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Participation is considered a positive student classroom behavior that can also create a face-threatening classroom climate that may be alleviated through interpersonal relationships with the instructor. Participants (N = 189) categorized as low apprehensives perceived less face threat and more face support when participating; moderate apprehensives had similar perceptions and communication behaviors to high apprehensives; rapport was negatively related to face threats and participation anxiety, and positively related to face support and participation; and face support was the only significant predictor of students’ participation for low and moderate apprehensives, while instructor communication did not predict participation for highly apprehensive students.

Keywords: Anxiety; Face Threat; Face Support; Participation; Rapport

Student participation in the classroom is considered a desirable student behavior because students who participate learn and retain information longer (van Blankenstein, Dolmans, van der Vleuten, & Schmidt, 2011), improve their communication skills with both students and teachers (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004;...
Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005), engage in greater critical thinking (Al-Kandari, 2012), perform better academically (Burchfield & Sappington, 1999), have greater value for educational experiences (Messman & Jones-Corley, 2001), and are more likely to persist in college (Astin, 1999). Similarly, students also recognize the importance of participation in the classroom (Fassinger, 1995; Fritschner, 2000). Still, students report feeling apprehensive about participating in the classroom, and at times, this apprehension prevents them from engaging in participatory behavior or from reaping the benefits of classroom participation. In other words, students face a paradox of participating: participation is important to academic success, but it is an apprehension-producing event. In the current study, we examined this paradox through the lens of face threat and face work. Specifically, we explored classroom participation as an face-threatening and apprehension-invoking behavior. Further, we examined the potential for instructors to temper perceived face threat and participation apprehension using face-supportive communication strategies.

**Literature Review**

Goffman (1967) conceptualized face as an overarching identity, or the way one perceives and portrays oneself to others. The general notion of face comprises two types of face, positive face and negative face. Positive face is an individual’s desire to be liked, to be affiliated with others, and to be perceived as competent (Holtgraves, 2001). Negative face is an individual’s desire for freedom and autonomy and to avoid imposition from others (Holtgraves, 2001). Although individuals communicate in ways to portray and maintain both faces, it is possible that communicative events can reduce feelings of liking, affiliation, competence, freedom, or autonomy. Consequently, the reduction of any of these feelings may result in a face threat.

Face threat and face support are relational processes (Sidelinger, Bolen, Frisby, & McMullen, 2012). Face threats are categorized as either positive or negative, with the positive or negative labels specifying which face is being threatened. For example, a positive face threat signifies that an individual’s feelings of liking, affiliation, or competence are being threatened, while a negative face threat signifies that an individual’s feelings of autonomy or freedom are threatened. Both types of face threat can potentially produce negative results. With communicative attention to face, it is possible to avoid face threat entirely or to recover from face threat if it occurs. Goffman (1967) suggested that avoidance is a strategy that individuals may use to prevent a face threat from occurring. Face threats may also be prevented through the use of politeness strategies by interaction partners (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Parallel to the types of face, Brown and Levinson suggested that interaction partners can employ strategies to protect or support both positive and negative face. Positive face support is used to establish a positive relationship, ensuring individuals that they are liked, respected, and affiliated. Negative face support focuses on strategies that make a request or event less intrusive to the autonomy or freedom of an individual. Similar to the positive or negative labels assigned to face threat, positive face support would support one’s need to be liked or affiliated, while negative face support would support
one’s need for autonomy. To summarize, face threats, whether positive or negative, are considered a threat to one’s identity needs and are often detrimental. Face support, whether positive or negative, is considered helpful for one’s identity needs and often beneficial.

To date, face work theories have been applied in the instructional setting from both instructor perspectives (e.g., Dunleavy et al., 2008) and student perspectives (e.g., Kerssen-Griep, Hess, & Trees, 2003). Specifically, regarding face threat, students can threaten an instructor’s face through nagging (Dunleavy et al., 2008) and challenging a grade (Sabee & Wilson, 2005). In a study of instructors with communication apprehension, instructors experienced face threat from students when the students questioned their expertise or character or objected to student grades or policies (Baiocchi-Wagner, 2011). On the other hand, instructors may threaten students’ face through compliance-gaining attempts (Sidelinger et al., 2012). Instructors can support students’ face by giving face-sensitive performance feedback (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003; Kerssen-Griep, Trees, & Hess, 2008). The presence of any type of face support in an instructional setting generally enhances positive outcomes, including relationship satisfaction, student motivation, and student involvement (Agne & White, 2004; Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003), while face threats may be detrimental to the instructional setting.

