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## Precursors of trust in virtual health communities: A hierarchical investigation

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### ABSTRACT

Lack of trust can have a negative influence on consumers' willingness to share and adopt information in virtual health communities. However, not much is known about factors that influence the development of trust in such communities. This paper examined precursors of trust in virtual health communities. Data were collected from 361 users of virtual health community sites in South Africa. Structural equation modelling using version 23 of AMOS was used to analyse the data. The findings show that information usefulness, community responsiveness and shared vision have significant influence on consumers' overall trust in health-related virtual communities. The findings, however, show differences in the extent to which precursor variables influence different dimensions of overall trust. The study provides insights that can help managers of such sites to effectively foster the development of trust in their communities.

### 1. Introduction

Growing need for online engagement has over the past decade fuelled a proliferation in online-based Social Networking Services (SNSs). SNSs are varied in nature with some primarily targeted at users who already have relationships offline, e.g. friends, relatives and other associates [39]. Other SNSs, however, facilitate formation of relationship among strangers. Individuals are in such cases brought together by issues of common interest often not related to offline interactions [22]. In coming together, they form what are known as online communities or virtual communities. Of interest, in this study are health-related virtual communities. In this study, a virtual health community is defined as a collective of individuals who communicate with each other on health-related matters through dedicated sites in the Internet. Common interest around health issues is what brings individuals together as members of a virtual health community. According to Zhao et al. [72], these sites serve as social spaces that enable people to meet, share information including experiences and advice and provide emotional support to one another. The inter-personal interactions that take place help patients and carers feel less alone and more empowered to make better decisions that relate to managing health conditions faced by them.

The ability of any virtual health community members to derive these benefits largely depends on members' willingness to open up to each other and contribute to discussions on the platform. Many researchers, however, note that because of the perceptions of risk, people in general are reluctant to open up to strangers more so to people they

meet online and that they do not personally know [11]. Studies by Brengman and Karimov [6] and Warren et al. [69] among others note the need for managers of online sites to find ways of fostering trust if they are to attract and/or retain users to their sites. Trust is also noted to be a critical element for ensuring team success and effectiveness [7]. Lack of physical contact and rules that can help guarantee knowledge-sharing behaviour makes the virtual environment an inherently risky one. In situations of risk, people are known to resort to trust as a method of reducing uncertainties [74].

According to Cho et al. [16], trust refers to 'the willingness of the trustor (evaluator) to take risk based on a subjective belief that a trustee (evaluatee) will exhibit reliable behaviour to maximize the trustor's interest under uncertainty (e.g. ambiguity due to conflicting evidence and/or ignorance caused by complete lack of evidence) of a given situation based on the cognitive assessment of past experience with the trustee' (p. 28:5). Chang et al. [11] defined trust as 'a psychological state that allows a person to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of others' (p. 440). It is known to help rule out undesirable, however possible, future opportunistic behaviours of others [26,67]. A review of literature shows that trust exerts significant influence in facilitating greater cooperation [21], commitment [34] and sharing of information between social and economic parties [10,53].

While the importance of trust in social and economic relations is widely acknowledged, a number of limitations in literature on trust affect knowledge development in this area. One limitation relates to how trust is defined and conceptualised. As noted by Sankowska and

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Paliszkievicz [61] and Whipple et al. [70], some studies on trust conceptualise it as a one dimensional construct, while others conceptualise it as a multidimensional construct. A review of literature further shows that even where multi-dimensional perspective is considered in conceptualising trust, variations and lack of consensus characterise how this is done. This renders current contributions fragmented rather than cumulative and increases the need for studies conducted in different contexts confirming important dimensions. Furthermore, although trust has been widely studied in literature, the way in which trust develops remains an under-researched area [31] more so in virtual communities [54]. This is due to lack of research focused on the development of trust in virtual communities and due to the fact that studies in relationship marketing literature mainly focus on trust as an antecedent variable in trying to understand consumer behaviour. Given its importance in driving desirable interpersonal and group behaviours [24,36], it is important for researchers and managers to have a good understanding of antecedents of trust in virtual communities [54], especially virtual health communities. As noted by Leimeister et al. [42] compared to other types of virtual communities, high involvement communities such as communities of patients cannot be nurtured in the absence of high levels of trust. Patient communities are considered high involvement platforms because they commonly involve sharing of private personal information including intimate feelings, personal concerns and personal experiences, some of which may be associated with a negative stigma [57,40]. A study by Bansal et al. [3] found that the decision to disclose personal information online is highly influenced by trust.

