METHODS FOR ENCOURAGING CHARITABLE SOCIAL NETWORKING

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ABSTRACT
A method of encouraging charitable donations by individuals who are members of a social network is disclosed. A user creates a member account by supplying user identity data from the user and creates a campaign, wherein the created campaign is associated with one or more charities and a financial goal. The user sends invitation to one or more members or non-members and the one or more members or non-members may accept or decline the user's invitation. The one or more members are given the option to donate any amount of money to a charity to post comments about the user, where the monetary value of the donation is associated with the comments posted such that a higher amount donated represents a higher trustworthiness of the comments. The one or more members or non-members may support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities and/or total monetary value of the money donated by the one or more members or non-members, where the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user's reputation.
FIGURE 1

100

CPU 102

110

LAN Data Transmission Controller

112

LAN Interface

114

Network Controller

116

TO PSTN

104

Program and Data Storage

118

Input Devices

106

Printer Interface

120

Database 120

122

TO LAN

108

Display Unit
FIGURE 2A

Creating Means 21

First Allowing Means 22

Second Allowing Means 23

Third Allowing Means 24

Calculating Means 25

Fourth Allowing Means 26
FIGURE 2B

Create a member account by verifying a user's identity and collecting user identity data from the user

Allow the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members

Allow the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user's invitation (one or more non-members must create a member account in order to accept or decline the user's invitation)

Allow one or more members to post paid comments or free comments about the user

Calculate one or more user weight values based on a number of members in a user's group and their one or more user weight values, a total value of posted paid comments about the user and volume of posted comments about the user

Allow the user to post a reply to the posted comment by the one or more members
FIGURE 3

301 302 303 304 305

306

External Network Infrastructure 307

308 309 310

311

Internal Network Infrastructure

312 314

313 315

Application Servers 313 Database Servers 315

Internet 306

Router Switch Firewall

Balancer
Figure 4

Enter user identity data (S401)

- Is the data valid? (S402)
  - Yes (S403)
  - No

  Does email already exist? (S404)
    - Yes
    - No (S405)

  Is credit card info valid? (S406)
    - Yes
    - No (S407)

  Does user's name match credit card? (S408)

  Send "thank you for your interest" message (S409)

  Provide user with terms of use agreement (S410)

  Accept Terms (S411)

  Send validation email (S412)

  Receive validation email (S413)

  Create member and store user identity data (S414)
FIGURE 5

Enter new user identity data

S501

S502

Is the data valid?

No

Display new user identity data

S504

Update and store data in repository

S503

Further edit data?

Yes

END

No
FIGURE 6

Enter invitation information for a person to invite

Is the person a member? Yes NO

Display existing member invitation message

Is the input valid? Yes Send email invitation to existing member

Acknowledge existing member invitation sent

END

Display prospective member invitation message

Is the input valid? Yes Send email invitation to prospective member

Acknowledge prospective member invitation sent

END
FIGURE 7

Is the invitee a member?

Yes

Enter whether member accepts or declines the user's invitation.

Accept

Update records to show that member accepted invitation

Notify inviting member by email

Acknowledged accepted invitation

END

Decline

Update records to show that member declined invitation

Notify inviting member by email

Acknowledged declined invitation

END

No

Figure 4
FIGURE 8

END

Cancel

S801
Confirm member resignation from user’s group

Cancel

S802
Send email to member seeking resignation

S803
Acknowledge member’s resignation from user’s group
FIGURE 9

S904 View user's group  

S901 Confirm member termination from user's group

S902 Send email to terminated member and update records in repository

S903 Acknowledge member's termination from user's group
FIGURE 10

Enter free comment to post S1001

Did user prevent member from posting comment? S1002

Prevent member from posting comment S1003

Yes

Is entry valid? S1004

No

Post comment S1005

Update records and store comment in repository S1006

Acknowledge posting of comment S1007
FIGURE 11

Enter comment to post, value of post, one or more charities and whether post will be anonymous

Did user prevent member from posting comment?

Is entry valid?

Enter credit card information to pay for post

Is credit card info valid?

Display order summary and post comment

Complete transaction, update records and store comment in repository

Send transaction receipt by email

Acknowledge posting of comment
FIGURE 12

1. Display list of posted comments
   - Cancel
   - Confirm retraction of a posted comment
     - Re-confirm retraction of the posted comment
       - Update records and remove retracted posted comment from repository
         - Send email to inform member and user of retraction
           - Acknowledge retraction of posted comment

END
FIGURE 13

S1301 Fill out “reply” form

S1302 Is entry valid?

Yes

S1303 Post reply and send confirmation message to user

S1304 Update records and store reply in repository

S1305 Acknowledge posting of reply
FIGURE 14

S1401
Is this a user's own posted comment?

Yes

S1403
Display list of posted comments

END

No

S1402
Did member already vote on this posted comment?

Yes

No

S1404
Vote for accuracy of posted comment

S1405
Update records and store vote in repository
FIGURE 15

Enter poll information (i.e., name, description, whether poll is anonymous or signed)

Is poll sponsored or free?

Enter question

Is info valid?

Update records by storing poll in repository

Review poll

Select members to take poll

Enter poll value and payment information

Is info valid & credit card approved?

Add an additional question?
FIGURE 16

S1601 Member fills out answers to poll questions

S1602 Is info valid?
   No

S1603 Is this a sponsored poll?
   Yes
      S1604 Add credits to member’s account
   No

S1605 Record poll results by storing in repository.
Individual inputs search terms

Parse search terms

Is input valid?  No

Perform search

Display search results
FIGURE 18

S1801

Is member logging out?

Yes → S1802

Log member out of the system

No → S1803

Fill out login form

Need password

S1804

Send password by email

Login

S1805

Does email exist?

Yes

No

S1806

Does password match?

Yes → S1807

Log user into the system

No

END
FIGURE 19

1. Fill out resignation form
2. Confirm resignation
3. Notify members in the user’s group of the user’s
4. Update records

Cancel

END
FIGURE 20

S2001 Access The “My Tools” Interface

S2002 Does the member want to submit the URL to a search engine?

Yes

S2003 Programatically submit URL to a search engine for indexing

S2004 Acknowledge that indexing is complete

No

S2005 Does the member want to display the printable invitation to post a comment?

Yes

S2006 Display printable invitation to post a comment

No

S2007 Does the member want to display the printable invitation to become a member?

Yes

S2008 Display printable invitation to become a member

No

END
FIGURE 21

Creating a member account by verifying a user's identity and collecting user identity data from the user.

Allowing a user to create a campaign and associate the created campaign with one or more charities and a financial goal.

Allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members to support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities to help reach the financial goal.

Allow the one or more invited members or non-members to support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities.

Calculate one or more user weight values based at least on a total volume of invited members or non-members that support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities and a total monetary value of the money donated by the one or more members or non-members, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user's reputation.
**FIGURE 22**

**John-Paul Young**

Tell us about your new campaign.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campaign Name</th>
<th>2201</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web page</td>
<td>http://</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Goal</td>
<td>$00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>&lt;Select Favorite Charity&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image Upload</td>
<td>Browse...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
FIGURE 23

John-Paul Young

Campaign: Campaign to Save Burma

THE VALIANT Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Burma's democratic opposition, has been released, supposedly "unconditionally" — she had rejected conditional release — from nearly six years of house arrest. Evidently the military thugs who run what they call Myanmar feel they can afford a limited departure from China's example of opening the economy without sharing any political power at all.

Donations to this campaign go to: United Way of America.

Please participate with a donation by 29 Jun 2007.
FIGURE 24

Allow a user to identify a topic

Allow the user the option to donate any amount of money to one or more charities to post a message relating to the topic

Allow one or more members or non-members to the option to donate any amount of money to one or more charities to post a reply to the message

Calculate one or more user weight values based at least on a total monetary value associated with the posted message and one or more posted replies, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user’s reputation.
FIGURE 25

POST A MESSAGE

Yoga Memberships

Does any body know of a good yoga studio in Oyster Bay? (visit site)
Visit campaign: Campaign to Save Burma!

