

# Coworking spaces and workplaces of the future: Critical perspectives on community, context and change

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## Abstract

The last decade has witnessed increased demand by employers and workers for greater flexibility, especially regarding remote and hybrid work. There has therefore been a substantial increase in academic interest in coworking, including within business and management studies. We conduct a systematic literature review of research on coworking and coworking spaces (CWS) to argue this field is now sufficiently developed to merit recognition as an important element of discussion surrounding workplaces of the future. We outline the core themes in coworking research and identify three key research weaknesses relating to common understandings of community, context and change. The article then advances a future research agenda based on two avenues of enquiry. First, greater attention needs to be paid to the value propositions of CWS as businesses. Second, the concept of embeddedness should be used to better understand CWS in their local and national contexts, and we argue for a broader, place-based analytical focus on CWS. We present two possible future scenarios for CWS, based on opposing forces of homogenisation and differentiation, and we outline their relevance for further debate surrounding workplaces of the future.

## KEYWORDS

coworking, coworking spaces, embeddedness, flexibility, workplaces of the future

## INTRODUCTION

When coworking first emerged in the mid-2000s, it was viewed as a novel way of working, with the potential to transform futures of work (Neuberg, 2022). Increasing numbers of people now work in places other than their main workplace (Donnelly & Johns, 2020; Felstead, 2022)—a trend accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This generates debate around whether this represents a permanent change in working practices (Hern, 2020). Coworking has not yet found a place among intense discussions surrounding flexibility and hybrid working as the ‘new normal’ of work. This is despite emergent research examining how, between the office and the home, there exists a growing ‘third space’ of flexible working arrangements—at the centre of which are coworking spaces (CWS) (e.g. Bouncken et al., 2020;

Resch & Steyaert, 2020; Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020; Yacoub & Haefliger, 2022).

We define CWS as nonhome, nonconventional office sites where individuals, teams, or even entire organisations engage in work, with the aim of benefitting from synergistic encounters with a community of other coworkers. The CWS themselves are often designed to facilitate these encounters. As such, CWS can be conceptualised as ‘a sharing economy in two dimensions providing the access to shared physical assets (office, infrastructure, cafeteria etc.) and the sharing of intangible assets (information, knowledge etc.)’ (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018, p. 322; see also Bouncken et al., 2020; Bouncken et al., 2021; Bouncken et al., 2023). There currently exist over 34,600 CWS worldwide (Statista, 2023), with the highest concentrations of spaces in the United States, United Kingdom and India. The first

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CWS opened in San Francisco in 2005 and many contemporary CWS retain the core model of a shared office used by independent tenants renting desks (Blagoev et al., 2019; Gandini, 2015). Many of the earliest CWS were set up by ‘small, self-organized groups of independent workers’ to ‘pool economic resources to reduce the cost of rent and to counter isolation’ (de Peuter et al., 2017, p. 700). Either side of the COVID-19 pandemic, new CWS have been founded at an increasing rate, with a five-fold increase in the number of CWS globally in the period 2015–2024 (Isac, 2019; Statista, 2023). In this context, large multinational CWS providers have come to dominate the public perception of the CWS market, developing a business model whereby they act as ‘market intermediaries, enabling workers to connect with others and [to] develop professional relationships in an office-like environment’ (Gandini & Cossu, 2021, p. 4). CWS are also increasingly being used by global corporations whose workforces take advantage of opportunities to hot-desk and to work remotely (Aroles et al., 2019, p. 289).

CWS present an interesting case study for critical engagement with a range of core managerial and organisational questions. As Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac (2016, p. 3) note, ‘coworking challenges classic organisational approaches and raises human, social, managerial and organisational issues that are particularly salient to management sciences, as well as to society as a whole’. For example, rather than merely being sites where self-employed ‘digital nomads’ connect across atomised forms of work, CWS also often service teams of employees from other firms and organisations. Teams of entrepreneurs will often begin business endeavours in CWS as a precursor to renting their own office space (Avdikos & Merkel, 2020); globally recognised companies such as Uber and Spotify, for example, were originally conceived by start-ups based in CWS, illustrating the potential for CWS to act as sites for the development of disruptive innovations which revolutionise product and technology markets. CWS remain physical, concrete spaces that are owned and managed, and are shaped by processes of urban real estate development and speculation, raising interesting but under-researched questions of CWS business strategies (Yates et al., 2024) and how competing CWS offer different value propositions to their users. CWS cannot simply offer space, they must also act as spaces where communities can develop and where innovation can occur, while at the same time remaining viable as businesses.

We identify three core conceptual and empirical weaknesses in the extant literature around community, context and change. In relation to community, the existing literature tends to view CWS as sites of spontaneous or serendipitous collaborative activity. This can overlook the processes through which the curation and facilitation of relationships between CWS users happens and the ways in which this can both include and exclude users. In

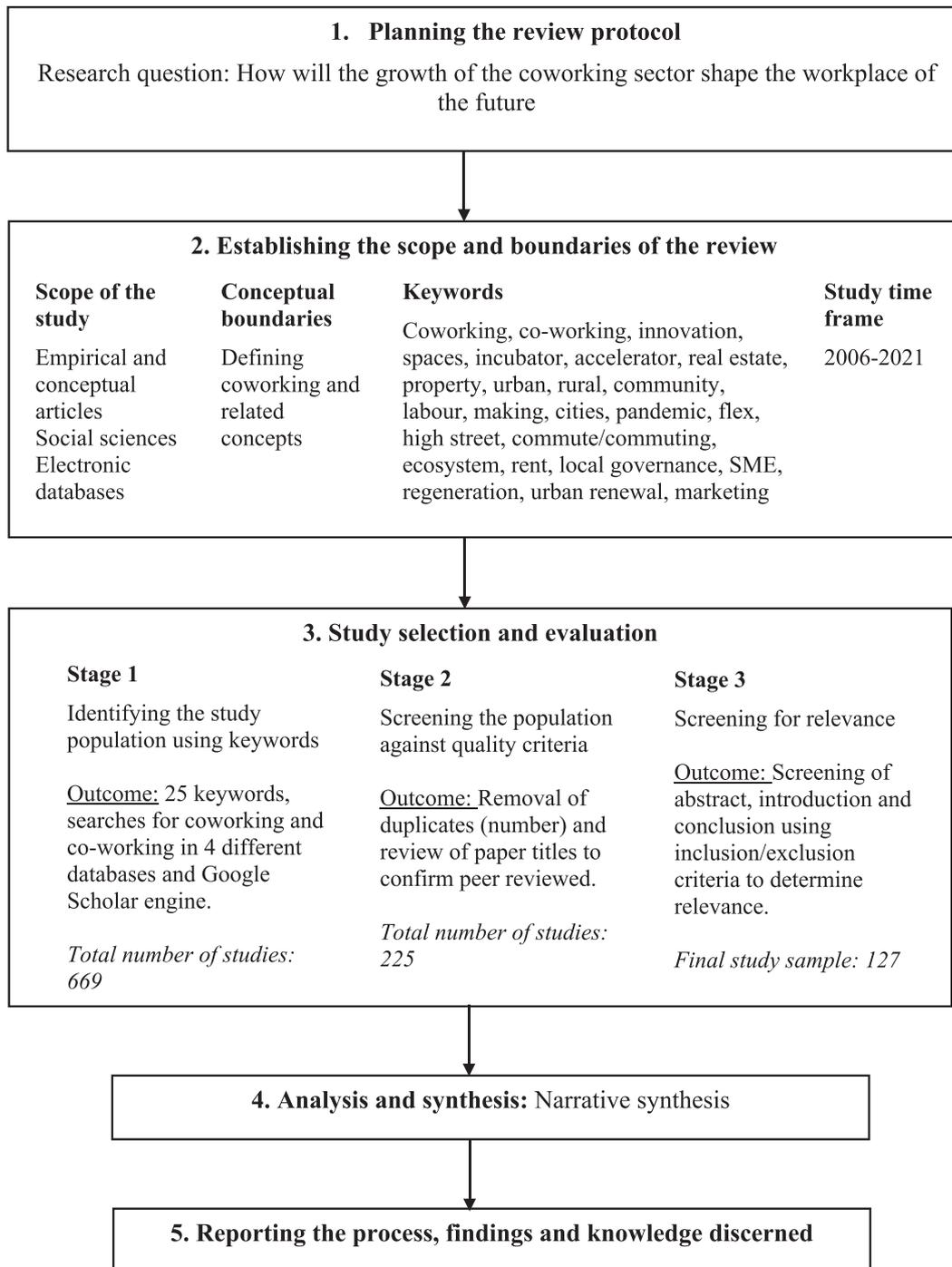
particular, we note that the conceptualisation of CWS users as independent and entrepreneurial actors can obscure the precarity, flexibility and ‘platformisation’ (Richardson, 2021) of much of the work taking place within CWS. With regard to context, the extant literature has not fully registered the boom in CWS-linked real estate. Specifically, it has insufficiently considered the precise connection between this boom and broader economic dynamics, as well as in terms of the different strategies CWS adopt as profit-oriented businesses. Finally, we observe that change dynamics are not fully considered by the literature. CWS are too often viewed as static entities, along with the markets in which they operate and compete. Our contribution presents a conceptual framing to begin to address the oversights found in the extant literature.

