Coworking through the Pandemic: Flexibly Yours

by

Meghan Kathleen Crouch

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Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the examining committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner	DR. DEBBIE LALIBERTE RUDMAN Distinguished University Professor, School of Occupational Therapy Western University
Supervisor	DR. ELLEN MACEACHEN Professor, School of Public Health Sciences University of Waterloo
Internal Members	DR. ELENA NEITERMAN Continuing Lecturer, School of Public Health Sciences University of Waterloo
	DR. JENNIFER WHITSON Associate Professor, Sociology and Legal Studies University of Waterloo
Internal/External Member	DR. NADA BASIR Assistant Professor, Conrad School of Entrepreneurship and Business University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

Coworking can be defined as a paid for service (usually) providing shared workspace and amenities to users. When the pandemic hit, owing to the business model's in-person foundations of physical proximity and shared amenities, the coworking industry was expected to be seriously impacted. Yet fast forward, and as the pandemic has played out, coworking businesses are uniquely positioned in this uncertain and changing workscape. This dissertation presents one of the first academic explorations into how independent coworking businesses fared in the initial year of the pandemic. Specifically, the research explores the following questions:

1. How did independent coworking businesses manage and adapt to the pandemic?
2. What is virtual coworking and what are the experiences of workers in these virtual coworking spaces?
3. How does coworking flexibility affect social support and connection?

Using a critically interpretive poststructural approach, this ethnography included virtual fieldwork and interviews. Sixty hours of virtual participant observation and 30 loosely structured interviews were conducted with coworking stakeholders (i.e., owner-operators, managers, and users) over videoconferencing platforms. Secondary data included written fieldnotes and coworking documents.

Results capture the strategies used by coworking business owner-operators and managers to sustain their businesses and the attendant relationships with coworking users, irrespective of whether or not a physical location could be provided under pandemic lockdowns. Given the expansion of coworking businesses into virtual service offerings, a key contribution of my research is the finding that co-location in a physical coworking space is *not necessary* to cultivate vibes and a sense of community. By removing the physical infrastructure of coworking, the virtual coworking product in which I participated points to both a reinforcement of and an emphasis on the centrality of social connection, support, and

community. By de-centering the priority of a physical co-location, I conceptualize coworking businesses as commodified support infrastructures—affective atmospheres produced through the entanglement of human bodies, other living things, objects, and technologies in a space.

In viewing coworking businesses as fluid affective atmospheres of support, my research adds to the emerging coworking scholarship that attends to the atmospheric qualities of coworking, the role of affective labour, and the possibilities of encounters and interactions as bodies, objects, and technologies interconnect. My results reinforce the deep ambivalence of coworking, capturing tensions between productivity and sociality, and a blurring of boundaries between professional and private, and work and leisure. The analysis also suggests that the inherent flexibility, informality, turnover, and autonomy in coworking practices can make creating stable social connections and support difficult. Finally, the COVID-19 crisis brought to light how coworking lies primarily outside the scope of current employment legislation, which includes occupational health and safety, employment standards, and workers' compensation. In the absence of well-defined policy directions, coworking business owner-operators and managers made individualized decisions, thereby ultimately downloading further risk and responsibility onto their coworking users.

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Completing this PhD has been a true privilege. It has been an opportunity to read and think deeply about issues I am interested in. A time and space to critically examine the complexities and complicatedness of doing engaged research. An exercise permitting innate curiosities to lead where they may and also an exercise of determination and perseverance. After spending so many years working towards The Defense, it feels surreal that it is now completed. Getting here was only possible with the patience and support of so many.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> "Work can kill you quickly or slowly, and that was true before the pandemic brought this line of critical analysis back onto our collective radar" (Weeks in Cole & Marasco, 2021, p. 744).

> "But we are at a societal inflection point. Parts of our lives that were once quietly annoying have become intolerable; social institutions that have long felt broken are now actively breaking us" (Warzel & Petersen, 2021, p. 7).

1.1 Research context

Work, including its accompanying physical and psychosocial conditions, is a powerful determinant of health and wellbeing (Kalleberg, 2009). The COVID-19 pandemic has made this explicit, yet as the above remark by critical scholar Weeks underscores, this is not new knowledge. Likewise, the pandemic is highlighting and exacerbating the brokenness of work and our relationship to it (Warzel & Petersen, 2021; Weeks in Cole & Marasco, 2021). While experienced differently depending on one's intersectional identity and socioeconomic position (Côté et al., 2021; Jetha et al., 2021), the failings of work as a social institution along with our complicity with work in its current forms became glaring as the pandemic wore on. According to Weeks in an interview with Cole and Marasco (2021), be it "low waged work, unemployment, underemployment, overwork, unremunerated work, shadow work, precarity, debt; all of these are now more visible and legible as systemic problems" (p. 743).

Besides exposing the pernicious precarization of work (Côté et al., 2021), the COVID-19 pandemic is also transforming *how* we work. It has accelerated future of work trends including digitalization, hybridization, and flexibilization[1] of work arrangements. Moreover, although these technologies and 'new' working patterns existed pre-COVID-19, the pandemic

[1]For the purposes of this thesis, *digitalization* refers to "partially or fully converting elements of firm value-chain activities and business models to digital platforms via emergent digital technologies such as mobile and visual connectivity, cloud computing, robotics, smart phones, artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, additive manufacturing, 3-D printing, and Internet of Things (IoT)" (Amankwah-Amoah, Khan, Wood, & Knight, 2021, p. 603). *Hybridization* refers to the work practice of alternating between working from home and from an organizational workplace using virtual technologies (Halford, 2005). *Flexibilization* refers to work activity performed at discretionary places and times using virtual technologies (i.e., spatiotemporal flexibility) (Kingma, 2019; Svensson et al., 2022).

necessitated the widespread adoption of these trends (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021; Aroles, Cecez-Kecmanovic, Dale, Kingma, & Mitev, 2021; Muzio & Doh, 2021) by asking those capable of performing work at home to do so (Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021). Under the pandemic and the pervasive adoption of technology-enabled remote work arrangements, workplace intimacies and relations are similarly transforming (Dawson & Dennis, 2021). Future of work trends embracing new work practices have been lauded for increasing efficiency, productivity, worker autonomy, flexibility, greater satisfaction and balance between work and life demands, while minimizing overhead costs, commute times, and greenhouse gas emissions (Aroles et al., 2021; Haider & Anwar, 2022; Mehdi & Morissette, 2021b).

Pandemic-related disruption has shown that remote work is possible for many workers previously bound to an office and simultaneously shone light on the complexities of working remotely, presenting a mix of opportunities and challenges for both employers and workers alike. At national, industry, firm, and individual levels, the pandemic has tasked us with managing unprecedented uncertainty (Muzio & Doh, 2021). Businesses of all sizes have needed to implement changes, sometimes on the fly, in response to pandemic-related lockdowns and social distancing measures (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021). Consequently, there has been an "accelerated demand for flexibility" (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021, p. 3) which coworking spaces, the subject of this dissertation, are positioned to cater to (Howell, 2022a; Wright, Marsh, & Wibberley, 2021).

"Coworking" can be operationally defined as "subscription-based workspace" (Howell, 2022, p. 1) in which individuals pay a fee to have access to "amenity-rich shared workspaces" (Jamal, 2018, p. 778). In other words, coworking businesses provide a physical, shared space (usually) for coworking users to work in. The coworking users typically have membership options that offer different types of "desks" with access to a variety of additional amenities (e.g., document printing services and permanent mailing address) purchased for a flexible term (i.e., day, month, year). Initially conceived as a grassroots community of practice to provide independent knowledge workers the spatial and social infrastructure to do their work, the first 'official' coworking space opened in 2005 (Spinuzzi, Bodrožić, Scaratti, & Ivaldi, 2019). The practice of working in shared workplaces is evidently not new per se (de Peuter, Cohen, & Saraco, 2017;

Kojo & Nenonen, 2017); however, the exponential growth and proliferation of coworking since the mid 2000s is particularly noteworthy (Blagoev, Costas, & Kärreman, 2019; Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018). The commercialized coworking conglomerate *WeWork* may be the most infamous name in the coworking industry with a documentary film, miniseries, and at least two books detailing the epic unravelling of the company once valued at over $47 billion dollars. Still, as of March 2022, *WeWork* had over 700 coworking locations in 38 countries worldwide—representing *only* 3% of the global coworking market, with 64% of coworking businesses independently owned with a single location (Howell, 2022b).

The future of coworking spaces and the industry as a whole appeared dire early on in the pandemic owing to the business model's foundations of physical proximity and shared amenities (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Howell, 2022a; Mayerhoffer, 2021; Wright et al., 2021). Very quickly, however, the pandemic-related work from home experiment (Aroles et al., 2021) made clear the importance of and demand for coworking spaces in the context of today's post-industrial knowledge economy. Of course, individuals who had used coworking spaces pre-pandemic—workers who conceivably had the ability to work from anywhere and had chosen to *pay* for a desk in a shared office environment to do *their* work often on *their* own—were well aware of the reasons why they chose *not* to work from home. Yet, as millions of workers were sent home to work remotely to comply with their country's public health guidelines, they too discovered both the benefits and hardships of their own "home office," and the appeal of coworking became relevant for a larger percentage of the workforce now untethered from their offices. For employers, coworking spaces are a middle ground, a "third workspace" (Kingma, 2016). These spaces offer workers a professional setting for work outside the home, requiring neither a commute to the corporate office nor long-term financial commitment on behalf of the organization (Howell, 2022a; Kraus, Bouncken, Görmar, González-Serrano, & Calabuig, 2022; Wright et al., 2021). The ubiquity of the terms *hybrid* and *flexible* in the discourses pertaining to *return to the office* plans suggests that coworking will become one component of a multi-sited "workscape" (Felstead, Jewson, & Walters, 2005a, p. 16) that workers draw upon as part of their hybrid and flexible working life. This workscape may include multiple sites including the home, the occasional coworking desk, and the company's headquarters (Aroles et al., 2021; Warzel & Petersen, 2021).

In Canada, the coworking industry is seeing proliferate growth as a result of the pandemic-induced work from home experience, especially in suburban and rural areas as workers relocate outside of urban centres (Farooqui, 2022). The growing body of critical research situates coworking practices in the broader 21st century economic landscape as increasingly characterized by neoliberal imperatives and precarious employment. Simultaneously, countries like Canada—with advanced economies—are escalating their reliance on technologies to perform work. Hodder (2020) notes that, paradoxically, despite being more connected than ever via technology, people's work and working lives have become more dispersed and individualized. This raises questions about the impact of the increase in remote working arrangements given that a sense of belonging is a well-known basic psychological need (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Considerable current evidence underlines the associations among social isolation, loneliness and poor health and wellbeing outcomes (e.g., Fried et al., 2020; Holt-Lunstad, 2022; O'Sullivan, Lawlor, Burns, & Leavey, 2021). A recent study by Wöhrmann and Ebner (2021) found a decrease in the quality of social relations at work in proportion to the time spent working remotely (i.e., away from the primary office). Similarly, Becker, Belkin, Tuskey, and Conroy (2022) reported that work-related loneliness has increased during the pandemic. As restrictions ease and we "learn to live with COVID-19," the relevance and appeal of coworking spaces as sites for work and social connection for growing numbers of workers, employers and policy makers will remain of interest to academics and media alike (e.g., Bindley, 2022; Howell, 2022a; Immen, 2022; Mayerhoffer, 2021). With coworking practices, sites, and business models continuing to emerge and evolve, these complexities and changes offered a rich landscape for this dissertation research.

1.2 Thesis purpose and research questions

With emergent and flexible work practices on the rise, coworking spaces offer intriguing sites to investigate some of the complexities of the transformations of work that have been accelerated under the COVID-19 pandemic. Coworking may offer diverse workers social connection and support, yet as work becomes more dispersed, independent and remote, coworking practices may have unintended consequences. Coworking may further blur notions of "work and leisure, professional and private spheres, intimate and private realms" (de Vaujany, Leclercq-

Vandelannoitte, Munro, Nama, & Holt, 2021, p. 688). It may also introduce new tensions among strangers working in these shared workspaces. The pandemic has brought to the forefront the importance of and need for social connection, and multisectoral interventions, including community and employment level initiatives, are necessary to effectively address this complex societal issue (Holt-Lunstad, 2022, O'Sullivan et al., 2021).

The broad dissertation aim is, therefore, to investigate the coworking landscape in Canada to examine future of work possibilities that embrace technology, spatiotemporal flexibility, and hybridity. The research will specifically address a timely need that remains underexplored to date, namely examination of how coworking businesses managed through the pandemic. Even prior to COVID-19, Blagoev et al. (2019) suggested that coworking spaces "constitute critical 'interfaces' at which the changing discourses and practices of independent work, contemporary capitalism, and new forms of organizing come together" (p. 2). Today, amidst pandemic accelerated hybrid and flexible work arrangements, this seems especially true.

The dissertation research explores the following questions:

1. How did independent coworking businesses manage and adapt to the pandemic?
2. What is virtual coworking and what are the experiences of workers in these virtual coworking spaces?
3. How does coworking flexibility affect social support and connection?

The research methodology (Chapter 3) includes interviews with independent coworking space owner-operators, managers, coworking users, and past owner-operators and users; virtual fieldwork via online coworking unconferences and meetings; and participant observation in a newly formed, virtual coworking community. Interviews, fieldwork, and observations were conducted between June 2020 and March 2021. Through exploring the research questions, this dissertation captures, examines and reports on coworking business realities as hybrid workspaces

that bring together an amalgam of various types of non-standard[2] workers, including independent contractors, start-ups, and remote workers of larger organizations.

1.3 Contributions

With coworking businesses challenging traditional conceptualizations and boundaries between communities and organizations, this dissertation research contributes to the emerging body of coworking scholarship. Findings offer novel insights regarding flexible and remote work practices in Canada, including where this work is happening, how it is happening, and what new demands may be placed on workers as a consequence. Moreover, this research is among the first to investigate how various independent coworking businesses navigated the initial year of the pandemic and the expansion of coworking businesses to offer virtual services.

1.4 Thesis organization

Following this Introductory chapter, Chapter 2 – Literature Review situates the current dissertation project within pertinent scholarship. Drawing from diverse disciplines, the chapter offers in-depth discussion of the relationships between work and health and the changing nature of work. Chapter 3 – Methodology details the qualitative research design and recounts a number of challenges that arose in shifting the examination of coworking to a remote/virtual investigation. Chapter 4 – Findings presents the dissertation findings. These include coworking businesses' varied responses to pandemic-related economic shutdowns, the virtual coworking product curated for remote workers, the value of the independent coworking services, and issues that arise when strangers are brought together in a fluid, unconventional workspace.
The dissertation concludes with Chapter 5 – Discussion where I highlight key contributions of this research. I additionally consider the implications of the research, provide methodological reflections, and offer suggestions for further research.

[2] Here I define non-standard forms of work as including all forms of work outside of the standard employment relationship. The standard employment relationship is defined as "a continuous, full-time relationship in which a worker has one employer and normally works on the employer's premises under the employer's supervision" (Fudge, Tucker, & Vosko, 2003, p. 354). Non-standard work includes self-employment, temporary, part-time, seasonal, casual, and project-based work. Non-standard employment may mean that workers have multiple employers, temporary employers, or no employers (i.e., self-employed) (Vosko, 2010).

Chapter 2
Literature Review

This literature review provides the contextual landscape for the dissertation research. The chapter is organized into five main sections:
In section 2.1, Working our lives away?, I introduce work as a social determinant of health, with a focus on psychosocial working conditions and the ways in which these influence workers' health and wellbeing.

In section 2.2, Transformation of work in the post-industrial economy, I examine the changing contours of work and how these have impacted working life. Non-standard and flexible working arrangements, including telework (remote/virtual), and the emerging challenges are identified.

Section 2.3, New working arrangements: the rise in coworking spaces, offers a consolidation of the literature on the "new" ways of working and, specifically, the emergence and proliferation of coworking. I explain what coworking is—beyond simply renting desks to workers—and provide detailed descriptions of coworking users, amenities, and business models.

In section 2.4, Coworking complexities, contentions, and conundrums, I present an in-depth critical review of the diverse disciplinary perspectives on coworking, pointing to the ongoing challenges, ambiguities and contestations present in the extant literature.

In section 2.5, The pandemic, coworking, and the tale so far…, I highlight the pandemic-related work transformations and uncertain economic climate in which flexible coworking businesses are uniquely positioned. I demonstrate that research regarding how coworking businesses mitigated the impacts of the pandemic and how the dynamics of coworking are evolving is warranted—providing the rationale for this dissertation.

2.1 Working our lives away?

Our living and working conditions have long been recognized to be the primary factors that influence health with respect to both the quality and quantity of a human life (Raphael, 2010). Work is understood to be a social determinant of health, and in the following sections I outline how an individual's employment, including the physical and psychosocial working conditions in which it takes place, affects health and wellbeing. I then detail the conceptualization and measurement of psychosocial working conditions and their importance in the post-industrial workplace.

2.1.1 Work as a social determinant of health

Despite a predominant focus on individual lifestyle 'choices' in public health campaigns, media discourse, and lay person's beliefs, external conditions—or social determinants of health—as they are commonly referred to, equal or exceed the health effects of these personal behaviours and lifestyle factors (e.g., physical activity levels, dietary intake) (Raphael, 2011).

Work is central to people's lives and intimately related to health and wellbeing in myriad ways (Bodin et al., 2020; Kalleberg, 2009; Peters, Dennerlein, Wagner, & Sorensen, 2022; Smith, 2007; Sorensen et al., 2021). On a practical, material level, an individual's employment largely determines their economic reality (Benach et al., 2014; Burgard & Lin, 2013). Work is not only a means to a paycheck (Burgard & Lin, 2013), however; it is critical for socialization (Siegrist et al., 2004), tied to one's social status, sense of belonging, meaning, and identity (Burgard & Lin, 2013; Smith, 2007). Among the twelve social determinants of health identified by Health Canada, two are related to work: employment and working conditions, and unemployment and employment security (Raphael, 2010).

The relationship between work and health is complex and reciprocal. Although work may not be the sole cause of health issues (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013; LaMontagne et al., 2014; Memish, Martin, Bartlett, Dawkins, & Sanderson, 2017), it exposes individuals to a variety of physical, environmental, chemical, psychological, and social (psychosocial) factors that, as Burgard and Lin (2013) suggest, "get under the skin" (p. 1106) to influence health and wellbeing (Peters et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2021). Employment income and employment-affiliated access to

benefits (i.e., healthcare or medical benefits, sick days) also affect additional social determinants of health such as housing quality and food security (Bodin et al., 2020; Peters et al., 2022).

From a historical perspective, during the industrial revolution mounting pressure from labour groups as well as the employers' recognition that "accidents and loss of life caused delays and cost money" (Allvin & Aronsson, 2003), employment and labour law, regulations and standards began addressing hazardous stressors (i.e., materials, technologies, processes, etc.) associated with manual work and the goods-producing labour sector (Eakin, Cava, & Smith, 2001; Karasek et al., 1998; Walters, 1983). As a consequence of these reforms and other occupational health and safety enhancements, reductions in the harms caused by the more traditional, visible, and measurable occupational exposures and stressors have been mitigated over the years (Ramkissoon, Smith, & Oudyk, 2019).

2.1.2 Conceptualizing the psychosocial work conditions

The prevention and protection of workers' safety has extended far beyond the industrial context and physical factory floor to include the psychosocial working environment (Allvin & Aronsson, 2003; Madsen & Rugulies, 2021; Niedhammer, Bertrais, & Witt, 2021). The psychosocial work environment is defined as "the sociostructural opportunities available in the workplace that allow individuals to have their expectations met with regard to wellbeing, productivity, opportunities for learning, and positive interactions with others" (Ramkissoon et al., 2019, p. 412). There is growing recognition of the health impact of the psychological and social (psychosocial) characteristics of work (Fan, Mustard, & Smith, 2019; Fan & Smith, 2018; Ramkissoon et al., 2019). At an individual, micro level, psychosocial work factors or job stressors have real implications on both physical and mental health outcomes (Eakin et al., 2001; Scott, 2004), which may additionally influence health-related behaviours and organizational outcomes (i.e., productivity, absenteeism, and turnover (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013; LaMontagne et al., 2014). In fact, the four outcomes of the psychosocial work conditions, namely physical, mental, behavioural, and organizational, are not mutually exclusive, but are interrelated and often overlapping (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013).

In contrast to more detectable, quantifiable occupational health and safety risks, psychosocial workplace stressors are less visible and more difficult to measure (Burgard & Lin, 2013; Ramkissoon et al., 2019). Theoretical concepts of the psychosocial working conditions thought to influence job stress (i.e., psychological strain) are commonly operationalized into self-report instruments (Marmot & Siegrist, 2004), with Niedhammer et al. (2021) noting that self-report instruments remain the most widely used assessment of psychosocial work factors, with alternative methods rare. Smith and LaMontagne (2015) aptly remind us that all of these theoretical models "are provisional and subject to revision in light of evolving knowledge" (p. 595). Despite the vast body of knowledge establishing the impacts of psychosocial work characteristics on health outcomes, lack of agreement persists regarding the pathways and mechanisms specifying these relationships (Niedhammer et al., 2021; Smith & LaMontagne, 2015). Examples of psychosocial dimensions of the working environment include psychological demands and decisional latitude, social support, effort-reward (im)balance, long working hours, organizational justice, emotional demands, work-life balance, and workplace bullying or violence (Niedhammer et al., 2021; Ramkissoon et al., 2019).

2.1.3 Psychosocial work hazards: invisible yet pervasive

With the move away from manufacturing towards a service-based economy, unlike other occupational risks to which only specific groups of workers are exposed (e.g. asbestos), the psychosocial work conditions or job stressors of the modern, post-industrial workplace have the potential to affect a larger proportion of the working population because all workers may be exposed to such stressors (LaMontagne et al., 2014). Psychosocial workplace factors have the potential to contribute to mental distress (i.e., depressed mood, anxiety, burnout, etc.) that may or may not reach a diagnosable mental disorder or illness (Collins, 2014; Memish et al., 2017). Further, exposure to job stress, including poor psychosocial working conditions, can certainly exacerbate underlying health conditions as well as increase the risk of poor health behaviours and chronic illness, including musculoskeletal disorders and cardiovascular disease (Bongers, 1993; Dimoff & Kelloway, 2013; LaMontagne et al., 2014; Memish et al., 2017; Mustard, Chambers, Ibrahim, Etches, & Smith, 2015). Niedhammer et al. (2021) examined existing systematic reviews to date, and found consistent significant associations between job strain, long

working hours, effort-reward imbalance, and job insecurity and cardiovascular disease and depression.

Optimistically, working conditions are identified as a major modifiable risk factor and can also serve to promote psychological wellbeing (Collins, 2014; LaMontagne et al., 2014). LaMontagne et al. (2014) have advocated for an integrated intervention approach for workplace mental health that would protect, promote, and address the problems of mental health. Specifically, protection of mental health would involve reducing exposure to work-related risks; promotion would include enhancing positive aspects of work as well as addressing mental health problems in the workplace. Fan et al.'s (2019) Canadian context research found the psychosocial work environment to be related to two distinct aspects of mental health—mental illness and mental wellbeing—suggesting that interventions that address psychosocial factors can enhance both dimensions.

The significance of the psychosocial working environment on the health of individuals, organizations, and communities at large has been buttressed with the recognition of the heavy socioeconomic burden of mental health issues in the workplace. There is increasing awareness of the role and influence of psychosocial working conditions in the development of mental health problems (Ramkissoon et al., 2019). In fact, with their high prevalence in working populations (LaMontagne et al., 2014), mental health problems are either the first or second leading cause of work-related-sickness absence in all industrialized countries. With young adults and those in their prime working years among the most affected, the indirect financial costs to the Canadian labour force, for example, as a result of lost productivity (i.e., absenteeism, presenteeism, and job turnover) were conservatively estimated to be $6.4 billion dollars in 2011 (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2013). The financial rationale for Canadian employers to invest in workplace mental health and psychological safety was reinforced by the "perfect legal storm" (Shain, 2010, p. 1): increasing pressure for corporate responsibility generated by various provincial and federal legislation. In January 2013, Canada became the first country to introduce a voluntary policy initiative, the National Standard for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, to provide a set of guidelines for organizations to create and maintain a psychologically healthy and safe workplace (BNQ, CSA, & Mental Health Commission of

Canada, 2013). An international review of workplace mental health guidelines recently assessed the Standard as having the highest quality and comprehensiveness of content (Memish et al., 2017).

In the wake of the pandemic, attention to consider the workplace as a prime target for health promotion and interventions to foster health and social support has been revitalized (Hammer, Allen, & Dimoff, 2022; Villeneuve & Parent, 2021). Simultaneously, other scholars are advocating for more upstream approaches that look at the macro issues which influence the psychosocial working conditions (Niedhammer et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2022; Sorensen et al., 2021). Sorensen et al. (2021) call for an expanded approach, proposing a conceptual model beyond the workplace. Their model includes the structural factors that influence worker health and wellbeing to "reflect the dynamic system influencing how work is performed, the technologies employed, and the nature of employment relationships" (p. 2). I turn now to highlight some of these larger social, economic and political factors that have influenced the transformation of work, including recent pandemic-induced accelerations (Amankwah-Amoah et al., 2021; Aroles et al., 2021).

2.2 Transformation of work in the post-industrial economy

Beginning in the 1970s (Holbeche, 2018; Kalleberg, 2009), the process of "neoliberal globalization" (Kalleberg, 2009, p. 2; Labonté & Stuckler, 2016, p. 316) began transforming the business landscape. In response to intensifying global competition, the prevailing business strategies, management practices and policies, along with their discourses, have come to prioritize innovation, efficiency, and flexibility in order to gain competitive advantage (Caldbick, Labonte, Mohindra, & Ruckert, 2014; Martin, 2019; Parry, 2016; Standing, 2011). Financialization, that is, maximizing shareholder value, has also become increasingly important for businesses (Kochan & Riordan, 2016). Labour came to be viewed as just another cost to be minimized (Kochan & Riordan, 2016; Martin, 2019). Organizations downsized, outsourced, and adopted other flexibility practices to reduce labour costs (Holbeche, 2018; Kochan & Riordan, 2016). Technological advancement and digitization additionally altered the way businesses *did* business (Benner, 2002; Nowak & Grantham, 2000), and facilitated the re-shaping of organizational structures and strategies as well as work practices and conditions (Benner, 2002;

Nowak & Grantham, 2000). Increasingly sophisticated communication technologies placed few infrastructural constraints on where, when, and how work can get done (Hari, 2017). Working arrangements became spatially and temporally flexible and, therefore, boundaryless (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2013).

These innovative communication technologies, buttressed by the neoliberal globalization movement, contributed to the "fissurization" of the workplace (Weil, 2014) and the decentralization of work (Allvin & Aronsson, 2003; Ekberg et al., 2016; Ertel, Pech, Ullsperger, Von Dem Knesebeck, & Siegrist, 2005). Many of the risks and costs traditionally carried by the organizations have been downloaded to the workers (Benach, Vives, Tarafa, Delclos, & Muntaner, 2016; Ertel et al., 2005; Fleming, 2017; Neff, 2012). Whereas work, as a social institution, had conventionally been defined and characterized with regard to location, time, division of responsibility, and the employment relationship (Allvin & Aronnson, 2003), modern work in the post-industrial economy varies considerably. It is no longer inherently bound to a specific location (Felstead, Jewson, & Walters, 2005b) or scheduled timeframe (Schneider & Harknett, 2019). Consequently, conventional office work is being carried out in diverse and transient settings (Felstead et al., 2005a; Halford, 2005; Hislop & Axtell, 2009; Quinlan & Bohle, 2008; Sewell & Taskin, 2015). Moreover, traditional employment relations and contracts are becoming more specialized and individualized, and alternative types of contract agreements are being relied upon that muddle the employee-employer distinction (Allvin & Aronsson, 2003; Howard, 2017). In fact, as Stone (2004) remarked, "the very concept of the workplace as a place, and the concept of employment as involving an employer, are becoming outdated" (ix).

2.2.1 Non-standard work and precarious work

Neoliberal political, economic, and business policies and practices have led to the increasing prevalence of non-standard forms of work. *Non-standard work* includes versions of self-employment, temporary, part-time, seasonal, casual, or project-based work (Fudge, 2005; Kalleberg, 2009; Vosko, 2010). Typically, employment and labour laws and policies are based on the standard employment relationship (Ekberg et al., 2016; Fudge et al., 2003; Vosko, 2010) characterized by "a continuous, full-time relationship in which a worker has one employer and normally works on the employer's premises under the employer's supervision" (Fudge et al.,

2003, p. 354). *Precarious employment*, in contrast, can be characterized as employment that is insecure with regards to employment contract(s), inadequately renumerated, and risky due to lack of rights and protection (Kalleberg, 2009; Rubery, Grimshaw, Keizer, & Johnson, 2018; Vosko, 2010). While non-standard work and precarious work are not new per se, what has changed, however, is the pervasiveness of these employment phenomena (Kalleberg, 2009). Non-standard employment forms do not fit easily with the binary, legal definitions of those that are employees (based on the traditional standard employment relationship) (Vosko, 2010) or those that are self-employed (Eurofound, 2018; Martin & Lewchuk, 2018; Vosko, 2010). Although non-standard employment is not inherently precarious work (Rubery et al., 2018; Vosko, 2010), in the realm of labour law the employment contract is the platform that drives labour legislation and determines eligibility to the system of labour rights, protections, and benefits (Fudge et al., 2003; Vosko, 2010).

In practice, the conceptual boundaries between employee and self-employed are becoming increasingly blurred (Eurofound, 2018; Fudge et al., 2003) and there is growing recognition of the diversity within the self-employment category (Grekou & Liu, 2018; Schoar, 2009). Such changes have real impact for those in the labour market across jurisdictions and what this means with respect to their access to health benefits and other social protections (Vosko, 2010). With the rise of non-standard employment, and self-employment in particular, more individuals are likely to experience forms of work insecurity because of poor contractual rights and/or exposure to market fluctuations (Eurofound, 2018). As Martin and Lewchuck (2018) lament, "most legislation remains outdated and provides for a workforce and economy that no longer exists" (p. 9). Within Ontario, for example, various laws and legislation provide workers with rights, benefits, and protections regarding minimum employment standards (i.e., the Employment Standards Act); health and illness/injury compensation (i.e., the Occupational Health and Safety Act, and the Workplace Safety and Insurance Act); and federally, income security (i.e., Employment Insurance). Regulatory implementation and effectiveness are complicated by non-standard employment forms (Lippel & Walters, 2019) as well as the fact that these "policies and initiatives span areas of health, disability, employment, joblessness, and public health" (MacEachen, 2019, pp. 6-7). The rise in non-standard work means that a growing percentage of

the Canadian labour force falls outside the scope of the standard employment relationship, and, in many cases, the rights and protections it affords (Fudge, 2005).

Closely tied to precarious employment is the perception of job insecurity; notably, individuals are increasingly concerned about job loss given the reality that even white-collar work can be outsourced (Kalleberg, 2009). Further, blended workforces, wherein standard and nonstandard (i.e., temporary, contract, etc.) workers are working alongside each other, can negatively influence even standard employees' perceptions of job security (Howard, 2017). All groups of workers are increasingly affected by precarisation, whether directly or indirectly (Benach et al., 2016; Premji, 2017).

On a macro level, precarious employment has been recognized as an emerging social determinant of health, an upstream determinant (i.e., structural factor) to the proximal psychosocial working conditions (Benach et al., 2014; Scott, 2004). According to Scott (2004), instead of acting as an acute stressor, job insecurity and "its chronicity… translates into a particular type of health risk… akin to the effects associated with long-term and traumatic forms of strain" (p. 146). Precarious work is associated with negative health outcomes and quality of life through various pathways. These include increased exposure to physical and psychosocial hazards found in workplace conditions, ambiguous or non-existent occupational health and safety legislation applicability, a lack of social protections such as employment insurance, low renumeration, and a lack of control over personal and professional lives (Bhattacharya & Ray, 2021; Bodin et al., 2020).

Problematically, it is unclear how many workers find themselves in these various insecure work arrangements (Benach et al., 2014; Benach et al., 2016; Howard, 2017; Lewchuk, 2017; Zhang & Zuberi, 2017). The heterogeneity in non-standard work, how precarity is conceptualized and operationalized, and lack of a standardized definition make accurate estimation along with comparison difficult across nations and research studies (Benach et al., 2014; Benach et al., 2016; Howard, 2017; Lewchuk, 2017; Zhang & Zuberi, 2017).

Within Canada, self-employment has more than doubled since 1976, with 2.9 million Canadians self-employed as of 2018 (Yssaad & Ferrao, 2019). Yet, in 2021, 10.1% of all employed people in Canada self-identified as self-employed workers without employees, up from 6.3% in 1976 (Statistics Canada, 2022b). As an indicator of employment quality, these workers may be vulnerable with respect to income and social protection as a consequence of their employment category (Statistics Canada, 2022b). As another indicator of employment quality, the proportion of workers (both employees and self-employed) that held multiple jobs simultaneously in 2021 had more than doubled from 1976, to 5.1% (Statistics Canada, 2022a). While there are many reasons why individuals may have multiple positions, working more than one job may indicate insufficient earnings in the primary employment form (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Further, on average, temporary employment has been growing at a faster pace than permanent employment since 1997 (Fields, Bourbeau, & Patterson, 2018). Evidence suggests that both non-standard and precarious employment are emerging issues in the Canadian context, and non-standard work is no longer the exception (Premji, 2017; Zhang & Zuberi, 2017). Despite workers self-reporting permanent, full-time employment, a more nuanced profile, using the Employment Precarity Index (EPI), revealed that a substantial portion of these workers were in employment relationships that more realistically demonstrated characteristics of precarity, including schedule unpredictably, income variability, and uncertainty about future employment (Lewchuk, 2017). Such realities are indeed worrisome as indicators of the quality of employment.

The non-standard and precarious employment trends in Canada are reflective of those occurring globally. A recent International Labour Office (ILO) report warns that, left unchecked, COVID 19-induced economic changes will continue to erode the quality of working conditions (International Labour Office, 2022). The pandemic and associated acceleration of technological change have deepened systemic inequalities. Those in developing nations with higher inequality and weak social support have disproportionately been affected with regards to employment health and safety and job disruptions (International Labour Office, 2022; Jetha et al., 2021).

Even prior to the pandemic, the transformation of paid work was creating new challenges related to occupational health and safety (Ekberg et al., 2016) with scholars highlighting the deterioration in occupational health and safety outcomes as a result (Quinlan & Bohle, 2009,

2013). Flexibility has created a proliferation of distributed and mobile workers working outside the traditional workplace (Charalampous, Grant, Tramontano, & Michailidis, 2019; Lippel & Walters, 2019; Neis & Lippel, 2019; Premji, 2017; Rockmann & Pratt, 2015). As organizations manage rapid changes and volatility of the markets with organizational flexibility (i.e., in work schedules, in forms of employment, in geographical location of work), who is ultimately responsible for ensuring the occupational health, safety, and wellbeing of the worker becomes blurry (Howard, 2017; Lippel et al., 2011; Lippel & Walters, 2019; Montreuil & Lippel, 2003). For instance, Lippel and colleagues (2011) demonstrated how triangular employment relationships in temporary employment agencies complicated regulatory oversight and effectiveness with regards to occupational health and safety and workers' compensation in the Canadian context. Still, minimal research exists regarding health promotion, workplace disability prevention, and workplace disability management, including return to work practices in non-standard work contexts (Ekberg et al., 2016). As Howard (2017) has remarked: "what kind of risks, how much risk, and the number of workers who bear the risks from nonstandard work arrangements are not clear" (p. 7).

2.2.2 Challenges of flexible work arrangements

Attempting to keep apace, recent literature reviews and research have focused on various types of flexible work arrangements (i.e., e-work, distributed work, telecommuting, teleworking, home-based); employment-related geographical mobility; and occupational health and safety concerns, regulation, management and worker wellbeing (see Allen, Golden, & Shockley, 2015 for details; Charalampous et al., 2019; Lippel, Johnstone, & Baril-Gingras, 2017; Lippel & Walters, 2019; Montreuil & Lippel, 2003; Nayani, Nielsen, Daniels, Donaldson-Feilder, & Lewis, 2018; Neis & Lippel, 2019; Quinlan & Bohle, 2008, 2009). *Flexible work* arrangements generally refer to any work arrangements that permit work to be performed at discretionary times and places (Svensson et al., 2022), while *telework* refers to the specific flexible work practice that occurs outside of the principal office using technology to perform work (Beckel & Fisher, 2022; Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021). Since telework occurs offsite, away from the central office, it is also referred to as *remote* work (Aroles et al., 2021).

What makes studying flexible work arrangements challenging are its diversity, limitations in how it is conceptualized and measured, and its administrative invisibility (Allen et al., 2015; Charalampous et al., 2019; Howard, 2017; Lippel & Walters, 2019; Montreuil & Lippel, 2003; Nayani et al., 2018; Neis & Lippel, 2019; Quinlan & Boyle, 2008). Because researchers use various terms and operationalizations to estimate the prevalence of non-standard work arrangements, approximations regarding the size of the workforce involved were unclear prior to the pandemic (Allen et al., 2015, Lippel & Walters, 2019; Montreuil & Lippel, 2003). Beyond the basic condition that telework occurs off the employer's supervised premises, telework can vary according to where the work is done (home or other location); whether the teleworker is employed by an organization, is self-employed, or is an independent contractor; and the intensity or extent of the teleworking with respect to how much time is spent outside the main office.

The diverse elements of what constitutes flexible work all have implications for worker welfare (Montreuil & Lippel, 2003). Messenger and Gschwind (2016) suggest that the conceptualization of "telework" has evolved with technological advancement. Telework is dynamic with respect to its organization (i.e., total, partial, occasional), location (i.e., home, third spaces), and communication/information technology (i.e., computer/telephone, laptop/mobile phone, tablet computer/smartphone). While telework is associated with known positive individual and organizational outcomes (e.g., flexibility in working time, real estate costs), it is also associated with negative outcomes at both the individual and organizational level (e.g., isolation, intra-team difficulties) (Allen et al., 2015; Charalampous et al., 2019). The actual time spent teleworking and whether it is employer or worker driven appears to influence whether the outcomes are beneficial or detrimental (Allen et al., 2015). Further, despite the increase in teleworkers even prior to the pandemic, there is limited research on the management of distributed workers to ensure occupational health and safety; the occupational health and safety leadership of this group of workers is similarly an understudied topic (Nayani et al., 2018).

With the widespread adoption of remote work, the pandemic brought renewed attention and research regarding telework and health as many workers transitioned to work from home arrangements, particularly those involved in knowledge work (Ng et al., 2021; Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021). Consistent with previous research, recent reviews concluded that measurement

heterogeneity with respect to telework exposure and health outcomes makes comparison across studies particularly challenging (Beckel & Fisher, 2022; Lunde et al., 2022). Consequently, telework research to date is rather indeterminate with regard to its impact on worker health and wellbeing, influenced by many factors across organizational, social, and individual levels that have been shown to have both positive and negative effects (Beckel & Fisher, 2022; Ng et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2022). For example, work-life conflict, location of telework, intensity of videoconferencing to perform job role, childcare duties, and interpersonal relationships may all influence telework and health outcomes. As part of their review, Beckel & Fisher (2022) created a conceptual model outlining the complex relationship between telework and worker health and wellbeing, identifying antecedents, mediators, and moderators that have been reported in the literature to date (Figure 2.1 below).

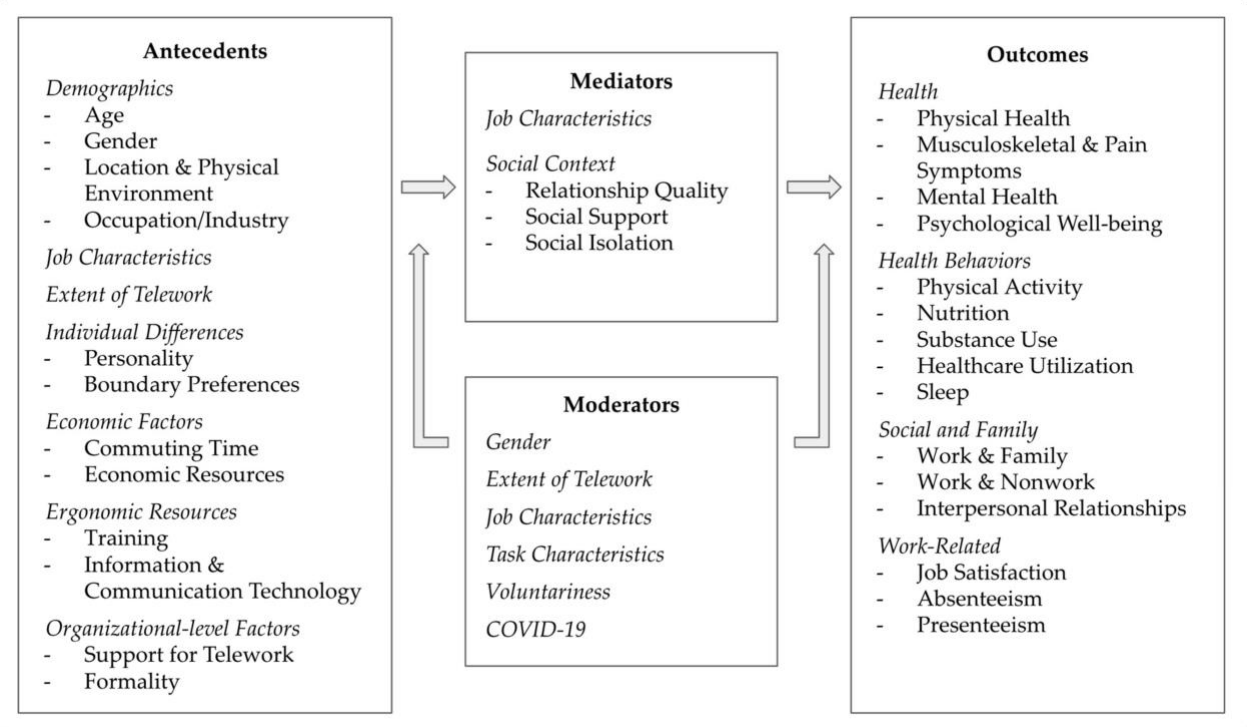

Figure 2.1. Conceptual model of the relationship between telework and health and wellbeing (Beckel & Fisher, 2022, p. 5)

Figure 2.1 illustrates the variety of factors, including individual, contextual, and job characteristics (antecedents), that studies have found affect the relationship between telework

and health and wellbeing outcomes. The arrows between the boxes that represent the four main sets of variables in the model indicate the influence of moderators and mediators. Some factors have been shown to explain (i.e., mediate) the relationship between telework and health and wellbeing outcomes (e.g., job autonomy, social support) whereas others influence the strength and direction of the relationship (i.e., moderators) between telework and health and wellbeing outcomes (e.g., gender, voluntariness).

