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A Great Escape: The Effect of Negative Public Affiliation on Belongingness to Virtual Communities

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Abstract:

In this study, we study negative public affiliation, which we define as discomfort with being publicly linked to a potentially socially stigmatized group or interest. We investigate how users who feel negative public affiliation form feelings of belonging to a virtual community. We also consider the impact that brand congruity (how much a user identifies with an interest or brand) has on feelings of belonging. To investigate negative public affiliation, we drew a sample from members of Twilight-themed virtual communities and evaluated the interrelationship between negative public affiliation, brand congruity, and belongingness (how well users feel they fit in virtual communities). Our results indicate that high negative public affiliation and high brand congruity with Twilight positively impacted feelings of belonging: users who felt Twilight reflected their identity but felt uncomfortable publicly discussing their interest felt a stronger sense of belonging in relation to their virtual communities. Our study offers practical implications for firms seeking to design and maintain virtual communities that support the broadest possible group of users. Of equal importance, our study provides a new direction for information systems research on virtual communities and suggests a need to study users who participate in socially uncomfortable, stigmatized, or unacceptable communities.

Keywords: Negative Public Affiliation, Virtual Community, Stigma, Identity, Platforms, Brand Congruity.

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1 Introduction

In a posting to “Letters to Twilight”, a popular virtual community, UC (a username) shared:

I'm paranoid. I fear that when I'm browsing the books at Target, not even looking for Twi-stuff, and I notice a teeny tiny pic of Rob [Robert Pattinson, an actor who plays the role of Edward Cullen 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: “I think it’s because Twilight isn’t ‘okay’ for adults to like”. Other fans relate and even offer suggestions to her 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 self-identify as “Twiwards”, a common nickname for Twilight fans who, despite fearing embarrassment for their affiliation, express a fierce loyalty to Twilight. Some Twiwards who participate actively in virtual communities have a difficult time admitting to their fandom in their offline life. These individuals’ behavior can range from refusing to discuss their interest in the books or movies to feeling uncomfortable about purchasing Twilight merchandise. These individuals appear to express what we label “negative public affiliation” (NPA), which refers to the extent to which one does not want to openly express having a particular interest in a socially problematic idea or product (in this case, being a Twiward).

Fans such as “Twiwards” who may feel discomfort when openly expressing their affection for a brand in their public lives may find virtual communities particularly important. These communities can provide a sense of acceptance and belongingness among like-minded individuals. Virtual communities provide an opportunity for individuals to feel safe in sharing their opinions and communicate about other interests in a setting where they feel a sense of belonging. We need to study virtual community members (such as Twiwards), which includes individuals who experience negative public affiliation, because these members constitute potentially important market segments for firms. For example, Twiwards represent a diverse and lucrative market: for instance, the movies in the Twilight franchise garnered a combined US\$3.3 billion in worldwide revenue (Watson, 2018). For fans such as Twiwards, virtual communities have become forums to meet, share, and express their affection for a wide range of brands, products, ideas, and value systems.

Virtual communities have become an increasingly important area of interest in information systems (IS) research (Kim, Bae, & Kang, 2018; Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2003), and people today commonly use them. For example, over 25 million Americans claim they have interacted with or been a member of a virtual community at some point (Ridings & Gefen, 2001) with most memberships lasting an average of 4.5 years (Cole, Suman, Schramm, Zhou, & Salvador, 2013). Given the lack of geographical boundaries, virtual communities can create opportunities beyond simply marketing to consumers and shape how information spreads and impacts member behaviors (Wolke, 2018). Accordingly, we particularly need to understand what creates feelings of belonging to virtual communities, particularly ones that negative public affiliation affects.

IS research has investigated many factors in the virtual community and social media context (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), such as identity-formation and -verification behaviors and reasons for using virtual communities (Donath, 2002; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze 2006), the bridging of online and offline relationships (Zhang & Pennacchiotti, 2013), the creation of social value via virtual communities (Goh, Gao, & Agarwal, 2016), the development of firm-sponsored virtual brand communities (Bapna, Benner, & Qiu, 2019), and how firms can leverage firm-supported virtual communities to create organizational value (Roberts & Dinger, 2016, 2018). However, scant research specifically examines users who join virtual communities for stigmatized or socially taboo interests (i.e., interests that they do not want to express publicly, such as weight-loss techniques; see Bradford, Grier, & Henderson, 2017). We need to conduct such research because it contributes to explaining how virtual communities attract potentially stigmatized members, clarifies how to drive sustained engagement and interaction with communities, and may also shed light on how to design communities to provide safe havens for individuals with stigmatized interests, such as adult Twilight fans, individuals with stigmatized conditions such as HIV (Flickinger et al., 2018), or individuals who have unpopular political beliefs.