We contend that the different ways in which CWS seek to offer a value proposition to their users and the extent to which CWS are embedded or not in localities have major implications for the future of these workplaces, as well as for employers and workers. This article is shaped by the following research question: how are changing dynamics in the CWS market shaping workplaces of the future? We answer this question by means of a systematic, comprehensive review of literature on coworking and CWS. The article first details the methodology we adopted to conduct our systematic literature review, before presenting a review and critique of the extant themes identified in the coworking literature. We then present a new research agenda, before engaging in discussion of the future of CWS and their potential impact on workplaces of the future and HRM more widely.

## METHODOLOGY

This section details the steps taken to conduct a systematic literature review of due coworking and CWS. Williams et al.’s (2021) four core principles for systematic literature reviews were followed, namely, the adoption of a demarcated focus; the execution of a detailed and transparent plan to find all relevant literature; assessment of articles using predefined criteria; and a synthesis of the knowledge with identification of research gaps. Denyer & Tranfield’s (2009) multistep review approach was also adopted to assemble and review the extant literature on coworking (outlined in Figure 1). In June 2021, a Systematic Review Research Team (SRRT) was formed based on a research grant collaboration with members from five different UK Higher Education institutions.

As the term ‘coworking’ first emerged in 2005 (Gandini, 2015) our review has assessed the growth of academic work on this topic from 2006 onwards. We decided to keep the inclusion criteria broad due to the emerging nature of the coworking topic. Reviewed



**FIGURE 1** Summary of the systematic review methodology, following Denyer & Tranfield (2009).

material included books, journal articles, forms of grey literature, industry reports (from organisations like WeWork and Regus, for example) and materials from the Coworking Library (an independent and open access repository of publications on coworking). Research was not excluded on the basis of journal rankings (these are often unreliable measures of quality), and the literature search comprised all social science disciplines. Given the

interdisciplinary nature of the coworking topic, and in response to calls for interdisciplinary research in management studies (Jones & Gatrell, 2014), we chose to use a wide range of databases to ensure coverage of social science disciplines; specifically: *EBSCOhost*, selecting Business Source Complete, eBook Collection, Econ Lit and Green FILE, *Elsevier Science Direct*, *SAGE Journals* and *Wiley Online Library*.

## Study selection and evaluation

Significant time was spent constructing search strings to improve the efficiency of the search (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). In the case of this relatively new and bounded term, we began by searching for 'coworking' and 'co-working', both of which are used in equal amounts in the literature (coworking generated 63 results, co-working 64 in our final dataset). Initial searches generated 669 studies (the study population) from which duplicates were removed. Typically, systematic reviews would conduct a process of screening the population (Zahoor et al., 2020). However, as explained above, quality judgments were not made and peer- and nonpeer reviewed publications from any publishing outlet were included. (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009, p. 685). This approach produced a population of 225 studies (stage 2).

The third screening stage involved reading the abstract, introduction and conclusion of each publication to determine relevance. The screening criteria here was twofold. First, studies were excluded in which coworking referred to an entirely different phenomenon unrelated to work, organisations and workspaces; for example, in academic fields such as speech therapy, engineering and communication studies. Second, we differentiated studies based on whether coworking was a key theoretical or empirical focus, or whether it was a tangential part of the study (therefore not adding to our knowledge of CWS). The search process also involved a secondary data collection exercise in which the databases were searched again for 'coworking' and a range of relevant topics. This was to inform the analysis and synthesis stage, outlined below.

## Analysis and synthesis

The aim of this stage was to break down individual studies into constituent parts and to describe how articles relate to one another, and to make associations between the parts identified in individual studies (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). A narrative process was used, as this is considered an effective way to identify the story underpinning a disparate and fragmented body of evidence (Bailey et al., 2015). The database of 127 core articles was then transferred to an Excel spreadsheet, in which they were categorised by theme based on the second round of searches. We recorded details of each study (authors, title, journal, date), type of study, aims of the study, empirical and/or theoretical framing, key findings, relevance to our research question, reliability and utility. This enabled us to begin analysing the articles in each theme and to synthesise a thematic narrative.

The articles covered multiple social science disciplines, with 49 articles published in business and management journals (if property, facilities and communications management journals are excluded, the total is 40). Some

articles included several of the themes. Each coauthor was allocated one or more themes and read all the articles connected to that theme before producing a long synthesis highlighting the main areas of focus and core contributions. Many articles were included in multiple themes meaning that multiple team members were reading the same papers, but each from a different perspective, adding to the rigour of the systematic literature review process. We then created a priority list of core contributions for each theme. The articles in this list were then read by all coauthors. This narrative analysis ensured that all coauthors were familiar with all the core contributions and had expertise in one or more of the themes. We then progressed from focusing on individual studies towards the generation of concepts and relationships; identifying patterns, themes and big-picture answers relating to the research question (Williams et al., 2021) as well as weaknesses in the extant research.

Our review process has some limitations. First, the wide range of perspectives on CWS means that searches generated a high volume of results. This required a high degree of human intervention in filtering relevant articles. Our inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed to formalise this process, but this was still some scope for human error and/or subjective interpretation. Second, given this diversity it is difficult to precisely bound the field of work on CWS. There are areas of overlap, for example with work on makerspaces or innovation studies, that required us to make decisions about what we needed to exclude in order to have a manageable focus on the topic. Third, the review does not consider papers in progress, or studies that are not in the databases noted above. We have included reference to recent papers of potential significance from outside the search dates in the introduction and discussion sections of this article to keep it as timely as possible. Fourth, although our search terms were determined following careful consideration, the choice of these terms could be a limitation of the study. There may be relevant articles covering coworking using different terminologies, although in the context of CWS this seems unlikely given the specificity of the term. Finally, we are highly conscious that our study includes only English language contributions. This is the primary limitation of the review as there are growing bodies of literature published in other languages, particularly by Francophone researchers.

