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Favours Within the Tribe: Social Support in Coworking Spaces

Abstract

Emerging from the changing social, technological and cultural changes to work, coworking has been positioned as a new economic engine composed of collaboration and community, providing support for entrepreneurship, innovation and soft infrastructure for economic development. However, an alternative interpretation of coworking suggests it responds to the isolation and insecurity of self-employment by the formation of ‘community’ to provide mutual support to navigate precarious work conditions. Faced with contrasting accounts of coworking, using in-depth interviews and ethnography of a coworking space, this paper explores the support members of the community offer by drawing on the concept of social support. It contributes to our understanding of social support in an entrepreneurial context and explores a more nuanced and darker side to social support in coworking spaces. Whilst coworkers engaged with others to provide emotional, informational and instrumental support, social support also revealed exchange relationships underpinned by reciprocity, which reinforced precarious work conditions.

Keywords

Coworking, Social Support, Creative Industries, Community, Entrepreneurism, Self-Employment, Precarious Work

Introduction

Coworking is a growing phenomenon. Emerging from the collapse, and blurring of traditional boundaries of work, space, resources, and technology, coworking enables workers to rent desks, flexibly on a weekly, monthly, or daily basis, in shared work settings (Merkel, 2015). A differential feature of coworking from other forms of shared office space is the centrality of social interactions, emphasis on community, and the offer of mutual support (Garrett et al., 2017; Merkel, 2015; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). From a position of relative obscurity a decade ago, currently, 2.2 million people work in over 22,000 coworking spaces worldwide (Deskmag, 2019) and this number is expected to rise to over 5 million people working in 40,000 coworking spaces by 2024 (Risio, 2020). Its geographical reach also underlines its evolution, coworking spaces operate worldwide, with the largest markets in North America, Europe, and Asia (Risio, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on

coworking. Covid-19 restrictions have impaired coworking business models underpinned by their emphasis on flexibility, community, collaboration and shared space. Furthermore, drops in demand and increased investment in health and safety measures due to Covid-19 restrictions have presented financial challenges and led to calls for enhanced government support for coworking spaces (Malin, 2020, Bozkurt et al, 2020). However, in reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic and increased home, hybrid and more 'flexible' working, coworking spaces have also been presented as an affordable and flexible way for organisations to access office space and enhance collaboration, lower costs and enhance choice for workers (Malin, 2020).

Extant literature highlights the diversity of characterisations of coworking. Coworking is positioned as soft infrastructure (Bradshaw & Blakely, 1999), essential for the revitalisation and economic development of cities and communities (Jamal 2018), a new business model for office provision (Salinger, 2013), and a mechanism to support entrepreneurship and innovative micro clusters (Bouncken and Reuschl, 2018, Capdevila, 2015). More critical interpretations suggest coworking responds to the isolation, insecurity, and precarity of self-employment, providing a basis for self-help, self-organisation, meaningful social encounters, recognition, and belongingness by the formation of 'community' (Garrett et al., 2017, Merkel, 2019). However, rather than defend against inhospitable work conditions, a darker side to coworking suggests it can reproduce precarious working conditions (de Peuter et al., 2017), increase work intensification, and encourage self-exploitation (Lorne, 2020, Waters-Lynch and Duff, 2019).

In the context of offering collegial support to guard against inhospitable workplace conditions, the literature highlights how social support can enhance workplace wellbeing through enacting emotional, informational and instrumental support (Smollan and Morrison, 2019). Social support is typically conceptualised as social relationships that benefit others in coping with challenging circumstances (Smollan and Morrison, 2019). Despite optimistic accounts of giving and receiving social support, the emotional toil and stress for those enacting support, alongside indebtedness and challenges to self-esteem for those receiving it, reveal the personal costs related to social support (Lundqvist et al., 2018; Smollan and Morrison, 2019). Although literature centrally focusing on social support typically

examines relationships within conventional organisations, examples outside of this micro specialism recognise undesirable consequences of enacting activities related to social support (McKenzie et al. 2019).

