Examining knowledge contribution from the perspective of an online identity in blogging communities

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Abstract

Knowledge contribution is one of the essential factors behind the success of blogging communities (BCs). This research studies knowledge contribution behavior in a BC from the perspective of knowledge contributors and their characteristics using the lens of social identity theory. Social identity theory asserts that individuals are fundamentally motivated to present or communicate their identities in everyday social life through behavior. A similar line of reasoning can be used to argue that members of a BC would also be motivated to communicate their online identities through their behavior, that is, through knowledge contribution in the BC. Specifically, this study conceptualized the online identity and examined the effects of its personal (online kindness, online social skills, and online creativity) and social aspects (BC involvement) on knowledge contribution. The data was collected using an online survey from the members of Cyworld, a popular BC in South Korea and a few other countries (members from South Korea were included in this study). The results indicate that both the personal and social aspects of online identity and their interactions significantly influenced knowledge contribution. Based on the findings, this study offers suggestions to organizers of BCs to enhance the knowledge contribution from their members.

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1. Introduction

Blogging communities (BCs) are virtual communities (VCs) which allow members to post blogs on their websites. Blogs are an online version of people’s daily diary, which allow anyone to share his or her thoughts and experiences. Although similar in many aspects to a VC, there are a few essential differences between a BC and a VC. BCs, unlike VCs, have no shared spare, clear boundary, or clear membership (Efimova, Hendrick, & Anjewierden, 2005; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Retcher, & Wetherell, 1987), and they are driven by the personalities behind them (Efimova et al., 2005). Specifically, blogs assist in the formation of online identities rather than share interests and discussion topics. BCs encourage a one-to-many form of communication with little public interaction compared to other forms of computer-mediated communication (Blanchard, 2003). However, BCs often incorporate interactive features, similar to VCs, such as links to other blogs, forums areas for discussions, and spaces for comments regarding the blogger. Moreover, in a VC, the level of interaction is much more intense and members develop a sense of community, whereas the level of interaction in a BC is not so intense (Efimova et al., 2005).

There are various types of BCs which are similar in their key technological features but differ in other aspects (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Some sites (e.g., Facebook) support the maintenance of pre-existing social networks, whereas others help strangers to connect based on shared interests, political views, or activities (e.g., Cyworld, Rediffmail) (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Similarly, some sites cater to diverse audiences (e.g., Facebook), while others attract people based on common language or shared racial-, sexual-, religious-, or nationality-based identities (e.g., Rediffmail) (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Sites also vary in the extent to which they incorporate new information and communication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging, and photo or video sharing. For example, Cyworld allows members to purchase and use avatars in their blogs, but Facebook does not have such features. Although there may be diverse BCs, the key to all these BCs is either sharing among the members of pre-existing social networks or among the members of interest based social networks. BCs where members develop communities based on shared interests and views were the focus of the present study.

The key activity that takes place in a BC is knowledge contribution, which means “transferring and sharing of knowledge from one party to another” (Doring, 2002; Kumar & Thondikulam, ...
Members contribute knowledge in a variety of ways such as posting recipes, providing new technology information, sharing investment information, and writing reviews of books and movies to name a few. The amount of knowledge and information exchange that takes place in a BC can be estimated from the size of the blogosphere, which according to Kubal (2006) doubles in size roughly every 6 months and is more than 60 times larger today than it was 3 years ago. Everyday more than 75,000 new blogs are created in BCs.

The accumulated knowledge in a BC can be used for gaining strategic advantages. Dell Inc. and Tripadvisor (although not BCs) have been successful in using the knowledge accumulated in their online forums. Dell Inc. uses the knowledge accumulated in its customer forum for identifying market trends and improving its research and development (R&D) and marketing activities. Similarly, Tripadvisor, the largest global travel information and advice destination on the Web, capitalizes on its traveler forum, which has more than 5 million reviews and opinions accumulated over the years. While these reviews and opinions are useful for travelers, the exchange of information is a source of revenue for Tripadvisor, which earns revenues through advertisements. However, not all websites are as successful as Tripadvisor in facilitating knowledge exchange. Chiu, Hsu, and Wang (2006) assert that facilitating knowledge exchange among the members of a BC is one of the biggest challenges in fostering a BC (von Krogh, 2003).

Previous research has examined knowledge contribution mainly from a cost-benefit perspective (Hew & Hara, 2007; Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2005; McLure & Faraz, 2000; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2005), an organizational citizenship behavior perspective (Yu & Chu, 2007), a social capital perspective (Chiu et al., 2006; Kim & Han, 2009; Wasko & Faraj, 2005), a self-interest, and a public-good perspective (Archibulli, Page, & Welling, 2003; Jie, Jiang, & Chan, 2007). These studies focused mainly upon identifying the motivation behind the knowledge contribution such as altruism (Hew & Hara, 2007), reputation (Wasko & Faraj, 2005), future reciprocation (Ackerman, 1998), expectancy (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004), and trust (Kim & Han, 2009).

Another stream of research on online knowledge contribution (e.g., Donath, 1998; Doring, 2002; Leary, 1995; Ma & Agarwal, 2007) asserts that individuals contribute knowledge as a means of communicating their identities. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987) also asserts that individuals are of communicating their identities. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 2007) asserts that individuals contribute knowledge as a means of communicating their identities derived from one's personality traits such as helpfulness, kindness, and tenderness and social identity (identity derived from belonging to a particular group such as Christians, congressmen, and amateur artists). Specifically, this paper seeks answers to research questions: (1) how does the members’ online identity relate to their knowledge contribution? And (2) how do the personal identity and social identity interact each other in affecting online knowledge contribution?