This study built on previous instructional communication research that situated student participation as a face-threatening communicative event (e.g., Neer, 1987) by using theories of face threat and face support as an explanatory mechanism for students’ decisions to participate in the college classroom. Specifically, we sought to extend previous research that discussed face support as a relational process (Sidelinger et al., 2012) by examining the general perceptions of instructor–student rapport as a strategy instructors may use to support students’ face when students are expected to participate in the college classroom.

**Classroom Participation as a Face-Threatening Event**

In general, communication apprehension is defined as “broad-based fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication” (McCroskey, 1976, p. 116). Later, Neer (1987) identified classroom participation as a “case of specialized CA” or communication apprehension about engaging in discussion-based activities in the classroom (p. 155). Classroom participation is a set of student behaviors that can include attending class, asking questions, participating in group discussions, and delivering teaching presentations (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005; Fassinger, 1995; Fritschner, 2000). Although the majority of instructors have the perception that classroom participation is a positive student behavior (Rocca, 2010), other scholars (e.g., Meyer 2001, 2008) have argued that participation is a threatening practice for those students who do not wish to participate orally, and it is a practice that may detract from student learning and create negative attitudes toward the classroom. Additionally, some students perceive the classroom as a potentially threatening environment (Howard & Baird, 2000; Neer & Kircher, 1989). Perceived threats
associated with classroom participation revolve around students’ lack of preparation (Fassinger, 1995), fear of judgment and evaluation from both peers and instructors (Howard & Baird, 2000; Weaver & Qi, 2005), and concerns about classmate acceptance (Neer & Kircher, 1989), all of which conceptually align with threats to positive face. Additionally, students who are highly apprehensive about classroom participation are less willing to participate and communicate in the classroom (Chan & McCroskey, 1987; Neer, 1987; Neer & Kircher, 1989). Thus, these fears about participating and perceived classroom face threats appear to affect student behaviors and outcomes, and may potentially be explained in three ways.

First, apprehension may cause students to view the classroom through a perceptual filter in which teacher behaviors are evaluated and assigned meaning differently when compared to students who are low in apprehension. In support of this argument, Bippus and Young (2000) found that students’ perceptions of classroom involvement reflected a self-serving bias. In other words, students placed value on certain types of course-related classroom participation based on their self-perceived communication apprehension. Moreover, highly apprehensive students found attendance to be more important to class involvement than did low apprehensive students (Bippus & Young, 2000).

Second, the differing perceptions may be explained by face needs. Erbert and Floyd (2004) argued that individuals possess face needs that influence how they perceive potential face threats. In their study on demonstrations of affection as face-threatening behavior, the perception of face threat was moderated by the individual’s need for face support. Perhaps students’ differing levels of face needs are more indicative of how they perceive face threats and face support in the classroom. Further, the potential for students to have different levels of face needs may provide insight into how instructors should address those face needs.

Third, the level of participation apprehension a student experiences may influence how the student approaches face-threatening situations. In previous research, only the low and high apprehensive students have been used for analyses, ignoring moderately apprehensive groups (e.g., Bippus & Young, 2000; Neer & Kircher, 1989); in some analyses the moderately apprehensive students have been automatically grouped with the low apprehensive students (e.g., Ellis, 1995). However, when moderately apprehensive students have been examined separately, they have reported significantly different perceptions of communication competence, changes in apprehension over time, and smaller friendship networks (Ellis, 1995; Zakahi, Jordan, & Christophel, 1993). Yet, other results reveal that moderate apprehensive students behaved more similarly to high apprehensives (Zakahi et al., 1993).

These seemingly contradictory findings may be explained by examining the ways in which individuals with differing levels of apprehension respond to face-threatening situations. Goffman (1967) identified three strategies used in face work, including avoidance, corrective, and interchange. Highly or moderately apprehensive students may be employing a face-protective orientation and using avoidance strategies by simply not participating. While low apprehensive students are equally likely to have their face threatened and be perceived as incompetent, less prepared, or less likable by
peers and instructors during participation, they may in fact ascribe to a defensive orientation. Low apprehensive students may participate and then practice corrective face work if needed. Given the mixed research findings about moderately apprehensive students, and the studies in which moderate apprehensives were not analyzed or were grouped with the low apprehensives, in this study we treated low, moderate, and highly apprehensive students as three distinct groups who might respond differently to participation as a face-threatening situation.

