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Qualitative Research Methods for the Exploration of Coworking Environments

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Abstract

Coworking is a flexible workspace arrangement that is characterized by the sharing of resources, socializing between peers, collaborating on mutual projects, and co-crafting a community of work. As a result of the benefits coworkers draw from their experience, the coworking model has grown significantly over the past years, which has also led to increasing attention by scholars. When researching the contemporary workplace's evolving nature, a qualitative approach enables scholars to observe, record, and capture the changing attitudes concerning a given subject. Similarly, field researchers have applied qualitative methods with gradually increasing rigor and complexity. To further enhance future studies, the paper highlights key development patterns and best practices from a review of selected qualitative studies of the past years to draw conclusions for future research practices and the most suitable qualitative research methods for the examination of coworking environments. Finally, the paper discusses advisable qualitative methodological frameworks.

Keywords

coworking, collaborative workspaces, workspace research, qualitative research

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Qualitative Research Methods for the Exploration of Coworking Environments

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Coworking is a flexible workspace arrangement that is characterized by the sharing of resources, socializing between peers, collaborating on mutual projects, and co-crafting a community of work. As a result of the benefits coworkers draw from their experience, the coworking model has grown significantly over the past years, which has also led to increasing attention by scholars. When researching the contemporary workplace's evolving nature, a qualitative approach enables scholars to observe, record, and capture the changing attitudes concerning a given subject. Similarly, field researchers have applied qualitative methods with gradually increasing rigor and complexity. To further enhance future studies, the paper highlights key development patterns and best practices from a review of selected qualitative studies of the past years to draw conclusions for future research practices and the most suitable qualitative research methods for the examination of coworking environments. Finally, the paper discusses advisable qualitative methodological frameworks.

Keywords: coworking, collaborative workspaces, workspace research, qualitative research

Introduction

Coworking is a relatively new flexible workspace phenomenon, characterised by the co-location of highly diverse groups of independently working individuals and dispersed teams within the same work environment (Parrino, 2015) that is attributed by communal characteristics (Butcher, 2013; Ross & Ressia, 2015; Weijs-Perrée et al., 2019) such as sharing of resources (Bouncken & Reuschl, 2018), social learning (Bilandzic et al., 2013), and collaborating on joint activities (Merkel, 2015). Accordingly, these modern and thoroughly adaptable office spaces (Wright, 2018), focus on building solidarity as a by-product of professional cooperation through the knitting of meaningful relationships built upon the development of trust and social support (Bianchi et al., 2018) that lends itself to a sense of community at work (Garrett et al., 2017).

Relationships arise commonly due to the precisely planned functional infrastructure that is designed to encourage interaction amongst coworking space users (Green, 2014; Orel & Kubátová, 2019). The physical features of coworking premises are further supported by mechanisms that foster connections between individual users of a formal or informal nature (Brown, 2017; Gregg & Lodato, 2018; Spinuzzi et al., 2019). The social ambivalence of coworking environments is thus distinguished from traditional workspaces by being the stage for networking (De Peuter et al., 2017). Moreover, recent findings suggest a positive influence of social interactions and coworking environments on the productivity of individuals or groups of individuals who are using these flexible workspaces on a consistent basis (Bueno et al., 2018).

The first contemporary coworking spaces emerged due to increased labour markets and were popularized in subsequent years due to socioeconomic changes (Cabral & Van Winden, 2016; Merkel, 2015; Parrino, 2015). However, as the global economy grew over the past decade (Baten, 2016), the coworking model became widely adopted by the corporate world (Clifton et al., 2019; Grazian, 2019; Jamal, 2018). Thus, coworking environments have taken on a hybrid role, moving from self-supportive solo-entrepreneurial based workspaces to also incorporate more competitive, team-driven shared office spaces (Bouncken et al., 2018; Constantinescu & Devisch, 2018; Orel & Bennis, 2019), pushing the coworking model into cross-pollination and seeing the emergence of new sub-model types (e.g., “corpworkings,” “work-leisure retreats,” etc.; Bréchnignac et al., 2017; Marchegiani & Arcese, 2018; Schopf et al., 2015). Put another way, Gandini and Cossu (2019) observed coworking has transitioned to a post-recession, “neo-corporate model” of a flexible workspace, and represents the central office for a more significant number of knowledge and highly specialized workers in global cities.

Due to its novelty and recent transformation, the coworking model appears to be an under-explored phenomenon that deserves more attention within workplace research and cross-related study fields. While the subject has been explored by authors of a handful of literature review papers and book chapters (e.g., Gandini, 2015; Orel & Doublet, 2020; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016; Yang et al., 2019) that examine materials published in peer-reviewed journals and edited books, academia is still missing a comprehensive appraisal of exploratory studies of the coworking model that have taken a qualitative approach.

The contemporary concept of coworking has emerged in 2005 in the USA, and from that point on gradually expanded further. In 2010, the reopening of *New Work City*, a New York based coworking space, as well as the first *Coworking Day*, kicked off the subsequent rapid growth of these collaboratively used workplaces (Orel & Dvouletý, 2020). After Spinuzzi’s (2012) qualitative interview study in nine coworking spaces in Austin, Texas, narrowed the concept of coworking and counteracted the prevailing ambiguity and lack of appropriate definitions, further exploration of the coworking model garnered interest of other workplace scholars. In a similar manner to Spinuzzi’s study, key empirical studies in the field have taken qualitative approaches, allowing researchers to explore the intricate, interaction-based dynamics in coworking spaces. Such qualitative research is especially useful as a way of identifying relevant measures, and for building first frameworks and models through inductive approaches (Creswell, 2007), which facilitates follow-up quantitative studies. After major qualitative studies had been published, the first quantitative studies emerged beginning in 2016 (e.g., Bueno et al., 2018; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016; Robelski et al., 2019). These authors built on results of previous qualitative studies on the coworking model to add to the body of knowledge through quantitative research.

To further aid in the advancement of the field, the purpose of this paper is to investigate fundamental qualitative studies that probed selected coworking environments and carefully studied particular cases in various settings. Inspiration has been taken mainly from the paper on exploratory assessment of qualitative approaches to mixed methods practice by Hesse-Biber (2010). While the author argued there is a methodological orthodoxy in how mixed methods are practised in a way that favours qualitative methodologies, the paper outlines a handful of papers and shows the synergy of combining methods in the service of qualitatively driven approaches. That said, the qualitative approach enables scholars to seek on how to empower individuals’ stories, aiming to understand how they create meaning within their social world.