## CENTRAL THEMES AND WEAKNESSES IN THE EXTANT COWORKING RESEARCH

Our systematic literature review reveals a significant increase in academic interest in CWS. From 2006 until 2014 fewer than 10 papers were published each year, rising to 10 in 2015 and then, possibly fuelled by the COVID-19 pandemic, reaching 61 in 2021. The numerical

distribution of papers is highly uneven across the analytical categories we used in our analysis with publications categorised as dealing primarily with ‘coworking spaces’ amounting to 92 out of 127 articles, with ‘innovation/incubation’ 56/127, with ‘urban/cities’ 43/127, with ‘community/collaboration’ 34/127, with ‘real estate/property’ 19/127, with ‘labour/work’ 17/127, with ‘makerspaces/fablabs’ 12/127, with ‘ecosystems’ 10/127 and with ‘rural coworking’ 9/127.<sup>1</sup> We thus observe greater attention being paid by the extant literature to CWS as sites of activities, with a focus on interactions between users within CWS rather than on ‘coworking’ as a broader phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

Our literature review identified four key cross-cutting themes in the coworking literature that related to CWS as workplaces, namely, their ‘differentiation’, their ‘usage’, the ‘broader ecosystems’ in which they operate, and ‘commercial real estate dynamics’. Within each of these four themes in the literature we identified the different conceptual approaches that are used; for example, research in the ‘differentiation’ theme is characterised by a focus on organisational forms of CWS, spaces of innovation and processes of sociality and relationality. Table 1 summarises the key conceptual approaches, the existing literature and key debates within each of the four cross-cutting themes.

Our systematic literature review is novel in that it highlights three core conceptual and empirical weaknesses in the existing literature, summarised under the headings of *community*, *context* and *change*.

## Community

First, we foreground the common understanding of *community* as being an important area of weakness because some of the early literature on CWS, and a surprising amount of continuing commentary, somewhat superficially sees these spaces as sites of spontaneous or serendipitous collaborative activity whereby the right people put in a room together will inevitably find their way to shared innovation or cooperation. Only a smaller, more critical, strand of literature registers the important role of practices of curation and facilitation in cohering these relationships and affinities between CWS users, as well as the spatial and organisational structures that bring them into being. There is therefore a need for further research about both the labour process through which this provision of curation and facilitation is performed, and the managerial character of this labour process. Through

the presence of such a conductor or facilitator of the assembled coworkers, the CWS may well come to represent not a free or ‘third’ space of autonomous creativity and activity but rather a managed workplace like any other, in which, we could argue, value is not shared but appropriated and captured from the commons of collective productivity. Due to the profile of those invited into ecosystems of entrepreneurship and innovation, there is some evidence that CWS reproduce rather than subvert existing forms of exclusion and inequality (Spinuzzi et al., 2019; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2021), thereby representing spaces of closure rather than openness or of capture rather than creation.

The attachment of CWS to positive notions of ‘community’ tends to reflect the assumption that coworking represents a more progressive or egalitarian counterpoint to hard-nosed entrepreneurial capitalism or to the daily grind of office work. However, by way of criticism of the extant literature, we would argue that first, the ‘community’ served and addressed by CWS is not necessarily that which is drawn from the (often diverse) local population but is more likely to be a community defined by some kind of professional or exclusive identity (creative, digital, entrepreneurial). Indeed, the literature tends to show that the most successful CWS in terms of user experience are those subject to careful curation of a community whose exclusivity renders it more likely to foster collaboration. This exclusivity is very likely to compound existing forms of under-representation that typify the classed, racialised and gendered professional strata that use CWS (Jiménez & Zheng, 2021). This problem is underdiscussed in the extant literature, largely on account of a vast majority of writing about CWS being written from an uncritical mainstream perspective tied to disciplines that tend not to deploy socio-economic concepts, such as class, as key tools for the critical understanding of the contemporary society within which CWS are embedded (as we discuss later). This calls for more research to understand these processes of exclusion in the contexts in which they occur (see below).

Our second contention as regards ‘community’ is that the extant literature tends to uncritically adopt an understanding of CWS users as being ‘independent’ or ‘entrepreneurial’, and of CWS as an empowering institutionalisation of collective capacity and support for open innovation. This understanding lacks sufficient consideration of the status of many CWS users as precarious, flexibilised workers and of CWS as an infrastructure for the stabilisation and continuation of the conditions that, for some of these subjects at least, reproduces a constant struggle to subsist. In this way, CWS also emerge as a means for the reproduction of flexibilised labour markets that drive down wages, conditions and security in other parts of the economy, as companies compete through distributing work to freelancers and other precarious employees on a contract-by-contract, project-by-project basis. Future conceptualisations of CWS, and their users,

<sup>1</sup>The total of these papers is greater than 127 as some papers contribute to more than one category.

<sup>2</sup>It was at this point in the research that we made the considered decision not to include makerspaces and fablabs in our analysis, due to the low number of appearances in the literature, and because these are distinctly differently organisation forms which operate by providing tools and equipment to aid production of physical goods, for example, access to 3D printers or machine cutting tools.

**TABLE 1** Thematisation of existing literature and debates on coworking.

Themes	Conceptual approaches	Key contributions
(1) Differentiation of types of CWS	Organisational forms of CWS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differing typologies of CWS exist based on categories including profit/nonprofit, users, location (Kojo &amp; Nenonen, 2016; Ross &amp; Ressia, 2015).</li> <li>• Research on <i>hackerspaces</i> and <i>makerspaces</i> (Capdevila, 2019; van Holm, 2017) and <i>CWS role in sharing/circular economy</i> (Bouncken, 2020; Richardson, 2017; Cappellaro et al., 2019)</li> <li>• Research on <i>incubators</i> and <i>accelerators</i> that can include structured coworking programmes (Madaleno et al. 2021)</li> <li>• Incubators and accelerators are viewed as distinct from CWS as they do not usually bring together founders with investors, though some overlap exists as both emphasise importance of opportunities for face-to-face interaction (Grazian, 2020).</li> </ul>
	Spaces of innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature focusing on spatiality of CWS; influenced by the spatial turn in innovation studies (Amin &amp; Cohendet, 2004).</li> <li>• Proximity and chance encounters are vital (Bouncken, Aslam, &amp; Reuschl, 2018) and important to promote innovation and knowledge exchange (Boschma, 2005; Torre &amp; Rallet, 2005).</li> <li>• Studies explore the physical and spatial dimensions of coworking communities (Capdevila, 2015; Johns &amp; Gratton, 2013).</li> <li>• CWS as propellants of territorial development (Lange, 2011) or as curators of places (Merkel, 2015).</li> <li>• CWS and territorial relations (Assenza, 2015; Lorne, 2020).</li> </ul>
	Sociality and relationality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research observes how material infrastructures constrain and enable social aspects of work and how two are ‘mutually entangled’—organisation shapes space and materiality (Bouncken et al., 2021, p. 122); space-CWS nexus is therefore viewed from perspective of sociality and relationality (Merkel, 2019).</li> <li>• Assenza (2015) notes new social relations demand new spaces.</li> <li>• Fabbri (2016, p. 353) adopts Massey’s (2005) ‘relational approach’ to argue CWS show ‘workspace and workplace are socially produced and at the same time produce social relations’.</li> <li>• Larson (2020) argues coworkers have agency to change what the organisation is.</li> </ul>
	Community dynamics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature focuses on underpinning community dynamics that foster and support innovation and entrepreneurship within CWS (Avdikos &amp; Merkel, 2020; Cabral &amp; van Winden, 2016; Clifton et al., 2019; Parrino, 2015).</li> <li>• CWS differ from other forms of managed office space as they consciously host and foster a community of workers - beyond this recognition there is debate about what ‘community’ signifies, exacerbated by the variety of CWS (Jiménez &amp; Zheng, 2021).</li> <li>• Some research argues ‘community’ is simply those workers who seek to benefit from using a CWS (Cappellaro et al., 2019; Garrett et al., 2017). See also Blagoev et al. (2019), Schmidt &amp; Brinks (2017), Spinuzzi (2012).</li> <li>• Research on how CWS can reducing historic community tensions. (Brown &amp; Cole, 2016; Šebestová et al., 2017).</li> </ul>
(2) How and why workers use CWS	Collaborative working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early theme of ability of CWS to promote serendipity and collaborative working (Isac, 2019; Merkel, 2015).</li> <li>• Waters-Lynch &amp; Potts (2017) conceptualise CWS as ‘Schelling points’ which act as network hubs in urban areas to bring workers together, built on the cultivation of trust within the community.</li> <li>• Examination of knowledge sharing and learning, overlapping with literatures on entrepreneurship. See Bednář et al. (2021), Houghton et al., (2018), Butcher (2018), Rese et al. (2020).</li> </ul>
	Community curation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of CWS in curating coworking communities and activities emphasised in literature (Yacoub &amp; Haefliger, 2022). Spinuzzi (2012) finds much of coworking’s value-added for users rests on who else is coworking in the same space.</li> <li>• Curation can be conducted by designated community managers (Parrino, 2015). Though some scholars question its significance; Weijs-Perrée et al. (2019) argue little is known about the preferences of users, their research suggesting users often prefer a CWS without a host.</li> </ul>
	Worker motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CWS as supportive spaces for entrepreneurs, freelancers, remote workers and self-employed users (Capdevila, 2019; Gandini, 2015; Howell, 2022).</li> <li>• Benefits of CWS for various groups of workers, for example, public sector workers (Houghton et al., 2018), groups who do not have regular contact with other workers, for example, the self-employed (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2021), women</li> </ul>