This main contribution of the present study for online knowledge contribution is that it developed a framework for conceptualizing online identities and explained members’ online knowledge contributions. The present study also empirically tested and validated online knowledge contribution. Finally, it offers practical insights to the organizers of BCs by identifying the factors that influence online knowledge contribution behavior.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, the concept of identity and social identity theory, which is the theoretical background for the present study, is discussed. Then, the hypotheses examined in the present study are discussed. This is followed by the research methodology and data analysis section. The results of the present study and their implications are presented in the discussion and implications sections followed by the conclusion of the present study.

2. Conceptual background

2.1. Concept of identity

Various definitions of identity that have emerged in the literature reveal that an identity has distinguishing characteristics. For example, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2003) defines identity as “qualities and attitudes you have that make you feel you have your own character and that you are different from other people.” The Collins Cobuild English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2003) defines identity as “who you are; the identity of a person or place is the characteristics they have that distinguishes them from others.” This notion of distinguishing characteristics has also been clearly brought out in academic literature. For example, Ruyter and Conroy (2002) proposed that identity is the dynamic configuration of the defining characteristics of a person. The term “defining” in this definition indicates that identity comprises only those aspects that one (or others) regards as the most representative of his or her character (Flanagan, 1991). Examples of such aspects may include tenderness, knowledge, humility, and kindness.

The second notion regarding identity is that a person exhibits different identities in different situations (Harter, 1998; Mead, 1934). For example, a person may behave very kindly with his family or friends, but behave arrogantly with others. Here, the person’s identity is reflected as being kind in one situation and arrogant in another situation.

The third notion regarding identity is that it is developed through social interactions (Harter, 1998). These interactions help one to reflect about oneself based on what others perceive. For example, one may think of oneself as a very good person but the feedback he or she receives from others may tell about his or her weaknesses such as being arrogant or proud. Furthermore, through social interactions, one may adopt the attitudes of the other person (Mead, 1934). It is a common observation that people tend to adopt the attitudes and behaviors of celebrities such as actors, politicians, and social reformers.

2.2. Online identity

Online identity is defined as the configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in online space (Ruyter & Conroy, 2002) which makes the person feel he or she has his or her own character and is different from other people. Without identity, people have no way of explaining who they are and how they differ from others. In the physical world, an identity corresponds to a physical self (Donath, 1998). Satchell, Shanks, Howard, and Mur-
phy (2006) assert that online identity is the key to how people are able to communicate and interact with others electronically. Extending this notion of situation-dependent identities to an online context, several researchers (e.g., Calvert, 1999; Turkle, 1997) assert that one’s identity in an online context would be different from (and not necessarily linked with) his or her identity in an offline context (Calvert, 1999; Jacobson, 1999). In the online context, previous studies have used terms such as Internet identity, digital identity (Turkle, 1997), and online identity (Vasalou, Joinson, & Pitt, 2007a) synonymously. Following Ruyter and Conroy (2002)’s definition of identity, the present study defines online identity as a configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in the online space.

Offline (i.e., real) identity differs from online identity in several aspects (Table 1). According to Turkle (1997), the identity established online may not be a true representation of one’s real identity. In the physical world, one’s identity inherently corresponds to one’s physical body (Donath, 1998). First, without identity, one cannot explain how he or she differs from other human beings (MacLeod, 1999). On the other hand, people can portray themselves differently from what they are in an online context. For example, an individual who is shy offline could exhibit aggressive behavior online. Similarly, an individual who is actually an extrovert may prefer being an introvert in online space.

Second, formation of an offline identity is tedious and requires time and effort (Bailenson & Beall, 2005; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005) since one has to build relationships that portray one’s identity. However, forming an online identity is relatively easier because it is not constrained by the limitations of a physical space.

Third, factors beyond one’s control (e.g., race, age, and gender) affect offline self-definition and self-presentation. In contrast, one can use a number of digital means (e.g., avatars) to express an online identity and can easily select the image(s) he or she wants to portray. Fourth, certain aspects of offline identities are difficult to hide. On the other hand, one can selectively choose to portray his or her identity in the digital environment. Lastly, the images people use to portray themselves in their offline identities are constrained by physical situations and practical conditions (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997), whereas images used for online portrayal are constrained by the online system. An identity established online is thus not necessarily tied to the identity of the person offline (Calvert, 1999). Therefore, it is important to study the role of online identity for knowledge contribution.

2.3. Previous research on online identity

A number of studies (see Table 2) discuss the development of online identity and its influence on one’s behavior (e.g., Boyd, Chang, & Goodman, 2004; Millen & Patterson, 2003; Turkle, 1997; Vasalou, Joinson, & Pitt, 2007b; Walker, 2000). Boyd et al. (2004), for example, noted that in computer-mediated communications, identity was established through software-enabled visual or textual representations. Such establishment of identity is limited by the availability of such visual or textual representations. For example, emoticons are used for expressing one’s emotions. However, the number of emoticons available is finite and one may not find the emoticon that truly represents one’s emotions. Customizing one’s avatars is another way of establishing one’s identity (Vasalou et al., 2007b). These avatars portray individuating properties back to their owners and outwards to the community.