With that in mind, for this review paper, we selected six studies on the gradual development of a coworking model and analysed the use of a qualitative research methodology to assist (workplace) scholars in understanding the changing nature of contemporary coworking

environments through users' perspectives. The purpose of this paper is, therefore, to aggregate results across multiple studies and reflect on different qualitative approaches with the aim to develop consensus findings that could enable scholars or practitioners to make sense of a large amount of information.

Advantages of Qualitative Research Methods in Coworking Space Research

Qualitative research methods commonly used in past workspace studies have received less attention than they warranted in hindsight (Saunders & Townsend, 2016). Qualitative research can provide the verbal and visual description of the wants and needs of workspace users (Campbell, 1999). It offers researchers a way of understanding of workspace scenery and distinctive characteristics (e.g., Agrawal & Garimella, 1994; Coradi et al. 2015; Peterson & Beard, 2004), and it can evaluate the processes that are connecting workspace users with the workspace premise (e.g., Fried et al., 2001; Jonge et al., 2001; Pati et al., 2014; Wistow & Schneider, 2003). That said, qualitative research methods have repeatedly been used in cases where there was no other primary data available. Hence, they provided explanatory accounts and recommendations for further studies (Plowman et al., 1995).

However, it bears noting that qualitative research does not provide a holistic account of a complete workspace scenery, which oftentimes demands the application of a robust dataset that is available through quantitative approaches (Campbell, 1999). When designing qualitative research, it is crucial to address such issues of validity and reliability of data (Bentley & Yoong, 2000), or other appropriate criteria for qualitative research (e.g., Guba & Lincoln, 1981), and to identify the approach that might minimise possible sampling-related problems and observation biases (Roulston & Shelton, 2015).

Nevertheless, a qualitative approach allows scholars to observe, record, and capture the changing attitudes related to a selected subject, such as the continual changes we are seeing in the contemporary workplace. Additionally, qualitative research methods can add context to the investigated subject dynamics and reveal data that would not be obtainable with a quantitative approach, giving context to the preselected variables and providing greater detail concerning the examined subject.

Following Spilka's (1998) anthology on the workplace research evolution, the qualitative exploration of coworking environments has become a more complex and mature discipline. Thus, to capture this development, identifying key past studies, and categorising them by importance and influence on subsequent research (i.e., the frequency of being referenced in scholarly texts) is especially useful. Coworking spaces have recently undergone a dramatic change in their number, type, range of users, and purpose. This increased demand has left coworking as an under-researched field with insufficient data that would allow scholars to closely study these flexible work environments' implications in relation to other subjects (Jeske & Ruwe, 2019; Lévai, 2018; Yang et al., 2019).

While an ethnographic approach can uncover characteristics of sampled coworking spaces by immersing the scholar in the environment itself and enabling him or her to gain understanding of the processes that are driving the outcomes for users themselves, the phenomenological method of research utilizes interviews to gather information from coworking space users, and to help the scholar comprehend their perspectives on the outcomes (e.g., enhanced productivity, increased tendency towards knowledge sharing, etc.). For this purpose, the grounded theory method enables coworking space scholars to systematically build theories from the obtained data to explain why these work arrangements coworking have evolved the way they have, and to illustrate both the development and the advancement of the processes that characterize the coworking space. However, due to the previously mentioned changing nature of coworking environments, the case study model functions as a valuable

approach that provides a suitable in-depth glance at selected cases of coworking spaces in various settings.

Methods

The following narrative review examines the case studies in chronological order intending to understand how the qualitative research methods have developed and gradually progressed in parallel to the growing complexity of the coworking phenomenon. We selected six scholarly papers on coworking space research. Our selection criteria included: works that represented the first qualitative studies on this topic and works with the highest number of citations amongst research papers on the subject, indicating that they are core sources for the subsequent scholarly exploration of the coworking model.

The reviews of the selected papers proceed as follows. For each paper, first, we identify the purpose of the research, as well as research questions where applicable. To allow for an analysis of methodological developments, the employed methods, and relevant details regarding the process and sample are provided. The overall research process is also mapped for better comparability. This is followed by a brief discussion of main findings, an outline of the conclusions, as well as the implications the authors underscore, focusing on recommendations for future research (methods).

Case Studies of Qualitatively Driven Research Designs of the Coworking Space Model

Case Study 1: Exploring Coworking as a Concept

In “Working Alone Together: Coworking as an Emergent Collaborative Activity,” Clay Spinuzzi (2012) narrowed the coworking concept to counteract the prevailing ambiguity and lack of appropriate definitions. In doing so, Spinuzzi focused explicitly on the understanding of coworking from industry members by trying to find answers to the fundamental research questions of (a) What is coworking? (b) Who coworks? and (c) Why do people cowork?

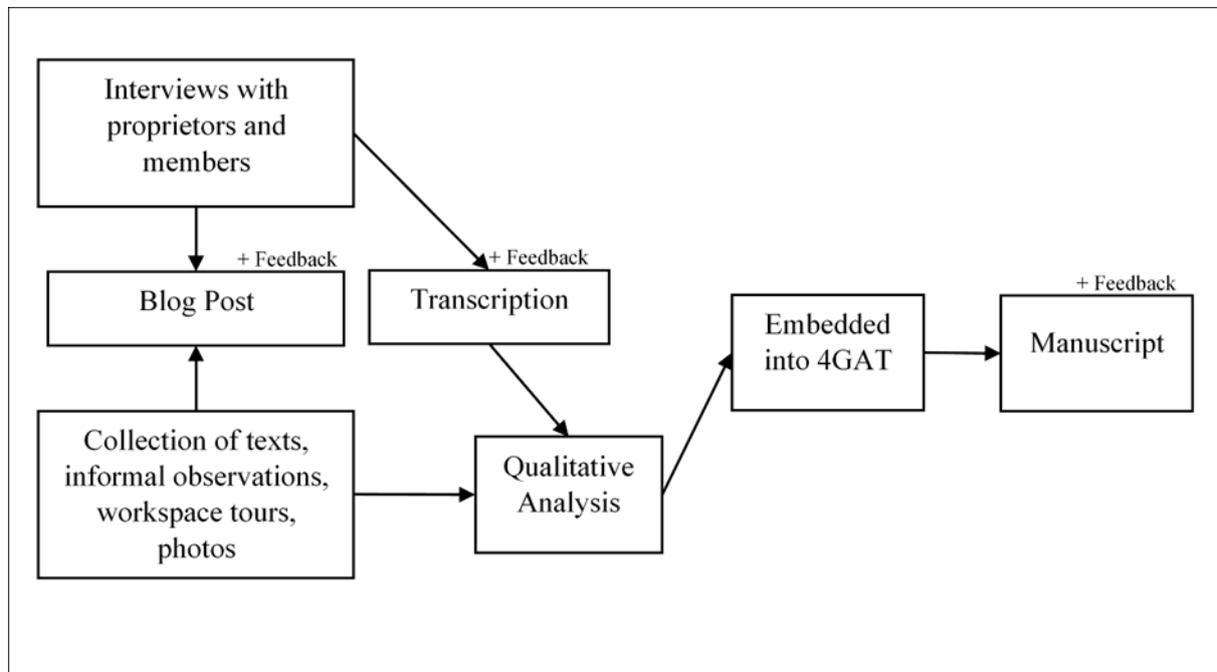
In seeking to answer these, Spinuzzi carried out a qualitative study through both formal and informal interviews in a total of nine coworking spaces in Austin, Texas. The formal interviews were conducted with the coworking spaces' proprietors, at random points in time (including before the opening of one space), and ranged from 29-77 minutes in length, with an average of 48 minutes. In the case of multiple proprietors, group interviews were carried out. To capture a second viewpoint, further interviews were conducted with 17 coworking space members selected through a convenience sampling technique, lasting between 9-45 minutes, with an average of 21 minutes.

Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed, and entire entries were coded through starter coding, open coding, and axial coding to finally reduce the data for key themes to emerge. The qualitative data was further enriched through informally collected data from coworking space tours, photos, and other sources (e.g., freely accessible LinkedIn profiles), to then be entered into the relational database.

The data analysis was largely carried out by investigating consistencies among different data types. Thus, code relationships were compared to other data types and sources to identify commonalities to be then further analysed. A crucial element for the analysis was recurrent feedback from participants on different aspects. Following the completion of informal interviews, participation in coworking space tours, finalized transcription of formal interviews, as well as a working draft of the research manuscript, profiles of each selected coworking space were published on the author's blog site. This

approach minimised any potential bias and facilitated stronger ties with participants who had been directly involved in the research process.

Figure 1
Spinuzzi's (2012) Methodological Approach



Contradiction and disagreement of participants pervaded the overall findings; yet, common themes arose. The analysis of proprietors' interviews revealed three groups of coworking spaces, which differed in their proprietors' understanding of coworking: "The Community Workspace," "The Unoffice," and "The Federated Workspace." For each, the researcher discusses different characteristics and orientations, from primarily serving the local community, providing an interactive alternative to traditional offices, or fostering B2B relationships through the ongoing interactions of co-workers, respectively.

Similarly, the findings from the analysis of individuals who have been using the selected coworking spaces show differences in their understanding of coworking, ranging from coworking as "a space," "an inexpensive office alternative" to coworking as "collaboration," among others. From comparing proprietors' differences in understanding the purpose of coworking with the range of definitions of coworking space members, Spinuzzi concludes that "how the participants perceive the object of coworking affects how they co-construct it" (p. 409), as an important contribution to the first research question on what is coworking.

The findings further indicate that the selected coworking spaces' members were mostly in line with proprietors' expectations of them, despite minor differences. The expectations towards coworking of these actors, however, again displayed discrepancies, especially in regard to the space, design, and impression on externals, as well as the flexibility and location of the space. However, these could largely be explained by the individuals' sociodemographic, such as their age group or the connectedness to clients depending on their business.

Concerning the third research question of why people cowork, Spinuzzi identified commonly perceived benefits of coworking in avoiding negative effects from working in isolation. The former includes (i) interaction, (ii) feedback, (iii) trust, (iv) learning, and (v) partnerships. An underlying assumption behind the discrepancies towards outcome

expectations appeared to be the overall anticipation of coworking space members of either parallel work or cooperative work as an outcome.

The above-described findings were then embedded into a fourth-generation activity theory (4GAT) framework based on grounded theory. As opposed to a third-generation activity theory, that is based on the premise that an activity system of human actors manipulates an object to achieve an outcome (e.g., manufacturing a car from raw materials), Spinuzzi argues coworking is different and requires a fourth-generation activity theory framework to be analysed:

In sum, 4GAT responds to the same trends that have led to coworking. Thus, I follow the 4GAT line of analysis here, examining the phenomenon of coworking as an inter-organizational, collaborative object. What are the aspects of that collaboration? What activities does it network? The 4GAT analysis proffered here, I believe, fits the phenomenon of coworking well: Although coworking initially seems to be an unproblematic service, it means rather different things to different participants, and a 4GAT analysis can tease out these differences and suggest further lines of inquiry. (p. 402)

In viewing the findings within the 4GAT framework, Spinuzzi identified two distinct configurations of coworking: “The Good-Neighbours” configuration and the “Good-Partners” configuration. With the first configuration, users of coworking spaces regularly encounter with customers on a face-to-face basis in order to sustain their neighbourly relationships and support everyone’s parallel work. Conversely, the Good Partners configuration stands for linking highly specialized individuals in coworking spaces in order to withstand common work-related difficulties. Both configurations serve as a way of interpreting the observed tensions and discrepancies and allow for a classification of the coworking spaces included in the original sample. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of findings, advocating the need for future research in the field. For this, the applied activity theory is described as a valuable tool for future studies.

Case Study 2: Comparing Spaces to Investigate the Role of Proximity

In her 2015 study “Coworking: Assessing the Role of Proximity in Knowledge Exchange,” Lucia Parrino investigated the role of proximity in coworking spaces as a means to foster knowledge exchange. The study was done in two phases, beginning with an exploratory first phase seeking to deepen understanding of coworking in general. A second phase conducting a qualitative study on the role of proximity in coworking environments.