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Themes	Conceptual approaches	Key contributions
	Cultures of entrepreneurship	<p>working part-time (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2021) and other marginalised groups (Madaleno et al., 2021).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research focuses on the subjective understandings, behaviour and sense of well-being and work-life-balance of individual CWS users (Orel &amp; Alonso Almeida, 2019).</li> <li>• Bouncken, Laudien, et al. (2018) examine worker satisfaction and highlight some of the 'darker' aspects of entrepreneurialism such as (self)-exploitation and distrust.</li> <li>• A critical strand of literature problematises the culture of entrepreneurialism as well as the effective and affective impact of CWS communities on community members (e.g., Pollio, 2020).</li> <li>• Jakonen et al. (2017) conceptualise CWS as 'affectual assemblages' that promote 'added value through social interaction', which can nevertheless flounder if individuals feel their sense of achievement is inhibited by being embedded within the community.</li> <li>• Waters-Lynch and Duff (2021:396) argue many communities are characterised by a sense of ambivalence as users struggle to reconcile the 'common atmosphere' of CWS with its 'enclosure and commodification ... by way of a distinctive business model'. See also Bouncken, Aslam, and Reuschl (2018) and Clayton et al. (2018) for discussion of entrepreneurial intermediaries.</li> </ul>
	Corporatisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CWS are increasingly attracting companies in addition to self-employed workers, as companies are seeking to colocate their workers away from company headquarters.</li> <li>• Companies also renting desk space for employees to use at existing CWS. Employees of incumbent firms represent an increasing proportion of CWS users (Bouncken et al., 2020). See also Knapp et al. (2021) and Bouncken et al. (2021).</li> <li>• de Peuter et al. (2017, p. 691) state companies can view CWS as 'an innovation stimulant, a recruitment venue and a low over-head location for temporary project teams'.</li> <li>• Recent articles have begun registering the shift towards corporate CWS and corporate tenants moving into existing CWS (e.g., Leclercq-Vandelannoitte &amp; Isaac, 2016; Zukin, 2021).</li> <li>• Mayerhoffer (2020, p. 209) describes the rise of 'corpworking'—clients frequenting CWS and renting out private offices.</li> <li>• Bouncken et al., 2021, observing companies such as Microsoft, Google and Amazon that are investing in internal CWS, notes their aim is to enhance coordination projects as well as expand their innovation pipeline (Bouncken et al., 2021, p. 121).</li> <li>• CWS also called 'smart work centres' in corporate contexts (Errichiello &amp; Pianese, 2019).</li> </ul>
(3) Broader ecosystems of entrepreneurship and innovation	CWS and entrepreneurial ends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agreed sense of the rationality of CWS communities for instrumental entrepreneurial ends (Bouncken et al., 2020; Jamal, 2018) in spite of debates around the status of CWS as communities and the types of communities they generate.</li> <li>• Literature examining CWS in context of start-up ecosystems and innovative entrepreneurialism (Bueno et al., 2018; Fraiberg, 2017; Gauger et al., 2021) finding positive influence of social interactions and coworking on productivity.</li> <li>• Studies associate CWS with Silicon Valley and with other initiatives around the world to replicate innovative start-up hubs (Lavčák et al., 2019; Pollio, 2020).</li> <li>• Capdevila (2015) conceptualises CWS as crucial components of the 'middle-ground' of local ecosystems, linking together macro systems of innovation with clusters or networks of firms and individuals (see also Renaud et al., 2019; Šebestová et al., 2017; Spinuzzi et al., 2019).</li> </ul>
	Ecologies and ecosystems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concepts of 'ecologies' or 'ecosystems' informs some work noting external political and economic context in which CWS operate. Bouncken et al. (2020) consider internal and external factors that account for the growth of CWS as centres of innovation and entrepreneurship, noting different ownership models as key points of divergence. See also Clifton et al. (2019).</li> <li>• Assenza (2015) highlight the importance of 'anchor tenants'—local organisations with prominent economic impact in the local context - as part of 'start-up communities'. See also Fiorentino (2019).</li> </ul>

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Themes	Conceptual approaches	Key contributions
	Benefits of colocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Literature on innovation sees CWS as fora for assembling community from the 'weak ties' that characterise online innovation ecosystems - weak ties being taken as necessary for innovation (Aguiton &amp; Cardon, 2007).</li> <li>Assumption that colocation confers economic benefits to participants, though research notes there been no proper measurement of the relationship between 'spatial configuration', 'social and cognitive functioning, knowledge spillovers and 'ultimate economic outcomes', including at the local or regional level (Assenza, 2015, p. 37; Clifton et al., 2019).</li> <li>Management of spaces is seen as central to the capacity to innovate, through actors such as 'coworking anchors' who administrate or oversee space rental (Aguiton &amp; Cardon, 2007). See also Bouncken &amp; Aslam (2019), Coll-Martinez &amp; Méndez-Ortega (2023).</li> </ul>
(4) Commercial real estate dynamics	Financialisation of urban spaces	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research examining specific cites, for example, Capdevila (2015) shows CWS growth in Barcelona partly driven by desire to get a return from real estate.</li> <li>Zhou (2018) observes a distinction between different gradations of CWS in terms of prestige and rental yields, noting the possibility of a fall in demand for office space and thus rental income creating difficulties for CWS (for example WeWork). (See also Williams, 2020; Wright, 2018; Yang et al., 2019).</li> <li>Renaud et al. (2019) explores link between local government strategy to develop creative cluster comprising CWS and profitable real estate models.</li> </ul>
	Characterising models for landlords	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Saiz (2020) identifies four models for landlords: (i) putting under-utilised space 'to work' as shared offices (ii) providing 'flexible space-term' services with simple short-term leases that are high cost but low commitment for users (iii) a lease arbitrage approach, involving multiple sub-leasing of properties and (iv) a boutique model that is highly customised to individual users.</li> <li>Pajević (2021, p. 1) notes how coworking is 'a lucrative business model and office real estate strategy', in which flexwork has become a feature of today's deregulated and financialized real estate market (see also Green, 2016; Kämpf-Dern &amp; Konkol, 2017).</li> </ul>

need to look beyond the positive CWS vision of the birth of a new world of work and instead pay greater attention to the enforced mobility, flexibility and 'platformisation' (Richardson, 2021) of much of the work taking place within CWS.