The online identity, thus, establishes influences one’s behavior. Walker (2000) explored how online identity influenced one’s presentation of one’s homepage through design and content. Similarly, Millen and Patterson (2003) described the influence of online identity on policy decisions (e.g., use of real-world identity) for a community network and the impact of this network on creating social capital.

Table 2 reveals that the characteristics of online identity (or Internet identity) have not been ascertained clearly. Moreover, the role of online identity on knowledge contribution is also not completely clear. Similar to an offline context, one’s online identity would presumably influence one’s online behavior. Understanding the characteristics of online identity and its role in influencing behavior (e.g., online knowledge contribution) would therefore contribute to the existing body of literature. Social identity theory allows for the use a theoretical lens to explain the influence of identity on behavior; therefore, it was used in the present study for understanding the role of online identity in knowledge contribution.

2.4. Social identity theory

Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) contends that an individual’s identity consists of personal identity and social identity. Personal identity is derived from individual personality traits. It categorizes the self as a unique entity (Baumeister, 1998) and involves attributes specific to the individual such as skills and beliefs. Personal identity, thus, is derived from self-knowledge of an individual’s personality traits and from a belief in the uniqueness of the self.

Social identity is derived from belonging to a particular group. Social identity is an individual-based perception of what defines the “us” associated with any internalized group membership; it is a person’s knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Social identity, thus, serves to distinguish the self and members of one group from the members of all other groups.

This theory holds that personal identity influences people’s behavior via the process of identification (i.e., the process by which one, being a unique entity, associates with certain groups to bolster his or her self-esteem), and social identity influences people’s behavior via the process of categorization (i.e., the process by which one put himself or herself and others into categories such as race, religion, and gender).
as students, professionals, and housewives to show identity) and comparison (i.e., the process by which one compares his or her group(s) with other group(s) seeing a favorable bias towards the group to which (s)he belongs).

When personal identity is prominent, an individual’s needs, standards, beliefs, and motives primarily determine behavior (Stets & Burke, 2000). When social identity is prominent, one sees himself or herself as an exemplar of a social category through self-categorization and comparison (Turner et al., 1987). Under these conditions, collective needs, goals, and standards of one’s community primarily determine behavior (Verkuyten & Hagendoorn, 1998). However, both personal identity and social identity can be prominent at the same time with no dominant identity, and yet, the individual can function in a coherent manner. Adhering to Hogg and Abram’s (1988) definition of personal identity, the present study defined online personal identity as a set of idiosyncratic traits and personality characteristics that the person has in online space. Similarly, adhering to the definition of social identity proposed by Tajfel and Turner (1986), the present study defined online social identity as that part of the individual’s identity which is derived from knowledge of his or her membership in an online social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.

The conceptual framework for the present study is shown in Fig. 1. Consistent with social identity theory, Fig. 1 shows that online identity influences one’s online behavior. Online behavior can be ascertained through various means such as the postings made by the members on the BCs, the various avatars and accessories used by members, and the design of the home page. The present study focused on the blogs posted by the members on the BCs, which demonstrate the knowledge contributed by the member.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Term</th>
<th>Context</th>
<th>Research Output</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Millen and Patterson (2003)</td>
<td>Online identity</td>
<td>Discussed online identity policy and its impact on creating social capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkle (1995)</td>
<td>Digital identity</td>
<td>Digital identity breaks from constraints of everyday life, allowing users to transcend the limits of the real world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vasalou et al. (2007b)</td>
<td>Online identity</td>
<td>Found that users tend to customize their avatars to portray their own characteristics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker (2000)</td>
<td>Internet identity</td>
<td>Discussed the presentation of self on Internet home pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doring (2002)</td>
<td>Online Identity</td>
<td>Review of research work on the application of online identity to personal home pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huffaker and Calvert (2005)</td>
<td>Online Identity</td>
<td>Teenagers tend to reveal true information about their real identity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One’s personal identity is formed based on one’s values (Hitlin, 2003). Values serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or any other social entity (Hitlin, 2003, p. 119). Based on the literature (Andreoni, 1995; Hirschman, 1980; MacDonald, Jackson, Hayes, Baglioni, & Madden, 1998; Scott, 1965), five values (kindness, social skills, intellectualism, status leadership, and creativity) can be correlated with knowledge contribution behavior. Chamberlain (1985) reported that these five values share the same underlying meaning. The present study termed this common factor as online creativity. Based on the preceding discussion and in view of prominent online knowledge contribution behavior, the present study proposed online kindness, online social skills, and online creativity to be the three constructs that represent the online personal identity.

When individuals relate to a particular group, they share an emotional involvement and achieve some degree of social consensus about the evaluation of their group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Group involvement implies a state of motivation, arousal, or interest towards the focal group and has been used as an indicator of an individual’s attachment and sense of belonging to that particular offline group (Havitz & Dimanche, 1999). Therefore, the present

![Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.](image-url)
In a BC, people communicate their personal identity and social identity in numerous ways such as joining some online groups, decorating their blogs with avatars, posting their knowledge on blogs and online forums, and managing relationships with others to name a few. In the next section, the present study developed a research model and hypotheses as a way to discuss the influence of online personal and social identities on online knowledge contribution.