Member#1  
6 Jun 2007: yeah, there is one called "Ohm Yoga" on Main Street.

Member#2  
6 Jun 2007: I agree, this is a good studio
Allow a user to create a group, wherein the created group is associated with one or more charities through one or more campaigns.

Allow the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members to join the group.

Allow the one or more invited members or non-members to join the group.

Calculate a group weight value based at least on the number of invited members or non-members that join the group and a total monetary value of money donated to the one or more charities through the one or more campaigns by all of the members or non-members of the group.
### FIGURE 27

**Group: Yoga enthusiasts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Profile</th>
<th>Discussions (1)</th>
<th>Events (0)</th>
<th>Polls (0)</th>
<th>Members (1)</th>
<th>Applicants (0)</th>
<th>Media (0)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Group Profile</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><img src="#" alt="Edit Group Settings" /></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overview</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Established</td>
<td>6 Jun 2007</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy</td>
<td>Public Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inclusion</td>
<td>No approval required</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exclusion</td>
<td>Moderator termination</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joining</td>
<td>Anyone can apply</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderator</td>
<td>John-Paul Young</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Founder</td>
<td>John-Paul Young</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Society Poll</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Polls Found</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion Topics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome to the Yoga enthusiasts Discussion Board</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Members</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission</td>
<td>Find and talk with people who love Yoga</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Upcoming Events</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Group Events Found</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Last Msg:** Today
FIGURE 28

List one or more user identity data search terms

Automatically Compare the one or more listed user identity data search terms with user identity data of one or more members

If one or more user identity data search terms match the user identity data of one or more members, automatically update a user’s list to add the one or more members
METHODS FOR ENCOURAGING CHARITABLE SOCIAL NETWORKING

REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] The present disclosure is based on and claims the benefit of Ser. No. 11/328,752 filed Jan. 10, 2006, entitled “Method And Apparatus For Collecting And Storing Information About Individuals In A Social Network,” the entire contents of which are herein incorporated by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The present disclosure relates generally to social networking and, more particularly, to methods for encouraging charitable social networking.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] The Internet provides enterprises and individuals with the ability to communicate with a world-wide audience. In the past few years, there has been an explosion in the popularity and volume of use of the Internet, facilitating interaction among individuals. A number of services have been developed and offered over the years which allow individuals to network socially over the Internet for specific purposes. These services are uniformly referred to as “social networking.” For example, some services such as Match.com and eHarmony match individuals for dating purposes, while other services such as Friendster and LinkedIn match individuals for social and business networking purposes.

[0004] These existing services have a specific purpose of connecting people to help facilitate introductions and personal networking. There is a need, however, that remains unfulfilled by these existing services, a need for a universal service that allows individuals to connect together and rally around a charitable cause. Accordingly, there is a need for a universal service that provides users with a means for bringing individuals together to support and raise money for charitable causes.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0005] This application describes methods and apparatuses for collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network and encouraging charitable donations by individuals who use the social network. A method of encouraging charitable donations by individuals who are members of a social network, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure includes, allowing a user to create a member account by supplying user identification data from the user, allowing a user to create a campaign, wherein the created campaign is associated with one or more charities and a financial goal, allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members, allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user's invitation, wherein the one or more non-members create a member account in order to accept or decline the user's invitation.

[0006] A method of encouraging charitable donations by individuals who are members of a social network, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure includes, allowing a user to create a member account by supplying user identification data from the user, allowing a user to create a campaign, wherein the created campaign is associated with one or more charities and a financial goal, allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members, allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user's invitation, wherein the one or more non-members create a member account in order to accept or decline the user's invitation, allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user's invitation, wherein the one or more members or non-members who support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user's reputation.

[0007] A method for encouraging charitable donations through a social network, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure, includes allowing a user of the social network to form a group, wherein the group is associated with a message board, allowing the user the option to donate any amount of money to one or more charities to post a message to the group message board, allowing one or more members or non-members the option to donate any amount of money to one or more charities to post a reply to the message, and calculating one or more user weight values based at least on a total monetary value associated with the posted message and one or more posted replies, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user's reputation.

[0008] A method for encouraging charitable donations through a social network, comprising, allowing a user to create a group, wherein the created group is associated with one or more charities through one or more campaigns, allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members to join the group and donate money to one or more charities through the one or more campaigns, allowing the one or more invited members or non-members to join the group and to donate money to one or more charities through the one or more campaigns, and calculating a group weight value based at least on the number of invited members or non-members who join the group and a total monetary value of money donated to the one or more charities through the one or more campaigns by all of the members or non-members of the group.

[0009] A method of encouraging charitable donations by collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network, and valuing the information according to a value of charitable donations associated with the information, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure, includes creating a member account by verifying a user's identity and collecting user identification data from the user, allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members, allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user's invitation, wherein
the one or more non-members must create a member account in order to accept or decline the user’s invitation, allowing one or more members the option to donate any amount of money to a charity to post comments about the user, wherein the monetary value of the donation is associated with the comments posted such that a higher amount donated represents a higher trustworthiness of the comments, calculating one or more user weight values based on a total monetary value of posted comments about the user and volume of posted comments about the user, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user’s reputation and allowing the user to post a reply to the posted comment by the one or more members.

A method of encouraging charitable donations by collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network and valuing the information according to a value of charitable donations associated with the information, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure, includes creating a member account by verifying a user’s identity and collecting user identity data from the user, allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members, wherein the invitation comprises an invitation to post paid comments, allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user’s invitation within a predetermined time, wherein the one or more non-members create a member account in order to accept or decline the user’s invitation, allowing one or more members the option to pay to post comments about the user in any amount, wherein a higher amount paid represents a higher trustworthiness of the comments and wherein proceeds from paid comments are donated to one or more selected or default charities, calculating one or more user weight values based at least on a total value of posted paid comments about the user and volume of posted paid comments about the user, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user’s reputation, and allowing the user to post a reply to a posted comment by the one or more members.

An apparatus for encouraging charitable donations by collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network and valuing the information according to a value of charitable donations associated with the information, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure, includes creating means for creating a member account by verifying a user’s identity and collecting means for collecting user identity data from the user, first allowing means for allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members, second allowing means for allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user’s invitation, wherein the one or more non-members must create a member account in order to accept or decline the user’s invitation, third allowing means for allowing one or more members the option to donate any amount of money to a charity to post comments about the user, wherein the monetary value of the donation is associated with the comments posted such that a higher amount donated represents a higher trustworthiness of the comments, calculating means for calculating one or more user weight values based at least on a total monetary value of posted comments about the user and volume of posted comments about the user, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user’s reputation, , and fourth allowing means for allowing the user to post a reply to the posted comment by the one or more members.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The features of the present application may be more readily understood from the following detailed description with reference to the accompanying drawings wherein:

FIG. 1 shows a block diagram of an exemplary computer system capable of implementing the methods and apparatuses of the present disclosure;
FIG. 2A shows a block diagram illustrating an apparatus for collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 2B shows a flow chart illustrating a method for collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 3 shows a block diagram illustrating the general architecture of a system that operates in accordance with one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 4 shows a flow chart illustrating the step of creating a new member account, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 5 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of editing user identity data after it is entered, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 6 shows a flow chart illustrating the step of allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members to join the user’s group, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 7 shows a flow chart illustrating the step of allowing the one or more members to accept or decline the user’s invitation to join the user’s group, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 8 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of resignation from a user’s group after accepting an invitation, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 9 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of termination from a user's group after accepting an invitation, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 10 shows a flow chart illustrating the posting of a free comment by a member about a user, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 11 shows a flow chart illustrating the posting of a paid comment by a member about a user, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 12 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of retracting a posted comment, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 13 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of posting a reply to a posted comment by one or more members, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 14 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of voting for the accuracy of a post, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 15 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of creating a poll, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 16 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of responding to a user poll, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 17 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of searching for a member, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 18 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of logging in or logging out of the system, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 19 shows a flow chart illustrating the process of deleting an account, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 20 is a flow chart illustrating a feature of a system for collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure; and