## Context

Second, we emphasise the need for greater attention to *context* in order to better understand CWS. For instance, the extant literature has not yet fully registered the substantial boom in CWS-linked real estate in the period during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. This period has seen a further development of what was previously largely obscured in the appearance of the CWS market, which is that the creation of such spaces is often an artefact of dynamics of urban real estate rather than anything to do with the conspicuous offering of contacts, connections and collaborative workspace by CWS to freelancers and other users. Aside from a recent contribution (Yates et al., 2024), the literature has insufficiently considered the precise connection between CWS, real estate, and broader economic dynamics, and how these impact upon the different strategies CWS adopt to make a profit. Moreover, there is a need for further research

that critically comprehends the substantial challenge the development of these underpinning tendencies poses to the future capacity of a diverse array of CWS to offer the kinds of service and experience that freelancers and other users supposedly seek out.

The sparse but significant literature on CWS from scholars researching real estate dynamics subverts many commonhold assumptions about the origins and continuation of CWS by foregrounding the role that rental revenue from office space plays as the main driver of whether a space becomes dedicated to coworking (e.g., Saiz, 2020; Zhou, 2018). This literature also discusses coworking as a stopgap, temporary measure for landlords seeking to secure revenue from otherwise empty commercial spaces. The very recent collapse of WeWork, which aggressively expanded based on overestimations of revenues for coworking spaces, is further testimony to the volatility of CWS business models and hence to their future development. Whilst there have been several useful engagements with the financial and practical details of how different CWS business models function, and the role of landlords within this sector, most of the literature provides an incomplete picture of how this connects to the broader economy through which the revenue-raising strategies of different economic actors are shaped in line with underpinning profit imperatives (Yates et al., 2024). In short,

there is insufficient understanding of precisely *why* and to what ends commercial real estate markets should develop in such a way as to result in the creation and operation of different and changing forms of CWS, to which we now turn.

## Change

Third, we identify the question of *change* within CWS markets as another research weakness. The existing literature is split between earlier approaches that foreground the demand for CWS among precarious freelancers and independent workers in creative or nascent digital industries seeking to retain autonomy whilst recreating a solidaristic collective experience of work for contemporary times; and later approaches that emphasise the demand for CWS among more professionalised ‘entrepreneurial’ strata operating in higher-value higher-innovation tech industries and services, who are motivated by the search for resources, investment, networks and collaboration opportunities. In both versions, CWS are assumed to be essentially static entities, as are the markets in which they operate and compete. CWS are often treated as the consequence of demand from individuals and industries, rather than as a consequence of supply; the latter suggesting that there is greater potential for the transformation of CWS over time and in context. CWS are a business model based on circumscribing certain forms of potentially autonomous or common activity within frameworks through which their value can be measured, managed, captured and appropriated. The inflow of users into spaces is not simply because of their desire to collaborate or be catered for in various ways. It is also driven by the institutionalisation of the CWS as a forum through which forms of production and work are made meaningful, sustainable and, crucially, profitable. As such, more dynamic conceptualisations of CWS are needed that can consider changes in *both* CWS users and CWS business models, given the coconstitutive relationship between the two.

We thus observe from our systematic review that existing research on CWS prioritises empirical studies of social belonging and the networking opportunities CWS offer to independent workers, often therefore ignoring the ‘organizational dimension’ that goes beyond spontaneous community but which much existing research leaves ‘undertheorized’ (Blagoev et al., 2019, pp. 895–897). Attempts to capture this dimension remain focused on immaterial or discursive processes when they occur in the business and management literature (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2021), neglecting the broader socio-economic-spatial context of wider changes in the real estate sector and labour market within which increasingly commercialised and diversified CWS business models are developed and differentiated (Clifton et al., 2019). This oversight is important, not only for the study of CWS,

but also for broader concerns within management studies for understanding the future of work, the potential demise of the single workplace and the growth of remote working, and the HRM implications of these changes. A key reason for advocating sharper analytical focus on such structural factors is because of the role macro-level processes play in determining outcomes for businesses, and for those who work within, or for, CWS.

## CWS AND WORKPLACES OF THE FUTURE: A RESEARCH AGENDA

The preceding section provided an overview and critique of the key salient research themes in the scholarship on coworking from a range of disciplines. We emphasise the significant and growing contribution of business and management studies to this growing body of research (Aroles et al., 2019; Blagoev et al., 2019; Bouncken et al., 2020, Bouncken et al., 2021; Capdevila, 2019; Gauger et al., 2021; Jakonen et al., 2017; Leclercq-Vandelannoitte & Isaac, 2016, Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Spinuzzi, 2012; Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2021; Wright et al., 2022). This section engages the literature we have systematically reviewed with the central concern of this article and special issue—the workplaces of the future. We take two, interlinked approaches. First, we propose to advance beyond existing understandings of CWS by interrogating the value-added of CWS, focusing not merely upon their generative function in terms of innovation, community and revenue (or rents), but on the substantial contradictions that cut across these themes. Second, we draw on the concept of embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985) as a means of better understanding CWS in their local (and national) contexts. This approach results in a relational understanding of CWS and the tension between forces of their homogenisation and differentiation that can inform debates around the future of workplaces and work more broadly.

### Coworking communities and the ‘generative’ future workplace

We propose further research into the tension between CWS as sites of community and of conspicuous openness—of positive, ‘affectual assemblages’ (Jakonen et al., 2017)—on the one hand, and their potentially exclusionary character on the other. This tension connects with broader questions, for example, surrounding urban gentrification and inequality. A feature of some CWS business models is to take advantage of the availability of cheap unused office stock, a proportion of which may be left dormant by the rise of remote working. In some cases, CWS have been set up in derelict former industrial premises which could potentially be put to other uses of more benefit to local communities, such as

housing and community spaces (Grazian, 2020, p. 6). As a form of privatised and exclusive urban space, such CWS are 'reinforced by a series of mundane technologies, security doors and online registration, mediated by the concierge and member hosts' (Lorne, 2020, pp. 754–755), which have an exclusionary effect on those who cannot gain access due to resource constraints. At the same time, the 'openness' of CWS acts as cover for the propagation of dynamics that themselves create inequality and hardship, strengthening an entrepreneurial rationality that intertwines risk-taking with social values (Lorne, 2020, pp. 752–757), undermining the benefits of reduced social isolation which CWS allegedly provide (King, 2017). Bouncken, Aslam, and Reuschl (2018) note, for instance, that while CWS can act as positive sites for entrepreneurship by fostering innovation and knowledge-exchange (2018, p. 137) they also present challenges to entrepreneurs such as social isolation, exploitation and conflict/distrust (2018, pp. 138–144). Bouncken et al. suggest these problems can be resolved through strategies such as provision of mentoring and training, promotion of pro-social CWS community norms and a start-up culture, and a conflict resolution mechanism (2018, pp. 141–144). But clearly, more research needs to be done in this area.

Strategies such as these have closely bound some CWS to the communities they are associated with (whether around work or locality), even as they participate in contested cycles of gentrification that infringe upon those communities (Merkel, 2015, pp. 127, 134), in addition to processes of exclusion that, whilst necessary to the cultivation of a bounded community, discourage others from participation. CWS are taken to rest on the curation of 'chance encounters' with potential collaborators that are themselves commodified, based on an apparent openness concealing 'material and social exclusions' established to protect and add value to the information, projects, connections, skills and reputation that CWS offer to project-based workers (de Peuter et al., 2017, pp. 691, 698; Lorne, 2020, p. 760). Even in the most socially oriented spaces, the curation of CWS users by hosts and managers can exclude those whose 'social and environmental mission' is not considered suitable (Lorne, 2020, pp. 754–755). Moreover, the curation of a collaborative community often pursues diversity of professions and skills rather than class, gender and race (de Peuter et al., 2017, p. 697).