Virtual communities constitute a unique platform for customers to engage with products, themes, and ideas that they might never otherwise identify with publicly due to concerns about negative public

affiliation—for example, the “Bronies” subculture of adult men who identify as fans of the children’s cartoon My Little Pony (Klein, 2017; Yiin, 2016) and the online platforms where they gather (e.g. poniverse.net). Consumers who feel strongly connected with a given brand have high brand congruity (i.e., the extent to which a person identifies with a brand) (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). For Hasbro, the company that manufactures My Little Pony, Bronies constitute not only a market for selling their goods but also a source of ideas on how to improve their product. For firms to access and capitalize on consumers who feel negative public affiliation, they need to understand the paradox of why some customers support virtual communities online and act more discretely about their interests offline. In this study, we take a step toward understanding the public-private paradox that some consumers manifest in their support for brands and evaluate how this disconnect manifests in the context of brand-related virtual communities.

Consequently, we ask the following research question (RQ):

RQ: Do negative public affiliation and brand congruity impact feelings of belonging to virtual communities?

To answer this question, we focus on how one’s identification with a particular interest or brand (in this case, the Twilight franchise) and the negative public affiliation associated with this interest impacts belongingness to virtual communities.

In studying online negative public affiliation, we connect multiple fields of inquiry to further understand the way that individuals bifurcate their online and offline identities due to the stigma attached to brands with which they identify. Specifically, we draw on three research fields: 1) stigmatized groups (Dunn & Creek, 2015; Goffman, 2009; Link & Phelan, 2001; Maratea & Kavanaugh, 2012), 2) negative or damaged brand reputations (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold, 2011; Jørgensen, Taboubi, & Zaccour, 2003; Martinez & Pina, 2003), and 3) virtual communities (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Porter & Donthu, 2008). We extend such research by specifically investigating social stigmas in terms of potentially tainted brand images and the virtual communities that support them. For practitioners, this research explains how and why consumers might engage with brands they may be reluctant to identify with publicly.

This paper unfolds as follows: in Section 2, we define and discuss virtual communities and preview our research model. We also define negative public affiliation; explain the interplay of NPA, belonging, and brand congruity in virtual communities; and build the logic underlying the hypotheses. In Section 3, we describe our method and, in Section 4, provide the results we obtained from empirically testing the model. In Section 5, we discuss our results and implications for theory and practice. Finally, in Section 6, we conclude the paper.

2 Theory and Hypothesis Development

Virtual communities are online platforms that use information and communication technologies to enable users to engage and interact based on common interests, demographic characteristics, and/or values (Porter & Donthu, 2008). Virtual community platforms come in many forms and offer various interfaces, all of which enable asynchronous or synchronous interactions that afford users the opportunity to express “who they are” (de Vries, Peluso, Romani, Leeflang, & Marcati, 2017; Sundén, 2009). Studies in IS, organizational psychology, and marketing suggest that virtual communities have become a setting in which users express their identities (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Virtual communities allow users to articulate a network of “friends” with whom they share a connection as an essential feature (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Virtual communities offer individuals opportunities to verify their identities through a supportive friendship network (Byrne, 1997). For instance, studies indicate that virtual communities enable identify verification behaviors, described as “the perceived confirmation from other community members of a...person’s belief about his [or her] identities” (Ma & Agarwal, 2007, p. 46). In other words, do other community members see users the same way they see themselves? Norms around identity verification behaviors shape how the virtual community treats individual users.

Virtual communities typically allow users to openly exchange ideas and opinions with others who share their interests, which leads to shared behavioral norms (Pai & Tsai, 2016). The way in which people behave in these communities resembles how they behave in real-life communities and is characterized by shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and moral responsibility for other community members (Muniz, & O’Guinn, 2001). Virtual communities go beyond real-life communities in that they allow for greater geographical dispersion of one’s network, which allows users with “niche” interests to connect with each other (Schau & Muniz, 2002).

In this study, we focus on how one’s unwillingness to publicly express a stigmatized interest (negative public affiliation) drives belongingness to a related virtual community. Similarly, we argue that the extent to which one identifies with a brand (brand congruity) magnifies one’s belongingness to the virtual community. Finally, we consider that the extent to which negative public affiliation magnifies the influence that brand congruity has on belongingness. We present our research model in Figure 1 and define key constructs in Table 1.

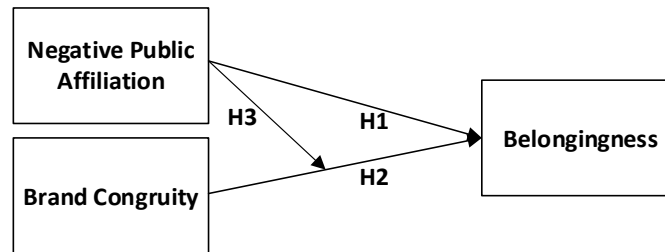


Figure 2. Research Model

Table 1. Construct Definitions

Construct	Construct definition
Negative public affiliation	The extent to which one does not want to openly express a particular interest or identification with a socially difficult or stigmatized problematic idea, product, or value system.
Belongingness	The user’s feeling of belonging to a virtual community (i.e., the perception that one constitutes an important, contributing member who ensures that the community will continue) (Porter & Donthu, 2008).
Brand congruity	The degree to which individuals define themselves with the same attributes that they believe define a brand (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010, p.84).

