and firm acknowledgment versus a noncommittal information about the outcome (see Supporting Information: Appendix B). To avoid biases resulting from known companies, we chose a fictitious company name on behalf of which we conducted the idea contest. Hence, participants thought they would develop ideas for that particular company and not for a University. Participants were randomly routed into one out of the four scenarios, representing the four experimental conditions. We had pretested the factorial research design with a convenience sample of 46 respondents recruited online ($N = 12$ female, $M_{age} = 31.74$). Respondents rated the scenarios in combination with the programmed configurator as realistic ($M = 3.98$ on a 5-point scale) and indicated whether the scenario described their participation as successful and the firm acknowledgment as instrumental on a 5-point Likert scale. The group that was exposed to the scenario description of a successful participation ($N = 23$, $M_{acceptance} = 4.61$) differed significantly from the group that answered in relation to the unsuccessful participation ($N = 23$, $M_{rejection} = 2.52$, $p < 0.001$) when answering a question on success. Similarly, the firm acknowledgment condition was rated as richer in content ($M_{acknowledgment} = 3.46$, $M_{no\_acknowledgment} = 2.91$, $p < 0.05$). Thus, the pretest indicates that the manipulation works as intended.

For the main study, after excluding those who failed to pay attention to attention check questions, we ended up with a sample of $N = 401$ participants. Respondents ages ranged from 18 to 50 ($M = 32.15$, $SD = 8.74$) and 47.4% were women. In terms of education, 31.2% had at least a Bachelor's degree, 18.5% had some form of apprenticeship, and the rest had at least a basic high school degree. After reading the scenario, participants had to answer questions concerning customer emotions, voice, feedback giving, and future participation intentions, along with manipulation checks and demographics.

5.2 | Measures and validity checks

5.2.1 | Measures

For measuring the dependent variables of customer engagement targeted toward other customers, we relied on Beatty et al. (2012) for positive and negative word-of-mouth. For assessing future participation intention, we used a single item, which is suitable when the core construct has no dimensional structure (Franke et al., 2013). Customers feedback giving was assessed with two items adapted from Beatty et al. (2012). Emotions were measured by using items adapted from Finn (2005, customer delight) and Bougie et al. (2003, customer anger). While most multi-item scales were measured on a 5-point Likert scale, we used different scale anchors to conform to the respective item stems. For emotions, we asked to which extent respondents would feel the respective emotions ranging from "1" = *not at all* to "5" = *very intense*. For positive word-of-mouth, negative word-of-mouth, and feedback giving, the scales ranged from "1" = *fully disagree* to "5" = *fully agree*. Future participation intention was measured as a single item construct on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from "1" = *fully disagree* to "7" = *fully agree*. We also included single-item questions to assess perceived effort of creating the solution ("1" = *I did not think long about my creation* to "5" = *I thought very intensively about my creation*"), self-rated idea quality ("1" = *very bad* to "5" = *very good*), and duration ("1" = *less than 20 s*; "5" = *more than 2 min*) to generate the solution. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicates that the four experimental groups do not differ in these respects. We also assessed gender ("1" = *male*, "2" = *female*) and age.

5.2.2 | Confirmatory factor analysis

To assess the quality of the measurement instruments, we applied a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). We used AMOS 25 and a maximum likelihood estimator to receive fit statistics for positive word-of-mouth, negative word-of-mouth, feedback giving, delight, and anger.[2] The fit values used involve χ^2 value (CMIN), goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and standardized root mean square residual (SRMR). The results indicate that the data fit the model quite well ($\chi^2 = 408.29$, $df = 137$, $\chi^2/df = 2.980$, GFI = 0.91, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.96, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.07) (Hu & Bentler, 1999). All scales had Cronbach's α values and values for composite reliability .70 or above. Average variance extracted (AVE) is greater than 0.50 for each construct, and, in support of discriminant validity, AVE exceeded the squared interconstruct correlation for all multiitem measurement instruments (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Ratios for heterotrait–monotrait also exceeded typical thresholds (>0.85, Henseler et al., 2015). Table 3 displays correlations and square roots of AVE.

5.2.3 | Common method variance (CMV)

Typically, when measurement instruments are used to assess all model variables, resulting correlations might be a consequence of CMV (Fuller et al., 2016). To limit the threat of CMV, we used different scale anchors and scale lengths. To quantify the amount of CMV present in the data, we additionally applied the unmeasured latent method construct approach (Williams & McGonagle, 2016). Comparing results of CFA with and without an unmeasured common

[2]We excluded future participation intention from the CFA because it is a single-item measure for which no item loadings would be calculated.

TABLE 3 Correlations and reliabilities (Studies 1 and 2).

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
(1) Delight	**0.93/0.90**	−0.40	0.36	−0.25	0.21	0.19
(2) Anger	−0.50	**0.84/0.92**	−0.40	0.43	−0.40	−0.37
(3) Positive word-of-mouth	0.68	−0.47	**0.90/0.85**	−0.58	0.49	0.26
(4) Negative word-of-mouth	−0.32	0.55	−0.41	**0.86/0.81**	−0.45	−0.25
(5) Feedback giving	0.47	−0.20	0.37	−0.08	**0.81/0.76**	−0.25
(6) Future participation intention eWOM intention	0.55	−0.29	0.70	−0.17	0.45	−/−

Note: $N = 401$ (Study 1) and $N = 103$ (Study 2). Diagonal elements in bold indicate the square roots of the average variance extracted for constructs measured with multiple items. Future participation intention is a single-item measure. Values before the slash pertain to Study 1, values after the slash pertain to Study 2. Correlations displayed in the lower half of the table pertain to Study 1; correlations in the upper half pertain to Study 2.

latent factor (which consists of all manifest indicators) showed that factor loadings did not deviate substantially from each other (<0.12). Thus, issues of CMV do not loom large for this study.

5.3 | Results

5.3.1 | Manipulation checks

To check if idea rejection and firm feedback were successfully manipulated, we conducted one two-way ANOVA, with single-item measures for idea rejection and firm feedback as dependent variables and the two dummy codes for the respective experimental groups. As expected, participants in the idea acceptance group rated the scenario as more successful ($M_{acceptance} = 4.62$, $M_{rejection} = 2.13$; $F(1, 399) = 612.36$, $p < 0.001$, 5-point scale from "not very successful" to "very successful"). Similarly, participants rated the firm feedback as more content-rich than the other group ($M_{acknowledgment} = 3.45$, $M_{no\_acknowledgment} = 2.69$; $F(1, 399) = 31.41$, $p < 0.001$, 5-point scale from "not at all" to "to a large extent").

