

Coworking spaces as sites of organizing

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Study premises

Coworking spaces (CWSs) engage professionals characterized by spatial, temporal, and employment flexibility – i.e., freelancers, solo-entrepreneurs, remote workers (Garrett et al., 2017). They mobilize ‘third place’ features to put forward values such as autonomy, flexibility, and collaboration, with the final objective to foster creative outcomes (Garrett et al., 2017). It is ever-more important to understand how CWSs become organizational, thus moving beyond a community-related reading of CWSs that has catalyzed most scholarly attention. Recent attempts tried to unpack the organizational character of CWSs. Yacoub and Haefliger (2022) showed how CWSs cater more than just a sense of community, indeed shaping professionals’ work and collaboration practices and fostering collective action and co-orientation. Through a systematic review of the literature on coworking, this study seeks to offer a fine-grained illustration of how CWSs emerge as sites of organizing for professionals who do not share a unique organizational affiliation, along with developing a research agenda for future studies (to be elaborated in the full paper).

Methodology

The systematic literature review drew on Tranfield and colleagues (2003) three-stage approach. In the first stage, a search in the WoS and Scopus databases was renewed multiple times up to 16 August 2022, yielding a final set of 85 documents. In the second stage, the documents were analyzed to code and group the main themes in the literature that could posit CWSs as sites of organizing. The third stage resulted in a framework depicting four dimensions across which the organizational character of CWSs is articulated – ‘materiality’; ‘temporality’; ‘identity’; ‘formality/informality’. A duality between managers and members of CWSs also emerged: whereas coworking managers intentionally contribute to these four dimensions by ‘curating’ (e.g., Brown, 2017; Merkel, 2015) the characteristics, activities, and orientations of CWSs, coworking members organically contribute to them through their everyday actions and interactions (Figure 1).

Results

The ‘materiality’ dimension refers to the contribution of features of the physical space and material artifacts in the emergence and endurance of organizing in CWSs. For instance, the mutable and open design sought by coworking managers can work as a canvas for members to appropriate rooms, desks, and other specific artifacts (Wilhoit Larson, 2020). It can also favor the negotiation of the functions of coworking areas among members holding diverse – sometimes conflicting – needs, objectives, and activities (Bouncken & Aslam, 2021). Moreover, CWSs might be designed by coworking managers to foster exploration and collaboration (Merkel, 2015). However, some members might not fit in these orientations and be more self-centered and focus-oriented (Wijngaarden, 2022): thus, they can ‘redesign’ their working areas by secluding them through features of traditional workspaces (Wilhoit Larson, 2020).

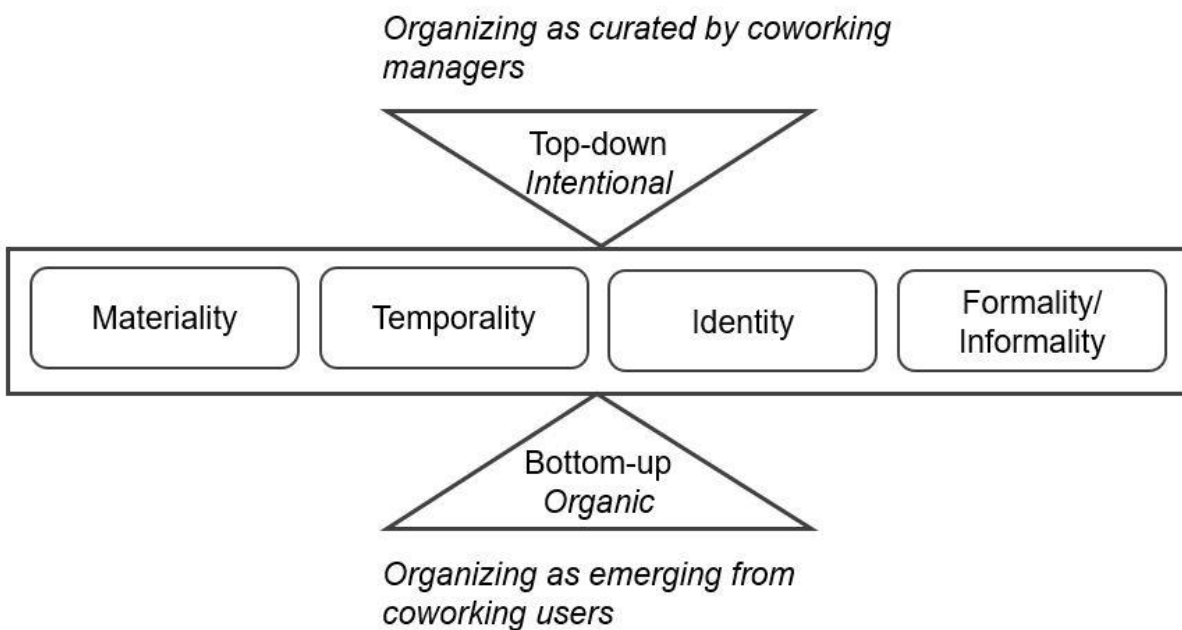
The ‘temporality’ dimension refers to the contribution of CWSs’ temporal rhythms. Coworking members bring forward different temporal demands (e.g., 24/7 vs 8-to-5 models): thus, CWSs can work as sites to either accelerate or decelerate temporal flexibility. Moreover, coworking members’

co-construction of rituals and routines contribute to the temporality of their activities in CWSs (Blagoev et al., 2019). Coworking managers can influence temporality by defining ‘organizational platforms’ – e.g., events, shared lunches, booking tools – around which members can organize their daily activities.

The ‘identity’ dimension refers to the contribution of CWSs’ role in shaping the professional identity of those who attend them. For instance, the sense of community, the value orientation, and the potential networks provided by CWSs can help coworking members gain identity support (Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2020). This support is vital for freelancers and solo-entrepreneurs, who may need a ‘holding environment’ providing cues and practices to infer ‘who they are’ as professionals (Bacevice & Spreitzer, 2022; see also Petriglieri et al., 2019). On the one side, these professionals can benefit from social recognition and reputational spillovers; on the other, they can mitigate perceived precarity and isolation.

The ‘formality/informality’ dimension refers to the contribution of the degree of formalization of the work activities and relations unfolding in CWSs. Professionals – especially freelancers and solo-entrepreneurs – can organize around CWSs to reduce precarity and informal labor. On the one side, coworking affiliation can facilitate the formalization of collaborations and welfare support; on the other, it facilitates ‘boundary work’ in formalizing the location and timing of work activities (Merkel, 2019). Moreover, coworking managers can also seek to curate a welcoming and supportive work environment: this is vital for early-career professionals and for addressing gender inequality in flexible work arrangements (Sargent et al., 2021). However, coworking members’ reciprocity may sometimes end up exacerbating informality by pushing members to deliver non-paid emotional support and contribute to the coworking community for free (Wright et al., 2021).

Figure 1 – A framework for coworking spaces as sites of organizing



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