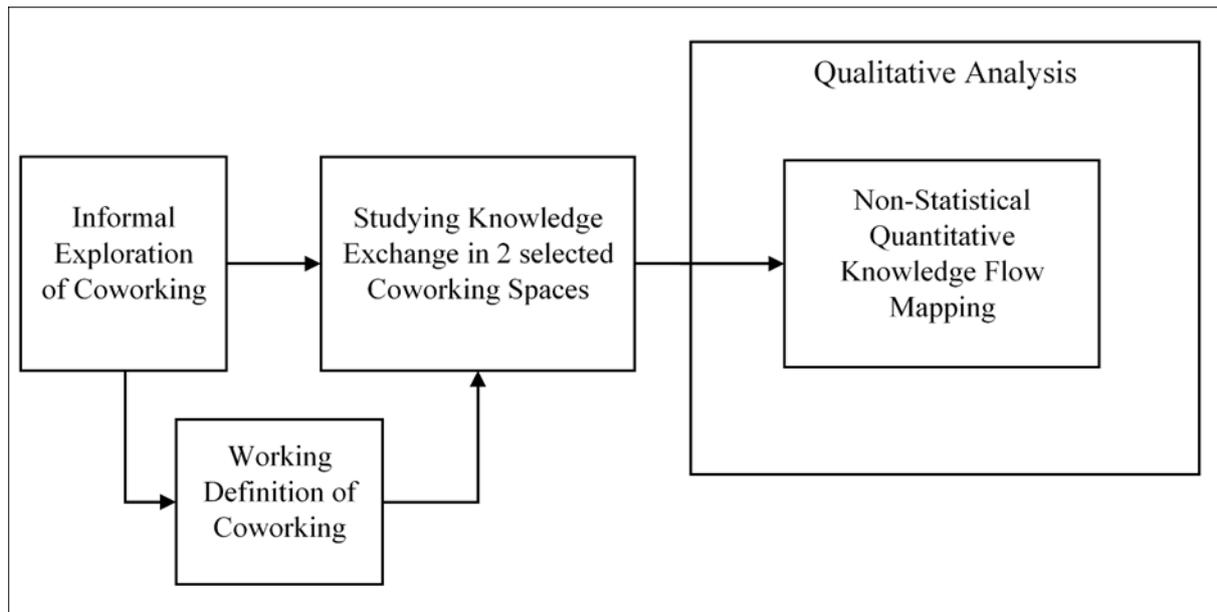
For the first exploratory phase, Parrino analysed existing literature and documents, and participated in seminars and events on coworking. A total of 58 coworking spaces were chosen in Milan (27) and Barcelona (31) and investigated further during a ten-month period. She notes that this stage has been “pivotal in moving from a generic interest in coworking in the knowledge economy to the well-formed and investigable research question” (p. 3).

The second investigative phase was intended to shed more light on the role of proximity. Two coworking spaces with similar degrees of geographical proximity were selected, with one space offering an organisational platform for members to interact and therefore facilitate additional forms of community. In each space, a heterogeneous sample of five members were allocated, and the data was collected through structured, in-depth interviews revolving around four key themes, twice with ten days in between. Furthermore, covert participant observation of 50 hours total allowed for the collection of additional data.

The research uses social network analysis to study knowledge flows among the participants using software to visualize each study participant's knowledge network. To categorise, knowledge was differentiated into “know-what,” “know-how,” “know-why,” and “know-who.” However, the use of basic statistics in the reconstruction “was not meant to have any statistical value” (p. 4). Instead, the focus on knowledge content served as the justification for the qualitative approach taken.

Figure 2

Parrino's (2015) Methodological Approach



To narrow the concept of coworking further, Parrino suggested a coworking continuum ranging from coworking spaces with a “presence of an articulated platform of tools and initiatives designed to stimulate interaction and collaboration” and “total absence of such offers” (p. 5). In addition, a working definition of coworking was developed based on the three traits of (i) co-localisation in the same workspace, (ii) heterogeneity of members, and (iii) the presence (or absence) of tools to encourage interaction.

In the first findings section, Parrino presented the merged self-centred knowledge transmission network structures, and for each of the two spaces counted the occurrence of knowledge flows within the different knowledge categories. It became apparent that despite detected knowledge flows in both coworking spaces, the higher frequency of knowledge transfer, collaborative action, and mediation activities could be observed only in the coworking environment with an accompanying shared platform. Moreover, the staff seemed to further play a crucial role in facilitating social proximity.

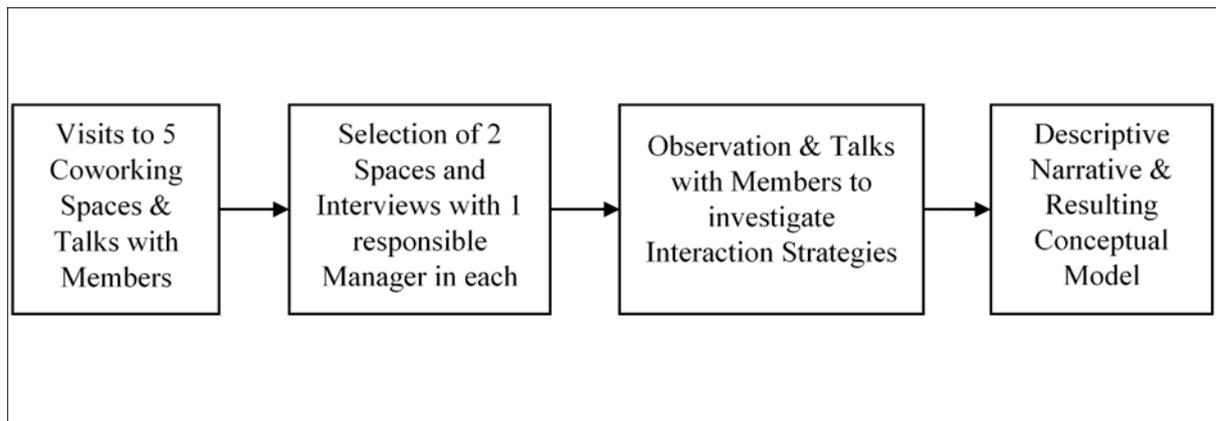
Parrino concluded that the effectiveness of coworking spaces largely depends upon the contextual setting and its related factors, hence further emphasising the use of qualitative methods in coworking research. She notes that future research should also seek to compare observations across regions and countries to further investigate cultural and contextual factors. Making use of ethnographic and biographical methods is also encouraged. Lastly, more research into the details of organisational platforms for coworking spaces is recommended to increase the observed benefits.

Case 3: Aspects of Effective Coworking Space Management

Shifting the research focus to the coworking space managers previously identified as crucial elements of successful coworking, Cabral and Van Winden (2016) conducted their qualitative study “Coworking: an analysis of coworking strategies for interaction and innovation” to determine: (i) which strategic management tools are used in coworking spaces to make workers interact, (ii) the extent to which these tools facilitate interaction between workers, and (iii) how these tools enable innovation. In finding answers to these questions, the researchers intended to contribute to the body of knowledge on effective coworking management to further maximise benefits such as “cooperation” and “knowledge exchange.”