The theoretical framework of face threat and face work may illuminate how and why students respond in the classroom. Students may employ avoidance strategies, choosing not to engage in class discussions at all due to the fear of feeling incompetent and disliked (i.e., to preserve positive face). This may create a barrier to participation because, when students do participate, they put themselves at risk for positive face threat. For example, if a student answers incorrectly, the student may feel incompetent and/or not receive instructor or peer approval (Neer & Kircher, 1989). The concerns about liking, approval, and correctly answering reported by students are parallel to the competence and affiliative positive face needs of students. Even students who answer correctly are at risk of not being accepted by their peers if they are perceived as a compulsive communicator (McCroskey & Richmond, 1993). Similarly, if students inappropriately disclose personal information by participating, they may feel judged by peers as incompetent or less likable (Frisby & Sidelinger, 2013). Further, when students are more closely connected to their peers and instructor, they may be more concerned about fulfilling positive face needs and may be more likely to employ avoidance strategies.

In addition to the positive face threats inherent in classroom participation, certain communication behaviors used by instructors may also create perceptions of negative face threat. These behaviors may lead to student perceptions of imposition (i.e., negative face). For example, Frisby and Martin (2010) found that building classroom connectedness and developing student–instructor relationships were related positively to class participation. Structurally, Fassinger (1995) found that manipulating classroom seating arrangements could elicit feelings of comfort and encourage participation. Additionally, Peterson (2001) found that requiring and assigning participation grades could encourage student engagement in the classroom. However, these strategies may impose on students’ autonomy needs. For example, if a student is required to participate for a grade or sit in a particular place or structure, or an instructor cold-calls the student, the student may experience negative face threats.

Thus, classroom participation is linked to both positive student outcomes (e.g., Astin, 1999; Burchfield & Sappington, 1999) and negative student outcomes (e.g., Bourhis & Allen, 1992; McCroskey & Andersen, 1976). Given the importance of participation recognized by both instructors and students, it is important to identify instructor strategies that can alleviate student fears about classroom participation in order to ensure that all students, including highly apprehensive students, can garner equal educational benefits in the classroom through participation. Many of the instructor strategies that would potentially ease fears associated with participation apprehension are considered interpersonal in nature. Considering instructors’ desire
for students to participate and the ways in which instructors can maintain positive interpersonal relationships that attend to both the rhetorical and relational needs of students (Mottet, Frymier, & Beebe, 2006; Sabee & Wilson, 2005), it is important to consider how instructors may provide face support in face-threatening situations.

Instructor–Student Rapport

The instructor–student relationship is asymmetrical in that the instructor is typically perceived as having more power, authority, decision-making ability, and classroom leadership (Chory & McCroskey, 1999; Sidelinger et al., 2012). Although a power differential exists between instructors and students, this relationship is still largely recognized as an interpersonal one (Frymier & Houser, 2000; Nussbaum & Scott, 1980). Instructors develop and maintain interpersonal relationships with their students through appropriate self-disclosure (Hosek & Thompson, 2009), immediacy (Frymier & Houser, 2000), confirmation (Goodboy & Myers, 2008), and appropriate humor (Lei, Cohen, & Russler, 2010), among other behaviors. In fact, award-winning teachers identified the ability to effectively convey interpersonal messages to students as a dimension of instructional communication competence (Worley, Titsworth, Worley, & Cornett-DeVito, 2007).

In previous research, interpersonal communication with instructors and peers was an important determining factor to students’ perceptions of the overall classroom environment as either supportive or threatening (Rosenfeld, 1983). Instructors play a critical role in developing classroom climate and may engage in specific behaviors that contribute to a positive interpersonal climate. For example, Goodboy and Myers (2008) found that instructor confirmation was associated with more frequent student participation, and another instructor interpersonal strategy, rapport building, has been associated with greater student participation, student motivation, and learning (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008).

Rapport is defined as an overall impression of the instructor encompassing a mutual, trusting, and prosocial bond, including a personal connection and enjoyable interactions (Catt, Miller, & Schallenkamp, 2007; Faranda & Clarke, 2004; Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000; Ryan, Wilson, & Pugh, 2011). Thus, rapport is a perceived outcome based on students’ observed instructor communication. Rapport-building behaviors may enhance this impression and increase student interactions with one another, student participation, perceptions of supportive instructors, affective learning, state motivation, and cognitive learning (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers, 2008; Ryan et al., 2011).