5.3.2 | Hypotheses testing

To examine H1a–d, we conducted a MANOVA with positive word-of-mouth, negative word-of-mouth, feedback giving, and future participation intention as dependent variables and rejection as the independent variable. The main effect of rejection was significant for positive word-of-mouth ($M_{acceptance} = 3.92$, $M_{rejection} = 2.79$, $F(1, 399) = 155.22$, $p < 0.001$), negative ($M_{acceptance} = 1.38$, $M_{rejection} = 1.79$, $F(1, 399) = 26.07$, $p < 0.001$), feedback giving ($M_{acceptance} = 5.25$, $M_{rejection} = 4.22$, $F(1, 399) = 86{,}49$, $p < 0.001$), and future participation ($M_{acceptance} = 5.91$, $M_{rejection} = 4.78$, ($F(1, 399) = 49.25$, $p < 0.001$). Taken together, the results provide full support for H1a–d.

For testing H2 (mediation) and H3 (moderation), we used the SPSS macro PROCESS to test indirect and moderating effects simultaneously (v. 3.4.1, Hayes, 2017). In a first step, we investigated the moderating effect of firm acknowledgment on the effect of idea rejection on emotions (H3). We used PROCESS model 1 and regressed anger and delight on idea rejection (1 = *idea rejected*, 0 = *idea accepted*), firm acknowledgment (1 = *acknowledgment*, 0 = *no acknowledgment*), their interaction, as well as a set of controls (i.e., age, gender, self-rated effort, self-rated idea quality, and duration). As expected, idea rejection had a positive effect on anger ($b = 0.68$, $p < 0.001$) and a negative effect on delight ($b = -2.62$, $p < 0.001$) (Table 4). Acknowledgment had no direct effect on emotions. However, the idea rejection × acknowledgment interaction is significant for delight ($b = 0.60$, $p < 0.001$). Thus, we find first support for H3a, but not for H3b.

TABLE 4 Moderation results (Study 1).

	Anger	Delight
Independent variable		
Idea rejection	0.68 (0.11)***	−2.62 (0.12)***
Moderator		
Acknowledgment	−0.09 (11)	0.16 (0.12)
Interaction		
Idea rejection × acknowledgment	−0.15 (0.15)	0.60 (0.16)***
Controls		
Age	0.00 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)*
Gender	0.02 (0.08)	−0.15 (0.08)*
Effort	0.02 (0.05)	0.01 (0.06)
Idea quality	0.01 (0.05)	0.08 (0.05)
Duration	0.00 (0.04)	−0.00 (0.04)
R^2	0.14	0.69
F	10.631	109.80
N	401	401

Note: Unstandardized coefficients, standard errors in parentheses.
*$p < 0.1$; ***$p < 0.001$.

To formally test for moderated mediation (H2 and H3), we used PROCESS model 7 with 5000 bootstrap samples. First, we investigated effects for customer engagement behavior targeted toward other customers (Table 5). Looking at positive word-of-mouth first, of the controls, gender and idea quality are significantly related to positive word-of-mouth. The conditional indirect effects of idea rejection on positive word-of-mouth through delight are significant for no acknowledgment ($b = -1.31$, 95% confidence interval [CI] = [−1.63, −1.00]) and firm acknowledgment ($b = -1.00$, 95% CI [−1.63; −1.00]). Thus, rejection reduces positive word-of-mouth and delight mediates the effect of idea rejection on positive word-of-mouth. The significant index of moderated mediation (b = 0.30, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI = [0.14, 0.50]) indicates that the acknowledgment moderates the indirect effect. Anger is also a mediator for acknowledgment ($b = -0.10$, 95% CI = [−0.18, −0.03]) and no acknowledgment ($b = -0.13$, 95% CI = [−0.22, −0.05]). However, no moderation effect is observable (index of moderated mediation: b = 0.03, $SE = 0.03$, 95% CI = [−0.03, 0.10]).

The test for negative word-of-mouth revealed that delight (no acknowledgment: $b = 0.26$, 95% CI = [−0.02, 0.54]; acknowledgment: $b = 0.20$, 95% CI = [−0.02, 0.42]) and anger (no acknowledgment: $b = 0.29$, 95% CI = [−0.02, 0.54]; acknowledgment: $b = 0.23$, 95% CI = [−0.02, 0.42]) do not function as mediators on a 95% significance level. Also, the interaction is not significant in both cases.

Next, we calculate results for customer behavior targeted toward the service company (Table 6). First, concerning feedback giving, a significant difference for indirect effects exists for the mediation through delight (No acknowledgment: $b = -0.77$, 95% CI = [−1.13, −0.42]; acknowledgment: $b = -0.59$, 95% CI = [−0.87, −0.33]). Thus, the index of moderated mediation ($b = -0.18$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI = [−0.32, −0.07]) indicates acknowledgment reduces the negative effect of idea rejection on feedback. The effect through anger is somewhat counterintuitive though. The indirect effect of idea rejection on feedback giving through anger is positive (no acknowledgment: $b = 0.11$, 95% CI = [0.03, 0.21]; acknowledgment: $b = 0.08$, 95% CI = [0.02, 16; no significant interaction]. This

TABLE 5 Moderated mediation results for positive and negative word-of-mouth (Study 1).