With such considerations in mind, we argue that any future research agenda on CWS should also focus not simply upon the role CWS play in the generation of community, but also the different business models of CWS and the effects these have on different forms of their use. For example, some CWS attempt to address the contingencies of the working lifestyles of their members by introducing varying levels of fees for their members flexibly tiered according to the 'fluid schedules' of, for instance, self-employed users, from offering drop-in rates

to monthly subscriptions (de Peuter et al., 2017, pp. 690–691). But at the same time, as pointed out above, this exclusivity exists in a dynamic tension with the rhetorical and organisational openness deemed to be crucial to the CWS market, often resulting in the enforcement of 'social hierarchies and material exclusions' (Lorne, 2020, p. 749). We therefore call for research that highlights the tensions that exist in the ways in which CWS spaces include or exclude particular users, and we highlight the need for critical approaches to CWS that repoliticise their formation, business models and impacts on individuals and work organisations.

## Contextualising CWS

As reviewed above, all too often CWS are studied as isolated, hermetically sealed containers of work-related activities. While research in this vein can increase our knowledge of the internal dynamics of CWS, it ignores the context in which CWS operate and, in particular, their operation as businesses seeking to generate revenue. The ways in which CWS develop different business strategies attest to the fact that CWS are embedded in the local markets in which they compete. Of additional significance are changes in labour market compositions at different geographical scales and the fragmentation of the location of work (home, office and 'third' spaces) that directly shape demand for CWS (from individuals and employers).

We argue that future research on CWS, and indeed any research on workplaces of the future, should seek to locate them in their local, national and international socio- and political-economic contexts, thereby bringing greater granularity and specificity to the understanding of how a range of different types of spaces attract different types of employees, freelancers, small businesses and community groups. Avdikos & Merkel (2020, pp. 348–350) propose that such finer distinctions can provide 'robust frameworks' capable of supporting targeted public policies aimed at growth and local development, which are currently 'scarce, based on weak evidence', and which treat CWS in an undifferentiated, homogeneous way (2019, pp. 353–354). A more heavily contextualised, and less taxonomised, approach to CWS is especially important if we are to understand their embeddedness. This demands exploration of the 'emerging connections between collaborative and sharing platforms, the designing of new civic urban infrastructures, and local and municipal government policy supporting experiments in open innovation ecosystems' (Lorne, 2020, p. 761), arguably shifting the focus of research from a managerialist preoccupation with the variegated forms and internal dynamics of different CWS towards questions of how CWS are shaped by, and play a role within, broader socio- and political-economic contexts.

By shifting the analytical focus of research on CWS, greater space will be created for more holistic approaches

to understanding the connections within and between actors and stakeholders in the creation, growth and transformations of CWS and beyond. In this spirit, Assenza (2015) pushes us to consider space differently: not only as physical space, but also as social context and as a conceptual space within which production occurs and which can contribute to new venture creation. Valuable contributions have been made, including Merkel's (2019; 2021), which highlight of the role of CWS as curators of places of which they are only a constitutive element and which are conducive to more generative collaborative and social relationships; that is, of CWS as part of a broader critical urban practice, explicitly revealing the network relationships between CWS and their ecologies/economies. Similarly, Zukin (2021) views CWS as social spaces embedded in the social capital of institutional networks and communities. The work of Richardson (2017, 2021) has much to offer management research on the changing nature of work and technology, observed within and through CWS as spaces of coordination in which the digital reorganisation of work produces flexible arrangements of space and time. However, there is not as of yet any sustained attention by business and management of the extensive interconnections of CWS (specifically those

reaching beyond the four walls of the space) nor of the broader implications for the organisation of work within particular multiscalar contexts. In Figure 2, we present our conceptualisation of the embeddedness of CWS, viewing these spaces as 'nested' within different spatial scales in which stakeholders and other actors interact.

Our approach encourages both greater engagement across the social sciences to develop interdisciplinary approaches to CWS, and for more nuanced considerations of our methodological (and conceptual) tools to understand CWS less as individual sites of working but more as spaces within and through which working practices are changing. It provides a framework to contextualise CWS in order to explore the changing dynamics of work within the diverse CWS sector in the next section.

### Changing forms of CWS and their embeddedness: implications for the future of workplaces

Institutional, financial and geographical tensions are seldom picked up within the bulk of research on CWS, which is a limitation of the literature. Yet it is these

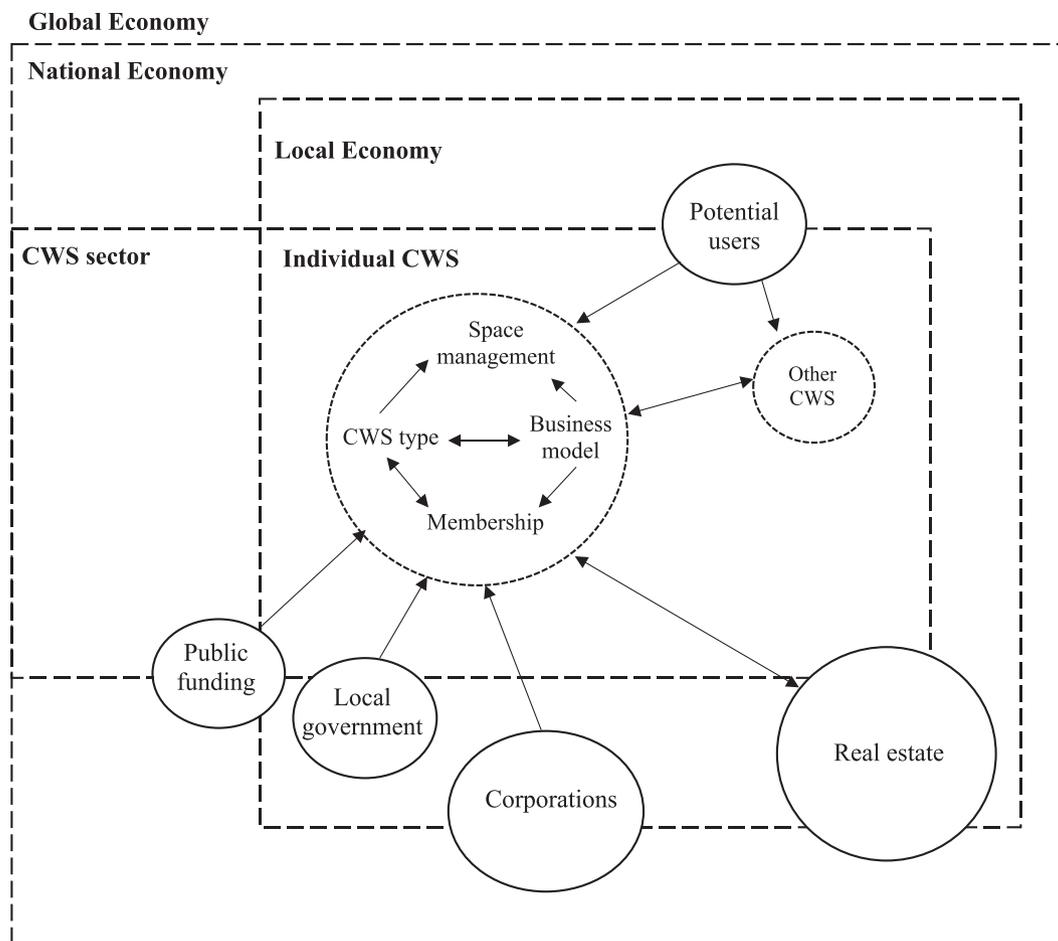


FIGURE 2 Nested relations of CWS.

tensions that are likely to drive both coworking and the future of work, and which therefore demand further research. Gandini & Cossu (2021) have characterised the consolidation and expansion of CWS as being in a ‘mainstream neo-corporate’ phase which initially accelerated in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 Global Financial Crisis, and which, more recently published research suggests, has continued beyond the COVID-19 pandemic (Yates et al., 2024). Opportunities for the further transformation of CWS markets are evidenced in the early signs of an emerging trend of hotel, hospitality and retail spaces adapting their facilities to host CWS and other forms of workspace in the wake of the pandemic (Grazian, 2020, pp. 22–23). There are signs that the CWS market could continue to expand and change as remote working becomes more feasible, acceptable, and even preferable for both employers and employees (Donnelly & Johns, 2020), and as ‘larger organizations and enterprises look to decentralize their workforces into smaller branch offices and remote teams into private flexible offices’ (CoworkingResources, 2020). Such change will cause new challenges for managers who are already having to coordinate increasingly diffuse workforces. HR managers, in particular, face specific challenges of managing performance, of seeking to maintain morale, and of maintaining a sense of attachment to an employer as physical distance from headquarters increases (Donnelly & Johns, 2020).