Students’ perceptions of rapport and rapport-building behaviors with their instructor have been linked to increased classroom participation. For example, Weaver and Qi (2005) found that faculty–student interactions were the greatest causal factor in student participation, and both verbal (Menzel & Carrell, 1999) and nonverbal immediacy (Rocca, 2008) of instructors are related to students’ willingness to participate. Further, Frisby and colleagues (Frisby & Martin, 2010; Frisby & Myers,
2008) found relationships between students’ impressions of rapport and participation. However, these studies fall short of explaining why positive rapport would motivate students to participate. One explanation is offered by Boostrom (1998), who posited that safe spaces, or “a figurative space constructed through social relations” (p. 399), constitute inclusive and supportive environments where students are protected from emotional and psychological harm. Students described instructors who created a safe space as caring, respectful, supportive, and encouraging or requiring active participation (Holley & Steiner, 2005). Thus, prosocial instructor behaviors, or behaviors that elicit perceptions of rapport and encourage active participation, can potentially help students to feel comfortable and supported. Student perceptions of rapport with their instructors may help to create a safe space where students take participatory risks as a means to construct knowledge. As face has been considered a form of identity (Goffman, 1967), Boostrom goes on to say that “the ‘space’ is ‘safe’ when individuals and groups know that they will not face criticisms that would challenge their expressions of identity” (Boostrom, 1998, p. 407). This supportive and positive environment created through instructor–student relational communication that produces rapport likely increases perceptions of a safe space where student identity (i.e., face) will be supported, rather than threatened, during instructional activities such as participation.

Taken together, the previous associations between instructor–student rapport and classroom participation suggest that when students are comfortable with the instructor, they may feel more comfortable participating, even if they experience participation apprehension. Students who perceive positive rapport with an instructor may trust that the instructor will not threaten their identity, will not evaluate them harshly, and will be more sensitive to their face needs. In terms of positive face threats and positive face support, instructors who build rapport with their students are perceived to see their students as people instead of students (Starcher, 2011), and this may help to fulfill students’ affiliative needs. Anderman, Andrzejewski, and Allen (2011) found that teachers who built and maintained rapport were supportive, motivational, and kept students on track without drawing attention to errors or misbehaviors. Embarrassing the students who are off task, misbehaving, drawing attention to incorrect answers when speaking up in class, and criticizing student ideas will threaten students’ competence face and were described by Holley and Steiner’s (2005) participants as characteristics of an unsafe space. Most important to this study, the most frequent behavioral outcome identified by students in an unsafe space was not participating during class (Holley & Steiner, 2005).

In terms of negative face threat and negative face support, when instructor–student rapport exists, students may not feel that their autonomy is being threatened by participation, and may instead be encouraged to speak up because of the positive relationship context. This is also consistent with Anderman et al.’s (2011) results in that rapport-building and maintaining included autonomy support and was motivational for students to become emotionally, cognitively, and behaviorally engaged. Thus, instructor rapport may operate as both a positive and negative face
support strategy in the classroom. Similar to the idea that rapport is indicative of personal relationships in the classroom, Neer and Kircher (1989) found that even when students experienced participation apprehension, they were more likely to participate if they personally knew their classmates and perceived the classroom as a positive interpersonal climate.

In addition to using rapport-building techniques, instructors may further enhance the classroom environment through preventative face work and face-support strategies. For example, receiving instructional feedback on academic performance, much like in-class participation, is a face-threatening event. When giving feedback, instructors may use techniques like sensitivity (King, Schrod, & Weisel, 2009) and nonverbal immediacy (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011) to mitigate face threats. When instructors practice face-threat mitigation, they are evaluated as having greater competence and character and as being more caring (Witt & Kerssen-Griep, 2011). Further, these instructors are evaluated as encouraging student motivation (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003; Kerssen-Griep & Witt, 2012) and creating positive perceptions of instructors as mentors (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2008).

To summarize, when instructors expect or require that students engage orally in classroom participation, students may perceive positive and/or negative face threats that impose on their autonomy and expose their identities to risk for competence and approval threats from both peers and instructors. There is reason to believe that these perceived threats may be exacerbated for students who are highly apprehensive about participation. To explore the specific effects of different levels of participation apprehension, we posed the following hypotheses:

**H1:** High participation apprehensive students will perceive (a) more positive face threat and (b) more negative face threat when compared to low and moderate participation apprehensive students.

**H2:** High participation apprehensive students will perceive (a) less positive face support and (b) less negative face support when compared to low and moderate participation apprehensive students.

**H3:** High participation apprehensive students will report lower participation when compared to low and moderate participation apprehensive students.

Although participation may be inherently threatening to both positive and negative face, instructors may interact in prosocial ways to develop a comfortable classroom climate perceived to be a safe space. When instructors build rapport with students, they may increase feelings of comfort, acceptance, willingness to participate, and perceptions of positive and negative face support. To extend the line of research into instructor–student rapport, we posed the following hypotheses:

**H4:** Perceived instructor rapport will be positively related to (a) perceived positive face support, (b) perceived negative face support, and (c) reported classroom participation.

**H5:** Perceived instructor rapport will be negatively related to (a) participation apprehension, (b) perceived positive face threat, and (c) perceived negative face threat.
Finally, to provide a deeper understanding of the factors that contribute to students’ actual participative behavior in the classroom, we posed the following hypothesis:

**H6:** The relative contribution of perceived instructor rapport, participation apprehension, perceived face threat, and perceived face support will vary significantly as predictors of reported classroom participation depending on participants’ level of participation apprehension (low, middle, high).