There is some evidence to suggest that anything beyond 40% of time spent teleworking may be harmful for individuals with respect to experiencing loneliness (Beckel & Fisher, 2022). As Wöhrmann and Ebner (2021) remind, "teleworking is neither good nor bad" (p. 365); yet it is related to certain working conditions, including boundaryless work and lower quality social relations, that have implications for workers and employers. In light of the continuance of the pandemic and an increase in those teleworking in comparison to pre-pandemic levels, explicit telework policies, training for both employers and workers regarding remote and hybrid work arrangements, as well as ongoing research regarding the impacts of telework on health and wellbeing are advocated for in the extant scholarship (Beckel & Fisher, 2022; Lunde et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2021; Peters et al., 2022). Specifically, further research is necessary to examine the "multitude of plausible moderators and mediators" (Lunde et al., 2022, p. 11) of the complex relationship between health and telework from home and other remote locations. Particular attention to methodological issues such as study design and measurement of both telework exposure and health outcomes has been emphasized by the most recent literature reviews, echoing pre-pandemic sentiments from scholars on the need to improve the quality of the evidence (Beckel & Fisher, 2022; Lunde et al., 2022).

In April 2020, roughly 40% of Canadian employees worked the majority of their hours at home in comparison to only 4% in 2016 (Haider & Anwar, 2022; Mehdi & Morissette, 2021b). Although by January 2021, this number had fallen to 32%, estimates suggest that post-pandemic, Canadian employees will prefer to work 24% of their total working hours from home (Mehdi & Morissette, 2021a). There is recognition that certain industries and jobs are more conducive to telework; hence, the percentage of teleworking individuals varies across education level and industry sector (Haider & Anwar, 2022; Mehdi & Morissette, 2021b). For instance, a greater

percentage of workers with higher education and/or those in finance, insurance, and professional, scientific and technical services have the ability to work from home in contrast to low skilled, more labour-intensive workers (Haider & Anwar, 2022; Mehdi & Morissette, 2021b; Reuschke & Felstead, 2020). Research conducted by the McKinsey Global Institute indicates that among advanced economies approximately 20 to 25% of the workforce could work remotely three to five days per week and be equally as effective as they would be working in an office (Lund et al., 2021). The result would be a remote workforce consisting of four to five times as many individuals working remotely in comparison to pre-pandemic levels (Lund et al., 2021). While projections do not consider the employer's intentionality nor willingness to institute teleworking, they certainly rationalize a research agenda towards further understanding the complex relationship between teleworking and health and wellbeing.

2.2.3 Knowledge work and precarious work

In addition to the increase in non-standard, flexible working practices, another transformation in the post-industrial economy has been the shift towards, and growth among, service industries, with the accompanying rise in professional, managerial and technical work that is said to be "knowledge-intensive" (Kalleberg, 2009; Valdés & Barley, 2016). The term "knowledge work" has increasingly been used to encapsulate and characterize a variety of occupations in the 21st century (Murgia, Maestripieri, & Armano, 2016). While contention remains as to exactly what distinguishes knowledge work from other types of work and the ambiguity of knowledge in and of itself (Alvesson, 2001; Felstead et al., 2005a), *knowledge work* generally includes the acquisition, production, and application of various types of information (Charalampous et al., 2019) requiring "cognitive, relational and communicative faculties, in collaboration with others or with machines" (Murgia et al., 2016, p. 2). Further, knowledge work is largely intangible, embodied, and inherently, *peopled* (James, 2013, p. 485) and its means of production are the worker's intellectual skills and expertise (Charalampous et al., 2019). Knowledge work is associated with autonomy, flexibility, creativity, innovation, and ongoing learning and skills upgrading, with less reliance on standardization, context-specific knowledge, and routine work (Charalampous et al., 2019; Murgia et al., 2016; Schieman, Whitestone, & Van Gundy, 2006; Valdés & Barley, 2016). In the United States, knowledge workers (i.e., professional, technical and managerial workers) account for the largest segment of the employed population (Valdés &

Barley, 2016). Similarly, in Canada the fastest rate of employment growth in 2018 was among knowledge workers in the professional, scientific and technical services (Patterson, Hazel, & Saunders, 2019).

Highly skilled knowledge workers are glamourized in the neoliberal, entrepreneurial society in which we live, with primacy and importance given to knowledge work in the post-industrial economy. Despite this rhetoric, the diverse disciplinary literature to date (e.g., Benner, 2002; Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2013; Gill, 2010; Gill & Pratt; 2008; Gray, 2017; James, 2013; Neff, 2012; Shih, 2004) reflects a growing awareness of the precarious working conditions and insecurity of various types of knowledge workers, suggesting a reality far less glamorous than purported (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2013; Gill, 2010; Gill & Pratt, 2008). As a consequence of the type of work, few infrastructural constraints determine where, when, and how work gets done (Hari, 2017). Information and communication technology and creative/media companies are often recognized for their progressive work-life balance policies (Hari, 2017; MacEachen, Polzer, & Clarke, 2008). However, research suggests that workers in fact experience significant work-life conflict (James, 2013), with noted pressures and expectations to adapt personal schedules to suit business and/or project timelines (Hari, 2017; MacEachen et al., 2008).

By virtue of the volatility, pace, and competition that exist in these sectors, as well as development, project, and sales life cycles, long and intense working conditions are pervasive (Hari, 2017; James, 2013; MacEachen et al., 2008; Shih, 2004; Weststar & Legault, 2017). Organizational structures tend to be flat as opposed to the traditional hierarchical strategies (MacEachen et al., 2008), and self-control and self-management are encouraged (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2013). Worker flexibility and autonomy appear constrained, despite optimistic work-life balance rhetoric. Indeed, flexible working practices can be employee friendly or employer friendly, and discourses are often at odds with these policies in practice (Fleetwood, 2007). As Kidd Damarin (2006) argued, “workers may have significant control over concrete labour processes while lacking authority over the larger structures in which labour is embedded” (p. 458). Software and video game developers along with website producer and other technology workers are increasingly hired on project-based contracts (Bergvall-Kåreborn &

Howcroft, 2013; Kidd Damarin, 2006; Weststar & Legault, 2017), meaning that "job placement is a recurrent test" (Weststar & Legault, 2017, p. 297). Unfavourable working conditions, such as unlimited and uncompensated overtime (James, 2013; Weststar & Legault, 2017), are endured by workers because future employment is contingent on current performance and reputation (Benner, 2002; James, 2013; Kidd Damarin, 2006; Shih, 2004). Full-time, permanent employment relationships are becoming less common in information technology industries (Benner, 2002). Instead, temporary, contractual employment trends are producing a highly skilled, highly mobile group of precarious knowledge workers (Benner, 2002; Kidd Damarin, 2006; Shih, 2004; Weststar & Legault, 2017) acting "as… entrepreneur[s] of the self" (Weststar & Legault, 2017, p. 297). Similarly, in the cultural and creative industries (e.g., journalists, video game designers, website developers) workers are often independent contractors, freelancing or working for micro-businesses with work characterized as insecure, intense, and demanding (Cockayne, 2016; Gill, 2010).

Traditionally, higher status occupations were thought to confer favourable work conditions and health protections as a result of the job resources they offered (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Schieman, 2013). Work attributes such as autonomy, schedule control, job challenge, authority, and opportunities for professional development were theorized to be motivational and to offset the stressful aspects of the work or the demands that may tax the worker (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). There is empirical support, however, that challenges the higher status hypothesis, reporting that some job-related resources in these higher prestige occupations may be associated with additional pressures that generate strain and stress on the worker and contribute to higher levels of work-to-home conflict (Schieman, 2013; Schieman et al., 2006). Accordingly, "the possibility that status advantages are not impervious to some forms of stress exposure may offset some of their psychosocial benefits and actually suppress disparities in wellbeing that are often linked to socioeconomic status" (Schieman et al., 2006, p. 253). In fact, some of the attributes of higher status occupations, in keeping with characteristics of knowledge work (e.g., job authority, flexibility, schedule control, devotion to work, learning opportunities), may introduce stress exposure via interference between work and home roles. A more nuanced view of resources and their interrelationships with demands in today's work context is, therefore, demanded (Schieman, Glavin, & Milkie, 2009; Valdés & Barley, 2016).

A study by Perez-Zapata, Pascual, Alvarez-Hernandez, and Collado (2016) that investigated the apparent autonomy paradox of knowledge workers found that although these workers had a perception of autonomy (i.e., spoke of self-management and their choice to work), their intense working patterns suggested otherwise. The authors point out that "[the autonomy paradox] has the additionally insidious and worrying effect of enforcing organizational controls without leaving marks, because it is workers themselves who self-control, a dynamic they perceive as their own choice" (p. 43). Further, they note that knowledge work intensification is identified by workers as self-induced which obscures the social structural context in which the (over)work is embedded (p. 44). Perez-Zapata et al. (2016) also suggest that in the increasingly boundaryless work context, self-management imperatives become internalized and blur distinctions between resources and demands. Other research on knowledge work intensification has reported that sources of intensity include the ambiguity in work demands, the blurring of work and leisure time, the focus on outcomes only performance evaluations, information overload, the need to constantly upgrade skills, the accelerated pace of work, and limited control over the quantitative workload (Bäcklander, Rosengren, & Kaulio, 2018; Evenstad, 2018). Such factors induce chronic stress and place workers at a heightened risk for burnout (Bäcklander et al., 2018; Evenstad, 2018).

2.3 New working arrangements: the rise in coworking spaces

In the following sub-sections, I trace the emergence of coworking businesses, situating them within the broader development of alternative work practices and changing socioeconomic and technology currents. I then explain what coworking is—beyond simply renting desks to workers—and provide detailed descriptions of coworking users, amenities, and business models.

2.3.1 The proliferation of coworking spaces

As the nature of work itself has undergone significant changes, technology-enabled hybrid (Halford, 2005), multi-locational (Hislop & Axtell, 2009), intermediate (Messenger & Gschwind, 2016), and third workspaces (Kingma, 2016) have all been terms used to describe what has now, more generally, been conceptualized as "new ways of working," (Aroles et al., 2021; Kingma, 2019, p. 383). Coworking is one of these new ways of working. The origins of

coworking can be situated within a larger emergence of spatial practices developed for these new ways of working that combine work, learn, and recreation activities (Morisson, 2019; Schmidt & Brinks, 2017; Waters-Lynch, Potts, Butcher, Dodson, & Hurley, 2016). The appearance of these shared spatial arrangements paralleled larger contextual socioeconomic and technological changes that began in the 1990s, continuing through the early 2000s—namely the restructuring of work via digitization, neoliberal globalization, and the valorization of a 'creative class' of freelance and project-based knowledge workers in the 'new economy' (Aroles et al., 2021; Gandini, 2016; Kalleberg, 2009; Schmidt & Brinks, 2017). Yet, shared workspaces are not an entirely new phenomenon (de Peuter et al., 2017; Kojo & Nenonen, 2017; Spinuzzi, 2012; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). For instance, beginning in the 1970s artists began sharing studios to offset the costs of space and supplies (de Peuter et al., 2017; Merkel, 2019). Additionally, fee based, fully furnished telecentres for companies to rent, equipped with fax machines, desktop computers and fixed phone lines emerged mid-1970s (Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017), while open concept office designs offering flexible 'hot desks' emerged with the advent of laptops and other portable ICT (Morrison & Macky, 2017)

Waters-Lynch et al. (2016) noted that "new institutional structures are emerging and old forms are being reconfigured" (p. 2) that blur informal, public, third-place characteristics (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982) such as flexibility, community, and sociality with characteristics of the first place (i.e., home) and second place (i.e., office) (Morisson, 2019; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). Coworking spaces along with hackerspaces, fab labs, accelerators, maker spaces and serviced offices fall along a continuum with respect to their orientation towards work-learn-play elements and the blending of social, domestic and productive characteristics (see Waters-Lynch et al., 2016).

Shared coworking spaces have proliferated worldwide (Brown, 2017; Howell, 2022b; Kraus et al., 2022). The fracturing of the stable employment relationship, the increase in non-standard work (Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Spinuzzi et al., 2019), and the financial crisis of 2007/2008 and its aftermath (Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2015) have been associated with the explosion of the new articulation of coworking as a "shared office space movement" in the last fifteen years or so. A number of scholars cite the first 'official' coworking space as having opened in 2005 in San

Francisco (Capdevila, 2015; Gandini, 2015; Howell, 2022b; Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2018; Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017). However, Deskmag, a "well reputed" (Gandini, 2015) industry source that publishes an online magazine focused on coworking, offers a more nuanced history. They attribute early coworking developments to the hackerspace, C-base, in Berlin in 1995; flexible desk use in New York City in 1999; and the opening of the entrepreneurial work community, Schraubenfabrik, in Vienna in 2003 [3](Foertsch & Cagnol, 2013). Irrespective of historical specificities, by 2015 there were an estimated 8,900 coworking spaces worldwide (Foertsch, 2019) and by 2020, almost 20,000 (CoworkingResources & Coworker, 2020). CoworkingResources and Coworker (2020) predict that the number of coworking spaces will reach roughly 40,000 by 2024 with approximately 5 million coworking users globally. As of 2020, Canada was identified as having the sixth largest coworking market in the world, with over 600 coworking spaces (CoworkingResources & Coworker, 2020). The United States leads the rankings with the most coworking spaces worldwide at over 3,700 (CoworkingResources & Coworker, 2020).

For academic purposes, that most of the statistical data on coworking derives from industry sources has made cross-checking for reliability and validity as well as generating comparative analyses somewhat challenging, especially given the pace at which the coworking industry has been evolving (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). Coworking data sources that appear in the extant scholarship are primarily drawn from Deskmag, the coworking magazine that produces the yearly Global Coworking Survey. During the pandemic period between 2020-2022, Deskmag generated the 2021-2022 Coworking Space Trends report (Foertsch, 2022). Another coworking industry source, CoworkingResources, joined with the largest online coworking listing platform, Coworker.com, to produce the 2020 Global Coworking Growth Study, purported to be the most comprehensive analysis based on propriety data (CoworkingResources & Coworker, 2020). Howell's (2022b) secondary data analysis was generated from existing data provided on the online listing platform, Coworker.com, the most comprehensive listing of coworking businesses in over 172 countries. Howell scraped data from all of the coworking listings (N = 16,169) on the platform's website as of May 2021 and supplemented this extraction with review of 280 articles

[3] For a detailed history of coworking as presented by Deskmag (2015): http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/156192/The-History-Of-Coworking-Presented-By-Deskmag/

and reports produced by Coworker.com on the industry. Additionally, Howell (2022b) collected in-situ data in one coworking space in the US, conducting annual surveys from 2017-2020 with the 800 plus coworking users, 100 hours of participant observation working in the space, and 64 semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs that coworked there. Within the scholarly literature, Howell's (2022b) study represents the largest coworking data analysis to date, albeit relying on commercial data sources.

2.3.2 What is coworking exactly?

Coworking can be described as a "subscription-based workspace" (Howell, 2022 p. 1) in which individuals pay a fee to have access to "amenity-rich shared workspaces" (Jamal, 2018, p. 778). Individuals paying to use the space have no employment relationship to the coworking business; instead, the relationship between those who pay to work in the space and the space itself is framed as a 'membership' (Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017, p. 420). The flexibility of the memberships, ranging from day passes to monthly rates with some coworking businesses offering longer- term membership subscriptions, appeals to nascent ventures or independent workers with uncertain revenue and growth prospects (Howell, 2022). Coworking spaces differ with regard to their business models, amenities, size, workstations, and the types of workers they cater to (e.g., women only, niche industries, etc.) (Servaty, Perger, Harth, & Mache, 2018; Spinuzzi, 2012). In fact, Bouncken and Reuschl (2018) identify coworking space diversification across six dimensions: coworking users (i.e., characteristics of coworking users), social intensity (i.e., amount of social interaction among coworking users), institution of the coworking space provider (i.e., is coworking business affiliated with other institutions), physical assets (i.e., design and amenities provided), availability (i.e., membership models), as well as professional focus and competition (i.e., whether targeted to specific groups determines collaboration/competition). Jakonen, Kivinen, Salovaara, and Hirkman (2017) note the challenges of conceptualizing the coworking phenomenon due to its emergent qualities, and scholars have lamented that a unified coworking definition is difficult to ascertain (Brown, 2017; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Kraus et al., 2022; Yacoub & Haefliger, 2022). A recent literature review conducted by Kraus et al. (2022) echoes this lack of consensus in definitions of coworking. While various researchers conceptualize coworking by emphasizing diverse activities and elements involved (i.e., innovation, support, collaboration, etc.), the

majority of definitions include co-location of workers in a shared, physical space (Kraus et al., 2022), or "space-as-service" (Gregg & Lodato, 2018, p. 176). In the following sub-sections, I describe the variations in coworking that appear in the academic literature.

Coworking users

A variety of actors make use of coworking spaces ranging from self-employed freelancers to remote employees or teams in large organizations to fast growth, start-up businesses (Howell, 2022a, 2022b; Yacoub & Haefliger, 2022). Some coworking businesses cater to distinct industries or types of workers (e.g., social enterprises, fintech or healthcare startups, independent creatives and freelancers) (Blagoev et al., 2019; Merkel, 2019). Coworking users are autonomous with regards to their coworking usage (Servaty et al., 2018), with differences in their frequency of use (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Wright et al., 2021). Common among all coworking users is their ability to work remotely as long as there is a stable Wi-Fi connection, conceivably, as Gandini (2016) identifies "workers in the knowledge economy" (p. 97). While originally intentioned for independent or freelance workers (Merkel, 2015), coworking users include corporate employees as well (Howell, 2022a). Coworking spaces have additionally become preferred workspaces among digital nomads (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Orel, 2019; Thompson, 2019), a specific subset of remote workers combining work with "extensive leisure travel" (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021, p. 3). For a mobile, location-independent set of workers, coworking spaces claim to offer digital nomads connection to other like-minded workers, a sense of community, enhanced productivity and balance with regards to work and leisure (Chevtaeva & Denizci-Guillet, 2021; Orel, 2019; Thompson, 2019).

Coworking space: design and amenities

The coworking space can be a stand-alone building or situated within a building or tower (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Kojo & Nenonen, 2017). The spaces can range in both physical and membership size, from an intimate community of workers to hundreds of coworking users (Kojo & Nenonen, 2017). Coworking spaces are designed according to various aesthetics ranging from 'typical' corporate professionalism to Silicon Valley tech vibes that blend work and play elements (Howell, 2022b; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). Coworking spaces are equipped with open seating 'hot desks' (i.e., first come first serve basis), private desks, and/or have private offices for

various-sized teams, meeting/conference rooms, and phone booths (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Gregg & Lodato, 2018). Coworking spaces may also have kitchens, lounges, event space, multi-use studios, art galleries, and cafes integrated into the design (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Howell, 2022b). Amenities are as diverse as the architectural designs. They may include ping pong tables, gyms, beer taps, snacks, childcare, health insurance[4] and may be targeted to attract particular types of coworkers (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Howell, 2022). IT infrastructure (i.e., internet, software, 3D printers, etc.) features prominently. Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte (2021) argue that technology "constitutes the basic infrastructure" (p. 6) of coworking practices. Entrepreneurial workshops, programming, partnerships and mentors may also be offered (de Peuter et al., 2017, Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Jamal, 2018).

Coworking business models

Howell (2022b) suggests that the coworking business model entails coworking businesses renting space or leasing buildings from property owners, adding amenities and design features, only to charge higher prices for short-term access to fractional amounts of the shared space. Yet, coworking businesses display a variety of ownership and governance structures. Some coworking businesses rent their space from owners; others own the building or property outright (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018). Additionally, coworking spaces may be owned by universities and IT companies and/or funded, either partially or fully, by local governments, universities, or corporations (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Howell, 2022b). Further, like gym memberships (Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017), coworking service fees are typically paid monthly by coworking users, although on demand day passes for coworking services or the option to buy a set number of hours are also offered (Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Howell, 2022b). Some memberships include access and use of all amenities whereas other memberships offer specific services and amenities at additional cost. Fees for coworking memberships therefore range according to desk type (i.e., hot desk, private office) and amenities included/added on. Sources of revenue for coworking

[4] Within Canada, an accessible health insurance plan, Coworking Health Insurance Plan (COHIP), was developed to offer independent workers affordable access to health, dental, disability, insurance, prescription drug coverage and extended health benefits. COHIP was first made available through membership in affiliated coworking spaces, and later made accessible to all who want coverage (see https://www.cohip.ca/en/cohip-the-coworking-health-insurance-plan/) (COHIP, 2013).

businesses, in addition to selling coworking as a service, include space rental and events (Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Jamal, 2018).

The trend in the coworking literature has been to distinguish between "commercial coworking" (Merkel, 2015, 2019), which refers to serviced office companies that offer coworking (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016) –or what Gandini and Cossu (2021) call "neo-corporate coworking" –and smaller, independently run coworking spaces. Merkel's (2015; 2019) focused examination of grassroot coworking spaces concluded that while coworking can be thought of as socio-material infrastructures (Merkel, 2015, p. 132) that provide both the material and immaterial needs to the workers within, most spaces have been commercialized as "professional, high-end and exclusive service[s] and glamorize the individual culture of entrepreneurship with their invocations of the 'do what you love ethic'" (p. 539).

Commercially driven, global real estate development firms that offer coworking (e.g., *WeWork*, *Regus*) are what Gandini and Cossu (2021) identify as the neo-corporate coworking model and are "part of a spectrum of [coworking] practices" (p. 434). The authors note, however, the presence of resilient coworking businesses. These independently run coworking spaces "position themselves in opposition" (p. 434) to neo-corporate coworking, embodying values they believe align with those coworking was initially envisioned to promote, namely sustainability, collaboration, and community (Gandini & Cossu, 2021). Drawing on principles from the open-source movement, the early coworking pioneers were themselves independent creative knowledge workers; they envisioned a model of working together that was based on collaboration and community in response to the isolation of working at home or in public spaces such as coffee shops (Merkel, 2015; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). Coworking has been framed as a global movement (Merkel, 2015), with a manifesto and core set of values [5] to guide a "shared, communal understanding" (Schmidt & Brinks, 2017, p. 292). Certainly, the concept of coworking has evolved (Brown, 2017). Present day commodified versions of coworking are a far cry from the initial vision of a worker driven, grassroots solution to share workspace and offer

[5] These core values are collaboration, openness, community, accessibility, sustainability (see coworking.org for further details) (Open Coworking, n.d.).

social and community support for like-minded independent freelancers (Brown, 2017; de Peuter et al., 2017; Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Merkel, 2015, 2019; Spinuzzi et al., 2019). Nevertheless, as Blagoev et al. (2019) report, the majority of coworking businesses are independently owned and operated, and among these, 64% are single location only spaces (Howell, 2022b).

2.4 Coworking complexities, contentions, and conundrums

Much of the research on coworking spaces to date has framed the phenomenon, movement, or practice as a solution to the social isolation and displacement felt by independent knowledge workers or those who do not have an employer-provided workspace (Blagoev et al., 2019; de Peuter et al., 2017). Whether individuals "work alone together" (Spinuzzi, 2012) or actively co-construct community through social interaction (Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017), the research tends to situate coworking as a response to increasing flexibility and precarization (Blagoev et al., 2019; de Peuter et al., 2017). Coworking, as a coping mechanism, may offer a sense of belonging and identity (Blagoev et al., 2019), visibility (Merkel, 2019), and a potential platform for collectivist action for a growing population of untethered workers (de Peuter et al., 2017). More entrepreneurial and business focused scholarship has explored how coworking spaces act as intermediaries, with focus on their role in entrepreneurial learning, creativity, innovation, collaboration, and resource acquisition (Aslam, Bouncken, & Görmar, 2021; Brown, 2017; Butcher, 2018; Güneştepe, Topal, & Tunçalp, 2021; Howell, 2022b; Micek, 2020; Waters-Lynch & Potts, 2017; Yacoub & Haefliger, 2022). Coworking spaces have also been studied for their role in stimulating local economic development and revitalization outside of urban centres (Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Jamal, 2018).

Yet, while academic and marketing materials suggest that coworking offers its users community and collaboration, Spinuzzi et al.'s (2019) discourse analysis of how community and collaboration are practiced in reality reveals that both are often ill defined and more aspirational than shaping actual behaviour and practice. The authors found that the majority of the coworking space 'communities' they studied (with respect to structure, division of labour, and the relationships within) were driven by market logics rather than interdependence, common objectives, and the mutual benefit of collaborative community construct that the researchers had operationalized for the study. Community as a concept is elusive, however, and has been the

centre of academic debate that seemingly defies consensus (Studdert, 2016; Traill, 2021). Traill (2021) conceptualizes community as a fluid social practice, as both an idea and "as a verb: communing" (Studdert, 2016, p. 623). Traill's view allows for the exploration of "the ambiguities of how community is imagined and practiced" (p. 487). For the purposes of this thesis, I draw on this notion of community to consider both the agenda that community *as an idea* may serve while paying parallel attention to the ongoing actions of everyday communing in coworking. According to Trail (2021), "community as an idea reinforces, curates and creates dissonances within communal practices. This suggests that a focus on the relation of communing to community-as-idea is a fruitful way of untangling the complexities of urban collective life" (p. 496).

In today's 'sharing economy,' scholars have argued that the risks and costs traditionally carried by the organizations have been downloaded to the workers (Benach et al., 2016; Ertel et al., 2005; Fleming, 2017; Neff, 2012). Coworking sites appear to be a prime example of this. In what seems to be a perverse joke, "coworking invites disembedded workers to buy back access to the resources, including workplace community, from which they have been dispossessed" (de Peuter et al., 2017, p. 689). Similarly, Lorne's (2020) research of coworking in London, England suggests that the language of open innovation obscures the exclusionary, pay for access requirement to network among other 'responsible' citizen-entrepreneurs. Lorne (2020) argues that "the promotion of open ecosystems of social innovation under austerity localism legitimizes new forms of informality in support of enterprise-friendly individualization-masked-as-collectivism, further eroding state responsibility for collective welfare and provision" (p. 761).

Despite the emergent body of literature from diverse disciplines examining the social support offered through coworking, and problematizing the neoliberal imperatives that underpin a growing number of these coworking spaces, Petriglieri, Ashford, and Wrzesniewski (2018) have highlighted the under exploration of coworking spaces as "holding environments" for workers unattached to an organization or specific workplace. Taking up Petriglieri et al.'s (2018) call for the examination of coworking spaces as ad-hoc organizations for unbound workers, Blagoev et al.'s (2019) ethnography explored the organizational dimensions of one coworking space in Berlin, Germany. Through their investigation, the authors found that coworking spaces may

indeed serve as ‘surrogate’ organizations as originally proposed by Petriglieri et al. (2018). In fact, Blagoev et al. (2019) emphasized that both informal and formal relationships in coworking spaces create “degrees of organizationality” that are “enacted not only through the sense of community, but also through routines, rituals and co-discipline” (p. 19).

Used in the context of coworking, organizationality is neither verb (i.e., organizing) nor noun (i.e., organization); instead, it is an adjective that can be used to oppose the binary classification of social collectives as organizations or not (Schoeneborn et al., 2019). Organizationality seeks to reflect the fluidity of coworking and its organizational elements while also appreciating the informality (Blagoev et al., 2019). Given the propensity for coworking spaces to display organizationality, future research should critically investigate how this new organizational form “may perpetuate or even generate social problems” (p. 19). Calls for more research related to the social aspects of coworking have been echoed by other researchers. Specifically, research is warranted to explore the forms and extent of social interactions that occur as well as the emergent and dynamic communities that develop within these spaces, including how these are constituted and sustained under various management conditions (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018; Butcher, 2018; Merkel, 2019; Spinnuzi et al., 2019). Explorations of coworking ought also extend to include the issues of power and potential for conflict that can arise when diverse groups of people with different values and ideological beliefs come together to work in communal coworking spaces (Spinuzzi et al., 2019).

The push to take up a research agenda that embraces more sociomaterial and affective perspectives has raised growing concern over the labour involved in such sociality and support in coworking (see Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019; Wright et al., 2021 for recent coverage). Researchers investigating coworking in particular have suggested that the co-construction of community, what Waters-Lynch and Duff (2019) term the ‘affective commons,’ is at least partially created by the coworking users themselves, a product of their unpaid affective labour (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019; Wright et al., 2021). According to Wright et al. (2021), there is an expectation of participating in the community wherein “coworkers also paid to contribute time and effort to the additional tasks of providing emotional, informational, and instrumental support” (p. 16). The

exacerbation of the precarity of these coworking users has also been noted: willingly paying for an uncertain opportunity, to *potentially* make a connection, to *maybe* collaborate, or to *possibly* be inspired—all theirs with the additional costs of their own time and labour efforts (de Peuter et al., 2017; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019; Wright et al., 2021). Accordingly, the benefits are unequally distributed, with coworking users co-constructing the support while the coworking operators profit from the commodification of this generated community (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019; Wright et al., 2021).

Taking a more nuanced view, other research has noted the emotional labour of community managers or *hosts* in creating the coworking atmosphere and offering care and hospitality to coworking users (Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Merkel, 2015, 2019). While coworking owners and managers genuinely want to support workers, they "walk a fine line by capitalizing on conditions to which they are also subject … the fabric of their community is not values, but the vacuum created by thinned and thinning employee-employer or citizen-city relations" (Gregg & Lodato, 2018, p. 184). Scholars have also identified contradictions inherent in these notions of support and community where coworkers contribute to the community with individualistic intentions driven by market logics (de Peuter et al., 2017; Gandini, 2015; Spinuzzi et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021). For example, coworkers are keen to contribute to the community in so far as doing so is an opportunity to network to develop their business, access talent, or collaborate to gain knowledge or insight (Spinuzzi et al., 2019; Wright et al., 2021).

Tensions and contradictions in coworking and its 'deep ambivalence' (de Peuter et al., 2017) have been noted since the earliest academic studies exploring the phenomenon (Gandini, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012). Academics have remarked on coworking's fluidity (Aslam et al., 2021; Raffaele & Connell, 2016), its flux (Spinuzzi et al., 2019), its "continuously changing social composition" (Merkel, 2019, p. 533), viewing coworking as a phenomenon of contradiction (Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2018). In a recent review of the sharing economy, Schor and Vallas (2021) contend that the sharing economy is "now configured as a polysemic space exhibiting high levels of contention. A flash point has been the use of utopian discourse to support profit making" (p. 373). Coworking is part of the sharing economy and the "power of pooling resources" (Gregg & Lodato, 2018, p. 177), bringing together diverse workers to share office infrastructure and

skills (Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Reuschl, Tiberius, Filser, & Qiu, 2022; Wright et al., 2021). Yet, it would appear, based on the coworking research to date, that much like the sharing economy in which it is embedded, coworking is similarly polysemic, having multiple meanings.

Despite the ubiquity of 'coworking' in today's sharing economy lexicon, coworking practices, sites, and business models continue to emerge and evolve, and so too does the nascent body of scholarship exploring the phenomenon. Diverse disciplines and fields of research have contributed to the academic conversations regarding coworking. Researchers come from business and entrepreneurship, organizational management, geography, urban planning, health, and sociology. Top contributing scholars come from Germany, Italy, the UK, the United States, France, Australia, Finland, the Czech Republic, and The Netherlands (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021). In total, authors from over 28 countries have published on the coworking phenomenon to date (Kraus et al., 2022). The most recent publications invite further research into the variety of coworking business practices as they continue to evolve, possibilities of economic diversity within coworking spaces, issues of surveillance and control, sustainable support, and responsible management of pooled affective resources, to name but a few. According to Massey's (2005) relational approach, "you can't hold places still" (p. 125). The organizational transformations of work during the pandemic, among coworking businesses in particular, certainly reflect Massey's notion of space "in relation to the outside world" (Elkington & Gammon, 2015, p. 3) as "a simultaneity of stories-so-far" (Massey, 2005, p. 24) that necessitates further research.

2.5 The pandemic, coworking, and the tale so far…

Whether an essential worker or not, the pandemic has highlighted how our work and working conditions directly impact our health and wellbeing (Peters et al., 2022; Villeneuve & Parent, 2021). The pandemic is also transforming *how* we work by accelerating 'new' working patterns characterized as emergent, hybrid, and dynamic (Aroles et al., 2021). Throughout this literature review, I have attempted to showcase the issues concerning the changing nature of work before and since the onset of the pandemic. Regarding these 'new' ways of work, Aroles et al. (2021) suggest:

> The experiences of the last two years, where work has been reshaped in unforeseen and urgent ways in the wake of the global covid-19 pandemic, particularly brings [sic] to the fore a different realization of the precarity and embodied nature of work, as well as shining

> a spotlight directly onto the possibilities and constraints of NWW within this uncertain and changing context (p. 7).

Beyond simply accelerating new ways of work, the pandemic has also forced organizations to "operate in constant crisis mode" (Muzio & Doh, 2021, p. 1374), to adapt and experiment with new practices and service models, scale down, or close completely (Muzio & Doh, 2021; Orlikowski & Scott, 2021). Muzio and Doh (2021) further suggest that the pandemic has produced clear winners and losers, "undermining many traditional face to face businesses while rewarding 'asset light', 'virtual' or 'networked' business models" (p. 1372). A commentary by Schor and Vallas (2021) about the sharing economy similarly highlights the pandemic challenges for the smaller firms that share physical assets and specialize in "face to face community" (p. 383). Given that the majority of coworking businesses *are* small operations—an estimated 64% (Howell, 2022b) to 66% (Foertsch, 2022) of coworking businesses operate a single location, with 69% employing one to four workers and another 20% employing 5-19 workers (Foertsch, 2022)—and that coworking business models traditionally rely on communal space and face-to-face community for value creation (Reuschl et al., 2022), prospects of the coworking industry post-pandemic were seemingly fraught (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Howell, 2022a; Mayerhoffer, 2021; Wright et al., 2021). Government responses to COVID-19 constrained the way Canadian (and other nation's) businesses could operate. In Canada, beginning in March 2020, across national jurisdictions, non-pharmaceutical public health interventions were implemented to slow transmission and mitigate the immediate health consequences of COVID-19. These included travel restrictions, school and business closures, and stay-at-home orders (Buajitti, Rosella, Bryan, Giesinger, & Goel, 2022). Social distancing measures, capacity limits, discouragement of indoor gatherings, and non-essential business closures introduced great uncertainty and challenge (Cyr, Mondal, & Hansen, 2021).

While businesses of all sizes have been forced to adapt, small businesses in particular have been hit the hardest, with fewer financial resources to handle the exogenous shock of the pandemic and the ensuing unstable economic climate (Hadjielias, Christofi, & Tarba, 2022; International Labour Office, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2020). Within Canada, as of May 2020, 32% of businesses with over 500 employees reported a 20% decrease in revenue. Small businesses were hit much harder, with almost 60% of businesses with one to four employees and 56% of

businesses with 5-19 employees reporting a 20% decrease in revenue (Statistics Canada, 2020). By the end of 2020, small businesses were still more likely to have experienced a drop in revenue; approximately 30% of small businesses with 1-19 employees reported that revenues were down by 30% in comparison to the previous year (Tam, Sood, & Johnston, 2021). Despite government initiatives and financial supports introduced to offset COVID-related impacts (e.g., wage and rent subsidies), small businesses were less able to take on more debt (Tam et al., 2021). Similarly, survey research completed by the Business Development Bank of Canada (BDC) in the first quarter of 2021 reported that while 73% of small- and medium-sized enterprises received governmental financial assistance, two out of five small- and medium-sized business owners expressed grave worry about debt and borrowing capacity (Business Development Bank of Canada, 2021).

Because coworking businesses foster local economic development and entrepreneurship (Jamal, 2018), they have been positioned to play an important role in pandemic recovery, offering cost-effective and flexible solutions for small businesses and the self-employed (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Wright et al., 2021). At the same time, the majority of coworking businesses are themselves small, independently owned businesses. "[A]s much as coworking spaces provide support for an increasingly contingent, precarious, and sacrificial workforce, coworking spaces themselves (evidenced by their owners) are also contingent, precarious, and sacrificial in many respects" (Gregg & Lodato, 2018, p. 184). This duality, both *supporting* small businesses and *being* themselves small businesses, makes examining coworking business responses to pandemic-related restrictions especially worthy of investigation; doing so promises insight into the resilience, sustainability (Gandini & Cossu, 2021; Mayerhoffer, 2021) and service evolution of the coworking sector.

The pandemic has brought renewed attention to social isolation and loneliness as public health issues with knowledge of the impact of both on mortality (i.e., premature death) and morbidity (e.g., CVD) (Holt-Lunstad, 2022; Smith & Lim, 2020). As Holt-Lunstad (2021) explain: "Social isolation refers to objectively being alone, having few relationships or infrequent social contacts whereas loneliness refers to subjectively feeling alone, or the discrepancy between one's desired level of connection and one's actual level" (p. 56). Current evidence has established associations

between social isolation, loneliness and poor health and wellbeing outcomes, in both the short and long term (Fried et al., 2020; Holt-Lunstad, 2021, 2022; O'Sullivan, Lawlor, Burns, & Leavey, 2021). Recent results from the Canadian Social Survey, Wave 2, for example, indicate that 13% of Canadians over the age of 15 reported always or often feeling lonely (Statistics Canada, 2021). Those reporting feeling lonely also reported worse mental health and lower life satisfaction (Statistics Canada, 2021). Studies have found that social connection can act as a protective factor; consequently, researchers are advocating for greater attention to be paid to the *social* in social determinants of health and for the prioritizing of social connection in public health initiatives in the wake of the pandemic (Holt-Lunstad, 2022; O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Smith & Lim, 2020). In the workplace, studies find that a growing number of workers feel disconnected from their colleagues, suggesting a decrease in the quality of social relations as a result of teleworking (Becker et al., 2022; Pew Research Center, 2022; Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021).

Social isolation and loneliness additionally affect job performance and commitment. Productivity is lower, and absenteeism and intentional turnover are higher, costing US businesses $154 billion dollars annually in consequence (Bowers, Wu, Lustig, & Nemecek, 2022). Yet, work can also foster social connections and engagement and be a source of meaningful, quality connections and support (Hammer et al., 2022), which may be especially important in remote work (Beckel & Fisher, 2022; Becker et al., 2022). The pandemic has brought to the forefront the importance and need for social connection. Researchers want to see multisectoral interventions, including community and employment level initiatives, to address this complex societal issue (Hertz, 2020; Holt-Lunstad, 2022; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). According to Hertz (2020), “the loneliness crisis is too complex and multifarious for any one entity to solve on its own” (p. 522).

Coworking businesses are uniquely positioned in this uncertain and changing context (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Howell, 2022a; Kraus et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021) and offer flexibility and a potential solution for lonely, isolated, or uninspired workers, whether employees or independents (Farooqui, 2022; Howell, 2022a, 2022b; Immen, 2022). The expectation is that there will be an increased relevance and use of coworking during the hybrid flexible workscape that is emerging and evolving (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Howell, 2022b; Kraus et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021). Researchers have acknowledged the need for the type of in-depth research

my dissertation represents (e.g., Berbegal-Mirabent (2021); Howell (2022b); Mayerhoffer (2021); Wright et al. (2021)): a timely investigation into the strategies coworking businesses have used to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic, including the expansion of coworking businesses to offer virtual services, and a deep look into the relationships, working practices, and challenges in this evolving industry.

Chapter 3
Methodology

This dissertation investigates the coworking landscape in Canada towards understanding future of work possibilities that embrace technology, spatiotemporal flexibility, and hybridity. It explores what draws users to coworking businesses (centralized sites containing various forms of non-standard knowledge workers) and how these businesses have been used and managed prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In selecting this area of study, I was intrigued by the seeming absurdity of workers paying to rent workspace when many, if not all, of these people could work from anywhere. Coworking sites provide space and services to a growing population of unbound or invisible workers—people whose creative and innovative human capital is often heralded as a driving force behind national economic growth and prosperity. These workers are glamourized in contemporary capitalism and the shared coworking spaces sold as hubs for productivity and community. To investigate daily work patterns, physical and psychosocial conditions, and social interactions and communities that emerge in coworking spaces, and what these mean for workers' health and wellbeing, I adopted an interpretive qualitative design guided by three research questions:

1. How did independent coworking businesses manage and adapt to the pandemic?
2. What is virtual coworking and what are the experiences of workers in these virtual coworking spaces?
3. How does coworking flexibility affect social support and connection?

This chapter recounts how the research was carried out, including methodological considerations and the methods used for data generation and analysis. Into it I have purposefully interwoven my "reflexivities of discomfort" (Pillow, 2003, p. 327), feeling seemingly at home with Pillows' (2003) call for reflexivity practices that "leave us in the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research" (p. 193). Given the ongoingness of the pandemic and the fluidity of the coworking businesses I was studying, I have chosen to represent the dissertation process in this way, feeling paradoxically comforted in the discomfort of uncertainties, partialities, and messiness of interpretive research and the part I played along the way.

Chapter 3 is broadly organized into the following ten sections:
Section 3.1, Qualitatively inclined, introduces my approach to the research. Reflexivity and thick description—as transparent methods for addressing the politics of evidence—are explained. I also outline the ethnographic-interpretive approach taken along with my philosophical/ conceptual grounding.