Coworking is an interesting locus to understand support outside traditional organisations contexts. Alongside its increasing prominence, coworking is placed centrally as a facilitator of social support, replicating conventional organisational relationships by offering independent workers a physical workspace to combine informal social interactions with more formal productive activities (Spinuzzi et al., 2019). An emerging body of work emphasises the emotional and informational support enacted in coworking Spaces, through informal discussions around psychological and practical challenges (Annink, 2017; Brown, 2017; Mitev et al. 2019). However, there appears to be little exploration of the negative implications of such support in coworking spaces (Gerdenitsch et al., 2016). Faced with contrasting interpretations of coworking in addressing the needs of isolated and insecure workers and gaps in the knowledge on how social support operates in entrepreneurial communities (Annink, 2017; Bianchi et al., 2018; Gerdenitsch et al., 2016,), this article aims to provide a critical assessment of the darker side of social support in coworking spaces.

Coworking and Community

The socio-economic context of coworking reflects wider changes in working lives as linear career progression and secure employment has been replaced by individualised, fragmented, and contingent forms of work (Waters-Lynch, 2019). Fundamental shifts in methods of production and changing technological, structural, and economic conditions have resulted in new forms of employment relationships, characterised by non-standard work arrangements such as project-based work, temporary contracts, and freelancing (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2013). Changing technological, structural, and economic conditions have led to a march of contingency and precarity, as workers internalise the risk associated with self-employment, and instability becomes commonplace (Neff, 2012; Ross, 2009). Technological advances combined with accelerating mobile and flexible ways of working have contributed to spatial separations between workers (Reuschke, 2019), placing isolated and precarious workers outside of the conventional boundaries of work (Spinuzzi et al., 2019).

Coworking's emphasis on social interactions and community, underpinned by values such as collaboration, openness, and accessibility, responds directly to the absence of the social forms and commitments related to the demise of conventional work-based communities (Garrett et al., 2017; Waters and Lynch, 2019). Despite the prominence of the term community in both; academic literature and promotional materials on coworking, the concept of community in relation to coworking remains opaque and inconsistent (Spinuzzi et al., 2019). For Butcher (2013), coworking extends beyond a place to retreat from the societal flux, offering a way to address tensions in the displaced workforce by encouraging a sense of belonging and the formation of social bonds, established by the shared community. Conceptualised in this way, community exceeds a sense of belonging or social bonds established by shared space.

Traill's (2021) recent theorisation positions community as a fluid form of sociality and action offering a more nuanced understanding of community and its manifestations in everyday social life (Blokland, 2017), via shared practices to accomplish intended purposes (De Vaujany et al., 2020). Consequently, this approach frames community not as a fixed, social form, but 'as an activity already central to social life' (Traill, 2021:486). This notion of community can also function instrumentally to exert influence on individuals' responsibility for each other and to support actions that may be detrimental to other groups (Blokland, 2017). The latter has been evidenced in interpretations of coworking, which align members to entrepreneurial values of rational, individualistic action, guided by market logic, autonomy, and independence, rather than collaborative community values (Spinuzzi et al, 2019). In essence, coworking offers a loose structure around community that combines the need for social connection with a social experience that corresponds with individual action (Garrett, et al.2017).

The problematic nature of coworking and community can also be evidenced by how it reproduces distinct forms of workplace inequalities. Its aesthetics and membership base creates and reinforces gendered and class-based notions of entrepreneurship reflecting white, male, middle-class places of work (Lorne, 2020). Furthermore, in coworking, the community is the selling point for 'opportunity', and the promise of future work through access to networks and collaboration. However, the trade-off is paying for rental of access, often funded by undertaking paid work outside of coworking spaces and

enacting unpaid ‘affective labour’ to develop, sustain and maximise their coworking investment (Lorne, 2020). This unbalanced notion of community is then commoditised by owners and utilised without reciprocity by other members, creating tensions for other coworkers and exacerbating work intensification (Waters-Lynch and Duff, 2019). Rather than providing a solution for inhospitable work conditions, it appears ‘community’ accommodates and reinforces the processes it aims to defend against, glossing over the social and economic problems of self-employment, stabilising the current status quo of precarious entrepreneurs (Merkel, 2019; Lorne, 2020). Fundamentally, coworking and its use of community, creates market opportunity from precarity and insecurity, while simultaneously facilitating the fragmentation of employment (de Peuter et al., 2017).