**Method**

**Participants**

One hundred eighty-nine students from a large university in the southeastern United States were recruited to complete the survey, including 67 males (35.4%) and 122 females (64.6%). The participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 29 (\(M = 19.27, SD = 1.65\)). A majority of the participants were first-year students (\(n = 96\)), followed by juniors (\(n = 46\)), sophomores (\(n = 31\)), and seniors (\(n = 14\)). Nearly all of the participants were full-time students (\(n = 188\)) pursuing a variety of majors across the university.

**Procedures**

Following IRB approval, the study announcement was posted to a research participation system to recruit students enrolled in undergraduate communication courses. This system allows recruitment of a representative sample of the undergraduate population because all undergraduates complete a minimum of two lower-level communication courses to fulfill general education requirements. A description of the study was provided to students, including how much time they should expect for participation. All participants completed the same questionnaire through a secure emailed link hosted by Qualtrics, an online survey system.

Students referenced the instructor they had immediately prior to completing the survey, a method endorsed by Plax, Kearney, McCroskey, and Richmond (1986). Both the recruitment strategy and survey completion directions ensured that students reported on a variety of subject areas, increasing diversity of classrooms and instructors from which data were gathered. However, the limited demographics that were collected and the anonymity of the survey do not allow us to determine with certainty that participants reported on 189 different instructors or classrooms. Participants reported on courses taught by 91 male instructors and 98 female instructors. The majority of participants reported that participation was a requirement in the course on which they reported (\(n = 120\)), but we did not ask for details about what constituted participation for that specific course. One hundred five of the participants stated that the class they reported on was required for their major, 71 participants reported that it was not required, and 13 participants did not know whether the class was required for their major.
Instrumentation

Participation. Participation was measured using Fassinger’s (1995) scale with one item omitted and one minor modification. First, the omitted item asked students to report how many times they participate in the targeted class. Myers and Rocca (2007) argued that students under or overestimated the number of times they participated and suggested omitting this item. Based on this argument and following more recent studies published using the 5-item version of Fassinger’s scale (e.g., Frisby & Martin, 2010; Goodboy & Myers, 2008), we used the 5-item version of the scale. Second, and also following previous uses of this scale, we were interested in students’ self-perception of their own participation behaviors independent of social comparison; as such, the phrases “relative to my peers” and “more than my peers” were removed from two items. Thus, students in this study responded to five items (e.g., “I contribute to class,” “I volunteer in class”) on a 5-point Likert-type scale measuring frequency ranging from never (1) to often (5). Frisby and Martin (2010) obtained a reliability coefficient of .92. Internal reliability for this study was .93 (range = 5–25, \( M = 14.93, SD = 5.86 \)).

Rapport. This study utilized Frisby and Myers’ (2008) adaptation of Gremler and Gwinner’s (2000) 11-item measure of rapport. The scale measures enjoyable interaction (six items; e.g., “I look forward to seeing my instructor in class”) and personal connection (five items; e.g., “I have a personal relationship with my instructor”). Students responded on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). Frisby and Martin (2010) reported a reliability coefficient of .94. Internal reliability for this study was .95 (\( M = 46.59, SD = 15.23 \)).

Participation apprehension. Participation apprehension was measured using the Class Apprehension about Participation Scale (CAPS) developed by Neer (1987) to identify levels of apprehension during class discussion. The 20-item Likert-scale was intended to measure two dimensions of situation-specific classroom participation apprehension: communication participation (e.g., “I usually do not speak in class unless called on by the instructor”) and communication confidence (e.g., “I have difficulty organizing my thoughts when I want to say something in class”). The scale ranged from not at all like me (1) to exactly like me (5). Neer reported a reliability coefficient of .94 (\( M = 52.68, SD = 15.61 \)). In this study, we obtained an alpha coefficient of .81 (\( M = 50.84, SD = 10.80 \)).

Face threat. Face threat was evaluated using a scale developed by Cupach and Carson (2002) that measured perceived face threat on two dimensions, both measured on a scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). The original negative face threat scale contained four items (e.g., “Constrains my choices”) and achieved a reliability of only .68 (Cupach & Carson, 2002). More recently, scholars added two items to the negative face threat scale (i.e., “Makes me feel obligated to comply,”
“Makes me feel like I had no control”; Frisby, Booth-Butterfield, Dillow, Martin, & Weber, 2012), resulting in increased reliability of .74 in their study. In the current study, the 6-item negative face threat scale obtained an alpha of .83 ($M = 15.75, SD = 6.53$).