To understand the implications of negative public affiliation in virtual communities, we focus on how individuals use such communities as a means to escape or as a safe space to manifest their identity (Chen, 2007; Lin, 2008). Individuals—especially stigmatized groups who feel socially devalued due to perceived socially undesirable characteristics, beliefs, or behaviors and who, therefore, feel unaccepted in traditional social settings—have long considered virtual communities an avenue to escape from the confines of reality (Nip, 2004; Robinson, 2007). For stigmatized groups, virtual communities can provide a safe space to exhibit and explore their affiliations or identities without fearing negative consequences from a less accepting “real” world (Mitra, 2006).

Negative public affiliation describes the reluctance to openly express or admit to having a particular interest. NPA relates to “disidentification” (considered the “opposite of identity”, what a person “is not”) and cognitive dissonance (Aronson, Blanton, & Cooper, 1995). Virtual communities may become forums for expressing NPA due to the anonymity they offer (Kim, Lee, & Lee, 2019). They allow users to express their most personal feelings behind the safety of their computer screens and under the assumption that they may do so anonymously through leveraging platform features or through creating pseudonymous profiles (Heer & Boyd, 2005).

NPA addresses a tension or dissonance between the way individuals socially identify themselves in a public space and the way they explore their identity in a more private or anonymous manner in online settings. While we focus on NPA and potentially stigmatized brands in this study, one can equally apply the NPA concept to socially unacceptable ideas or stigmatized issues in a given culture—for example, politically progressive individuals living in a conservative environment or individuals living with HIV (Flickinger et al., 2018). While the NPA concept also certainly pertains to illegal or legally questionable issues, in this paper, we restrict our focus on the NPA concept to legal yet socially problematic interests, beliefs, and behaviors because we assume that the psychology and motivation behind hiding sensitive identity elements become more complicated when examining illegal activities (Holt, Blevins, & Burkert, 2010) and also likely exist in a different nomological network due to the fear of potential legal repercussions in addition to the potentially negative social repercussions that we evaluate here.

When virtual community users feel shame about their interest in a topic or brand (NPA) but feel safe expressing or exploring their interest in a stigmatized topic or brand in the confines of a virtual community, we expect that they likely feel a sense of belonging with other community members. To “belong” in the context of virtual communities amounts to feeling accepted by a virtual community and valued as an important, contributing member who ensures that the community will continue (Hennig-Thurau, Walsh, & Walsh, 2003). This feeling affirms both the individual’s identity and their connection to the virtual community. Belongingness helps to “delineate what the [community] is not, and who the...community members are not” (Porter & Donthu, 2008). For example, in a study on NFL virtual communities, McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig (2008) explain that these communities are valuable because they “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”. This study highlights the value of connecting a brand’s consumers with fellow community members, and not just with the brand itself.

When considering virtual communities and NPA, perceived belongingness may be a mechanism that community members use to evaluate others and assign them to in-groups and out-groups (Goldberg, 2005; Quattrone & Jones, 1980). For example, users of a Twilight-themed community might consider community members to be people who “get” and understand their Twilight fandom and they might consider people who do not understand or accept their fandom as outsiders. By assigning others to in-groups (e.g., Twihards) and out-groups (e.g., nonfans or casual fans), individuals reinforce their own identity as part of the group and feel a higher level of affinity with similar others—those in the in-group (Reskin, McBrier, & Kmec, 1999; Tajfel, 1981).

One’s public affiliation with a virtual community may also play a role in how much one feels that one belongs to a community. When choosing to affiliate with a group of people, a user actively elects to “become more like one’s peers through a socialization process” (Witvliet, van Lier, Cuijpers, & Koot, 2009). Virtual communities research indicates that users may choose to join virtual communities for various reasons (Malinen, 2015), such as to feel a sense of belonging (McAlexander et al., 2008), to learn more about a product (Devasagayam & Buff, 2008), or to discuss a topic with other interested members (Kim et al., 2008). Online platforms offer users the ability to connect on matters that they otherwise might feel ashamed of or reluctant to publicly discuss (NPA). One might then expect that feeling negative public affiliation with any private interest might increase the sense of belongingness that an individual feels to a virtual community largely because the individual cannot find that sense of understanding in the real world. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H1: Feelings of negative public affiliation positively impact belongingness to a virtual community.

Online platforms allow users to express their identities in terms of their connection with a brand or a virtual community’s theme (e.g., Twilight or My Little Pony); indeed, a brand itself may represent some aspect of the user’s “self” or identity. In studying how people come to identify with brands, products, and interests, Belk (1998) introduced this topic (i.e., affirming one’s identity through one’s interests/possessions/etc.) and found that users consider these possessions as an extension of their self-identity. Thus, people’s using brands to express elements of their identity and as a marker to identify in-group vs. out-group members pertains to our study.

