Better Collaborating!
Groups Facing Information in Online Contexts

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ABSTRACT

Research on how people collaborate in groups for sharing, retrieving, managing and disseminating information is still an emergent field in Library and Information Science.

The purpose of this poster is presenting the research findings of my Master Thesis on Information and Knowledge Society at the Open University of Catalonia (UOC), which had the aim to study a specific case of collaborative information behavior in completely online groups that initiated, developed and completed a teamwork project in the virtual learning environment of the UOC's Virtual Campus.

The study methodologically developed a multidimensional analytical approach, built from a set of twelve interrelated variables in three dimensions. A field study was conducted using virtual ethnographic techniques.

Findings reveal that the collaborative information behavior in completely online groups seems to be particularly influenced by the factors related to the internal group dynamics (e.g. leadership style, degree of cohesion, or group rules).

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INTRODUCTION

Teamwork is encouraged nowadays as an imperative skill to better perform all critical factors, including information, that are involved in the project-based structures of many organizations.

The inherently collaborative nature of group activities generates new relationships with information which uncover collaborative informational behaviors when the groups search, retrieve, manage and disseminate information.

Karunakaran, Reddy and Spence[2] synthesize up to date theory and research produced on Collaborative Information Behavior (CIB) and propose a new definition (see fig. 1). Their *Model of Collaborative Information Behavior in Organizations* is one of the most recent contributions to CIB (see fig. 2).

Groups in online contexts show specific characteristics concerning how their members communicate to each other, how they use technology and how the group dynamics impacts on collaboration.

That is why research on collaborative information behavior in completely online groups reveals understandings of the phenomenon distinct from those related to face-to-face groups[1].
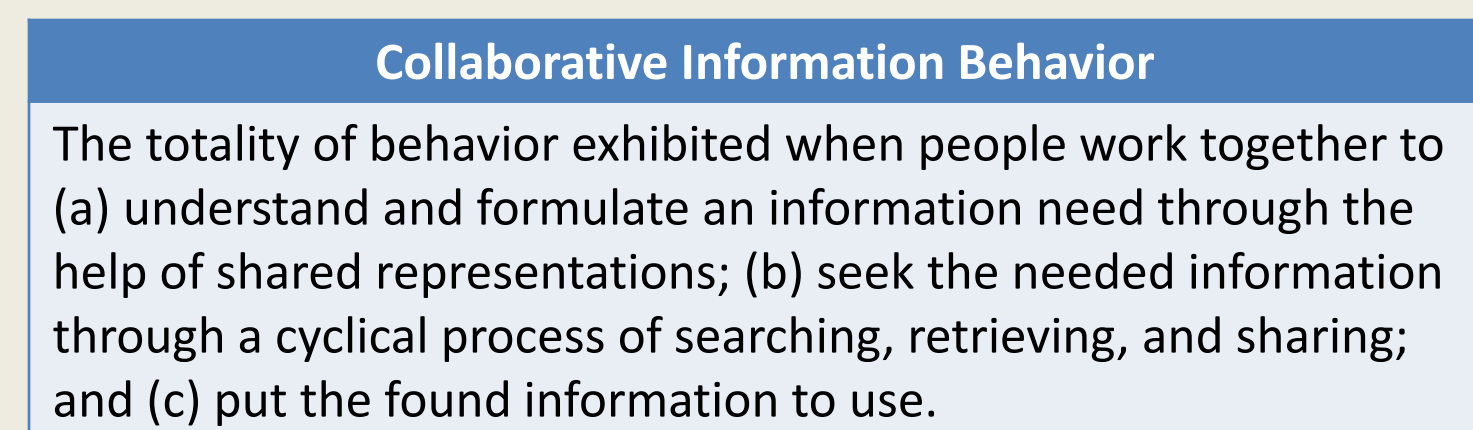
Collaborative Information Behavior

The totality of behavior exhibited when people work together to (a) understand and formulate an information need through the help of shared representations; (b) seek the needed information through a cyclical process of searching, retrieving, and sharing; and (c) put the found information to use.