3. Research model and hypotheses

Based on the preceding theoretical background and conceptual discussion, the proposed research model for the present study is shown in Fig 2. In accordance with the concept of group involvement (Havitz & Dimanche, 1999), the present study defined BC involvement as a state of motivation, arousal, or interest towards the focal BC. Involvement in the BC indicates the level of an individual’s attachment and sense of belonging to a particular BC (Havitz & Dimanche, 1999). The higher the involvement in a BC, the stronger one is attached to it. When a member is highly attached to a group, (s)he tends to perceive participation and other online activities as essential and develops patronizing behavior (Kyle, Graefe, Manning, & Bacon, 2003). In addition, when a member’s level of involvement in a BC is high (i.e., a feeling that (s)he is part of the BC), the member tends to value the social interactions with the other members of the BC. Furthermore, a member with a high level of involvement in the BC would be characterized as citizenship behavior (same as organizational citizenship behavior) (Yu & Chu, 2007), whereby the member actively shares knowledge to help other members. As a member’s involvement in the BC increases, the member expends more effort in the BC and actively contributes knowledge to benefit the BC. This relationship is supported by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner et al., 1987), according to which, social aspect of one’s self-identity will influence his or her behavior in a group setting.

**Hypothesis 1.** BC involvement has a positive effect on online knowledge contribution.

In accordance with the definition of kindness (Scott, 1965), the present study defined online kindness as the degree to which one is concerned about the happiness of other members in the BC. Kindness is one of the dimensions of personal identity and is regarded as a traditional virtue in many cultures and in religious traditions. It is not uncommon that some people help others for their own benefit (Andreonì, 1995). However, in many cases, people do not necessarily carry out the act of helping and other pro-social behavior (i.e., behavior considered socially good such as speaking kindly and saying encouraging words) for any tangible benefits; instead, they do so out of kindness. Kindness corresponds to a large body of evidence from privately provided public goods, like charitable giving. A kind person is more likely to sacrifice some personal benefit for others’ interest because of altruism (Ma & Agarwal, 2007; Yu & Chu, 2007). Extending this idea to the context of the BC, an individual with kindness may be more concerned about the happiness of other BC members. Similarly, a person who wishes to portray himself as a kind person online would do so by carrying out altruistic activities in a BC. When other BC members need help, a kind person may post replies (i.e., knowledge or ideas) in the community. Previous research (Kurzban & Houser, 2001) also suggests that kind members actively contribute their knowledge to others by replying to the posts and contribute a great deal more to the community than those who are not kind.

**Hypothesis 2.** Online kindness has a positive effect on online knowledge contribution.

Following the definition of social skills (Scott, 1965), the present study defined online social skills as the degree to which a person is able to get along with all kinds of people in the BC. MacDonald et al. (1998) proposed that social skills influence, to a large extent, the interaction and communication in the community. MacDonald et al. (1998) found that a high level of social skills increased people’s ability to establish and maintain social relationships. A large social network implies that a person has many friends in the community. When help is needed, a member with social skills is more willing to contribute his or her knowledge to help others in the community based on the social exchange between members (Yu & Chu, 2007). The difference between kindness and social skills is that a kind person helps others because it is in their nature to do so and may not necessarily be due to the person who received the help. A person with social skills, on the other hand, freely forms relationships with others. MacDonald et al. (1998) also found that social skills increased the ease of getting a message across to other parties in an offline community. Thus, members with high social skills have less difficulty sharing knowledge with other people, and they feel at ease in contributing knowledge. Similarly, in the context of the BC, members with social skills may easily get along with others, attempt to form networks, and take part in leading or moderating a group activity (such as mountaineering or picnics), thus, contributing to knowledge contribution in the BC.

**Hypothesis 3.** Online social skills have a positive effect on online knowledge contribution.

In keeping with the definition of creativity (Midgley & Dowling, 1978; Scott, 1965), the present study defined online creativity as the degree to which an individual is receptive to new ideas and makes innovative decisions independently of others in the BC. Hirschman (1980) postulated that a person’s creativity is immediately related to his or her behavior. Those who are creative are more inclined towards the use of innovation in their domain (Agarwal & Prasad, 1998). When other members need help, creative members readily offer solutions (Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004) and, thus, contribute knowledge to others in a BC. Agarwal and Prasad (1998) also mentioned that creative people require lesser reinforcement for using innovations as compared to other. In product development communities, members’ creativity is particularly crucial because it brings out ideas for newer and better products, thus, contributing to the increased level of knowledge in the BC (Holmstrom, 2001). Consequently, creative people may contribute more knowledge in a BC.

**Hypothesis 4.** Online creativity has a positive effect on online knowledge contribution.
According to social identity theory, an online personal identity can result in various online behaviors regardless of the online social identity. That is, when the level of involvement in the BC is low, online behavior could be influenced separately by the online personal identity in the BC. On the other hand, involvement in the BC initiates and manages the self-categorization (categorization into groups) process and helps to establish a person’s social identity (Terry, Hogg, & White, 1999). Categorizing oneself as a group member shifts the self-concept and unifies it with the focal group. People identify themselves with a specific group as their level of involvement in the group increases (Terry et al., 1999). Previous research also supports interaction between personality traits and social identity (Frissbie, Fitzpatrick, Feng, & Crawford, 2000; Terry et al., 1999). As the level of involvement changes, the effect of personal identity on online behavior could change.