Accordingly, we focus on the extent to which virtual community members identify with a brand as a component of their overall social identity. We use the term brand congruity to describe the degree with which individuals define themselves by the same attributes that they believe defines a brand (Hughes & Ahearne, 2010, p. 84). Studies indicate that, just as salespeople actively promote brands that reflect their identities, users become more active in brand communities and “sell” the brand when they feel that the brand communicates their identity as individuals (de Vries et al., 2017; Hughes & Ahearne, 2010). We need to understand how virtual community members relate to brands to develop theory and practical implications for firms that wish to manage their brand image and optimize returns from their investments in virtual communities.

In considering virtual communities and identity, we need to consider that some brands might suffer from tarnished or negative brand images that create a social stigma that some consumers may prefer to avoid. For example, the Washington Redskins, an American football team, have long been engaged in controversy because many consider the team name to be a racial slur referring to Native Americans (Pata & Halbritter, 2017); indeed, many journalists and announcers avoid using the team name entirely (Demby, 2014). For other brands, due to their taboo nature, many fans may be unwilling to publicly consume or

discuss their interest in it—for example, the *Fifty Shades of Grey* erotic novels and films (Miller, 2012). For others, fans may perceive a social stigma simply because they do not make up the target market for consuming a product (e.g., adult males who consume My Little Pony-related media and products) (Klein, 2017; Yiin, 2016) or adult fans of *Twilight* who think teenage girls make up its target market (Cordes, 2009). Regardless of where brand-related stigma comes from, in order to optimize brand value and sales, firms should seek to understand how to engage with fans and consumers of their brand who keep their interests private; they should not only consider marketing strategies for such fans but also evaluate how to specifically develop products and services that would reach these more private market niches.

In sum, belonging has at its core the idea that a user must “fit in” with the virtual community and also with the brand in question. Research also suggests that virtual communities have “engendered higher levels of identification and normative pressure, perhaps because of the richer and multifaceted nature of interpersonal relationships therein” (Algesheimer, Dholakia, & Herrmann, 2005 p. 29). Based on the evidence we provide, we evaluate whether brand congruity in virtual communities leads users to feel higher levels of belongingness to the community:

H2: Feelings of brand congruity with a virtual community’s topic positively impact belongingness to the community.

Furthermore, we argue that NPA moderates the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness. High NPA users are more likely to feel a close connection to a virtual community—especially when the interest or brand associated with that community connects tightly to how they perceive themselves (i.e., brand congruity). Studies on identity and virtual communities indicate that users feel obligations to the virtual community, receive support from fellow members, and even experience emotional attachment to virtual community members (Blanchard & Markus, 2004) or attachment to brands through virtual communities (Vernuccio, Pagani, Barbarossa, & Pastore, 2015).

Research highlights that virtual communities “give 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). For example, Bernstein et al. (2011) conducted a study on 4chan, a virtual community that has played a prominent role in developing Internet culture and has millions of predominantly anonymous users who converse over message boards on many different topics. Bernstein et al. (2011) showed that 90 percent of posts were anonymous with only timestamps and profile names to signal status, which actually fostered stronger community belongingness.

With high NPA (e.g., when one feels shame about a certain interest that they have, one that does not neatly match their personality in public), it strengthens and catalyzes the relationship between brand congruity and the feeling of belonging. For users who do not feel shame (low NPA) about their strong connection to a brand (high brand congruity), they do not need the virtual community to express and explore their interest in a brand that some might find shameful. This user might still feel connected to the virtual community due to their shared interest in the brand, but they do not need the virtual community to the same extent as a high NPA user to explore aspects of their identity connected to the brand. For high NPA users, on the other hand, the virtual community represents the only means for them to escape public judgment and explore their interest in the brand with which they identify so strongly.

Consider the Bronies subculture of adult male fans of My Little Pony. Some might feel comfortable wearing My Little Pony-branded merchandise in public, attending My Little Pony movies, and expressing their interests to random people and can find others who share their fandom in this way. Other Bronies might enjoy the My Little Pony media (shows and movies) but be embarrassed to wear branded merchandise or publicly identify as a Brony. For these fans, virtual communities offer an opportunity to interact with and feel a sense of belonging among like-minded fans that would be far more difficult to locate in real life. Thus, we hypothesize:

H3: Feelings of negative public affiliation positively moderate the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness; specifically, increasing levels of negative public affiliation strengthen the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness.

3 Method

We conducted an online survey with members of *Twilight*-oriented virtual communities to gather data on belongingness, brand congruity, negative public affiliation, and control variables (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity, etc.).

3.1 Study Context

We surveyed virtual community members from virtual communities focused on Twilight. In line with Kim et al. (2008), we selected this population because it allows for ample opportunities for customer innovation (through forums, fan fiction, digital collages, etc.) and has a modular nature.

