

# “On Here, I’m Team Jacob:” Exploring Feelings of Belongingness in Virtual Communities

Full paper

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## Abstract

Virtual communities have become important for enthusiasts to meet, share, and express their affection for a wide range of products, ideas, and brands. While virtual communities have been studied previously, the literature is lacking a perspective on virtual communities surrounding products, ideas and brands that users are embarrassed to admit they care about (that is, that they have a negative public affiliation towards), but that nonetheless are a representation of the user’s identity (brand congruity). This study presents a research model positing that, within a virtual community environment, feelings of negative affiliation and brand congruity will influence users’ feelings of belonging to the virtual community, and negative public affiliation will also moderate the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness. Our results indicate significant relationships between negative public affiliation and brand congruity with feelings of belongingness. Our study has implications for the field, as well as for practitioners.

## Keywords

Virtual communities, social media, negative public affiliation, belongingness, brand congruity

## Introduction

In a posting to the popular virtual community, “Letters to *Twilight*,” one member of the community, UC (a user name), states:

I’m paranoid. I fear that when I’m browsing the books at Target, not even looking for Twig-stuff, and I notice a teeny tiny pic of Rob [Robert Pattinson, an actor who plays the role of Edward Cullens in the *Twilight* movie series] I feel like people hear my heart skip a beat and STARE

UC goes on to explain that her self-proclaimed paranoia results from her deep-seated fear that others will learn she is a fan of the *Twilight* movies. When reflecting on her paranoia, UC concludes that, “I think it’s because *Twilight* isn’t ‘okay’ for adults to like.” Other fans can relate, and even offer suggestions to mask her fandom, such as using a younger sister or daughter as an excuse to see the movies or purchase merchandise. Another member, Jaydey17, empathizes and suggests, “Maybe it’s a universal thing because I’m the same way.”

UC and Jaydey17 are self-proclaimed “Twihards” (a common nickname for *Twilight* fans) with a fierce loyalty to the brand. These fans are a small representation of the diverse and lucrative (the three movies in the *Twilight* franchise garnered a combined \$87 million) market (Pomerantz, 2012). However, some of these Twihards have a difficult time admitting to their fandom. The behaviors of these individuals can range from refusing to discuss that one likes the movies to feeling uncomfortable about purchasing *Twilight* merchandise. These individuals appear to be expressing what might be labeled a “negative public affiliation,” which can be defined as a feeling of reluctance or discomfort with liking, talking about, and/or having any sort of public connection with the *Twilight* brand.

Perhaps because fans, like the “Twihards,” feel discomfort when expressing their affection for a brand in public, online platforms have become important for enthusiasts to meet, share, and express their affection

for a wide range of products, ideas, and brands. For example, social media provides the opportunity for these individuals to share their opinions about *Twilight*, as well as communicate about other interests, discuss their personal problems, or solicit this information from others. Social media is an umbrella term used to describe collaborative technologies that enable sharing and viewing user-generated content (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Users can join an assortment of online platforms, such as Facebook or Wordpress, with varying interfaces and software that allow for user-generated content. Typically, on such platforms, users exploit their ability to communicate by forming virtual communities around brands, products, and ideas, including the *Twilight* movies. These virtual communities may be defined as “groups of people, with common interests and practices, who communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism” (Ridings et al, 2002, p. 273). An important characteristic of the virtual community is that the primary communications of the community are electronic or are enabled by IT (Ridings & Gefen, 2006). Virtual communities are an area of interest in MIS (Lee et al, 2003), and in the general public, and are incredibly pervasive, with over 84 percent of Americans claiming they have contacted or been a member of an online community at some point (Rainie & Fox, 2015), and with most memberships lasting for, on average, 4.5 years (Cole et al, 2013).

