

Silicon law of oligarchy or democratic disruptor?

Patterns of member participation in the decision-making of digitally organized worker cooperatives.

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Worker co-ops strive for workplace democracy

Arguments for workplace democracy

- Economic
- Citizenship
- Ethical



Participation in decision-making as key to workplace democracy

→ Collective decision-making ensures that the will of the members ultimately rules

Problem of democratic organisation

Common pattern: participation elite versus inactive members

Is self-governance by workers inevitably transient?

- Iron law of oligarchy (Michels, 1911), degeneration thesis (Cornforth, 1995)



Previous research on drivers of member participation in worker co-ops

- Knowledge, skills, experience (Romero & Pérez, 2003; Summers & Chillas, 2021)
- Social relations to other members (Hernandez, 2006)
- Commitment to staying a member (Hoffmann, 2006)
- Smaller cooperative size in terms of membership (Ng & Ng, 2009)
- Class, gender, and race (Meyers & Vallas, 2016; Sobering, 2016)

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Digital mediation lowers democratic transaction costs

- Platform co-ops to expand workplace democracy in the economy?
- Interest by cooperative movement

Member participation in digitally organized worker co-ops

- Same old same old participation inequalities?
- Or is collective decision-making successfully facilitated...
 - ...on larger scales?
 - ...for less committed members?
 - ...in more loose-knit groups?
 - ...among members of diverse skill levels?



Research question

What explains the participation of members in the decision-making of digitally organized worker cooperatives?



Theory



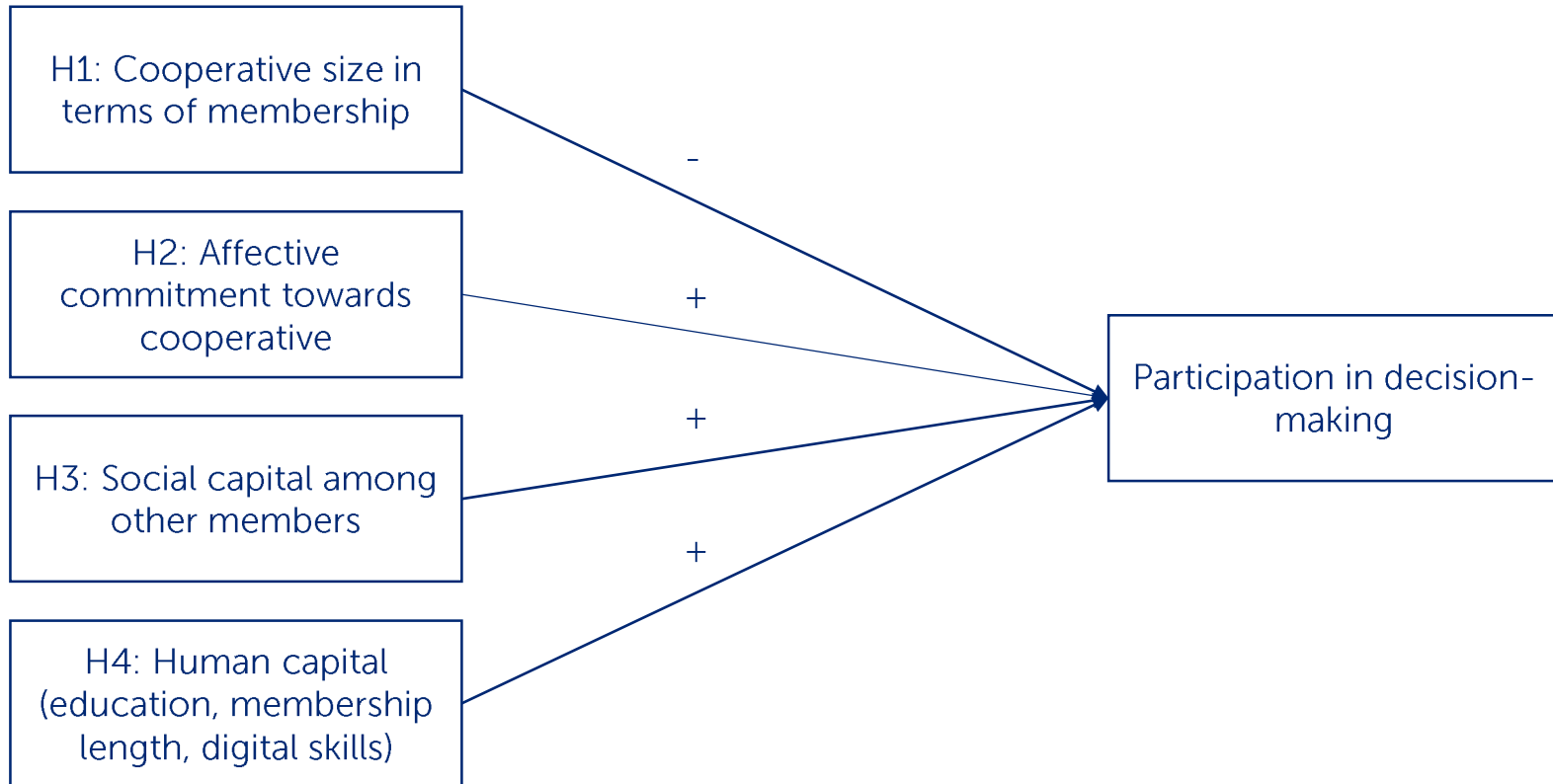
Social dilemma of member participation

- Full participation would best reflect the membership's preferences overall
- But individual members have little influence on their preferred decision outcomes and democratic transaction costs are typically non-zero
- Therefore: Inactivity in collective decision-making as the dominant strategy

Down's voter paradox (1957): participation is not completely absent

→ So what makes some members more willing and able to participate than others?