The Twilight community represents a useful population from which to sample due to the range of positive and negative public affiliations of its members and the presence of multiple large and active Twilight communities. Twilight, a worldwide phenomenon, began as a young-adult vampire romance novel series written by Stephanie Meyer and spawned a series of movies as well. Meyer regularly interacts with her work's loyal fans via her author's website (<https://stepheniemeyer.com>). The Internet hosts many virtual Twilight communities, such as "Twilighters Anonymous" and "Twilight Guys", that offer an opportunity for individuals to discuss the series openly. Perhaps due largely to its popularity among adolescent females, not all Twilight fans are willing to publicly disclose their loyalty to the popular franchise (Cordes, 2009).

Table 2. Sample Characteristics

Sample characteristics	Value
Gender	Female (72.3 percent) Male (2.3 percent) Unspecified (25.4 percent)
Age	<18 (24.6 percent) 18-21 (12.3 percent) 22-25 (18.5 percent) 26-30 (4.6 percent) 31-40 (7.7 percent) 41-50 (3.8 percent) 51-60 (0.8 percent) Unspecified (27.7 percent)
Education	Less than high school (7.7 percent) High school (18.5 percent) Some college (21.5 percent) College degree (18.5 percent) Master's degree (3.8 percent) Professional degree (0.8 percent) Unspecified (29.2 percent)
Income	< \$10,000 (24.6 percent) \$10,000 - \$19,999 (7.7 percent) \$20,000 - \$29,999 (2.3 percent) \$30,000 - \$39,999 (3.1 percent) \$40,000 - \$49,999 (5.4 percent) \$50,000 - \$59,999 (2.3 percent) \$60,000 - \$69,999 (0.0 percent) \$70,000 - \$79,999 (2.3 percent) \$80,000 - \$89,999 (1.5 percent) \$90,000 - \$99,999 (0.8 percent) > \$100,000 (0.8 percent) Unspecified (49.2 percent)
Marital status	Single (51.5 percent) Married (14.6 percent) Divorced (3.8 percent) Unspecified (30.0 percent)
Race	American Indian/Native American (0.8 percent) Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander (3.8 percent) Black or African American (2.3 percent) Hispanic or Latino (10.8 percent) White (48.5 percent) Other (4.6 percent) Unspecified (29.2 percent)

To gather data, we sampled from three virtual communities: “Twifans.com”, “Fan Pop: Twilight”, and “DazzledByTwilight.org”. The community members responded to a post in the community forums that briefly explained the study’s purpose with a link to the questionnaire. We asked members to pass the link on to other Twilight fans who might be interested in the study (a snowball sampling process). In all, 130 users agreed to participate in the study. In the research model, we controlled for sample characteristics, which we describe in Table 2.

3.2 Perceptual Measures

We developed the negative public affiliation scale through interviewing active virtual community members. We went through an iterative process to develop items, which involved using q-sorts to develop initial items. We further pre- and pilot-tested the items. The NPA measure demonstrated acceptable reliability (i.e., over 0.8).

We slightly adapted established scales to measure brand congruity (Helgeson & Supphellon, 2004) and belongingness (Gambone & Arbreton, 1997). These scales had established reliabilities over 0.8. We present the measures in Table 3.

Table 3. Perceptual Measures

Construct	Items	Factor loading
Negative public affiliation	NPA1. I feel comfortable talking about how much I like the “Twilight” movies in public. ® ¹	0.78**
	NPA2. When I’m around certain people, I act like I’m not a “Twilight” movie fan.	0.84**
	NPA3. I can talk to anyone about my interest in the “Twilight” movies. ®	0.69**
	NPA4. It’s embarrassing to admit to other people that I like the “Twilight” movies as much as I do.	0.88**
	NPA5. I wear t-shirts and “Twilight” movie apparel when I go out. ®	0.63**
Belongingness	Belong1. I feel like I belong with this virtual community.	0.88**
	Belong2. I do not feel like my ideas count in this virtual community. ®	0.65**
	Belong3. People really listen to me in this virtual community.	0.72**
	Belong4. This virtual community is a comfortable place for me to “hang out”.	0.86**
	Belong5. On this virtual community, I feel like I matter.	0.83**
	Belong6. If I do not participate in the virtual community forums/conversations, someone in the forum will notice. ¹	0.16
Brand congruity	BC1. I am quite similar with the typical “Twilight” fan.	0.86**
	BC2. I would like to be perceived as similar to the typical “Twilight” fan.	0.82**
	BC3. There is a link between the “Twilight” movies and how I view myself.	0.83**
	BC4. I can identify with the “Twilight” movies on a personal level.	0.84**

® denotes reverse-coded item

** : p-value < 0.001

¹: denotes item we dropped from further analysis. NPA5 indicated high cross-loadings with other factors, and Belong6 loaded poorly.

4 Results

To analyze our factor structures, we used structural equation modeling (SEM) with the EQS 6.2 software package, which tests for non-normal data using Mardia’s coefficient (Ullman, 2006). Our Mardia’s coefficient fell within acceptable bounds (< 3), which indicates normal data. Tests for skewness and kurtosis fell within acceptable bounds.