Previous research examining virtual communities often focuses on topics that mirror research that examines contemporary social media (as per boyd & Ellison’s 2008 meta-analysis), focusing in particular upon identity formation/verification behaviors and reasons for use or intention to use (Donath, 1999; Ridings & Gefen, 2006); bridging online and offline relationships (Zhang et al, 2013); privacy and knowledge sharing issues (Abdul-Rahman et al, 2000; Goldie, 2003); and network and relationship analysis (Dholakia et al, 2004). Further, ample research from the referent field of Marketing/Consumer Behavior regarding virtual communities also considers the e-marketing and branding perspective, focusing upon the commercial aspect of virtual communities (Kozinets, 1999; Muniz & O’Guinn, 2001; Porter & Donthu, 2008), and the community-building behaviors, which are often studied using a combination of ethnographies and questionnaires (Porter & Donthu, 2008).

While virtual communities have been extensively investigated, the literature has left unexamined the cognitions surrounding users who join virtual communities for interests they do not openly share in their daily lives, or are even ashamed to discuss publically with their friends (their negative public affiliations). Such research is important because, while negative affiliation may reflect low desire to outwardly like or affiliate with an interest, this affiliation may result in users thus being more active in virtual communities. Previous research endeavors examine how one’s affiliations and fandoms, such as with “*Twilight*,” serve as “extensions of self,” affirming one’s identity (Belk, 1988), but fewer studies investigate the dissonance of negative public affiliation with a brand/product/tv show/etc. To understand this phenomenon, research needs to consider virtual communities as a means of *escape* and how using social media as a sanctuary of sorts may impact perceptions of “belonging” within a community, with the link between feelings of “belonging” to a community and increased usage having already been empirically validated (Chen, 2007; Lin, 2008). In particular, research fails to address how feelings of belonging to a virtual community are impacted by strongly identifying with a brand/fandom/etc. (brand congruity), but being hesitant to admit to this in a public forum (negative public affiliation). Hence, our study focuses on this phenomenon, asking: *how do feelings of negative public affiliation and brand congruity impact feelings of belongingness in virtual communities?* To answer this question, this study focuses on how one’s identification with a particular interest or brand (in this case, the *Twilight* franchise) and one’s negative public affiliation may impact their feelings of belonging in a virtual community.

The study unfolds as follows. First, a definition of social media and classification of virtual communities, as well as definition of virtual communities, will be described in additional detail. Next, virtual communities and identity formation/verification, and the role of brand congruity, will be discussed. This theoretical perspective will lead to the introduction of a research model, description of the study’s method and results of the study. It will conclude with a discussion of results, implications for theory and practice, and limitations and areas for future research.

## Theoretical Perspective

Social media platforms come in a variety of forms and interfaces, all of which use interactive formats that offer users the opportunity to express “who they are” (Sunden, 2009), with previous studies in MIS, organizational psychology, and marketing focusing on social media as a means to express one’s identity. It

is important to note that the identity literature stream is multifaceted and is discussed in a number of ways. We will focus our study on one's network of friends (and the belongingness construct), identity through identifying with a brand (brand congruity), and identity surrounding brands one chooses not to publically identify with (negative public affiliation). (Donath, J. S. 1999; Ellison & boyd, 2007).

Given the large number of online platforms with varying features (some sources indicate that over 500 platforms exist at any given time; Craig, 2013) and ways to express one's identity, it is meaningful to classify them. Kaplin and Haenlein (2010) classify online platforms by user social presence (how well an individual platform can convey user information) and media richness (how much information can be transmitted). Some online platforms are more effective than others; these platforms are classified as "self-presentation/ self disclosure" platforms, allowing users to express themselves and share a large degree of personal information (platforms include Facebook, LinkedIn, and Tumblr). On the lower end of the spectrum, with low richness and little means by which users might present their "selves" is collaborative social medias (such as Wikipedia, which largely uses text and some graphics). While most online platforms are considered "ideal" for presenting user information, authors point out that they are somewhat limited in richness, compared to, for example, virtual social worlds, like Second Life. As such, virtual communities tend to be high in allowing users the opportunity to express themselves and high in media richness, suggesting they are ideal for users to express their identities. Blanchard & Markus observed members of an online sports community. Coupling their observations with user interviews, the authors found examples of self-presentation through the use of online member signatures (2004). Further, Ma & Agarwal, indicated that social media provides an avenue for identity verification, answering the question, "Who am I?" The authors surveyed members of an online banking community and found that users presented their "selves" through avatars, websites, digital signatures, etc. and that these self-presentation behaviors improved how much banking knowledge the users contributed to the community. More active users used more identity verification behaviors (2007).