Hypotheses



Methodology

Survey among members of an Italian network of four worker cooperatives in the cultural, education and IT sectors ($n = 418$)

- General assembly meetings via videoconferencing
- Consultation of members via online polling
- Due to COVID-19 pandemic, other face-to-face communication was also restricted
- No conflation with other attempts to resist participation inequalities

Methodology

Dependent variable

- De Facto Participation Power scale (Weber et al., 2009)

Independent variables

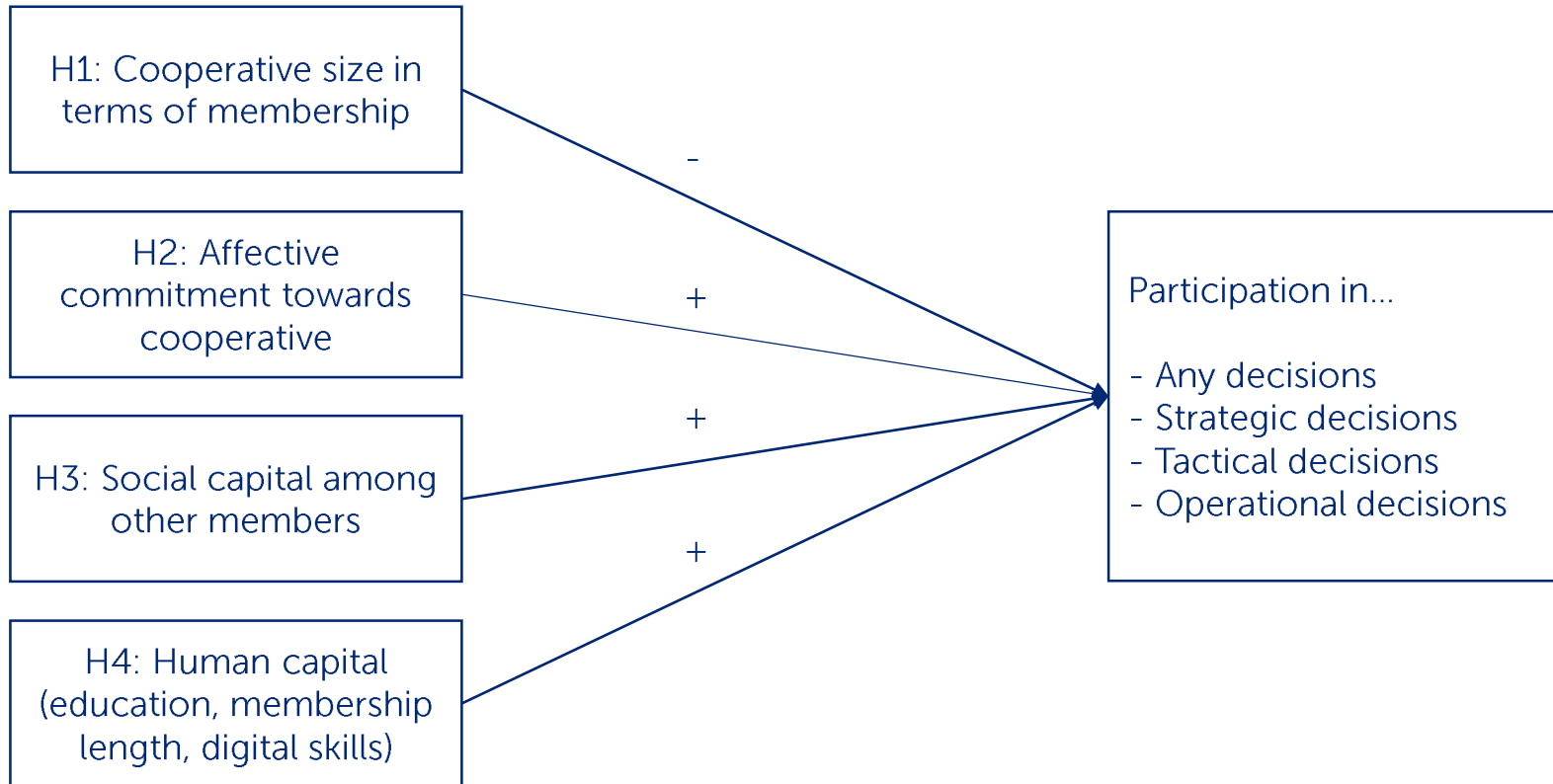
- Cooperative size (categorized by total membership)
- Affective commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990)
- Social capital (Van Der Gaag & Snijders, 2005)
- Human capital: education (ISCED-2011), membership length (in years), and digital skills (Van Laar et al., 2019)

Analytic approach

- Logistic regression analyses
- Control variables: age, gender, and migration background



Findings



Conclusions & discussion

Traditional worker co-ops (previous studies)	Digitally organized worker co-ops (current study)
Higher participation in smaller co-ops	X
Higher participation by more committed members	✓
Higher participation by members with more social capital	✓
Higher participation by members with more human capital	X
Higher participation by male, older, native members	X

Conclusions & discussion

Implications

- Nuance to calls by researchers on platform co-ops and the cooperative movement for IT to expand workplace democracy
- Fostering workplace democracy requires more than technological innovation → social innovations
- Future research is warranted, especially longitudinal and comparative