Future research on CWS therefore needs to do two further things to generate new insights and to inform debates on the future of workplaces, and of work more generally. First, it must pay attention to the lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic around the sustainability and

resilience of CWS business models. Second, it must engage with related academic work on the changing nature of workplaces and work, the spatial reorganisation of businesses, land use changes, and real estate dynamics. This has implications for management scholars insofar as it highlights the analytical need to place organisations in their context and within wider sets of social relations, whilst simultaneously exploring the tensions and contradictions this creates in local communities, societies and economies. In this respect, the study of CWS could connect with increasing interest within leading management journals in the broader political-economic context within which organisations exist and their management unfolds (e.g., Vincent et al., 2020); as well as theorisations of paradox and of dialectic reasoning as a means to explore the contradictory relationships among organisations, and between organisations and other socio-economic units within their networks (Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2017). With this kind of relational approach in mind, we suggest that two competing tendencies could potentially shape the future development of CWS markets—those of greater *embeddedness* and *disembeddedness* of CWS (see Figure 3).

### The tendency towards the homogenisation and disembeddedness of CWS

The emergence of larger CWS operators with multiple sites is increasing the prevalence of a homogenised form of CWS, and, as the market matures, further homogenisation towards a single business model may predominate. In light of the challenges of developing sustainable CWS

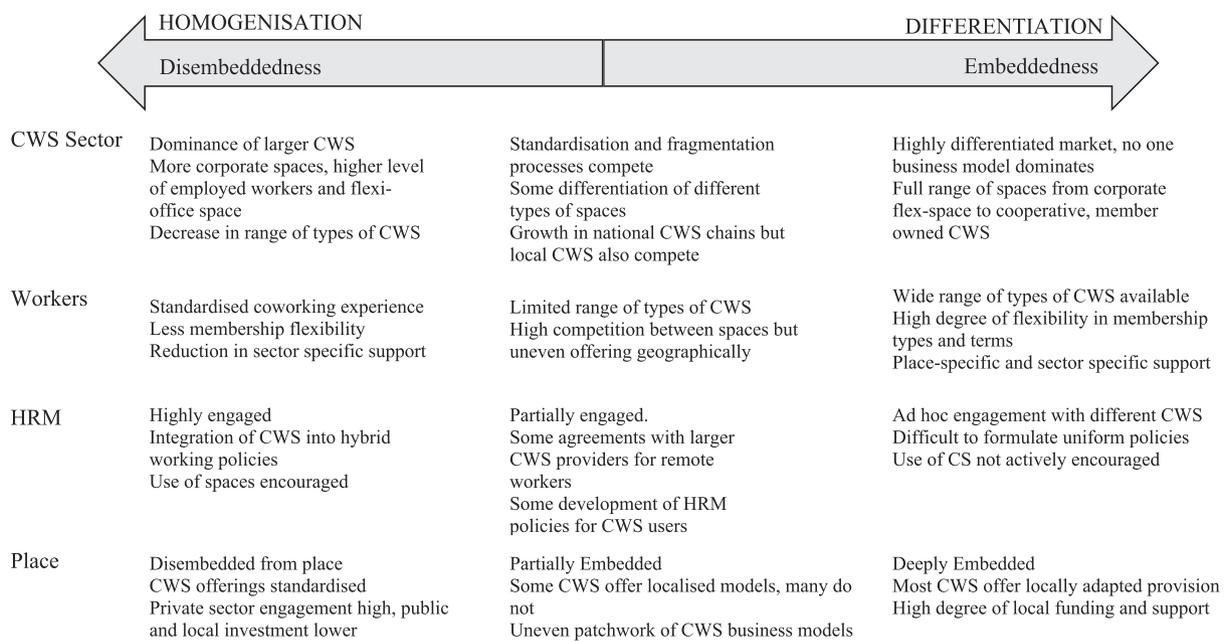


FIGURE 3 Change dynamics and embeddedness in coworking.

business models, a standardised CWS scenario would be predicated on attracting enterprise clients as the main source of revenue, thereby relegating individual users of CWS to secondary importance. This scenario echoes research on ‘corpworking’ (Mayerhoffer, 2020), and research on CWS business models which highlights how corporate CWS can out-compete other forms of CWS due to their economies of scale and scope (Yates et al., 2024). The original ethos of coworking, that of bringing individuals together to facilitate serendipitous encounters in a nonstandard office space, would be further undermined as enterprise clients increasingly demand more private and secure spaces for their workers. This scenario could be fuelled by demand from employers seeking temporary and flexible space for their employees, with larger companies potentially seeking to make national agreements with coworking spaces in multiple locations.

This homogenisation of CWS would lead to a situation wherein CWS are disembedded from wider urban ecosystems, given that the dominance of a particular business model involves high levels of homogenisation among coworking providers. This would limit opportunities for CWS to draw from, and to be influenced by, their locality, potentially undermining the development of deeper ties with local actors and communities. A driving factor for this disembeddedness will be that CWS would not need to interact with local actors, due to the success of the prevailing business model, which would also likely reduce competition and therefore innovation in the CWS sector. If the tendency towards homogenisation intensifies, there would be a larger number of CWS, as the model is easy to expand into suburban and also rural areas (note also a likelihood to expand nationally and internationally). In short, this disembeddedness is driven by the same processes which have reproduced the homogenisation evident in most urban areas characterised by the proliferation of identical chain stores and branded outlets (Hughes & Jackson, 2015). Competitive pressures will have led to the dominance of a particular business model, which supersedes all competition.

For users, homogenisation would likely result in an increased number of coworking spaces, but a decrease in the diversity of types of spaces. Highly localised, community-led (or even cooperatively owned) spaces would retreat in the face of highly professionalised CWS with ‘superior’ (more predictable) business models and lower operating costs. Workers would likely experience less flexibility in membership terms and conditions. This would matter more to self-employed and freelance individuals than remote/hybrid workers employed by companies. CWS would become an accepted and normalised ‘workplace of the future’, still used by individual freelancers, but increasingly occupied by enterprise clients such as remotely located teams, and even entire firms. This would have varied

implications for HR, both academically and practically. It is likely that HR departments will normalise the management of remotely based employees in CWS, and that new HRM policies will be developed that support and encourage working away from ‘main’ offices in CWS, often in ways that are designed to promote flexible working, collaboration with other CWS users, increased wellbeing, and to potentially act as sites for recruitment of new staff. This homogenisation would likely see the increase of remote working in CWS as a commonplace feature of urban life.