Cupach and Carson’s (2002) original positive face threat scale included 10 items (e.g., “What he/she said was polite”) and previously had a reliability of .88. For the purpose of this study, one positive face threat item was removed (e.g., “My partner’s actions were hostile”) because it was not appropriate for the classroom context. The 9-item positive face threat scale obtained an alpha of .70 ($M = 24.24, SD = 7.01$).

Face support. Face support was measured using a modified version of the Instructional Face Support Scale (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003). The original scale, which separated face work into three dimensions (tact, approbation, and solidarity), was previously reliable: $\alpha = .74$, $\alpha = .71$, and $\alpha = .86$, respectively (Kerssen-Griep et al., 2003). Our study used the 15-item original scale but separated the items into a 10-item positive support dimension (i.e., approbation and solidarity dimensions) and a 5-item negative (i.e., tact) face support dimension following Kerssen-Griep et al.’s (2003, 2008) conclusion that solidarity and approbation did not operate differently from one another, and that both were indicative of positive face support. The items were assessed on a 7-point scale ranging from not at all (1) to very much (7). The 10-item measure of positive face support (e.g., “Works to avoid making me look bad”) achieved low reliability ($\alpha = .67$). Two items were dropped resulting in an 8-item scale with improved reliability: $\alpha = .81$, $M = 34.78$, $SD = 8.51$. Negative face support (e.g., “Makes me feel like I can choose how to respond”) was measured using five items and achieved acceptable reliability: $\alpha = .72$, $M = 26.89$, $SD = 5.21$.

Results

Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 predicted that high participation apprehensive students (HAS) would perceive greater positive and negative face threat (H1), less positive and negative face support from instructors (H2), and report lower participation (H3) than moderate (MAS) or low (LAS) apprehensive students. Following previous research on developing groups of HAS and LAS (Bippus & Young, 2000), a mean split was used to compare participants who were (a) one standard deviation above the mean or higher ($n = 30; HAS$), (b) one standard deviation below the mean or lower ($n = 31; LAS$), and (c) those who were within one standard deviation above and below the mean ($n = 128; MAS$). Although the number of participants in the LAS and HAS groups was reduced, the test did yield sufficient power to detect differences. The one way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was significant, $\Lambda = .88$, $F(2, 189) = 2.35$, $p = .01$, $\eta^2_p = .06$, power = .94.

The group differences were examined using post hoc Scheffé analyses. See Table 1 for a table of group means, standard deviations, and significant differences. In general, LAS perceived less positive face threat, less negative face threat, and more negative face support than HAS. There were no differences between the three groups
on perceptions of positive face support. LAS reported greater participation frequency than MAS. Finally, MAS reported less perceived negative face threat than HAS. Thus, H1 was supported, H2 was partially supported, and H3 was supported.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that instructor rapport would be positively related to positive face support, negative face support, and reported participation. In support of H4, instructor rapport was significantly related to negative face support, positive face support, and participation. Hypothesis 5 predicted that instructor rapport would be negatively related to participation apprehension, perceived positive face threat, and negative face threat. In partial support of 5, instructor rapport was significantly negatively related to negative face threat and positive face threat, but not significantly related to participation apprehension. See Table 2 for a correlation matrix of all study variables.

Hypothesis 6 predicted that the relative contribution of perceived instructor rapport, participation apprehension, perceived face threat, and perceived face support would vary as predictors of participation according to students’ level of participation apprehension. Given the inequality of group sizes, this hypothesis was tested using three linear regressions – once with all of the LAS removed, once with the MAS removed, and once with the HAS removed. The regression model with LAS removed from the model was marginally significant, $F(6, 157) = 2.14, p = .05$, adjusted $R^2 = .04$.

### Table 1 Post Hoc Scheffé Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>LAS</th>
<th>MAS</th>
<th>HAS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>$\eta^2$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Face Threat</td>
<td>3.03  (.76)</td>
<td>3.18 (.69)</td>
<td>3.49 (.66)</td>
<td>3.61*</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Face Threat</td>
<td>2.26  (.94)</td>
<td>2.55 (1.03)</td>
<td>3.28 (1.21)</td>
<td>7.98***</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Face Support</td>
<td>4.54  (1.19)</td>
<td>4.36 (1.04)</td>
<td>4.05 (.98)</td>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative Face Support</td>
<td>5.78  (1.08)</td>
<td>5.37 (.99)</td>
<td>4.95 (1.08)</td>
<td>5.07**</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>3.47  (1.48)</td>
<td>2.90 (1.09)</td>
<td>2.84 (1.04)</td>
<td>3.27*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Means sharing subscripts across each row are significantly different from each other. LAS = low apprehensive students; MAS = moderately apprehensive students; HAS = highly apprehensive students. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