As discussed earlier, members with high levels of online kindness, online social skills, or online creativity would contribute more knowledge in the focal BC compared respectively to those with low levels of online kindness, online social skills, or online creativity. However, as the member’s involvement (i.e., psychological identification) with the BC increases, the member’s online knowledge contribution also increases compared to the other BC members because of the pro-social behavior (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002). Conversely, members whose involvement in the BC is low may be less motivated to contribute knowledge online, even though they may have high levels of online kindness, online social skills, or online creativity. Therefore, the effect of online kindness, online social skills, or online creativity on online knowledge contribution may become stronger for those who have high levels of involvement in the BC than for those who have low levels of involvement in the BC.

**Hypothesis 5.** BC involvement moderates the effect of online kindness on online knowledge contribution.

**Hypothesis 6.** BC involvement moderates the effect of online social skills on online knowledge contribution.

**Hypothesis 7.** BC involvement moderates the effect of online creativity on online knowledge contribution.

## 4. Research methodology

The empirical data for the present study was collected using an online survey posted at Cyworld,3 which is a virtual community of online relationships, interests, and transactions. It provides facilities for its members to create blogs over its website and, therefore, is a blogging community. Members can post their ideas and knowledge to their blogs. Cyworld is a South Korean social network service operated by SK Communications. At Cyworld, members cultivate relationships by forming friendships with each other through their minihompage. Members can decorate their mini-rooms with various virtual goods (such as background music, pixelated furniture, and virtual appliances) available at Cyworld. Cyworld also has operations in China and Vietnam; however, in the present study, the focus was on its South Korean operations.

Cyworld was a good context for the present study for a number of reasons. First, it has more than 20 million members all over the world and, thus, provided a good experimental platform for the present study. Second, members express their identity through virtual goods, and therefore, Cyworld was a good platform for examining online identities. Third, members develop communities based on their shared interests and views; thus, there was a natural development of BCs (and hence knowledge sharing) at Cyworld.

### 4.1 Data collection

The data for the present study was collected through an online survey conducted over a period of 4 weeks. Using Cyworld’s search function, around 2000 members were selected and invited via e-mail to participate in the online survey. In addition, the respondents were assured that their responses would be kept confidential. Furthermore, the respondents were informed that there was no right or wrong answer so they could answer each question honestly.

One hundred and eighty-five complete and valid responses were collected. Although the response rate was only 10%, it was acceptable because there were no follow-up email reminders. In an online survey, a large number of the respondents generally do not respond. The majority of respondents in the present study were between 20 and 29 years of age (mean = 25 years, standard deviation = 7.1). As for the respondents’ profession, some of them were undergraduate students (26%) or high school students (20%) while others were professionals (21%). On average, the members had 3.07 years (standard deviation = 1.67) of experience with Cyworld and 7.75 years (standard deviation = 2.39) of experience with using the Internet.

It was made clear that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions, thereby, reducing the chances of non-response bias creeping into the solution. Additionally, the survey period was only 1 month, which was not long enough for the respondents to respond in a biased manner. However, to properly substantiate the validity of the results, non-response bias was tested because it increased the validity of the analysis and results. According to Armstrong and Overton (1977), non-response bias is assessed by testing for the differences between early and late respondents since late respondents are almost similar to non-respondents. The non-response bias was assessed by comparing early and late respondents (i.e., those who replied during the first 2 weeks and during the last 2 weeks), T-tests showed that the early respondents and late respondents did not differ significantly (p < 0.01) in terms of age, Internet experience, or Cyworld experience. Mann–Whitney tests also did not reveal any significant differences (p < 0.01) in the gender ratio between the two respondent groups.

### 4.2 Instrument development

In developing the measurement instrument, existing validated scales and empirical procedures were adapted to the context of the BC. Scales for BC involvement were adapted from Kyle, Graef, Manning, and Bacon (2004). The scales for online kindness, online social skills, and online creativity were adapted from Scott (1965), and the scales for online knowledge contribution were adapted from Igbria, Parasuraman, and Baroudi (1996).

Two knowledge management (KM) researchers reviewed the survey instrument and checked its face validity. Given that the items for measuring the constructs were adapted from various sources, all the measurement items were subjected to a two-stage conceptual validation exercise. A sorting exercise was done with four graduate students acting as judges. All of them placed the items onto the intended constructs. Finally, the measurement instrument was reviewed in a focus group of ten Cyworld members to check for any ambiguity of wording or format. The measurement items were anchored on the 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). The final survey instrument is shown in Appendix A.

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3 In 2006, Cyworld received the Wharton Infosys Business Transformation Award for its society wide transformation of interpersonal interaction.
5. Data analysis and results

5.1. Instrument validation

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using VARIMAX rotation was conducted in SPSS 16.0 to validate the survey instrument. All the items were loaded on distinct factors with Eigen values greater than 1.0, explaining 81.40% of the total variance. Next, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) using PLS was done. Convergent validity was established by examining composite reliability (CR), Cronbach’s $\alpha$, and the average variance extracted (AVE) (Gefen, Straub, & Boudreau, 2000). As shown in Table 3, CR and Cronbach’s $\alpha$ for all the constructs exceeded 0.7. The AVE for each construct was greater than 0.5. Thus, the results established that the items demonstrated convergent validity.