4.1 Confirmatory Factor Analysis

To test the measures' dimensionality and reliability, we used confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Our scales all demonstrated acceptable reliability with a Cronbach's α of 0.77 or higher (Nunnally, 1978). The initial CFA revealed somewhat weak model fit (CFI = 0.83; SRMR = 0.11; RMSEA = 0.12; RMSEA 90% C.I. = 0.10, 0.14). We dropped two items that demonstrated particularly poor factor loadings or cross-loadings from the analysis to improve our model's final fit. The dropped items included one from belongingness ("If I do not participate in the virtual community forums/conversations, someone in the forum will notice") and one from NPA ("I wear t-shirts and 'Twilight' movie apparel when I go out"). The revised CFA demonstrated good model fit (CFI = 0.95; SRMR = 0.08; RMSEA = 0.07; RMSEA 90%; C.I. = 0.02, 0.10).

We evaluated our measures' convergent validity by examining the average variance extracted (AVE) for construct items with scores of 0.5 or higher indicating convergent validity. The AVEs for our scales exceeded than 0.67. Furthermore, we also found evidence of discriminant validity by using the square root of the constructs' AVE, which was higher than the interconstruct correlations for our measures. We present factor loadings, cross-loadings, and the correlation matrix in Tables 4 and Table 5.

Table 4. Factor Loadings and Cross-loadings

	Affiliation	Belongingness	Brand congruity
NPA1	0.78	0.19	0.23
NPA2	0.84	0.33	0.16
NPA3	0.69	0.19	0.18
NPA4	0.88	0.29	0.20
Belong1	0.28	0.88	0.43
Belong2	0.30	0.65	0.27
Belong3	0.23	0.72	0.31
Belong4	0.25	0.86	0.31
Belong5	0.22	0.83	0.36
BC1	0.25	0.37	0.86
BC2	0.25	0.32	0.82
BC3	0.12	0.33	0.83
BC4	0.16	0.41	0.84

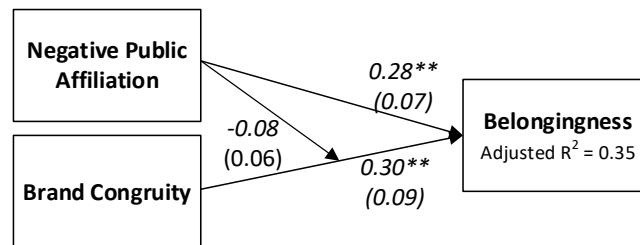
Table 5. Correlation Matrix

Constructs	Cronbach's α	Mean	Std. dev	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) Belongingness	0.84	4.77	1.85	0.79								
(2) Brand congruity	0.85	4.50	2.07	0.49	0.83							
(3) Negative public affiliation	0.77	5.05	2.10	0.33	0.23	0.80						
(4) Age	—	—	—	-0.14	-0.17	-0.02	1.00					
(5) Education	—	—	—	-0.01	-0.01	-0.05	0.50	1.00				
(6) Gender	—	—	—	-0.02	-0.06	0.30	0.00	-0.22	1.00			
(7) Income	—	—	—	-0.02	-0.08	-0.12	0.34	0.27	-0.06	1.00		
(8) Marital status	—	—	—	-0.05	0.02	0.14	0.67	0.22	0.03	0.24	1.00	
(9) Race	—	—	—	-0.07	-0.03	-0.01	0.03	-0.14	-0.08	-0.02	0.01	1.00

Note: the square root of the AVE appears along the diagonal

4.2 Hypotheses Testing

We used SmartPLS (version 3.2.7) to test the relationships among the latent variables that we constructed in this study. Our final model showed acceptable explanatory power (adjusted $R^2 = 0.35$). We present the results of our hypotheses in Table 6 and Figure 2.



- Notes: 1) Control variables: gender, age, education, income, marital status, race
 2) Numbers in parentheses are standard errors.
 3) **: p-value < 0.001

Figure 2. SEM Model Results

We found support for H1 ($\beta = 0.28$, $SD = 0.07$, $t = 3.80$, $p < 0.001$); that is, our respondents' discomfort with publicly supporting the Twilight increased their sense of belongingness to the Twilight virtual community.

We also found support for H2; that is, brand congruity positively influenced user's belongingness ($\beta = 0.30$, $SD = 0.09$, $t = 3.28$, $p = 0.001$). Thus, it appears that, for members of the Twilight virtual community, respondents appear to have stronger feelings of belonging to the community when they strongly identify with the Twilight brand.

To test the moderating influence that negative public affiliation had on the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness (H3), we created interaction terms and tested the SEM model with the interaction term in SmartPLS. By including the interaction term in the model, we found that the interaction term was not significant at ($\beta = -0.08$, $SD = 0.06$, $t = 1.46$, $p = 0.14$). This finding suggests that negative public affiliation did not moderate the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness. In other words, feelings of negative public affiliation did not magnify the impact that brand congruity had on belongingness. Thus, we did not find support for H3.

