

## Trust, Empathy, Social Identity, and Contribution of Knowledge within Patient Online Communities

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### Introduction

Health care providers such as Mayo Clinic, Kaiser Permanente, Cleveland Medical Center and Johns Hopkins are providing access to online health communities.

In 2009 61% of American adults looked for health information online.

41% of adults used online groups, blogs or websites to find "someone like me."

### Hypothesis

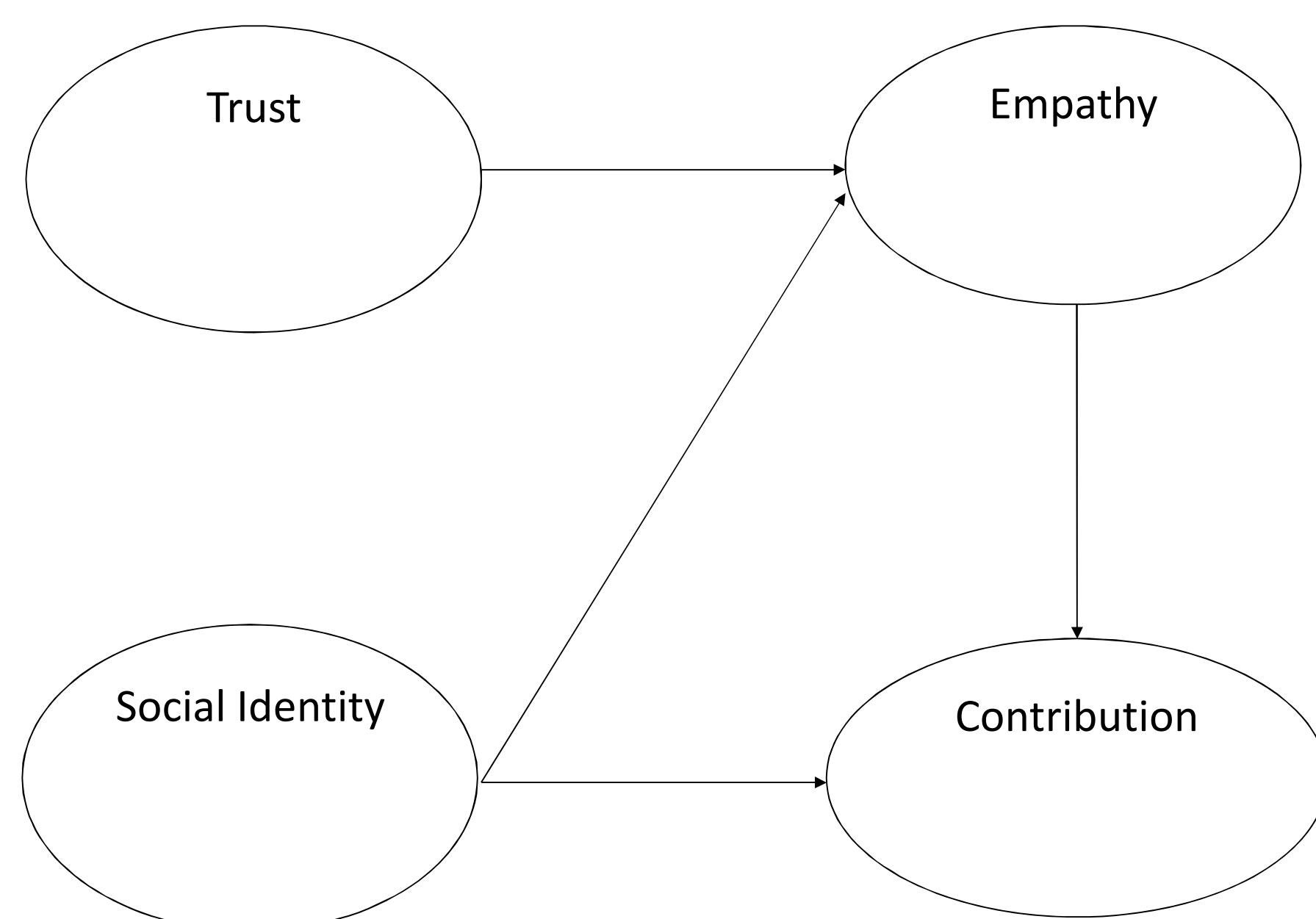
*Hypothesis 1: Trust is positively related to empathy in patient online communities (POC).*

*Hypothesis 2: Social identity is positively related to expressions of empathy within patient online communities.*

*Hypothesis 3: Development of shared social identity is positively related to the likelihood that an individual will share personal knowledge or experiences in a POC.*

*Hypothesis 4: Empathetic exchange is positively related to the contribution of information and knowledge in patient online communities.*

### Model



### Objectives

To examine the effect of trust and social identity on empathy for others with similar health conditions

To determine the extent to which empathy in turn motivates members to contribute knowledge and support to other members of online communities.

**Table 1**  
Description of the Study Respondents

Characteristic	Breast cancer	Non-breast cancer			Overall
		Fibromyalgia	Persistent headaches	Other	
Number of respondents	97	36	24	28	185
Average age	55.63	46.91	47.91	41.32	50.35
Gender (% female)	98.9	86.1	87.5	96.4	94.6
Education (high school and less than high school: college: master and more than master) (%)	6.8 : 55.7 : 38.4	16.7 : 72.3 : 11.1	4.2 : 50 : 45.8	22.2 : 70.4 : 7.4	10.9 : 61.1 : 27
Average duration of their participation (months)	43.19	31.65	31.58	16.14	34.80 months
Frequency of visit (less than 4 times a month : 2-3 times a week : daily) (%)	3.6 : 12.5 : 81.8	13.9 : 19.4 : 66.7	20.8 : 12.5 : 66.7	25 : 10.7 : 64.3	12.4 : 14.6 : 73

Note: 28 respondents didn't disclose their POC membership. Therefore, these respondents were categorized as other.

### Results

Trust and social identity are necessary antecedents of the development of empathy in online communities.

Empathy, in turn, motivates members to contribute knowledge and support to other participants.

### Implications

Developers of online support groups should design the website so that it effectively facilitate the creation of trust and social identity in order to promote meaningful member contributions.