The discriminant validity of the measurement model was checked by comparing the squared root of AVE for each construct with the correlations between that construct and other constructs. If the squared root of AVE was greater than the correlations between the construct and other constructs, then it indicated discriminant validity. As shown in Table 4, the squared root of AVE for each construct exceeded the correlations between that construct and the other constructs. Hence, the discriminant validity of the instrument was established.

5.2. Hypotheses testing

To test the moderating effect of the hypotheses as well as the main effect of the hypotheses, hierarchical moderated multiple regression (HMMR) (Saunders, 1956) was used. This method is the preferred statistical method for examining moderator effects when either the predictor or the moderator variable is measured on a continuous scale (Aguinis, 1995). The results are shown in Table 5. The first step in HMMR was to test the effects of control variables on online knowledge contribution. The second step was to test the effects of main factors on online knowledge contribution. The present study found that three factors (online involvement, online social skills, and online creativity) had significant effects on online knowledge contribution, explaining 40.7% of the variance. Therefore, H1 (BC involvement), H3 (online social skills), and H4 (online creativity) were supported, but H2 (online kindness) was not supported.

The third step of HMMR analysis was to test the full model by adding interaction terms to the main model. Before fitting the data into a regression model, the interaction terms were standardized. This procedure was intended to reduce problems associated with multicollinearity among the variables in the regression equation. The present study saw a significant increase of $R^2$ in the full model compared to the main model ($\Delta R^2 = 0.14, F = 1.5, p < 0.05$). The results, thus, revealed that the BC involvement moderates the effect of online kindness on online knowledge contribution ($\beta = 0.13$) and the effect of online creativity on online knowledge contribution ($\beta = −0.15$). These results support H5 (the moderating effect of BC involvement on the relationship between online social skills and online knowledge contribution) and H7 (the moderating effect of BC involvement on the relationship between online creativity and online knowledge contribution), but not H6 (the moderating effect of BC involvement on the relationship between online social skills and online knowledge contribution).

In addition, the data was tested for common method variance by using the Bentler and Bonnet test and Harman’s single-factor test as suggested by Podsakoff, Mackenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003). The Bentler and Bonnet test involves the estimation of three models and the comparisons between them, i.e., the null model (MM0) that has no underlying factor, a common-factor model measurement model (MM1), and the measurement model in the present study (MM2). A test of significance for the difference between the $F$ values of MM1 and MM2 shows that the fit of MM2 is statistically superior to the fit of MM1 ($p < 0.001$). It shows that the measurement model fits the data better than a single-factor model, a result that supports the validity of the constructs in the measurement model. Harman’s single-factor test involves an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of all the items to determine

### Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Factor analysis</th>
<th>AVE</th>
<th>CR</th>
<th>Cronbach’s $\alpha$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CRE1</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRE2</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRE3</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRE4</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.67</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INV1</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INV2</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INV3</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INV4</td>
<td>0.75</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIN1</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIN2</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIN3</td>
<td>0.77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIN4</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.73</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNO1</td>
<td>0.73</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNO2</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNO3</td>
<td>0.83</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC1</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC2</td>
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<tr>
<td>SOC3</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4

Correlations between constructs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Mean (Std. Dev.)</th>
<th>INV</th>
<th>KIN</th>
<th>SOC</th>
<th>CRE</th>
<th>KNO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INV</td>
<td>4.51 (1.58)</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIN</td>
<td>4.43 (1.25)</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC</td>
<td>4.56 (1.43)</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRE</td>
<td>4.32 (1.52)</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KNO</td>
<td>4.37 (1.56)</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Leading diagonal shows the squared root of average variance extracted (AVE) of each construct.
and share new ideas. Consistent with Chamberlain’s findings, creative members are motivated to contribute their ideas in the BC.

Second, online social skills and online creativity, which represent personal aspects of online identity, have significant influence on online knowledge contribution in a BC. This is consistent with social identity theory (Verkuyten & Hagendoorn, 1998), according to which the personal identity influences identity communication behavior (i.e., online knowledge contribution). Prior research also showed that involvement likely translates into commitment to the community and its members (Kyle et al., 2004). When this involvement increases, commitment to the focal BC and to its members becomes stronger. As a result, members participate in the focal BC more actively and display pro-social behavior. With more pro-social behavior toward the online group, individuals increase their knowledge contribution to the community.

Third, BC involvement moderates the relationship between online kindness and online knowledge contribution. However, BC involvement has a negative moderating effect on the relationship; members with high online creativity contribute less knowledge in the BC as their level of BC involvement increases. One possible reason is that creative people are constantly looking for edge in the BC as their level of BC involvement increases. One possible explanation for this insignificant direct effect is that online kindness itself is not enough to influence knowledge contribution behavior. This is because even those who are kind online may feel shy and uncomfortable in talking to strangers. People need to be further motivated to perform a helping behavior like knowledge contribution. For example, people in an unfamiliar environment might tend to have reservations about contributing their views. This explanation is supported by the results of the moderating effect of BC involvement on the relationship between online kindness and online knowledge contribution behavior. The present study found that individuals with online kindness contributed more knowledge online in the BC when they had a higher level of BC involvement. This is consistent with prior research (Frissbie et al., 2000) that found significant interaction effects between personality traits and social identity.