Further, virtual communities allow users to express their identities in terms of their connection with the brand or theme of the community itself (in this case, *Twilight*), where the brand itself may represent some aspect of the user's "self" or identity. This topic, of affirming one's identity through one's interests/possessions/etc., was introduced in Marketing by Belk, who studied possessions of brands, products and customer interests, suggesting that users consider these possessions as an extension of self, or of their identities (1988). The term, "brand congruity" then, is used to measure how strongly individuals feel that a brand/interest/possession (i.e., the interest surrounding the virtual community) represents this inner self, or represent the identity of the user. It is theoretically related to the constructs of "self" and "identity," and is a construct that is narrowed down to a particular fandom/brand/possession/etc. Brand congruity alludes to a psychological relationship with the brand/interest where the user feels that the brand reflects him/her in some meaningful way. (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). Users need to feel that the brand communicates who they are as individuals and they may, in tern, feel that they are indeed similar to other members of the community as well.

Previous research, especially in Organizational Behavior, also indicates individuals affirm their identities through their friend network (Byrne, 1997). Through virtual communities, users articulate a network of "friends" with whom they share a connection (one's network) and are able to see friends' networks as well (boyd & Ellison, 2008). Users can openly exchange ideas and opinions with other users who have the same interest. Thus, the network, or community, of users is essential, with research into virtual communities indicating that these online communities actually share common characteristics with real-life communities, including a shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, moral responsibility for other community members (Muniz, Jr., & O'Guinn, 2001). Further, virtual communities differ from real-life communities in that they allow for greater geographical dispersion of one's network, allowing users with "niche" interests to connect with each other (such as the Saab community mentioned in Schau & Muniz Jr., 2002).

Thus, if said user feels that his/her presence is noted within the community, that his/her ideas are important, and that the community understands him/her, a feeling of belongingness can occur. To "belong," in the context of this study, is to feel that one is an important, contributing member who is essential to the continuation of the virtual community. This feeling is important in terms of affirming an individual's identity (as indicated above), but also in terms of the virtual community itself, because belongingness "serves to delineate what the [community] is not, and who the... community members are

not” (Porter & Donthu, 2008). McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, in a study of NFL virtual communities, explain that these communities are so effective because virtual communities offer a way to enmesh the user in a network of relationships with the [NFL] brand and fellow users, as opposed to the traditional [NFL team] brand loyalty—a one-to-one relationship between a brand and its customer” (2008). Again, the importance of a user feeling that he/she fully belongs within the community, and has meaningful relationships with community members, is evident.

In sum, central to the definition of belonging is the idea that a user must “fit in” the virtual community, and also with the brand in question. Research also suggests that virtual communities “engendered higher levels of identification and normative pressure, perhaps because of the richer and multifaceted nature of interpersonal relationships therein” (Algesheimer et al, 2005 p. 29 Based on the evidence provided, this study will also assert that the more the interest underpinning a virtual community reflects a user’s identity (brand congruity), the more he/she will have feelings of belonging to the community:

H1: Feelings of brand congruity positively impact feelings of belongingness within a virtual community.