Figure 3

Cabral and Van Winden’s (2016) Methodological Approach



Cabral and Van Winden initially identified five coworking spaces in Amsterdam as the most important regional hub for coworking. Upon visiting them “in order to have a good understanding of which types of coworking spaces exist and how they differ from each other” (p. 10), two coworking spaces selected. Interviews were conducted with the responsible director in one space, and the community manager in the other. Subsequently, observations and semi-structured interviews (after initial piloting and translation) were conducted with eight of eight members in one space and ten of thirteen members in the other space, respectively. These interviews ranged from 13 to 32 minutes in length and explored: (i) a typical day in the space, (ii) motivation behind the coworking space usage, (iii) characteristics of the physical space, (iv) examples of interactions between coworking space members and community managers, and (v) outcomes of those. Participants were chosen to reflect a cross-section of industries and lengths of time spent in a dedicated coworking environment.

Given the lack of research in the field, the analysis is described by the researchers as an exploratory study. Using a descriptive narrative approach, findings that include direct quotes extracted from interviews are discussed and interpreted for each of the two coworking spaces, focusing specifically on the workspace strategies (e.g., fostering interactions, mediating relations, etc.), and its implications for members. The discussion is further enriched by the inclusions of photographs from the space to exemplify the discussion for the reader.

In response to the first research question, the roles of active community managers are stressed as key success factors. For it to work, however, the manager needs to be aware of the individual members, their needs, and preferences to respond appropriately when connecting members. Furthermore, depending upon the aim of the coworking space, the study offers new insight upon the necessity of actively managing diversity to ensure an adequate coworking

space user composition that leads to further benefits for the coworking space members. Nevertheless, Cabral and Van Winden (2016) advocate the need to understand members' motivations in joining a particular coworking space, where the primary focus should be on the potential for fruitful interaction. Diversity, in that sense, acts more as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, and therefore needs to be treated with care.

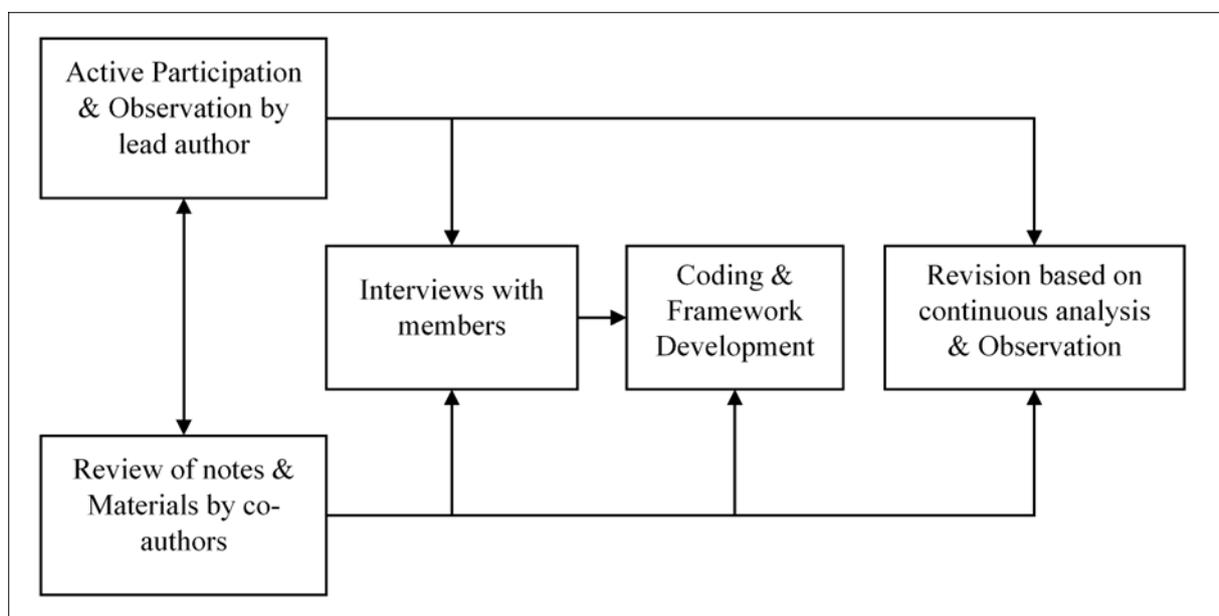
In terms of a spaces' design, the researchers find that open spaces with shared areas further contribute to positive outcomes for members. Furthermore, networking tools provided by the space enhance the connectedness of coworking space members. The authors use a conceptual map to visualize their findings and summarise the study before discussing conclusions. Here, they also caution readers regarding “the certainty and generalizability of the conclusions [which] are limited by the data set and the number of analysed coworking spaces” (p. 29).

Case 4: Immersed in Qualitative Research for a More in-depth Understanding of the Coworking Model

Past research led to the assumption that coworking is primarily advantageous when a sense of community (SOC) is established. Garrett, Spreitzer, and Bacevice (2017) explored this further in their study of “Co-constructing a Sense of Community at Work: The Emergence of Community in Coworking Spaces” to determine how a SOC is: (i) created, (ii) maintained, and further (iii) improved by looking into a specific case. The study was guided by the underlying research question: “[How] is a SOC constructed by independent workers in coworking spaces?” (p. 822).

Figure 4

Garrett's et al. (2017) Methodological Approach



The study was conducted at a non-disclosed US-based coworking space with a little over 60 members total, and 15-25 members frequenting the space on a regular daily basis. The researchers describe a diverse member composition with a focus on community, with approximately half of members being freelancers and the other half representing remote workers. The managerial base of the selected coworking space consisted of three managers

or “maintainers” (p. 823) that are in charge of administrative tasks and general coordination activities.

The data was collected through ethnographic observation of members, semi-structured interviews, as well as chat conversations on the shared server of a selected coworking space. In addition to this, and similar to previously described studies, the lead author further engaged with the coworking space through observation and active participation over a period of six months.

Garrett et al. (2017) specify their epistemological stance to be that of relation constructivism. In the context of coworking, this refers to the assumption that social actors derive their understanding of the world by attaching meaning to social interaction. Studying such phenomena, therefore, requires viewing the world from the perspective of the individual actor. The researchers focus specifically on exploring the encounters, which they subdivide into “observing the norms of the community, identifying commonalities with other members, and perceiving potential benefits of membership” (p. 832).