Section 3.2, Brief overview of the study, lays out a high-level summary of the study and its research components to frame the chapter's subsequent sections.

In section 3.3, Beyond research design 101, I address the complexities of researching through the pandemic (a period of extreme uncertainty) and the back and forth with the Office of Research Ethics in order to conduct the virtual fieldwork.

Section 3.4, Coworking businesses (sites) in the study, presents the eight sites along with their diverse characteristics.

Section 3.5, The interviews, gives the nitty gritty, describing the recruitment and sampling strategies used, the interview processes involved, and the participants selected. Detailed profiles of coworking stakeholders are provided.

Section 3.6, Participant observation, outlines the virtual fieldwork conducted including participation in the *Empower* virtual coworking community and other virtual coworking events.

Section 3.7, Secondary data collection and production, covers the use of digital materials and fieldnotes—the secondary data components of the research design.

In section 3.8, Reflections on fieldwork and data collection, I touch on "Presenteeism" (an experience, loosely, of both presence and absence) and other ethical sensitivities and vulnerabilities—for both participant and researcher—relevant to the virtual fieldwork.

Section 3.9, Data analysis, presents what Wolcott (2002) has called "the real work of qualitative research," (p. 102) namely how I tried to make sense of the data generated. Included are the methods I used for transcription, coding, and interpretation. I discuss, further, the messiness of the process and additional ways of "meaning making" I adopted as an interpretive bricoleur.

Section 3.10, The ongoing process of understanding, wraps up this Methodology chapter. A summary of the methods used is provided in the context of the ongoingness of analytic interpretation and understanding.

3.1 Qualitatively inclined

What drew me to qualitative research and led me to take it up as the approach for my doctoral studies was its capacity for capturing the complexity and nuance of specific phenomena under investigation. Given its inherent flexibility and emergent qualities (Creswell & Poth, 2018), qualitative research design is neither neatly defined nor can it be "easily boil[ed] down to formula" (Van Maanen, 1998, p. x). For the phenomenon of coworking, especially in a pandemic context, these iterative characteristics were great strengths towards "following the plot" (Marcus, 1995). At the same time, there is contention around how to establish quality in qualitative research (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018b; Rose & Johnson, 2020; Seale, 1999; Tracy, 2010). Assessments of non-formulaic qualitative research using proceduralist approaches that have been developed in positivist/post positivist paradigms can lead to an "inappropriate transfer of scientific conceptions of quality" (Eakin & Mykhavlovsky, 2003, p. 190). Another issue concerns the development of a "cornucopia" (Tracy, 2010, p. 837) of new terms that appropriate language like 'reliability' and 'validity' in an interpretive sense (Seale, 1999; Tracy, 2010). Qualitative research is not outside the scope of "the politics of evidence" (Denzin, 2019, p. 722), which some scholars have connected with current academic culture (Rose & Johnson, 2020) and the steadying march of neoliberalism onto campus (Denzin, 2019; Spooner, 2018).

Without further privileging scientific discourse (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Rose & Johnson, 2020), how do we showcase the quality of our research and what, then, are the determinants of rigorous research? Doucet (2008) calls for a transparency in knowledge production, while Rose and Johnson (2020) speak to using techniques of trustworthiness to ensure that the various

methods employed are commensurate with the paradigm within which the research is situated. For my methodological choices, thick description, critical reflexivity, and positionality (Rose & Johnson, 2020) emerged as the most relevant techniques of trustworthiness.

3.1.1 Thick description

Providing a detailed account of the "contextual details of social, political, or economic phenomena increases the sense of a qualitative researcher's overall embeddedness and awareness of the "field" in which they are studying" (Rose & Johnson, 2020, p. 442). As Freeman (2014) says, it is not the amount of detail that makes a description *thick* but "rather an articulation of how we see and understand" (p. 827). This involves showcasing the "complex architecture" (Freeman, 2014, p. 827) of interpretive analysis by constructing the context in which we see and come to understand.

3.1.2 Critical-reflexivity and positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher herself constructs the interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2014) and is said to be the instrument (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018a). To generate insight and "radical consciousness" (Finlay, 2002, p. 544) of the co-construction in the research project (Mitchell, Boettcher-Sheard, Duque, & Lashewicz, 2018), I have sought to be critically reflexive throughout the research process. Through recursive critical-reflection and memoing, I have considered how my position and assumptions have influenced both the research process and the final texts (Davies, 1999). Critical-reflexivity does not inherently ensure quality in qualitative research (Finlay, 2002; Pillow, 2003), but it can be used to demonstrate commitment to transparency (Doucet, 2008). Weaving reflexivity into this Methodology chapter, as a method, allows an accounting of my involvement, uncertainty, partiality, and ongoing contemplations; I put forth an interpretation of the findings but assuredly not *the* interpretation. As Mauthner and Doucet (2003) explain:

> There may be limits to reflexivity, and to the extent to which we can be aware of the influences on our research both at the time of conducting it and in the years that follow. It may be more useful to think in terms of 'degrees of reflexivity', with some influences being easier to identify and articulate at the time of our work while others may take time, distance and detachment from the research. … our deepening understanding of reflexivity – and the range of personal, interpersonal, institutional, pragmatic, emotional, theoretical,

> epistemological and ontological influences on our research – has only come through emotional and intellectual distance from our project. (p. 425)

It would have been naïve to presume that a priori procedures for research would remain unchanged throughout the duration of a qualitative project undertaken during a pandemic. COVID-19 necessitated and exacerbated the flexible and emergent elements of my research design. My initial plan to employ a multi-sited, ethnographic approach (e.g., Kunda (2013); Marcus (1995)) was upended by the in-person public health risks and gathering limits of the pandemic. In hindsight, I had not anticipated that my project would morph as dramatically as it did nor that some of my philosophical assumptions about research would become unsettled. I started questioning my assumptions and beliefs, feeling unanchored at times. Was this the result of the dissertation research process generically, and grappling with issues regarding onto-epistemological principles just part of the development of an early academic researcher doing interpretive inquiry for the first time? Or was this more to do with the unfolding global pandemic and its reverberations through every social process and aspect of our lives?

Despite not having answers to these questions, like others I believe that "established practices [and] existing ways of doing things" were disrupted by COVID-19 (Orlikowski & Scott, 2021, p. 2). Moreover, as Orlikowski & Scott (2021) note, the ambiguity and uncertainty of the pandemic have been accompanied by an opening up of possibilities for experimentation and new ideas. Perhaps this led me to adopt the methods I did? I certainly became keenly aware that method "is performative… [It] crafts arrangements and gathering of things – and accounts of the arrangements of those things – that could have been otherwise" (Law, 2004, p. 143).

3.1.3 Philosophical/ conceptual grounding

All methods used in the knowledge production process influence the knowledge produced, making it critical to account for the philosophical underpinnings that guide the selection. At the paradigmatical level, towards explicating a theoretically-informed study, I have sought scientific understanding through a critically interpretive poststructural approach. I acknowledge ontological and epistemological complexity. I recognize that individual meaning making and experience are influenced by norms, practices, and discourses that are in themselves constituted in historical and social contexts, and always mediated by power relations (CCQHR, 2018;

Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kincheloe, 2005). The problematization of universal truth claims is nothing new, with well-worn challenges to notions of authority, representation, and objectivity in postmodern, poststructural research (Cheek, 1999; Clarke, 2003; Lather, 2001). Consequently, in line with Jackson and Mazzei (2012), I assume "data is partial, incomplete and always being re-told and re-membered" (p. 3). Further, a critical approach recognizes my involvement in the construction and interpretation of data (i.e., transactional epistemology emphasizing reflexivity) and that ideologies and values underpin truth and knowledge (Kincheloe, McLaren, Steinberg, & Monzó, 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018b). For these reasons, the below-described concepts of liminality and the bricolage approach were useful for navigating the difficulties of researching and presenting the messiness and complexities of social reality (Clarke, 2003) in the coworking spaces.

Liminality

As a researcher, I kept coming back to the concept of liminality, a state of being, betwixt and between (Söderlund & Borg, 2018). Merriam-Webster (online) describes liminality as "a state, place, or condition of transition." Unsure where I first came across the term, I was relieved to discover Bell (2021), an anthropologist, who speaks about "COVID-19 liminality" (p. 82). In the ongoing pandemic, we are neither pre- nor post-, caught in the flux of uncertainty. With the COVID-induced transformations, pivots, adaptions, disruptions, and accelerations, social norms and aspects of life became inherently fluid. As if in an apocalyptic fiction, all seemed eerily within the realm of possibility. What if I used the metaphor of liminality to think about my research project? What would it mean to be ontologically "liminal" as a way to defy "entrenched modes" of doing research (Carlson, McGuire, Koro, & Cannella, 2020)? Relatedly, Simpson, Harding, Fleming, Sergi, and Hussenot (2021) call for ontological process approaches, citing the inadequacy of stable dualisms to speak to the contemporary "worlds-in-process" (p. 1777). There is recognition that philosophical orientations are no longer neatly bound to specific, clearly delineated paradigms (DeForge & Shaw, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018), and that "elements of interpretivist/postmodern, critical theory, constructivist, and participative inquiry fit comfortably together" (Lincoln et al., 2018b, p. 133).

The Bricolage

In keeping with the philosophical considerations that inform my dissertation research, I adopted Denzin and Lincoln's (2018) "researcher as interpretive bricoleur" (p. 106) approach, elaborated further by the work of Kincheloe (2001, 2005). If social research is indeed a craft-skill (Seale, 1999) and methods are simply tools or strategic devices (Hindle, 2004), methodological design conceivably ought be able to incorporate aspects of various methods. Further, these techniques "do not have to be linked inextricably to particular philosophical or paradigm positions" (Seale, 1999, p. 475). Employing elements of different methods, the researcher as bricoleur (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Kincheloe, 2001, 2005; Kincheloe et al., 2018) strengthens their tool kit and broadens their interpretative capabilities (Kincheloe, 2001), attending to the "complexity of everyday life" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 327). Recognizing this complexity, bricolage embraces both epistemological and ontological complexity and necessitates researcher humility and self-reflexivity (Kincheloe, 2005). Consistent with my beliefs about my role as researcher in the construction and interpretation of data, the bricolage "… constructs a far more active role for humans both in shaping reality and in creating the research processes and narratives that represent it" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 325).

Elaborating on his initial perspective, Kincheloe (2005) valued how the strength of the bricoleur extends beyond methodological flexibility. While recognizing the fluidity and dynamisms of a bricolage approach, Kincheloe (2005) articulated the following five dimensions of bricolage that researchers may consider

- The methodological bricolage refers to using multiple techniques for data generation.

- The theoretical bricolage draws from a variety of social theory perspectives to ground the research inquiry including critical theory, postmodernism, cultural studies, constructivism, and feminism.

- The interpretive bricolage employs a diverse set of interpretive tools to encourage hermeneutical interpretation, focusing on meaning and understanding (Crotty, 1998; Freeman, 2014), with the aim of learning "how to grasp and express the past anew"

(Gadamer, 1986, p. 46). Hermeneutical interpretation is generative in this sense, and as Jardine (1992) described, this involves: "playfully explor[ing] what understandings and meanings this instance makes possible" (p. 56). These possibilities of meaning, from various perspectives, make apparent the complexity of interpretation, "learning from the juxtaposition of divergent ideas and ways of seeing" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 344).

- The political bricolage recognizes how research is implicated by political and power dynamics and encourages attending to and reflecting upon how "normative assumptions" have impacted the research, data generated, and knowledge constructed.

- Narrative bricolage, the final dimension, concerns the stories told about research and how representing research according to various types of stories influences the knowledge produced. This dimension encourages reflection and awareness of the researcher's narrative choices and consequences on knowledge production.

These tenets of the bricolage approach allowed my dissertation research to incorporate elements and perspectives from various methodological and interpretive repertoires. Throughout this chapter I have tried to explicate these approaches and the specific strategies and heuristics I used in the research process.

3.1.4 An ethnographic inquiry

To understand the coworking phenomenon demanded deep exploration of the setting and the means to collect ample observations to build up a representative picture. An ethnography proved an ideal fit. Historically rooted within anthropology, colonialism, and objectivism, great diversity now exists among contemporary ethnographic research with the digital having a marked impact on how scholars go about studying social life (Markham, 2018). A foundational belief of ethnography is that valuable knowledge is gained through deep hanging out with a particular culture-sharing group and "experiencing the daily ebb and flow of life" (Madden, 2010, p. 39). In my study, participant observation in virtual coworking experiences led to an understanding of what was actually going on in virtual coworking and what drew coworking users to pay for such services. According to Markham (2018), "ethnography is an approach that seeks to find

meanings of cultural phenomena by getting close to the experience of these phenomena" (p. 1134). Both a practice and product (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011; Madden, 2010), ethnography is a labour of translation (Franklin & Roberts, 2006), collecting and inscribing emic perspectives attending to the multiplicity of meanings (Blagoev et al., 2019).

The ethnographer is the instrument for data collection, and through analysis and interpretation, ethnography allows for representation by the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011). By interviewing a variety of coworking stakeholders and participating in virtual coworking experiences, I was able to appreciate the situated understandings of the various coworking stakeholders and coworking communities. An especially good choice for studying coworking during an unprecedented period of flux and uncertainty (i.e., liminality), ethnography accommodates the complex historical, cultural and social contexts in which a phenomenon is complexly embedded (Blagoev et al., 2019). Specifically, the ethnographic approach I employed embraced an interpretive bricolage approach, adopting onto-epistemological complexity. Use of thick description and critical-reflexivity lent detail, nuance, transparency and, possibly, credibility to the research account.

3.2 Brief overview of the study

The present research was conducted under revised University of Waterloo Ethics # 41886 (Appendix A). To situate the reader, I provide below a bird's eye view of the methods adopted. I will not go into the detailed considerations, decision making, or specifics of the methods chosen until later in the chapter.

Broadly, then, to address the research investigation into how coworking businesses managed and adapted during the pandemic, the research design included four types of data collection: loosely structured interviews; participant observation; written fieldnotes, and digital coworking documents and texts. The latter included membership agreements and coworking community guidelines provided by the coworking businesses along with publicly available coworking websites and media coverage on coworking. Figure 3.1 below provides an overview of the research process, types of data collected, and analyses conducted.

Figure 3.1. *Research design wheel*
Shown is a circular representation of the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes of the study. The right side of the wheel depicts primary and secondary data collection methods and materials. The left side depicts the iterative processes of interpretation from transcription to final write up. Stages were less distinct in practice than illustrated.

Primary data were generated from two sources, namely interviews and participant observation, as shown in Figure 3.1 above. These data were collected between June 2020 and March 2021. Interviews comprised 30 one-to-one's conducted virtually using Webex, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or the telephone. Interviewees represented three groups of stakeholders, i.e., owner-operators, managers (employee non-owners), and users as presented in Figure 3.2 below. (Which participants were affiliated with which particular site is shown later in Table 3.2 and Table 3.3 under section 3.5 The interviews.)

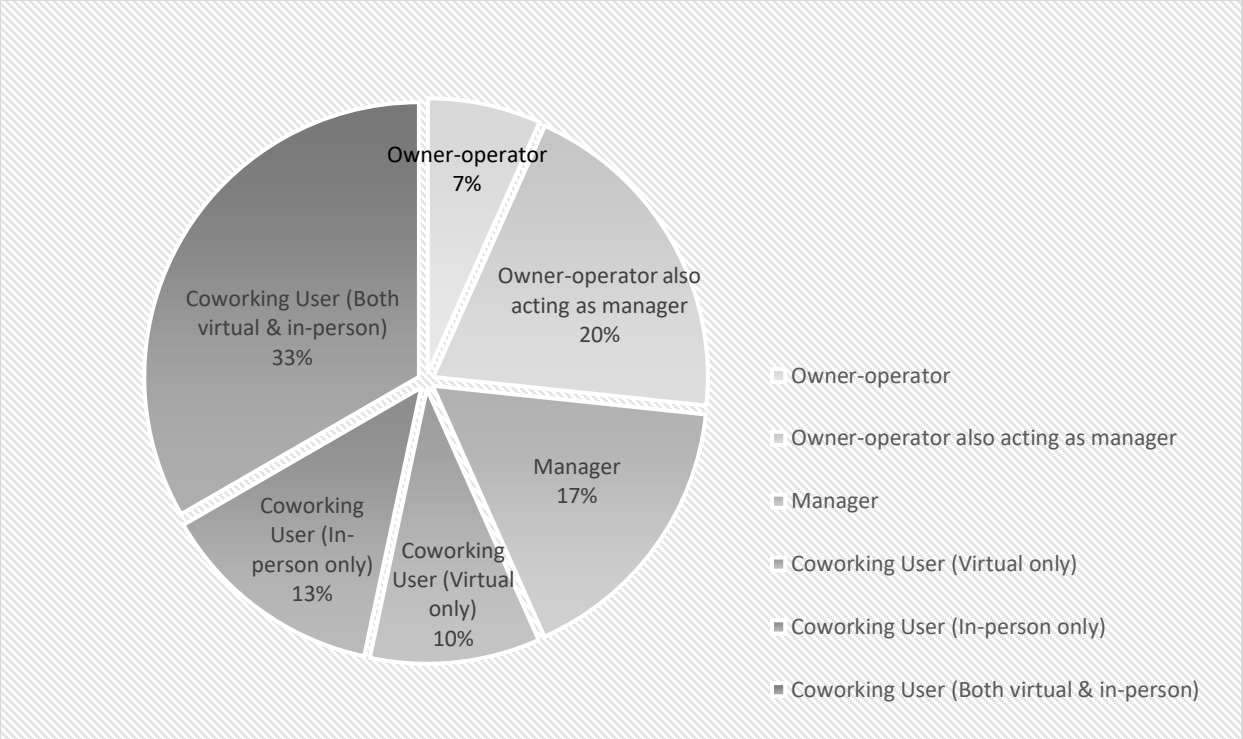

Figure 3.2. *Breakdown of participants in the coworking stakeholder interviews*
The pie chart depiction of the stakeholders interviewed shows the proportion of stakeholder participants by role.

As illustrated above, stakeholder participants could be grouped as owner-operators, owner-operators who also managed their site, managers, and coworking users. Coworking *owner-operator* is the term I have chosen to represent those that own and may or may not also oversee the running of the coworking business. As Figure 3.2 shows, 20% owned and managed their site whereas another 7% of owner-operators did not act as manager of their respective site. *Manager* refers to individuals who were employed to oversee the running of the coworking business. *Coworking users* (previous or current) comprised roughly 56% of the interview participants. Users, based on their experience of coworking, could be further allocated into virtual only, in-person only, or both (i.e., virtual coworking and in-person coworking experiences).

In practice, groups are not always mutually exclusive. For example, a coworking business owner-operator may be a coworking user at another coworking business. A coworking manager may work at a coworking business in exchange for use of the coworking desk space, making them also a coworking user. Likewise, a coworking owner-operator may have been the

coworking manager of the site prior to the hiring of a manager. There is, therefore, some fluidity / flexibility in the coworking stakeholder positionings.

Participant selection occurred using a purposeful sampling strategy tied to coworking *gatekeepers*. Gatekeepers are described in the literature as individuals in positions of leadership in an organization who give permission or grant access to researchers to conduct research in their organizations or the communities of interest (Berbary, 2013). The gatekeepers (or key informants) in my study were owner-operators who had pre-agreed to allow me to spend time in their spaces to observe the daily work and running of their versions of coworking and to assist me with recruitment for the interviews. The businesses owned by gatekeepers reflected the heterogeneity in coworking business characteristics. For example, one coworking space was geared towards women entrepreneurs and another towards coworkers engaged in creative industries.

Participant observation, the second method of primary data collection, comprised 60 hours total observation of coworking "unconferences," meetings, and a virtual coworking community, *Empower* (June 2020 to March 2021). *Empower* was a newly formed virtual coworking service and the owner-operator, Miriam, was one of my gatekeepers. Besides taking part in *Empower*'s virtual coworking, I participated in five virtual coworking "unconferences" and meetings. Congruent with ethnographic approaches, the rationale for this fieldwork was to experience virtual coworking and the independent coworking community events in situ, observing the coworking stakeholders' interactions and dynamics (Wright et al., 2021).

Secondary data sources included documents provided by coworking business (e.g., coworking membership agreements, community guidelines, etc.), publicly available coworking web content (e.g., https://www.coworkingresources.org/about and https://www.deskmag.com/en/), and written fieldnotes of the participant observations. All materials served to contextualize and heuristically aid interview and fieldwork data collection and analyses.

The basic method of data analysis and interpretation began with transcribing the audio recordings of interview data using otter.ai™ software. Coding was done using NVivo™

software. The approach was iterative and thematic guided by an inductive reading of the transcripts, the coworking literature, and wider scholarship regarding work and health considerations. A codebook (Appendix F) was created and updated throughout the process. The processed data were stored on a secure, password-protected server at the University of Waterloo according to the Ethics approval, and final correspondence with the participants occurred in the form of a participant Thank You letter (Appendix E).

3.3 Beyond research design 101: pandemic research praxis

Having overviewed the study, in the following sections I recount a number of the uncertainties and methodological challenges that had to be addressed to conduct the research during a once-in-a-century global pandemic (i.e., in a period of extreme liminality). COVID-19 transformed the phenomenon of interest I was studying. As Grossman and Kimball (2021) have said, COVID-19 is altering our society in ways which have not yet been fully realized. Consequences of this system shock will have ripple effects for decades to come. Really, is there anything that the pandemic has not affected? In the coworking landscape, some spaces were transitioning or expanding their services to virtual format; some remained open throughout the pandemic; some closed either temporarily or moved to being entirely virtual. The lack of homogenous response can be connected to the regulatory grey zone in which coworking exists. Specifically, because coworking businesses are categorized as service providers (i.e., they offer mail services and workspace for essential businesses), the coworking businesses themselves came to be considered "essential businesses and services." This "essential businesses and services" label resulted in a variety of responses in coworking business practices (e.g., shut down or stay open?) during pandemic lockdowns, in particular, which had ongoing implications for the dissertation's research design.

3.3.1 Plot twist

Canada's March 2020 lockdown brought a halt to university-related research and in-person enquiries, derailing my original research design in several ways. Pre-pandemic, in the summer of 2019 (when the notion of a global pandemic really was a science-fiction plot!), I had found three coworking business owner-operator gatekeepers (key informants), and we had agreed to reconnect once I had obtained Ethics approval for the study. I submitted the first application to

the Office of Research Ethics on March 18, 2020. Ironically, March 18, 2020 is the same day our University suspended all non-critical, lab and human participant research, in line with the Federal Government's request that we, as Canadians, do everything possible to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. There was something perversely humorous about submitting my proposal, which detailed my intention to do *in-person* interviews and participant observations in at least three various coworking locations, on the *same* day we heard that all research and research-related travel were suspended "until further notice." While I invariably knew that qualitative research designs were by no means neatly defined nor formulaic, given their inherent flexibility and emergent qualities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Van Maanen, 1998), I had nevertheless never envisioned that the need to make deep revisions to my long-planned research design would arise the same day I submitted the Ethics Proposal.

3.3.2 "Pivoting"

I observed and attempted to process the events of the global pandemic as it continued to develop in the early weeks, knowing that I still had to do my thesis regardless of this "situation" we all found ourselves in. While other workers tried to get on with "business as usual" in the context of the health crisis, for me this meant I would need to conduct my dissertation remotely. As I write this, I know that the research was done entirely from my makeshift office, in my one-bedroom apartment, alone. And yet, as I began tweaking my proposed methods to resubmit my re-envisioned Ethics protocol back in April 2020, I could not have anticipated how long the pandemic would stretch on. I began re-negotiating my methods and project as "something to do" (Smith, 2020, p. 20). As writer Zadie Smith (2020) observed early on during the pandemic:

> … Like pugs who have been lifted out of a body of water, our little limbs keep pumping on, as they did when we were hurrying off to our workplaces. Do we know how to stop? Those of us from puritan cultures feel 'work must be done,' and so we make the cake, or start the gardening project… to work on "something" (p. 23).

For me, amending the research design was my "*something*" to work on in the early pandemic, April through May 2020. Doing this was my means of coping with the uncertainty of being in-between. Work and busyness have always been one form of escape for me; carrying on with my research during the pandemic was no different. I could envision interviews being easily enough adapted to a virtual/remote format. And documents, too, could be virtually gathered from coworking organizations' websites. However, my planned participant observation in the actual

coworking spaces? Working alongside coworkers and studying the social interactions, daily work patterns, physical and psychosocial conditions in the spaces? These major ethnographic elements of my project appeared stymied along with my intended strategy for recruiting in-situ.

3.3.3 Going digital? Ethical amendments and ongoing gatekeeper engagement

Ultimately, I rewrote Ethics to do an ethnographically-informed, virtual fieldwork study from home. The final arrangement produced the research design overviewed earlier in this chapter (3.2 Brief overview of the study). Because I had never imagined a research design that had zero in-person fieldwork, figuring out not only methods but the field of study per se became challenging under the pandemic scenario. In the back of my mind, I did not think remote research was how my dissertation was *supposed to be*. In reflection, I believe this is why I maintained ambivalence regarding conducting my research digitally.

In May of 2020 I got back to the original three owner-operator gatekeepers to request the virtual interview format and their help with recruiting participants from within their coworking membership (Appendix C). Reminded that work with gatekeepers is not a one-off and instead an ongoing conversation (Berbary, 2013), I did not get replies from two of the three gatekeepers. Understandable, given they were busy managing the pandemic crisis on the front lines of their business. When the two I had been waiting to hear from did get back to me, both opted to participate as interviewees rather than carry on in a gatekeeper role. As it felt especially difficult to ask anything of anyone during the initial months of the pandemic, I was and remain grateful for the contributions all participants made to the study, whatever their role.

The owner-operator of the coworking business, *Empower*, who was still willing to be a gatekeeper suggested that it would be more authentic for me to do the recruitment myself. Moreover, since her business had transitioned to an active *virtual coworking service*, she encouraged me to join it (the virtual coworking) and recruit from there. I also picked up a "new" gatekeeper by chance, via a personal (family) business connection. This gatekeeper, David, the owner-operator of the *District* coworking space, was also involved with a collective of

independent coworking owner-operators[6] within a major city centre. David invited me to join a virtual provincial coworking "unconference"[7] and suggested that I recruit for participants from among the other coworking owner-operators at this unconference—a method I adopted.

A particular challenge was that the Office of Research Ethics wanted details I did not have regarding the exact nature of my research into virtual coworking and these virtual coworking unconferences. Since coworking was, like other businesses, moving into providing events and services online, especially early on in the pandemic, what then constituted virtual coworking and virtual coworking conferences? These virtual coworking spaces and events were being created ad hoc in real time in response to a crisis in which a prominent characteristic of coworking, i.e., bringing individuals together, was all of a sudden seen as a public health risk. This back and forth for ethics approval reminded me of Bell's (2014) article about informed consent, lamenting that some requirements based on certain assumptions about the nature of science are incommensurable with many characteristics of ethnographic inquiry. As Markham (2018) has suggested, in the move towards research that involves digital communication technologies and the internet, "typical criteria and ethical regulations fail to adequately encompass the characteristics, vulnerabilities, and rights of people in an epoch of anonymity, microcelebrity, photo filters, avatars, and self-branding" (p. 11).

3.3.4 Field of study: pandemic context and blurring boundaries

My pre-COVID plan had been to draw sites and participants from within one Canadian province and interview stakeholders in person. With the shift to virtual fieldwork happening at the same time as the coworking businesses under study were also expanding to virtual offerings in response to COVID-19 restrictions, I found that I had easy access to connections beyond provincial geographical bounds. For example, Zoom platform coworking unconferences and meetings were taking place that were run by national and international collectives of independent coworking space operators and coworking communities. These stakeholders were able to share

[6] According to coworking owner-operator David, independent coworking owner-operators are "not the WeWorks, Regus or big multi-site [coworking] operators, and so have a very different perspective and origin. Each of the independent operators are [sic] not operating as a big real-estate play but rather for more intrinsic values" (Email communication, May 14, 2020).

[7] Unconference is a term adopted from the open-source tech community, where a portion of the agenda and content for the conference is actually user generated by the attending participants.

resources and strategies relevant for different stages of the pandemic irrespective of public health region and geographic locale. The first virtual unconference I attended (June 2020) featured international speakers. They spoke about how coworking businesses were handling the pandemic in their particular geographic regions and what new opportunities existed for coworking businesses via remote workers. Zoom breakout room topics covered virtual coworking, government supports for small businesses by region, coworking inclusion and diversity, and mental health resources for entrepreneurs. All attendees received a post-conference crowdsourced document with notes from the workshop sessions and a list of key global resources. Website links to general coworking business resources, lists of worldwide coworking conferences and coworking member benefit programs, coworking marketing and promotion businesses, blogs and Facebook groups affiliated with coworking collectives were all included.

While the porous nature of many of the boundaries during the pandemic enabled by digitality (de Vaujany et al., 2021) added a layer of complexity to scoping the field of my inquiry, I was able to follow the opportunities that presented. As Markham (2018) notes, given the ongoing developments of information technologies and their enmeshment in our lives, "[w]hat boundaries are sensible to construct around a cultural context? …boundaries are built discursively, or through connection, interest, and flow, rather than geography, nationality, or proximity" (p. 1130). My field became one constructed as "a space for social action" (Dumont, 2022, p. 9). As Dumont (2022) asserts:

> When fieldwork is eminently multi-sited, immersion is not about being in places but instead about being in a space. This view builds on the understanding that multiple locations become research sites that converge into a space for social action because they play a meaningful role in everyday interactions and practices. (p. 11, emphasis in original).

Dumont (2022) maintains that *by following the people*, the space for social action can be constructed. I contend that in accepting invitations from the gatekeepers, I followed the people and also the plot (Marcus, 1995). Consequently, the final study design included stakeholders involved in the coworking industry internationally across jurisdictional divides and infection waves.

3.4 Coworking businesses (sites) in the study

As presented earlier in this chapter (Fig. 3.1, section 3.2), the research design comprised two methods of primary data collection—interviews with coworking stakeholders and participant observation in the virtual coworking community, coworking "unconferences", and meetings — and two secondary sources, namely fieldnotes and digital coworking documents. The following section describes the coworking businesses in the study. The majority of interview participants were affiliated with one of the eight coworking business sites. Primary observation (virtual fieldwork) was also conducted at one of these sites (*Empower*).

Characteristics of the eight coworking businesses are provided in Table 3.1 on the next page. Seven of the eight sites were independently owned. The eighth site was a non-profit (*Do Good*) that put any monies generated by the business back into its social entrepreneurial and innovation initiatives.

During pre-fieldwork I had developed a list of coworking sites via extensive internet searches. My strategy aimed for a purposeful sampling of information-rich cases (Patton, 2015), i.e., cases chosen to "…fit the study" (Coyne, 1997, p. 627). Since various types of coworking exist in terms of both business model adopted (e.g., non-profit, profit, co-operative) and target audience (e.g., women only, discipline-specific, daycare amenity, etc.), I wanted heterogeneous sites to represent this variety. The eight sites in this study were arranged by the gatekeeper/key informant approach mentioned earlier. Specifically, I had arranged gatekeepers/key informants in the early research design period, each an owner-operator of a coworking business that differed from the others with regard to business model and user characteristics.

Table 3.1. *Study's coworking business sites and their respective characteristics*

Business Name	Membership Types	Open during pandemic?	Virtual Services?	Distinguishing Characteristics
Excel	Private offices, dedicated desks, hot desks +Community membership	Open. Closed to public during emergency shutdowns.	No	Coworking users are mainly established consultants & remote workers.
Citizenry	Private offices, dedicated desks, hot desks +Virtual office*	"Closed" with some members still accessing space. Reopened in line with jurisdictional requirements.	Yes + mail service with professional address	Coworking users are mainly freelancers from diverse fields. +Dog friendly site +Games area +Rooftop patio
Pitch	Private offices, dedicated desks, hot desks	Open. Closed to public during emergency shutdowns.	No	Coworking users are a mix of freelancers, small businesses & employees of large organizations
Empower	Dedicated desks, hot desks *Virtual coworking only as of 2021 +Zoom meetings, work sessions, members-only Slack channel	Closed during initial shutdowns. Mail pick-up only. Reopened in line with jurisdictional requirements.	Yes	Coworking users are restricted to women-identifying +Offer virtual courses for entrepreneurs & consultants
District	Private offices, dedicated desks, hot desks +Flex pass (set hours of hot desk use per month)	"Closed" during emergency shutdowns with some members still accessing space. Reopened in line with jurisdictional requirements.	No	Coworking users are mainly creative industry workers ~Not officially staffed but owner-operator on site during regular business hours
Do Good	Private offices, dedicated desks, hot desks +Community membership +Team tables Virtual office* access to virtual coworking space	"Closed" during emergency shutdowns with some members still accessing space. Reopened in line with jurisdictional requirements.	Yes + mail service with professional address	Coworking users are mainly social innovation entrepreneurs +Pre-pandemic offered local community hub that saw 300-500 people daily for on-site public events & meetings
WorKIN	Private offices, part-time dedicated desks Virtual office* +Members-only Slack channel	Closed during emergency shutdowns. Reopened when **non-essential** businesses were able to reopen in line with jurisdictional requirements.	Yes +mail service with professional address	Coworking users are working parents + On-site non-licensed daycare provided**
Workscape	Private offices, dedicated desks, hot desks +Flex desk (set days per week of hot desk use) +Community membership*	Open. Closed to public during emergency shutdowns.	Yes +Virtual coworking membership	Coworking users are a mix of creative industries, employees of organizations, & independent contractors

*New services offered since the pandemic

** *WorKIN's* childcare centre as a non-licensed amenity was unable to provide childcare during pandemic shutdowns. Because most users relied on the childcare services, during shutdowns *WorKIN* was closed.

Three of the eight coworking spaces are in suburban cities (*Excel, Pitch, Workscape*); the remaining five are in major cities. Excluded were coworking spaces offered by large commercial real estate management corporations (e.g., WeWork, Regus)[8] and none of the coworking businesses in the sample had affiliations with a university or college. Most of the coworking business sites in the study have been in operation for between two and five years (as of 2020) with two businesses (*Citizenry* and *Do Good*) in operation for more than five years.

All of the coworking spaces in this study included a physical space / building located within a Canadian province.[9] In terms of square feet, the majority of coworking businesses in the study were less than 10, 000 square feet. Three of the coworking businesses were located in buildings owned by the coworking business owner-operator. In these cases, a portion of the owned building space was designated for coworking while the rest of the building was rented according to longer lease agreements following more traditional office rental models, event spaces, and studios, for example. One of the coworking spaces, *Excel*, was set to launch a second location that would offer only private office memberships to cater to employed remote workers seeking an office outside of their home but not wanting to travel to their assigned corporate office space. *Empower* was specifically targeted towards women-identifying entrepreneurs whereas *WorKIN* provided onsite childcare and thus attracted primarily working parents.

As indicated in Table 3.1 (under Membership Types), various memberships were offered across coworking businesses. These ranged from entry level first-come first-serve open seating (i.e., hot desk memberships) to private offices able to accommodate individuals and teams of diverse size depending on the size of the private office. The majority of sites in the study all offered private office, dedicated desk, and hot desk membership options. Amenities in the coworking spaces included access to printers and scanners, meeting rooms, high speed internet, common seating/lounge areas, and shared kitchens. Depending on the coworking space and membership type purchased, some services were either included or offered at additional rates (i.e., mail services, filing cabinets, storage lockers, etc.). Spaces provided 24/7 access at certain

[8] While three large national and multi-national organizations that offered coworking were approached to participate, I was unable to engage them in my research.
[9] As of 2021, the coworking business, *Empower*, decided to permanently close the physical coworking space and offer virtual coworking only. This change occurred after I had finished data collection.

membership levels, although the actual spaces were typically staffed only during more traditional business hours (i.e., weekdays anywhere between 8:00 am to 6:00 pm). Further, some coworking spaces offered discounts, credits, or certain hours per month of meeting room access depending on membership level. The majority of the coworking spaces offered local retail discounts or free coworking passes at affiliated partner coworking spaces. Noteworthy is that five of the eight coworking businesses offered virtual coworking services (Table 3.1, column 3), and that all of these virtual services were developed in response to the pandemic.

3.5 The interviews

A total of 30 in-depth, loosely structured, virtual interviews were conducted with coworking stakeholders beginning in June 2020 and continuing to March 2021. Referring back to Figure 3.2 (Section 3.2), roughly 27% of participants were either owner-operators or owner-operator-managers, 17% were managers (non-owner-operators), and 56% were coworking users. The users can be loosely divided into those who only coworked virtually, only coworked in-person, and coworked both ways, at 10%, 13%, and 33% respectively.

Interviewees were mainly located in one Canadian province, and one participant resided in the United States. To protect coworking business and participant identities, all identifying information was removed from the data. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants and coworking businesses, with a separate Excel™ sheet linking the actual participant to the pseudonym. This file is stored on a secure, password-protected server at the University of Waterloo, and the data will be destroyed in seven years, pursuant to Ethics Application #41886.

3.5.1 Recruitment methods for interviews

Recognizing there is no perfect sampling strategy, Coyne (1997) recommends that researchers pre-determine the information that is most useful and needed in an investigation and then determine suitable sampling methods. I ultimately adopted the gatekeepers' suggestions and invitations to recruit for interview participants during my participation at virtual unconferences, meetings, and virtual coworking. In other words, the participant observation component of the virtual fieldwork provided the means to recruit participants for the interview component. My initial plan had been to include only coworking users who were current coworking members, had

at least four weeks of coworking experience, and coworked at least three days per week. However, pandemic lockdowns made such criterion largely irrelevant. Besides the wider workforce was shifting to remote working, during shutdowns—whether coworking users or not—workers everywhere were being asked to work from home in accordance with Public Health guidelines.

The pandemic also necessitated flexibility around methods to gain access to participants, which is often the case despite careful research design (Berbary, 2013). Recruitment during the pandemic was a known challenge, especially in the early months (Smith, 2022). People were pre-occupied with their own pandemic realities. Therefore, for the purpose of obtaining maximum participation, I accepted as eligible for my study anyone participating in the virtual events and/or virtual coworking at the eight included sites. As Berbary (2013) recognizes, it is "[the] ability to gain access to a setting or a group of people that ultimately determines the path of research" (p. 1).

Specifically, through attending virtual unconferences and meetup events over Zoom, I recruited 12 participants. When gatekeeper David of *District* invited me to my first unconference, upon registration I also opted to sign up to an email listserv for upcoming coworking virtual events. At the unconferences and events I attended, I used chat messaging and direct messages (DMs) to reach out to coworking owners-operators and managers present. I introduced myself as a doctoral student investigating coworking spaces for her dissertation. I typed in this introduction and provided my University of Waterloo email address for anyone interested in learning more. People indicated interest either by passing along their email in the chat or emailing me directly. I used email to follow up with those interested and included my Letter of Information (Appendix D).

Through participating in the *Empower* virtual coworking community, I recruited another 12 participants. I used a recruitment strategy similar to the one used at unconference events. Namely, as pre-agreed with *Empower*'s gatekeeper and owner-operator, Miriam, I first identified myself as a PhD student researching coworking for her thesis. I reassured those attending the Zoom meetings that I was there to learn more about what virtual coworking consisted of and also

to get actual work done! I invited anyone who wanted to learn more about my research or had questions to contact me directly on Slack or via my University of Waterloo email (which I added in the videoconferencing chat). I sent my Letter of Information via direct email to those who indicated interest in participating in my study.

The remaining six of the total of 30 participants were recruited via the assistance of the owner-operators and coworking managers I interviewed. These stakeholders shared my recruitment poster (Appendix B) with their coworking community networks via newsletters, listservs, and postings to their respective Slack channels and Facebook pages. Interested individuals responded to the recruitment poster by emailing me directly; I then sent them my Letter of Information. Perhaps surprisingly, 100% of those who indicated interest ended up as participants in my study.

3.5.2 Coworking owner-operator and coworking manager participants

A total of 13 interviews were conducted with owner-operators and coworking space managers affiliated with the eight different coworking spaces as shown in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2. *Coworking owner-operators and managers*

Name	Gender	Role	Coworking Affiliation
Pam	F	Owner-operator	*Citizenry*
Everett	M	Coworking manager	*Citizenry*
David	M	Owner-operator-manager	*District*
Robert	M	Coworking manager	*Do Good*
Miriam	F	Owner-operator-manager	*Empower*
Kelly	F	Coworking manager	*Empower*
Steve	M	Co-owner-operator	*Excel*
Amy	F	Co-owner-operator-manager	*Excel*
Margaret	F	Coworking manager	*Pitch*
Chloe	F	Owner-operator-manager	*WorKIN*
Dorothy	F	Coworking manager	*Workscape*
Ian	M	Past owner-operator-manager	NA
Sarah	F	Past owner-operator-manager	NA

As indicated in Table 3.2, two of the interviewees were past owner-operator-managers of coworking businesses now working in other coworking related-areas (i.e., coworking/ community consulting and flexible workspace management software). Coworking owner-operators self-identified as small business owners, yet they typically additionally oversaw the coworking operations and running of the coworking space. Some coworking businesses had hired employees managing the space. For instance, Miriam and Pam, both owner-operators, employed paid coworking managers. Owner-operators David, Chloe, Steve, and Amy, on the other hand, did not. Coworking managers often had descriptive titles, suggestive of their work directed towards cultivating, animating, curating coworking community initiatives within the coworking businesses. Eight positions of coworking management in my sample were held by females (three of these coworking managers) while five positions of coworking management were held by males (two of these coworking managers).

3.5.3 Coworking user participants

Seventeen of the 30 interviews conducted for the study were with either past or current coworking users. Specific sample demographics of user participants and details of their coworking affiliations, employment sector, and coworking experience are provided in Table 3.3 on the next page.