### **The tendency towards the differentiation and embeddedness of CWS**

This scenario envisages the CWS sector fragmenting into a plethora of differing business models and organisational forms, from large corporate CWS to small independent CWS, and with no one single type predominating. This would result from high levels of competition between spaces and be predicated on a stable (or rising) number of workers seeking out CWS. It is thus dependent upon broader labour market dynamics that favour remote and hybrid work for users. There would be a high level of local embeddedness as the forms assumed by different CWS become heavily shaped by the needs, requirements and competitive pressures of their localities. It would be characterised by high levels of competition and therefore also innovation, as CWS are forced to interact closely with their localities in order to grow. The lack of any one prevalent business type may strengthen the power of the local state to act to shape the CWS sector, as it is less likely the powerful CWS will have come to dominate. However, differentiation within the sector may also make it challenging for the local state to know *how* to support CWS, should it wish to, due to the complexities and heterogeneity which prevails. In this instance there would be multiple competing voices seeking to represent the sector, who may have wildly differing aims and interests. The high levels of differentiation which exist in this scenario could also lead to claims that it is indeed unhelpful to speak of there being a single CWS sector at all, as high levels of competition generate wide divergences in business models, and, ultimately, differing visions as to what CWS should be.

The pressures on HR departments in this scenario would be high, due to the increased levels of complexity and the wide variety of different business models (and therefore financial, operational and spatial systems) which exist in the sector. These may limit HR’s willingness to allow workers to use CWS, undermining opportunities for employers and workers to benefit from CWS. This could be a barrier to growth, leading to spaces being less stable and sustainable, therein limiting opportunities for remote working in third spaces.

## Tensions between embeddedness and disembeddedness

Tensions between tendencies towards the embeddedness and disembeddedness of CWS will not necessarily be geographically even. Outcomes may vary in different places in the short-term. The contemporary status of the CWS market is already one in which different business models are competing (Yates et al., 2024). As this review highlights, there are many different types of CWS with varying—and sometimes opposing—aims and business models. At present, the corporate CWS business model has grown, but is not yet predominant, meaning that alternative business models and substantial variations can, and do, exist. Smaller, independent CWS whose business models are very different to that of large, corporate CWS do compete in the market and are partially embedded in their localities. The small, independent CWS operate by attracting a particular group of individual users, for example freelancers working in a particular sector or occupation, and they strive to maintain at least some of the sense of community that was one of the hallmarks of early CWS. They do operate in competitive markets, however, and so may have to accept enterprise and remote working teams to supplement their income.

Within this context of a relatively open and differentiated CWS market, the existence of competitive pressures will compel CWS to continue to innovate, and in doing so this will facilitate greater interaction with localities, whether it be with other firms, or social and community organisations more generally. The lack of any one prevalent business model will mean CWS will need to continue to seek new users, tailoring what they offer to the specifics of the locality. This would not occur in a market wherein one type of CWS has come to dominate. The tendency towards greater homogenisation and disembeddedness is least likely to occur in those places where there is diversity of demand for workplaces to suit different needs. In addition, the role of the local state and regulation will influence the degrees to which CWS are embedded in their localities. Some local state managers may be more willing to work with and support locally owned CWS than they would support large, impersonal corporate CWS. However, the degree of support depends on the composition of local politics.

To the degree that there is uneven geographical variation in degrees of homogenisation/disembeddedness, on the one hand, or differentiation/embeddedness on the other, HRM departments will be unable to develop a 'one-size fits all' approach for their remote staff who are working in CWS. This will present challenges, but can also generate opportunities, particularly if HR seek to use the presence of their staff in CWS as an opportunity to find new potential recruits. It will be harder for HR managers to develop expertise around more differentiated CWS markets, but this can offer different avenues for

innovation in spaces, particularly where focused on building competitive strengths and indeed communities around strategic sectors.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings have allowed us to consider how the growth of the coworking sector may shape workplaces of the future. We argue for a deeper understanding and conceptualisation of the key processes shaping the CWS market. Macroeconomic conditions, urban property dynamics, business strategies, users and customers, technology, and broader socio- and political-economic contexts are leading to the development of multiple CWS business models, ranging from large corporate to small independent. Our systematic literature review has revealed that the composition of CWS markets varies according to local conditions, although the compulsion of CWS to remain economically competitive and viable is leading to more CWS adopting an enterprise-client-friendly model. We propose an approach that allows us to conceptualise and observe the increasing homogenisation and disembeddedness of the sector in many places.

When considering the implications for the workplaces of the future, we again find that economic realities are a key factor driving how coworking spaces will shape the future of work. We anticipate ongoing tensions between processes of homogenisation and differentiation that will directly influence the CWS sector; the diversity, sustainability and embeddedness of CWS; the experiences for workers; and the role of HRM. More organisations and independent freelancers may choose to use CWS, but only if it is economically beneficial for them to do so, and if they can access CWS on an inclusive basis. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ongoing inflationary crisis across advanced economies it remains unclear to what extent organisations and individuals will want to rent out often expensive coworking space, particularly when cheaper options may be available elsewhere. It may transpire that the dream of coworking is rudely awoken by the cold light of economic fact.

Thus far, discussion around hybrid working has been centred around the impacts of hybrid work on (labour) productivity. Yet we highlight the understudied character of commercial real estate markets as drivers of workspace provision. The 'slicing off' of the costs of workspace (and infrastructure) is something that the research on coworking enables us to observe from a wide angle. These issues are likely to demand more attention both in the employment contract and in academic research as the tensions between the 'costs' of provision of working infrastructure by employers versus the needs and desires of workers become more widely recognized. Against this backdrop we observe an intensification in interest in the future of work and have endeavoured here to highlight the critical role of coworking and CWS in understanding the variety

of different outcomes that are emerging from the increase in spatial and temporal flexibility in some types of work.

We urge that more attention be paid to 'third spaces' of work in charting this fast-paced transformation of spaces where contemporary, digitally connected work is performed, and argue that these spaces will only become more critical to our understanding of the future of work as these processes develop. Nonstandard work and platform work have prompted much discussion of the governance of the employment contract, but the materiality of workplaces has not really been considered beyond issues of health and safety. The coworking sector, meanwhile, alerts us to, for instance, the land-rent-value dynamics that will increasingly exert an impact on both workplace organisation and architecture and specific arrangements of hybrid working.

## CONCLUSION

Our paper advanced its arguments by presenting findings from a systematic literature review of 127 papers published between 2006 and 2023. We have situated coworking and CWS within broader debates concerning precisely when, where and how work will be conducted in the future, and how the growth of coworking will shape workplaces of the future (with associated implications for HR). We have identified four cross-cutting themes in coworking research (their differentiation, their usage, the ecosystems in which they operate, and commercial real estate dynamics) and three areas of research weakness (community, context and change). We then advanced a future research agenda which made two arguments. First, greater attention needs to be paid to the value propositions of CWS. Second, the concept of embeddedness should be used to better understand CWS in their local (and national contexts), arguing for a broader, place-based analytical focus on CWS. In making these arguments we imagined two possible scenarios for the future of coworking and CWS which relate to this Special Issue theme of 'workplaces of the future', namely, the homogenisation and differentiation of CWS. These are ends of a continuum which provide predictive capacity as to how the CWS sector will develop, while also raising questions as to the efficacy of describing the CWS market as a cohesive one due to the range of different spaces and business models.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors, excluding Derya, are founding members of CORECOL, a collective researching coworking and the future of work. Derya acted as a research assistant on the funded project and provided intellectual contribution through the analysis of the data. All other contributors were coinvestigators on the project. Jennifer led the systematic literature review and is the lead contributor. Edward, Greig, Harry and Ödül contributed to the

analysis, framework development and all provided written contributions throughout the writing and revision process. The order of names listed reflects the overall contribution to the paper.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Available on request. There is no primary data, instead a spreadsheet supporting the systematic literature review.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

None required. The paper used only secondary data.

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