One’s public affiliation with the interest/brand/etc. underpinning the virtual community may also play a role in how much a user feels he/she belongs to a brand community. When choosing to affiliate with a group of people, one is actively electing to “become more like one’s peers through a socialization process” (Witviolet, 2009). Research regarding virtual communities indicates that users may choose to join virtual communities for a variety of reasons, such as to feel a sense of belonging (McAlexander et al, 2008), to learn more about a brand or product (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008), to discuss a brand with other interested members (Kim & Bae, 2008), and so on. Less research discusses using virtual communities as a means of *escape*; some users have interests that they may not feel inclined to publically admit to (for instance, being a *Twilight* fan) for perhaps a number of reasons: feeling embarrassed or ashamed of their interests, worrying that others will judge them, not believing they will meet other like-minded individuals in real-life, and so on. This reluctance to openly express or admit to having a particular interest is known as a “negative public affiliation.” In terms of its nomological net, the term is related to “disidentification” (considered the “opposite of identity,” what a person “is not,” though it should be noted that public affiliation deals with topics that verify one’s identity) and cognitive dissonance (public affiliation focuses more on the “public” nature of dissonance) (Aronson et al, 1995). Social media, and by extension, virtual communities, allows users to express (what are sometimes) their most personal feelings behind the safety of their computer screen and with the assumption that they may do so anonymously, or even through the creation of inauthentic profiles (originally termed “Fakesters” by Heer and boyd, now popularly known as “catfishing”). In the study of Fakesters, the authors even suggest that all social media profiles are “false” in a sense (2005).

Research indicates that online platforms offer users the ability to connect on matters that they otherwise might feel ashamed of or reluctant to publically discuss (negative public affiliation) and that feelings of belongingness are important in virtual communities. One might expect, then, that feelings negative public affiliation with any interest/brand might increase feelings of belonging to a virtual community, largely because that sense of understanding cannot be found outside of the virtual world. We hypothesize:

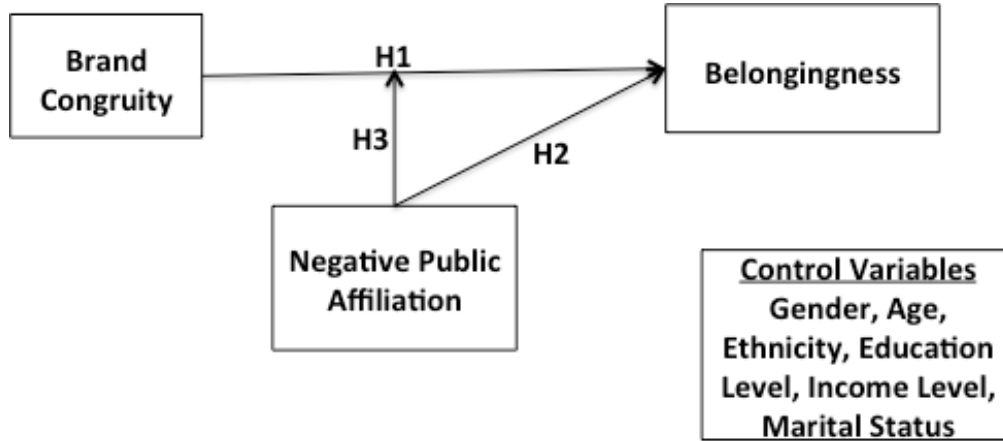
H2: Feelings of negative public affiliation positively impact feelings of belongingness within a virtual community context.

Further, we also argue that negative public affiliation will moderate the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness, where only having one or two outlets through which the user can discuss a particular interest, may inflate or increase feelings of belongingness within the virtual community. Previous studies in the identity literature stream, in MIS as well as in organizational behavior, indicate that members feel obligation to the community, received support from fellow members, and even experience emotional attachment to community members (Markus & Blanchard, 2002), which may be more important in an arena that “gives space and time to a great many people who may wish to... ‘work through’ aspects of themselves they do not ‘own’ in their RL [real life] existences” (Palandri & Green, 2000 p.640). Bernstein and authors’ (2011) study of 4chan, a virtual community, showed that 90 percent of posts were anonymous, with only timestamps and profile names to signal status, which actually fostered a stronger community identity; this, again, emphasizes the idea of using virtual communities as an “escape,” and we maintain that the propensity to “escape” may be stronger when one feels ashamed of

a certain interest he/she has, one that does not neatly match his/her personality in real-life. Thus, we hypothesize :

H3: Feelings of negative public affiliation will moderate the relationship between brand congruity and feelings of belongingness. Increasing levels of negative public affiliation will strengthen the relationship between brand congruity and feelings of belongingness, while decreasing levels of negative public affiliation will weaken the relationship.