	Consequences							
	PWOM				**NWOM**			
	Coefficient	**SE**	***p***	**95% CI**	**Coefficient**	**SE**	***p***	**95% CI**
Antecedents								
Idea rejection	0.17	0.13	0.2036	[−0.09; 0.43]	−0.06	0.13	0.6097	[−0.31; 0.18]
Delight	**0.50**	**0.05**	**0.0000**	**[0.40; 0.59]**	**−0.10**	**0.05**	**0.0303**	**[−0.18; −0.01]**
Anger	**−0.19**	**0.05**	**0.0000**	**[−0.30; −0.08]**	**0.44**	**0.05**	**0.0000**	**[0.34; 0.54]**
Controls								
Age	−0.00	0.00	0.4131	[−0.01; 0.01]	−0.00	0.00	0.4631	[−0.01; 0.01]
Gender	**0.19**	**0.08**	**0.0157**	**[0.04; 0.35]**	−0.04	0.08	0.6293	[−0.19; 0.11]
Effort	0.09	0.06	0.1053	[−0.02; 0.20]	−0.06	0.05	0.2574	[−0.16; 0.04]
Idea quality	**0.11**	**0.05**	**0.0373**	**[0.01; 0.21]**	0.08	0.05	0.1506	[−0.03; 0.17]
Duration	0.05	0.04	0.2074	[−0.03; 0.12]	**−0.08**	**0.04**	**0.0299**	**[−0.15; −0.01]**
	$R^2 = 0.49$				$R^2 = 0.26$			
	$F(8, 392) = 47.16$, $p < 0.001$				$F(8, 392) = 16.85$, $p < 0.001$			
	Conditional indirect effect of rejection through delight				*Conditional indirect effect of rejection through delight*			
Acknowledgment	Coefficient	Boot SE		95% CI	Coefficient	Boot SE		95% CI
No	**−1.31**	**0.16**		**[−1.63; −1.00]**	0.26	0.14		[−0.02; 0.54]
Yes	**−1.00**	**0.13**		**[−1.26; −0.76]**	0.20	0.11		[−0.02; 0.42]
Index of moderated mediation	**0.30**	**0.09**		**[0.14; 0.50]**	−0.06	0.03		[−0.13; 0.01]
	Conditional indirect effect of rejection through anger				*Conditional indirect effect of rejection through anger*			
Acknowledgment	Coefficient	Boot SE		95% CI	Coefficient	Boot SE		95% CI
No	**−0.13**	**0.04**		**[−0.22; −0.05]**	0.29	0.14		[−0.02; 0.54]
Yes	**−0.10**	**0.04**		**[−0.18; −0.03]**	0.23	0.11		[−0.02; 0.42]
Index of moderated mediation	0.03	0.03		[−0.03; 0.10]	−0.07	0.07		[−0.22; 0.06]

Note: Unstandardized coefficients; 95% confidence interval for indirect effects in square brackets. Significant effects ($p < 0.05$) in bold.
Abbreviations: CI, confidence interval; NWOM, negative word-of-mouth; PWOM, positive word-of-mouth.

TABLE 6 Moderated mediation results for feedback giving and future participation (Study 1)

	Consequences							
	Feedback giving				Future participation intention			
	Coefficient	SE	*p*	95% CI	Coefficient	SE	*p*	95% CI
Antecedents								
Idea rejection	**−0.44**	**0.18**	**0.0150**	**[0.09; 0.80]**	0.34	0.25	0.1633	[−0.14; 0.82]
Delight	**0.30**	**0.06**	**0.0000**	**[−0.43; −0.17]**	**0.49**	**0.09**	**0.0000**	**[0.32; 0.66]**
Anger	**0.16**	**0.07**	**0.0266**	**[−0.31; −0.02]**	**−0.51**	**0.10**	**0.0000**	**[−0.70; −0.31]**
Controls								
Age	0.00	0.01	0.9510	[−0.01; 0.01]	−0.00	0.01	0.5993	[−0.02; 0.01]
Gender	−0.21	0.11	0.0511	[−0.00; 0.42]	0.00	0.15	0.9895	[−0.29; 0.29]
Effort	**0.15**	**0.08**	**0.0474**	**[−0.30; −0.00]**	**0.38**	**0.10**	**0.0003**	**[0.17; 0.58]**
Idea quality	−0.03	0.07	0.6937	[−0.11; 0.17]	0.04	0.10	0.6934	[−0.15; 0.23]
Duration	0.00	0.05	0.9518	[−0.11; 0.10]	0.11	0.07	0.1277	[−0.03; 0.25]
	$R^2 = 0.24$				$R^2 = 0.30$			
	F(8, 392) = 15.59, $p < 0.001$				F(8, 392) = 20.67, $p < 0.001$			
	Conditional indirect effect of rejection through delight				*Conditional indirect effect of rejection through delight*			
Acknowledgment	Coefficient	Boot SE		95% CI	Coefficient	Boot SE		95% CI
No	**−0.77**	**0.18**		**[−1.13; −42]**	**−1.28**	**0.27**		**[−1.80; −0.76]**
Yes	**−0.59**	**0.14**		**[−87; −0.33]**	**−0.99**	**0.21**		**[−1.42; −0.58]**
Index of moderated mediation	**0.18**	**0.06**		**[0.07; 0.32]**	**0.29**	**0.09**		**[0.13; 49]**
	Conditional indirect effect of rejection through anger				Conditional indirect effect of rejection through anger			
Acknowledgment	Coefficient	Boot SE		95% CI	Coefficient	Boot SE		95% CI
No	**0.11**	**0.05**		**[0.03; 0.21]**	**−0.34**	**0.10**		**[−0.54; −0.17]**
Yes	**0.08**	**0.03**		**[0.02; 0.16]**	**−0.26**	**0.09**		**[−0.47; −0.11]**
Index of moderated mediation	−0.03	0.03		[−0.10; 0.02]	0.08	0.08		[−0.09; 0.23]

Note: Unstandardized coefficients; 95% confidence interval for indirect effects in square brackets. Significant effects ($p < 0.05$) in bold.
Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

implies that anger increases feedback giving; an effect that might be explained by consumers' tendency to express complaints or even develop revenge intentions in case of anger, instead of silently bearing their frustration. Finally, we tested the moderated mediation model for future participation intention. The conditional indirect effects of idea rejection on future participation through delight are significant for no acknowledgments ($b = -1.28$, 95% CI = [−1.80, −0.76]) and firm acknowledgment ($b = -0.99$, 95% CI [−1.42, −0.58]). As the index of moderated mediation is significant ($b = 0.29$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI = [0.13, 0.49]), we conclude that acknowledgment has the potential to reduce the negative influence of idea rejection on future participation when delight is the mediator. Concerning anger, we again find negative indirect effects (No acknowledgment: $b = -0.34$, 95% CI = [−0.54, −0.17]; acknowledgment: $b = -0.26$, 95% CI = [−0.47, −0.11]), but no significant interaction (index of moderated mediation: $b = 0.08$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI = [−0.09, 0.23]).

