

Does email communication increase participation in organizational decision making?

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The question of the organizational consequences of computer-mediated communication is very complex

After 30 years the debate did not reach yet any shared and definitive conclusions

Main theoretical perspectives in the debate on the effects of CMC

- **Technological determinism** (media characteristics approaches) (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Kiesler et al., 1984)
- **Emergent outcomes** (Orlikowski et al., 1995; Yates et al., 1999)
- **SIDE model** (Spears & Lea, 1994)

The “democratization argument”

Due to some technical features,
email enhances the uninhibited
participation of lower-level
employees in decision making
processes

that is

ePDM is higher than vertical
(bottom-up) F2F-PDM

Technical features of email

- Narrow bandwidth causes a limited transmission of status indicators (social cues) and information richness (non-verbal and para-verbal communication and instant feedback are prevented)
- Asynchronicity, rapid transmission and reply, text-based communication, dyadic and multiple simultaneous distributions

that is

email is a poor communication medium

Other implications

Email is inappropriate in complex interactions because its poorness cannot avoid ambiguity

however

Somebody argues that, in some complex interactions like negotiation settings, the possibility of overlooking personal and irrelevant cues improves task execution

Emergent outcomes

The actual use and real effects of ePDM depend on many contextual factors that, far beyond technical features, mediate the structure and evolution of human communication.

Thus

The true outcomes of ePDM depend on such factors and its predictability (if any) rests on its analysis

SIDE model

It shares criticisms of the emergent outcomes approaches to technological determinism and adds that human communication is not necessarily or strongly channeled through personal (direct) connections but also through social (indirect) norms and common values, which are carried by weak cues as email