In the first stage of the study, the researchers intended to promote understanding by deriving themes from interviews and discussing findings in weekly meetings. The themes and discussions subsequently served to contextualize interview protocols and to narrow the scope of the research further. Using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program, the transcripts were then coded, first using line-by-line coding to identify key themes and results of the secondary data analysis (e.g., emails) were fed into it. The codes were then clustered and integrated into a comprehensive framework. The latter repeatedly underwent testing and revision as a result of the ongoing observation and weekly discussions, as newly observed phenomena were viewed and interpreted through the use of the conceptual framework.

From the coding process, three dominant interacts emerge with members “endorsing,” “encountering,” and “engaging” as a part of the SOC. The study also suggests a degree of overlap with concepts of organisational culture, such as the socialisation process of new members, and the way that shared assumptions and behaviours are developed. The developed framework indicates that for an SOC to be effective, the community's vision needs to be endorsed to allow for members to encounter and engage as highly interdependent activities. These, in turn, re-shape the vision of the community. Therefore, coworking spaces should aim to align the collective and individual desires for the community by creating and implementing necessary structures, practices, and functions.

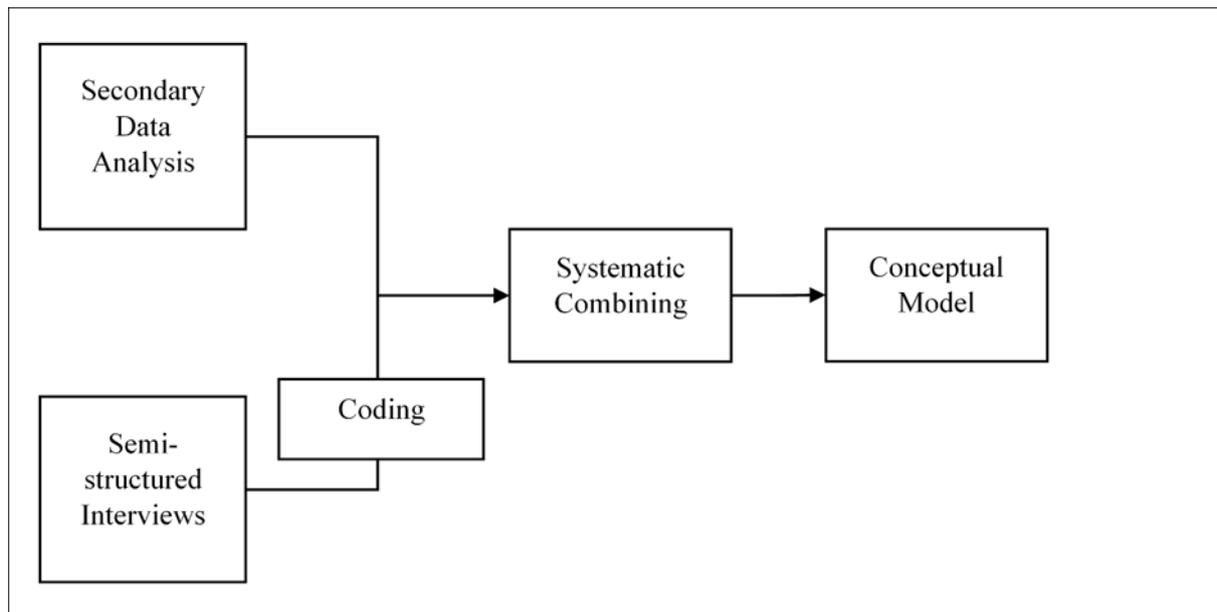
Based on the view of coworking as a more dynamic phenomenon, the researchers recommend further attention to the nature of community at work, which they describe as “an autonomous, interactive, and ongoing process” (p. 838). In particular, they suggest exploring new ways to encourage community work without pressuring members into any behaviours.

Case 5: Using New Methods to Investigate the Effects of Coopetition in Coworking Environments

In finding new ways to further enhance value creation in coworking, Bouncken, Laudien, Fredrich, and Görmar (2018) analysed the potential and role of “coopetition” in coworking spaces in their study “Coopetition in Coworking-Space: Value Creation and Appropriation Tensions in an Entrepreneurial Space.” With the aim of “analysing coopetitive tensions in different types of coworking-spaces” (p. 387), they built upon a multiple case study approach to derive a model on the coopetitive functioning of a sample of coworking spaces in Germany.

Figure 5

Bouncken's et al. (2018) Methodological Approach



Using purposeful sampling, the researchers selected twelve coworking spaces where key informants were accessible with archival data used to prevent critical informant bias. The selected coworking spaces were located in Germany in order to avoid cultural bias, thus generating a diverse sample in a geographically bounded area. By conducting a past literature review, an interview guide protocol was created for semi-structured in-depth interviews between April and November 2016. Interviews ranged from 40 to 90 minutes in length. With the study strongly embedded into prior research, the researchers made use of systematic combining instead of grounded theory, as the latter intends to approach studied phenomena bias-free, so that relevant themes arise during the research, as opposed to them being identified prior to conducting the research. Subsequently written up transcripts were sent back to interviewees for confirmation. Participants and their data were anonymised.

Using the “Gioia methodology,” Bouncken et al. (2018) evaluated the obtained data and enriched it further through the inclusions of secondary data such as websites, press publications and additional material obtained by informants. The coding process was divided into several parts. To begin, the first-order concepts and second-order themes were identified. These were then allocated into aggregate dimensions to further make sense of the data. The codes are disclosed fully to readers in multiple data tables. The authors derive a model that maps four distinct coworking space types for their openness and tensions from systematically combining the resulting data.

The researchers take a new perspective on coworking spaces by viewing them as institutions, justified by members' shared assumptions. Accordingly, coworking would function as a relevant new form of an institution in regard to entrepreneurship and innovation. To reap positive benefits from coworking, the authors focus specifically on the two aspects of value creation for customers, and appropriation to utilize the value created. It, therefore, seems appropriate to investigate how this can be achieved through cooperation.

From the results, the researchers identify four distinct types of coworking spaces (“corporate,” “open corporate,” “consultancy,” “independent”) which largely differ in terms of their openness and the resulting challenges they face. They note that balancing tensions of both collaboration and competition cultivates strong potential for innovation in

coworking spaces. However, to reach such a stage, they describe the community managers as a key figure in a coworking ecosystem. Bouncken et al. (2018) share the opinion that the future research should focus “on specific archetypes or proto-type institutions of coworking-spaces and measure the influence of mechanisms for value creation and value appropriation” (p. 406), as well as look further into the impact of national contexts on the latter.