Taken together, across all models, there is large support for the notion that anger and delight mediate the link from being rejected to the outcomes; we will discuss deviations in the discussion section. We therefore consider H2 as broadly supported. We find more subtle results for H3. While firm acknowledgments reduce negative effects in all cases, in only three out of eight cases the reduction is significant. Furthermore, the moderated mediation is only significant for delight, and not for anger. We therefore would consider H3 as partly supported.

5.4 | Discussion

The aim of this first experimental study was to show that being rejected in an idea contest (compared with a win) is a stressor and has negative consequences on positive word-of-mouth, feedback giving, and future participation intention while it increases negative word-of-mouth (H1a–d); the data support this assumption. The results from this study further elucidate the mediating effects of anger and delight

(H2): Being rejected had a significant influence of all studied outcomes, which, in turn, are mostly stimulated by emotions such as anger and delight. However, given that we have eight mediation paths (for four outcomes with two mediators each), not all results yield significance or are in the expected direction. Thus, while most paths speak to a mediation through reduced delight and increased anger, some have to be discussed in greater detail. First, while rejection relates to delight and anger, and both relate to negative word-of-mouth, still, the indirect effect is not significant, indicating that rejection affects negative word-of-mouth directly. Second, the indirect effect of rejection on feedback giving through anger is significant and positive (in contrast to the indirect effect through delight), which emphasizes the specific role anger has in relation to behavior targeted toward the firm. Anger is likely to increase complaint behavior (e.g., Bougie et al., 2003), which why it is positively associated with feedback giving. In sum, it can be stated that being rejected indirectly affects positive word-of-mouth, feedback giving, and future participation intention, while it directly affects negative word-of-mouth.

Concerning firm acknowledgment, broadly speaking, acknowledgment cannot significantly dampen anger, but restore delight. Moderated mediation, which was not the core of H2 and H3, exists in three out of eight cases. In particular, the moderated mediation results mirror the ones for mediation and moderation: Except for negative word-of-mouth, for which no indirect effect exists, all mediations through delight are significantly different for acknowledgment versus no acknowledgment. Thus, the results point to the fact the way rejection is communicated has an effect on customer delight, but not on anger.

6 | STUDY 2: FIELD EXPERIMENT TESTING FEEDBACK VERSUS ACKNOWLEDGMENT IN REJECTION COMMUNICATION

In Study 2, we conducted a one-time Burger contest with a local merchant. Study 2 is designed to increase external validity by testing effects of being rejected for real customers while at the same time assessing effects of different types of individualized firm feedback in contrast to firm acknowledgment.

6.1 | Study design, procedure, and participants

Study 1 assumed that respondents had no prior knowledge about the seeker company, that is, they had no prior experience as customers of that firm. However, potential detrimental effects of being rejected are particularly vulnerable to existing customers. To this end, we conducted a real-life design contest (i.e., a new Burger idea contest) with a local merchant. The local merchant is located next to a university in a medium-sized German city. Among its best-selling products are Burgers, which make about 48% of their turnover in food. Over a 1-week period, student assistants recruited participants by means of a stand located on the way from the University to the merchant. The stand was equipped with three laptops so that three participants could work on their Burger design simultaneously. We used an advanced version of our configurator used in Study 1 to allow for orchestrating ingredients. In addition to the predefined options that resulted in far more than 100,000 combinations (e.g., 5 types of patties, 6 types of bun, 8 types of cheese, 2 types of bacon, 14 different sauces, 9 choices of lettuce, etc.), we offered to suggest own ideas for the main categories bun, patty, cheese, and extras. Participants further had to give their creation a name. Along with the options to generate a Burger idea, participants had to answer a short questionnaire about the merchant. In all communication with customers, the merchant was the entity that conducted the contest. That is, although student assistants recruited participants, they act as the face of the merchant, not as researchers. As an incentive, participants could choose among a can of American beer or Dr. Pepper. Participants were also informed about the chance to win 1 out of 50 Burger vouchers in case they also take part in the second part of the study after they received a decision. Finally, the five winning burger ideas also received cash prizes (runner-ups as well as 4th and 5th) and a voucher for an adventure website (winner). Together, these prices were worth 450 Euros. The final burgers were produced and open for sale afterwards. After 1 week of acquiring participants (4 h per day), 222 burger ideas had been created by 222 participants.

Conducting a real-life contest required making use of a real Jury. Of the 222 burger ideas, we preselected 50 by excluding those with inappropriate burger names, duplications, and those that are too close to existing offerings. The final 50 ideas then had been evaluated by a jury consisting of one of the merchant's cooks, a nutrition expert, and two customers (one student, one employed at the university). Each burger was rated on five categories. Two weeks after we closed the submission of ideas, participants were informed via email about the outcome of the contest. The five winners received an email indicating that they are among the winners. These participants were not considered to take part in Stage 2 of our research. The remaining 217 participants received one out of three emails that represent our randomized experimental design.

The experimental design involved *three* different types of rejection emails. Group 1 received an email with a rather standardized, but acknowledgeable text including the information that the idea got rejected (see Supporting Information: Appendix B). This situation mirrors the acknowledgment in Study 1.[3] Groups 2 and 3 received individualized emails with more information, in which the Burger creation was valued by repeating what the creation was about. Groups 2 and 3 further varied in the reason for being rejected, and thus in the possibility to attribute blame. For Group 2, the email informed participants that the Jury had chosen another Burger that has a better fit with the current menu. Here, participants were confronted with an unexpected situation (i.e., the

[3]We note that we did not include a noncommittal response because we worked with a merchant and real customers the merchant aimed to treat in a positive manner.

option that the burger would not fit to the overall menu was not communicated a priori) that create more cognitive dissonance. Hence, participants perceive lower consensus.

The email that was received by Group 3 participants indicated that the jury had excluded the idea because other ideas were rated as more innovative. This is an expected outcome that also might hold for other participants (high consensus). We had pretested the experimental conditions with the help of 60 MTurk workers (M_{age} = 35.15, 35% female) and found significant differences between acknowledgment and individualization. The final sample of those who also answered t_2 questionnaire was N = 103 (M_{age} = 23.97, 38.8% women).[4] The three different groups did not differ in respondents' visit frequency and perceived effort for creating the idea (both measured with one item).