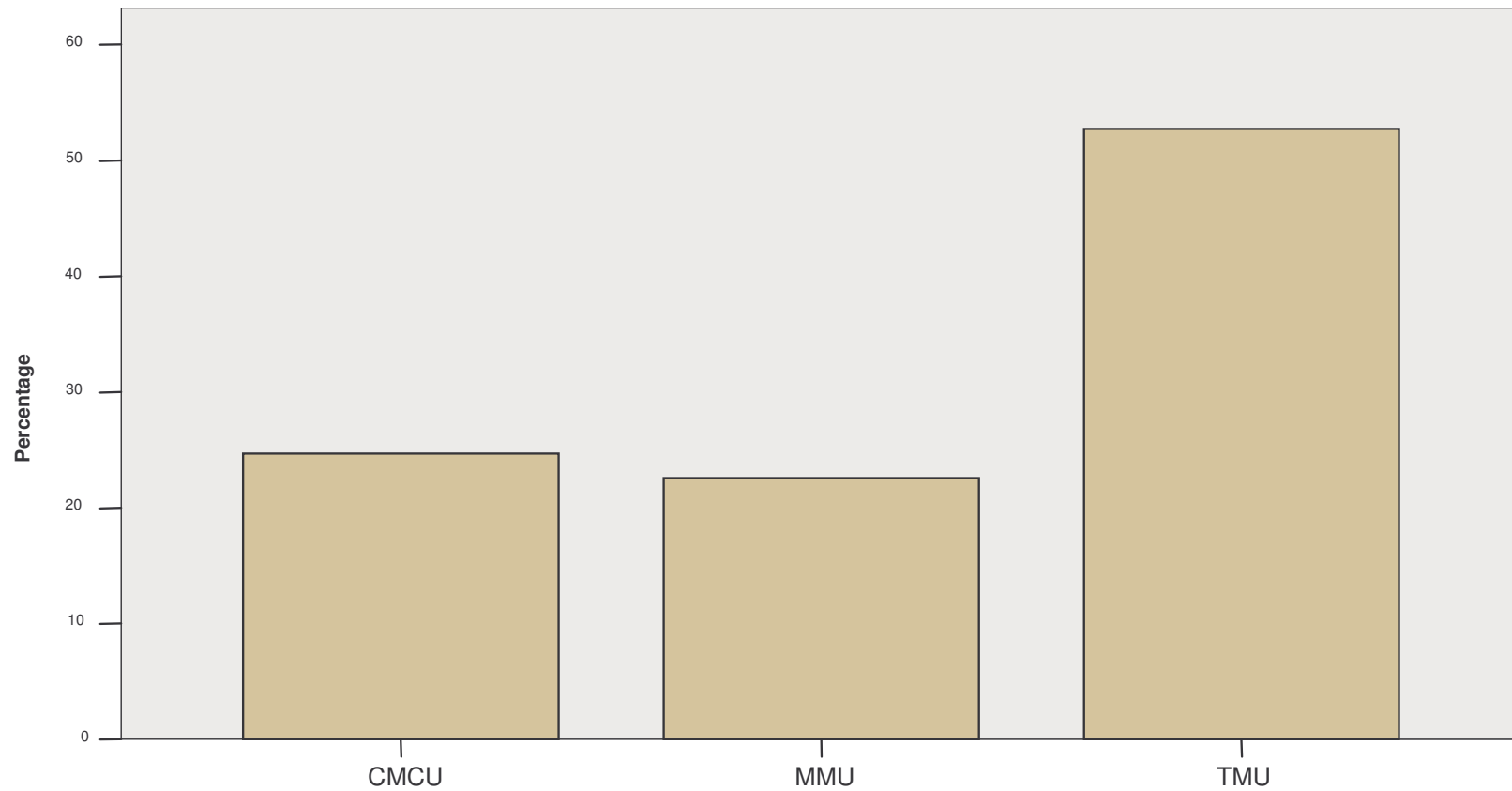
Dataset and methodology

- 590 respondents distributed over three European subsidiaries (I, NL, UK) of a leading American corporation in business software: hold control for technological, structural (roles & procedures) and business characteristics
- Multivariate and multi-dimensional statistics
- Behavior of three user types (Biggiero, 2008, www.ssrn.com)

ePDM of three user types

- CMCU - 82% use email 40-80%, 99% use F2F less than 40%
- MMU - 75% use email 40-80%, 79% use F2F less than 20-60%; 57% use fixed phone 20-60%; 59% use mobile phone 20-60%;
- TMU – 83% use email 20-60%; 76% use F2F 20-60%; 82% use fixed phone less than 40%; 78% use mobile phone less than 40%;