FIG. 21 is a flow chart illustrating a method for encouraging charitable social networking, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 22 is a screen shot illustrating the process of creating a campaign, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 23 is a screen shot illustrating a method for charitable social networking, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 24 is a flow chart illustrating a method for encouraging charitable social networking, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 25 is a screen shot illustrating a method for encouraging charitable social networking, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 26 is a flow chart illustrating a method of charitable social networking, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 27 is a screen shot illustrating a method for encouraging charitable social networking, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure;

FIG. 28 is a flow chart illustrating a method for encouraging charitable social networking, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The present disclosure provides tools (in the form of methodologies, apparatuses, and systems) for encouraging users of a social network system to donate money to charity, and, as a reward for making charitable donations, the users experience a positive effect in terms of a boost to their respective reputation ratings, which are also referred to as “user weight values” or “karma scores.” In addition, the charities themselves benefit, as the money donated through the social networking site may be used to further and to advance the social causes which the charity represents.

FIG. 1 shows an example of a computer system 100 which may implement the methods and apparatuses of the present disclosure. The apparatuses and methods of the present disclosure may be implemented in the form of a software application running on a computer system, for example, a mainframe, personal computer (PC), handheld computer, server, etc. The software application may be stored on a recording medium locally accessible by the computer system, for example, floppy disk, compact disk, hard disk, etc., or may be remote from the computer system and accessible via a hard wired or wireless connection to a network, (for example, a local area network, or the Internet, etc) or another transmission medium.

The computer system 100 may include a central processing unit (CPU) 102, program and data storage devices 104, a printer interface 106, a display unit 208, a (LAN) local area network data transmission controller 110, a LAN interface 112, a network controller 114, an internal bus 116, and one or more input devices 118 (for example, a keyboard, mouse etc.). As shown, the system 100 may be connected to a database 120, via a link 122.

Obtaining information about individuals is valuable to employers, prospective employers, universities, and other
individuals. This information allows for the assessment of an individual’s character, reputation and personality, especially if the individual is a potential employee or mate. This information is most helpful if it is reliable. According to an aspect of the present invention, the reliability of comments made about members of the social network is boosted by tying the posting of a comment to a charitable donation. The amount of money donated to a charity may reflect the strength of conviction of the person posting the comment, and, hence, may affect the reliability of the comment. The more money one is willing to donate, the more reliable the comment may be. The system of the present invention enables others more accurately to assess the reputation of members of the social network.

[0048] An apparatus for collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network, according to one embodiment of this disclosure, will be described below with reference to FIG. 2A. The apparatus 20 includes creating means 21, first allowing means 22, second allowing means 23, third allowing means 24, calculating means 25, and fourth allowing means 26.

[0049] A method for collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network, will be explained below with reference to FIGS. 2A and 2B. The creating means 21 creates a member account by verifying a user’s identity and collecting user identity data from the user (Step S201). The first allowing means 22 allows the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members (Step S202). The invitation may be one or more of the following: an invitation to join a user’s group, an invitation to create a member account, an invitation to post free comments, or an invitation to post paid comments. A “paid comment” is a comment which is posted in conjunction with the donation of money to charity. A “free comment” is a comment which is posted without donating money to charity. The second allowing means 23 allows the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user’s invitation, wherein the one or more non-members may create a member account in order to accept or to decline the user’s invitation (Step S203). The third allowing means 24 allows one or more members to post paid comments or free comments about the user (Step S204). For example, a user may send an invitation to post paid comments to a member that states, “if you post paid comments about me, I will post paid comments about you.” The calculating means 25 calculates one or more member weight values based on a number of members in a user’s group and their one or more member weight values, a total value of posted paid comments about the user and volume of posted comments about the user, or any combination of these and other factors as described herein (Step S205). The fourth allowing means 26 allows the user to post a reply to the posted comment by the one or more members (Step S206).

[0050] FIG. 3 is a block diagram illustrating the general architecture of a system that operates in accordance with one embodiment of the present disclosure. A plurality of user interface devices 301-305 are connected to the Internet 306. The user interface devices 301-305 may be any device capable of presenting data, including, but not limited to computers, laptops, television sets, mp3 players, cellular telephones, or personal digital assistants. The Internet 306 is connected to the external network infrastructure 307 which comprises a router 308, a switch 309 and a firewall 310. The router 308 forwards packets between the internal network infrastructure 311 and the user interface devices 301-305 over the Internet 306. The switch 309 acts as a gatekeeper to and from the Internet 306. The firewall 310 shields the internal network infrastructure 311 from unauthorized access through the Internet 306. The external network infrastructure 307 is connected to the internal network infrastructure 311, which comprises a load balancer 312, an email server 314, one or more application servers 313, and one or more database servers 315. The load balancer 312 balances the traffic load across the one or more application servers 313. The email server 314 sends, receives and stores electronic messages to and from the user interface devices 301-305.

[0051] FIG. 4 is a flow chart illustrating the step of creating a new member account, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. The user enters his/her user identity data (Step S401) and the system checks to see if the user identity data is valid (Step S402). For example, the system checks the user’s entry to verify that the syntax is correct and/or that there is no information missing from any required field. According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, the user identity data may include the user’s full name, email address, nickname, date of birth, home address, work address, high school, college, degree, place of employment, work history, maiden name, country, or any information that the user includes to identify himself. If the user identity data is not valid (No, Step S402), then the system loops back to Step S401. If the user identity data is valid (Yes, Step S402), then the system checks to see if the user’s email address already exists (Step S403). If the email address exists (Yes, Step S403), the system loops back to the sign-in screen at Step S401 and the user re-enters the user identity data. If the email does not exist (No, Step S403), the user enters his/her credit card information (Step S404). The system then checks to see if the credit card information is valid (Step S405). If the user’s credit card is not valid (No, Step S405), the system loops back to Step S401.

[0052] If the user’s credit card is valid (Yes, Step S405), the system checks to see if the user’s name matches the name on the user’s credit card (Step S406). According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, verifying a user’s identity comprises a zero-value transaction on a credit card owned by the user. If a minor seeks access to the system, the child’s parent or guardian must explicitly approve the minor’s use of the system, and the system conducts a zero-value transaction on a credit card owned by a parent or guardian with the same last name as the minor. If the names do not match (No, Step S406), the system loops back to Step S401. If the names match (Yes, Step S406), the system provides the user with an agreement outlining the terms of use (Step S407). If the user declines to accept the terms, the system sends the user a “thank you for your interest” message and exits (Step S408). However, if the user accepts the terms, the system sends the user a validation email (Step S409). After this validation email is received (Step S410), the member is created and the user identity data is stored in the repository (Step S411). According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, with a credit card, a user may deposit a specified amount of money into his/her prepayment account and use that money to post comments and/or pay members for responding to polls. Accordingly, the member account may comprise the charities a user has contributed to and/or the account balance.

[0053] According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, a user may edit his/her user identity data after it is entered. FIG. 5 illustrates this process. A user may enter the new user identity data (Step S501) and the system will check
to see if input is valid (Step S502). For example, the system may check the user’s entry to verify that the syntax is correct and/or that there is no information missing from any required field. If the input is not valid (No, Step S502), the system will loop back to Step S501. However, if the input is valid (Yes, Step S502), the system will update and store the data in a repository (Step S503). The system may display the new user identity data (Step S504) and allow the user to further edit the data (Step S505). If the user chooses to edit the data again (Yes, Step S508), the system loops back to Step S501. However, if the user chooses not to further edit the information (No, Step S508), the process ends.