The above relationships are outlined in the research model (**Figure 1**), below:



**Figure 1. Research Model**

## Method

To test our research model, we used a questionnaire consisting of perceptual measures of belongingness, brand congruity, and public affiliation.

### *Perceptual Measures*

To test our research model, a questionnaire was used that consisted of previously established and validated scales to measure brand congruity (Helgeson & Supphellon, 2004) and belongingness (Gambone & Arbretton, 1997). Both of these scales had established reliabilities of over .8. A public affiliation scale was developed for the affiliation construct and tested with acceptable reliability of over .8 as well.

### *Control Variables*

Demographic variables such as gender and ethnicity are popular variables in many studies, with organizational psychology in particular focusing on them, with mixed results (McCarthy et al, 2010). We measured those demographic variables, as well as age, education level, income level and marital status as control variables.

## Results

To analyze our factor structures and research model, structural equation modeling (SEM) was used with the EQS 6.2 software package, which tests for nonnormality of data using Mardia's Coefficient (Ullman, 2006). Our Mardia's Coefficient fell within acceptable bounds (<3), indicating normal data. Tests for skewness and kurtosis fell within acceptable bounds.

### *Sample Characteristics*

A questionnaire was administered to members of *Twilight* virtual communities. *Twilight* is worldwide phenomenon that started as a young-adult vampire romance novel series written by Stephanie Meyers and spawned a series of movies as well. Compared at first to the popular "Harry Potter" children's novel series, *Twilight* soon gained its own niche market, and Meyers regularly interacted with her loyal fans via

her author's website. Perhaps due largely to its popularity among adolescent females, not all *Twilight* fans are willing to admit their loyalty to the popular franchise. Virtual communities, such as "*Twilighters Anonymous*" and "*Twilight Guys*" are available on the Internet, offering an opportunity for individuals to discuss the series openly. The *Twilight* brand was selected due to its wide range of public affiliations among the fans, as well as the abundance of online communities to join. Further, in line with a Kim and Bae study (2008), this brand was selected because it allows ample opportunities for customer innovation (through forums, fan fiction, digital collages, etc.) and is modular in nature. The sample consisted of members of numerous online communities, such as "Twifans.com," "Fan Pop: *Twilight*," and "DazzledBy*Twilight.org*." The community members responded to a post in the community forums that briefly explained the purpose of the study with a link to the study. They were also asked to pass the link on to other *Twilight* fans who might be interested in the study (a snowball sampling process). 150 users agreed to participate in the study. Sample characteristics are noted in **Table 1**, below.

Sample Characteristic	Value
Gender	Female (81 percent)
Age	22-25 (24.5 percent)
Education	Some college (24.6 percent)
Income	Less than \$10,000(26.2 percent)
Marital Status	Single (57.1 percent)
Race	White (55.6 percent)