Table 3.3. *Coworking user characteristics*

Coworker name	Age range	Gender	Employment sector	Self-employed	Coworking affiliation	Coworking experience
Sonja	20s	F	IT, marketing, advertising	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual
Becky	40s	F	IT, marketing, advertising	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual
Jenny	20s	F	Organizational/ human development	Yes*	*Empower*	Virtual and in-person
Victoria	30s	F	Organizational/human development	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual and in-person
Huda	20s	F	Food services	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual
Katya	30s	F	IT/ Design	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual and in-person; various coworking businesses
Joyceline	30s	F	Retail	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual and in-person; various coworking businesses
Melanie	40s	F	IT, marketing, advertising	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual and in-person
Nicole	30s	F	Healthcare	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual and in-person
Emma	30s	F	IT	Yes	*Empower*	Virtual and in-person; various coworking businesses
Greg	60s	M	Environment	Yes*	*Do Good*	In-person; various coworking businesses
Mati	40s	M	Social care	Yes	*Do Good*	In-person; various coworking businesses
Dillon	60s	M	Recruitment & HR	Yes	*Do Good*	In-person
Lily	20s	F	Healthcare	Yes*	*Do Good*	In-person
Grace	50s	F	Education	Employee	*Workscape*	In-person
Elizabeth	60s	F	Creative arts	Yes*	*Past coworking user*	In-person; various coworking businesses
Elaine	30s	F	Social care	Employee	*Do Good*	In-person

*Self-employed business owner with hired worker(s)

My sampling intention was to capture the experiences of a variety of coworking users from different professional and personal backgrounds with a range of motivations for coworking. The users recruited reflect this diversity of characteristics with respect to age, gender, employment sector, coworking experience, and employment arrangements.[10] Coworking users ranged in age from mid-20s to mid-60s. Fourteen coworking users identified as female and three as male. Two coworking users (i.e., Grace and Elaine) were employees of organizations whereas all other coworking users were self-employed. Four self-employed coworking users were small business owners with hired workers (i.e., Jenny, Greg, and Lily, and Elizabeth). Coworking users came from a broad range of, largely, knowledge worker professions.

3.5.4 Interview process and data collection methods

Interview participants chose how they wanted to connect: videoconference platform or telephone. The majority (22 of 30) of interviews were done using videoconferencing platforms that enabled synchronous connection with both audio and video inputs (e.g., WebEx, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Google Chat). My initial plan to use only the Webex software, due to UWaterloo's licensing agreement, was abandoned after multiple technological challenges and numerous complaints by early participants regarding their hatred of WebEx. I shifted to letting participants select their preferred platform. I liken this shift to allowing participants to select a preferred public location had we been able to do face-to-face interviews.

Interviews were booked for either 30- or 60-minutes. Actual durations ranged from 20- to 90-minutes. Average length of interviews was 52 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded (and transcribed) using the commercial version of the software Otter.ai.

[10] It is difficult to know precisely what a representative sample for coworking sites and stakeholders looks like given the lack of reliable statistics for coworking. Howell (2022) cites a 2019 industry-based survey of 7,432 coworking users conducted by Coworking Insights (see https://coworkinginsights.com/reports/) that reports 73% of coworking members were in startups or small businesses, 19% were freelancers or digital nomads, and the remaining 8% were remote employees of organizations. Another survey of 1,876 coworking users conducted by Foertsch (2017) found that 41% of coworking users were freelancers, 36% employees, and 16% identified as employers. The remaining 7% of coworking users engaged in other activities (i.e., studying). In this same survey, both coworking users and coworking business owners estimated that 40% of coworking users in their coworking space were female (Foertsch, 2017). Lack of available information regarding the design, sampling strategies, and response rates of these surveys is a barrier to determining the reliability of such statistics. Non-response bias is an additional challenge in survey research, and it is unclear whether there even is an external "gold standard" data source to assess and evaluate non-response bias (Lohr, Riddles, & Morganstein, 2016).

During four interviews, technical challenges (e.g., poor connectivity, dropped calls) led to adoption of spontaneous alternatives, either another videoconference platform, audio with no video, or telephone call. While these problems "ate up" interview time, rapport was typically buttressed by the problem solving, teamwork, and eventual re-connection success. Qualitative methods researchers have noted the unintended rapport-building consequences of such glitches (Roberts, Pavlakis, & Richards, 2021). In fact, while poor Wi-Fi connection and hang ups may have been a source of frustration and anxiety pre-pandemic, such issues inclined to be perceived as trivial set amidst the backdrop of the pandemic. Roberts et al. (2021) mention that communication prior to the interviews, that is, the email exchanges leading up to the interviews, also affects rapport. Email exchanges did give me insight into communication styles, displays of professionalism, and degree of candor to come. For example, Margaret, coworking manager of *Pitch*, used exclamations in most of our emails and her typical send off was, "Have a lovely day." Similarly, reflective of his business' social entrepreneurial membership, Robert, coworking manager of *Do Good*, used "May your day be going as well as it can" as his email sign off. These email exchanges and technical challenges were captured in fieldnotes I wrote up following each interview. Fieldnotes also included initial impressions, analytical hunches, and critical-reflections. For instance, an example set of notes:

> *Steve spoke of how working from home wears on people and the importance of working together in a space that feels right but hard to quantify. Reminded that coworking is still a privilege that only so many can afford. How may my experience of working from home influence how I analyze and interpret Steve's statement?*

I had developed a semi-structured interview guide, but in practice it was both cumbersome and largely irrelevant given the pandemic milieux we were all inhabiting. I therefore adapted to a more open interview approach, largely unstructured. Interviews generally covered the topics displayed in Figure 3.3 below. Topics related to employment history/occupation, daily work, and work practices and coworking. I also tried to be sensitive and receptive to what resonated with participants, at times allowing them to determine the interview's direction.

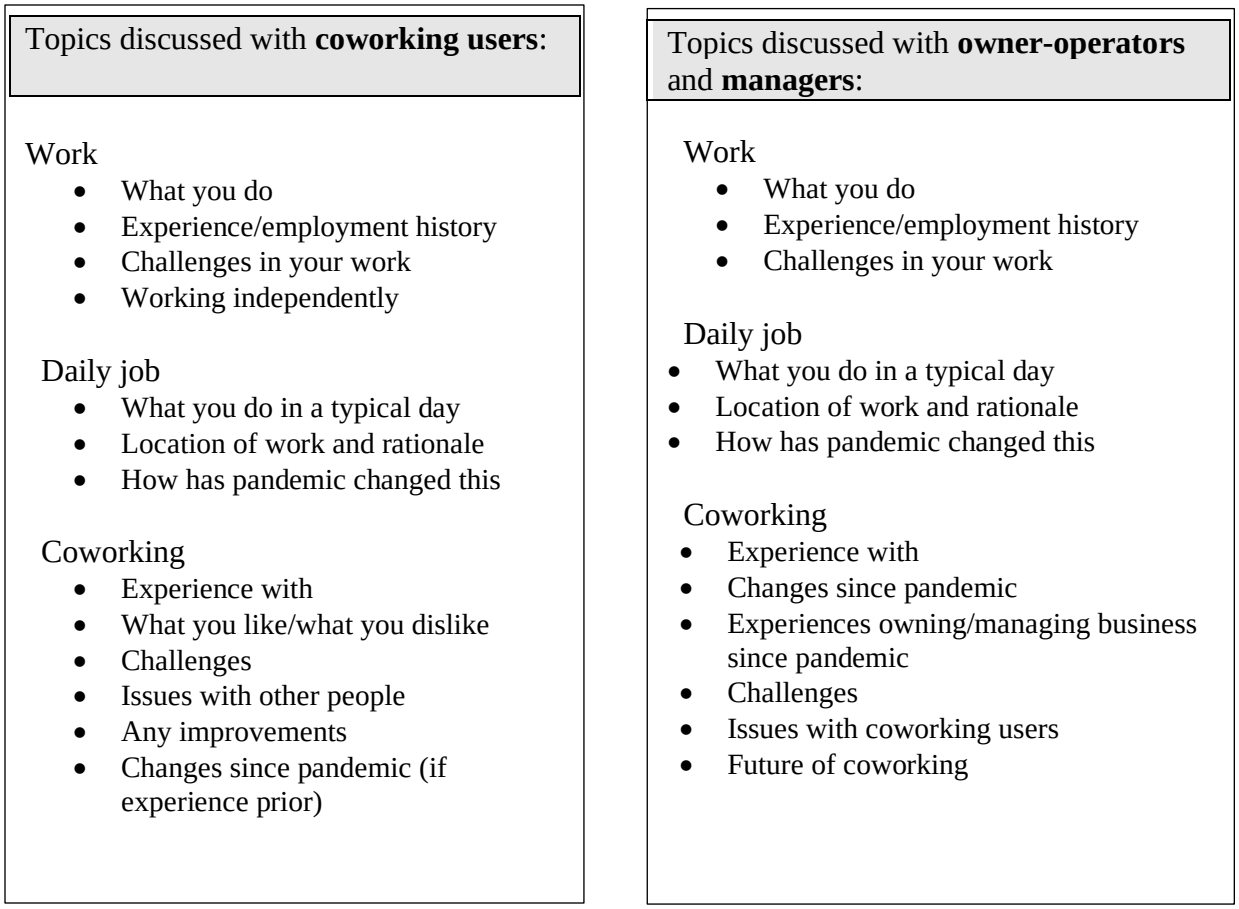

Figure 3.3. *Diagram of the loosely structured interview topics used*

3.6 Participant observation

Participant observation, the second of the two primary data collection methods used in this research, involved fieldwork via virtual coworking events in wider coworking communities (i.e., beyond the eight participant sites) and the virtual coworking community (*Empower*).

3.6.1 In virtual coworking unconferences and meetups

I spent 16 hours at virtual "unconferences" and meetings (i.e., five events total) that were run by collectives of independent coworking space operators and coworking communities. These unconferences and events were organized to bring together the larger community of coworking stakeholders to share knowledge and experience regarding how coworking owner-operators and managers were sustaining and supporting their "membership communities." These events were open to the public and the majority were free. Those that were not free used a "pay what you

can" structure. Except for two unconferences, these events were recorded by the conference organizers. Upon request, I was given links to the full audio and video recordings. I attended unconferences and other events in June 2020, October, December, February, and March 2021.

3.6.2 In the virtual coworking community

The other ad-hoc participant observation component of my research took place with *Empower*, one of the eight participant coworking businesses in the study. Specifically, I bought a four-month membership for *Empower's* virtual coworking service (July to end October 2020) and virtually coworked online. The decision to join this particular virtual coworking site was prompted by ongoing conversation with its owner-operator, Miriam, who was also one of my study's gatekeepers. I logged 44 total hours of participant observation online at *Empower*. On average I spent 11 hours per month attending the virtual Zoom sessions. The membership allowed me access to a pre-organized weekly schedule of 4.5 hours of Zoom sessions (details on these sessions and my experiences of virtual coworking are provided in Chapter 4 - Results). My involvement included attending sessions devoted entirely to working on individual projects online together (called 'work sprints'), goal setting/ accountability sessions, and community connection meetings. These latter involved either group brainstorms or "ask and give" exchanges. My membership also gave me 24/7 access to a private Slack channel (undocumented hours).

For myself, as an independent dweller, participating in a coworking community or conducting an interview was often the first or only conversation/ interaction I had in a day—especially during COVID-19 lockdown periods. I did not explicitly ask other coworkers or my participants about their own living arrangements, but through conversations I came to appreciate the significance of my isolation during periods of my research. More broadly, I frequently contemplated how the pandemic has been impacting our relationships in our working lives. Whether we live independently or not, for those of us who do most of our work alone, we may still network or connect, have meetings or calls with clients, 'leads,' or team members, and I am struck by how all of these interactions have changed during the pandemic period. They can carry a different weight, a new intimacy perhaps, even if we had been strangers before the first connection. And what of the relations between those who shared physical space in coworking environments or

met for the first time during the pandemic, sharing time and intimacies in these newly created virtual communities? Dawson and Dennis (2021) contend that workplace intimacies are transforming because of the pandemic. They recognize that "work has unbound itself from its usual relations" (Dawson & Dennis, 2021, p. 6). Usual relations necessitating professionalism? I wonder whether there will be any going back from these "new relations" within workplaces that have been changed to offer different intimacies of sorts?

3.7 Secondary data collection and production

The research design made use of digital materials and fieldnotes as described below:

3.7.1 Digital materials

To provide background information and situate interviews and participant observation, artefacts in the form of digital materials were collected. Eleven documents (105 typed pages total) were provided by coworking business owner-operators and virtual event organizers. These materials included coworking community guidelines, coworking user agreements, crowdsourced unconference notes and resources. Other materials were publicly available on the internet, e.g., coworking business website content, coworking blogs, newsmedia articles. I also subscribed to the email newsletter of one of my sites (*Pitch*) and to the community email listserv of another of my sites (*Do Good).* Digital materials were read and reviewed with an eye to the language, topics addressed, and context of coworking service providers and users.

3.7.2 Fieldnotes

During virtual conferences, meetups, and virtual coworking community calls, I documented my experiences in the form of fieldnotes. Traditionally, fieldnotes refer to detailed, systematic, written notes on participant observation and are commonly associated with ethnographies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Franklin & Roberts, 2006; Rashid, Caine, & Goez, 2015). My fieldnotes were not rigourously systematic, sometimes even scattered. They included the nature of Zoom sessions, what those involved, and other broad descriptors. However, I often omitted specifics out of respect for the privacy of individual participants and coworking users.

When writing fieldnotes, I tried to pay attention to what Pink and Morgan (2013) have termed the *nonrepresentational* elements—those aspects that are invisible, unconscious or unspoken, and not fully captured through structured interviews or Likert scale instruments (Kunda, 2013). Eakin and Gladstone (2020) refer to this as invisible data. I wrote remarks concerning things not said outright in virtual sessions yet, possibly, implied or alluded to. I also recorded what stood out or surprised me along with various other real-time reactions and feelings while participating in the settings. For example, while virtual coworking, logging into the Zoom sessions was a fully aesthetic and affective experience. As the various virtual coworking users logged in, upbeat music played in the background. As everyone's faces and backdrops appeared, a mosaic of colour, movement, and expressions created a sensory spectacle to attend to. Immediately I was taken from my one-bedroom apartment into a virtual world depicting the simultaneous scenes of remote others. Although strangers, it was still oddly comforting to feel a part of *something.* In total, I produced approximately 100 pages of typed fieldnotes.

3.8 Reflections on fieldwork and data collection

My fieldnotes hold many descriptive details and also represent a material testament that drew out an ongoing reflection I have had throughout this pandemic, namely, how many of us are working but not *really* working? I have been naggingly aware of myself as "the researcher" and of the intersectional (and sometimes liminal) spaces that coexist between the researcher and the researched—gatekeepers, sites, and all coworking stakeholders.

3.8.1 "Presenteeism" and researching during a pandemic

I sometimes found myself going through the motions of my dissertation but struggling to be actively present, thoughts preoccupied with pandemic updates: death tolls, travel bans, vaccine races. How many of us were and are present but somewhat absent, I wondered? And then, "Wait, the struggle is real. I'm not 'working from home'… I'm *working* from home in a PANDEMIC!" And yet, few accommodations were made. Most of us just kept on working. In the occupational health literature this phenomenon is termed "presenteeism" (Dew, Keefe, & Small, 2005; Van Der Feltz-Cornelis, Varley, Allgar, & de Beurs, 2020).

As someone who lives with mental illnesses and is studying work and health associations, I have required more effort to maintain my recovery throughout the pandemic. People use food, work, exercise, and drugs/alcohol as coping strategies: eating for comfort (baking sourdough!); work (burnout is almost a status symbol?); exercise (I've fallen in love with running again!, totally passionate about spinning); and alcohol/cannabis (drinking starts earlier in some households…cannabis edibles join the lunch menu). For me, past experience with an eating disorder, addiction, depression, and anxiety led to unhealthy relationships with these very things that many people were using to "get through" the pandemic. My commitment to recovery has required more mental energy during various months, days, moments, and I have often found myself operating with limited bandwidth. While this has been my experience, what about other workers? Worried about their parent in a long-term care facility? Waiting to hear whether their youngest child has tested positive and what having to isolate in their tiny apartment might mean for their other daughter, partner, Self? The distraction of the hospital shortages, the confusion about mask wearing, the changing limits on social gatherings, changing rules about work from home and returning to the office! Will we be able to see anyone during the holidays? The climate crisis, systemic racism, social uprisings and storming the capital! All this alongside the insidious imperative that we be productive and the 'business as usual' expectations.

For those of us with the privilege of working remotely, both during the pandemic and up to the present, how many of us—to varying degrees based on our personal lives, histories, dynamic entanglements with the pandemic, socio-political and racial inflections—bring ourselves 'to' work yet struggle to fully engage? How many of us come onto virtual platforms and "show face" at meetings while, with camera off and microphone muted, we are trying to do another task… one ear half-open for our name or anything that may require our full attention? How do we show our productivity and work ethic in these situations? I do not always feel all that productive. I can respond to emails. Some work just feels too hard, too deep, less tangible than the number of emails cleared from the Inbox. It can feel as though I am never working yet always working. Stress/ed out. Burn/ed out. Zoom/ed out.

Throughout all stages of my virtual research, I tried (and continue to try) to take in and process the images, sounds, and actions that occur simultaneously in the little boxes on my screen. I

catch a glimpse of myself. “Is that what I look like today?” In meetings, I thumbs up and nod my head agreeingly, often overenthusiastically. What other annoying social habits and Zoom mannerisms have I developed because of the pandemic? Virtual meeting done, my smile fades and my waving hand returns to the home keys. Now what? I stare blankly at my screen. Another sober blackout. “Focus. What do I need to work on? What am I capable of working on?” As Behrisch (2020) laments: “What is *worth* doing right now?” (emphasis added, p. 668). I sometimes feel that even the “instrumental habits of performativity and productivity” that Behrisch mentions (p. 670) seem useless, empty at times. Drawing on the Slow Movement, she has suggested that we can “transcend this cycle of impermanent human achievement to value things that matter profoundly: affect, feeling, imagination, pleasure, curiosity, and care” (p. 671)—all of which are ambiguous, elude quantification and measurement, and defy neoliberal ideals. But, can we?

Technically, I have always been a potential coworking space user, a “free to work from anywhere” worker, a worker affiliated with an institution but without a “contract” that put limits on where I do that work. My positionality to my topic of inquiry changed under COVID-19. I became no longer just a potential coworking space user but instead someone who wanted a coworking space to work. Is this the appeal of coworking spaces? While I may not have been able to stop thinking about my thesis and my data, a virtual coworking space at least provided a soft boundary between where I do thesis work and where I live the rest of my life. Had I been able to do on-site fieldwork, this boundary would have been literal/physical.

During the hundred gazillion hours it has taken to write up my dissertation, I was constantly visited by questions, feelings, affects… and left wondering whether they count as *something*, this embodied data? Are they part of my analysis? According to Denzin (2019), “there is a need to unsettle traditional concepts of what counts as research, as evidence, as legitimate inquiry” (p. 723). Like Behrisch (2020), Denzin (2019) argues that “experience cannot be quantified, counted, or turned into a thing. Experience is an on-going process… it is messy, open-ended, inconclusive, tangled up in the writer’s and reader’s imagined interpretations” (p. 722). These reflexive observations, both intellectual and emotional reactions, “constitute sources of knowledge” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 419). These instances, even in their singularity, their

fleetingness, their defiance of quantification, of boundaries, of tangibility, they happen. They pester me in ways that I cannot un-notice. Both Becker (1993) and Jardine (1992) cite examples of "being 'struck' by something" (Jardine, 1992, p. 55) that offered interpretive avenues to follow "for the possibilities of understanding" (Jardine, 1992, p 56). Similarly, Freeman (2014), quoting Geertz, acknowledges that "[t]here is no guide to follow, only "the informal logic of actual life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 17) that presents itself to us interpretively for us to venture in and attend to" (p. 832).

3.8.2 Ethical sensitivities during primary fieldwork

Although COVID-19-specific disease risks were mitigated with remote interviewing and participant observation, a number of ethical considerations required heightened sensitivities throughout my data collection. For example, I had anticipated having the completed Letter of Information and Consent forms in advance of the actual interviews. Some participants did return the filled-out forms prior to the interview; others did not. In these cases, we completed the informed consent verbally before beginning the interview. Moreover, recognizing my own shifting emotional states, focus, priorities, and inabilities in COVID times, I wanted to be acutely sensitive to and understanding of that in others. Giving ourselves permission to "nope" out or mess-up on an activity that was not life altering seemed appropriate. I reminded all participants that they could skip any questions they preferred not to answer, end the interview at any point, and also withdraw entirely all their responses from my study. None did.

The virtual environment of interviews and participant observation brought a certain level of intimacy and intrusion of personal spheres—what is often off limits for both the researcher and participant (Meskell, Houghton, & Biesty, 2021). While cameras could be turned off or virtual backgrounds selected or blurred to ensure privacy, participant choices became further data to consider. What image, or lack thereof, were we both putting forth? Were these front or backstage performances (Goffman, 1959)? Was the choice deliberate?

Additionally, familiar with existential angst myself, I was often keenly aware of how the pandemic had created a certain emotional openness or perhaps vulnerability in me? My participants as well as others I coworked with in the *Empower* virtual space expressed similar

heightened uncertainties and anxieties. These sentiments resonated. As I "practice[d] active listening skills and aim[ed] to listen more and talk less" (Meskell et al 2021, p. 2), in the isolated and remote working conditions of my one-bedroom apartment, personal and academic identities seemed practically inseparable. The dissertation topic itself was partially motivated by my own often-fraught relationship with work. Sensitive to the challenge of setting boundaries between the personal and the professional, I was hearing others describe their own boundary struggles in relation to coworking communities. I valued these disclosures. I knew not only how effortful many activities became during early stages of the pandemic, but also the hardships it brought to small businesses (like the independent coworking owner-operators) and the self-employed (like most of the coworking users in my study).

Still, all participants repeated numerous times their enthusiasm to participate in my study—which they deemed both valuable and timely. Their trust in me and willingness to assist were sometimes unsettling. While I had been critical of the discourse surrounding connection and collaboration in coworking, I was now benefitting from aid I had initially anticipated to be marketing speak. The value of what I may have learned from interviewees and participant observation as coworking stakeholders carried out their everyday work activities made clear the ethical sensitives involved in ethnographic work and the inherent power differentials between the researched and the researcher (Berbary, 2013).

All in all, my dataset ended up being very rich indeed, comprising approximately 26 hours of interviews, 60 hours of participant observation, and approximately 100 pages of fieldnotes.

3.9 Data analysis

In this section I outline how I tried to make sense of the data I generated, including the transcription, coding, and additional interpretive processes. As Wolcott (2002) reminded me, "the real work of qualitative research lies in mindwork, not fieldwork" (p. 102). Below I explicate this mindwork, employing a bricolage of interpretive tools.

3.9.1 Transcription

The software Otter.ai was used to record and transcribe the 30 interviews for the purposes of data analysis. I then completed listen-throughs of all software-transcribed interviews once each, with focus on (in)accuracy of the software transcriptions. Interview sections that were inaudible/ unintelligible after listen-throughs were marked in the transcript as [I/A]. Punctuation that indicated a question or exclamation was inserted. Pauses that were unusual to an individual's speech patterns were denoted by LP (long pause). Sentences that trailed off and were left unfinished were marked with a double-dash (--). Inflections or contextual comments were noted by brackets (i.e., {she laughs}) to aid in later stages of analysis and interpretation.

Although the act of transcription is, in and of itself, an act of interpretation, re-representation, and consequently, an act of power (Bucholtz, 2000), I used the Otter.ai software to simplify the complexity of the task. Then, during the manual process of editing the computer-assisted interview transcriptions, I added context and details recalled from the actual interview event, ever mindful of my on-going involvement in knowledge production (Tilley, 2003). This supplementing included memoing of additional context, thoughts, and reflections. Straining to hear through the background noise or poor quality, I constantly asked myself *i*s that what they said or am I listening for that? The process was often frustrating and at times I marked my "decisions" with question marks I left in the transcript to denote uncertainty around my choice.

Following interview listen-throughs, I developed written participant summaries that included information about interviewees' employment, working practices, and experiences with coworking. As part of the recursive work towards data interpretation, I also noted prominent topics discussed along with any further thoughts or questions that had arisen during the listen throughs. Participant summaries were on average two pages in length and served as a tool to familiarize myself with both the data produced and some possible themes for use in later iterative coding.

3.9.2 Coding: attempting to procedure my way to making meaning

The transcribed interviews were uploaded to NVivo software [School of Public Health owned] for the purposes of initial data coding. Consistent with the interpretive bricolage approach and

actively constructing my analytic methods (Kincheloe et al., 2018), I utilized Clarke's (2003) postmodern version of grounded theory to guide initial data coding. Specifically, I used inductive coding involving in vivo codes but then also drew on academic scholarship and media/cultural discourses in an abductive process (Clarke, 2003) to create the codebook. In doing so, I attempted to attend to how individuals make meaning in the *situation*, additionally attending to discursive and more structural elements. I outline the steps I took below.

I created a codebook based on in-depth reading of three transcripts with maximum variation. One transcript was based on an interview with a coworking owner-operator, another with a coworking manager, and the third with a coworking user who had only ever virtually coworked (i.e., never coworked in a physical coworking space). These three transcripts represented distinct coworking stakeholders (i.e., coworking owner-operator, manager, and virtual user). Each of these interviews offered rich insight into a wide range of topics set out in my loosely structured interview guide (Figure 3.3, section 3.5.4).

After identifying in vivo the line by line codes for each of these three interviews, I examined both overlapping and uniquely labelled codes. From these I created higher-level categories that would encapsulate all the initial codes identified from the three transcripts (approximately 30 codes). The codebook was influenced by my working knowledge of concepts that were familiar to me from academic literatures and media/cultural discourse. The codebook evolved as I used it to code each transcript, recursively redefining and relabeling the codes as the work progressed. For example, in vivo codes that related to virtual coworking, including virtual coworking memberships, online programming to engage coworking users, benefits or perks of virtual coworking, comparison between physical and virtual coworking, in-person coworking community versus online coworking community, were bundled under a higher-order *Coworking gone virtual* code. Another example: initial codes that related to coworking business decisions to stay open or close under pandemic directives, new protocols or regulations implemented by the coworking business (i.e., cleaning/screening), user activity in coworking business since COVID, and COVID implications for the selected sites were merged under a higher-level *COVID* code. The final codebook consisted of 20 codes (shown in Appendix F) that included *Coworking gone*

virtual; COVID; CoWORK: The business of coworking; Social relations/ connection/ community in coworking; Productivity, and *Entrepreneurial spirit*.

During coding I carried out accompanying memoing to assist with data conceptualization (Appendix G provides examples). My aim was generative coding (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020) which involves an ongoing, iterative dialogue between the codes and the data to create "the infrastructure of the conceptual analysis" (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020, p. 9). I found, however, that although I had succeeded in binning the data into topical "chunks," or what Braun and Clarke (2019) term "domain summary themes" (p. 593), the coding work itself had not gotten me close enough to thinking as deeply and critically about the data as I needed to be. The coding process had been useful to manage the large volume of data, as Coffey and Atkinson (1996) suggest it can be. Beyond the "*Which category does this segment fit?* or *Do I need to rethink the codebook?*" questions, I needed to think analytically and holistically about what it all *meant*. This experience was a strong reminder that the process of coding is not the analysis in and of itself (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Eakin & Gladstone, 2020).

3.9.3 Other ways into my data

As researchers note, procedures or prescriptive steps in interpretive research do not in and of themselves produce meaning (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Eakin & Gladstone, 2020; Kunda, 2013). This is done by the researcher. And so, while coding in NVivo had organized my interview transcript data into 20 broad codes, whereby all data in each code seemed to share some common element or characteristic, and all data were linked (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), more interpretive work was required. Data analysis and interpretation are inherently creative processes (Hunter, Lusardi, Zucker, Jacelon, & Chandler, 2002; Kunda, 2013)), the so called "creative essence of the scientific sort" (Kunda, 2013, p. 18). This stage of research maximizes the creative presence of the researcher (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020). Therefore, to advance the analysis and interpretation of the data, I adopted the use of additional heuristic devices, presented in the following sub-sections:

Situational analyses: messy mapping

I used the analytic tool of situational mapping to situate the coworking data that the study produced. This approach supported analytic memoing. It helped me to visualize the moving parts of the coworking data. Guided by Clarke's (2005) method, I asked myself: what non-human and human elements matter here? What ideas, concepts, discourses, symbols matter in the situation? This type of "messy" situational analysis (2003, 2005) was developed to extend the utility of grounded theory, which is credited to sociologists Glaser and Strauss (1967) and established within the positivist paradigm. Clarke's (2003; 2005) elaboration and mapping techniques were guided by postmodern developments including the crisis of representation and feminist work on embodiment and situated knowledges (Clarke, 2005; Haraway, 1991). In her initial work, Clarke (2003; 2005), like Charmaz (2014), contended that grounded theory, based on symbolic interactionism, is a theory-methods package. She elaborated on various strategies that align it with postmodern assumptions to take it "further around the postmodern turn" (Clarke, 2005, p. 2). The result is a theory-method that highlights difference, complexity, discourse, relationality, and the researcher's involvement in the research process. Specific considerations that required noting in the 'situation' of the 'coworking phenomenon during the pandemic' included technological, discursive, moral, spatial, and temporal elements. The full, messy, complex situation was displayed visually using this method. An example is shown in Figure 3.4 on the next page.

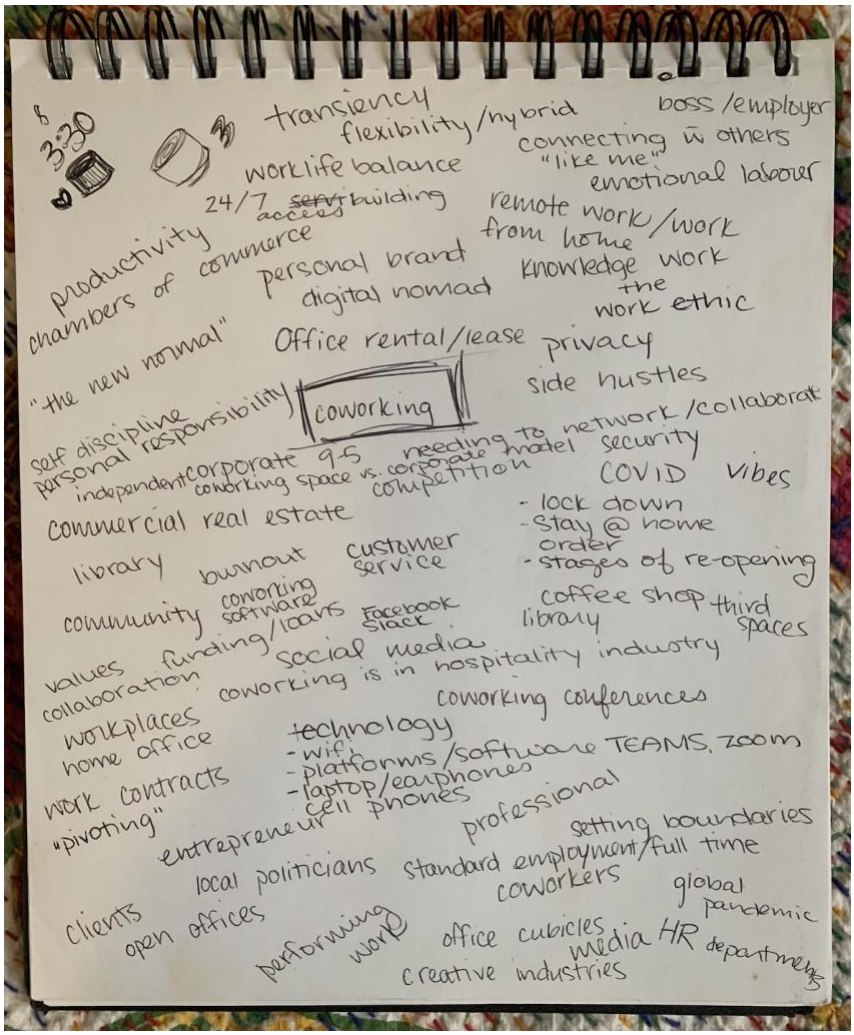

Figure 3.4. "*Messy*" *situational mapping*
The photo illustrates elements of "what matters" in the data interpretation process.

Everything as data

During the analysis, I found myself thinking about my data even when I was not "doing" data interpretation, a scenario noted in ethnography as "ethnographic sensibilities." I picked up on events, encounters, content, and images in my everyday life that seemed pertinent to understanding my data. The domain of my research increasingly blurred on the personal. It was in the pre-programmed message that appeared in my Microsoft Outlook once I moved the last email from my inbox into a folder: "What a productive day! You've accomplished a lot!" It was in setting up online virtual work sessions with peers to get sh*t done…. in joining an MS-Teams

meeting and hearing tenured professors quip that "weekends are a luxury" and seeing nearly everyone on my display screen nod or chuckle in agreement, as though weekends were unavailable to anyone. It was in Apple TV's *WeCrashed*, a drama miniseries about the coworking business *WeWork* and the couple behind it. It was and is in the plethora of available applications and programs designed to boost productivity, avoid procrastination, track progress, and manage projects (e.g., Focusmate, SelfControl, Cold Turkey Blocker, Freedom, Forest, Beeminder, Pacemaker, Trello, pomodora timers, Asana, KanBan Flow—to name but a few). It was in the personal to-do lists I peppered my notebooks with, the Application Notes, the cell phone reminders of what I should be doing—despite I was often overwhelmed with having so much to do and being unsure even where to start. It was in moving to a new home… in setting up a remote office for 'productivity' and 'focused work' that disagreed with our newly adopted dog's frenzied response to squirrels… in buying an analogue timer to track when I was working. It was also in becoming resentful of my partner who left and returned home from work on a regular, predictable schedule, and who, outside of those hours, seemed to have a home life separate from work. It was even in coming across a Daily Shouts in *The New Yorker* satirizing work from home and the *absurd* remote work practices (presented in Figure 3.5 on the next page).

Hey, all. Sorry I'm late. I was trying to get work done at home, but, I'm telling you, I can't work from home anymore—too many distractions, not enough space. But I can't afford to rent an office. I need to find another place where I can do my work. Where do you go to work these days?

Oh, I work at a coffee shop where they'll let me sit for 20 minutes if I buy a coffee. Where do you go to work?

I work sitting on the grass beneath a brutalist modern sculpture in a city park until my fingers get cold or the raccoons come. Where do you go to work?

I work sitting on a stone wall outside an office building where I used to temp and can still pick up the Wi-Fi. Where do you go to work?

I work at a sandwich shop that lets you sit as long as you like, but its furniture is wicker, so you have to develop a callus. It took me two weeks, but now I could sit on glass. Where do you go to work?

I work in the back alley of a landmarked Broadway theatre that hasn't had a show inside it for six years. The Wi-Fi name is MOURNFULVAUDEVILLEGHOST. Where do you go to work?

…

I work in a frozen-yogurt shop from the '90s that I access through a time portal I found behind the lockers in the women's changing room at my gym. Where do you go to work?

I work at a WeWork [coworking space/site].

Also through a time portal?

No. They're still around, I guess…

Figure 3.5. *Seeing coworking everywhere: The New Yorker Daily Shouts*
Excerpt from "Where do you go to work these days?" (Sharbutt, 2022).

All of these instances shaped how I thought about and analyzed the interview data and coworking experiences I had been investigating. All added to contextualize and construct meaning with my data. All added to my interpretive repertoires of understanding.

On reading

Doing a PhD demands wide and deep reading. Fortunately, I have always loved to read. I love being taken by a strong authorial voice, not always understanding what is being said yet urged to read on… something evoked within. I was drawn to methodological texts, the ways we do our research and the theoretical rationale behind theses. I read across disciplines: Sociology. Health. Geography. Anthropology. Education. Science and Technology. Cultural studies. I kept reading, reaching for the piece that would illuminate my data. I held fast to the (false!) hope that I would come across some prescriptive formula that would direct me to what story to tell about my data. Instead, I highlighted what spoke to me, what may be relevant for particular data, even when I was not yet explicitly sure. And, of course, reading in turn shaped how I read my data, how I wrote and memoed about it. Jackson and Mazzei (2012) discuss how theory and data co-constitute each other. How plugging them in to each other creates new possibilities and understandings. Is that what I was doing? As Augustine (2014) explained:

> There were no rules that governed this reading, and I never reached a point of clarity. Instead, the more I read and reread and underlined phrases, the more out of control I felt… When I read, I lost track of time and connected ideas in surprising ways. ... Data were no longer just words in interview transcripts. Theory too was data that I was reading, collecting, and analyzing simultaneously. (p. 251)

Similarly, seeing how other academics use theoretical concepts or methodological tools provided me with techniques to try with my own data or lenses with which to view my data. Other sources of interpretation and inspiration were less scholarly works (Kunda, 2013): opinion pieces in major news media, collections of essays, books of poetry, memoirs. As I read, I could not help but think about what these contents might offer my data interpretation. I noticed how topics I read about in academic literature appeared elsewhere: community, liminality, productivity, care. These concepts I was thinking about, reading about, researching about, writing about, seemed to show up in unexpected ways. Was this me overinterpreting my daily life? Was this me

overanalyzing and overthinking? The blur between my research and my life has left me wondering whether it is standard for work to creep into one's mind when we are *not* working?

Paying attention to discourse and language

During participant observation in the virtual coworking community and while reading through interview transcripts, I paid close attention to how people spoke and used language. Discourses can be defined as the ways in which individuals talk and write about a phenomenon (Rudman, 2005). In its basic form, discourse analysis examines language in use; how phenomena are written and talked about (Rudman, 2005; Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001), recognizing discourses as a powerful form of social action (Wetherell et al., 2001). Discourses are constitutive; they build and do, and are socially and actively constructed (Wetherell et al., 2001). In other words, how language is used shapes reality (Cheek, 2004) and, in turn, is shaped by cultural, political, and social factors situated within a specific socio-historical context (Rudman, 2005). Language is not value free (MacEachen et al., 2008). Moreover, how phenomena are discursively constructed has both immaterial and material implications (Frost et al., 2010) "from the negotiation of self-identity, the shaping of collective 'taken-for-granted' beliefs, to the distribution of social resources" (Rudman & Molke, 2009, p. 379).

By scrutinizing what participants said, how it was said, and what was not said, I sought to expose taken-for-granted assumptions and how power can be wielded as discourse (Cheek, 2004). For instance, coworking space managers and owner-operators spoke about coworking being about community and referred to coworking users as "members." Using such language paints a particular image of coworking businesses and the relationship between those paying for the coworking service. Additionally, viewing coworking spaces as communities rather than shared workplaces allows for coworking spaces to be viewed outside the scope of Employment and Occupational Health and Safety Law, for instance. Furthermore, discourses that take the position that *people are not supposed to work from home*, a discourse keenly adopted by coworking advocates (and anyone that benefits from people working outside of the home), make certain assumptions that privilege masculinist notions of work—namely that the only *real* work is employment based and "centre[s] production for the market" (Cockayne, 2021, p. 502). Such

discourses devalue other notions of work, for instance work that is unpaid, informal, and social reproduction (e.g., Cockayne, 2021). Techniques of discourse analysis guided me to look for "meaning" in difference, contradiction, or silence (Eakin & Gladstone, 2020). For example, while a coworking manager was describing the coworking space staying open during the pandemic, instead of using the term "members" to refer to coworking users, as she did in other parts of the interview, she used the term "tenants." Noticing instances such as this prompted me to return to the transcripts a number of times, revealing opportunities to recognize the plurality of interpretations and multiple meanings that are possible (Kvale, 1996).

Writing as an analytic means: writing as method and representation

Academic writing did not come naturally for me. My thoughts felt and sometimes still feel tentative. And yet I know writing is both necessary and important, the final representative product of the research endeavour. As Eakin and Gladstone (2020) emphasize:

> Writing is a vehicle for articulating, framing, sifting, organizing, questioning and putting shape to the myriad analytic elements and ideas whirling around in the head of the analyst. Ultimately, writing is a key route to conceptualizing and theorizing research findings. Researchers write in order to become conscious of what they want to say, what they can say, how they can say it. (p. 10)

What I appreciated was reading researchers who spoke about writing (Kunda, 2013; Van Maanen, 2010; Wolcott, 2002), the craft of constructing the story (Frank, 2004; Golden-Biddle & Locke, 1997), their difficulties in representations through writing (Evans, 2000), and the effortful work of writing to analyze (Augustine, 2014; Eakin & Gladstone, 2020). In hindsight, it was the iterative writing process, the revisioning and back and forth conversations and discussions with my supervisor, committee members, and other "behind-the-scenes readers" (Kunda, 2013, p. 18) asking me to clarify what I meant, be more explicit, elaborate, etc. that I believe were critical for my analysis. Others have noted the value of scholar and peer readers to provoke further analytic thinking, refinement and interpretation that a single researcher cannot arrive at on their own (Augustine, 2014; Kunda, 2013). Wolcott (2002) remarked that "our interpretations should mirror [the] complexity rather than suggest that we have the omniscience to infer 'real' meanings" (p. 96). Certainly, during the iterative writing of the dissertation, the discomfort and issues around representation, voice, and authority became obvious (Berbary, 2019; Evans, 2000). Language plays an important part in this (Eakin and Gladstone, 2020; Evans, 2000). I could not nor cannot know exactly how my interpretation will be (re)interpreted

by readers (Evans, 2000). Yet, this reaffirms the importance of choosing the language, tone, organization, research story's meta narrative… ultimately, how I represent the data on the page. These choices make the writing process a deliberative, recursive, and often painstaking craft.

3.10 The ongoing process of understanding

The actual life we have been presented with in the pandemic context is quite unbelievable. Even the informal logics of everyday life became problematized and transformed. The "new normal"? My study of coworking phenomenon was exploratory. Yet, as I was virtually conducting the fieldwork from my grandparent's antique card table (*aka* makeshift office) in my one-bedroom apartment (for an initially anticipated two-week! COVID-19 shutdown), the pandemic was transforming the coworking sector. It has accelerated and amplified prophesized future of work characteristics such as digitization, virtualization, and consequently, flexible work arrangements and remote work. Individuals, organizations, government, and society are in the process of adapting and grappling with these changes (Muzio & Doh, 2021). My investigation into how coworking spaces and stakeholders have been doing business *intersects* with an unexpected historical inflection point of uncertainty, social disconnection, and virtual hyper connection. And these uncertainties are happening alongside well-publicized climate, racial, health, and social inequities. The bombardment of instances and happenstances at times was overwhelming, leaving me in little doubt as to the worth of a well-designed, flexible research methodology.