Distribution of user types

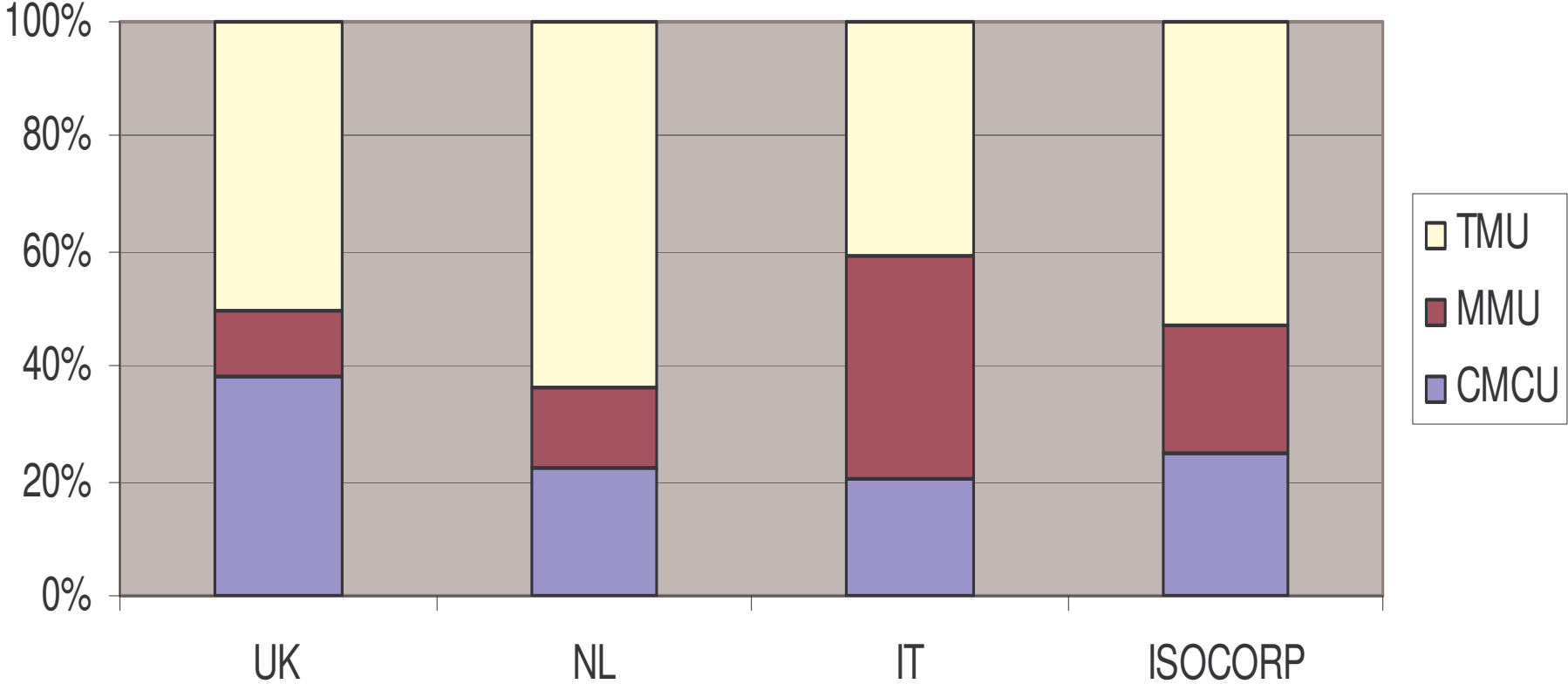


General result: low values assigned to ePDMs

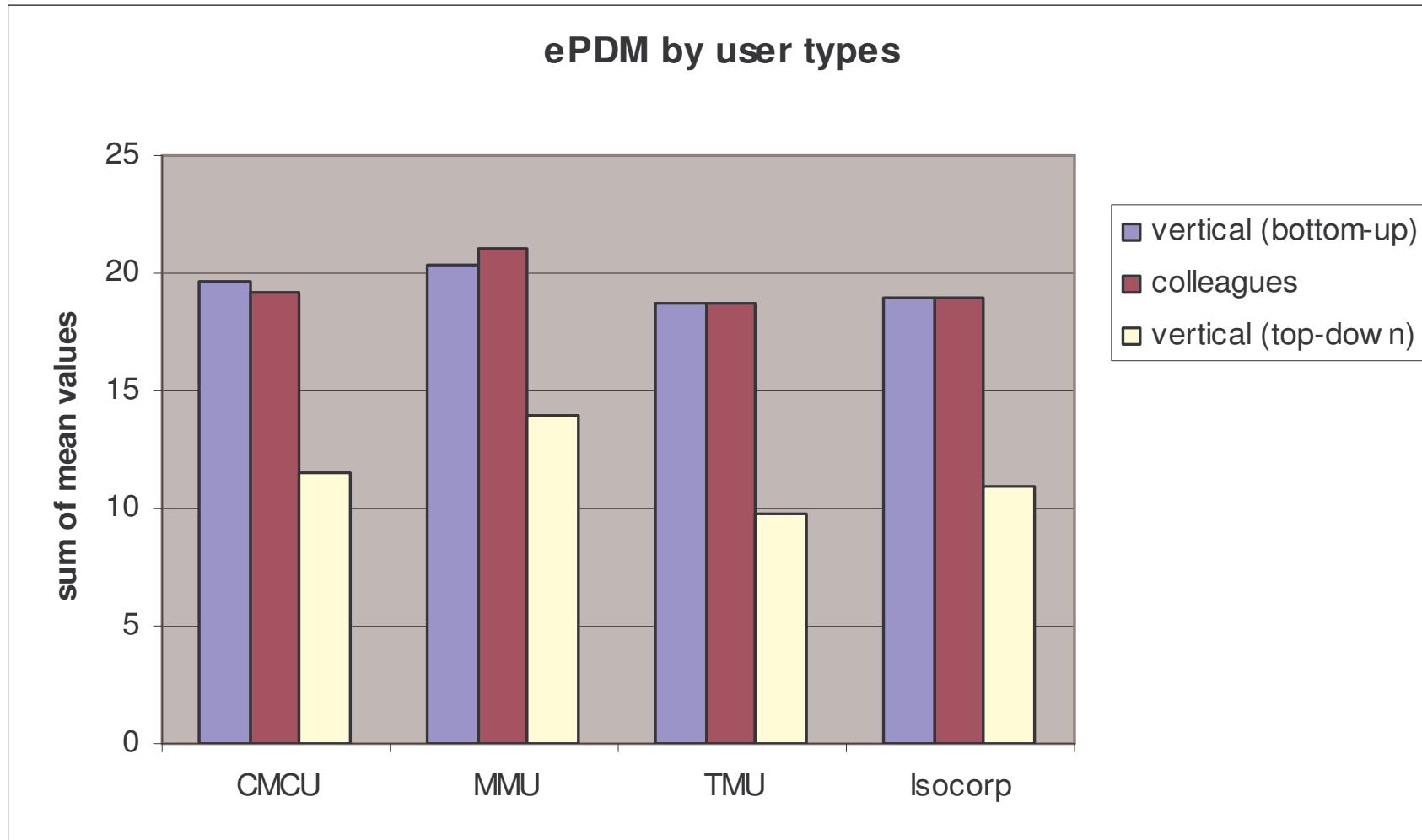
Out of 15 items concerning
the various aspects of ePDM,
only two are a little bit over
the mean value and one
coincides with the mean