Table 6. Hypotheses Testing

Variables	Coefficient	Sample mean	Standard deviation	T-statistics	P-Values
Negative public affiliation	0.28**	0.28	0.07	3.80	0.00
Brand congruity	0.30**	0.30	0.09	3.28	0.00
NPA x brand congruity	-0.08	-0.07	0.06	1.46	0.14
Note: dependent variable is user's belongingness to the virtual community. **: p-value < 0.001					
Hypothesis					Supported?
H1: Feelings of negative public affiliation positively impact belongingness to a virtual community.					Yes
H2: Feelings of brand congruity positively impact belongingness to a virtual community.					Yes
H3: Feelings of negative public affiliation positively moderate the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness.					No

5 Discussion and Implications

5.1 Findings

We sought to stimulate research on how users' negative public affiliation and perceived brand congruity influenced user belongingness to virtual communities by completing an initial study on members of Twilight-themed virtual communities. By doing so, we address what impacts the sense of belongingness to virtual communities for stigmatized interests or topics that an individual might prefer to keep private. We noted the vast membership of virtual communities (Ridings & Gefen, 2001) and the fact that many studies address community membership (and feelings of belonging) in terms of forming and maintaining personal and group identities (Belk, 1988) but that virtual communities research does not address communities centered around stigmatized topics that result in negative public affiliation (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). We address these concerns by focusing on the effect of negative public affiliation and brand congruity on belongingness.

Our results offer several contributions to our knowledge on virtual communities and feelings of belonging. First, we found that negative public affiliation for Twilight impacted belongingness to Twilight-themed virtual communities. Our reasoning for proposing a direct relationship concurs with the notion that virtual communities provide an "escape" from the real world and afford opportunities for exploring that aspect of one's identity and finding support for topics and interests that a user may otherwise feel ashamed to discuss (thus, increasing feelings of belonging). As we found support for this relationship, the implication seems to be that our respondents felt a stronger sense of belonging and connection with the virtual community when they reported higher levels of negative public affiliation.

Next, increasing amounts of brand congruity impacted belongingness in our Twilight context. Specifically, we expected to find a relationship between brand congruity and belongingness and found a strong positive relationship. When respondents indicated they strongly identified with the Twilight brand, they reported having a stronger sense of belongingness to the virtual community. We can reasonably think that, if users decide to pursue a subject in a virtual community context, their actual cognitions of relating to this subject might impact how well they feel they "fit into" the broader virtual community of users who pursue the same interests. Our logic on belongingness implies that users affiliate or belong to virtual communities that they feel reflect at least some aspect of their identity.

We proposed that negative public affiliation would moderate the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness in our theoretical model. We argued that high NPA individuals strongly attached to a brand would find the virtual community a far more important escape and avenue to connect with like-minded individuals, whereas low NPA individuals with strong brand interests can simply share their interests publicly and find like-minded fans in real life. As for why we did not find support for the moderation, we propose two potential reasons. First, affiliation and identification with a brand, while surrounding somewhat similar domains, involve different behaviors (presenting oneself as a fan vs. identifying privately that one is a fan) and might not necessarily relate to each other in a meaningful way. Second, the topic we chose (the Twilight franchise) or our sample characteristics may have caused the result. In any case, our results show that we likely need more research in this area. However, most compellingly, our findings imply that, with brand congruity (i.e., when users feel it reflects their identity), feelings of belonging will occur *despite* the reticence to publicly identify with the brand.

In all, our study constitutes a starting point for investigating how negative public affiliation shapes belongingness to virtual communities and sheds light onto how online platforms create value for stigmatized brands by allowing more "embarrassed" consumers to participate and support the brand. Our results indicate that negative public affiliations do impact belongingness to virtual communities as does brand congruity, which measures how strongly users felt Twilight exemplified who they were. Such results have several theoretical and practical implications.

5.2 Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The study contributes to IS theory in several ways. Our results indicate the salience of virtual communities, especially for topics that users care deeply about, *despite* feelings of negative public affiliation. As such, the virtual community's salience suggests that researchers can and should do more research in this area.

First, our study contributes to the growing literature stream related to virtual communities by investigating perceptions surrounding the sense of belongingness to a community; it also contributes to potential usage continuance precedents (negative public affiliation and brand congruity) (Lin, 2008). NPA suggests that virtual communities may offer a means to pursue interests that users feel ashamed about in real life. Scant research discusses using virtual communities as a means of *escape*. Some users may opt to join virtual communities because they can remain anonymous and, thus, protect their “real-world” identity (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). For instance, our study specifically considers adult Twilight fans (i.e., users who have an interest that they may prefer to keep private due to the potential for social stigma). However, our findings may also extend to other contexts in which users may wish to keep their interests private, such as asking for relationship advice or seeking career advice or mentoring. Such users may want to preserve their privacy for many reasons: for example, they may feel embarrassed or ashamed about their interests, worry that others will judge them, believe it is not possible to meet other like-minded individuals in real life (Bernstein et al., 2011), or even fear negative relationship or career repercussions.