This methodology chapter has recounted the ethnographical bricolage approach taken and the research design adopted to investigate the underexplored daily working practices of coworkers, the social relations, and the psychosocial considerations within coworking spaces. The study involved primary data from 30 interviews that were transcribed, coded, and analyzed and another close to 60 hours of participant observation. I have provided a critically-reflexive description of the research components, including the challenges of virtual fieldwork. I presented the recruitment and interview practices employed, characteristics of the eight coworking businesses participating in the study, and profiles of the 30 coworking stakeholders interviewed. The ability to capture "work practices and relationships in situ" (Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 84) through interviews and participant observation generates in-depth experience and understanding of the workers' perspectives regarding everyday practices and the social meanings of specific

behaviours and language (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Green & Thorogood, 2014). The primary data were complimented by secondary data in the form of coworking documents and copious fieldnotes. Recognizing that analysis of the data collected is not a distinct phase of the research process per se (Kunda, 2013; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003), that it continues "throughout and beyond the life time of the project" (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 425), I drew on multiple supporting methods. These included memoing, messy mapping, reading widely, my own experiences of remote work, attending to language in use, dialogue with others, and writing. The methods employed allowed me to gather quality data on the coworking phenomenon and generate a "complex architecture" (Freeman, 2014, p. 827) of interpretation.

Chapter 4
Findings

This chapter presents the results from the dissertation study of the coworking landscape in Canada. The research design comprised 30 virtual interviews with multiple coworking stakeholders (owner-operators, owner-operators that also acted as managers, hired managers, and coworking users). Some users had experience coworking virtually only, some in-person only, and others had experience coworking both ways. Interview participants were affiliated with one of eight coworking business sites (except for the past owner-operator and coworking user participants). Taken together these sites reflect the heterogeneity of the coworking sector as much as possible[11]. The study aimed to identify daily work patterns, physical and psychosocial working conditions, social interactions and communities in coworking spaces, and what these mean for workers' health and wellbeing in this flexible workscape context. The data collected were interpreted and analyzed to answer the three research questions:

1. How did independent coworking businesses manage and adapt to the pandemic?
2. What is virtual coworking and what are the experiences of workers in these virtual coworking spaces?
3. How does coworking flexibility affect social support and connection?

[11] As indicated in footnote[10] Chapter 3 – Methodology: It is difficult to know precisely what a representative sample for coworking sites and stakeholders looks like given the lack of reliable statistics for coworking. Howell (2022) cites a 2019 industry-based survey of 7,432 coworking users conducted by Coworking Insights (see https://coworkinginsights.com/reports/) that reports 73% of coworking members were in startups or small businesses, 19% were freelancers or digital nomads, and the remaining 8% were remote employees of organizations. Another survey of 1,876 coworking users conducted by Foertsch (2017) found that 41% of coworking users were freelancers, 36% employees, and 16% identified as employers. The remaining 7% of coworking users engaged in other activities (i.e., studying). In this same survey, both coworking users and coworking business owners estimated that 40% of coworking users in their coworking space were female (Foertsch, 2017). Lack of available information regarding the design, sampling strategies, and response rates of these surveys is a barrier to determining the reliability of such statistics. Non-response bias is an additional challenge in survey research, and it is unclear whether there even is an external "gold standard" data source to assess and evaluate non-response bias (Lohr et al., 2016).

Chapter 4 – Findings is arranged into seven sections:
In section 4.1, Coworking business responses to COVID-19, I describe the independent coworking business decisions in response to the pandemic-related public health interventions from the perspective of coworking owner-operators and managers.

In section 4.2, Virtual coworking: the elements and the gestalt, I outline the emergence of virtual coworking during the pandemic, how virtual coworking was conceptualized, and what it offered users working apart. Based on my virtual fieldwork and participant observation in the *Empower* virtual coworking community, I describe the synchronous programming (i.e., weekly Zoom sessions) and asynchronous Slack communication components of *Empower*'s virtual coworking membership.

Section 4.3, In-person or virtual coworking: what are coworkers looking for? explores how in-person and virtual coworking emphasized distinct coworking elements and enabled different possibilities for coworking users (e.g., social interaction).

In section 4.4, Coworking as a *physical* place, I examine the importance of coworking as a distinct geographic site where individuals intentionally go for productivity, sociality, or both.

Section 4.5, Beyond office infrastructure: the immaterial value adds of coworking, highlights that a critical part of the business of coworking in independent coworking spaces is the support and community provided to the users. Yet, I problematize the entanglement of care and capitalism when this support is offered as a fee-based service.

In section 4.6, Social realities of bringing together strangers, I address issues that arise when an amalgam of workers are brought together in a fluid, social and professional workspace, including noise, conflict, and the inherent transience of coworking users.

Section 4.7, Summary of findings, offers a synopsis of the results presented in this chapter.

4.1 Coworking business responses to COVID-19

In Canada, beginning in March 2020, a series of public health interventions were introduced to slow the transmission of COVID-19 (e.g., social distancing, limits to the number of people attending in-person gatherings). These interventions additionally included stay-at-home orders and school and nonessential business closures during provincially ordered emergency shutdowns. When provincial jurisdictions declared these emergencies, coworking businesses were not specifically named in regulations stemming from the emergency acts. For instance, within Ontario, under the Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act (RSO 1990, c E.9), closure of non-essential businesses was ordered (s 7.0.2 (4)) according to O Reg 82/20 as amended by O Reg 119/20). Whereas more "typical" business owners could find their business category specifically named in these regulations, such as grocery stores and gas services, coworking businesses were not (see https://www.ontario.ca/laws/regulation/r20119). Consequently, owner-operators existed in a liminal state as to their business status and obligations under such regulations. While some owner-operators self-classified according to named essential businesses in the regulations (i.e., "property management services", "postal services", or "businesses that supply other essential businesses") to justify remaining open, one coworking business offered childcare, and was not authorized to operate in accordance with O Reg 51/20.

In this findings section, I explore the coworking business responses to pandemic-related interventions from the perspective of coworking owner-operators and managers. Their responses to pandemic-related emergency shutdowns of the economy highlight the legislative void in which coworking businesses primarily exist. I will focus on coworking's invisibility in regard to labour law in particular (i.e., occupational health and safety legislation, employment standards, workers' compensation, and employment insurance). Because coworking is a relatively new phenomenon, labour legislation specifically addressing coworking sites and the relationships therein is absent. Unlike traditional workplace arrangements wherein the employee works on employer premises under the employer's supervision (Fudge et al., 2003), no actual employment relationship exists between the coworking business owner-operators and the coworking users. The users, or "members" as coworking owner-operators and managers often refer to them, pay for the services provided by the coworking business. Coworking businesses, therefore, do not

appear to be bound by the traditional employer-employee framework (i.e., the employment "contract" as foundation for all occupational health and safety and related labour law enacted to protect workers from unsafe workplaces and working conditions). When coworking business owner-operators were tasked with responding to the pandemic in a way that catered to their customers, who are not employees but rather users *paying* for the services, owner-operators did not find themselves held to the same requirements to uphold labour laws and obligations as apply in the employer-employee employment relationship[12]. In the absence of legislation, coworking business owner-operators "interpreted" the pandemic orders and rationalized business decisions to either stay open to accommodate their users' needs or to temporarily close.

All the owner-operators and managers I interviewed reported that their respective coworking business followed, at a minimum, the applicable municipal and provincial government Public Health and Safety guidance throughout the pandemic. Space limits, physical distancing, and masks in common areas were in place per governmental mandates. Additionally, the coworking businesses were not open to the public, nor did they sell drop-in (i.e., daily) passes or new memberships during the strict shutdown periods to comply with capacity restrictions and distancing protocols. Beyond this baseline response, however, the data analysis revealed that there were, in fact, three coworking business responses to the pandemic emergency shutdowns: staying open to coworking users; closing but allowing users to still access the coworking space; and closing completely.

4.1.1 Still open for business

Three out of eight coworking sites within my sample remained open to coworking users with safety measures in place. Margaret, for instance, the manager for the coworking business *Pitch*, explained that their coworking space chose to handle the government shutdown of nonessential services by leaving the decision up to the coworking users themselves:

> … We just sent a note to everybody saying, '[the coworking space] is still open, you can still use your own office, you can use a hot desk, we have sanitation products, if you are concerned.' … So, basically, the idea was if you are willing to come to [the coworking space] then you understand that it's your responsibility to ensure that you're comfortable doing so and that you're safe and that. We can help as much as possible …

[12] The exception to this is the hired employees of the coworking businesses (i.e., coworking managers).

> I wouldn't say at your own risk, I mean we weren't threatening them, we're just saying like, we're open for you, this is still your office. So, like, come in, if you want… do what you feel you need to do.

Despite *Pitch* remaining open, Margaret noted that the space saw a marked decrease in user attendance following the government's announcement of the mandated closing of all nonessential services in March 2020. *Pitch's* membership base was a mix of freelancers, small businesses, and employees of large organizations. The true diversity of the personal and employment circumstances of the workers using the space was highlighted during the pandemic-related shutdowns. When schools closed, for example, *Pitch*'s large user base of parents stopped coming in, as did the corporate employees who used the coworking space as a satellite office because they were required to work from home by their employer. Due to the obligations of these employers with regard to ensuring the health and safety of their remote employees, these coworking users were instructed *not* to use the shared coworking space and, instead, to work from home.

Margaret suggested:

> The order from above is that even if you are in a coworking space, you're not to be in a room together. …so, a lot of people are ordered home, a lot of people went home out of necessity, and there were very few people coming in…

Although *Pitch* remained open, the space saw limited activity during the initial period of the pandemic. In contrast, in the case of *Excel*, half of the users (i.e., established consultants and remote workers) kept coming to the site throughout the shutdown period. However, for Steve, *Excel's* coworking owner-operator, and his partner and cofounder Amy, it appears that their decision to remain open was a difficult one:

> … we had to really think hard about whether we were going to close down entirely, meaning none of our members could come. And there was a number of commercial and cultural reasons why we chose not to do that. Not the least of which is we couldn't make the rent if we didn't stay open. …So, as it turned out, more than half of our office members just kept coming anyway because they were essential businesses. And they needed… that's where they run their company and that's where they work… so they came for the most part every day. So, we remained open, and we as a business, in and of itself, were always an essential business because we manage office space, and we manage people's mail, and we manage people's premises. So, we were always allowed to be open, never mind that we just support businesses that were essential in their own right. But we did close ourselves to the public and really just discouraged a lot of traffic.

Steve and Amy owned the coworking business, but they did not own the building it was in. They had to factor their monthly rental expenses into the decision to remain open or to close. Steve's long explanation suggested his need to rationalize why they remained open despite the provincial restrictions, as if I, the interviewer, were a safety inspector. This was perhaps indicative of his sensitivity to the "do your part" narrative that was socially burned into our conscious, if not subconscious, minds over the pandemic. In addition to Steve's owner-operatorship of *Excel*, he was also a business consultant experienced in counselling other businesses on harmonizing strategic decisions and policies with their organizations' values and brand. Immersed in the corporate responsibility discourse, Steve made a point of elaborating how the rationale to open or close aligned with his own coworking business's (*Excel*) brand and business objectives.

4.1.2 The nuances of closing… it is complicated

Other coworking space managers described their businesses as closed during the pandemic shutdowns. However, as the conversations continued, it became clear that some of their clients were still using the space. These businesses were, in effect, closed but only to a degree. Coworking space owner-operators used various justifications for this arrangement, such as users requiring their office and having their own keys, and, thus, not being able to deny users' access to the space or control their entering and exiting the building. Such rationales were illustrative of the interesting terrain coworking businesses were in during the pandemic and their need, as service providers, to remain flexible with their paying customers despite government orders.

Coworking space manager Everett, of *Citizenry*, the dog-friendly coworking business catering primarily to freelancers, explained his business' response:

> So, closing for us meant we weren't staffed, we weren't providing services like coffee and regular cleaning three times a week and all these things that we would normally do. So, very much bare bones but we encouraged members to stay home. And the vast majority did. There was about five people who really needed a space to work and they kept coming in … in a big space. So, it's not… there wasn't any violations happening there. …We always worded very strongly that we really encouraged people to stay home.

Because *Citizenry* used a FOB system, this permitted coworking users who needed the space to enter and use the coworking premises even if it was technically closed and/or unstaffed. Everett continued:

> We really didn't want to close or anything, but it became so obvious that closing was the only option, plus provincial guidelines … it wasn't appropriate for us really to be open. Literally, everything else was closed. It was not even anyone out on the streets or anything. So, it became an easy decision.

According to Everett, *Citizenry* appeared to take cues from other businesses' responses to the provincial mandates. Despite the easy decision to close and *Citizenry's* strongly worded encouragement that users to remain at home, some coworking users continued working on site. That Everett considered *Citizenry* "closed" perhaps speaks to the central focus of social support and community at this coworking business. Although some coworking users were still accessing the physical site, the true 'service' offering of the coworking business, namely social connection and community, was, in Everett's view, unavailable.

While other coworking spaces alluded to the idea, Robert, coworking manager of *Do Good*, a non-profit space that focuses on social entrepreneurism and innovation, explained the unclear legal position in which coworking businesses found themselves. Despite *Do Good's* decision to be proactive and close down in line with their Province's public school system,

> … how closed were we going to be was an open question. It wasn't clear whether or not, you know; locking our doors is one thing but actually taking away everyone's actual access was another thing, which we are told might be illegal. And so, we opted to just make it basically FOB only, while strongly encouraging no one to come in. … we had a complicating factor, the fact that we have multiple businesses here that are essential services. And so, they, so, they had to keep working. … we couldn't just totally abandon the space. And of course, there's still mail coming in and other things like that.

This non-profit that Robert worked for had a couple of sites within a Canadian city. As a larger and more established coworking organization with more than 20 employees, pursuant to the occupational health and safety laws in their jurisdiction, *Do Good*, in fact, had a health and safety committee. This committee routinely met to discuss the pandemic as it emerged and collectively came to its decision. This process was exceptional compared with the other independent coworking spaces interviewed. In the other cases, without specific human resource departments, occupational health and safety personnel, or health and safety committees to advise them, the responsibility and decision to remain open, limit services, or close completely were left solely to the owner-operators and managers.

4.1.3 Actually closed

The unique characteristics of the remaining two coworking spaces included in my sample influenced their closing during the shutdown periods in their jurisdictions. Other than the owner-operators' weekly visits to the space to collect mail and check the facilities, in these cases, closure meant no coworking users accessed the space. Chloe, the coworking owner-operator of *WorKIN*, which offered onsite childcare, explained her business rationale for deciding to temporarily close:

> We have been deemed by [name of city] Public Health as not essential… They view our *childcare facility* as an amenity to coworking … children's play spaces can't be open right now … so [the coworking space], can't, the childcare can't be open. The coworking side can be open, but no new members in shutdown… we can't do tours, we can't sell to new members, we can't take on anybody new, we can't do meeting spaces … we're really capped at private office members only who can use this space, so I shut it down.

For Chloe, it did not make financial sense for *WorKIN* to stay open when most of her users had chosen her facility specifically *because* of the onsite childcare. With that service no longer available, many of these people had to return home to the same "work environment" they had joined Chloe's *WorKIN* to avoid (i.e., trying to work while simultaneously providing childcare).

Another business, *Empower*, a coworking space for women entrepreneurs, also decided to close. Miriam, *Empower's* coworking owner-operator, admitted:

> To be honest, it was more of a gut feeling too … a lot of the way we operate … is what's the right thing to do here? And we knew it wasn't ethical to keep charging people for memberships when they were being, we were being told by the government to stay home. We just couldn't, you know, we couldn't in our right mind be charging memberships. So that's when we decided to make the decision and pause everything and say 'stay home and stay safe right now.' … there's been some coworking spaces that have stayed open … it's all about managing what's best for your members too. And understanding our demographic, a lot of our members are moms or new mothers who have kids to take care of, so, no one is coming into the office now without childcare, you know, potentially having extra health risks bringing that home. That just wasn't an option to them. So, while some coworking spaces stayed open, their members are different too.

Miriam, like Chloe, had a large portion of coworking users with childcare demands and duties. The coworking users' pre-pandemic childcare arrangements were no longer available during the strict shutdown periods, and in response to this, Miriam closed *Empower*'s doors. This is reflective of the general trend during the pandemic in which gendered care norms and inequities

were exacerbated.

Despite the pandemic-related interventions to slow the transmission of COVID-19, the independent coworking spaces were legally able to remain open because they contained essential businesses. Additionally, as coworking businesses are not standard workplaces in that the coworking users are paying for services and are not employees of the coworking business, the coworking users were accessing the space of their own volition, often themselves operating businesses that could be classified as essential. The various decisions and explanations, as well as the language coworking business owner-operators and managers used to describe their pandemic responses, highlight the ambiguous terrain in which coworking businesses exist and the unique circumstances of their users. Attempting to appease their customer base of paying

users, independent coworking businesses handled the complexities and challenges of balancing their own business interests, their users' needs, and mandated COVID-19 public health orders.

Section 4.1 has highlighted that beyond closing to the public, the coworking businesses within my sample demonstrated three management responses: remain open to current coworking users; close (whereby they strongly encouraged coworking users to stay at home and provided minimal staffing of the coworking space for those users who required access); and close completely, meaning no coworking users were permitted to access the site during the pandemic-related shutdown of the economy. This variety of responses showcases the consequences of the misalignment of current labour legislation with coworking business realities in which no employment relationship exists between coworking users and the businesses themselves. Add in a global pandemic, and the result was a myriad of individualized responses with the responsibility falling on independent coworking business owner-operators and, possibly, their few staff members, to come to these decisions.

4.2 Virtual coworking: the elements and the gestalt

With the associated health risks of in-person encounters, the pandemic spurred coworking businesses to offer virtual services. In the following sub-sections, I describe the pandemic-induced transition of coworking businesses to virtual services. I also describe what virtual

coworking can include based on findings from the study's primary data collection. This included 30 interviews with coworking stakeholders and participant observation in the virtual coworking community, *Empower*, between July and October 2020 and attending numerous virtual coworking events. Since notions of pre-pandemic coworking have typically assumed a physical site where individuals come together to share space and amenities, I outline what constituted the *Empower* virtual coworking experience that individuals paid for, including how the virtual coworking users had come to understand and value it.

4.2.1 Seeing beyond four walls

Like other industries, the pandemic forced coworking owner-operators and managers to adapt their business models. With limits to in-person gathering, physical distancing orders, and nonessential business closures during the pandemic, coworking businesses began to offer alternative, virtual coworking services[13]. Sarah, a community organizer who had been involved in coworking since 2004 as an owner-operator, consultant, and coworking user, explained:

> I think what was really exciting about the pandemic acceleratedness is, it wasn't hard for a lot of us who have genuine communities and really believe in the power of coworking to shift quickly into an online or virtual model, because we know that the space wasn't the priority in the first place, it really has to do with the people, the connections, and the support that we have for each other, and that if we have the technology to support it, it's possible.

According to Sarah, who belonged to several of these virtual coworking communities in cities around the world, at the core of coworking and the reason why individuals gathered in the first place were a set of common values: collaboration, community, sustainability, openness, and accessibility. In her view, these values are what differentiate coworking as a grassroots movement offering mutual support for freelancers from the coworking "industry" or "corporate coworking" which offers commercialized, serviced offices and prioritizes financial and corporate interests (i.e., WeWork, Regus). While independent coworking owner-operators and managers identified themselves as part of the *coworking movement*, distinct from globally operated corporate real estate companies and serviced-office firms that *offered coworking*, the spectrum of

[13] According to research participant, Sarah, a few virtual coworking services existed prior to the pandemic. Yet, the pandemic spurred a marked shift towards virtual coworking services (Mayerhoffer, 2021). With the exception of a mention by Mayherhoffer (2021) noting the transition of coworking into the virtual/digital realm due to COVID-19, I am unaware of research that has discussed virtual coworking to date.

coworking practices likely exists along a continuum between both of these extremes (Gandini & Cossu, 2021).

Of the coworking owner-operators and managers I interviewed, five of the eight coworking sites they represented and ran began offering virtual services during the pandemic. Due to the timing of when the interviews took place (June 2020 and March 2021), many of the study sites had not yet developed or launched their virtual services for us to discuss during the interviews. The exception was the coworking business for women entrepreneurs, *Empower*. *Empower's* virtual community began at the start of the pandemic when the business was temporarily closed. Interestingly, both the owner-operator and the manager I spoke with acknowledged that they did not knowingly create the online coworking membership. Rather, it was something that happened organically out of the circumstances they found themselves in as a response to having closed their space to coworking users during COVID-19 shutdowns. Kelly, *Empower*'s coworking manager, explained:

> We decided to close our doors, but that very same day, we were still in the office because it was a Monday morning, and we decided to host a free virtual [videoconferencing] call. … And so, we didn't have any idea what we were going to say or do, but we just knew that we wanted to provide a space that if people wanted to see people, we would be that space… we were going to be everyone's daily dose of sunshine. … We had no strategy, but it was like 'this is just what we need to do.' … And then came the point where we're like, 'Okay, how are we going to make money?' … The first couple of weeks were so unknown, we're like, maybe, we could open in a couple of weeks? …and then when it's like, 'no this is going to be something that we're closed for a while, we need to create a business decision for this. Since we've been hosting those [videoconferencing calls] for a couple weeks, we were able to get surveys and feedback from everybody. So, we really just started asking people what they're looking for and what they wanted. And with that, we took what … we had done in-person… and we decided to bring it to the internet.

Bringing *it*, the coworking space, to the virtual world was initially a way to check in on *Empower*'s coworking users and those who joined for the free sessions from their larger social media audience. Feeling obliged, *as needing to do this*, suggests their sense of purpose to connect and be there for their coworking users. As the weeks continued, however, the business realities of *Empower* required that they determine a viable path forward.

Miriam, *Empower*'s owner-operator, similarly acknowledged the happenstance nature of their virtual coworking model. She shared:

> We didn't even know we were creating a virtual membership at first. We took a program that we have here, in-person, and turned it into an online thing. And that's when we basically workshopped the virtual membership and turned it into something. … it's been such a massive opportunity for us to be able to connect with people… our membership is made up of people who are far beyond the [city]. … the pandemic really forced us to see beyond our four walls.

In fact, while they reopened in June 2020, *Empower's* virtual coworking community pivot during the pandemic eventually became their only coworking membership offering. In 2021, they decided to permanently close the physical location and became an exclusively virtual coworking service.

For many coworking spaces that were experiencing a drop in their in-person members as the pandemic dragged on, seeing beyond the four walls of their coworking spaces was necessary. Offering virtual services, including virtual offices, mailboxes, and virtual memberships, provided alternate, albeit significantly lower, revenue streams that many coworking businesses adopted. At one of the virtual coworking public events I attended over Zoom in the early months of 2021, a panel discussion was run with three coworking leaders on how their own organizations were weathering the pandemic restrictions. Fielding a question related to virtual coworking services, one panelist described how virtual products made coworking accessible to a wider audience—"meeting people where they are with their needs." Virtual coworking services offered a lower barrier to entry for those who were unable to afford the physical in-person coworking, uncomfortable being in physical proximity to others due to COVID-19, or lived too far from the physical location.

4.2.2 But seriously, WTF is virtual coworking?

Like some of the virtual coworking users I interviewed, I was initially unable to fathom what virtual coworking even was. Coworking had been described previously as "paying to work" (de Peuter et al., 2017, p. 689), but paying to work in your *own* home? This seemed ludicrous! Fortunately, I had the opportunity to participate firsthand. The *Empower* coworking owner-operator, Miriam, had agreed to allow me to come to their physical coworking space for my research when the idea of a global pandemic was just the plot of a science fiction novel. With their "virtual coworking" pivot at the beginning of the pandemic, I was encouraged to join. For

four months between July and October 2020, I virtually coworked to try and understand what was involved.

Empower's virtual coworking membership consisted of four Zoom sessions according to a pre-organized weekly schedule for a total of 4.5 hours of Zooming each week with complete strangers. These Zoom sessions included two sessions devoted entirely to working on individual work tasks online together, called "work sprints" (1.5 hours each totalling 3 hours per week), goal setting/ accountability sessions (30 minutes each week), and community meetings (one hour each week), which consisted of either group brainstorms or "ask and give" sessions. Additionally, the virtual membership included 24/7 access to a private Slack channel[14]. All of these were voluntary; virtual coworking users could participate in as many or as few of the services and online spaces as they desired.

Melanie, a self-employed web designer and virtual coworking member, offered a simple, straightforward explanation of virtual coworking:

> ... to be fair, other than the work sprints, all they do is offer online networking opportunities on a schedule. That's what virtual coworking is, right? Like this isn't complicated. It's just like on a schedule. You pay every month to have these events in your calendar and connect … which I think is very valuable. … So, if [*Empower*] stopped offering this, would I go looking for another virtual coworking space? Yes, I would for sure because I really do need and enjoy that community.

Other virtual coworking users also spoke of the connection and community aspects of the virtual experience. Connecting with others who worked remotely during the weekly accountability meetings, brainstorming sessions, and community calls on Zoom allowed users to meet and interact with a diversity of workers.

Katya, a freelancer who had coworked in physical coworking spaces in every city she travelled to across the globe, shared:

> They [*Empower*] have really managed to create the sense of community even though you're actually not physically in the space with other people… it really has allowed me to meet like an enormous amount of people that I would not normally … face to face. And some of them are not even in [name of city]… There's literally somebody for everything!

[14] Slack is an instant messaging software application for the workplace that has "channels" for specific groups and topics to be discussed (John, 2021)

> If you have any question in your business, there's somebody who's an expert at that, or knows somebody, so, it's a very sort of generous and helping community. Because I've been part of certain groups where people are just selling … they just care about getting leads or they're not necessarily caring about helping you. They're just caring about promoting their own stuff. I feel like with [*Empower*], what they've been able to do is actually build those more personal relationships.

Other virtual coworking users similarly echoed the sense of community and *genuine* connection they felt in the virtual space.

4.2.3 Virtual coworking: a beautiful solution

Among the study participants who were virtual coworking users, many had in fact enjoyed in-person physical coworking at some point as well; but, their circumstances had made it impractical to regularly go to the physical coworking space even pre-pandemic. Commuting to a coworking location and the financial commitment were cited as reasons why they never joined an in-person coworking space. Nicole, an independent health practitioner explained:

> I didn't join for a full-time membership. … At that time, it would have been probably a 40–45 minute commute, so, it wasn't, location wise, it wasn't the best fit. And then also price wise, I was like, 'ahh I can't afford that.' … when COVID hit, the virtual membership is such a better option for me. I don't literally want to be commuting that far. ... even now, I don't want to go to an office, five days a week. Love it to have the events online and the community and the Slack channel. And all of that is so worth it …

Nicole felt both the commute and the cost for a physical coworking space made a coworking membership prohibitive. The virtual coworking experience, however, was a worthwhile investment.

Another virtual coworking member, Victoria, a self-employed life coach, described making use of the physical *Empower* coworking space to host her own business events. Despite wanting to attend in-person more regularly, the inconvenience of the long distance to the physical location together with the nature of her work made the physical coworking option impractical. She admitted:

> I actually held my own events there [at the coworking space]. … I had always really kind of wanted to go there more often. But I find just getting there on transit took up too much of my time during the day, so virtual coworking was like a beautiful solution to that. … It's just the nature of my work too, I'm on calls a lot and then have sort of moments of being on the computer in between. … That just means that I'd be sort of in one of those

> phone booths, the closets… the door closed … the opposite of what you'd want for coworking. … the virtual… where I can work my calls around that, because I know when we're all coming together [virtually] and I can actually plan for it. As opposed to, sort of going into an office all day but spending 90% of the time in one of those little phone booths.

Victoria's daily work involved regular phone sessions with clients that required her to continually 'closet' herself in the phone booths in the physical coworking space. While this was done for privacy and noise considerations, Victoria found it antithetical to why she would work in a coworking space, which was for social interactions and to be in a shared space and community with others. The virtual coworking membership allowed her to have her coaching conversations with clients in the privacy of her own home and, at the same time, have access to daily interactions with other virtual coworking users working remotely, often from their own home.

The convenience and accessibility of virtual coworking were the draw for many of the participants I interviewed. Other coworking users cited the costs and duties of childcare and doggy daycare as detracting from the appeal of in-person coworking. Instead, as one panelist on a Zoom coworking meetup described, they sought virtual coworking communities that allowed them to "be at home without the distractions of home."

4.2.4 Curated connection: good feels and vibes

Based on segments from my fieldnotes during participant observation and personal coworking in *Empower*'s virtual coworking sessions, I describe in the following sub-sections what each of the four pre-organized weekly Zoom sessions entailed in virtual coworking. *Empower* was a coworking business targeted towards people who identify as women entrepreneurs. Despite reopening the physical location at various non-emergency stages during the pandemic, *Empower* ultimately decided to transform, rebranding permanently as an online only community. My participation at the site occurred during Summer and Fall 2020, which was after the interview

conducted with Miriam, the owner-operator, and before the business' decision the following year to permanently become virtual.[15]

Participating online in a virtual coworking membership, I experienced the opportunities for social connection and community building that the virtual coworking users I had interviewed had described. There was something uniquely cultivated in coming together synchronously for these Zoom events while being proximally apart. Each virtual coworking Zoom event began promptly as scheduled, with a five-minute buffer for those still joining (likely searching through their emails or digital calendar invites for the Zoom link). As virtual users joined the sessions, we were greeted by upbeat music (think: Hooked on a Feeling) and individually welcomed in a bright cheery voice by the coworking owner-operator or coworking manager turned host of the videoconferencing call. Admittedly, as a remote worker who does most of her work independently, being audibly recognized for simply showing up felt ashamedly validating. As participants logged on and were welcomed, the Zoom window filled with the other virtual coworking users on the call, their workstations and backgrounds appearing as other little colourful rectangles, contributing to the mosaic of virtual coworkers coming together. As their camera displays illustrated, some people were still finishing up tasks or getting settled, their attention focused elsewhere. Others waved or smiled or, upon seeing their on-camera appearance, fixed their hair. Some tidied their workspace while others texted or chatted on cellphones. Some had their coffee mugs mid sip and others chewed as they typed. Some unmuted to give personal "shout outs" to other virtual coworking users. Conversation in the chat was rapid, filled with emojis and greetings. *What's everyone's mood today*? asks the host. The chat is

[15] *Empower* was the only coworking business in the study that specifically served people who identify as female entrepreneurs. While not representative of the other coworking businesses in my sample, their immediate response during the pandemic, i.e., the owner-operator and manager closed the location and developed a virtual coworking membership, was a unique 'once in a pandemic' development that I was able to observe. With participant observation not permitted in physical coworking businesses, I was nevertheless able to capture, in real time, the evolution of a coworking business model. Later on, at an online coworking event, when other coworking owner-operators and managers inquired about setting up virtual coworking as an alternative revenue stream, *Empower* was brought up as an example that was "killing it" (i.e., applauded for a successful pivot to offering virtual coworking services). For my study, such information-rich experience of virtual coworking gave me valuable insight into a coworking business that shifted from offering a physical shared workspace "where magic happens," to a virtual entrepreneurial service—without any physical coworking space—that eventually became the business' focus. While not all virtual coworking services can be programmed as *Empower* was, their response was certainly illustrative of techniques other coworking businesses were experimenting with during the pandemic.

peppered with replies. At five minutes after the start time, the music stops, and the session begins.

The four Zoom session offerings that *Empower's* virtual coworking users could join weekly along with how coworkers used the Slack platform are described next:

Accountability

Every Monday, virtual users could join this 30-minute session that involved setting focused goals for the week. We were paired up with another member and sent to virtual breakout rooms, where we introduced ourselves if we had not previously met. We then started on the task: *Discuss one great thing that happened last week, three work goals for the week, and three self-care goals for the week. Ensure you tell your partner how you want to be kept accountable! Daily Facebook chats? Instagram check ins? Texts? Midweek call or email? Slack DMs.* In the last minutes of the session, we were brought to the main Zoom room. *How is everyone feeling about their goals this week?* Thumbs up, nods, and smiles on camera, comments and emojis filling the chat. The session wrapped up with a positive send-off.

Work sprints

Every Tuesday and Thursday for 90 minutes, virtual users could join these Zoom sessions *To get Sh*t Done*. For many virtual coworking users I interviewed, working online together during the afternoon Zoom work sprints helped with productivity and focus while also allowing chatting with other coworkers via the chat messaging feature. Microphones were muted promptly five minutes after the work sprint start time, but small talk filled the time beforehand. *How many browsers do people have open right now?* Numbers, commentary, and emojis bubbled the chat conversation on the side of the Zoom window. Some virtual coworkers unmuted their microphones to answer. Right before getting started, the host encouraged us to type into the chat what we were going to work on during the 'sprint' session. The host read these out loud. We then received instructions to close computer tabs, put away cellphones (unless needed for our work), and to *Work like a boss!* A curated "motivational" music list was played by the host the entire session. We could choose to mute it if we preferred working in silence. Often, the chat conversation continued throughout the session as users shared their love of a song playing or

posed questions to the group. *My friend's roommate dated the lead singer of this band*! The chat erupted. *Anyone have hot tips and quick hacks for sales funnels?*

Some of the virtual coworkers told me that the chat feature was a source of distraction, a constant balancing act between working and keeping up with the conversation that hummed along throughout the session. One virtual member told me that, while she wanted to be supportive of the conversation and respond if anyone mentioned her in the chat, she struggled to follow along and work concurrently. Every so often someone typed in a task they had just finished, *slaying* a goal, or complained that they did not want to work, the *struggle is real today*. Celebrating others' "wins" and achievements or simply agreeing with a coworker's sentiments was frequent, and the chat conversation was often filled with validations: "me too," "YASSSSSS," "THE WORST," "I feel that," "100%," or emojis. *Thirty minutes left! Sprint Sprint Sprint!* Work sprint sessions ended with, first, a virtual group stretch (host encourages attendees to physically stand and stretch) followed by positive remarks about the work people had accomplished. The chat typically filled with celebratory expressions reinforcing the host's take-home message. Occasionally, someone said they needed to do another sprint: *DM me on slack or gram if interested!"*

Group Masterminds

During these one-hour meetings, attendees were asked to write down one thing we were currently struggling with or wanted feedback on from other coworkers. The struggle or challenge could be in our personal or work life. We were then sent to breakout rooms where we had five minutes each to state the issue we wanted help with and get other users to weigh in, offering advice or personal experience. Not everyone in the group always had a problem they wanted help with; some joined in simply to offer assistance, if possible. We were brought back to the main Zoom room ten minutes prior to the session's end. Anyone who had not had a chance to seek advice in their breakout group was given the opportunity to do so in the time remaining. The conversation in the chat suggested that users appreciated the feedback received. *Best group session ever!!! So thankful for all your help!* Other users were encouraged to follow up, e.g., *@Dahlia send me a reminder so I don't forget.* Or, links to websites and Instagram handles were posted: *Anyone else who needs suggestions for … def check this out!* Sessions ended with a

positive acknowledgement. As users signed off, I did the same, once again alone in my apartment, staring at my own reflection on my screen.

Ask and give sessions

These one-hour sessions, all about harnessing the talents and skills of the group, were highlighted by interview participants as an aspect that made this community exceptional. (Ask and give sessions are not unique to *Empower* or to virtual sessions*;* I had previously been to a free, in-person event where we did the same activity.) Everyone was asked to think of one "ask" and one "give." The "ask" was something we were seeking: a favour, advice, assistance with a problem, something we wanted from the community. Examples included the following: *Gift ideas for a loved one. Feedback on my website design. Recommendations for the best dog-sitting service in the city. Following me on Instagram. Retweeting or promoting my service on your LinkedIn.* The "give" was something we were offering other users of the coworking community: *A virtual coaching session. Self-care ideas and scheduling. Special discount towards a virtual writing workshop. An information session on entrepreneurial contracts (recognizing that this does not constitute legal advice!). What to say to your new therapist in your first session. Best hidden gems to get out of the city for the weekend on a lean budget. Plant care 101. An empathetic listener.* What coworking session attendees were seeking and giving were diverse—some clearly aligned with the coworker's business or work activities, others of a more intimate nature. In some sessions users had no "ask" for the community—just a "give." As each member took their turn, some users immediately indicated interest or willingness to assist. Zoom claps and hearts, hand raises displayed on camera, and chat comments showing desire to give or receive. After sharing the ask and give, coworkers were encouraged to pop the details, and their contact information, into the chat and also to post in the #askngive channel on Slack in case anyone not at the session wanted to contribute.

Comparing the in-person ask-and-give session that I had attended before the pandemic with the virtual coworking version of my fieldwork is difficult. My sense is that there seemed to be more at stake in-person? And, perhaps, more impression management and business professionalism? I certainly recall wanting to be liked. It was a hot afternoon when I arrived at the physical coworking space for the networking event, and I distinctly remember worrying about my sweaty

appearance and feeling out of place among the female entrepreneurs. Virtually, the ask-and-give sessions seemed more relaxed. I had no qualms about wearing sweatpants! There seemed to be a warm acceptance amongst women on these virtual calls, an eagerness to cheer on and help one another out. While the in-person event had friendly others, the nervous energy amongst the entrepreneurial group of relative strangers seemed palpable. The silences and somewhat forced laughter could not be chalked up to Zoom lag or muted audio. Was there security behind a laptop with everyone else as simply an "image" displayed on my screen? In my estimation, the pandemic generally supported a more compassionate lens with which to view others, and I suspect this also shaded the virtual interactions.

Slack work

Access to *Empower*'s private virtual community on the messaging platform Slack was part of the business's virtual coworking membership product. Slack was used to converse with other virtual coworking users in group chats (channels) according to specific topics, in private groups, or through direct messages (DMs) 24 hours a day, seven days a week. During synchronously programmed Zoom sessions, virtual coworkers often asked others to DM them on Slack or Instagram to connect or follow up. Slack channels included #chitchat, #crushingit, #events, #goodvibes, #perks, #resources, #mondayaccountability, and #askngive. We were invited to introduce ourselves in the #intros channel, with our name, business, and one thing no one would find on our About Me page. It struck me that many of these people likely had webpages with *actual* About Me pages! Women posted their accomplishments to have others applaud their successes in the #crushingit channel.

Virtual coworking users occasionally made announcements on behalf of other community coworkers, perhaps too shy or modest to share their own achievements. #goodvibes was for subjects considered motivational, ranging from inspirational quotations to animal pictures to memes to gifs. Sometimes, users asked for good vibes to be sent their way, indicating an upcoming meeting, challenging task, or just having "one of those days" and needing a boost. These comments always received multiple responses from the community. #events was a channel where people posted online workshops they were running or highly recommended. Reminders of someone's Instagram live event or the launch date of their new merch or seasonal

flavours were also posted. I initially had the Slack notifications enabled on my phone, but rather quickly turned them off because the Slack channel conversations were constant. *How did people get their work done?* I reminded myself that for many of these women, the Slack activity was likely one part of their work: cultivating relationships, demonstrating their skills or expertise, promoting their business. Slack was a tool used to ask for advice or information and offer up the same to other women entrepreneurs trying to make a living.

4.3 In-person or virtual coworking: what is the coworker looking for?

From the interview data collected, in particular from interviews with participants who had experienced both virtual and in-person coworking, in-person and virtual coworking seem to emphasize distinct coworking elements and enable different possibilities. Table 4.1 provides details of the comparison between virtual and in-person coworking described in this section.

Kelly, the coworking manager of *Empower,* spoke about the difference between the in-person and virtual offerings. She admitted:

> [Virtual coworking] changed my mind of like what coworking can be…. we call URL…is our virtual... IRL [In Real Life] … is our [name of City] office and they're very different products. They both have amazing benefits, but they're very different. So, our IRL is very much, you get the benefits of being in a beautiful space, you get the environment, you get the proven ways … the natural light, and the bright colours, and the good design that allows you to be productive. Also here, obviously you can still strike up conversations with people, that can be amazing connections, but it's a bit more spontaneous. Whereas, the URL is very intentional. If you show up to a Monday accountability call, you're going to get a partner, and you're going to meet somebody new. If you go to a mastermind, you're gonna have a chance to go on the hot seat. So, it's just two different products. Whereas IRL is a lot more physical in terms of supporting you where you're at, URL's a lot more intentional in terms of networking and creating a community… We saw connections happen so much faster in the virtual versus in-person.

Kelly seemed to view the versions of coworking as distinct products. The material in-person coworking offered a physical location for productivity, whereas the online virtual space offered an intentional emphasis on connection and community.

Coworking users who had participated in both the virtual and in-person offerings similarly acknowledged that social connections were not a guarantee in the physical space. Joyceline, for instance, shared:

> Now that I've done the virtual, the virtual coworking works for me because I still interact with people virtually. …I have time blocks every week on my schedule. So, I have something to look forward to… I know that if I'm stuck on something, I can ask the community. It's even better because we interact with each other, which is not necessarily the case when you go to the physical location, you just go and rent a desk… now in the virtual coworking space... you have a different way to have access to the community because, again, entrepreneurship is a lonely journey.

For Joyceline, virtual coworking allowed her to seek support and connect with others in a way that physical coworking did not. Similarly, Melanie recognized the difficulty of making in-person connections. She explained:

> Unless you were there all the time it's very difficult to make connections, right? Because when you go in, people are working, right? … the whole concept is that you're there to work and focus. … so, I don't tend to invade other people's space that way unless they seem to want that.

Melanie, who had an hour commute to the coworking space, described that the infrequency of her physical attendance at the coworking site made it challenging to build connections with other coworkers, especially when the presumption was that individuals were there to work.