It is controversial if this is a
failure of ePDM or of PDM

User types distribution across countries



CMCU and MMU perceive email to be more useful when participation in decision making takes place with superior respect to what is perceived by TMU



Feeling of being controlled

though employees do not perceive email communication as a serious menace to their own privacy, freedom or autonomy, they are aware of this danger

CMCU scores the highest level (the sum of mean values is 6.89) of fear to be controlled, respect to TMU (5.58) and MMU (5.65)

UK scores (7.15), Italy (5.96), NL (5.42)

Email use for vertical and horizontal communication
(and feeling of being controlled) differ across countries
Italy has the highest degree of dissimilarity

	Degree of dissimilarity between countries			
	WD	UK	NL	IT
WD	0.00	0.12	0.39	0.47
UK	0.12	0.00	0.53	0.32
NL	0.39	0.53	0.00	0.79
IT	0.47	0.32	0.79	0.00

Diversity

- The diversity of countries within user types is 5 times higher than that of user types within countries (the total degree of dissimilarity is respectively 15 and 3)
- Mostly dissimilar are IIT and NL for CMCU and MMU
- Mostly similar UK and IT for TMU

Conclusions (1)

1. email communication enhances bottom-up and horizontal participation in decision making;
2. employees are aware of the danger of using email for increasing control and surveillance;
3. the feeling of being controlled is not correlated to email extensive use;
4. country differences matter substantially and more than user types differences.

Conclusions (2)

- The democratization argument is confirmed to a limited extent: little help to Technological determinism approaches
- Contextual factors and specifically national cultures do matter a lot
- Dark side of email communication is present
- Emergent approaches and SIDE model received support too

Legenda

email with superior to exchange info	Sup_exc_info
email with superior to manage me	sup_man_me
email with superior to manage them	sup_man-them
email with superior to support me	sup_supp_me
email with superior to share aims/interests	sup_share-aims
email with colleague to exchange info	coll_exc_info
email with colleague to manage me	coll_man_me
email with colleague to manage them	coll_man_them
email with colleague to support me	coll_supp_me
email with colleague to share aims/interests	coll_share_aims
email with subordinate to exchange info	sub_exc_info
email with subordinate to manage me	sub_man_me
email with subordinate to manage them	sub_man_them
email with subordinate to support me	sub_supp_me
email with subordinate to share aims/interests	sub_share_aims
email lets others keep track of me	keep_track
email increases control	in_control
email reduces control	red_control
i avoid email to avoid monitoring	avoid_monit