This paper aims at contributing to this understanding by examining precursors of trust in virtual health communities. The key questions addressed in this paper are as follows:

- Are ability, integrity and benevolence distinct dimensions of trust in virtual health communities?
- What are the significant precursors of trust in virtual health communities at both overall and dimensional level?

The specific objectives of the paper are (a) to explore the distinct dimensions of trust in virtual health communities, (b) to examine significant precursors of trust at overall level and at dimensional level and (c) to explore the differential effects of precursors of trust on each dimension of trust and on overall trust among members of virtual health communities.

The paper has been organised such that the next section provides a theoretical framework to the study, and this is followed by description of the methodology and presentation of findings. Thereafter, findings are discussed and their managerial implications outlined. Finally, conclusions drawn from the study, its contributions to theory and limitations and suggestions for future research are presented.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The study made use of the social exchange theory and the common bond theory to understand trust and its precursors in the communities. The reason for integrating the two theories is to enable a more comprehensive understanding of factors influencing trust in virtual health communities. Integration of theories is known to help provide a broader understanding of consumer behaviour [35,65]. Both theories, i.e. the social exchange theory and the common bond theory, are useful to understand the dynamics of social relations. The social exchange theory focuses specifically on benefits associated with social relations and the influence of such benefits on behaviour [19]. The common bond theory focuses on the importance of attachment in explaining group member behaviour [58]. The two theories thus complement each other. By integrating them, this study comprehensively examines the influence of both benefits and attachment factor of shared vision to explain trust in virtual health communities. The next two sub-sections look at these theories in more detail.

### 2.1. Social exchange theory

Originating in the 1950s, the social exchange theory has its roots in the fields of psychology, sociology and anthropology [19,63]. Coulson et al. [19] observed that at its core, the theory holds that ‘all social life can be treated as an exchange of tangible and intangible resources and rewards between actors’ (p. 135). The theory posits that social interaction at inter-personal and organisational levels is contingent upon associated resources and rewards [63]. In looking at resources and rewards, the social exchange theory recognises that exchange relationships involve some level of economic and social interdependence. This interdependence makes parties involved somewhat vulnerable to the relationship [47]. Vulnerability brings with it costs of engaging in exchange relationships.

The fact that exchange relationships entail some vulnerability makes trust core to the social exchange theory [30,47]. The theory argues that trust helps reduce costs of interaction. Empirical evidence abounds in support of the positive influence that trust has on lowering of costs in exchange relationships [12,52]. Trust is noted to facilitate voluntary cooperation [56]. Rewards, however, are said to be helpful in building trust and facilitating ongoing social exchange [51]. They help enhance calculative basis for trusting an exchange partner.

Researchers including Zhao et al. [72] and Chen and Hung [14] pointed out that the key benefit that attracts people to virtual communities is to do with knowledge growth through information sharing. The opportunity to get feedback from many people and to get it fast is another key benefit that attracts people to virtual communities [55,59]. This paper argues that these potential benefits are rewards that can serve as important bases upon which trust in virtual communities can be built. Accordingly, the study postulates that information usefulness and responsiveness are important precursors of trust in virtual health communities (refer to Fig. 1).

### 2.2. Common bond theory

A review of literature shows that trust can also be built on the basis of the characteristics of the parties involved. The characteristic base for building trust stresses the importance of understanding similarities between parties to explain the existence or lack of trust [44,46]. Gefen [29] and Ziegler and Golbeck [75] observed that similarity facilitates the formation of feelings of shared ethical principles and behaviours and that in doing so helps create ties of friendship and trust. This argument is in line with the common bond theory. Derived from social psychology studies on voluntary groups, the common bond theory focuses on understanding precursors and consequences of group attachment [58]. Research using common bond theory identifies ‘similarity’ as one of the key precursors of group attachment. People are known to like others who are similar to them in terms of needs, preferences, values and attitude. People can thus be similar in different ways. Hsu et al. [38] note that similarity in terms of shared vision in voluntary groups has a positive influence on the levels of trust. Accordingly, the proposed model in this study includes shared vision as a precursor of trust (refer to Fig. 1).

### 2.3. Proposed conceptual model

#### 2.3.1. Conceptualising trust

This study took a multi-dimensional perspective in looking at trust. Doing so has the advantage of enabling one identify the important basis for building individual dimensions of trust. A review of literature, however, shows lack of consensus on what constitutes important dimensions of trust. Variations exist on the number and actual dimensions of trust that researchers consider to be important. For example, Nicolaou et al. [50] argued for the importance of two dimensions, namely goodwill and competence, to understand the perceptions of risk in electronic exchanges of data. Wang et al. [68] and Gefen et al. [26],

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