6.2 | Measures and validity checks

The same set of measures as in Study 1 were used and administered during the design contest (t_1), and after participants received the decision email (t_2, 2 weeks later). The only exception is future participation intention, which was measured on an 11-point likelihood scale ranging from 0% to 100% this time (Franke et al., 2013). However, as emotions related to the outcome evolve after receiving a notification email, we assessed anger and delight only in t_2 and not during the idea contest in t_1. For all other measures, we could compare assessments prior and after the rejection email. We also integrated additional, merchant-related controls such as visit frequency.

A CFA with the t_2 sample (N = 103) revealed good fit with the data (χ^2 = 151.13, df = 94, χ^2/df = 1.608, GFI = 0.88, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.07, SRMR = 0.06; for factor loadings see Supporting Information: Appendix C). As in Study 1, factor loadings are in acceptable ranges. Discriminant validity is given (see Table 3). The same approach to assess CMV was used and indicated that CMV is again no threat to this study.

6.3 | Results

6.3.1 | Manipulation checks

The manipulation of individualization worked as intended ($M_{acknowledgment}$ = 2.19, $M_{individual\_noconsesnus}$ = 4.13, $M_{individual\_consesnus}$ = 4.21; F (2, 100) = 42.68, p < 0.001). As we did not want to point respondents to our experimental design, we did not capture the degree of blame attribution.

6.3.2 | Hypotheses testing

We captured emotions (i.e., anger and delight) in t_2 only to allow for such emotions to emerge from the rejection decision. We observed differences in levels of delight when acknowledgment is contrasted against individualized firm feedback ($M_{acknowledgment}$ = 2.95, $M_{individual\_no-consensus}$ = 4.20, $M_{individual\_consensus}$ = 3.83; F(2, 100) = 7.09, p < 0.001). A Scheffé post hoc test indicated significant differences between standard acknowledgment and both types of individualized responses, but no difference between individual responses in relation to delight. Thus, individualized rejections lead to higher levels of delight compared with standard rejections in support of H4a. Anger did not differ between groups ($M_{acknowledgment}$ = 1.58, $M_{individual\_noconsensus}$ = 1.79, $M_{individual\_consesnus}$ = 1.97; F(2, 100) = 0.85, p > 0.05), which why we have to reject H4b. We ran an additional series of OLS regressions with PROCESS and Helmert coding (Hayes, 2017). With Helmert coding, the acknowledgment group is first contrasted against the combined two individualized feedback groups (X1), followed by a comparison of individualization with no consensus (Group 2) against consensus (Group 3) (X2, Table 7). The results again indicate that delight in the combined individualization groups is higher than for the acknowledgment group (b = 1.05, p < 0.01), while controlling for age, gender, visit frequency, self-rated effort, and self-rated idea quality. No differences are observable for anger. Thus, this study replicates Study 1 findings in that anger is not dependent on the way rejection is communicated, while delight changes according to different forms of rejection.

Although not hypothesized, for reasons of completeness, we also report values for future customer engagement targeted toward other customers as well as to the firm. The differences between the three experimental groups are marginal when we compare t_2 values. Positive word-of-mouth ($M_{acknowledgment}$ = 5.90, $M_{individual\_noconsensus}$ = 6.01, $M_{individual\_consesnus}$ = 5.64; F(2, 100) = 0.96, p > 0.05), feedback giving ($M_{acknowledgment}$ = 5.71, $M_{individual\_noconsensus}$ = 5.53, $M_{individual\_consesnus}$ = 5.54; F(2, 100) = 1.05, p > 0.05), and future participation intention ($M_{acknowledgment}$ = 7.57, $M_{individual\_noconsensus}$ = 8.13, $M_{individual\_consesnus}$ = 7.47; F(2, 100) = 2.083, p > 0.05) did not reveal significant differences after conducting post hoc tests. Only for negative word-of-mouth slight differences exist with highest negative word-of-mouth intentions for the group "consensus" ($M_{acknowledgmenet}$ = 1.12, $M_{individualized\_noconsensus}$ = 1.30, $M_{indivdualized\_consensus}$ = 1.50; F(2, 100) = 3.15, p < 0.05). Post hoc tests reveal that the acknowledgment email is significantly different from the individual email that contained information regarding consensus. However, despite the significant difference, the overall level of negative word-of-mouth is comparatively low for all groups.

With a real idea contest, we had the chance to analyze changes in levels of pre-existing customer engagement behavior and post-rejection engagement for real customers. For testing differences between pre and postrejection evaluations, we used difference

[4]We compared those who completed t_2 survey (N = 103) with those who did not (N = 114) to exclude a potential survival bias. Our results indicate that the two groups do not significantly differ in terms of age (M_{t1only} = 23.84, M_{t2} = 23.97, p > 0.1), gender (M_{t1only} = 1.58, M_{t2} = 1.61, p > 0.1), and perceived effort (M_{t1only} = 3.53, M_{t2} = 3.37, p > 0.1). To compare drop-out rates across groups, we further conducted a χ^2 test with the three groups (standard, individualized A, individualized B) and participation in two survey waves (t_1 and t_2). The χ^2 statistic is 0.1943. The p value is 0.91. The result is *not* significant at p < 0.05, suggesting that there are no group differences in relation to survival.

TABLE 7 Helmert coded regression for emotions (Study 2).

	Mediators					
	Delight			Anger		
	Coefficient	SE	*p*	Coefficient	SE	*p*
Antecedents						
X1	**1.05**	**0.30**	**0.0007**	0.30	0.26	0.2602
X2	−0.26	0.36	0.4612	0.14	0.31	0.6558
Controls						
Age	−0.04	0.05	0.3457	0.02	0.04	0.6776
Gender	0.11	0.31	0.7139	−0.11	0.27	0.6829
Visit frequency	0.16	0.14	0.2416	0.13	0.12	0.2762
Effort	0.04	0.14	0.7855	−0.05	0.13	0.6790
Idea quality	−0.02	0.24	0.9313	0.31	0.21	0.1488
	$R^2 = 0.15$			$R^2 = 0.05$		

Note: Unstandardized coefficients; significant effects ($p < 0.05$) in bold. X1 refers to the combined group of individualized and nonindividualized (Groups 2 and 3). X2 refers to the difference between Groups 2 and 3 only.