### Table 2 Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Rapport</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Participation</td>
<td>.20**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CAPS</td>
<td>–.11</td>
<td>–.12</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. PFT</td>
<td>–.30**</td>
<td>–.25**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. NFT</td>
<td>–.23**</td>
<td>–.07</td>
<td>.36**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td>–</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. PFS</td>
<td>.58**</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td>–.11</td>
<td>–.43**</td>
<td>–.22**</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. NFS</td>
<td>.45**</td>
<td>.28**</td>
<td>–.30**</td>
<td>–.62**</td>
<td>–.54**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. CAPS = Class Apprehension Participation Scale; PFT = Positive Face Threat; NFT = Negative Face Threat; PFS = Positive Face Support; NFS = Negative Face Support. **Correlation significant at .01.
with negative face threat predicting participation frequency ($\beta = .21, p = .04$). The regression model with MAS removed from the model was not significant, $F(6, 60) = 2.12, p = .07$, adjusted $R^2 = .10$. Finally, the regression model with HAS removed from the model was significant, $F(6, 158) = 5.56, p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .15$, but none of the independent predictors were significant in the model.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to apply theories of face work to examine students’ reports of classroom participation and participation apprehension. We also explored perceived instructor rapport, a teacher–student relational variable, as a potential communication strategy to enhance participation by providing face support (both positive and negative) and reducing students’ perceptions of face threat (both positive and negative). The results of this study reveal three important contributions to the literature. First, we now have a deeper understanding of participation apprehension as one barrier to classroom participation. Second, instructors’ interpersonal behaviors were perceived differently by LAS, MAS, and HAS, suggesting that instructors may not be able to approach rapport-building and classroom engagement in the same way with all students. Finally, instructors’ use of face support and reduced use of face threats, both of which are related to perceptions of positive rapport, emerged as prosocial instructor strategies with potential to increase classroom participation and the potential to create perceptions of a safe space with some students.

Our findings for hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 not only confirm that participation apprehension is associated with lower student participation, but also the findings confirm that students with different levels of participation apprehension have significantly different perceptions of instructional face support and face threat. These results were obtained because, unlike most previous studies of classroom participation, we examined low, moderate, and highly apprehensive students to compare the entire range of students that instructors are likely challenged with teaching and engaging in the classroom. The inclusion of MAS revealed that their perceptions of the classroom and participation behaviors often differed from LAS and HAS. The results suggest that unlike some previous research, MAS should not be combined with either LAS or HAS groups or ignored. Because most students in this study fell into the moderate category, the results surrounding the identification of all three groups can be informative for instructors who desire encouraging participation and building rapport in the classroom. This group of students may be regularly overlooked because they may not exhibit some of the extreme and observable symptoms of anxiety expressed by HAS (e.g., sweating, trembling; Bodie, 2010). Understanding more about MAS is also important for treating all levels of apprehension. Further, understanding this group is important to instructors making pedagogical decisions as the interpersonal strategies used by an instructor predicted participation frequency for MAS and LAS, while interpersonal strategies had no predictive effects for HAS.

It is important to note that the correlations for hypotheses 4 and 5 revealed that rapport is significantly and strongly related to both positive and negative face support.
and face threat. It may be that perceptions of rapport, when considered a general impression of the instructor–student relationship, can be elicited by being face supportive and reducing face threats. However, rapport was not correlated with student participation. Thus, we can infer from our findings that specific behaviors, like being face supportive, can enhance feelings of rapport and are ways to increase student participation.

While the connections between positive rapport and face support, creating a positive climate, classroom participation, and facilitating a safe space are strong in the previous literature, in testing hypothesis 6 we found that rapport did not emerge as a significant predictor of participation. We can only speculate about why these contradictory findings emerged in our data. First, positive impressions of rapport or a safe space may be an expectation students have for all college classrooms and, therefore, may not elicit different participatory behaviors. The feelings of being in a safe space and feelings of rapport, as suggested in our results, may not be enough to overcome participation anxiety for some groups of students. Second, rapport may be the assessment of the general relationship, but as a perception does not highlight specific verbal and nonverbal behaviors that may enhance or hinder student participation. Finally, other variables may be of greater importance to students’ decisions to participate (e.g., course structure).

Our results have several practical implications for instructors. As the majority of participants were categorized as MAS, it may be fruitful for instructors to enact behaviors that are more influential for that audience segment. Much of the extant research provides practical advice for addressing those students who are HAS (e.g., Bippus & Young, 2000; Chan & McCroskey, 1987; Neer, 1987; Neer & Kircher, 1989) while giving relatively less attention to MAS. Given that MAS perceived the classroom and behaved most similarly to those who were HAS, it becomes equally important to address MAS. Thus, instructors should work to support students’ affiliative, competence, and autonomy face needs. For example, instructors may employ contract grading methods where students may choose to make participation worth a smaller portion of their grade (i.e., autonomy, negative face support) or by asking questions that do not have correct answers but still spark discussion (i.e., competence, positive face support).