**Table 1. Sample Characteristics**

### ***Confirmatory Factor Analysis***

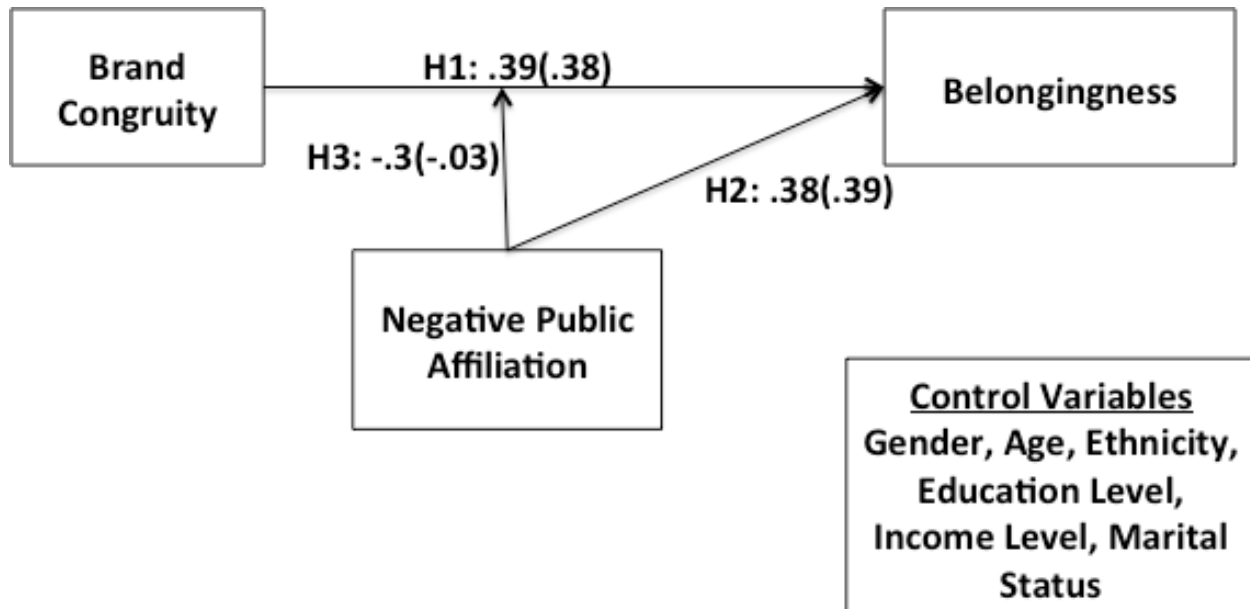
To test the dimensionality and reliability of the scales used in this study, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Our final model showed acceptable fit and our scales all demonstrated acceptable reliability (the belongingness scale's Cronbach's alpha = .84, the affiliations scale's Cronbach's alpha = .77, and the brand congruity scale's Cronbach's alphas = .85). We determined the convergent validity of our measures by examining the average variance extracted (AVE) for construct items, with scores of .5 or higher indicating convergent validity. The AVEs for our scales were all higher than .67. Further, we also found evidence of discriminant validity by using the square root of the construct's AVE for was higher than the inter-construct correlations for our measures.

### ***Common Method Bias***

We used both procedural and statistical remedies to control for method bias, using multiple methods of measuring our perceptual measures and experimental manipulations, protecting of respondent anonymity and reducing evaluation apprehension (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Also, when informing subjects of their IRB rights in their informed consent letter, we assured respondents that their answers were anonymous, and all personally identifying information was secure and confidential. We also repeated this guarantee in the post to community members. We also told our participants that there were no right or wrong answers, and to respond to all questions as honestly as possible.

### ***Hypotheses Testing***

The results of our hypotheses are shown in **Figure 2. Hypotheses Testing**.



**Figure 2. Hypotheses Testing**

We found empirical evidence supporting H1 ( $b = .38$ ,  $\beta = .39$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t = 3.1$ ,  $p < .005$ ) and H2 ( $b = .39$ ,  $\beta = .38$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $t = 3.39$ ,  $p = .001$ ). That is, our data supported the relationships between brand congruity (identifying with a brand) and negative public affiliation (discomfort with publically supporting a brand) with feelings of belongingness within a virtual community. To test H3 (the moderating relationship), we created interaction terms and ran a general linear model in SPSS using composite variables. We also tested the interactions using latent variables in our structural model in EQS and by running a multilinear model using composite variables. Using the interaction term, we found that H3 was not significant at  $F(18,66) = 2.93$ ,  $.1$ .

## Conclusion

Our study addressed the issue of how one's discomfort with publically associating with a brand (negative public affiliation) and one's identification with a brand (brand congruity) impacts their feelings of belongingness within a virtual community (in this case, *Twilight*). Our results have many important implications. Specifically, we expected to find a relationship between brand congruity and belongingness in our model and found a strong positive relationship. When our respondents indicated they strongly identified with the *Twilight* brand, they reported having stronger feelings of belongingness (feeling that they fit in) within the virtual community. It is not unreasonable to think that, if a user decides to pursue a subject in a virtual community context, his/her actual cognitions of relating to said subject might impact how well the individual feels he/she "fits into" the broader virtual community of users who likely have and pursue the same interests. The implication is that, users do feel that they belong in virtual communities that they feel reflect at least some aspect of their identity.