[0054] A user may invite members and non-members to join his/her user group. An invitation may be sent by email or any other means of notification, such as mail, text message, fax, or phone. FIG. 6 is a flow chart illustrating the step of allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members to join the user’s group, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. The user enters invitation information for a person (Step S601) and the system checks to see if the person is a member (Step S602). If the person is a member (Yes, Step S602), an “existing member invite message” may be displayed to send to the member (Step S603). According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, the message may be automatically input by the system or manually input by the user. The system checks to see if the input is valid (Step S604). If the input is not valid (No, Step S604), the system loops back to Step S603. If the input is valid (Yes, Step S604), the system sends an email invitation to the existing member (Step S605) and acknowledges that the invitation was sent (Step S606). However, if the person is not a member (No, Step S602), the “prospective member invitation” message may be displayed to send to the prospective member (Step S607). According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, the message may be automatically input by the system or manually input by the user. The system checks to see if the input is valid (Step S608). If the input is not valid (No, Step S608), the system loops back to Step S607. If the input is valid (Yes, Step S608), the system sends an email invitation to the prospective member (Step S609) and acknowledges that the invitation was sent (Step S610).

[0055] The invited members or non-members may accept the invitation into the user’s group, reject the invitation, or not respond to the invitation. The members or non-members may have a predetermined time in which to accept the invitation to join the user’s group. For example, a member or non-member may have six months to respond. In addition, a member or non-member who fails to respond or rejects the invitation, may change his/her mind any time within the first year, for example. After a certain period of time, for example, one year, that invitation may automatically be removed from the system. In order for a non-member to either accept or reject the invitation, he/she must become a member by creating a member account (See FIG. 4). FIG. 7 is a flow chart illustrating the step of allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user’s invitation to join the user’s group, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. The system determines whether the invitee is a member (Step S701). If it is determined that the invitee is not a member (No, Step S701), then the system allows the invitee to become a member according to the process set forth in FIG. 4. If it is determined that the invitee is a member (Yes, Step S701), the member enters whether he accepts or declines the user’s invitation (Step S702). If the member accepts the user’s invitation (Accept, Step S702), the system will update the records to show that the member accepted the user’s invitation (Step S703), notify the user (inviting member) by email (Step S704), and acknowledge the accepted invitation (Step S705). If the member declines to accept the user’s invitation (Decline, Step S702), the system will update the records to show that the member declined the user’s invitation (Step S706), notify the user (inviting member) by email (Step S707), and acknowledge the declined invitation (Step S708).

[0056] According to an embodiment, the system may store invitation data which comprises a member name, status of the member’s invitation, date and time invitation was sent, the total number of invitations sent, the total number of invitations accepted, not responded to or rejected, and, if applicable, the date and time the invitation was accepted or rejected.

[0057] The one or more members may opt-out of the user’s group after accepting the invitation. FIG. 8 is a flow chart illustrating the process of resignation from a user’s group after accepting an invitation, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. Member resignation from the user’s group is confirmed (Step S801) and an email is sent to the user seeking resignation (Step S802). If the member decides not to cancel his/her resignation (Cancel, Steps S801 & S802), the process ends and the resignation is not completed. However, if the member goes forward with the resignation, the member’s resignation from the user’s group is acknowledged (Step S803).

[0058] The user may terminate the one or more members from his/her user group after these member(s) have accepted the user’s prior invitation to join his/her group. FIG. 9 is a flow chart illustrating the process of termination from a user’s group after accepting an invitation, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. Member termination from the user’s group is confirmed (Step S901). During this process, if the member decides to cancel his/her termination of the other member (Cancel, Step S901), termination is not completed and the user’s group is viewed (Step S904). However, if the user goes forward with the termination, an email is sent to the terminated member, records are updated in the repository (Step S902), and the member’s termination from the user’s group is acknowledged (Step S903). According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, if the user changes his/her mind after the termination, they may re-invite the member into his/her group by sending them an invitation.

[0059] According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, members may post one or more comments about other members. These comments may be either “free comments” or “paid comments” (i.e. comments posted in conjunction with the making of a donation to one or more charities). In addition, the comments may be qualitative comments about a character or trait of a member. For example, a member may post a comment describing the work habits or work ethics of another member. According to another example, a member may post a comment about a member’s personality, such as “Mary is fun-loving, hard working, and easy to get along with.” Other examples may include comments regarding historical events, such as “In 1990, John and I entered a bicycle ride to support AIDS research.” These comments may be qualitative in nature, to the extent that they allow a reader to evaluate a member’s personal qualities, and assess a member’s reputation. The more positive comments posted, the more favorably the member’s reputation may be. Conversely,
the more negative comments posted, the less favorable the reputation may be. A qualitative assessment of the posted comments combined with the user weight values, which provide information regarding the amount of charitable donations associated with those comments, enable a user to form a judgment about the reputation of a member of the social network. For example, a user with a high user weight value and positive commentary may have a good reputation.

**[0060]** FIG. 10 is a flow chart illustrating the posting of a “free comment” by a member about a user, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. A member enters a comment to post (Step S1001). The system then checks to see if the user has blocked the member from posting (Step S1002). For example, the system may check to see the user’s account information to make sure that the user did not block the member from posting a comment. If the member is blocked from posting (Yes, Step S1102), the system prevents the member from posting a comment (Step S1103). If the member is not blocked from posting, (No, Step S1102) the system then checks the entry for validity (Step S1104). If the entry is not valid (No, Step S1104), the system loops back to Step S1101. If the entry is valid (Yes, Step S1104), the comment is posted (Step S1105) and the records are updated by storing the comment in the repository (Step S1106). The system then acknowledges posting of the comment (Step S1107). According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, the free comments may be automatically signed with the member’s full name.

**[0061]** FIG. 11 is a flow chart illustrating the posting of a “paid comment” by a member about a user, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. A member enters a comment to post, the value of the post, one or more charities and whether or not the post will be anonymous (Step S1101). According to an embodiment, the value of the post may be suggested by the user or anyone else. In addition, the user or system may provide a predeter mind list of charities from which the member may select the one or more charities. The proceeds or a portion of the proceeds from the “paid comment” may be donated to one or more selected or default charities. For example, members may select from a list of charities and the system will collect the payments and automatically transfer the funds to the relevant charities on a periodic basis. The system may also provide members with information relevant for declaring the tax deduction. According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, the “paid comment” may be in a predetermined amount or an amount determined by the one or more members. For example, the minimum cost for a paid comment may be $2, while the maximum cost may be any amount determined by a member. According to an aspect of the present invention, the amount of the charitable donation may be proportional to the strength of conviction of the member posting the comment. For example, it the posting member feels strongly about a comment she is about to post, she may decide to donate more money to charity to strengthen the effect of the comment. The converse also may be true. The higher the amount of the donation, the higher the user weight value may be, and the greater the effect the comment may have on a user’s reputation.

**[0062]** The system then checks to see if the user has blocked the member from posting (Step S1102). For example, the system may check to see the user’s account information to make sure that the user did not block the member from posting a comment. If the member is blocked from posting (Yes, Step S1102), the system prevents the member from posting a comment (Step S1103). If the member is not blocked from posting, (No, Step S1102) the system then checks the entry for validity (Step S1104). If the entry is not valid (No, Step S1104), the system loops back to Step S1101. If the entry is valid (Yes, Step S1104), the member enters his/her credit card information to pay for the post (Step S1105). The system then checks to see if the credit card information is valid (Step S1106). If the credit card information is not valid (No, Step S1106), the system loops back to Step S1105. However, if the credit card information is valid (Yes, Step S1106), the order summary is displayed and the comment is posted (Step S1107). The transaction is then completed, and the records are updated by storing the comment in the repository (Step S1108). A transaction receipt may be sent by email (Step S1109) and the posting of a comment is acknowledged (Step S1110). According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, the one or more members may pre-pay for comments by choosing an amount to deduct from their credit card. This amount is then transferred into the member’s prepayment account as a credit balance. When the member posts a paid comment, the amount paid may be deducted from the member’s credit balance.