scores between t_2 and t_1 evaluations.[5] The assessment of behavioral constructs (i.e., voice, feedback giving, and participation intention) before the contest was suitable as participants already had experiences with the merchant. We again used PROCESS (v 3.5.1, model 4) with Helmert coding and rejection type as a multicategorial independent variable. We first tested effects on changes of customer engagement towards other customers in the presence of age, gender, visit frequency, self-rated effort, and self-rated idea quality as controls (Table 6). For positive word-of-mouth, the different rejection types had no influence on the change in positive word-of-mouth (Δ positive word-of-mouth), but anger exhibited a moderate negative influence on Δ positive word-of-mouth ($b = -0.15$, $p < 0.1$).[6] The results for negative word-of-mouth, however, are somewhat counterintuitive. First, both emotional responses (i.e., anger and delight) moderately influence the change in negative word-of-mouth (delight: −0.11, $p < 0.1$, anger: 0.10, $p < 0.1$). In addition, the results of the Helmert coding indicate that the individualized rejection emails cause an increase in negative word-of-mouth ($b = 0.27$, $p < 0.1$). Moreover, in contrast to our reasoning, the consensus group is significantly stronger influence on Δ negative word-of-mouth than the individualized no consensus group ($b = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$) (Table 8).

Results for feedback giving and future participation intention are similar. The type of rejection has no influence on the change in feedback giving or future participation. However, anger again has negative influences on outcome variables. These effects are significant for feedback giving ($b = -0.41$, $p < 0.01$) and moderately significant for future participation intention ($b = -0.28$, $p < 0.1$) (Table 9). Given these results, H5 cannot be supported as we will discuss in the following.

6.4 | Post hoc study: Testing alternative mediators

While our conceptual model rests on emotional reactions as explanatory mechanisms for how firm communication in an idea rejection context affects future engagement, alternative mediators could explain the proposed effect and hence could limit the validity of the results. To increase confidence in our results, we explored two alternative explanations for the effect of individualized feedback when rejecting customer ideas: perceived transparency and decision regret. Perceived transparency refers to customers' level of information detail and perceived understanding of a firm's actions (e.g., a rejection email in an idea contest) (Cambier & Poncin, 2020; Martin et al., 2017). Customers could perceive an individualized feedback email (vs. a standard rejection email) as firms being more transparent about the outcome of the idea contest which, in turn, could positively affect customers' fairness perceptions as well as future engagement intentions (Gebauer et al., 2013; Sawhney et al., 2005). Decision regret refers to remorse or distress over a decision which might be an alternative emotional coping strategy for customers in response to receiving an idea rejection note (Brehaut et al., 2003).

We conducted an additional post hoc study to test those two alternative explanations by recruiting participants from MTurk that had a 95% Hit-approval rate on at least 500 tasks (Peer et al., 2014). We aimed for 150 responses but had to exclude 13 participants that failed to the pass attention checks, leaving us with a sample of $N = 137$. Mean age was 34.1 ($SD = 8.3$), 92 were male, 44 were female and 1 person indicated to be transgender. We contrasted a standard email and an individualized email (both taken from Study 2) in a two-factorial between-subject design and participants were

[5]We calculated construct reliability on item-wise difference scores (Cronbach's $\alpha > .70$). We also reran our analysis with change scores created by regressing scores of the second point in time on corresponding scores of the first point in time (standardized residual scores). Results remained stable.

[6]Because our sample is comparatively small, we consider 90% significance levels as moderately significant for difference scores.

TABLE 8 Helmert coded regression results for positive and negative word-of-mouth (Study 2).

	Consequences					
	Δ PWOM			Δ NWOM		
	Coefficient	SE	*p*	Coefficient	SE	*p*
Antecedents						
X1	0.27	0.22	0.2115	**0.27**	**0.16**	**0.0893**
X2	−0.04	0.24	0.8612	**0.45**	**0.17**	**0.0109**
Mediators						
Delight	0.04	0.07	0.5870	**−0.11**	**0.05**	**0.0517**
Anger	**−0.15**	**0.08**	**0.0692**	**0.10**	**0.06**	**0.0999**
Controls						
Age	**−0.08**	**0.03**	**0.0213**	−0.01	0.02	0.6701
Gender	−0.20	0.20	0.3329	0.09	0.15	0.5446
Visit frequency	0.01	0.09	0.9163	0.04	0.07	0.5112
Effort	**−0.17**	**0.09**	**0.0804**	−0.03	0.07	0.6422
Idea quality	0.01	0.16	0.9450	0.15	0.12	0.2046
	$R^2 = 0.14$			$R^2 = 0.21$		
	Relative indirect effect through delight			*Relative indirect effect through delight*		
	Coefficient	Boot SE	95% CI	Coefficient	Boot SE	95% CI
X1	0.04	0.07	[−0.09; 0.21]	−0.11	0.06	[−0.24; 0.02]
X2	−0.01	0.03	[−0.08; 0.05]	0.03	0.04	[−0.04; 0.13]
	Relative indirect effect through anger			*Conditional indirect effect of rejection through anger*		
	Coefficient	Boot SE	95% CI	Coefficient	Boot SE	95% CI
X1	−0.05	0.05	[−0.17; 0.03]	0.03	0.04	[−0.02; 0.12]
X2	−0.02	0.07	[−0.20; 0.08]	0.01	0.04	[−0.04; 14]

Note: Unstandardized coefficients; 95% confidence interval for indirect effects in square brackets. Effects with $p < 0.1$ in bold. X1 refers to the combined group of individualized and nonindividualized (Groups 2 and 3). X2 refers to the difference between Groups 2 and 3 only.

Abbreviations: NWOM, negative word-of-mouth; PWOM, positive word-of-mouth.

randomly assigned to one of two scenarios (see Supporting Information: Appendix D). The two experimental groups did not significantly deviate in age, gender, and their preference for American food ("How would you describe your preference for American bar food (Incl. Burgers)?", measured from 1 = *I hate American food* to 5 = *I love American food*). Perceived transparency was measured with a four-item scale adopted from Martin et al. (2017). Decision regrets were captured with three items adapted to our study context from Brehaut et al. (2003) so that high values depict low levels of regret (see Supporting Information: Appendix D). All 7-point scales anchored at strongly disagree and strongly agree. We also included future participation intention, measured with a likelihood scale ranging from 0% to 100%.