Fourth, BC involvement moderates the relationship between online creativity and online knowledge contribution. However, BC involvement has a negative moderating effect on the relationship; members with high online creativity contribute less knowledge in the BC as their level of BC involvement increases. One possible reason is that creative people are constantly looking for new ideas (Hirschman, 1985). Creative people are more interested in new and challenging environments that involve the opportunity to try out new things. When their BC involvement level is high in a particular BC, these creative members may already be very familiar with, and accustomed to, the environment. As a result, they may start looking for a new environment. Consequently, their motivation to contribute knowledge to the current community might lessen. Therefore, when involvement in the BC is high, members with online creativity might not want to contribute as much knowledge as they did earlier.

The present study found no significant moderating effect of BC involvement on the relationship between online social skills and online knowledge contribution. One possible explanation is that the effect of online social skills on online knowledge contribution is so strong that the moderating effect of BC involvement appears insignificant. MacDonald et al. (1998) proposed that social skills are important in social interaction that may influence knowledge whit ehether one general factor accounts for the majority of the variance. The test showed that the first factor accounts for less than 20% of the total variance. The present study further did principal component analysis using Varimax rotation; this revealed that each of the seven principal components explained — the range was from 13.78% to 18.54% — almost an equal amount of the 81.40% of the total variance. The test results show that the data collected for the present study did not suffer from common method variance.

### 6. Discussion and implications

#### 6.1. Discussion of findings

Some of the findings that could be of interest to academics and practitioners are presented here. First, BC involvement representing the social aspects of online identity has a significant effect on online knowledge contribution in a BC. This is consistent with social identity theory (Verkuyten & Hagendoorn, 1998), according to which the social identity influences identity communication behavior (i.e., online knowledge contribution). Prior research also showed that involvement likely translates into commitment to the community and its members (Kyle et al., 2004). When this involvement increases, commitment to the focal BC and to its members becomes stronger. As a result, members participate in the focal BC more actively and display pro-social behavior. With more pro-social behavior toward the online group, individuals increase their knowledge contribution to the community.

Second, online social skills and online creativity, which represent personal aspects of online identity, have significant influence on online knowledge contribution in a BC. This finding is also consistent with social identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000), according to which the personal identity influences identity communication behavior (i.e., online knowledge contribution). Especially, the significant effect of online social skills on knowledge contribution is consistent with the findings of Han, Zheng, and Xu (2007). Socially adept members find it easy to communicate with others online. Moreover, they happily contribute their views and help others. Online creativity is also significantly related to online knowledge contribution. Chamberlain (1985) categorizes creativity as a self-actualizing factor that encourages members to generate and disseminate new ideas. Creative people are more likely to generate and share new ideas. Consistent with Chamberlain’s findings (1985), creative members are motivated to contribute their ideas in the BC.

Third, BC involvement moderates the relationship between online kindness and online knowledge contribution although online kindness, which represents the personal aspect of online identity, does not significantly influence online knowledge contribution. One possible explanation for this insignificant direct effect is that online kindness itself is not enough to influence knowledge contribution behavior. This is because even those who are kind online may feel shy and uncomfortable in talking to strangers. People need to be further motivated to perform a helping behavior like knowledge contribution. For example, people in an unfamiliar environment might tend to have reservations about contributing their views. This explanation is supported by the results of the moderating effect of BC involvement on the relationship between online kindness and online knowledge contribution behavior. The present study found that individuals with online kindness contributed more knowledge online in the BC when they had a higher level of BC involvement. This is consistent with prior research (Frissbie et al., 2000) that found significant interaction effects between personality traits and social identity.

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### Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Control model</th>
<th>Main model</th>
<th>Full model</th>
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<tr>
<td>Control effects</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>–0.10</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profession</td>
<td>–0.09</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet Experience</td>
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<td>–0.02</td>
<td>–0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyworld Experience</td>
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<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main effect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BC involvement (INV)</td>
<td>0.20&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.22&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online kindness (KIN)</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online social skills (SOC)</td>
<td>0.34&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.33&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online creativity (CRE)</td>
<td>0.16&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>0.16&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderating effects</td>
<td>INV + KIN</td>
<td>0.13&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>INV + SOC</td>
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<td>–0.03</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>INV + CRE</td>
<td></td>
<td>–0.15&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<tr>
<td>R²</td>
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<td>0.453</td>
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<tr>
<td>ΔR²</td>
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<td>0.014</td>
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<tr>
<td>F Value</td>
<td>32.37&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1.50&lt;sup&gt;d&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup> p < 0.1.<br>
<sup>b</sup> p < 0.05.<br>
<sup>c</sup> p < 0.01.<br>
<sup>d</sup> p < 0.001.
contribution behavior. However, the strength of social skills is seldom discussed. The present study reported that people with social skills could easily communicate and get along with all kinds of people. Therefore, it hardly matters whether they have a high or low level of BC involvement. They could easily perform helping behaviors regardless of their level of BC involvement. BC involvement, therefore, does not significantly moderate the relationship between social skills and knowledge contribution behavior.