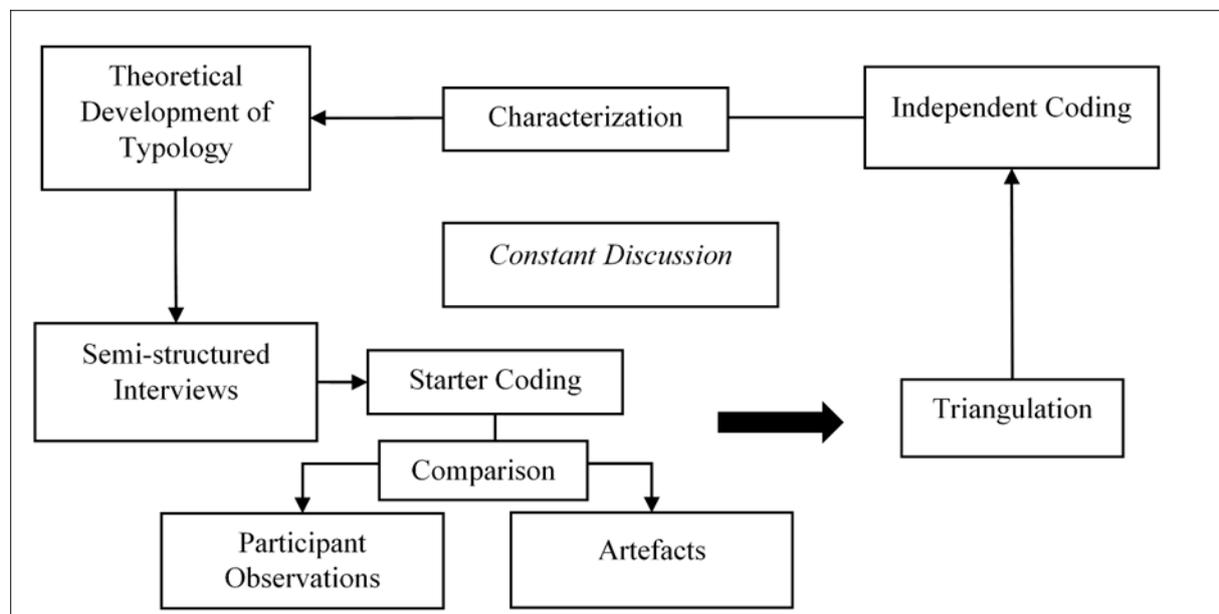
The researchers further discuss the limitations of their research. In this regard, they mention the homogeneous sample as a limiting factor but justify it with the necessity of conducting exploratory research in coworking as a fairly recent and under-researched phenomenon. This, however, carries further implications for the generalization of findings, which, due to the exploratory design, is not a given. For this, they advocate follow-up, quantitative studies to test mechanisms in managing competition in coworking spaces.

Case 6: Shaping the Future of Coworking Community

Seven years after one of the first and impactful publications on coworking (Spinuzzi, 2012), Clay Spinuzzi, together with Bodrožić, Scaratti and Ivaldi (2019), revisits the concept of community in coworking as a key theme in their study “Coworking Is About Community: But What Is “Community” in Coworking?” They note that despite increasing attention to coworking in the field, the themes of “community” and “collaboration” both “seem to be defined inconsistently across both the academic literature and the promotional discourse surrounding coworking” (p. 114). Their aim was, therefore: (i) to develop a concept of community to be used for future empirical studies and (ii) to specify and differentiate the concept of collaboration. The latter has been portrayed as beneficial for the broader field of social theory, as well as to render a comparison of different types of communities possible.

Figure 6

Spinuzzi's et al. (2019) Methodological Approach



The study takes an inductive, multiple-case study approach involving a total of six coworking spaces in Italy (Milan), Serbia (Belgrade), and the US (Austin). For this case study approach, a total of 33 interviews were conducted, mostly with site managers but in some cases members as well, all revolving around specified key themes. Moreover, participant observation

was used, and the collected data was further enriched with artefacts from the different coworking spaces, such as documents or photographs.

Prior to the commencement of data collection, the researchers developed a typology of communities, based on Adler and Heckscher's (2006) approach of differentiating between "Gemeinschaft," "Gesellschaft," and "Collaborative." The researchers adapted the approach and identified the "currently dominant types of community: Gesellschaft-like and collaborative" (p. 122) due to the lack of overlap of "Gemeinschaft" communities founded on blood relations amongst others. To serve as a comparative framework for theirs and future studies, Spinuzzi et al. (2019) revised characteristics of the various types into: (i) structure/division of labour, (ii) nature of the coworker-manager relationship, and (iii) nature of the coworker-coworker relationship.

After the interview data had been collected, the researchers coded starter codes for the application to the data. Subsequently, the data were compared further to the participant observations and other collected artefacts to triangulate findings obtained in the various coworking spaces under investigation. The coding process was then continued independently, and coworking spaces were characterised according to the initially developed typology. Throughout the entire research process, "researchers discussed each other's characterisations and examined each other's supporting data" (p. 129).

The researchers found that most coworking spaces function as "Gesellschaften" communities, with a current trend also revolving around the collaborative communities. Most selected coworking spaces appeared to be policy-based, with somewhat authoritarian coworker-manager relationships and sporadic examples of interdependence and collaboration. Accordingly, the coworker-to-coworker relationships seemed influenced mainly by the "institutional rules and values at each space" (p. 134) as the framework of interaction. As expected, they also found inconsistencies in the understanding and usage of both community and collaboration of involved actors.

Spinuzzi et al. (2019) advise the use of the coworking space typology as a valuable tool for future research, allowing for a more differentiated view of the community in coworking spaces. They further note that it facilitates micro-level analyses for its applicability in detecting misalignments, hence alluding to the advantage for practitioners. Finally, they also suggest longitudinal approaches for future studies, as well as expanding the research field to adjacent fields of knowledge production in general.