This relationship between brand congruity and belongingness was not moderated by negative public affiliation with a brand, though interestingly, we found a direct relationship between negative public affiliation and belongingness. Our reasoning for proposing a direct relationship dealt with the idea of using social media, and virtual communities in extension, as an "escape" from the real world, as well as finding support for subjects/activities/brands/etc. a user may otherwise feel ashamed to discuss (thus, increasing feelings of belongingness). As this relationship was supported, the implication does seem to be that our respondents reported increasing feelings of belongingness when they had high levels of negative public affiliation with a brand.

We also felt that this negative affiliation would moderate the brand congruity-to-belongingness relationship, strengthening it, using similar reasoning (i.e., if a user strongly relates with a brand and is

ashamed to discuss it in public, he/she will more likely experience feelings of belongingness within the community). The lack of support for the moderation may be due to a number of reasons. One idea is that affiliation with and identification with a brand, while surrounding somewhat similar domains, actually involves different behaviors (presenting oneself as a fan vs. identifying privately that one is a fan) and they might not necessarily be related in a meaningful way. The lack of support may be due to the selection of the brand itself (the *Twilight* franchise) or our sample characteristics, which indicates more research in this area is likely needed.

The study contributes to MIS theory in a number of ways. First, it contributes to the growing literature stream surrounding social media and more specifically, virtual communities, by investigating use behaviors surrounding feelings of belonging within a community; it also contributes to potential usage continuance antecedents (negative public affiliation and brand congruity) (Lin, 2008). It also contributes a perspective that social media may be used as a means to “escape” from the real world and to pursue an interest that the user otherwise would feel ashamed to have in real life. It also provides a different perspective in regards to the identity literature streams in MIS, Organizational Psychology, and Marketing, and use of social media/virtual communities. We also contribute to the referent field of Marketing by focusing on a successful franchise/brand (*Twilight*) and the virtual brand community surrounding the franchise.

Our study also has practical implications for managers and practitioners. Our findings did show that negative public affiliation and brand congruity impact feelings of belongingness within virtual communities. Understanding why and how feelings of belongingness increase may improve how these communities are designed (in terms of feature sets, interface, connectivity, creation of cues and personalization for communicating and presenting one’s user profile), moderated (especially regarding community behaviors and communication patterns), promoted, and maintained.

Our study requires additional refinement and testing in the future due to its limitations, and has many avenues for future research and extensions to it as well. First, our sample context (*Twilight* fans) may lack generalizability; additional brands/subjects/interests should be examined. Future studies may also opt to use experimental or netnography designs to get at the generalizability issue. Second, though the demographic characteristics of our sample were controlled for, brands that span different or multiple demographic bases or even cultures should be investigated in additional depth. Next, due, in part, to the lack of research in this particular area (negatively affiliated brand), our study focused on one dependent variable, belongingness, but other outcomes (deep usage, continuance intentions, intentions to explore, intentions to invite friends to join, cognitive absorption, etc.) should be considered in future studies. Also, this study establishes the idea of negative public affiliation with a brand and provides support that it impacts online behavior; future studies may examine this in more depth: for instance, does negative public affiliation influence communication patterns and cues on social media and virtual communities? How does this bridge with/impact real life relationships? Is there an online life vs. real-life dissonance and how is it dealt with? Is it different than users who identify strongly with a subject and engage with virtual communities on it, but have no difficulty discussing it in public? This study has many extensions in the future and may be improved by perhaps including characteristics of the virtual community itself, by using more than one virtual community, and by including additional dependent variables.

In conclusion, this study found that the negative public affiliation and brand congruity of users within *Twilight* virtual communities impacts feelings of belongingness, and that negative public affiliation does not moderate this relationship. The study discusses cognitions surrounding brand communities and contributes to the conversation of social media as an “escape.”

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