Figure 1. Definition of Collaborative Information Behavior [2] (p. 2438)

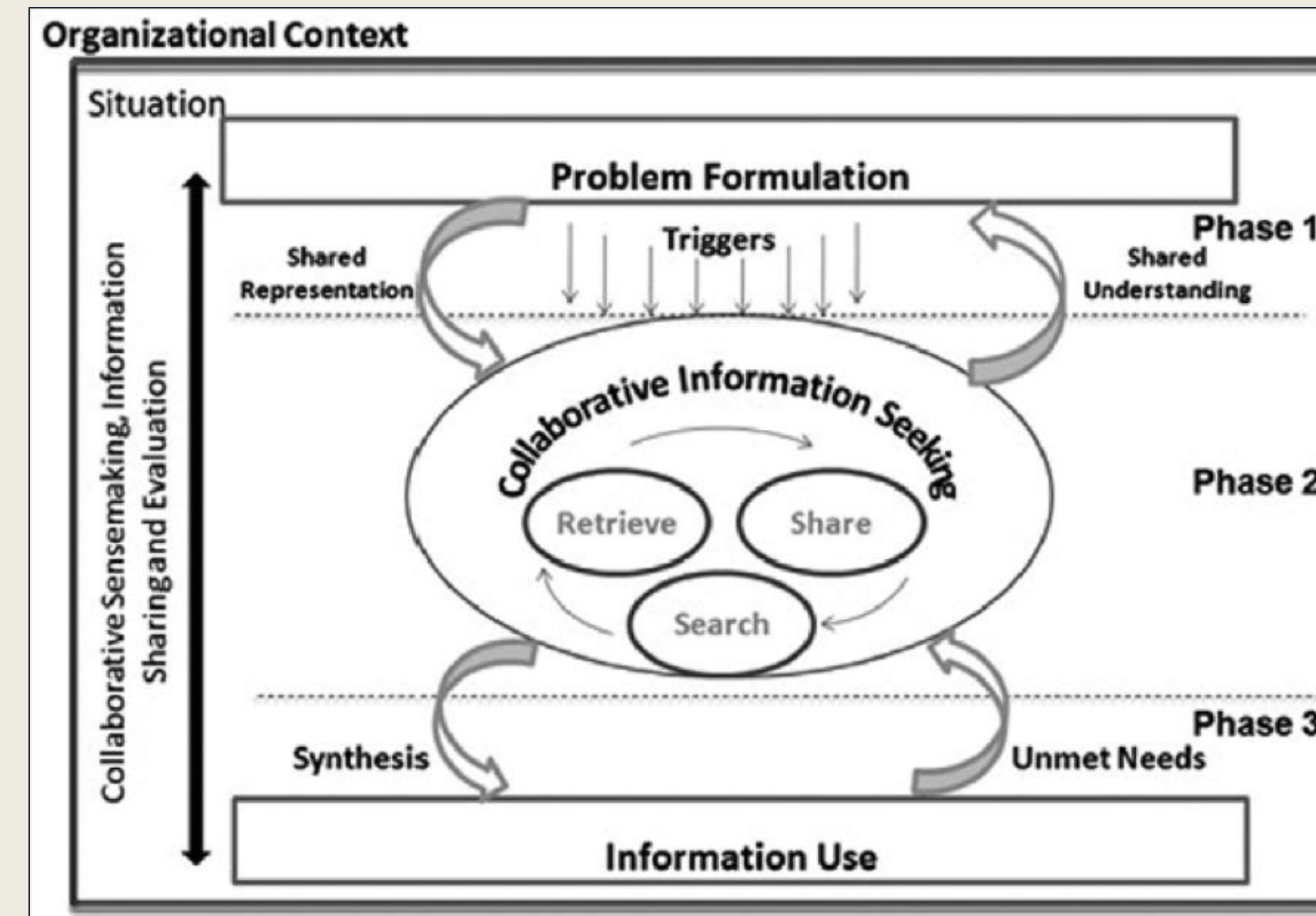*Image 1. Group networking*

Figure 2. Model of collaborative information behavior in organizations [2] (p. 2443)

METHODOLOGY

A multidimensional analytical approach was built based on twelve interrelated factors that the literature review uncovered as significantly relevant. Factors were categorized under three broad dimensions: communicative, social and technologic-informational (see fig. 3).