Overarching Themes

The provided reviews help outline the key development patterns of coworking research using qualitative methods. To better analyze the developments; however, we first underscore the overarching themes of the papers, and provide a brief overview of how they capture the themes of the respective studies. For this purpose, we compared the findings of the selected papers, focusing in particular on the contribution to the field of coworking research. With an eye toward similarities in thematic contribution, we identified a total of four loosely defined, overarching themes in order to group the papers, namely (i) "concept of coworking and typologies," (ii) "proximity and knowledge exchange," (iii) "interaction and community management," and (iv) "community." The first theme revolves around the conceptualization of a coworking model and various subsequent types of the model that have emerged over the years (i.e., from individual-purposed to group-purposed coworking spaces). The second theme is concerned with physical and social proximity within the (coworking) space itself that enables individuals to connect with other users and build or get involved in various networks, exchange (specialized) knowledge and affect both the level of well-being and the level of personal productivity. The third theme is based on mediated or non-mediated interaction that is a

common phenomenon in coworking spaces and oftentimes a user's criterion when selecting a daily workspace. Lastly, the theme "community" captures the creation of a supportive network of individuals that shows a high tendency of collaboration, sharing and mutual assistance.

Four of the papers (Bouncken et al., 2018; Parrino, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012; Spinuzzi et al., 2019, in parts) are concerned with (re)defining and providing typologies for the concept of coworking. The research conducted by Parrino (2015) and Bouncken et al. (2018) delves into the role of proximity and the related concept of knowledge exchange. Cabral and van Winden (2016), Bouncken et al. (2018) and Spinuzzi et al. (2019) focus on interaction among members, as well as the role of community managers in enhancing the former. The community as a whole is what Garrett et al. (2017), and Spinuzzi et al. (2019) explore further in their research.

Development of the Overarching Themes

We not only address the progression in terms of these themes, but also demonstrate the way that the applied methods have evolved to better suit the explored aspects. The earlier study by Spinuzzi (2012) in particular built an initial base for subsequent research by providing a first, in-depth typology of coworking spaces as a result of empirical research, thus adding to the first theme of the "concept of coworking and typologies." This had also enabled Parrino's (2015) study to add to this with a typology, both narrowing down coworking characteristics, and exploring the functioning of knowledge exchange due to physical proximity as a second major theme of "proximity and knowledge exchange."

Subsequent research, given the now more precise understanding of the concept of coworking, focused more on the dynamics within coworking spaces, and, therefore, adding to the understanding of the third theme, "interaction and community management." Cabral and van Winden (2016) explored the role of community management through tools, the space, as well as the actual community managers, shedding more light on the enabling factors of interaction. As an additional contributing factor to this, Garrett et al. (2017) expanded our knowledge on how the community co-constructs a sense of community, as the fourth overarching theme.

With the basic understanding of coworking further built, Bouncken et al. (2018) took a new perspective by viewing coworking spaces as institutions and drew on the concept of co-competition to explore the respective dynamics in coworking environments, and as such, adding further to the themes of (i) "concept of coworking and typologies," (ii) "proximity and knowledge exchange," as well as (iii) "interaction and community management." The final and most recent study by Spinuzzi et al. (2019) could build on the propositions by Garrett et al. (2017), as well as other research on the fourth theme, "community," by noting a lack of consistency in its use, as well as the understanding of collaboration as a major building block.

Similar to the gradual advancement of themes, the observable patterns are indicating increasing complexity, and rigor in the methodological frameworks chosen. Whilst interviews were made use of in all the reviewed studies, a pre-study immersion within one or more coworking spaces was especially prominent in non-typology papers, exploring thus-far unresearched sub-themes related to coworking. Later studies also expanded the body of knowledge by integrating their findings into other concepts, such as viewing coworking as institutions (Bouncken et al., 2018) as mentioned before, or utilizing community typologies (Spinuzzi et al., 2019). In addition to interviews, the use of other artefacts, such as blog posts, photos, emails etc., was also a common strategy to better make sense of findings. Interestingly, the number of sampled coworking spaces has generally been consistent, but especially studies focused on the first theme of the "concept of coworking and typologies" sampled a larger selection of coworking spaces.

Discussion

Following the discussion of the developments of the overarching themes covered by the studies and the underpinning methodological approaches, we can now highlight best practices to draw conclusions on qualitative research methods that are suitable for examination of coworking environments. In addition, we discuss suitable methodological frameworks for future studies.

An exploratory first phase preceding as well as during data collection can serve researchers as a way to immerse themselves in the research context further. The latter is effective not only to ensure the planned research aim and design are suitable, but also to facilitate the analysis stage for researchers, especially with ontological stances strongly tending to subjectivism or constructivism, where the analysis of data requires the researcher to view the observations through the eyes of the participants. This has proved to be especially important when exploring community/interaction-based phenomena to better contextualize observations and interviewees' experiences. However, when being closely involved with participants and coworking spaces, any potentially influential biases as a result of the researcher's own assumptions should be disclosed to readers.

Bias can also hinder an appropriate sample selection, which is why the selected sampling technique should be sufficiently discussed and justified. Despite the exploratory nature of qualitative research, and the resulting difficulties with making generalized findings, proper sampling enables researchers to correctly lay the necessary groundwork for follow-up studies of both a qualitative and quantitative nature. Further attention may also be paid to the diversity of the sample, aiming for a selection of different types of coworking spaces to better allow for generalizability of findings. Regarding disclosing potential sources of bias, Garrett et al. (2017), for example, specified their epistemological stance as part of their study; therefore, allowing readers to keep in mind the assumptions underlying the research. This approach is highly valuable for future research in the field, where discussions on the nature of the coworking model (ontology), and suitable methods for creating knowledge (epistemology) can accelerate the advancement of this rapidly growing field.

As opposed to the most prevalent strategy of grounded theory, Bouncken et al. (2018) used systematic combining in their study, which was supported by the more substantial inclusion of past research. Additionally, data enrichment through the collection of relevant artefacts (i.e., communication of members, documents, photographs, etc.) presents a unique opportunity for coworking research to induce more accuracy to findings.

To further enhance the reliability of qualitative research, continuously challenging findings, and conceptual models, as done by Garrett et al. (2017) and Spinuzzi et al. (2019), is a valuable approach that may aid the design and aim of follow-up studies. Such open discussion during the research process should also involve continually making sense of newly observed phenomena and simultaneous revision of the work in progress. The findings from qualitative approaches should further be tested through quantitative research.

Overall, the reviewed studies display a tendency towards increasing methodological rigor where researchers first frame the concepts and themes at hand and then develop working definitions and classifications where necessary. Further attention is paid to the validation of collected data through continuous feedback from participants. Findings are embedded in a novel and more complex frameworks, which enables researchers to deepen their understanding on a more abstract level, and which, in turn, can serve as an impetus for further coworking research.

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