**[0063]** According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, one or more user weight values may be calculated. The one or more user weight values are used to rank users and comments by their validity and reliability, with higher user weight values representing higher validity and higher reliability of the comment. A user weight value also is an indicator of a user’s reputation, with a higher user weight value suggesting a better reputation than a lower user weight value. For example, the calculation of user weight values may be done by compiling consistency and dependency information over the total number of users and the total number of comments. The one or more user weight values may be a recursive function of one or more of the following, which may be displayed for each user, any time a user is referenced and/or may be combined into a single scalar value: a number of members in the user’s group and their user weight values, a total value of posted paid comments about the user and/or volume of posted comments about the user, and/or the accuracy of the total number of posted comments about the user. For example, if the user has a high number of paid comments with a high value, then his user weight value will be higher. For example, a user with 75 comments (both paid and free), with a total value of $500 in paid comments will have a higher user value than a user with 75 comments (both paid and free), with a total value of $50 in paid comments. Moreover, if the members in a user’s group have a high user weight value, then the user is going to have a higher user weight value. However, if the members in the user’s group have a lower user weight value, then the user’s user weight value will be lower.

**[0064]** The user weight value also may be increased according to the user’s level of activity on the social networking site. For example, a user who participates in many polls may have an increased user weight value which corresponds to the amount of money he has donated to charity in responding to the polls. In this instance, where the social networking activity does not involve the posting of comments, the amount of money donated to charity may be associated with the user...
engaging in the activity so that that user’s reputation is positively affected by the charitable donations he or she makes.

[0065] According to an embodiment, the one or more user weight values are associated with and displayed for each user when the user is referenced and are calculated for every new posted comment by one or more members. For example, the paid comments may be ranked by an amount paid and displayed in descending order of the amount paid, with a highest amount first. The free comments may be ranked by the user weight value of the member and displayed after the paid comments, with a higher user weight value first. According to another embodiment, the one or more user weight values are associated with the posted comment. Thus, when a member posts a comment and donates money to charity in conjunction with that posting, the amount of the donation is associated with the comment, and the member posting the comment may receive a boost in user weight value for having made the donation, and the user about whom the comment was made also may receive a boost in user weight value for having encouraged the charitable donation of the posting member.

[0066] A member may retract a comment after it is posted. FIG. 12 is a flow chart illustrating the process of retracting a posted comment, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. A member confirms the retraction of a posted comment (Step S1201) and reconfirms the retraction of the posted comment (Step S1202). If the member decides to cancel the retraction (Cancel, Steps S1201-1202), the list of posted comments will be displayed and the process will end (Step S1203). However, if the member decides to continue with the retraction, the records will be updated and the retracted posted comment will be removed from the repository (Step S1204). An email is sent to the member and the user to inform them of the retraction (Step S1205) and the retraction of the posted comment is acknowledged (Step S1206).

[0067] A user may post a reply to any posted comment by the one or more members. This allows a user to provide a clarity, explanation, rebuttal, or emphasis to any posted comment. FIG. 13 is a flow chart illustrating the process of posting a reply to a posted comment by one or more members, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. A user fills out a “reply” form (Step S1301) and the system checks the validity of the entry (Step S1302). If the entry is not valid (No, Step S1302), then the system loops back to Step S1301. However, if the entry is valid (Yes, Step S1302), then the reply is posted and a confirmation message is sent to the user (Step S1303). The records are updated, the reply is stored in the repository (Step S1304) and the posting of the reply is acknowledged (Step S1305).

[0068] The members may each vote on the accuracy of a posted comment. For example, the vote may be initiated by a user or member with an email invitation. According to an embodiment, the votes for a user’s posted comments may be used in determining the user weight value for that user. FIG. 14 is a flow chart illustrating the process of voting for the accuracy of a post, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. The system checks to see if this is a user’s own posted comment (Step S1401). If it is (Yes, Step S1401), then the system displays the list of posted comments (Step S1402) and ends. If it is not a user’s own posted comment (No, Step S1401), the system checks to see if the member already voted on the posted comment (Step S1403). If the member already voted on the posted comment (Yes, Step S1403), then the system displays the list of posted comments (Step S1402) and ends. However, if the member had not already voted on the posted comment (No, Step S1403), the member may vote on the accuracy of the posted comment (Step S1404). The records are then updated and the vote is stored in the repository (Step S1405). For example, the vote may be a “yes” or “no” answer as to whether the posted comment is accurate, or it may be a number from a scale of 1 to 10, ranging from never true to always true.

[0069] Users may create a poll about themselves for either public or private viewing by choosing from default questions or creating their own customized questions. A poll may be about any topic that a user chooses, for example, how well the members know the user, members’ opinions on certain topics, etc. The polls may be sent to the members of a user’s group or they may be open to the public. According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, the user may choose to have the poll anonymous or signed and sponsored or free. A sponsored poll is a poll where the user agrees to provide the member with credits when a poll is successfully completed by the member. For example, a user may send an invitation to one or more members to take a poll offering to deposit $10 into the member’s account upon successful completion of the poll. The credits earned by successfully completing a poll may be used, for example, to create paid comments about another member, and/or to pay for a new poll. FIG. 15 is a flow chart illustrating the process of creating a poll, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. The user enters the poll information, such as the name, description and whether the poll will be anonymous or signed (Step S1501). The system checks to see if the poll is sponsored or free (Step S1502). If the poll is sponsored (Sponsored, Step S1502), the user enters the poll value and payment information (Step S1503). The system checks to see if the information is valid and the credit card is approved (Step S1504). If the information is not valid or the credit card is not approved (No, Step S1504), the system loops back to Step S1503. If the information is valid and the credit card is approved (Yes, Step S1504) or the poll is free (Free, Step S1502), the user may enter the first question (Step S1505). If the question is not valid (No, Step S1506), the system will loop back to Step S1505. Otherwise (Yes, Step S1506), the user enters the answer options (Step S1507). If the information is not valid (No, Step S1508), the system loops back to Step S1507. If the information is valid (Yes, Step S1508), the user may add an additional question (Step S1509). If the user decides to add additional questions (Yes, Step S1509), the system loops back to Step S1505, until the user no longer has additional questions. If the user does not have anymore questions to add (No, Step S1509), the user selects members to take the poll (Step S1510), reviews the poll (Step S1511) and the poll is stored in the repository (Step S1512).

[0070] FIG. 16 is a flow chart illustrating the process of responding to a user poll, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. A member fills out the answers to the poll questions (Step S1601) and the system checks to see if the information is valid (Step S1602). If the information is not valid (No, Step S1602), the system loops back to Step S1601. If the information is valid (Yes, Step S1602), the system checks to see if the poll is sponsored (Step S1603). If the poll is sponsored (Yes, Step S1603), the credits are added to the member’s account (Step S1604), and the poll results are recorded by storing them in the repository (Step S1605). If the poll is not sponsored (No, Step S1603), the poll results are recorded by storing them in the repository (Step S1605).
Any member of the general public may search for a member of the system by using a basic search (for example, first name and/or last name) or an advanced search (for example, name, location and/or other facts). The search results will be displayed according to their order of relevance. FIG. 17 is a flow chart illustrating the process of searching for a member, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. An individual may input search terms (Step S1701) and the system will parse the search terms (Step S1702) and determine whether the input was valid (Step S1703). For example, the individual may use any term included in the user identity data as a search term, such as a user’s name (first and/or last name), a user’s location, or a user’s email address. If a user does not want his/her user identity information to be publicly accessible, the user may restrict his/her user identity information to members who are only a part of his/her user group, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. If the input is not valid (No, Step S1703), the system loops back to Step S1701. However, if the input is valid (Yes, Step S1703), the search is performed (Step S1704) and the search results are displayed (Step S1705).