In contrast, some virtual coworking users acknowledged that the virtual space had limitations in the types of social connection that could happen on the internet. Emma, for example, suggested that small talk was largely absent online. A self-described digital nomad who had coworked across five different continents in a year, Emma had joined the virtual coworking during the pandemic. She shared:

> With [in-person] coworking I guess there's the little banter, like the [water]cooler talk right? You have those little connections that you can make with people. I think that's probably what's missing the most.

Victoria also mentioned the more informal, watercooler talk. She described it as follows:

> I think the thing about being there in real life is that different stuff comes up, right? There's a lot of stuff that comes up, just from hanging around the watercooler, or whatever they call it these days, and running into people in the bathroom… I think that's the piece that I still miss and would love to somehow see if there's a way to incorporate that virtually.

According to both Emma and Victoria, the less intentional, more spontaneous, and informal social interactions seemed to be more difficult to cultivate virtually. While chat conversations and small talk on Zoom and Slack permitted social connections beyond the coworking space's

programmed offerings, something seemed to be missing. Was the watercooler symbolic of something more?

Table 4.1. *Comparison of in-person and virtual coworking*

Coworking factors	In-person coworking	Virtual coworking**
Social interaction	• Impromptu • Events/ workshops bringing coworking users together* • Asynchronous, internal digital social networking (i.e., Slack, private Facebook group, or other digital platform)	• Structured, intentionally designed synchronous interactions via Zoom • Asynchronous, internal digital social networking (i.e., Slack, private Facebook group, or other digital platform)
Noise	• Inevitable in shared workspace • Phone booths available, not always used by coworking users • Private offices may not be soundproof	• Dependent on living situation (i.e., roommates, dependents, partners, separate room for work activities)
Price	Average Price in North America: Hot desk: $325.20/month CAD Permanent desk: $495.97/month CAD[16] Average Price based on sample data: Hot desk: $252.50/month CAD Permanent desk: $418.60/month CAD[17]	Ranging from $30–136.73/ month CAD[18]
Privacy	• Limited • Even private offices share communal areas (i.e., lounges, kitchens, etc.)	• Video conferencing permits other virtual coworkers to visually "see" into personal home unless background settings are altered
Commute	• Involves travel beyond home	• None
Work and life separation	• Physical workspace separate from home • Greater ability to separate work and nonwork activities, professional and personal lives	• Working in same location as living space (may or may not have separate room for work activities) • Separating work and nonwork activities, professional and personal selves likely more difficult
Autonomy	• Uncertainty/less control regarding environmental conditions such as lighting, noise, temperature	• Greater control over environmental conditions including lighting, noise, temperature

*Frequency varies depending on coworking business. Programming was not offered when pandemic restrictions were in place.
**Assuming virtual coworking is taking place at home

[16] Average North American coworking prices (Howell, 2022)
[17] Average based on the prices of the eight coworking businesses in my sample
[18] Range based on digital environmental scan and includes some sliding scale offers

4.4 Co-working as a *physical place*

This section examines the importance of coworking as a distinct geographic site where individuals intentionally go. Based on the interview data from coworking stakeholders and participant observation fieldwork (e.g., Zoom coworking events), the centrality of coworking as a place for both work and social connection was emphasized. What became apparent was the distinction in rationales for the importance of the physical space. For some individuals, what drew them to the in-person coworking space was the need for, quite literally, a physical space to work for themselves or their employees. For others, it was more about the community and social aspects of the in-person, physical space. Often, people remarked on the multi-purpose function of the coworking space as a site for productivity *and* sociality.

4.4.1 Coworking: need for a *workplace* outside the home?

According to Sarah, a previous coworking space owner-operator and community organizer, coworking spaces exist because work conducted there can be performed better. She described it as follows:

> The case was always the same, even then people could work from home. If that was the only issue, as soon as laptops came out, we all would have just drifted from, and we would work from anywhere. But the reality also is, and it's something that we know very clearly from our members and all of our experiences, that working from home is not ideal. And it's not the way for most people to find work-life balance. For some people, and for some time periods, or during a pandemic sure, maybe it's the best option [she laughs]. But most of the time, it's not healthy for people to work from home.

For Sarah, coworking spaces gave workers the support that was lacking in their personal spaces and created the opportunity for an improved working experience. This was a shared sentiment among coworking owner-operators and managers; the pandemic highlighted the importance of an intentional workspace to offer structure and order. Owner-operators and managers commented that users were losing their marbles working from home and slowly gravitated back to the physical space after pandemic-related emergency shutdowns were lifted, recognizing that businesses were carrying on and they needed this intentionally designated 'workspace'.

Others, too, highlighted the productivity benefits of having a designated space to work outside of the home. Steve, *Excel*'s co-owner and operator, explained what drew his coworking users to the physical coworking space, describing it as follows:

> You know, working where you live, the only people who do that, are people [who] have to do that. … I just think it wears out. … We have a hundred members, eighty of them have home offices, half of which are nicer than our place because they're rich. But they still come to [*Excel*] every day to work, or most days to work, because it's just more productive.

Steve suggested that, despite the majority of his coworking base having home offices they could work in, users chose to pay for a coworking membership at *Excel* because they found that they were more productive in the shared space, surrounded by others who were 'head down' working. In fact, Steve told me that some of his users thought of *Excel* as a productivity tool. Other owner-operators, managers, and coworking users remarked that there was a power, an energy, a buzz in being physically present with others who are also focused and working, and this, combined with not having the distractions of home, enhanced productivity.

Dorothy, coworking manager of *Workscape* also stressed the importance of the physical space for her coworking users. She described member activity in her space during the shutdown restrictions, commenting:

> They're coming in because they just can't work otherwise… I have a woman who in all honesty, when she thought that she couldn't come in, she got really emotional. I think she uses that space as kind of her lifeline.

Dorothy's description of some of *Workscape*'s users needing to come into the shared coworking space to get work done indicates that some workers depend on coworking spaces as an intentional place to work.

For working parents, Chloe also emphasized the importance of a physical space that also offered childcare. As owner-operator of *WorKIN*, a coworking business with onsite childcare as an amenity, Chloe described her ironic, almost comical situation of being contacted for tips on working from home with children during pandemic shutdowns:

> … I was getting called by the media, like 'can you provide tips for working at home with your kids?' and I was replying like, 'no because it's impossible, and the antithesis of my

> entire business. I can't give you tips for how to work from home with your kids. I built a business to help you not work from home with your kids … call somebody else. …

As a single parent, attempting to homeschool two children and work independently during the pandemic shutdowns, her frustration was palpable as she described her experiences. Later, Chloe shared:

> It's weird… I've talked to a lot of coworking owner-operators about this … it's very strange to have a solution that meets the needs for so many right now, even a wider base than we used to have, because so many have been pushed into 'work from home,' and yet it's against public health advice to encourage people [to try a coworking space]- in my case I can't even do it- there's other cases where coworking spaces are open, but they're feeling very conflicted about marketing right now. And yet, the intention is good right? It's not coming from a place of like, I'm trying to profit from this pandemic, it's coming from a place of like, I actually have something that can really help us all get through this really hard time. And I really want to help you. And I can't.

Chloe had built *WorKIN* to meet the needs of working parents, offering them a space for work that also had affordable onsite childcare. She described the irony of owning a business that was in demand more than ever, with so many working parents ordered to work remotely, yet being incapable of helping them during shutdown stages of the pandemic. Chloe's sentiments paralleled those of other coworking owner-operators: conflict around having sites capable of and designed for supporting remote workers while, at the same time, challenged to develop a nuanced marketing strategy aligned with public health guidelines to physically distance and stay home during specific stages of the pandemic.

The owner-operators and managers in my study emphasized the new demand for coworking spaces. Coworking businesses were able to offer services to new customers when COVID-19 restrictions were lifted and their regions no longer under shutdown(s). During these periods, some coworking space owner-operators and managers experienced an influx of inquiries and sales. For instance, David, coworking space owner-operator of *District* explained:

> Since Stage Three reopening, we are now open to new members joining us. And so we started getting a lot more inquiries … it's a whole different group of people who probably would not have considered coworking spaces before, but now that either both they and their spouse or partner … are stuck together in an often small apartment with kids running around and that sort of thing, we've had a number of people ready to jump in and become sort of a new coworking demographic that we've never really had before.

David, like other coworking owner-operators and managers, experienced interest from people who had never considered coworking prior to the pandemic. These workers wanted their workplace kept separate from their home. For employees who may have commuted to a corporate office before the pandemic, working from a coworking space closer to where they lived was potentially a more convenient alternative. One coworking user who joined a site during the pandemic referred to it as her "work sanctuary," after having tried unsuccessfully to work in her small, open-concept apartment alongside her partner who was doing the same.

4.4.2 Coworking: a *place* for community and sociality?

Some coworking businesses and coworkers commented that not only was the physical space integral to the coworking communities, but also the community and social aspects were what drew coworkers to these spaces as a meaningful *place* to work. With physical distancing and limited gathering orders during periods of the pandemic, some interviewees remarked on the challenges and impacts these created for their coworking communities and coworkers' choices to return or not. Robert, coworking manager of *Do Good*, said:

> Our business is so space based … I would say it's actually impossible to build up to the level of community that we were- we had in the space before COVID under these regulations. Because so much of our community stuff involved being in the same space, sharing food, you know… all of which can't be done now. So, like the difficulty around creating community at this moment is overwhelming. … I'm trying to kind of avoid … getting so far down the road of 'we need to make create a space that has no space for people to be together… and we're only online.' ... To me that is an overreaction to a time-based problem that we have right now. … the future is not online. … It might be online for many, in many ways, but the need for community is not going away. And the need for in-person community is not going away.

Among his many tasks, Robert oversaw planning and the weekly and daily events at *Do Good* that brought coworkers together in the space to engage with each other and "be in community." Robert had tried to foster similar interactions virtually, but he found that coworking users were Zoomed out. The idea of yet another online event "didn't really land" with users at *Do Good*. For Robert, the physical space was what facilitated the activities that fostered connection; the human need for in-person connection would endure.

Elaine, a coworking user who decided to cancel her membership during the pandemic, explained:

> It was a tough decision. But just thinking about the whole coworking concept is to have shared things. And if you can't have shared things anymore in this environment, then, kind of, what is the point, in a sense?

As a remote worker for an international consultancy firm, Elaine valued the in-person coworking space and presence of others, connecting and learning about local engagements and events. She remained hopeful she might return but could not rationalize paying for a service she was no longer able to use.

Similarly, Mati, a community developer and past coworking user, expressed his desire to return to the coworking space once more coworking users also returned. Originally drawn to coworking when he ran a non-profit business, Mati cancelled his membership in order to travel with his family for a few years. Mati had returned to Canada a few months into the pandemic. When I asked him if he would return to the coworking space, he said:

> I want to go there … just to meet people and reconnect with people. But apparently, with a few people I was talking with, there is not so much going on in terms of community… so, I'm still online [referring to staying connected through the coworking listserv].

Like others, Mati was seeking the community and sociality, and without these, he was not keen to rejoin the coworking space.

Echoing some of my participants' sentiments, one coworking owner-operator, at an online independent coworking collective meeting I attended in October 2020, explained, "COVID has hit the core of our business for those who want frequent, in-person contact." While restaurants and retail outlets had pivoted to offering take-out, delivery, and e-commerce options, as another owner-operator suggested (during a similar coworking collective Zoom meeting in February 2021), there is "no coworking curbside pickup" for those seeking in-person social connection.

Section 4.4 has demonstrated that coworking stakeholders, both users and business operators, view these spaces as both a productive place to work outside of the home *and* as a place for in-person social connection for remote workers. By virtue of the pandemic-induced widespread move to work-from-home arrangements, the appeal of coworking became apparent for a new

demographic of coworking users unbound from their organization's headquarters. Yet, for those seeking in-person connection and community, COVID-19 placed real limits on achieving this.

4.5 Beyond office infrastructure: the immaterial value adds of coworking

In the following sub-sections, I highlight that a critical part of independent coworking businesses is the support that they provide to their users—coworking as a sort of social infrastructure (Merkel, 2015). In my interviews and participant observation, these nontangible benefits of coworking were emphasized and enacted, including prioritizing connection, care, and support for and amongst coworking users. I describe how this support among the network of independent coworking businesses played out during the pandemic, and how it was understood as part of the "coworking as a service" package and commodified and sold to coworking users.

4.5.1 Coworking community support: not just renting desks?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the (assumed) centrality of the physical, in-person coworking space was challenged as coworking owner-operators threw considerable efforts into nurturing and even growing social connections in their respective coworking communities. Whether coworking sites remained open in some capacity or were entirely closed, what seemed to become paramount to independent coworking owner-operators was a focus on support, which was not dependent on the physical space alone.

This focus on support was central, occurring not only at the level of individual coworking sites but also modeled on a broader scale amongst the community network of independent coworking spaces. The coworking alliance events and unconferences (a term adopted from the open source tech community, where a portion of the agenda and content for the conference is actually user generated by the attending participants) were organized to bring together this larger community of coworking stakeholders to share knowledge and experience regarding how coworking businesses were sustaining and supporting their individual coworking users (i.e., their membership communities).

The independent coworking alliance unconference I attended in June 2020, for instance, was organized for the purpose of connecting and supporting the independent coworking business community as a whole. Sarah, a previous coworking space owner-operator and community organizer, described the event the following way:

> I definitely organized that as a response [to the pandemic] because independently, each of the operators were reaching out to me like 'what do I do?,' and I sort of reminded folks like, this is why we have the alliances, we're here for each other. So, instead of scrambling on our own, I think everyone was feeling, you know … when things get tough, people don't necessarily think about all the other people going through it, they think that they might be alone in this, and a lot of people in the early days [of the pandemic] were not sharing how much they were struggling, and how fearful they were, or how unsure they were, how they didn't know how to navigate some of these programs, and people really just needed to hear: 'it's going to be okay, we've got your back, we've got each other. We've been through this before, some of you weren't here the first episode, ones who've been through this before, we can share what we've learned from the last recession, how to weather the storm together.' And so, I really thought it was important to pull people together in response to the pandemic. Once we got our feet settled in June [2020], and we started to realize this is gonna be a long haul. We knew we needed to help each other out.

Sarah, who had been involved with coworking through the 2008 recession, included at this event other coworking peers who had endured the 2008 recession. They shared their experience and made recommendations for navigating uncertain periods. Having coworked in more than 700 spaces around the world, Sarah took pride in the fact that independent coworking owner-operators had built a collaborative industry over the years. Consequently, the objective of the June event was to bring together owner-operators and managers of independent coworking businesses in order to reconnect, share resources and practices, and remind everyone that "we're here for each other." This online Zoom unconference was open to anyone; the takeaway was a crowdsourced 30-page document with resources and notes from the event that was distributed to all attendees. Contents of the user-generated document contained information and website links on various topics on Public Health and COVID-19 guidelines, small business and workplace re-entry resources by region, virtual coworking membership ideas and examples, and mental health resources for entrepreneurs focusing on burnout and isolation. The second page of the crowdsourced document reads: *Made by you, for you. Shared knowledge and resources. We are better together.*

This community-oriented approach, with its focus on bringing others together to foster support and build connection, was intentional and a shared value of the independent coworking space owner-operators and managers I engaged with during my fieldwork. Chloe, the coworking space owner-operator of *WorKIN*, who I had met through a series of these virtual coworking events, commented:

> … that independent operator community to me has been so supportive and validating … they'll share anything and everything… just in the weeds support from the operators, which I think really … kind of modeling what you're offering as a service, right? … Coworking space owner-operators that I have worked with genuinely are invested in seeing other small businesses succeed, whether that's their business [or] their members, they want them to succeed, or other coworking space owner-operators that they know are in a similar state. So, I found that to be just so important. … That, to me, has really been part of the community that I think is just so great, it's so much more than… this big conglomerate is going to profit off of a desk that you're going to sit in, and be like, worker bees.

Chloe's appreciation of the support she received from others involved in the independent coworking spaces was representative of that experienced by other coworking owner-operators and managers I interviewed. The willingness to offer "in the weeds" support, to collaborate and openly share their knowledge and resources appeared emblematic of the value-driven nature of independent coworking spaces. Chloe's acknowledgement that independent coworking businesses within a geographical region can be "competing" for the same potential coworking users demonstrates the independent coworking community's commitment and emphasis on sharing resources and collaborating irrespective of competition and profits. This position reinforces the belief among independent coworking businesses that success for one can be good for all; as one coworking owner-operator said: "rising tides raise all boats."

During participant observation fieldwork, I, too, benefited from the openness and support of the independent coworking network of owner-operators, managers, and coworkers. I was welcomed to online coworking events and unconferences; owner-operators and managers passed along my recruitment materials to their coworking users and indicated their own willingness to participate in one-on-one interviews. In contrast were the three large national and multinational coworking organizations that I approached but was unable to engage in my research. Of interest is that two of the owner-operators interviewed in my study mentioned unsatisfactory experiences at *WeWork* locations. One had worked there; the other had purchased a day pass. Both told me that

when *WeWork* learned that the interviewees were themselves coworking business owner-operators, they were instructed to leave the *WeWork* coworking space. My participants said that *WeWork* employees told them that *WeWork*'s company policy does not permit competitors in the space. For independent coworking businesses, apparently the meaning of community support and how it is enacted were quite different from that of the "big conglomerate" coworking corporations.

4.5.2 "Community"- it is complicated: entanglements of care AND capitalism?

Coworking space owner-operators and managers spoke about the importance of community support. They socially connected and engaged with their users during the pandemic period regardless of where their coworking users were located (i.e., at home or in a coworking space). At one Zoom coworking event I attended in October 2020, "leaning in" to the value of community and supporting their users was a priority for independent coworking businesses. Complicating this notion of a caring community of support was the reality that these businesses also needed to generate revenue to survive. While not all owner-operators and managers directly spoke of it, support, connection, and community were components of, or perhaps the entire product(s), that these organizations were selling during the pandemic.

At a coworking Zoom event in March 2021, a coworking owner-operator and panelist shared that while people are initially drawn to coworking for the space, individuals stay for the connection and sense of belonging. Accordingly, this owner-operator believed that enduring the pandemic, when some spaces remained physically closed or had fewer coworking users in the space, involved prioritizing those connections and relationships with users. In her view:

> The best thing we can do in coworking spaces is really beef up our community, our connection, our hard conversations, our vulnerability— that will keep people wanting to be a part of it.

What was left unsaid—that keeping users interested in being a part of it would likely keep them willing to *pay* for the service—appeared to me as an ongoing tension between the idea of community, support, and connection, on the one hand, and business imperatives on the other. For me, it was a strange reality that was not always vocalized by owner-operators or managers and

did not neatly fit with the values they signaled in their encouragement of community and connection with their coworking users.

Instead, fostering a sense of community support and connection, and what support was provided, was what the owner-operators and managers I interviewed emphasized. For Amy, co-owner and operator of *Excel*, support involved phoning each of their coworking users to check in during the initial period of the pandemic. She explained:

> One of our main founding values was supportiveness, being supportive towards all of our members and supporting their businesses. … 'Okay, What could I do? What would be the easiest and most effective thing to do to exhibit that support right now?' and it just seemed like picking up the phone … I encourage that openness, if people want to talk about even what's going on … our hashtag is more than an office.

Amy demonstrated or enacted intentional support by connecting with coworking users individually to see how they were doing. According to Steve, Amy's co-founder at *Excel*:

> Community… that's become a bit of a buzzword in the industry now. … if you go on any coworking website or just you follow any … dialogue around coworking, it's like community this, and community that, and community the other thing. … So, it's become a little fuzzy and a bit of a trope. But for us, it's real.

And yet, Amy later shared in her interview:

> It's funny because I'll complain at home about not getting through my work and Steve will say something like, 'Well, you know, I saw you having a 45-minute conversation with person X. Like is that really a good use of your time when you're trying to get through your to-do list?' And then I'll think to myself, actually, I do think it is a good business strategy, aside from being just an authentic and decent thing to do, because that just sits well with me. … It's a good business practice, too. I believe that those kinds of conversations I had with people in 2017, 2018, 2019, are the reason they're paying me now for memberships that they can't even use in 2020. … There's a lot of different ways to ... to run a shared office space. It doesn't need to be that much personal interaction. But I think that's one of the differentiators for us. ... So, I mean, it's time consuming. And maybe demanding only in the point of it being time consuming, but I wouldn't change it, even if I could.

The effortful time and work of building community can bump up against the goals of productivity. In the above statement, Amy expressed her belief that even though community-building conversations involved an investment in time, it paid off in the end by retaining *Excel*'s coworking users through the pandemic. Here, creating a "genuine community" was tied to the business' revenues.

The notion that support and community were central to the entire business was shared by all coworking owner-operators and managers interviewed in the study. Moreover, it was reflected in the ways coworking businesses responsed to the pandemic. Everett, manager of *Citizenry*, described how he initially engaged virtually with users during the pandemic, holding Zoom calls and using their coworking Slack channel to connect. He explained:

> Because we didn't know exactly how long it was going to go on for, it was important to keep that community going online. So, we'd do Zoom calls… and just generally sharing resources, individually messaging every member and asking them like how they were getting on. Just, you know, how the business is going, all the usual questions… there is a kind of an obligation for us to know or look after the wellness of our members as well like to know how they're feeling. I think especially when something like a pandemic [like] this going on and you're pretty much locked up in your house all day. Yeah, and in coworking in general. There has been a big emphasis placed on wellness in the last few years and really, a lot of that falls on the community manager to have those conversations and make that part of the dialogue with your members.

Everett perceived that connecting with *Citizenry*'s users was part of his role as the manager of the coworking space, and that, regardless of where his users were, connection was still a priority.

Dorothy, coworking manager of *Workscape*, similarly saw keeping the community connected as integral. She admitted:

> I'm hoping, it's an experiment to see if I can continue bringing the community together, even when you can't meet in person, at least we can have some, some connection… I found it was really, really important to create dialogues that were authentic with people.

Dorothy expressed the desire to connect and support her community and coworking users with genuine dialogue. She later explained:

> It really is all in an effort to try and continue to support our tenants, and support our community, right? … so that people don't forget, we're there. And also, to keep people engaged, right? … Because otherwise there's no reason for people to continue to pay their membership.

Entangled in her desire to authentically connect with *Workscape's* coworking users was the idea that connection was obligatory, a required service provision in order to rationalize 'tenants'' paying for coworking services.

Even for Robert, coworking manager of the non-profit *Do Good,* it was critical that their business determine early on in the pandemic how they would provide support and connection that their users would consider valuable. He recalled:

> What was our value to our membership now, how do you keep them connected? … we basically tried to move as much as we could of our programming online … and that worked to a degree, although people very quickly were getting Zoomed out and so trying to do… some things on Zoom didn't actually really translate super effectively… we just, you know, basically gave up on that front. … What we did was… in April, we launched what we called [name of coworking space] Supports… this multifaceted attempt to sort of help people through this time. And it included a concierge service, which was just one of our staff who helped members that needed to connect [to] some of the government supports that were available ... We created some guides into how to apply for CERB and trying to help people apply for the wage subsidy as well. …And then our communications team sort of focused on either uplifting stories on members and how they are pivoting, or providing members more tools and resources … And then on top of all of that, we launched, basically launched a rent pool. So, instead of asking our members to sort of pay their full rent, because we sort of figured that was not going to be possible, we instead offered an opportunity for members to pay us basically what they could.

For Robert's *Do Good* coworking users, the value offered largely centred on supporting them and connecting them to other resources and financial assistance, with less emphasis on emotional support.

Similarly, Chloe, owner-operator of the coworking business that provided onsite childcare, *WorKIN*, tailored her supportive approach to her coworking users' needs. She offered:

> So, there were other coworking spaces that were running like virtual coworking, and monthly meetups, and weekly calls, and Instagram lives, and all this kind of membership engagement, but I was finding that the sentiment with working parents was, like, 'Shit has hit the fan. I am totally overwhelmed. I'm scared. My children are out of school…this coworking space I used to go to is the bottom of my priority list.' … I really just switched to empathy-driven communications for months. It was really like, 'I am with you, I am in the same boat as you. I am a parent, in shutdown, alone with these two kids.' Eventually we started to engage with members [virtually] on that premise… we call them Rant and Raves, or we were doing, like Wednesday night, like Whine nights, kid whine or drinking wine, whatever wine you have, like bring your whining. Just … it has no expectation of membership or community engagement; it was much more around just creating space for people who I knew were probably feeling the same way I was.

Although there were periods when the pandemic restrictions were less severe that allowed Chloe to open *WorKIN* and provide onsite childcare, as a parent herself living through this turbulent time, she was sensitive to her users' need for emotional support with no expectations. She

understood the difficulties. Despite the constant need to apply for government support so she could continue to pay her coworking space's rent and employees, she additionally held space for others, connecting, not physically, but in a digital, synchronous realm, and providing validation and support for other working parents. While Chloe's desire to stay connected and support her users seemed genuine, remaining visible in the email inbox of coworking users through newsletters and hosting occasional virtual events can also be viewed as a marketing strategy to keep users aware of the value of the coworking space.

Ian, now a high-level executive of a coworking software company, had once owned and operated his own coworking business. Like Chloe, he too saw coworking businesses as offering supportive infrastructure focussed on building and maintaining relationships among coworking users. He said:

> What coworking spaces are often trying to do is not just sell and rent desks, which, that is kind of the output of the product that they sell. But they're really … in the hospitality realm, building community, making connections. … making connections, you know, a lot of these folks would consider themselves kind of entrepreneurial ecosystem builders, which just means, you know, they are really connecting the dots.

Selling *more* than the physical office infrastructure, Ian suggests that they are instead creating potential opportunities by way of connection and community.

Similarly, for past coworking business owner-operator Sarah, coworking spaces are community hubs, connecting users with various resources. Accordingly, she stated:

> Most people see the key performance indicator of how many members you have, how many bums in seats. That's how you would record success in a WeWork setup, what the occupancy rate is. But for most operators, sure, that's a number you have to track for someone, but it's not really why they're doing it. What they want to know is, how many successes have their members had. How are their members doing?... So, if the space is thriving, then the space is meeting the needs of the members in that space, and that's different in every area. … in some spaces that looks like access to different kinds of people, or programming that they wouldn't get elsewhere. So, like being able to have the resources to support that programming or bringing guests or bringing in services for them. So, being part of the coworking space would connect them with other things. Some of them, being part of the coworking space gets them health and dental insurance. Some of them, being part of the coworking space it gets them the only mental health support they have, which is like a Friday coffee group at their coworking space.

The independent coworking businesses and communities viewed themselves as challenging the capitalistic status quo of maximizing profits. Their concern for the wellbeing of the coworking users, the consumers, was portrayed as a distinct offer in today's capitalistic environment. Along with the owner-operators and managers who endorsed the cultivation of connection and relationship building, coworking users themselves spoke of the benefits of the community aspects of coworking both during the pandemic and in general. They applauded the opportunities for connection, collaboration, and support. Sonja, a virtual coworking user said:

> The power of a coworking community for me is having access to resources. That can essentially help me be unstuck, feel supported and not alone.

Others described the benefits of belonging to a coworking *community*. The opportunities to collaborate, problem solve, or talk through business issues with others who had *been there* or *get it* seemed counter to individualistic, competitive entrepreneurial narratives. Unlike friends or a spouse or partner who may not be able to relate or does not have the same goals, these coworking relationships offered shared understanding and support. Paying for community meant paying for the connection to social and/or material supports that coworking users considered valuable.

Section 4.5 has described the social support and care reported by the coworking stakeholders I interviewed. These social aspects are part of the "coworking as a service" product that, according to my participants, validates and constitutes its worth.

4.6 Social realities of bringing strangers together

This section outlines the issues and challenges identified by coworking owner-operators, managers, and users as inherent to the coworking business of assembling an amalgam of workers in one space (i.e., either in-person or virtual). I first describe how coworking businesses set expectations for appropriate social conduct to avoid misunderstandings and make the Terms of (site) Use clear to coworking users. I then describe the disagreements and conflicts that stakeholders reported in the interviews—despite business owner-operator and managers' efforts to mitigate potential issues among coworking users, particularly around noise. I examine how coworking owner-operators and managers addressed these conflicts—some choosing more direct methods than others. Lastly, I identify the implications of coworking flexibility and how this

dynamic permits a transience that does not create ideal conditions for building community and fostering social relations.

4.6.1 Setting ground rules

Having complete strangers in a space together runs the risk of encountering social difficulties. In a pre-emptive move to avoid such issues, many coworking businesses had community guidelines, "house rules," or general member etiquette built right into the membership agreements that coworking users signed. The 11 coworking business documents that I reviewed (provided by owner-operator participants) prioritized the individual responsibility of each coworking user to respect other users and the shared space. In line with their brand, the language chosen in each document reflected the particular marketed image of the respective coworking business. For instance, *Empower*, the *supportive community* for women-identifying entrepreneurs, used phrases such as "girl power," "be nice," and "no bad vibes." The dog-friendly coworking space, *Citizenry,* has "don't be a dick" listed as rule number eight of their "house rules." These rules also included a set of dog "behaviour" expectations for canines accompanying their owners into the shared space. Other coworking spaces included statements on inclusivity and safe harbour, being mindful, and expectations for guests of the coworking users (i.e., clients, partners, etc.) who may use the space. Interestingly, the language (and tone) used in these community guidelines appeared to signal who belongs and who does not, targeting specific clientele. Coworking users may self-select a coworking business accordingly.

Because coworking users pay and access coworking services of their own volition, coworking business owner-operators are unlike "traditional" employers who have the obligation to make every effort to provide a physically and psychologically safe and healthy workplace. Coworking space owner-operators and managers are not legally held to this same standard. While it did make business sense to create a welcoming workspace for prospective coworking users, some coworking owner-operators and managers spoke of the responsibility and duty to intentionally create an inclusive and welcoming environment. During several of the coworking unconference events and meetings, in fact, time was devoted to discussing diversity and inclusion strategies in coworking businesses specifically. There was recognition that, unlike in a corporation, there is no department or mandate that ensures that the coworking space and users are diverse and

inclusive. For example, as Chloe, owner-operator of the *WorKIN* coworking site, aptly pointed out:

> There are some mandates or commitments from larger organizations, I'm thinking like a Deloitte, or KPMG, or TD Bank, they will have entire departments dedicated to making sure the office space has those inclusive elements, but when you're talking about independent coworking spaces, it's really on the owner-operator, the owner-operator operator, to prioritize those things and just what a difference it makes to the clientele who comes in the space.

Similarly, Sarah, a past coworking space owner-operator, described how an international collective of coworking associations that she was involved with had similarly recognized the need to refocus the coworking movement as a whole on its founding core values[19]. She explained:

> And so, that's part of the big initiative right now… to make … our spaces more inclusive and diverse and equitable and accessible. Because in a typical corporation, that would be standard HR practice. In independent coworking spaces, that's just not optional. When you operate how you want… you can just say everyone's here of their own free will, like in a restaurant… there's no responsibility to curate the culture in a coffee shop. It's just whoever's sitting there. You can take that approach. But the good ones [coworking spaces] don't. … we're seeing so many of the spaces that are doing really well, especially a lot of spaces that are women-owned and operated, who really [are] getting the culture right. It's an inclusive culture. It's a culture of acceptance, an accessible and sustainable one too.

"Curating the culture" when a business has new coworking users constantly coming and going was a topic Kelly, the coworking manager of the virtual coworking community *Empower*, spoke explicitly about:

> Because we have a lot more people that are coming in, and something so important to us, is making sure we create a space that feels safe and welcoming to anyone that's joining. And so, to be setting up that energy, the community guidelines at the beginning and being really clear what *Empower* is … how can we set up that first virtual brunch to really set the stage and be, 'Okay this is what we, *Empower,* is about, this is what you can expect from us, this is what we expect from you.'… We go over how our mission is for everyone to feel like a boss, and a boss looks different for all different people. … We also go over that there's no homophobia, there's no ableism, there's no sexism. There's no bullying allowed at *Empower*. It's just not what we do. We also talk about no gendered language so that we don't use the word guys, ladies, babe. Instead, we use folks, friends, pals. And the reason why we do that is to make sure everyone feels included.

[19] See https://coworkingidea.org/ for further information on how the coworking movement has moved away from its founding values of community, collaboration, accessibility, openness, and sustainability.

Kelly emphasized the importance of an intentionally planned event to guide expectations of the virtual coworking community. Without prompting, the women I interviewed who coworked at *Empower* expressed that they found the experience there very equitable, welcoming, and safe.

4.6.2 Community of roommates or workspace for professionals?

The owner-operators and managers I interviewed reported that when people come together to inhabit a shared workspace, even with guidelines outlining expectations and appropriate behaviour, tensions and issues are inevitable. The coworking stakeholders interviewed cited "silly stuff," for instance leaving dirty dishes in the sink, as a typical cause of squabbles between coworking users. Other issues were described as more heated discussions, such as the result of a debate on the coworking business' Slack Politics channel, which spilled over into the physical space. For coworking owner-operators and managers, these squabbles and differences were to be expected. "[B]ecause you've got 100 people in a space, in a way it's like having 100 roommates, right?" remarked Pam, owner-operator of *Citizenry.* Mati, a past coworker with coworking experience dating back to 2007 in the Middle East, also alluded to a roommates analogy when he described issues encountered in a coworking space:

> The more people are sharing the same facility, the more chances for, I don't know, you know, misunderstandings, misinterpretation, sort of, people will feel that there is some kind of offensive behaviors and so on. … You know the *Do Good* workers, they are service providers or partners, right? You're running a home with people you didn't choose.

According to Mati, this was an inherent dilemma in coworking in so far as people come from various life experiences, cultures, and organizations to work in the same space. Even if the coworking site owner or manager tries to address the social dynamics in advance, there would still be "challenges."

On the topic of handling personalities and conflict among coworking users, one coworking owner-operator joked that her partner referred to coworking as "adult daycare." Another mentioned that when she encountered issues between coworking users, her previous job as a teacher came in handy; she moved coworking users around as she would students in a classroom who did not get along. "I used to be a teacher," she noted with a smile. These terms and language position coworking users in contrast to professional, autonomous knowledge workers or colleagues, as they were also referred to. This use of flexible language to refer to coworking

users hints at the blurry duality of the vision of coworking as both a community *and* a workspace. *Citizenry*'s coworking manager, Everett, was likely alluding to this when he shared:

> For all the fun things that happen here, we have to maintain that professionalism. So, that's a balance that we have to really find.

With a constant flow of traffic in coworking spaces, striking the balance between a community gathering space and a professional office seems conditional on the effortful work of coworking owner-operators and managers.

4.6.3 An issue by default: noise in a shared space

Noise was the most frequent issue of contention, reported by owner-operators, managers and coworking users. Dillon, who worked at *Do Good* one day a week in exchange for unlimited access to the space, explained:

> If I was a person who required silence to concentrate, a coworking space wouldn't be — I used to give tours to people around the space and, if they said, 'well, I have to have silence' or 'I have to have complete quiet,' I would just say, 'you know, this isn't, this probably isn't the best space for you. Because there's really nowhere where it's totally silent all the time unless you were to rent an office.'

However, renting an office in a coworking space does not always ensure a silent workspace, especially if the walls between offices are thin, as *Citizenry*'s coworking manager, Everett, admitted were the circumstance in their space. Because coworking sites were often in re-purposed buildings, they had not necessarily been designed or equipped with costly soundproofing materials. According to Everett, he found noise complaints hard to address at his business since *Citizenry* allowed users to engage with each other and to make and take calls. He described the dilemma as follows:

> A noise complaint… those are the most difficult ones in the sense that, especially if someone's in a private office, you can't really tell those people 'Oh, … you can't take calls' or, we even allowed people to take calls in our shared space. And that's not something we're willing to, like completely change the rules on person complaints. So, those are definitely difficult things.

Steve, co-owner and operator of *Excel*, saw noise in a shared space in practical terms. He stated:

> I can't address these [complaints], you know? It is what it is; it's a shareable space. … you can book a boardroom time … we have three phone booths that they can use and things like that… But sometimes just the idea of a shared space just doesn't work for them. … our location is not for everyone. ... sound kind of travels… if you want to work in complete silence, you're gonna have to find a different solution.

The acceptance that noise is inevitable was a shared sentiment among coworking owner-operators and managers.

Even from the standpoint of a coworking user who rented a private office, Grace acknowledged that noise travelled in the space despite the availability of private (presumably quieter) offices:

> So, while we're in a private office … the office itself doesn't have a ceiling, so it's a private office, it's got the four walls, but it's open air up until, you know, the 20-foot ceiling that's above me. So, if anybody else is talking, you can always hear it, if people are walking around, you can always hear it. … Now there are… three boardrooms which are fully enclosed… And they also have what they call phone booths, which are really just little closets that are fully enclosed… but the phone booths don't have a desk, it's a stool, and the board rooms, I mean, they're decked out great - you sort of feel like a moron being in there as a person right on your own. … Some people are a little more mindful of the conversations that they're having … and some people naturally, their voices just travel a little more. So, it can be quite loud at times.

Grace's tone and response suggested some ambivalence. While the noise was worth mentioning, she recognized that the coworking space was equipped with areas should she require silence to work. Presumably, Grace did not find the noise enough of a problem to prompt her to use the phone "closets" or boardrooms.

Less forgiving when speaking about coworking noise and etiquette was Katya, a coworking user who had frequented various coworking locations around the world as she travelled and worked remotely. She described it as follows:

> It can be too loud because I've been to some coworking places and I'm like, 'Who the fuck is doing work here?' Like everybody's just chatting. … Somebody's having a meeting next to you on Zoom or something and it's like, 'Dude, get an office or like get, book a, book one of those little office rooms or whatever. You're surrounded by people. Everybody's listening to your conversation.' So, there are certain things like that… Loud people, obnoxious people, because you're not necessarily, you're dealing with people you don't really know, so, they're not like your coworkers or whatever. …It's pretty obnoxious. So, that hasn't been pleasant, just kind of like dealing with those kinds of people.

Despite the unpleasantness of these experiences and her animated recollection of these events, Katya said that she did not ever say anything to either the individuals or the coworking owner-operator and/or manager. She referred to herself as "a nonconfrontational person." Instead, she explained, she would move to a different area or leave altogether.

For coworkers who spoke to the coworking space's owner-operator or manager about a noise concern, the responses they received from the coworking owner-operator or manager suggested ambivalence, a shrug of the shoulders, a "what do you expect in a shared space?" attitude. For example, past coworking user, Elizabeth, recalled:

> There were times when it got tense in there because somebody was— some people, if they had to make a phone call would leave. But a lot of them didn't. … And finding a way to talk about it, because you signed into that space knowing that other people that you don't know are working in there and you don't know what they're going to be like. When I talked to the owner-operator of [the site] about this issue of noise, he was just going, 'Well, you know, it's dedicated space in a coworking area, still coworking.' I think [they] had a code of conduct there that was really sensitive to disability, race, age, like all the -isms but didn't have any— there were no guidelines or rules or suggestions around noise. … And sometimes it would be somebody in the other room with a loud, just a loud voice that projected across every, you know, the whole space.

Despite the recognition that the coworking space had created an intentionally inclusive code of conduct, in Elizabeth's view, the lack of attention or guidelines around noise was an oversight. While the noise created frustration and unfavourable working conditions for some coworking users, it was treated by the owner-operators and managers as seemingly inevitable in a shared space, just something that coworking users ought to accept.

Elaine, a past coworking user, described her experience when she encountered difficulties with another coworking user in the shared space:

> I'm quite frequently on Zoom calls and sometimes if you don't get the phone booth in time, and sometimes, some of the calls are more, a little bit more spontaneous, it's kind of hard to have calls in an open space. … initially, there was a desk near this person that wouldn't tolerate any kind of noise coming from other desks. So, it created kind of a hostile environment, I would say, and it felt uncomfortable enough, that I requested that my desk be changed to somewhere else, because that person was really rude. … But ever since then… I felt uncomfortable having a call in an open space in fear of like somebody else getting irritated and pissed off. … One of the first times it happened… I didn't name him or anything, but I did reach out to the manager saying, like, there's this person that, you know is really having an issue with me just having a call, like, what should I do? … And then I think that they were helpful in the sense, 'Well… if you can book a phone booth then book a phone booth; otherwise, you should be able to have calls because it's a shared space.' … But then I mean… it's a hard, it's difficult… I don't want to escalate the situation.

Both Elizabeth's and Elaine's comments indicated a reluctance to speak about their concerns, an acknowledgement that working in a shared space is their choice. It was as though choosing to work there somehow negated their right to complain. Their responses suggest an internalization of the notions of personal responsibility, individualism, and blame for "choosing" to work in the shared place.

4.6.4 Handling conflict

According to owner-operators and managers, seldom were there "serious" conflicts. It was *very rare* because "everyone's a good person around here," said one coworking manager. At the time of speaking, however, this same coworking manager had one user in the space suing another due to miscommunication over the terms of services when working together on a project. Admittedly, the coworking manager was dismayed that the disagreement had gone this far, although the manager observed that both individuals were still coworking users of the space.

Of the coworking owner-operators and managers who spoke about disagreements and conflicts between users, two different approaches emerged for handling these. Pam, coworking owner-operator of *Citizenry*, for instance, took a very engaged, proactive response. She felt, "you can't let something fester, right? If you know there's a problem between members you have to really jump on it quickly." For Pam, the possibility that the issue would become more problematic and

start to affect others in the space if left unattended caused her to step in as soon as a problem was brought to her attention. Others took a more hands-off approach, preferring to let issues between coworking users sort themselves out, avoiding the need to intervene if possible. Amy, coworking co-owner and operator of *Excel,* explained:

> Mostly I try to not be involved in it if possible… often it resolves itself, so, I try not to interfere if they can possibly work itself out. … as long as it's not a problem for the whole community, I guess then I'll stay out of it. If I anticipate that it's a problem for the community at large then I would have to get involved.

When dealing with disagreements between coworking users, both Amy and Pam spoke about the importance of listening to all coworking parties involved in an issue and acknowledging the problem. *Citizenry*'s coworking manager, Everett, admitted that he had to break up a big shouting match between two coworking users over one coworking user's dog. He described it as rather "embarrassing and awkward to deal with." Yet, with the one member and their company leaving the coworking site, "it kind of solved itself." Imagining myself as a coworking user in the space that day, I understood that it may have been a rather disturbing and upsetting incident to witness.