All multiitem scales showed good reliability with Cronbach's α exceeding .7 for both perceived transparency ($\alpha = .82$), and regret decisions ($\alpha = .71$). We first conducted a MANOVA with our experimental manipulation (standard vs. individualized email) as independent variable and transparency and regret decision as dependent variables. The results show no significant differences between the standard email and the individualized email for both perceived transparency ($M_{standard} = 4.19$, $M_{individualized} = 4.08$, $F(1, 135) = 0.73$, $p > 0.05$) and decision regrets ($M_{standard} = 5.15$, $M_{individualized} = 5.22$, $F(1, 135) = 0.12$, $p > 0.05$). Next, we conducted a mediation analysis with our experimental condition as independent variable, transparency and decision regrets as mediators and future participation intention as dependent variable, using PROCESS model 4 with 5000 bootstrap samples. Age and gender served as covariates in the model. The results reveal that the effects of our experimental manipulation (standard vs. individualized email) on perceived transparency ($b = -1.11$, $p > 0.05$) and decision regrets ($b = 0.09$, $p > 0.05$) are not significant. The indirect effects of our experimental manipulation on future participation intention via perceived transparency ($b = -0.70$, 95% CI [−2.71; 1.82]) and decision regret ($b = 0.85$, 95% CI [−2.94; 5.03]) are also not significant. However, the results show that perceived transparency ($b = 6.54$, $p < 0.05$) and decision regret ($b = 9.83$,

TABLE 9 Helmert coded regression results for feedback giving and future participation intention (Study 2).

	Consequences					
	Δ Feedback giving			Δ Future participation intention		
	Coefficient	SE	*p*	Coefficient	SE	*p*
Antecedents						
X1	0.09	0.28	0.7441	−0.29	0.38	0.4598
X2	0.08	0.30	0.8014	−0.13	0.42	0.7750
Mediators						
Delight	−0.04	0.09	0.6610	0.16	0.13	0.2149
Anger	**−0.41**	**0.11**	**0.0003**	**−0.28**	**0.15**	**0.0592**
Controls						
Age	−0.07	0.04	0.0875	−0.05	0.06	0.4061
Gender	**−0.54**	**0.26**	**0.0405**	0.10	0.36	0.7866
Visit frequency	0.04	0.12	0.7077	−0.02	0.16	0.8790
Effort	−0.10	0.12	0.4140	0.05	1.7	0.7873
Idea quality	**0.38**	**0.21**	**0.0702**	0.28	0.28	0.3317
	$R^2 = 0.20$			$R^2 = 0.12$		
	Relative indirect effect through delight			*Relative indirect effect through delight*		
	Coefficient	Boot SE	95% CI	Coefficient	Boot SE	95% CI
X1	−0.05	0.12	[−0.28; 0.18]	0.17	0.14	[−.05; 0.51]
X2	0.01	0.05	[−0.07; 0.13]	−0.04	0.07	[−0.21; 0.09]
	Relative indirect effect through anger			*Conditional indirect effect of rejection through anger*		
	Coefficient	Boot SE	95% CI	Coefficient	Boot SE	95% CI
X1	−0.11	0.05	[−0.21; −0.03]	−0.08	0.12	[−0.36; 0.12]
X2	−0.08	0.03	[−0.16; −0.02]	−0.04	0.15	[−0.51; 10]

Note: Unstandardized coefficients; 95% confidence interval for indirect effects in square brackets. Effects with $p < 0.1$ in bold. X1 refers to the combined group of individualized and nonindividualized (Groups 2 and 3). X2 refers to the difference between Groups 2 and 3 only.

Abbreviation: CI, confidence interval.

$p < 0.05$) positively influence future participation intentions. Taken together, the results indicate that perceived transparency and decision regret are not explaining the effect of individualized firm communication on future engagement and, thus, can be ruled out as alternative explanations.

6.5 | Discussion

In a field experiment with real customers, Study 2 unraveled further insights into how to rejection communication affects emotional and behavioral responses to being rejected as a stressor. Standard emails with acknowledgment are a convenient way of communicating contest results. We proposed that individualized feedback emails would increase favorable outcomes (delight, positive word-of-mouth, feedback giving, and future participation) while decreasing negative outcomes (anger, negative word-of-mouth). However, results are mixed. Concerning emotions, we replicate findings from Study 1: The way rejection is communicated affects delight, but not anger. While anger did not differ between the three groups, individualized emails caused more delight and should be favored when creating delight with an idea contest is a designated goal. A post hoc study further shows that perceived transparency and decision regret can be ruled out as alternative explanations for the proposed effects.

However, the concurring effect on future customer engagement behavior is limited. First, individualized emails cause no change in positive word-of-mouth, feedback giving, and future participation. That is, neither for standard emails nor for individualized ones, levels of pre-rejection customer engagement changed. However, negative word-of-mouth is even stronger for individualized feedback; which is not in line with our theoretical reasoning. While participants value the efforts involved with individualized feedback (i.e., they feel delighted), individualized feedback may contain too much information that leaves room for blame attribution and anger-induced negative word-of-mouth.

The results are not perfectly in line with Hypothesis 5. However, apart from the wording of the hypotheses, three observations are worth mentioning. First, even in the case of rejection, future participation intention can increase (Δ participation intention is positive). This finding is in line with prior research that showed that task-based customer engagement with idea contests can increase the bonding between firms and customers (Hofstetter et al., 2018; Piezunka & Dahlander, 2019). Second, given the rather small effect sizes and limited deviation across rejection groups, a standard acknowledgment seems to be sufficient to satisfy customers in cases of idea rejections. This is especially important as providing individualized feedback is very resource-consuming. Third, contrary to our expectations, the group individualized "consensus" performs worst in almost all cases when considering difference scores (e.g., increase in negative word-of-mouth; no substantial increase in future participation intention), which calls for further research into blame attribution processes in feedback communication.

7 | GENERAL DISCUSSION

The commonly held assumption is that idea contests are powerful tools to integrate customers into the process of developing new and improving existing products and to manage customers' innovation potential (Hofstetter et al., 2018; Luo & Toubia, 2015). However, idea contests are simultaneously a form of task-based customer engagement that involves cognitive, emotional, and behavioral elements (Harmeling et al., 2017; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Mirbagheri & Najmi, 2019), and such engagement can backfire (Blut et al., 2020). Importantly, this research reveals that rejecting ideas from engaged idea contest participants can induce consumer stress which, in turn, has detrimental effects on how consumers engage with the firm in the future. In particular, we show how communicating idea rejections affect customers' emotional responses (i.e., anger and delight as forms of emotional coping) as well as future customer engagement behavior in the form of customer voice (i.e., positive and negative word-of-mouth), feedback giving (i.e., providing customer knowledge), and future participation intentions. All these behaviors are considered relevant forms of customer engagement (Harmeling et al., 2017; Pansari & Kumar, 2017).