A member may log in or logout of their account at any time. FIG. 18 is a flow chart illustrating the process of logging in or logging out of the system, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. If a member is logging out (Yes, Step S1801), the system will log the member out (Step S1802) and end. However, if the member is not logging out (No, Step S1801), the member fills out the login form (Step S1803). If the member forgets a password (Need Password, Step S1803), the system will send the member the password, for example, by email (Step S1804). If the member is logging in (Login, Step S1803), the system checks to see if the email exists (Step S1805). If the email does not exist (No, Step S1805), the system loops back to Step S1803. If the email exists (Yes, Step S1805), the system checks to see if the password entered matches the password stored (Step S1806). If the password does not match (No, Step S1806), the system loops back to Step S1803. If the password matches (Yes, Step S1806), the system logs the user into the system (Step S1807) and ends.

A member may delete his/her account at any time. This will permanently delete all comments and other related data from the repository. Alternatively, the comments and related data may be maintained in the repository for a predetermined amount of time in the event the member decides to resume his/her account. FIG. 19 is a flow chart illustrating the process of deleting an account, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. The member fills out a resignation form (Step S1901) and confirms resignation (Step S1902). If the user decides to cancel the termination of his/her account (Steps S1901, S1902), then the system will end. Otherwise, the system will notify the members of the user's group of the user's resignation (Step S1903) and update records (Step S1904).

A member may access a “My Tools” interface as part of his/her member account, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. This interface allows a user to do any of the following: submit a Uniform Resource Locator ("URL") to a search engine, for example, www.google.com, for indexing, display an invitation to post, or display an invitation to join. FIG. 20 is a flow chart illustrating a feature of a system for collecting and storing information about individuals in a social network, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. Once a user accesses the “My Tools” interface (Step S2001), the system checks to see if the user wants to submit his/her URL to a search engine to index (Step S2002). For example, a member may have comments posted about him/her available through an Internet search engine, such as www.google.com. If the user decides to submit his/her URL to a search engine (Yes, Step S2002), the system will programmatically submit the URL to a search engine for indexing (Step S2003) and acknowledge that the indexing is complete (Step S2004). After the acknowledgment, or if the user does not want to submit his/her URL to a search engine (No, Step S2002), the system then checks to see if the user wants to display a printable invitation to post a comment (Step S2005). If the user decides to display a printable invitation to post a comment (Yes, Step S2006), the system will display the printable invitation to post a comment (Step S2007). Otherwise (No, Step S2007), the system will check to see if the user wants to display a printable invitation to others to become a member (Step S2008). If the user decides to display a printable invitation to become a member (Yes, Step S2008), the system will display the invitation (Step S2009). If the user decides not to display a printable invitation to others to become a member (No, Step S2008), the system will end.

According to an embodiment of the present disclosure, the members or non-members who post comments about a user may include institutions, including colleges, universities, high schools, and related organizations which may post facts such as matriculation years, credentials, graduation year, activities, major, etc. about a user. This institutional commentary may be posted in conjunction with or unaccompanied by a donation to a charity. Institutions and organizations which verify facts may receive a boost to their entity weight values, which are described below.

Any member who reviews information posted about a user may wish to receive verification that the factual information is true. For example, a member may wish to verify that a user attended a certain college or university, and obtained a certain degree in a given year. Thus, according to another embodiment, a member may request verification of the user identity data for any given member. The verification may be conducted by a third party, or may be conducted by the administrator of the social network, or any other person or entity. To conduct the verification, for example, a third party may contact the relevant institutions or companies in order to verify the user identity data, and then the third party may provide that verification to the requesting member. The person or entity conducting or arranging for the factual verification may charge the requesting user an additional fee or surcharge to have such verification completed. According to one embodiment, once a fact is verified for a requesting member, that fact may appear as verified for all persons viewing the fact about a user, thereby eliminating the need for subsequent requests for verification of the same facts. A verified fact may boost a user's user weight value more than an unverified fact because the reliability of the verified fact is greater.

The present invention may be used to implement a method for encouraging charitable donations through a social network where a user may raise money and awareness for a favorite charity or non-profit organization by organizing groups and campaigns and linking the two together. The more money and the more members or non-members who support the user’s charitable cause, the higher a user’s user weight value may be. For example, the method may be used to organize groups of members so that they can achieve social
goals, such as raising money for a charity, organizing volunteers, orchestrating alumni activities, or keeping in touch. According to one embodiment, the concept of a charity donation may be merged with a blog entry and associated with a charitable campaign, acting as a running commentary on the concept or progress of the charitable campaign. The more a user utilizes the methods of the present invention, the higher the user’s weight value will be. The user weight value acts as an indicator of the reliability of a user’s reputation. Persons who are altruistic and who encourage altruism, i.e., charitable donations, are trustworthy and tend to have reliable reputations.

[0078] FIG. 21 is a flow chart illustrating a method of encouraging charitable donations through a social network, according to an embodiment of the present disclosure. A user may create a member account by supplying user identity data, which may be verified (Step S2101). A user then may create a campaign and associate the created campaign with one or more charities and a goal, such as a financial goal or a participation goal (Step S2102). A campaign is a specific charitable cause that the user is passionate about and seeks to support. For example, a user may create a campaign to raise money to support the Girls Scouts, AIDS research, Cancer research, victims of 9/11, or any other charitable cause. The campaign may be created by describing the campaign and by selecting a name for the campaign and a date to reach the financial goal for the charitable campaign. For example, a user may create a campaign to save Burma and may choose a financial goal in any amount, for example, $3,000.00, donating all proceeds from the campaign to United Way of America. Alternatively, the user may decide to split the proceeds between one or more charities, for example, United Way of America and the American Red Cross. The user may select the name “Save Burma!,” set a goal deadline of Dec. 15, 2008 and describe the campaign by providing the history of Burma. According to an embodiment, the user may upload one or more images to associate with the campaign. In addition, the user may associate the campaign with a link to an external web page. For example, a link may be provided to a web page that lists facts about Burma. According to an embodiment, the user may create one or more campaigns, which all may be active simultaneously at any given time.

[0079] The user may send an invitation to one or more people or non-members (Step S2103). The one or more members may accept or decline the user’s invitation, where the one or more non-members may create a member account in order to accept or decline the user’s invitation (Step S2104). The one or more members have the option to donate any amount of money to a charity to post comments about the user, where the monetary value of the donation is associated with the comments posted, such that a higher amount donated represents a higher trustworthiness of the comments (Step S2105).

[0080] The user may then invite one or more members or non-members to support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities to help reach the financial goal. The members or non-members may be invited through, for example, email or any other communication means. For example, invitations may be sent to all the members of a user’s group to support the user’s campaign. According to an embodiment, the invited one or more members or non-members may invite one or more additional members or non-members to donate money to the campaign. The one or more invited non-members may be required to create a member account in order to donate money, according to an embodiment.

[0081] The one or more invited members or non-members may support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities to help reach the financial goal (Step S2106). According to an embodiment, the one or more invited members or non-members may make posts in connection with their donation to the one or more charities. For example, the one or more members or non-members may post a comment about how great they think the campaign is. According to an embodiment, the one or more invited members or non-members may continue to donate money to the one or more charities, even after the financial goal is reached.