Since coworking spaces provide a service, owner-operators have the right to terminate or revoke services if a coworking user does not comply with the Terms of Use/ Terms and Conditions. These are laid out in the membership agreement that the coworking user has signed to join. Despite this, only two coworking owner-operators mentioned having to terminate a coworking user's membership. When recalling a membership termination, Pam, owner-operator of *Citizenry,* recounted a person who was unbearable and verbally abusive to her. Similarly, Chloe, owner-operator of *WorKIN*, described an individual's use of misogynistic language and explained that she has "zero tolerance policies around this stuff … I have a history of taking out offensive members with no question."

4.6.5 Realities of being flexible

Owing to the nature of the coworking model, with its short-term structure and flexibility, there was a tendency for constant movement and membership turnover. The combination of services (ranging from day passes to monthly private office space and virtual services in some instances) alongside the dynamics of coworking users' individualized work practices, needs, employment

arrangements, and life circumstances created an environment of constant in and out traffic. Even during pandemic-induced shutdowns, when the independent coworking spaces were closed to the public and not offering drop-in day passes, coworking stakeholders all mentioned the considerable fluctuation in number of users present. Requirements to be at client's or employer's workplaces on certain days, or "breaking up their time between working from home and working at a place like this," as coworking manager, Margaret, of *Pitch* explained, influenced the dynamics and patterns of the coworking space. The 24/7 access also permitted use of the space, conceivably, at all times. One coworker, Mati, said he used the coworking site in the middle of the night when no one else was there and it was quiet. With such flexibility for use built into the coworking model, creating a cohesive, consistent, coworking community and culture seemed a very challenging task, despite the rhetorical appeal.

Sarah, a past owner-operator and community organizer, considered flexibility a great advantage to coworking:

> … it's different business principles … again why we encourage people to try different spaces, because you've got to find the right fit for you… I can choose the culture that's right for me, and I can be surrounded by people who make me feel good, who make me feel productive, and if it changes, I can also change. And I think that's a real opportunity that people didn't have in a typical workplace.

Coworking space dynamics, however, were not perceived as an opportunity for all the participants in my study. For example, Elaine, a past in-person coworker who ended up cancelling her coworking membership during the pandemic, described the inherent difficulties of creating social connections in the coworking realm:

> They definitely did want to create as much of a community as possible… I don't know. It's kind of weird… not everybody comes in at the same time. … so, sometimes you only see a person once in a while and then— so, you kind of say hi a little bit, but then you don't really fully get to know them … I didn't end up being that close to anyone in particular … The desk behind me would be empty for like, three months or something, or the person would only come in once, like every few weeks or something.

For Elaine, while the intention to create community was present at her coworking site, building community and social relationships seemed misaligned with the dynamics of other coworkers using the space. The flexibility for coworkers to work in-person at any time did not lend itself to naturally creating social connections. Having coworked globally, coworking user Katya also

mentioned that some spaces "… obviously don't have a big community, like you just kind of go in there, and nobody talks, and then you leave." A small business owner-operator also admitted that his draw to a coworking space was networking with businesses in the same field. Greg explained:

> When I first went to a coworking space, I was kind of hoping that there might be people that I could collaborate with who had sort of complementary skills and experience. And definitely that wasn't there. … And a lot of these companies … would come in and grow very rapidly and then outgrow the space and leave. So, there's a lot of transience in a sense. And I can't say I ever developed any kind of relationship with any of the other tenants there. There was one that was kind of across the hall from me that I would say hello to for a while, and then they moved. But that was kind of the extent of it. Some people, it's really important that they have someone they can talk to during the day, and they're not working from home, and that they have somewhat of a structure. In a sense, the problem with coworking … it … makes a lot of sense for companies that are changing a lot in size. … coworking has greater flexibility to add and contract. But obviously, that's less conducive to developing relationships with the other coworking firms or companies. And in my time [at last coworking space], two years there, there were a lot of people that came and went.

In Greg's view, the dynamism in the coworking space did not encourage the forming of social relationships. Can community be created in such flexible environments?

My first interview (June 2020) was with Elizabeth, a past coworking member and a small business owner for over twenty years; as we were wrapping up, I asked her whether there was anything I had not asked or we had not discussed that she thought was relevant or wanted to share. After quite a pause, Elizabeth said:

> I think that there are so many different kinds of coworking spaces and so many different people that have different kinds of spaces operating that they call coworking. It's interesting territory, because it's kind of fledgling, and there [are] so many different experiences of coworking, and expectations of them.

Coworking *is* fledgling. My own experiences with coworking owner-operators, managers, and coworkers (past and present) as well as the discourses concerning coworking circulating in the media have been extremely varied. Because of coworking's inherent flexibility, there are many variations and expectations of the spaces.

In this section, I have provided numerous examples from the data to illustrate the issues that coworking stakeholders experience in connection with the flexible use of coworking spaces by a

variety of workers. I have described how coworking businesses have used the terms of services in community guidelines and membership agreements in their effort to create an inclusive and safe environment. Despite this, conflicts and disagreements between coworking users did occur, and I outlined how different coworking managers and owner-operators dealt with problems, from timely and direct methods to more passive strategies. Noise was a particular problem in the shared office environment. There was recognition that community sociality and professional workspace considerations can produce conflicting expectations. Moreover, the flexible coworking model led some coworking users to question the ability to foster social connection and community given the frequent flow of people in and out of the spaces.

4.7 Summary of findings

Chapter 4 – Findings has recounted the study results. The analysis presented is based on data from 30 virtual interviews conducted with coworking business owner-operators, managers, and users. These data are supplemented with virtual participant observation fieldwork. Specifically, I attended virtual coworking meetings, unconferences, and participated in a four-month membership at one virtual coworking community.

I described how independent coworking businesses responded to the pandemic, highlighting the unique position of owner-operators and managers operating in non-conventional workspaces. In the absence of an employment relationship between the business owner-operators and coworking users, coworking businesses exist in a legislative void regarding labour law. Consequently, independent coworking business owner-operators made choices that reflected their particular circumstances and responded to the needs of their paying customers. Within my sample, all coworking spaces, at a minimum, followed their respective municipal and provincial government's Public Health and Safety guidance throughout the pandemic and were closed to the public during the strict shutdown periods. Beyond this baseline response, however, owing to their service provider position and the heterogenous nature of the business, coworking businesses either stayed open to current coworking users, closed while allowing users to still access the coworking space if requested, or closed completely. Of note is that the two women-operated coworking businesses in my study were closed completely.

Next, I identified the pandemic-induced virtual coworking services that developed as an alternative to in-person coworking. Drawing on my fieldwork in the virtual coworking community *Empower*, I described the virtual coworking product as an intentionally curated synchronous opportunity to cultivate connection and community for virtual coworking users working apart. *Empower's* virtual coworking service was offered through the videoconferencing platform Zoom and provided an accessible and affordable option compared with in-person coworking. An additional asynchronous Slack channel for communication between virtual coworking users was included with the virtual coworking membership.

Through a comparison of virtual coworking to physical, in-person coworking, I highlighted the reported intentions of coworking users to secure an intentionally separate workspace outside the home, and to experience in-person connection with others. Independent coworking businesses in my sample saw increased interest during the pandemic from a new coworking demographic, largely workers untethered from their employer's office because of pandemic-related remote work arrangements. I examined, further, the immaterial value of independent coworking services, with owner-operators and managers offering social support, connection, and care (i.e., concern for welfare) to coworking users and other independent coworking businesses. Lastly, I highlighted the issues that arise in coworking spaces, virtual and in-person, when strangers are brought together in a fluid, social, and professional workspace. Key issues cited by interviewees included noise, interpersonal working style conflicts, and inherent transience.

In closing, a number of the findings presented in this chapter have revealed some contradictions and additional questions around what is happening in the coworking spaces, how independent coworking businesses differ, virtual versus in-person coworking services, the expectations and experiences of the coworking stakeholders involved, and the realities of these hybrid work arrangements. These are examined in the following chapter, Chapter 5 – Discussion.

Chapter 5
Discussion

This discussion chapter is broadly organized into three main sections:
In 5.1 What? and so what?, I present an overview of the answers to each of the dissertation's research questions based on my findings. I then describe the five key contributions of the research, situating each in the broader scholarship on coworking.

In 5.2 Coworking on the move, I consider the implications of the key findings, drawing on social sciences literature to *play with theory and ideas* so as not to get too caught up in the task of "theoretical agonizing" (Wolcott, 2002, p. 98). Conceptualizing theory as frames for seeing (Alasuutari, 1996), I have selected literatures that support "reading" the data *through theory* (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) to illuminate the complexity and contradictions of the findings.

In 5.3 Looking behind and ahead, I examine the methodological strengths and limitations of the dissertation findings before moving on to future research considerations and final thoughts.

5.1 What? and so what?

In this section of the discussion chapter, an overview of the main findings from the dissertation is provided in the context of the major questions that guided the enquiry. This is followed by a description of the five key contributions of the research, each of which I situate in the broader scholarship on coworking. The aim of 5.1 What? and so what? is to offer readers a summary and preview to guide the in-depth discussion of the implications that is presented in Section 5.2 Coworking on the Move.

5.1.1 Answering the research questions: what?

A key question of the dissertation was how independent coworking businesses managed and adapted to the pandemic. Within my sample, all coworking spaces at minimum followed their respective municipal and provincial government's Public Health and Safety guidance throughout the pandemic and were closed to the public during the strict shutdown periods of the pandemic. Beyond this baseline response, however, owing to their service provider position and

heterogenous nature, three coworking business responses emerged: open to current coworking users; closed but allowing coworking users to access the coworking space if requested; or closed completely. The independent coworking business owner-operators made choices driven by the needs of their customers (the paying coworking users) and the particular business needs and models the owner-operators had adopted. In my sample, if coworking users needed a physical space in which to work during the pandemic, most coworking businesses (i.e., six of eight) were open or permitted access to the space upon request. Reflective of the general trend during the pandemic in which gendered care norms and inequities were exacerbated, the two female-operated coworking businesses were closed completely during the strictest shutdown periods. Half of the coworking managers had coworking users who had employers that requested the users to work from home instead of in the coworking space, which reveals the different employment relationships that coworking users are involved in. Additionally, workers with care responsibilities made limited use of the coworking space during emergency shutdowns as a result of their care obligations.

The pandemic brought to light that coworking businesses, as a rather new phenomenon, appear to exist in a legislative void with regards to labour law. The employment contract *is* the platform on which all occupational health and safety, workers' compensation, employment insurance, and employment standards rest, yet no actual employment relationship exists between coworking business owner-operators and the coworking users. Given that coworking users or "members" are paying for the services provided by the coworking business, coworking business owner-operators were not under the same obligations as an employer with respect to their coworking users. Moreover, coworking business owner-operators and managers reported being uncertain as to whether they were legally able to deny their paying users access to the coworking space, particularly given that coworking users had their own keys or FOB to enter and exit the premises.

My findings established that coworking businesses began to offer new virtual coworking services as an alternative revenue stream during the pandemic, with five of the eight coworking businesses in my study doing so. Based on my fieldwork in the virtual coworking community, *Empower*, the virtual coworking product evolved as an intentionally curated opportunity to

cultivate connection and community for remote coworking users working apart. For example, the virtual coworking site, *Empower*, offered synchronous videoconferencing sessions and an additional asynchronous Slack channel for communication between virtual coworking users as part of its membership. Broadly, virtual coworking services provided an accessible and affordable option in comparison to in-person coworking. Virtual coworking users experienced opportunities for social connection and community building, networking, resource sharing, support and motivation through the virtual coworking membership.

This dissertation also examined how coworking's flexibility affects coworking support and connection. As my participants identified, flexibility is built intentionally into the coworking business model. Membership plans that do not require long-term commitment are part of the appeal, particularly for nascent entrepreneurs and freelancers. Further, since coworking users are autonomous users with individual key or FOB access to the coworking site, they have discretion when they use the shared workspace. A general flow and movement of people into and out of the coworking business is normal with personal schedules dictating use of the space.

While coworking businesses are typically marketed as flexible, multi-use spaces, purposed for both productivity and sociality, these activities, associated with different expectations and norms, can create difficulties around coordinating opportunities for actual social connection. Participants identified that both spatio-temporal and space use flexibility at times created tense and ephemeral dynamics in coworking that made social support and connections an effortful, ongoing and difficult objective. This work largely fell on the shoulders of coworking managers or, sometimes, coworking business owner-operators themselves. Despite coworking businesses having put in place written expectations for appropriate social conduct to ensure that coworking users were clear on the terms of using the coworking service, the inherent flexibility of coworking—as a shared workspace for both productivity and sociality with coworking users coming and going according to personal schedules and needs—makes support and social connection in coworking a dynamic tension and "anything but a foregone conclusion" (Bauman, 2000, p. 8). This finding applies to both physical and virtual coworking contexts and was a tension pre- and post-pandemic for coworking stakeholders.

5.1.2 Research contributions: so what?

This research makes the following five contributions to the literature on coworking. I present them here to set up and frame the extended discussion provided under section 5.2 Coworking on the move. Contributions are revisited in section 5.3 Looking behind and ahead as well.

A study of coworking through the pandemic

This research provides one of the first in-depth explorations of the strategies used by coworking business owner-operators and managers to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic in real time, including the expansion of coworking businesses to offer virtual services. Moreover, this study is among the first empirical investigations of virtual coworking. Findings from this research in the Canadian context extend and complement those of Mayerhoffer's (2021) survey research, conducted in Germany during the Spring and Summer of 2020. Mayerhoffer reported that some coworking spaces remained fully or partially open during the pandemic with the majority of spaces expanding to offer virtual coworking services. In the reported absence of in-depth research documenting how coworking businesses navigated the COVID-19 crises (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Howell, 2022b; Mayerhoffer, 2021; Wright et al., 2021), a key contribution of my study is insight into how independent coworking businesses in Canada fared in the initial year of the pandemic. The findings, from the multiple perspectives of coworking owner-operators, managers, users, and past owner-operators and users, capture the strategies employed by coworking business owner-operators and managers to sustain relationships with coworking users regardless of their physical location. By incorporating the coworking users' perspective into the current qualitative study, this research contributes to the growing coworking literature, presenting novel insights into the pandemic-induced coworking adaptations and strategies.

Beyond the walls: the necessity of connection and community

My findings suggest the primacy of support and connection as foundational aspects of coworking, offering a re-visioned take on the existing literature which has largely assumed that physical co-location and co-presence are necessary (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Garrett, Spreitzer, & Bacevice, 2017). That is, previous studies have carried an inherent assumption that coworking support and connection occur in a shared physical workspace. These aspects of coworking have been found to be important in prior studies (e.g., (Jakonen, Kivinen,

Salovaara, & Hirkman, 2017; Wright et al., 2021). However, with the expansion of coworking businesses into virtual service offerings, a key contribution of my research is the finding that co-location in a physical coworking space is *not necessary* to cultivate vibes and a sense of community. By removing the physical infrastructure of coworking, the virtual coworking product in which I participated points to both a reinforcement of and an emphasis on the centrality of social connection, support, and community.

Affective atmospheres of support

Pre-pandemic concepts of coworking in the academic literature emphasized the shared physical space. By contrast, the pandemic has created novel iterations in the virtual space that bring coworkers together to connect and share. By de-centering the priority of a physical co-location, I conceptualize coworking business as commodified support infrastructures, affective atmospheres produced through the entanglement of human bodies, other living things, objects, and technologies in a space. In viewing coworking businesses as fluid affective atmospheres of support, my research adds to the emerging coworking research that attends to the atmospheric qualities of coworking, the role of affective labour, and the possibilities of encounters and interactions as bodies, objects, and technologies interconnect in coworking spaces (Aslam et al., 2021; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Jakonen et al., 2017; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019). My study finds that these coworking affective atmospheres of support can and have been created in virtual coworking spaces, indicating that coworking does not necessarily require a shared, physical site where coworking users are co-located. Instead, in virtual coworking, affective atmospheres are technologically mediated, constituted by elements in both the virtual and the physical environments in which the remote workers are situated.

Coworking's ambivalence

My findings provide Canadian empirical support for previous research that has highlighted the paradoxes and contradictions, the seeming duality and ambivalence of coworking (de Peuter et al., 2017). The tensions in coworking, in so far as coworking spaces are designed for opposing activities of productivity and social connection, have been noted in previous studies (de Peuter et al., 2017; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Gandini, 2015; Jakonen et al., 2017; Spinuzzi, 2012; Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2018; Wright et al., 2021). My results reinforce the deep

ambivalence of the working conditions and social relations in coworking, capturing tensions between productivity and sociality, and a blurring of boundaries between professional and private, and work and leisure. The analysis also suggests that the inherent flexibility, informality, turnover and autonomy in coworking practices can make creating stable social connections and support difficult.

Coworking existing in a legislative void

The final contribution this research makes is adding to the scant body of literature on the occupational health and safety issues in coworking (Robelski, Keller, Harth, & Mache, 2019; Servaty, Perger, Harth, & Mache, 2018). The pandemic crisis brought to light how coworking primarily lies outside the scope of current employment legislation which includes occupational health and safety, employment standards, and workers' compensation. As with other forms of non-standard work, researchers have highlighted emerging work spaces as often unregulated and invisible in relation to occupational health and safety legislation (Quinlan & Bohle, 2008); my research provides empirical analyses on the consequences of such invisibility. My findings detail some of the ramifications of occupational health and safety policy misalignment with new forms of work arrangements, workplaces, or organizational forms (Robelski et al., 2019). de Peuter et al. (2017) acknowledged coworking as "the ideal of the minimally regulated workplace" (p. 698) whereas Babb, Curtis, and McLeod (2018) identified shared workspaces (in Australia) as "emerging in regulatory voids left by outdated policy frameworks" (p. 496). My study's results demonstrate that coworking businesses are not considered employers: coworking users (or "members") are paying to use the coworking service with no employment relationship existing between the coworking owner-operator and the coworking users. Coworking business owner-operators in my sample did not find themselves under the same obligations of an "employer" with respect to their coworking users, nor were they clear about whether they could legally deny paying coworking users access to the coworking space. In the absence of well-defined policy directions, coworking business owner-operators and managers made individualized decisions, thereby ultimately downloading further risk and responsibility onto their coworking users.

5.2 Coworking on the move

> Qualitative researchers should reveal and revel in complexity… Leave for more quantitatively-oriented colleagues efforts to tie things up in neat bundles. They are better situated to do that and appropriately compulsive about it. (Wolcott, 2002, p. 96)

In section 5.2 of this chapter, I elaborate on the key contributions from the research through detailed discussion of their significance and potential implications. Prior to doing so, I introduce some additional theory and concepts I made use of to frame the exploration of the implications. Staying true to the bricolage approach adopted in the research inquiry, I have sought to embrace ontological complexity and the complexity of interpretation, "learning from the juxtaposition of divergent ideas and ways of seeing" (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 344). In offering a processual approach and taking a "worlds-in-process" view (Simpson et al., 2021, p. 1777), my intention is to stimulate on-going conversation and further thinking. In this way, this discussion chapter embodies the bricolage's hermeneutic and therefore its generative underpinnings (Kincheloe, 2005).

5.2.1 Some late-to-the party theory

The following sub-sections provide a brief summary of some theories and concepts I will be drawing on for the purposes of the discussion section.

'On being light and liquid' (Bauman, 2000)

I have found Bauman's (2000) work, particularly his metaphors of liquidity and fluidity, helpful for explaining some of the findings from my study. Liquid modernity, according to Bauman, is an "era of deregulation, individualization, frailty of human bonds, of fluidity of solidarities…" (Bauman in Jacobsen & Tester, 2007, p. 313), and certainly, the phenomenon of coworking, with the flexibility inherent in the coworking business model, can be seen in this way. On the places of work, Bauman (2000) suggests that in the liquid present "the place of employment feels like a camping site which one visits for just a few days, and may leave at any moment if the comforts on offer are not delivered or found unsatisfactory when delivered" (p. 149). This reference to a camping site draws parallels to coworking features such as individuals now *paying* to work (de Peuter et al., 2017), using hot desk spaces they bring their gear to, and setting up their work site each day. A campsite is also a fitting metaphor for the sentiments of the coworking community

managers and business owner-operators with whom I spoke. They saw that one of the "beautiful things" about coworking is that if the coworking space is not the 'right culture' or fit, the coworker was under no obligation to stay. The flexible work arrangements make it easy for the user to pack up their things and move on to another coworking site.

Bauman's research has been criticized by other scholars for lacking empirical evidence to support his claims, the variety of largely non-peer reviewed sources that he drew upon, and also for a presentation that is light on, if not devoid of, actual theory (Bryant, 2020; Cleary, 2020). Yet, as Clearly (2020) points out, Bauman's metaphors can be seen as heuristic tools, meant to encourage readers to create meaning for themselves. For similar reasons, I have woven aspects of Bauman's work throughout this discussion; it resonates with my coworking observations and adds depth to my understanding of the phenomenon.

"Space"

A growing body of literature conceives organizational "space" as beyond a finite, static container, and instead, as an emergent, ongoing process (Beyes & Holt, 2020; Stephenson, Kuismin, Putnam, & Sivunen, 2020). Drawing from diverse disciplines, theories, and scholars in the humanities and social sciences, space can be conceived as a performance, an assembling of elements including material objects, technologies, bodies (i.e., humans, animals, plants), discourses and affective experiences. These are all connecting to constitute space (Stephenson et al., 2020). Conceiving space in this way embraces a spatial multiplicity and ephemerality (Beyes & Holt, 2020) wherein space is a "continuous production of the new" (Massey, 2005, p. 23) and has been accompanied by various research tools and heuristics that attend to embodied experiences, rhythms, flows, multiplicity and the "feel of spaces" (Stephenson et al., 2020, p. 808).

Affective Atmospheres

Towards recognition of these embodied experiences, rhythms, flows, multiplicity and the "feel of spaces" (Stephenson et al., 2020, p. 808) in this discussion, I use the concept of affective atmospheres that bring together "the spatial and material processes of organizing… with the sensual and the affective" (Michels, 2015, p. 257). Specifically, affective atmospheres are bodily

experiences in relation to other bodies (i.e., humans, animals, plants) or things in space (Böhme, 1993; De Molli, Mengis, & van Marrewijk, 2019). These bodily experiences have been described as an energy, a resonance, a potentiality, an intensity, a force (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010; Stewart, 2011). Neither completely human made nor solely a product of the outside environment (Michels, 2015), affective atmospheres emerge from the entanglements of people, animals, plants, the material built environment and objects, "aris[ing]in the midst of in-between-ness… vital forces insisting beyond emotion" (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1). This insistence, *of something in the air*, may be forceful or may be subtle. Affective atmospheres, swirling and enveloping bodies in space, push, pull, nudge, suggest, provoke, deter. According to Stewart (2010), "everything depends on the feel of the atmosphere" (p. 340), and everyone can likely recall walking into a space and being struck by *something that feels like something* (Stewart, 2011). This "something" is the fleeting, vague, and indeterminate quality of an affective atmosphere.

Affective labour

Lastly, I draw on the notion of affective labour to elaborate on the work involved in coworking. Affective labour involves producing and manipulating affects to evoke modes of sociality and form relationships (Oksala, 2016; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019). Predominately performed by women, affective labour is an important component of most forms of contemporary work which emphasize such skills as communication and emotional intelligence (Oksala, 2016). While acknowledging there are feminist scholars who take exception to the use of the term affective labour[20], I have chosen to employ the term for two reasons. First, affective labour cannot be reduced to subjective feelings and instead emphasizes the work of affect through *interactions* (Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2019). Second, affective labour is critical in the service economy, in sectors such as retail and hospitality, where it is put to work to create the right atmospheres or vibes in line with an organization's brand identity (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2019; Threadgold, Farrugia, & Coffey, 2021). Despite the valorization and capitalization of affect, in which affects and affective atmospheres become selling features or the

[20] While beyond the scope of this project, from a traditional Marxist perspective, at least four types of affective labour (i.e., productive/reproductive/productive/unproductive) exist under the umbrella of affective labour with various consequences for feminist politics, power relations, and exploitation (Oksala, 2016).

products themselves, affective labour is feminized and can be poorly compensated, if at all (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2019; Oksala, 2016; Threadgold et al., 2021).

5.2.2 Contentions and complexities in coworking

Having briefly explained some of the theoretical concepts that add depth to understanding the findings, in the following sub-sections I draw on these concepts to provide sharper insights into the findings and their implications. As a subject of scholarly research, coworking is known to be challenging to conceptualize (Jakonen et al., 2017), and numerous scholars have lamented the absence of a unified definition (Brown, 2017; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Kraus et al., 2022; Yacoub & Haefliger, 2022). Studies have reported the informality (de Peuter et al., 2017; Yacoub & Haefliger, 2022), permeability (Aslam et al., 2021), fluidity (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021), flexibility (Howell, 2022b), flux (Spinuzzi et al., 2019), and turnover (Merkel, 2019) inherent in coworking spaces—all of which create difficulties with even attempting to contain the phenomenon. On one hand, the pandemic-induced coworking expansion into the virtual realm has made coworking as a concept even more elusive to define. On the other hand, COVID-19 has constrained and subsequently transformed coworking business models and membership needs, thereby allowing for the following considerations to be raised.

What is coworking if it is not about the physical site?

I see coworking as commodified support infrastructures, affective atmospheres produced through the entanglement of human bodies, other living things, objects, and technologies. This view, borrowing from Bauman's (2000) metaphors of liquidity and fluidity, aligns well with scholarship that perceives organizational "space" as an emergent, ongoing process (Stephenson et al., 2020). The perspective of coworking businesses as fluid, affective atmospheres aptly represents the dynamic movement inherent in the business model's foundational flexibility.

My virtual coworking findings suggest that co-location of users and a physical site may no longer be a requirement for coworking, nor a defining feature of what constitutes or defines coworking. While most concepts of coworking in the academic literature to date emphasize the physical space and co-location (Kraus et al., 2022), the pandemic has created iterations that bring

people together virtually to connect, mediated by technologies. The centrality of social support and connection[21] as foundational aspects of coworking were reinforced by the virtual coworking services (Jakonen et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2021), buttressing the idea of coworking businesses as affective atmospheres of support. As one of my participants maintained, "space wasn't the priority in the first place, it really has to do with the people, the connections and the support that we have for each other." This sentiment corresponds to what other studies have learned about coworking's atmospheric qualities (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019) and the possibilities of encounters and interactions as bodies, objects, and technologies interconnect in coworking spaces[22] (Aslam et al., 2021; Jakonen et al., 2017).

Among the participants in my research, the energy, magic, buzz, vibe or community feel, whether experienced online or in-person, was what coworking users sought. They were searching for the right *atmosphere* or *vibe* (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Gregg & Lodato, 2018). Whether coworking represented a tool for productivity, a hub of other entrepreneurs, or a 'lifeline' as one community manager described, individuals sought these coworking services as support infrastructures. These affective atmospheres provided *a different experience of work*, something coworking users needed to be a part of and willingly paid for (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019). Coworking business owner-operators and managers in my study believe that their coworking 'spaces,' including virtual products, are a solution to improving the work experience for a variety of workers. For these participants on the delivery-side, the pandemic highlighted the importance of their services as support infrastructures that allow work to be done better. To virtual coworking users I spoke with, as well as for myself when participating in the virtual community and online coworking collective meetings and events, the benefits and support of such services are tangible. Indeed, through ethnographic fieldwork I experienced directly the

[21] Social connection is a construct that includes the structure (i.e., size or frequency), function (i.e., received and perceived social support) and quality (i.e., positive and negative aspects such as intimacy or conflict) of social relations (Holt-Lunstad, 2022).

[22] Various scholars have used different terminology stemming from the various disciplinary approaches and perspectives contributing to this body of scholarship. These terms include sociomaterial assemblages (Aslam et al., 2021), affective commons (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019), atmospheres (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Gregg & Lodato, 2018), and affectual assemblages (Jakonen et al., 2017). I have chosen affective atmospheres as I wanted to stay close to participant in vivo accounts of the vibe, energy, and buzz they experienced. This term has intuitive appeal referring to the *feel* of a space as its "atmosphere".

energized atmosphere that was present every time I logged on. The work sprints offered by the virtual coworking business *Empower* were reminiscent of a high-intensity spin class with aspirational music and motivational cheerleading by the other virtual coworkers that created an embodied frenetic experience at times. While meeting the needs of coworking users pre-pandemic, coworking businesses—as *essential* support infrastructures during the pandemic—became sanctuaries to a wider demographic of workers, providing affective comforts that offered refuge to those who could afford to purchase membership.

The work of coworking support infrastructures

To generate or produce the atmospheres of support within coworking spaces demands labour; what that looks like, who gives it, and at what cost are questions that were raised in the analysis of my study's interview data. In company of other critical scholars, I see the need to make *visible* the labour involved in constituting affective atmospheres of sociality within coworking and bring scrutiny to the additional demands and expectations placed on coworking users. Affective atmospheres, as pooled resources, must be constituted, re-constituted, and sustained through interactions and encounters from the assembling of things and people in a physical or virtual space (Anderson, 2009; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Jakonen et al., 2017; Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2019; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019). Affective labour is put to work to co-produce and sustain these affective atmospheres (Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2019; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019).

Examples of affective labour in my study included welcoming virtual coworking users to Zoom calls personally, by name and with smiles; connecting coworking users who were expected to 'hit it off' with each other through deliberate, friendly introductions; emailing or phoning coworking users to check in during the pandemic; posting motivational memes to Slack channels; and handling "anything and everything." These actions are all part of the affective labour research participants described as mechanisms that create a welcoming and hospitable environment of comfort and care. Coworking business owner-operators and managers emphasized their concern for their users through both "authentically" reaching out and "out of obligation" to keep people "wanting to be a part of it." Coworking providers saw themselves as offering *more* than desks and office equipment and providing, to varying degrees, genuine care

for their coworking users. They "held space" for their users or curated an "intentional workspace" to give users a sense of stability and order during an otherwise chaotic period. In virtual coworking, the 'valuable service' virtual users received was being able to tap into a network of support and community co-produced with other remote workers. Coworking users were literally paying to access and connect with other remote workers. As one of my virtual coworking participants said: "[it's] online networking opportunities on a schedule."

To intentionally build and sustain a virtual (*vs* non-virtual) coworking product conducive to cultivating social connection and community 'feel' requires greater investment by the virtual coworking users in time and labour devoted to unpaid social interactions that may or may not "pay off" in the future. Similar to my findings, previous coworking literature has reported the affective labour involved on behalf of paying coworking users, owner-operators, and community managers to generate the productive, motivational, caring, welcoming 'vibes' and encounters (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Garrett et al., 2017; Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Jakonen et al., 2017; Merkel, 2015; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019). By removing the physical infrastructure of coworking, the virtual coworking product seems to reinforce the centrality of relationships. The affective labour required to cultivate these social relations closely resembles what Nancy Baym (2015) has termed "relational labour." Relational labour speaks to the *work* of relationships, including the skills and practices necessary to cultivate them. Baym's (2015) study refers specifically to the labour of music artists engaging with their audience 'communities.' Whitson, Simon, and Parker (2018) have extended relational labour to include the invisible, ongoing, and ambiguous work of game developers, another set of cultural workers:

> Although these connections could potentially serve instrumental purposes as a safety-net in precarious times – leading to jobs, or funding, or technical and moral support – they are discursively framed as intrinsically fulfilling, offering a sense of place and legitimacy within developer communities irrespective of any financial outcomes. (p. 620)

Coworking users in my study shared the game developers' motivations. Coworking users experienced the social relationships as valuable, genuine, and not financially driven. Further, coworking users were *paying* for the access to cultivate these relations—relational labour invested to create social connections, supportive infrastructures, and affective communal atmospheres.

That affective labour carries the potential to exacerbate the precarity of coworking users is of increasing concern to scholars studying the coworking phenomenon: coworking users are *willingly* paying for an uncertain opportunity to *potentially* make a connection to *maybe* collaborate or *possibly* be inspired… all theirs for the taking… at "only" the additional cost of their *own* time and labour (de Peuter et al., 2017; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019; Wright et al., 2021). The coworkers in my study supported one another by sharing resources, knowledge, and solutions regarding common occupational issues (i.e., informational); they offered their (professional/career) skills to other coworking users at reduced costs (i.e., instrumental); and they provided emotional support that blended personal and professional knowledge, fostering reassurance, a feeling of belonging, and the sense of a genuinely altruistic community. Their efforts are in line with Wright et al's (2021) finding that coworking users offer each other informational, emotional, and instrumental support. In my study, the *Empower* virtual coworking sessions were intentionally workshopped to provide these three types of supports that Wright et al. (2021) mention. *Empower*'s online Slack Channels supplied an alternative method to exchange such support. Their programmed sessions included brainstorming, ask and give, and accountability activities. These created opportunities for coworking users to discuss concerns of either a business-related or more intimate nature, an example of the blurring of the professional and personal boundaries. *Empower*'s online accountability sessions guided attendees to set weekly work *and* self-care goals. For some, this included exercise, or midday baths, or going to bed at a certain time. When *you* are the business, everything appears relevant, even the intimate details of one's life.

There is good evidence, then, that virtual coworking reinforces the centrality of relationships and the relational, affective labour involved. The sites I studied catered to employees of other companies and to self-employed entrepreneurs and freelancers. Entrepreneurs have more invested financially, emotionally and personally in work than 'regular' employees and are, therefore, more likely to feel a sense of community, to be involved, and to place greater importance on the coworking community than employees do (Howell, 2022b). With virtual coworking particularly emphasizing the connection and community aspects of coworking, entrepreneurs seemed especially drawn to virtual coworking services. This suggests that coworking and the labour involved may be another investment for the self-employed (or those

Kramer (2017) has called “entrepreneurs of the self” (p. 176)), contributing to an affective atmosphere of support.

5.2.3 Ambivalence and tension in coworking: it is what it is

Because affective atmospheres are “unruly” (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021), the concern exists that relational and affective efforts workers and coworking owner-operators/managers contribute may not bring about specific or even desired outcomes. My data, observations, and extant studies affirm that coworking affective atmospheres are uncertain and may propagate coworking’s ambivalent working conditions and social relations, producing dynamic tensions. It is therefore both useful and necessary to view coworking spaces as fluid affective atmospheres co-produced by the inputs of coworking users, owner-operators and managers. Doing so is one way to acknowledge coworking’s ephemerality, flux and uncertainty, vacillating with the movement and entanglement of people, other living things, and objects. Certainly, coworking atmospheres can be ‘designed,’ ‘staged,’ or ‘engineered’ towards an ideal ‘feel’ or ‘vibe’ (Bille, Bjerregaard, & Sørensen, 2015) with the entanglement of people, objects and technologies creating *possibilities* for action and serendipitous encounters (Aslam et al., 2021; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Jakonen et al., 2017; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019).

Nevertheless, affective atmospheres are ambiguous, fleeting, indeterminate and unruly (Böhme, 1993; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021). Curated attempts to design a particular atmosphere towards an ideal ‘feel’ or ‘vibe’ cannot guarantee its achievement (Bille et al., 2015). In this way, coworking businesses as affective atmospheres are “precarious accomplishments” (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021, p. 11), apt to change at a moment’s notice as bodies and things affect one another. A coworker takes a phone call in a common area. A member’s dog begins to bark. A pungent smell comes from the fridge in the shared kitchen. Another coworking member shares a picture of their niece in the Zoom chat. Each instance has the capacity to force, move, transform. These instances of *something* (Stewart, 2007) circulate, mediate, or possibly perpetuate action and resonances in other bodies (Anderson, 2009). Coworking spaces are charged with intensities and forces with ambiguous capacity to affect, to create possibilities (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010). How and who they will

affect is uncertain. This is the ambivalence of affective atmospheres, holding together "opposites in tension" (De Molli et al., 2019, p. 1495).

What, then, are the specific "opposites in tension" or dynamic tensions that coworking's affective atmospheres hold together? Community managers, owner-operators, and coworking users in my study spoke of their spaces in contradictory ways: as coworking spaces for productivity, for community and care, for quelling the loneliness of entrepreneurial life, for professional legitimacy and networking. Interview data from participants highlighted the deep ambivalence of coworking that past research has pointed out (de Peuter et al., 2017; Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019). By blending informal, third-space features (Oldenburg & Brissett, 1982) such as flexibility and sociality with more formal workplace elements and logics (Brown, 2017; Garrett et al., 2017), contradictory expectations and competing activities are the result (Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2019; Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2018). In the below sub-sections I describe some of the dynamic tensions in coworking identified in my research, all of which align with other coworking scholarship to date.

Present but absent

The contradiction of "present but absent" that Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte (2021) noted in their study of coworking was reported by my virtual participants as a familiar experience. They spoke of pre-pandemic onsite experiences wherein other users were all busy with their own work, eyes focused on tech screens, unavailable to socialize. My participants did not want to interrupt others' work in the space. Paradoxically, contributing to an affective atmosphere by connecting or engaging with other coworking users is often at odds with the technology-mediated work demands of coworking users (Jakonen et al., 2017). For this reason, my participants who wanted to make connections, network, and experience community preferred the virtual coworking membership as it was more intentionally curated towards community, carrying the expectation to connect. Still, it was also possible to be "present but absent" in the virtual realm. In fact, except for worksprints, all virtual coworking connection sessions were intentionally planned to engage with other virtual coworking users; yet, users could still be 'absent,' muted and talking either on the phone or with a partner who had entered the room, or working on an email or document instead of engaging in the Zoom room. Alternatively,

worksprints, a time intentionally planned to 'get shit done,' could instead become a time to use the Zoom chat feature to engage other virtual users. Likewise, while some users chose to turn their cameras off to work and focus, others spoke of not wanting to miss the opportunity to Zoom chat if someone messaged them. So, the virtual coworking realm, despite being designed for opposing activities of sociality and productivity, was unable to ameliorate completely the tensions that co-exist between constructing a time and space for work and for social connection. Affective coworking atmospheres may create possibilities for certain actions, but the constant flow and coming together of human and non-human objects in space, individual work demands and schedules, and the flexibility afforded by coworking models preclude any guarantee of social interactions. Aptly, then, coworking is typically framed as a 'choose your own adventure once you've paid the price of admission' service.

Fluidity and stability

Participants remarked on how the movement (fluidity) brought by the flexibility, informality, turnover, and attendance variability in coworking practices creates difficulties in fostering connections and community with others. Specifically, while coworking users recognize the coworking owner-operators' and community managers' best intentions and efforts to cultivate a sense of community, study participants indicated that the fluidity made it challenging to develop relationships and a "community feel." For some coworkers, transience does not allow for continuity and stability to establish connections with other coworking users. A research review regarding collaborative workplaces has similarly noted that fluidity collides with the relational stability that is usually necessary for social bonding and group cohesion (Manca, 2022). The *fluidity* afforded by coworking ignites a similar challenge—explored in this sub-section under the questions: 'Where art thou community?' and 'Commodifying community or genuine communal care?

Where art thou community?

The flexibility afforded to coworking users works against "communal being-ness" (Studdert, 2016, p. 622) because in practice coworking user attendance and sociality are based on personal convenience, preferences, individualized work objectives and schedules. In conceiving community as a fluid social practice, as both an idea and action (Traill, 2021), the *idea* of

community in coworking appears to act as a "feel good word" (Studdert, 2016, p. 622). It appeals to the desire for social connection in a world that is increasingly "pulling apart" (Hertz, 2020, p. 38). Community as action, however, is something that has to be practiced, demanding time and effort towards engaging in meaningful connections with and care for others (Hertz, 2020; Warzel & Petersen, 2021). In the actualized everyday practice of coworking, the action of *being in community*, requiring active engagement, time, and stability to build connections, seems to run counter to individualized agendas, productivity pressures, and flexibility (de Peuter et al., 2017; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Hertz, 2020; Jakonen et al., 2017). Community building is not necessarily what coworking users sign up for, yet in the absence of active engagement, Spinuzzi's (2012) sentiment of coworking as individuals "working alone together" (p. 433) gains ground. As Hertz (2020) has argued, "community as a concept is perhaps more appealing than community as a way of life" (p. 296). As a phenomenon, emerging and current coworking models do lean on the rhetoric of community to entice potential coworking users. Coworking, however, is complex given today's hyperflexible, individualized working lives, and some of my participants picked up on this tension with one coworking user explicitly naming it "transiency."

Commodifying community or genuine communal care?

Independent coworking business owner-operators in my research viewed themselves as challenging the capitalistic status quo of maximizing profits. Their concern for the wellbeing of their coworking users was portrayed as a distinct and genuine offer in today's neoliberal capitalism which has been criticized as fuelling individualism, competition, and growing income inequalities while normalizing indifference (Hertz, 2020). Along with the owner-operators and managers that endorsed the cultivation of connection and relationship building, coworking users themselves spoke of the benefits of the community aspects of coworking both pre- and during the pandemic, recalling opportunities for connection, collaboration, and support.

Yet, coworking is part of a growing number of businesses commercializing and commodifying community (Hertz, 2020). What individuals used to receive in their private lives from friends and family, and in traditional workplaces from other employees, they are now purchasing as affective services (Hertz, 2020; Oksala, 2016). Borrowing Wittel's (2001) term, coworking has been

suggested as a site for the performance of "*network sociality"* (de Peuter et al., 2017; Gandini, 2016) involving ephemeral social interactions wherein communitarian notions of trust are replaced by "reputation-based notions of trust" (Gandini, 2016, p. 97). It is noteworthy that all coworking managers and owner-operators in my study differentiated themselves from *corporate* coworking service providers (e.g., *Regus or WeWork*). Participants explicitly identified themselves as independent coworking businesses (exception *Do Good*, the non-profit) and aligned with the values of the coworking movement (i.e., collaboration, community, sustainability, openness, and accessibility). At the same time, however, I argue that the cost of coworking services constrains both the openness and accessibility of these coworking businesses. Moreover, by commodifying community in coworking, the legitimacy of the community product may be contentious. Is the community that is sold in coworking still community? According to Oksala (2016), selling affective labour products (i.e., community) "radially alters their meaning and value" (p. 292). Within coworking there is a tension—between authentic and genuine community care and a paid-for service—in which social connections and encounters have become enmeshed with value and commodified in an "economy of encounters" (see Jakonen et al., 2017, p. 236).