6.2. Limitations and future research

The results of the present study must be interpreted against its limitations. First, the data for the present study was collected from members of Cyworld, which essentially provides a platform for several BCs. It would be useful to replicate the present study across a variety of BCs and online groups for the generalizability. Future studies can also select a specific type of BC (e.g., a travel knowledge-sharing BC, investment knowledge-sharing BC, or medical knowledge-sharing BC) to test our model. Second, the present study identifies BC involvement as a factor representing the social aspect of online identity and three other constructs representing the personal aspects of online identity. Although the present study selected three constructs from the subtypes of values regarding online personal identity, future studies can identify and test other personal constructs. Fourth, other factors (e.g., BC characteristics) in addition to online identity may motivate online knowledge contribution. Third, the present study could only collect 185 responses out of 2000 members, which may be low in terms of response rate. However, since this is normal in online studies, this may not critically influence the results of the present study. Future research needs to test the combined effects of the motivators and online identity on online knowledge contribution.

6.3. Implications for research

The present study has several implications for theory. First, from a theoretical perspective, several studies have focused upon knowledge contribution in an online context. However, their main focus generally has been to identify the motivators of knowledge contribution (Chiu et al., 2006; Hew & Har, 2007; Kankanahalli et al., 2005; Kim & Han, 2009; Wang & Fesenmaier, 2004; Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Yu & Chu, 2007). Ma and Agarwall's (2007) study was an exception in its explanation of how perceived identity verification affects online knowledge contribution. However, there is an overall lack of clarity in understanding the characteristics of knowledge contributors and the effect of the personal and social characteristics of those contributors on their knowledge contribution behavior in an online context. Hence, the salient contribution of the present study was the development and testing of a theoretical model that explains knowledge contribution in a BC. People behave so as to communicate their identities (Leary, 1995). Thus, identity leads to human behavior. It is one of the first studies to systematically examine identity exploration, identity formation, and identity communication in the context of BCs. Online identity has provided further insights into understanding online behavior, especially online knowledge contribution.

The present study highlights another key theoretical implication in terms of social identity theory. This theory was developed to explain the development of identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and its subsequent behavior (Stets & Burke, 2000; Verkuyten & Hagendoorn, 1998). The present study contributes to previous research by demonstrating the application of social identity theory in knowledge management. The present study developed a construct of online identity by classifying online identity into online social identity and online personal identity by identifying constructs that represent the personal and social aspects of online identity in a BC context. In addition, it has helped explain how the identified constructs affect online knowledge contribution.

The findings of the present study highlight, from a social identity perspective, the salient role of BC involvement in determining members’ online knowledge contribution. Additionally, the present study highlights the salient roles of online creativity and online social skills as the determinants of online knowledge contribution from an online personal identity perspective. Furthermore, the present study finds a positive moderating effect of BC involvement on the relationship between online kindness and online knowledge contribution and a negative moderating effect of BC involvement on the relationship between online creativity and online knowledge contribution. The study, thus, contributes towards a rich understanding of knowledge contribution in a BC.

6.4. Implications for practice

From a practical perspective, the present study revealed that BC involvement is of vital importance to one’s online knowledge contribution. Therefore, organizers of BCs need to further increase the stickiness of the BCs so that members will have a higher level of involvement and thus increase their knowledge contribution. To enhance the level of BC involvement, providers of BCs need to improve the usefulness of the BC and to provide members with a pleasurable user experience (Gupta & Kim, 2007). In addition, BC organizers should actively organize and initiate interesting discussions among the members and by continuing their participation in the BC are more easily integrated into the community. These tactics might improve members’ levels of involvement.

The present study also showed that a member’s online social skills are crucial to encouraging online knowledge contribution in a BC. Organizers of BCs should pay special attention to members who are socially less skillful. Since online social skills are not necessarily the same as offline social skills, organizers of BCs should formulate innovative strategies to improve members’ online social skills so that even less socially skillful members find a way to communicate well with others in the online space. For example, organizers of BCs can provide guidelines or online tutorials to educate members on how to decorate their blogs and display their interests and hobbies to attract other members in the BC. BC providers can also organize more online and offline meetings to encourage and facilitate interaction among members. In this way, BC providers can help members in improving their social skills and build their self-esteem.

In addition, the present study revealed that creative members could become doubled-edged swords for a BC. If organizers of BCs manage their creative members well, such members will contribute many new ideas to the community, and in turn, attract others and enlarge the knowledge pool. On the other hand, if organizers of BCs do not manage them well, they may migrate to competing BCs. Therefore, organizers of BCs can attempt to provide a lively experience to its members by organizing competitions like “best blog design” competitions or “best Valentine’s Day greetings” together with rewards to keep members – especially creative members – attention. For example, Cyworld publicizes the ratings of each blog and, from time to time, it organizes competitions like best blog design and best design of community photos. In this way, creative members remain interested and continue to participate actively. Their innovative ideas further attract members to the BC.

7. Conclusion

The present study was an attempt to examine knowledge contribution behavior in BCs from the perspective of an online identity. Based on social identity theory, the present study
conceptualized online identity from both personal and social aspects of the online identity. The present study differentiated online identity with offline identity and developed a conceptual framework of online identity that explains members' online knowledge contribution behavior in a BC. The examination of knowledge contribution from the perspective of online identity is a valuable addition to existing literature. A few meaningful, interesting, and practical insights for organizers of BCs were revealed through the present study by explaining the personal and social aspects of online identity that influence BC members' online knowledge contribution behavior and the mechanisms of such influence.

References