[0082] The value of each donation by the one or more members or non-members is deducted from the financial goal and displayed. In addition, the running total may be displayed. For example, the user or any other member or non-member may want to see the details of all the donations made to the campaign at date. One view may show the donation by each member or non-member listed, for example, in date order or order of value, with the highest donation appearing first.

[0083] One or more user weight values may be calculated based on (1) a total volume of the members or non-members who support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities, and/or (2) a total monetary value of the money donated by the one or more members or non-members (Step S2107). The user weight value represents the reliability of a user’s reputation. For example, the more money that the members or non-members donate through the campaign to the one or more charities, the higher the user’s weight value may be. Similarly, the higher the number of members or non-members who donate through the campaign to the one or more charities, the higher the user’s weight value might be. In other words, the user’s reputation is more reliable if the user can encourage social good by procuring a large number of charitable donations.

[0084] FIG. 22 is a screen shot illustrating the method of creating a campaign, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure. The user may enter a campaign name 2201, description 2202, a link to an external web page 2203, a deadline 2204, a financial goal 2205, a charity 2206, and an image file 2207. Once the user enters the information of 2201-2207, the screen shot as illustrated in FIG. 23 may be displayed.

[0085] The method of the present disclosure may allow a user to post a message to a message board in the form of, for example, a blog, and encourage charitable donations by allowing members to donate money to charity when posting to the message board. A blog refers to a website where users post comments on a particular subject, and the comments are displayed in reverse chronological order, according to the date on which the comment was posted. The method may allow a user to link the posted message to one or more of the user’s campaigns, according to one embodiment. FIG. 24 is a flow chart illustrating a method for encouraging charitable donations through a social network, according to one embodiment of the present disclosure. A user of the social network may form a group, where the group is associated with a message board, such as a blog (Step S2401). The user may donate any amount of money to one or more charities to post a message to the group message board (Step S2402). According to one embodiment, a user may identify any topic of
his/her choosing, or may choose a topic from a predetermined list of topics. The user may invite members or non-members to post a reply to the message. One or more members or non-members may donate any amount of money to one or more charities to post a reply to the message (Step S2403). According to an embodiment, the user or the one or more members or non-members may make an anonymous donation to the one or more charities in connection with their post if they do not want to be identified.

One or more user weight values may be calculated based at least on a total monetary value associated with the posted message and one or more posted replies, where the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user's reputation (Step S2404). For example, the higher the monetary value of the posted message and the posted replies, the higher the user weight value may be. A higher user weight value indicates that the user has encouraged members or non-members to do a good act and to donate money to charity. Indeed, the more posted replies, the higher the user weight value would be. According to an embodiment, the value of each donation may be associated with the one or more members or non-members who post, and may be displayed along with the posted reply to the message. In addition, the total value of all donations may be displayed in connection with the initial message posted by the user.

FIG. 25 is a screen shot illustrating this embodiment of the present disclosure. For example, a member may identify a topic relating to “yoga memberships” and post a message requesting whether anyone knows a good yoga studio in Oyster Bay, N.Y. The posted message may include a hyperlink to one or more of the user’s campaigns. One or more other members or non-members may then reply to the posted message. The posted replies also may include a hyperlink to one or more of the members’ or non-members’ campaigns. According to an embodiment, the member may require members or non-members to donate money to charity in order to reply to the member’s posted message in any amount and may even set a minimum amount of the donation and may designate one or more selected charities.

According to an embodiment, a campaign group may be created and associated with one or more charities through a campaign to allow connections of people to stay in touch and connected to each other to collaborate toward a charitable goal, for example, raising money for a charity, a club, or a workgroup within a company. FIG. 26 is a flow chart illustrating a method of charitable social networking, according to this embodiment of the present disclosure. A user may create a campaign group and associate the group with one or more charities through one or more campaigns (Step S2601). The user may create this campaign group by entering a group name and a mission for the campaign group. In addition, the user has the option of setting a group’s privacy by designating the campaign group public or private. If the campaign group is designated as public, anyone may join, even non-members. If the campaign group is designated as private, only members may join. The user also may choose whether to allow only invited members to join or whether to allow any other members to join. The user may also designate whether a joining member or non-member may need approval to join. For example, before a member or non-member joins the campaign group they may need the user’s approval, majority approval, or unanimous approval from the other members of the group, or may need to be sponsored by a predetermined number of members. The user has the option to edit the group name, mission, privacy, joining features, inclusion features and group campaign at any time. The user who creates the campaign group may become the moderator of the campaign group or another group member may be chosen or elected. In addition, the user may resign as moderator of the campaign group at any time, reassign a new moderator, or delete the campaign group.

Once the campaign group is created, a user may invite one or more members or non-members to join the created campaign group and to donate money to the one or more charities through the one or more campaigns (Step S2602). For example, the user may send an invitation to join the campaign group to any member of the public by providing the recipient’s email address. In addition, if the user has created other campaign groups, the user may invite the members of those campaign groups to join the newly created campaign group. Alternatively, a user may invite one or more members who are saved in an address book or all members who are located by an automatic search of the member database. The description of an automatic search is further set forth below. The one or more invited members or non-members may join the campaign group and donate money to the one or more charities through the one or more campaigns (Step S2603).

Similar to the concept of the user weight values described above, a weight value or “karma score” may be assigned to the group as a whole. That value will be referred to herein as the “group weight value.” A group weight value may be calculated based at least on the number of invited members or non-members of the social network who join the group and a total monetary value of the money donated to the one or more charities through the one or more campaigns by all of the members of the group (Step S2604). The group weight value may be used as an indicator of the impact that the group is making collectively, for example, in connection with raising money for one or more charities through a campaign. According to an embodiment, a user weight value also may be calculated for the one or more members who join the group based on a number of posts of one or more of the following: events, discussion topics, or polls.

In addition, a weight value or “karma score” may be assigned to the charities or other companies or entities who participate in the social networking site. This weight value may be referred to as an “entity weight value.” The value of the entity weight value may increase with the amount and/or number of donations which the entity encourages. Thus, for example, a charity which participates in a campaign to raise money will receive an entity weight value which may correspond to the amount and/or number of donations it encourages. Donations to campaigns may be advanced if the charity or other sponsor of the campaign posts information on the social networking site which keeps users informed as to the status of the campaign, such as the amount of money raised or any other indicators of the success of the campaign. According to the present invention, entities which keep users informed and up-to-date about the status of a campaign, for example, may be rewarded by having their entity weight values increased according to the level and/or frequency of such updates. If users can view the success of the campaigns, they may be more likely to donate money thereby furthering the goals of the present invention.

Charities or other entities which participate in the social networking site also may sponsor polls or post message boards which solicit commentary from the users of the sys-
tem. The polls may survey members on any topic of interest. The message boards allow users to use words to convey a message. The entries may be posted on the virtual message board for all users of the social network to see. For example, a charity or other entity may query users as to how they perceive the work being done by the charity. When users of the social network participate in the polls and/or post comments on the message boards, and donate money to one or more charities, the entity weigh value may increase because charitable contributions have been encouraged by the charity.

Also, after members join the group, the user or any member of the group has the capability to email the other members, create a poll for the members, and/or start a discussion in which other members take part. The poll may be useful for surveying the group on any topic. For example, the poll may be used to find a meeting date that is convenient for all the members for an upcoming meeting, or may be used to ask members about recommendations for any topic at all. Similarly, the discussion may be used to raise any topic with the group by submitting a message. The message may be anonymous or signed. If so desired, the message may be directed to a particular member of the group. In addition, a file may be uploaded, for example, an image file, and associated with the message.

FIG. 27 is a screen shot illustrating a group profile for a “Yoga Enthusiasts” group. A member may edit the profile at any time by adding a group image. For example, a yoga mat image may be uploaded and added to the screen shot of FIG. 27 if the user so chooses.