5.2.4 Coworking: A legislative blind spot

The pandemic crisis brought to the forefront how coworking primarily lies outside the scope of current employment legislation (i.e., in Canada, provincial Occupational Health and Safety, Employment Standards, and Workers' Compensation). That Occupational Health and Safety and other related legislation (i.e., employment standards, workers' compensation) are misaligned with contemporary work is not a new revelation (Ekberg et al., 2016; Howard, 2017; Lippel & Walters, 2019; Quinlan & Bohle, 2008; Zhang & Zuberi, 2017). My research provides an additional example under the accelerated pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic: coworking *is* impacted by legislative misalignment. Pre-pandemic, occupational health and safety researchers had already noticed that for an increasing segment of the working population, organizational flexibility (i.e., in work schedules, in forms of employment, in geographical location of work) seemed on a collision course with traditional notions of the 'workplace environment' and the 'employer' (Allvin & Aronsson, 2003; Ekberg et al., 2016; Howard, 2017; Lippel & Walters, 2019; Quinlan & Bohle, 2008). Under non-traditional, flexible work arrangements, who is

ultimately obligated to and responsible for ensuring the occupational health, safety, and wellbeing of the workers has become muddled (Howard, 2017; Lippel et al., 2011; Lippel & Walters, 2019; Montreuil & Lippel, 2003).

What makes coworking-relevant legislation especially tricky to formulate is the heterogeneity in coworking. This is a very diverse space in terms of the spectrum of coworking practices (Gandini & Cossu, 2021), the variety of coworking sites and amenities they contain (i.e., childcare, cafes or restaurants, event spaces, artist studios, gyms, etc.), and the presence or absence of a priori employment contracts that coworking users bring into the space. Employed coworking users may have access to their company's provisions of support, rights, and protections; freelancers seldom do. Further, as part of their plural 'workscape,' (Felstead et al., 2005a, p. 16) coworking users can choose to hold one or potentially multiple coworking memberships across coworking businesses with varying attendance. That the legislation-driven employment/employee benefits or protections do not apply to independent workers in coworking businesses has opened the door for some of the risks and costs traditionally borne by employers (or organizations) to be downloaded onto workers (Benach et al., 2016; Ertel et al., 2005; Fleming, 2017; Neff, 2012).

This downloading or individualizing of work-related risk and responsibility (de Peuter et al., 2017; Neff, 2012) manifested in coworking spaces during the pandemic. With coworking users frequenting the coworking space for personal productivity at *their own risk* or being *encouraged to do their part to stay home* by the independent coworking business owner-operators and managers, the onus, burden, and blame were left with these users who themselves may have been seeking refuge from inhospitable remote working conditions, alienating work practices, or simply trying to effect a better work-life segmentation amidst increasingly blurring boundaries (de Vaujany et al., 2021). This individualization fails to capture and problematize the structural failures and insecurities of the context: lack of access to affordable childcare support and paid parental leave (Calarco, Meanwell, Anderson, & Knopf, 2021), the increasingly precarious labour market in the reputation economy (Gandini, 2016), the financial difficulties faced by small businesses during the pandemic, an "always-on, always-working" society enabled by technology (Hertz, 2020, p. 195) to name but a few obstacles. Framing the use of coworking

businesses as a “choice” prohibits a more nuanced perspective as to what motivates people to use or not use coworking spaces, whether during a pandemic or not.

Coworking, once envisioned to offer social and material resources to independent workers, is now a viable option for a wider variety of workers as the pandemic has untethered droves of workers from the formal office setup (i.e., employers have realized significant cost savings by minimizing in-person office work requirements for their employees), thereby altering the social and material arrangements of work in the Western context (Manca, 2022). With their ability to deliver a wide range of coworking services catered to meet the needs of diverse workers, coworking spaces are uniquely positioned in this post-COVID landscape (Howell, 2022a). Given the ‘narrative’ of coworking services as a fix for lonely, isolated, or uninspired workers, whether employees or independents, it is not surprising that we are witnessing an uptick in increased relevance and use of coworking in today’s emerging hybrid and pluralized workscape (Berbegal-Mirabent, 2021; Howell, 2022a; Kraus et al., 2022; Wright et al., 2021).

Yet, I caution any positioning of coworking as a panacea to remedy the ills of work today. These range from organizations being prompted to incentivize workers and retain talent amidst the “quiet quitting” movement, to employees hungry for a quiet space outside the home to work from one day a week, to freelancers searching for connection and community. Independent coworking spaces are small businesses themselves and thus cannot be relied upon to fulfil all the needs of a group of workers with great personal, social, and economic diversity (e.g., Vidaillet & Bousalham, 2018). Similarly, as a pay-for-access service, coworking spaces are not affordable for all.

While the coworking businesses in my study all genuinely wanted to make work better they are still “privatised solution[s] to structural problems” (Bryant, 2000, p. 31). Coworking businesses may be inadvertently “accommodating precarity” (de Peuter et al., 2017, p. 689) by offering individuals resources to make their working lives sufficiently tolerable which, in turn, may make it less likely or urgent that workers come together to collectively address the general decline of the quality of work. As Schaap et al. (2022) maintain, “precarity is a hegemonic formation that relies on working people’s consent” (p. 171); by offering support infrastructures for individual

working lives, coworking may be maintaining the hegemonic status quo of precarity. Further, coworking businesses as affective atmospheres may introduce additional demands for coworking users as they navigate the dynamic tensions and competing priorities in these shared environments. Given the relative "invisibility" of coworking businesses in regard to occupational health and safety and related employment legislation, and the limited research available on occupational health, safety, and psychosocial working conditions within the coworking sector, it is quite possible that evolving coworking models may be creating new dilemmas not easily remedied via existing (outdated) occupational health and safety policy frameworks.

5.2.5 Psychosocial working conditions of coworking spaces

This final sub-section elaborates on my dissertation findings through the perspective of psychosocial working conditions. Participants in my study considered tension as inevitable in coworking spaces because, when strangers come together, they bring various standpoints, needs, expectations, and cultural values. The collaborative workspace, as Manca (2022) suggests, "often becomes the theatre of unforeseen social dynamics that stem from the spatial reconfiguration of work activities and relations" (p. 348). Stress is the result of excess demands that require sustained effort or skill by workers to navigate in the absence of sufficient psychosocial resources to counteract these demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Karasek et al., 1998; Siegrist et al., 2004). Viewed through the lens of psychosocial working conditions, the conflicts, noise, and other tensions among coworking users that my participants reported would conceivably place additional demands on workers' ability to concentrate and focus. In excess, these demands can result in stress, an additional cost to be borne by coworking users as they work. Past research confirms that, broadly, distractions, uncooperative behaviours, noise disruptions, and lack of privacy in coworking and shared work environments *are* additional demands placed on the workers (Morrison & Macky, 2017; Robelski, Keller, Harth, & Mache, 2019; Servaty et al., 2018). Other coworking-specific studies have highlighted similar issues related to social distractions, noise, and lack of privacy in coworking spaces (Aslam et al., 2021; Endrissat & Leclercq-Vandelannoitte, 2021; Howell, 2022b; Yacoub & Haefliger, 2022) although these studies do not use an occupational health / psychosocial working condition framework.

In my research, ground rules, community guidelines, and common etiquette were written directly into the coworking contracts in an attempt to set the 'right' tone for how individuals ought conduct themselves. Responsibility for cultivation of the community relied on coworking managers, sometimes the business owner-operators themselves, to curate the affective atmospheres of community and care. And unlike in a large organization with a human resources department, creating and "managing" a diverse and inclusive coworking culture rests squarely on the shoulders of these individuals. In the virtual coworking events and unconferences I attended, topics of inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility were discussed to raise awareness in the wider independent coworking business network. Further, in my interviews with past and current owner-operators and managers, some people recognized not only their responsibility to curate a community, but also that creating a safe and inclusive culture requires an intentional approach and investment towards this end. Still, community managers and owner-operators joked about *adult daycare* and the awkwardness of handling conflict. The few coworking users that spoke to owner-operators or managers about people-problems were met, largely, with a shrug of the shoulders. "If you want complete silence to work, then *this isn't the right fit for you*." It appears that in a shared workspace, *it is what it is.*

Still, study participants also found social connection and support through coworking opportunities, and these may be psychosocial resources that offset the demands of a shared environment. Extant literature has established that flexibility, social aspects, motivation, and productivity are psychosocial resources provided in coworking and shared workspaces (Morrison & Macky, 2017; Robelski et al., 2019; Servaty et al., 2018). To this, a recent study by Beckel & Fisher (2022) adds that remote workers are more likely to experience beneficial health and wellbeing outcomes when they remote work from a location over which they have a high level of control. Towards maximizing or even boosting the psychosocial benefits that can be conferred by working conditions or environment, coworking may not be 'The Solution' that popular media and coworking marketing materials sometimes advertise. Instead, coworking is more likely to offer psychosocial conditions that are favourable to some coworking users on some days and not on others. Its inherent flexibility and ambiguity preclude guarantees.

5.3 Looking behind and ahead

In section 5.3 of this chapter, Looking Behind and Ahead, I examine the methodological strengths and limitations of the dissertation findings before moving on to future research considerations and final thoughts.

5.3.1 Methodological strengths and limitations: looking behind

The dissertation research adopted an interpretive bricolage approach to embrace ontological, epistemological, and interpretive complexity. As part of this methodology, I reflexively and intentionally considered my uncertainty, partiality, ongoing contemplations, and what part these, and I, played in knowledge construction. This methodological transparency is a strength of the dissertation in so far as it "expose[s] the analysis to contestation and critical scrutiny" (Stenvoll & Svensson, 2011, p. 584). The study represents my first engagement with *qualitative* methods. I recognize that the methodological choices I made have provided *a* way to understand the phenomenon of coworking. Through examining my ways of seeing and reading the data, alternative possibilities can be proposed and learned from.

A second methodological strength of this research lies in having collected and analyzed various types of data to understand the coworking phenomenon from multiple stakeholder perspectives and within the Canadian coworking landscape. The resulting data provoked a complex understanding of the phenomenon, allowing me to learn in situ from the viewpoints of stakeholders with different interests and objectives. Participating in a virtual coworking community provided me experiential knowledge of what paying to work from home can offer that interviews alone may not have revealed. Experiencing in real time the aesthetic and affective atmosphere of the virtual coworking service helped me to construct a rich descriptive account. Specifically, the time I spent in virtual coworking unconference events and meetings with independent coworking business owner-operators and managers led to an appreciation of the network of support these coworking businesses offer one another. Videoconferencing fieldwork permitted me to examine the practices of the coworking 'movement' and its associated values (professed in coworking literature) 'on the ground' in real time during a global crisis (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic).

As a neophyte qualitative interpretive researcher, I had plenty of learning opportunities throughout the dissertation research. One limitation of this research is the inability to have completed fieldwork at the physical coworking business locations due to the pandemic restrictions. My comparison of virtual coworking to in-person coworking is based on participants' accounts of in-person coworking and not my own in-person fieldwork experience.

Another methodological consideration is linked to the diversity of coworking experiences in my participant sample. Some coworking user participants had coworked both in-person and virtually whereas others had coworked only in-person or only from their own home (i.e. only virtually). Others had international and Canadian experience of coworking. A tighter analysis may have been possible had I set a "coworking minimum experience" for eligibility or even asked coworking participants to approximate their coworking experience with respect to days per week or hours per month. Yet, the variability in coworking experience may be a testament to the true flexibility of the phenomenon, which manifests in great diversity in frequency of coworking use and the resulting variety of membership plans offered (e.g., day passes *versus* passes according to total hours *versus* monthly options). My study also included more coworking users from the virtual coworking community, *Empower*, than from any of the seven other sites studied. As well, *Empower's* business model specifically aims to attract female-identifying entrepreneurs. My data may therefore overrepresent these users to some extent. However, the composition of "representative" of the general coworking demographic is largely uncertain because reliable data on coworking as a whole is lacking and/or difficult to access (Howell, 2022a; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016).

An additional methodological consideration of this research is that the relative precarity of workers was not examined. Although precarity was not the focus of the current investigation, data on participant's annual income/total household income, job stability/insecurity, and/or access to rights and protections could have offered insight into the precarity and economic heterogeneity of users involved in coworking. In this study, six participants had full-time permanent work at the time of their interviews (four coworking managers and two coworking users that were employees of larger organizations). The remaining 24 participants were self-employed. There is growing recognition that incredible heterogeneity exists among those who

are self-employed (Bögenhold, 2018; Cohen & Musson, 2000; Cohen, Hardy, & Valdez, 2018; Grekou & Liu, 2018). The incorporated self-employed are typically larger enterprises, employ more people, and have higher survival probabilities than their unincorporated counterparts (Levine & Rubinstein, 2017). While I did not ask self-employed participants if they were unincorporated or incorporated, I learned through interviews that at least seven of the self-employed participants did have employees. Given that precarity is becoming increasingly prevalent, future studies could include a measure of participant precarity to enable a more holistic picture of where coworking users can be situated within the spectrum of non-standard workers in the contemporary working landscape.

A final methodological consideration concerns the timing of the study's fieldwork. The findings presented capture the transformation of coworking in real time across the first year of the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that the data were collected at the same time that society-wide material arrangements of work per se were literally being re-made (e.g., vast numbers of workers became teleworkers / remote workers). This was a period of tremendous uncertainty. The context no doubt implicated numerous aspects of the research process and the data that were co-constructed. Researching coworking, a phenomenon that emerged as a coping mechanism for independent workers working from home—against a backdrop of a global work from home experiment for those that could—seemed somewhat absurd at times. All of a sudden, topics related to my dissertation became newsworthy: flexible work arrangements, blurring work and home boundaries, occupational health and safety, hybrid work. Is there some analytical generalizability to be gleaned, some interpretation that resonates with the working lives of those coworking or working remotely, I wondered? While I cannot know how my investigation would have played out in a different time, it was difficult not to read *as data to be interpreted* the wider conversations that the pandemic was bringing to the fore regarding quality of employment (e.g., quiet quitting, the difficulties of 'unplugging from work,' precarious working conditions).

5.3.2 Future research: looking ahead

This research offers insights into how coworking businesses operate, their practices and services, and in particular, the strategies coworking businesses used during the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, it provides a starting point from which future research initiatives can explore how or

whether the findings inform longer-term coworking trends in the post-pandemic flexible workscape. In the following sub-sections I suggest potential avenues that warrant further investigation in light of the dissertation findings.

Occupational health and safety and psychosocial working conditions of affective atmospheres

My research extends previous scholarship that calls for further examination of the occupational health and safety in shared coworking spaces. Despite employer obligations through occupational health and safety and other employment legislation, as established in this research, coworking business owner-operators are not the employers of coworking users, and so coworking users were still able to use coworking spaces throughout the pandemic. Some coworking users with employers were told, by their employers, not to use coworking space at certain stages of the pandemic. My study has captured how the standard 'contract of employment' misaligns with coworking business realities; coworking users are unevenly covered, or not covered at all, with respect to occupational health and safety and other employment legislation. Future research may want to focus on the occupational health and safety policy context in which coworking is embedded to examine occupational health and safety challenges, disparities, and potential benefits of shared workspaces. Coworking-specific policy will need to take account of the perspectives of coworking stakeholders, employers of employees making use of coworking, and "free agent" coworking users.

Recognizing that the immediate psychosocial working conditions influence health in a multitude of ways, my findings suggest that conflicts and noise are inevitabilities of strangers coming together to work in coworking spaces. Previous research has found that over-exposure to stimuli and interpersonal conflicts place additional demands on workers in shared, collaborative workspaces (Manca, 2022; Morrison & Macky, 2017; Robelski et al., 2019; Servaty et al., 2018). Recently, Endrissat and Leclercq-Vandelannoitte (2021) have suggested that coworking requires spatial self-management, referring to the *additional work* that requires coworking users to spatialize work actively by (dis)engaging with technology to constitute spaces of productivity or sociality in the coworking spaces. Further, numerous scholars have shown that, under productivity imperatives, self-discipline and self-management are increasingly important in new ways of working (de Vaujany et al., 2021; Felstead et al., 2005a; Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Hislop

& Axtell, 2009; Kingma, 2019). At the same time, coworking users are often expected to do the relational and affective *work* involved in co-producing affective atmospheres (Waters-Lynch & Duff, 2019; Wright et al., 2021). None of this "extra" work of coworking (spatial self-management, self-discipline, affective labour) has yet been explicitly considered in connection with psychosocial demands and impact on overall psychosocial working conditions. Studies that incorporate the affective and embodied aspects of coworking atmospheres may provide valuable insights for conceptualizing psychosocial working conditions in fluid spaces. As it currently stands, researchers primarily measure psychosocial working conditions through self-report instruments. They are also often constrained by assumptions that conceptualize working conditions as occurring in a single, stable, employer-owned and supervised "workplace." Development of valid instruments capable of capturing the dynamism of psychosocial working conditions consistent with flexible work arrangements seems particularly relevant.

In light of recent research on technostress, digital wellbeing, and zoom fatigue (Galanxhi & Nah, 2021; Riedl, 2022), while some of my participants identified virtual coworking as a *beautiful* solution, individuals or practitioners considering implementing virtual coworking may want to evaluate whether the value-added of agenda-driven videoconferencing sessions (e.g., work sprints) and the psychosocial benefits these may bring (e.g., social support, networking) outweigh the additional demands introduced. With the move to hybrid work models, Petani and Mengis (2021) have encouraged the exploration of "technology as lived," specifically, the IT-enabled, affectively embodied, hybrid workspace. Hybrid arrangements mean that workers are *simultaneously* multi-located—virtually in an online space and physically in a material environment—with both locations contributing to how the workspace is affectively experienced. For instance, how I experience my hybrid workspace, created by my co-location in the virtual coworking Zoom room and, simultaneously, the physical confines of my one-bedroom apartment, may be very different from another virtual worker's—perhaps this other coworker in the Zoom room is also physically in their home office… at the kitchen table… constantly interrupted by a barking dog and bickering children? Future studies could explore the health and wellbeing of remote workers and their psychosocial work conditions within an IT-enabled, affectively-lived hybrid workspace.

Virtual coworking and issues of power

Virtual coworking is arguably making coworking more accessible. Still, the future of virtual coworking is unknown. Whether virtual coworking is a niche product of the larger in-person coworking trend, was simply a temporary solution during the pandemic lockdowns, or will continue to grow post-pandemic remains unclear and is an area for further investigation. Additionally, the pandemic exacerbated gender inequities, placing unpaid care responsibilities and burden disproportionately on women (Gordon-Bouvier, 2021; Smith, 2022). While not new knowledge to feminist scholars, the majority of the responsibilities of unpaid care work in the home are performed by women regardless of employment status (Cockayne, 2021; Smith, 2022; Vosko, 2010). The pandemic simply highlighted this and society's dependence on the care work performed primarily by women (Gordon-Bouvier, 2021; Oksala, 2016; Smith, 2022). Catering to their users, many coworking businesses began offering virtual services during the pandemic as a response to COVID-19 shutdowns. Users benefited from this accessible version of coworking intentionally centered on community. It will be important to follow the post-pandemic status of virtual coworking services and communities to learn whether they gain or lose traction.

Future research that examines the intersections between socioeconomic status and gender among virtual coworking users as it relates to paid and unpaid labour is also called for. Home-based telework is performed more often by women (Felstead, 2022; Lopez & Neely, 2021), and the lower cost of virtual coworking is creating opportunities for a wider audience than ever before. Studies that contextualize these 'individual choices' in relation to changing employment arrangements (i.e., hybrid and flexible work models) and the organization of care work (Cockayne, 2021; Vosko, 2010) will be needed. Will women "choose" virtual coworking as a consequence of unaffordable childcare so they can stay home and work double duty? How about those with lower economic means? Will their economic insecurity remain invisible, tucked out of sight through participating virtually in coworking? Are independent knowledge workers who "choose" virtual coworking services at a disadvantage, unable to foster visibility and the social capital of "reputation" and legitimacy in the same ways as in-person coworking users (Gandini, 2016; Howell, 2022b)? Questions such as these may be of value to future researchers.

Moving forward, who gets to cowork in the physical realm? Will those in secure employment or more stable working arrangements (i.e., contract-protected employees) seek a physical coworking space that permits, to a greater extent, the separation between home and work? Will those without an "employer" who have the option to use coworking spaces be perceived as more professional and dedicated to work than their peers who remain working from home (Johnson, 2022; Raffaele & Connell, 2016)? Will presence, working time, and visibility in coworking spaces come to symbolize productivity to management as it has in other "traditional" workplaces (Rosengren, 2015)? Will this impact career progression and pay? Past research has suggested that those working off-site are more likely to be passed over for job promotions and opportunities for skill development (Felstead, 2022). In line with Cockayne's (2021) observations, "the presence of a physical office [or coworking space], opposed to an expectation that workers provide their own office space [at home], could become a new marker of class privilege in post-pandemic labour markets" (p. 506). How may coworking businesses become markers of privilege or perpetuate inequalities?

The increasing trend towards the hybrid workplace, where some or all workers are co-located in an office for some of the week and work from home for the rest of the week, is likely to have impact on extant power/agency relations. As Mortensen and Haas (2021) have noted, two sources of power are at play in the hybridization dynamic: hybrid positioning and hybrid competence. Hybrid positioning is related to a worker's access to resources (think technological infrastructures, office equipment, child care, etc.) and their visibility in relation to those in positions of leadership. Hybrid competence specifically addresses a worker's ability to navigate complex hybrid work arrangements, which can require additional skills (e.g., strong interpersonal skills) to those needed for fully offsite *or* fully onsite work (see Mortensen & Haas, 2021 for details). The hybridization dynamic can result in power differentials between employees, with associated implications for team dynamics and performance. For instance, researchers may want to investigate hybrid positioning in coworking in relation to hybrid positioning in working from home. Investigations that attend to power differentials in hybrid work environments are likely to be instructive for organizational change management.

There are many opportunities to further the scholarship in the emergent literature on coworking. Based on the findings in the current investigation, in combination with timely research on flexible and hybrid work arrangements, I look forward to the discoveries and possibilities that future coworking researchers will contribute.

5.3.3 Final thoughts and conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation research was to explore independent coworking business responses during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic using an interpretive qualitative design to ask: 1. How did independent coworking businesses manage and adapt to the pandemic?; 2. What is virtual coworking and what are the experiences of workers in these virtual coworking spaces?; and 3. How does coworking flexibility affect social support and connection?

The dissertation presents one of the first academic explorations into how independent coworking businesses fared in the initial year of the pandemic. It captures the strategies used by coworking business owner-operators and managers to sustain their businesses and the attendant relationships with coworking users, irrespective of whether or not a physical location could be provided under pandemic lockdowns. Given the expansion of coworking businesses into virtual service offerings, a key contribution of my research is the finding that co-location in a physical coworking space is *not necessary* to cultivate vibes and a sense of community. By removing the physical infrastructure of coworking, the virtual coworking product in which I participated points to both a reinforcement of and an emphasis on the centrality of social connection, support, and community. By de-centering the priority of a physical co-location, I conceptualize coworking businesses as commodified support infrastructures—affective atmospheres produced through the entanglement of human bodies, other living things, objects, and technologies in a space.

In viewing coworking businesses as fluid affective atmospheres of support, my research adds to the emerging coworking scholarship that attends to the atmospheric qualities of coworking, the role of affective labour, and the possibilities of encounters and interactions as bodies, objects, and technologies interconnect. My results reinforce the deep ambivalence of coworking (de Peuter, et al., 2017), capturing tensions between productivity and sociality, and a blurring of boundaries between professional and private, and work and leisure. The analysis also suggests

that the inherent flexibility, informality, turnover, and autonomy in coworking practices can make creating stable social connections and support difficult. Finally, the COVID-19 crisis brought to light how coworking lies primarily outside the scope of current employment legislation, which includes occupational health and safety, employment standards, and workers' compensation. In the absence of well-defined policy directions, coworking business owner-operators and managers made individualized decisions, thereby ultimately downloading further risk and responsibility onto their coworking users.

Coworking: flexibly yours

Coworking is a dynamic that brings people together, virtually or physically, synchronously or not. It delivers support in a way tailored to and malleable by the users' ("members'") needs. In the physical realm, coworking users get a desk space, a workstation outside of their home. Access to the site and its basic amenities is guaranteed, and maybe a hot coffee, lunch on a rooftop patio, or use of a private team meeting room, depending on the physical site and type of membership purchased. Users come and go as they prefer, and converse with others in the space if they choose to do so. The notion is that coworking users take what they need from the support provided. They have paid for it. Make it worthwhile. In the virtual space, users get access to the potential of what may come from interacting and connecting with others. Unlike physical coworking, virtual coworking does not provide tangible, guaranteed products (except for the weekly Zoom scheduled events that appear in the virtual coworking user's e-calendar). Virtual coworking is a 'bring your own office' invitation for those willing to pay. Its enduring value is whatever individual users make of the opportunities they now have access to… the network of people. In either physical or virtual coworking, however, the caveat remains that these are fluid and flexible shared workspaces, and the working conditions, like the businesses themselves, are dynamic, apt to ebb and flow with the movement of people and things *affecting* one another.

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Appendix A: Ethics Clearance Notification

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO

Notification of Ethics Clearance to Conduct Research with Human Participants

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Principal Investigator: Ellen MacEachen (Stothers) (Faculty of Applied Health Sciences)

Student investigator: Meghan Crouch

File #: 41886

Title: Coworking spaces: A new work phenomenon and its implications for health and wellbeing

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The Human Research Ethics Committee is pleased to inform you this study has been reviewed and given ethics clearance.

Initial Approval Date: 05/12/20 (m/d/y)

University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committees are composed in accordance with, and carry out their functions and operate in a manner consistent with, the institution's guidelines for research with human participants, the Tri-Council Policy Statement for the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS, 2nd edition), International Conference on Harmonization: Good Clinical Practice (ICH-GCP), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA), the applicable laws and regulations of the province of Ontario. Both Committees are registered with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under the Federal Wide Assurance, FWA00021410, and IRB registration number IRB00002419 (HREC) and IRB00007409 (CREC).

This study is to be conducted in accordance with the submitted application and the most recently approved versions of all supporting materials.

Expiry Date: 05/13/21 (m/d/y)

Multi-year research must be renewed at least once every 12 months unless a more frequent review has otherwise been specified. Studies will only be renewed if the renewal report is received and approved before the expiry date. Failure to submit renewal reports will result in the investigators being notified ethics clearance has been suspended and Research Finance being notified the ethics clearance is no longer valid.

Level of review: Delegated Review

Signed on behalf of the Human Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster

COWORKING COMMUNITY MEMBERS...

SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCE!

PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY EXAMINING THE HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF COWORKING COMMUNITIES AND THE FUTURE OF COWORKING

Involvement would entail an interview about your coworking experiences, lasting 30 minutes

To learn more about this study, or to take part, please contact Meghan Crouch: **mkcrouch@uwaterloo.ca**

THIS STUDY IS THROUGH THE SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH AND HEALTH SYSTEMS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO AND HAS BEEN REVIEWED BY, AND RECEIVED ETHICS CLEARANCE THROUGH A UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (ORE#41886).

UNIVERSITY OF WATERLOO
FACULTY OF APPLIED HEALTH SCIENCES
School of Public Health and Health Systems

Appendix C: Gatekeeper Recruitment Information and Consent Letter

[Date]

Dear [Insert Name]:

This letter is a request for [Name of Coworking Business] assistance with a project I am conducting as part of my PhD degree in the School of Public Health and Health Systems at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, under the supervision of Dr. Ellen MacEachen. The title of my research project is "Coworking spaces: A new work phenomenon and its implications for health". I would like to provide you with more information about this project that explores coworking from a health perspective.

The purpose of this research project is to explore the daily working conditions and social interactions in coworking spaces and to understand how these factors in turn shape how health, and wellbeing more broadly, are understood, practiced and experienced in these shared office spaces. Knowledge and information generated from this study may inform other coworking space operators, the coworking community, organizational/coworking health policy, as well as organizations and workers adopting flexible work arrangements regarding important considerations to ensure healthy, sustainable, and productive workspaces and workforces. In light of the global COVID pandemic, this study may offer insight into how coworking spaces might adapt.

I am writing today to ask if [Name of Coworking Business] is willing to participate in this research which will consist of me talking with coworking community members that wish to participate in interviews. I would also like to spend time in the coworking space if possible to observe the space and interactions between coworking community members. For example, I would observe where and how various coworking members work (i.e., use of communal workspaces, hot desks, personal workspace/desk). *Any observational protocols, will be designed in consultation with you (the owner/manager of the space).* I would like to provide you with recruitment posters for the research project to be distributed at your discretion and/or posted on any of the [Name of Coworking Business] websites and social media pages. Also, if you were able to distribute the digital version of the poster to coworking members via email/listserv that would be appreciated. Contact information is contained on the flyers and if a coworking community member is interested in participating they can contact me, *Meghan Crouch*, to discuss participation in this study in further detail. I would also welcome the opportunity for your participation in an interview should you be willing.

Participation of anyone is completely voluntary. Everyone will make their own independent decision as to whether or not they would like to be involved. All participants will be informed and reminded of their rights to participate or withdraw before any interview, or at any time in the study. Prospective coworking members will receive an information letter including detailed information about this study, as well as informed consent forms.

To support the findings of this study, quotations and excerpts from the interviews will be labelled with pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants. Names of participants will not appear in the thesis or reports resulting from this study. Participants will not be identifiable. Similarly, the identity of [Name of Coworking Business] will remain confidential with a pseudonym given to the organization.

All paper field notes collected will be retained and locked in my office in a secure digital location in the *School of Public Health and Health Systems* at the University of Waterloo. All documents will be confidentially destroyed after seven years. Further, all electronic data will be stored with no personal identifiers. Finally, only myself and my advisor, *Dr. Ellen MacEachen* in the *School of Public Health and Health Systems* at the University of Waterloo will have access to these materials. There are no known or anticipated risks to participants in this study.

I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#41886). However, the final decision about participation belongs to [Name of Coworking Business], and individual coworking community members. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567, ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca.

If you have any questions regarding this study or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please contact me at 905 327 0503 or by email ***mkcrouch@uwaterloo.ca***. You may also contact my supervisor, ***Dr. Ellen MacEachen*** at 519 888 4567 X 37248 or by email ***ellen.maceachen@uwaterloo.ca.*** I hope that the results of my study will be beneficial to [Name of Coworking Business], other coworking spaces, as well as the broader research community. I very much look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your assistance with this project.

Yours sincerely,

Meghan Crouch
PhD Candidate
School of Public Health and Health Systems
University of Waterloo

Dr. Ellen MacEachen
Associate Professor
School of Public Health and Health Systems
University of Waterloo

Organization Permission Form (should written consent be requested)

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by ***Meghan Crouch*** of the ***School of Public Health and Health Systems*** at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, under the supervision of Dr. Ellen MacEachen at the University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that pseudonyms for the name of our organization as well as coworking community members participating will be used in the thesis or any publications that come from the research.

I was informed that this organization may withdraw from assistance with the project at any time. I was informed that study participants may withdraw from participation at any time without penalty by advising the researcher.

I have been informed this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#41886) and that questions we have about the study may be directed to ***Meghan Crouch*** at 905 327 0503 or by email *mkcrouch@uwaterloo.ca* and ***Dr. Ellen MacEachen*** at 519 888 4567 X 37248 or by email *ellen.maceachen@uwaterloo.ca****.***

I was informed that if we have any comments or concerns with in this study, we may also contact the Office of Research Ethics at 1-519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca

Meghan Crouch
PhD Candidate
School of Public Health and Health Systems
University of Waterloo

Dr. Ellen MacEachen
Associate Professor
School of Public Health and Health Systems
University of Waterloo

I agree to help the researchers recruit participants for this study that are part of the [Insert Name of coworking] community.
□ YES □ NO

I agree to be contacted about participating in an interview as part of this research.
□ YES □ NO

Participant Name: _____
Participant Signature: _____
Date: _____

Appendix D: Participant Information and Consent Letter

Coworking spaces: A new work phenomenon and its implications for health and wellbeing

This study will examine the daily working conditions and social interactions in coworking spaces and how these factors in turn shape individual and community health and wellbeing in these shared office spaces. Knowledge and information generated from this study may inform the coworking community as well as organizations and workers adopting flexible work arrangements regarding important considerations to ensure healthy, sustainable, and productive workspaces and workforces. In light of the global COVID pandemic, this study may also offer insight into how coworking spaces may adapt moving forward.

You are invited to participate in this study, as we are conducting interviews with coworking members and coworking space hosts/managers/operators to understand their experience of working in these spaces. This research project is part of a doctoral thesis led by student researcher Meghan Crouch under supervision of Dr. Ellen MacEachen.

If you decide to take part in the study, you will be contacted for an interview of up to one hour, either conducted by phone or virtual platform (such as WebEx or Zoom). When information is transmitted over the internet, privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g., government agencies, hackers). University of Waterloo researchers will not collect or use internet protocol (IP) addresses or other information which could link your participation to your computer or electronic device without first informing you. If COVID physical distancing measures have been lifted, and if you prefer, the interview can also be in person at a time and location that is easy for you. You do not need to prepare for this interview, it will be like a conversation and you can choose what to share with us. Demographic questions will be asked (e.g., gender identity, age, etc.) as this information will assist us to better describe the study participants and the individuals that use coworking spaces. If at any point during the interview you feel uncomfortable, you may choose to stop answering the questions or leave the interview all together by letting the researcher know. Further, if you choose to leave the study after interviews are already completed, it is your decision whether to keep your interview data as part of the study.

All information that could identify you will be removed from the data we have collected within approximately 2 weeks and stored separately. We will keep identifying information for a minimum of 7 years and our study records for a minimum of 7 years. You can withdraw consent to participate and have your data destroyed by contacting us within this time period, although it is not possible to withdraw your consent once papers and publications have been submitted to publishers. Only those associated with this study will have access to these records which are password protected. All records will be destroyed according to University of Waterloo policy.

There are no known or anticipated risks from participating in this study. When we present results of the research, we will not release your name or any information that could identify you.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#41886). However, the final decision to participate is yours. If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567, ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca.

If you are interested in participating or have any additional questions, please contact me at 905 327 0503 or by email at mkcrouch@uwaterloo.ca.

Sincerely,
Meghan Crouch

CONSENT FORM

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Meghan Crouch and Dr. Ellen MacEachen at the School of Public Health and Health Systems at the University of Waterloo. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted.

I am aware that I have the option of allowing my interview to be audio recorded to ensure an accurate recording of my responses.

I am also aware that excerpts from the interview may be included in publications to come from this research, with the understanding that the quotations will be anonymous.
I was informed that I may withdraw my consent at any time pre- public release of research findings without penalty by advising the researcher.

This project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#41886). I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact the Office of Research Ethics at 519-888-4567 ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.
☐YES ☐NO

I agree to have my interview audio recorded.
☐YES ☐NO

I agree to be contacted for a possible follow up interview by the research team and can determine at that time should I wish to participate in a second interview.
☐YES ☐NO

If yes, please provide preferred contact information:

_____

I agree to the use of anonymous quotations in any thesis or publication that comes of this research.
☐YES ☐NO

Participant Name: _____ (Please print)
Participant Signature: _____
Date: _____

Appendix E: Participant Feedback Letter

[Date]

Dear [Name of Participant],

I would like to thank you for your participation in this study, "*Coworking spaces: A new work phenomenon and its implications for health and wellbeing*". As a reminder, the purpose of this study is to explore the daily working conditions and social interactions in coworking spaces and how these factors in turn shape individual and community health and wellbeing in these shared office spaces. It also examines the views of key informants on these issues. This will be one of the first studies to assess the intersections of shared working arrangements, working conditions, and health in our current sociopolitical and global pandemic context.

Please remember that any data pertaining to you as an individual participant will be kept confidential. Once all the data has been collected and analyzed, I plan on sharing the findings with the research community through conferences, presentations, and journal articles. If you are interested in receiving more information regarding the results of the study, or if you have any questions or concerns, please contact Meghan Crouch at the phone or email address provided below. If you would like a summary of the results, please let me know by providing your email address.

As with all University of Waterloo projects involving human participants, this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through a University of Waterloo Research Ethics Committee (ORE#41886). If you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics, at 1-519-888-4567, ext. 36005 or ore-ceo@uwaterloo.ca.

Sincerely,

Meghan Crouch

School of Public Health and Health Systems
University of Waterloo
Email address: mkcrouch@uwaterloo.ca

Appendix F: Coding Framework

Code	Description
Job	Captures what they do for work with respect to industry and sector. Describes what their work involves, who they do it with or for.
Entrepreneurial spirit	On being an entrepreneur including their motivation. Pros and cons.
Why cowork? Benefits of coworking	Captures general motivation (ie. productivity) for coworking as well as specific information on why they chose a particular space (ie. location, niche, etc). Also the benefits of coworking (ie. amenities, price, networking, etc)
Cons of coworking	The drawbacks to coworking: distractions, noise, working with strangers, offensive personalities, ergonomic issues, space considerations, price
Design of coworking space	Including the physical features of the space or aesthetic. Features such as hot desks, private offices, coffee/lounge area
CoWORK: business of coworking	What's involved in running/owning a coworking space. Operations and maintenance Issues of management: dealing with conflict, emotional labour, includes coworking values and culture
Who works here	Code to describe the type of people/worker the coworking space attracts
Coworking gone digital	Virtual coworking membership or mention of anything online facilitated by coworking membership Any comparison between physical versus virtual coworking, in person community versus online community, IRL vs URL Any mention of coworking gone digital
COVID	Anything COVID related including decisions to stay open or close. Any new protocols or regulations including cleaning/screening. Can also include membership/activity in coworking space since COVID and implications for their business.

Future of Work	Any mention of the future of work and flexible and or remote work practices and or arrangements
Mental health	Any mention of mental health. Issues related to burnout, isolation, being “zoomed out”, overwhelm, anxiety,
Work life balance (child code of why cowork?)	Any mention of work/life boundaries/blur or balance.
Social relations/connection/community in coworking	Anything related to relationships, social connection, and community in coworking
Places of work	Where individual chooses to work outside of coworking space. Could include home, coffee shops, employers office, clients office
Who pays? … for coworking or office equipment	Moral discourses and realities of paying for space to work- employers versus employees Who pays for equipment
Social relations/connection/community WITH colleagues	Anything related to relationships, social connection, and community with colleagues (if participant speaks of colleagues)
Laws, Guidelines, policies	Any sort of laws, guidelines, or policies related or applicable to coworking
Equity/inclusion/diversity/accessibility	Any mention of issues related to equity, inclusion, diversity and accessibility
Issues of privacy/security	Any mention of issues related to privacy or security in coworking spaces
Productivity	Ideas of productivity, time management, scheduling, pace of work/working time. Too much work.

Appendix G: Sample Coding Memos

March 3rd, 2021

How does loneliness factor into the equation of coworking and community? Today after my online research lab meeting I realized that those meetings with my 'colleagues/coworkers' was likely the only social encounters I'd have today. I've thought this before in the pandemic. For some reason I was reminded of that article that Ellen chose for a lab meeting (Franklin, 2012) regarding loneliness and liquid modernity. Go back and read.

Coworking members join to feel less alone/ to have a community. But coworking is inherently flexible/fluid/ transient. How do you develop connections in these "fluid" environments? Do they leave individuals really feeling less lonely? Are you able to be more authentic in these environments over traditional workspaces/places because these aren't your coworkers/superiors?

Today, during coding, struck by coworking operator, Pam, mentioning that she works from home to be productive, because in the coworking space she can't get actual work done. Recall other participants saying that they too, prefer working in isolation, so as to be undisturbed. So is coworking less about working and more about feeling less lonely in a precarious/uncertain/ fluid world? I thought coworking was about being "visible" and showcasing your work, but maybe it's a being visible in a more existential/ lonely way? Like you may not be talking to others while coworking (also mentioned among participants) but that at least you aren't alone? How does this fit/align/conflict with the consistent brand image that independents or really any knowledge worker employed on contract (ie. grad student, software designer) must personify in order to be "competitive" in the job market/ or sell their services to 'clients'?

How does precarity contribute/ relate to loneliness? Working all the time? Overworking? Working odd hours? Constantly upskilling? How does working take away from social connections and intimacy? Where does coworking fit?

https://apple.news/AOZuHK4vcSdaGIElTDpKFVw
This article from Macleans on the Loneliness Economy

Researcher Noreena hertz
The loneliness economy from the book the lonely century
Used the term infrastructures of community

April 19th, 2021

What is coworking?
A hub for small business; infrastructures for small business/entrepreneurs… but possibly all remote workers now?
A space/ place for community? What is community?

“Coworking is really in the hospitality realm”
Why are people coworking? A coping mechanism/ response? And to what?
Why are all these workers feeling lonely/alone? How does this relate to notions of work alienation/work performance/productivity?/ work status and identity
Is productivity the problem of loneliness?
Another aspect of precarity? Vulnerability bc of work location/where one works? layers of vulnerability? spectrum of precarity?
Acceleration of remote work vs. coworking industry in purgatory
The future of work: Flexibility, fluidity and the need for ‘structure’
Our relation to work: productivity to what end and for whom?
What is the purpose of a workplace/workspace? Connection? Productivity? Both?
What do concepts like work environment, psychological health and safety, psychosocial conditions mean in the context of coworking spaces?

From the article: https://warzel.substack.com/p/the-future-of-work-is-not-working

“*our relationship to work is broken*… fairly blunt question: what do we actually need from our working lives? Is it money? Career advancement? A sense of community? Healthcare? All of the above? What parts of what we currently ask of our job are extraneous — and far more about status or ego or insecurity? Is the logo on your business card more important than the work you do or the satisfaction you get from what you produce? These are the types of hard questions we need to be asking ourselves — starting with executives and managers — if we’re serious about re-imagining how we work. If that sounds radical, it’s because it is. Our relationship to our jobs is broken. Repairing that relationship will require some radical thinking.”