Furthermore, although many once viewed the Internet as a context that would expose users to differing viewpoints, evidence increasingly suggests that the Internet actually enables users to create echo chambers in which they mainly interact with people who share their viewpoints (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015). Also, because the Internet connects people on a large scale regardless of physical location, the Internet and, by extension, virtual communities allow users to find large numbers of sympathizers online. While individuals holding highly stigmatized, radical viewpoints (e.g., racism or xenophobia) may have previously felt isolated in a geographical locale, such individuals can now gather in online communities. As a result, this study may have implications for radical political groups in addition to stigmatized social groups. Perhaps these initial test results may have implications beyond online fandoms and provide rationale for investigating online echo chambers, online hate groups, and similarly polarizing virtual communities and activities.

We also highlight the fact that users may seek to separate their actual identity in the real world from their online identity in the virtual community. Our study underscores the importance of brand congruity in a virtual community context, which the identity literature has largely not examined; furthermore, our study also contributes to the negative public affiliation construct measure to examine how users/customers respond to stigmatized or taboo interests. The interplay between these constructs likely results in distinct facets of identity, which theory suggests may differ greatly from each other. When people (real-world friends, family, colleagues, etc.) do not receive an individual’s virtual identity well in the actual world, the individual’s corresponding negative public affiliation will increase and, thus, consequentially increase the individual’s sense of belonging to the virtual community as that represents the individual’s only platform to discuss and share their stigmatized interests with others.

Furthermore, the issue of distinct identities between the real world and virtual world suggests the need to investigate behaviors and coping mechanisms for individuals struggling with stigmatized elements of their identity beyond brands and perhaps even beyond their control, such as ethnicity, sexuality, or medical conditions. To some extent, negative public affiliation addresses the size of the chasm between one’s offline and online identities and may be useful for understanding individuals’ perceptions and behaviors in many contexts, such as HIV-positive people and their engagement with online support groups (Flickinger et al., 2018), people who hold unpopular political beliefs, and so on.

Third, given that negative public affiliation and brand congruity impact belongingness to virtual communities, our findings may help practitioners and virtual communities think about how platforms 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. Similarly, our findings indicate that brand congruity is a salient concept to understanding virtual community members’ the perceptions. We also need to understand how users respond to, consume, and communicate regarding popular media, products, and interests in virtual communities—especially regarding subjects that users are uncomfortable discussing publicly—and how such responses and related acts may impact how virtual communities advertise for, recruit, retain, and develop content for users, among other issues.

5.3 Limitations

Our study requires additional refinement and testing due to several limitations, which may, however, offer insights for future research endeavors. First, our sample context (Twilight fans) may lack generalizability, and one should view our study as an initial effort; researchers should examine similar patterns in other

virtual community contexts. Future studies should also employ experimental or ethnography designs to improve generalizability. It would be useful to combine statistical analysis with qualitative data to reap richer insight into the implications of negative affiliation. Second, although we controlled for the demographic characteristics of our sample, researchers should investigate brands that span different or multiple demographic bases or even cultures in additional depth. For example, online communities devoted to fantasy baseball or football may differ from literature/movie-based communities such as Twilight, Star Wars, or Harry Potter. Third, due to the lack of research in this particular area (negative affiliations), we focused on one dependent variable, belongingness, but researchers should also consider other outcomes (deep usage, continuance intentions, intentions to explore, intentions to invite friends to join, cognitive absorption, etc.) in future studies.

5.4 Future Research

This study provides initial evidence that negative public affiliation with a brand impacts online behavior. However, future studies can examine this finding more depth: for instance, does negative public affiliation influence communication patterns and cues on virtual communities and, potentially, on social media sites? How does this impact real-life relationships? Is there an online life versus real-life dissonance and how do people deal with it? Does such dissonance differ for users who identify strongly with a subject and engage with virtual communities about it but also who have no difficulty discussing it in public? Can studying negative public affiliation and belongingness explain the prevalence of, for example, online hate groups? Further, research should consider broader impacts on identity and stigma in online settings, such as the manner in which individuals socially construct or reinforce negative stigmas when, for example, they identify as “nerds” (Bucholtz, 1999; Craig & Grover, 2016; Kendall 2011), “gamers” (Shaw, 2012), or, in our case, Twihards. This study has many extensions in the future, and researchers can potentially improve it by including characteristics of the virtual community itself, by using more than one virtual community, or by including additional dependent variables.

6 Conclusion

In this study, we address the issue of how discomfort with publicly associating with a brand (negative public affiliation) and one's identification with a brand (brand congruity) impacts individuals' sense of belongingness to a virtual community (in this case, Twilight) and provides evidence that both brand congruity and negative public affiliation impact belongingness to the community. Interestingly, negative public affiliation had a direct relationship to feelings of belonging but did not moderate the relationship between brand congruity and belongingness, which may suggest the prevalence of brand congruity is salient regardless of public affiliation with the brand. Our findings shed light on the identification literature by highlighting negative public affiliation and providing guidance to practitioners in virtual community design. Future studies should further investigate the difference between users' actual social identity and virtual identity and test their responses to negative public affiliations in other online contexts as well.

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