One of the features of the social network is to allow a user easily to find other users who have similar interests, goals, skills, etc. For example, if a user wants to find all members who are interested in a specific charity, he may search the social network manually by entering in, for example, “saving Burma.” Such a search would locate all the members who have listed “saving Burma” as one of their interests. However, since new members are always joining the social network, it would be tedious to perform this search manually each time a user wanted to locate new members with shared interests. According to an embodiment, an automatic search may be performed. FIG. 28 is a flow chart illustrating a method of charitable social networking, according to this embodiment of the present disclosure. A user lists one or more user identity data search terms (Step S2801). The user identity data search terms relate to user identity data or other criteria, such as skills, interests, age, race, gender, location, employment, favoritie charities, group memberships, languages spoken, etc. The user identity data search terms may be automatically compared to the user identity data of one or more members (Step S2802). The user may save the user identity data search terms and the system will automatically run the search during predetermined time intervals, such as every three hours, to locate any new members who have joined the social network and who match the user identity data search terms. If one or more user identity data search terms match the user identity data of one or more members, those one or more members may be placed in a list, such as, for example, a “smart” list, which may be a data file associated with the user, a database or any other means to store information relating to the user. The user’s “smart” list may automatically be updated to add the one or more members (Step S2803). This feature enables a user to save time by automatically running searches to keep track of members who meet a user’s specified criteria. For example, if a user wants to find all members who are interested in yoga, the system will find all newly joining members who have listed yoga as one of their interests and automatically add the new members to the user’s “smart” list. This provides the user with a comprehensive list if the user needs to invite all the members to participate in a campaign, join a group, or take a poll.

According to an embodiment, a user may export his or her calculated user weight value to any email, web page, advertisement, message board, blog, or any other electronic medium, simply by exporting computer code containing the user’s weight value information into such medium. This exported data may be referred to as a “Karma Tag,” which allows the user to inform others outside the social network about their reliable and trustworthy reputation.

Numerous additional modifications and variations of the present disclosure are possible in view of the above-teachings. It is therefore to be understood that within the scope of the appended claims, the present disclosure may be practiced other than as specifically described herein.

What is claimed is:

1. A method of encouraging charitable donations by individuals who are members of a social network, comprising: allowing a user to create a member account by supplying user identity data from the user; allowing a user to create a campaign, wherein the created campaign is associated with one or more charities and a goal; allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members; allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user’s invitation, wherein the one or more non-members create a member account in order to accept or decline the user’s invitation; allowing the one or more members the option to donate any amount of money to a charity to post comments about the user, wherein the monetary value of the donation is associated with the comments posted such that a higher amount donated represents a higher trustworthiness of the comments; allowing the one or more members or non-members to support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities; and calculating one or more user weight values based at least on a total volume of members or non-members who support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user’s reputation.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the charitable campaign is created by describing the charitable campaign and by selecting a date to reach the financial goal.

3. The method of claim 2, further comprising allowing a user to upload one or more images to describe the charitable campaign.

4. The method of claim 1, further comprising allowing a user to associate a campaign with a link to a web page.

5. The method of claim 1, further comprising allowing the one or more invited members or non-members to post comments in connection with the donation to the one or more charities in association with the campaign.

6. The method of claim 1, further comprising allowing the one or more members or non-members to invite one or more additional members or non-members to donate money to the charitable campaign.
7. A method of encouraging charitable donations by individuals who are members of a social network, comprising:
allowing a user to create a member account by supplying user identity data from the user;
allowing a user to create a campaign, wherein the created campaign is associated with one or more charities and a financial goal;
allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members;
allowing the one or more members or non-members to accept or decline the user’s invitation, wherein the one or more members or non-members create a member account in order to accept or decline the user’s invitation;
allowing the one or more members the option to donate any amount of money to a charity to post comments about the user, wherein the monetary value of the donation is associated with the comments posted such that a higher amount donated represents a higher trustworthiness of the comments;
allowing the one or more members or non-members to support the campaign by donating money to the one or more charities to help reach the financial goal; and
calculating one or more user weight values based at least on a total value of the money donated by the one or more members or non-members, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user’s reputation.

8. A method for encouraging charitable donations through a social network, comprising:
allowing a user of the social network to form a group, wherein the group is associated with a message board;
allowing the user the option to donate any amount of money to one or more charities to post a message to the group message board;
allowing one or more members or non-members to the option to donate any amount of money to one or more charities to post a reply to the message; and
calculating one or more user weight values based at least on a total monetary value associated with the posted message and one or more posted replies, wherein the one or more user weight values represent reliability of a user’s reputation.

9. The method of claim 8, further comprising allowing the user or the one or more members or non-members to link to a campaign in connection with the posted message or posted reply to the message.

10. The method of claim 8, wherein the value of each donation is associated with the one or more members or non-members and displayed with the posted reply to the message.

11. The method of claim 8, wherein the total value of all donations is displayed in connection with the posted message.

12. The method of claim 8, wherein the user or the one or more members or non-members make an anonymous donation to the one or more charities in connection with their post.

13. A method for encouraging charitable donations through a social network, comprising:
allowing a user to create a group, wherein the created group is associated with one or more charities through one or more campaigns;
allowing the user to send an invitation to one or more members or non-members to join the group and to donate money to one or more charities through the one or more campaigns;
allowing the one or more invited members or non-members to join the group and to donate money to one or more charities through the one or more campaigns; and
calculating a group weight value based at least on a total monetary value of money donated to the one or more charities through the one or more campaigns by all of the members or non-members of the group.

14. The method of claim 13, wherein the group weight value is further based at least on the number of invited members or non-members who join the group.

15. The method of claim 13, further comprising allowing a user or the one or more members or non-members who join the group to post one or more of the following: events, discussion topics, or polls.

16. The method of claim 15, further comprising calculating a user weight value for the one or more members or non-members who join the group based on a number of posts of one or more of the following: events, discussion topics, or polls.

17. The method of claim 13, further comprising obtaining approval from the user or the one or more members of the group in order to allow a member or non-member to join the group.

18. The method of claim 13, further comprising allowing a user to designate the created group as public or private, wherein a private designation allows members of the group to participate in the group and a public designation allows members and non-members of the group to participate in the group.

19. The method of claim 13, further comprising allowing a user to export the one or more user weight values to an application outside the social network as a data tag which will apprise one of the user’s reputation.

20. A method for encouraging charitable donations through a social network, comprising:
allowing a user to create a group, wherein the created group is associated with one or more charities through one or more campaigns;
allowing one or more members or non-members to join the group and to donate money to one or more charities through the one or more campaigns; and
calculating a group weight value based at least on a total monetary value of money donated to the one or more charities through the one or more campaigns by all of the members or non-members of the group.

21. A method for encouraging charitable donations through a social network, comprising:
providing an online social network for users to obtain information about other users;
allowing a user to become a member of the online social network;
allowing the user to create a user profile containing information about the user;
allowing one or more different users of the online social network to view the user profile;
allowing one or more institutions to verify the information about the user contained in the user profile;
calculating an entity weight value for the institution based on a number of times that the institution has verified user information, whereby a higher entity weight value indicates a higher reliability of the institution.

22. The method of claim 7, further comprising allowing the one or more charities to post comments on the social network relating to the status of the campaign.
23. The method of claim 22, further comprising calculating one or more entity weight values of the one or more charities based on the volume of comments which the one or more charities posted on the social network relating to the progress of the campaign.

24. The method of claim 23, wherein a higher entity weight value represents a more reliable reputation of the one or more charities.

25. The method of claim 7, further comprising allowing the one or more charities to create a message board for users of the social network to post comments, wherein the users donate money to the one or more charities to post the comments.

26. The method of claim 25, further comprising calculating one or more entity weight values of the one or more charities based on the volume of comments which the users posted on the message board created by the one or more charities.

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