The conditions under which students are more likely to participate seem to inherently describe Boostrom’s (1998) idea of a “safe space.” Specifically, instructors who provided negative face support and reduced both positive and negative face threat likely cultivated perceptions of a supportive and inclusive environment where identities are protected and students are safe from emotional or psychological harm. Thus, when students perceived that they were allowed by their instructor to be autonomous, and that their competence or autonomy were not under scrutiny or evaluation by the instructor, they felt safe enough to participate in the classroom. This interpretation is supported in previous literature that links rapport and connectedness to students’ perceptions of a positive classroom climate where they may be safe in taking educational risks to explore and create knowledge through participation. Thus, instructors should exercise both awareness and strategic decision
making when structuring the classroom and participation expectations to maximize participation potential, if the instructor desires a participative classroom.

Bodie (2010) argued that common advice to instructors of apprehensive students includes being supportive, but he noted that little research tells instructors how to enact that support. This study begins to explore the strategies that instructors can use to create a supportive environment. Previously, Witt and Kerssen-Griep (2011) identified positive face support as the strongest predictor of favorable student outcomes. Other studies have revealed that instructors can support positive face by performing approbation and solidarity facework. Taken together with the results of this study, rapport-building is an instructor strategy that helps address positive face needs, but it is still distinct from face support. Yet, the two constructs appear to be strongly related. Specifically, instructors may build rapport by using “getting to know you” activities in the classroom (Trotter & Roberts, 2006) and engaging in out of class communication (Frisby, Sidelingier, & Heisler, 2012), which may demonstrate that instructors are willing to be affiliated with students (i.e., solidarity, positive face support). Extending these findings, our results suggest that being face-sensitive may also be critical when engaging students in, and responding to, student participation. Future research should examine the influences of instructor face support on a host of other student, classroom, and learning outcomes.

Of theoretical significance, this study provides support for using face as a theoretical framework to understand student participation decisions and behaviors, as well as a springboard for additional research on rapport, face, and participation in the classroom. First, Goffman (1967) argued that individuals develop an emotional attachment to their face. Recent research on face has linked students’ perceptions of face threats to feeling negative emotions (Kennedy-Lightsey, 2010). Future research should examine how the emotions attached to one’s face or identity may help us to predict and explain students’ decisions to engage in classroom discussions. Additionally, this study only focused on the relationship students have with their instructor. It is possible that apprehensive students feel rapport with an instructor but not their fellow classmates. Relatedly, students may experience face support from an instructor, but can that overcome face threats from peers? Future research should examine the perceptions of face threat and face support students may experience from both fellow peers and instructors in the classroom to understand factors that lead to participation. In future studies, results could also be triangulated with self-reports of participation apprehension and observer reports of student participatory behaviors.

As with any study, there are limitations that should be considered. First, the convenience sample may not have been representative of the general college student population. A majority of participants were first-year students, which may impact the types and sizes of classes about which the participants were reporting as well as their understanding of college participation norms. Second, the participants did not identify which behaviors constitute class participation. Instructors and students may differ in their definition of class participation, different types of participation may differ in the perceived level of face threat associated with the type, and it is also
possible that students are not accurate in their self-reports of class participation. Finally, the students were all reporting on instructors that they had in face-to-face classrooms. Specifically, investigation is warranted regarding instructor–student relationships without the face-to-face interactions of the traditional classroom and how this may affect student perceptions of face threat and face support when interacting via video, chat, or asynchronous channels such as discussion boards or wikis.

In summary, these findings have implications for instructors who wish to incorporate participation into their classroom. For students with low to moderate apprehension about participating, instructors should build a positive interpersonal relationship with students, providing face support and reducing face threats when encouraging them to participate in class. Instructors’ attempts to achieve rapport may enhance the overall learning climate by attending to relational goals (i.e., positive interpersonal instructor–student relationship) in order to achieve rhetorical goals (i.e., student participation). However, these communication strategies may be less effective in alleviating high levels of participation apprehension in students. The presence of elevated participation apprehension continues to pose an instructional and relational challenge for instructors.

References


Frisby, B. N., Sidelinger, R. J., & Heisler, J. (2012, November). The effects of teacher rapport and student-to-student connectedness on students’ outside of the classroom communication and behaviors. Paper presented at the meeting of the National Communication Association, Orlando, FL.