A field study was conducted based on virtual semi-structured interviews among a sample of three completely online groups. Content analysis techniques were applied to the qualitative data in order to inference and understand their meanings.
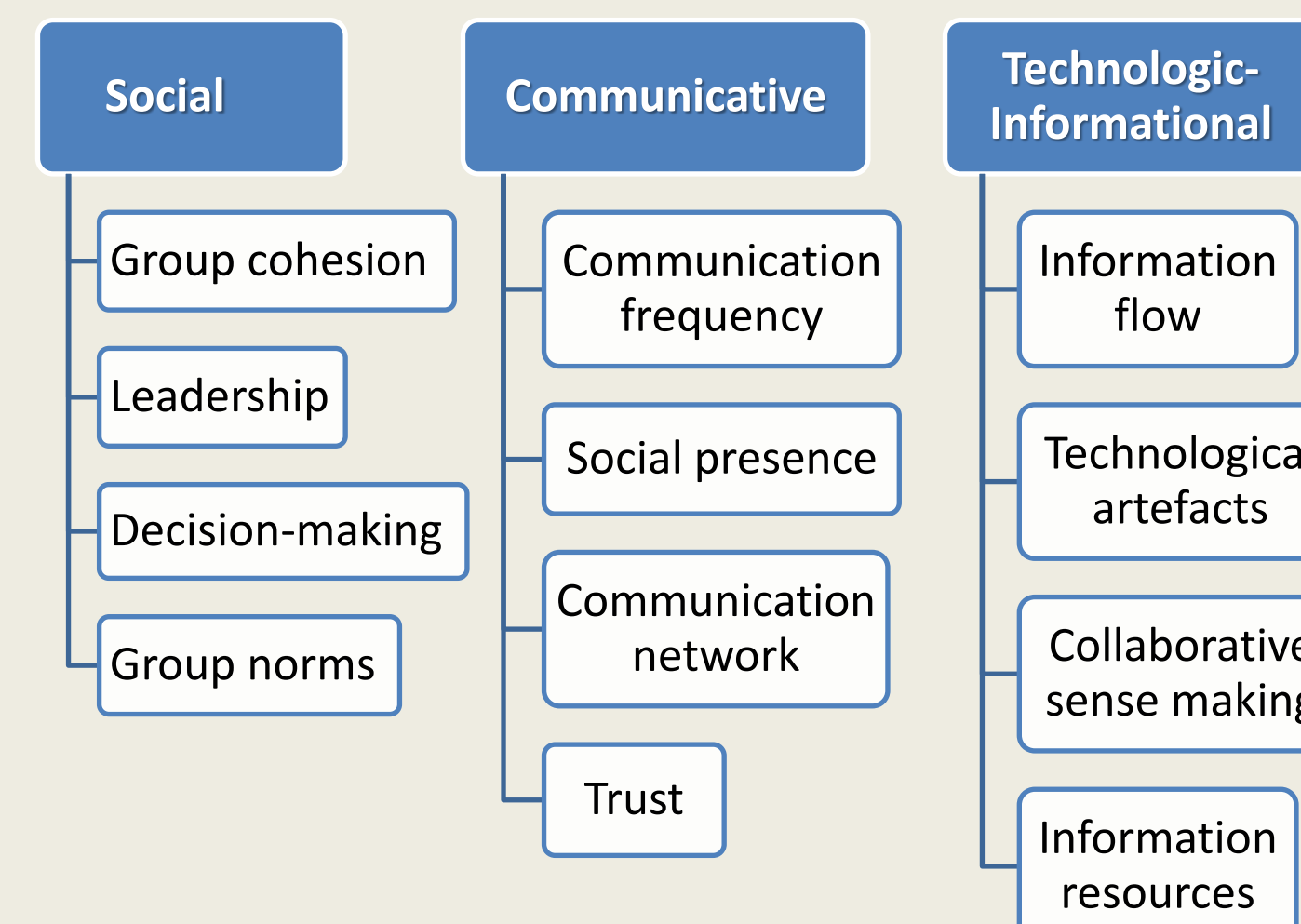

Figure 3. Multidimensional approach: dimensions and factors

RESULTS

Findings reveal that the leadership style has a significant effect on collaborative information behavior, facilitating or inhibiting the appearance of collaborative informational practices.

In groups where a shared leadership style emerges, group cohesion is higher and leads to a common and shared understanding about the informational needs, about the technological tools for sharing information, or about the information resources that should be sought.

Findings also uncover that collaborative information behavior is largely determined by the way that online groups use technology.

In particular, the results of this research reveal that mobile devices displace communications between group members out of the virtual learning environment, and this phenomenon has clear effects on collaboration: depending on the use of mobile devices, collaboration could be reinforced (because information flows become continuous), or could get weaker (because information overload tends to appear).

CONCLUSIONS

This research contributes a new multidimensional approach to the study of collaborative information behavior.

Results reinforce the need for a good balance between the three dimensions for a group to exhibit successful collaborative informational practices.

Specifically, collaborative information behavior in completely online groups seems to be particularly influenced by the socio-relational dimension, that is, the factors related to the internal group dynamics (e.g. leadership style, degree of cohesion, and group rules).

REFERENCES

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