Moreover, as a lack of ideas is often not a problem for firms (Hansen & Birkinshaw, 2007), the engagement aspect is even more important for service companies. Engaged customers spend more in future transactions and also contribute own resources to the company beyond financial patronage (Pansari & Kumar, 2017). Against this background, our research adds to the literature on customer engagement and possible downsides of idea contests from a stress perspective; here in the form of providing rejections to participants that actually should enjoy being part of the customer engagement initiative. The findings show that being rejected indeed affects customer emotions and future customer engagement behavior in the form of customer voice, feedback giving, and future participation intention, but this effect is considerably moderate and dependent on how the rejection is communicated. This clearly mirrors the assumption that process and outcome transparency are important to stimulate future engagement (Gebauer et al., 2013).

At the core of our findings, we show across two studies that providing acknowledgment outperforms noncommittal responses (Study 1), while individualized feedback only increases delight, and no other downstream variables. In addition, the results reveal that anger, although not mitigated by different response strategies, is a major driver of *changes* in behavioral customer engagement (Study 2). Thus, this research provides multiple implications for service research devoted to customer engagement and stress.

7.1 | Implications for research

Our results leave room for at least three implications for research. First, in contrast to the dominating view to treat idea providers as contest participants (Hofstetter et al., 2018), this research also focuses on engaged participants' participative roles as (current or future) customers of the seeker company (Blut et al., 2020). This view is important as especially idea contests are not solely mechanisms to tap consumers' creative potential, they are also meant for consumers to bond with the firm (Piezunka & Dahlander, 2019). Further research therefore should continue investigating firms' appreciation of customer engagement during task-based idea contests and other forms of engagement. Second, rejection is part of our lives—be it in the form of denied applications or promotions (Gilliland et al., 2001). However, according to cognitive dissonance as well as stress appraisal theory, each negative event will be evaluated separately and results in specific coping strategies (e.g., attitude change, information seeking, behavior change; Marikyan et al., 2020). Thus, idea rejection can be stressful for participating customers and cause negative emotions (or reduce positive ones) even though participants know that rejection may be a possible outcome. While notable research has investigated the effect of continuing participation in open online communities (Fombelle et al., 2016) and in relation to rewards (Hofstetter et al., 2018), future research should further focus on the role of emotions to fully understand the building of customer-firm relationships through customer engagement in idea contests. Third, the findings support a broader perspective of the role of rejection in situations, which were created to stimulate positive outcomes (i.e., customer delight, customer creativity) in a *one-time* idea contest. It might be interesting to see how these outcomes change when firms start using idea contests repetitively (Hofstetter et al., 2018).

7.2 | Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, it is still challenging to assess how much effort should be invested in communicating rejections (Fombelle et al., 2016; Saeki & J. O'Keefe, 1994). Our findings lend support for the fact that rejection is perceived as a negative event

(i.e., negative stressor) that causes negative emotions (and reduces positive ones). The findings hold several implications.

First, the findings show that the way rejection is communicated matters, although the differences between options are sometimes marginal. For example, Study 1 showed that rather non-committal rejections that do not contain more information beside the mere outcome should be generally avoided. In particular, compared with acknowledging customer engagement, a noncommittal response is associated with lower levels of delight. In addition, firms must be aware that contest participants might request additional information in the future when receiving a non-committal rejection. Hence, signaling some form of appreciation is advised.

Our second finding pertains to the trade-off between standard (acknowledgeable) responses and individualized feedback. We find that individualized rejection emails are not superior per se. As it is the case for Study 2, emails with simple acknowledgment do not perform significantly worse compared with individualized feedback. Thus, when limited resources are available for firms to communicate individualized rejections, simple acknowledgment of customer engagement is sufficient.

Third, companies should take extra care in formulating rejection emails to idea contest participants when it comes to "reasons" for rejection. Participants typically have some room to attribute their blame. Thus, firms may consider possible blame attribution paths before sending individualized rejection emails.

Finally, we would like to draw attention to a managerial implication derived from Study 2. In Study 2, the winner burger was a Quinoa–Avocado burger; a result that might not be considered mainstream for typical burger restaurant customers. Within 6 weeks after the introduction of the winner burger, the Quinoa–Avocado burger was sold 638 times. In the same time, the restaurant sold 4859 "normal" burgers (the number of offered "other" burgers varied between 5 and 7). In terms of bonding with customers (see future participation intention) the contest, thus, may be viewed as a success. From pure operational figures, the revenue for additionally sold burgers only scarcely exceeded associated costs.

8 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Some limitations across the two studies are worth to be mentioned and depict valuable avenues for further research. First, all study participants received compensation for their participation. In Study 1, all participants received fixed compensation, in Study 2 only those who had been selected in a raffle. The fact that participants received compensation is realistic, as real-life contests are also often incentivized to stimulate customer engagement. At the same time, monetary compensation could affect the level of felt emotions deriving from customer engagement. Second, this research addressed rather extreme forms of emotions as emotional coping that emerge out of extreme situations (e.g., surprise, service failure). Future research could consider rather moderate, and less activating emotional coping such as envy, regret, or frustration (Leary, 2015; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2007). Third, as the final customer outcomes, this research distinguishes customer engagement behavior toward the company from engagement behavior towards other customers such as voice. Again, voice is an outcome triggered by strong emotional states. Other, less visible outcomes could also result from engaging in idea contests as well as from receiving rejection. Among these outcomes are rapport, organizational identification, or customer citizenship behavior. Fourth, the experimental design did not focus on gamification elements, which recently have been investigated in relation to task-based customer engagement (Leclercq et al., 2020). Future research therefore could replicate our findings in relation to gamification-relevant constructs such as transparency and justice. Finally, in Study 1 we used fictitious brands and in Study 2 we partnered with a comparably small merchant. Future studies could replicate the findings for companies with strong brands.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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