Enacting Social Support

Predominately focussing on positive aspects, social support is recognised as a social “fund”, individuals draw on emotional and material resources to assist colleagues when experiencing demanding and stressful circumstances (Cohen, 2004). Numerous definitions (Collins et al., 2016; House 1981; Lundqvist et al., 2018; Sias, 2009; Smollan and Morrison, 2019) broadly follow three types of support: emotional (the expression of empathy, caring, esteem, encouragement, sympathy, and consolation), informational (the provision of facts, advice, and information that may help an individual) and instrumental (tangible help to get the job done). In an organisational context, social support is typically seen as being beneficial for staff, due to its ability to decrease stress and enhance employee and organisational wellbeing amid periods of personal stress or workplace tension (House 1981; Sias, 2009, Smollan and Morrison, 2019). Embedded in strong social and organisational bonds (Sias, 2009), individuals are more likely to enact social support if it reinforces existing workplace subjectivities (Smollan and Morrison, 2019). Although generally described positively, Lundqvist et al. (2018) highlight that social support can lead to stress, challenges to self-esteem, and indebtedness that can negatively impact employee’s emotions, resulting in frustration and a decline in workplace performance (Smollan and Morrison, 2019). This limited body of research detailing the negative aspects of social

support suggests that any challenges or costs to workers are under-acknowledged (Lundqvist et al., 2018).

Unbalanced notions of coworking communities, alongside evidence of social support in coworking spaces, prompt further questions about the nature of relationships in coworking spaces, and its ability to confront the dark side of entrepreneurship. Whereas, Bouncken et al. (2018) draw notions of trust, friendship, and the openness of coworking's physical environment to provide a basis for emotional support, Gerdenitsch et al. (2016) points to the fleeting nature of interactions, at the level of 'water cooler chat' impedes the enactment of genuine support. This suggests that support in coworking is more akin to a loose social connection, with minor work benefits (Richardson, 2017). Moreover, despite accounts of informational support such as exchanging information, providing feedback, and sharing ideas (Annink, 2017; Brown, 2017), there is limited evidence of more tangible support (Richardson 2017). In coworking spaces, there appears to be little exploration of the negative impacts of social support, Gerdenitsch et al (2016) point to the emotional exhaustion of enacting support. Lorne (2020) draws on how the seductive nature of openness, informality, and connectedness associated with coworking spaces create blurred boundaries and self-exploitation while promoting individualisation-masked-as-collectivism.

Looking beyond literature in the micro specialism of social support demonstrates the positive and less desirable implications of enacting social support. Accounts of solidarity, underpinned by feelings of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility, illustrates individuals acting collectively to provide social support, (Wilde, 2007). For example, by providing practical and emotional support to raise morale amid economic injustice (Beck and Brook, 2020), or by collective resistance amid stressful situations to respond to moral injustices (Bolton and Laaser, 2020). Despite the lack of social support literature in non-conventional organisational settings, an analysis of the gig economy workers points to multiple forms of informational and instrumental support in highly individualised work settings (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). However, illustrations of solidarities, also contain more undesirable consequences, Beck and Brook (2020) point to dominant groups of workers using their collective power to discriminate against, or exclude, workers and minority groups and draw on the regulation of emotions while investing

in solidarities, alongside the affective labour enacted while giving support. Further illustrations point to the intensification of work when performing the emotional management related to solidarities, drawing on the extraction of personal and social costs required to pursue collective interests and resist the pervasive and undesirable elements of work (McKenzie et al., 2019).

Amid calls to further understand solidarities in the individualised workforce (Beck and Brook, 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020) and changing spatial trends and workplace patterns in the context of coworking (Ross and Ressa, 2015), this article examines the darker side of social support in a coworking space. The article draws on the emotional, informational, and instrumental support enacted in coworking spaces and considers the personal costs and unintended consequences of social support.

Methods

The setting for this study is a newly established, privately owned coworking space (pseudonym 'Community Space'), located in the North of England and situated in an area recognised locally as an emerging digital and creative 'quarter'. To examine the interactions between members of the Community Space, data was collected via ethnography and interviews.

The purpose of the ethnography was to understand the dynamics and social interactions in the coworking community. The ethnography enabled the researchers to meet coworkers in their own domain, observe patterns in social organisation and ideational systems (Wolcott, 2008), and gain an appreciation of behaviour (Van Maanen, 1979). The choice of ethnography was supported by its use by others aiming to understand informal communities (Grebher and Ibert, 2006) and in coworking spaces (Garrett et al., 2017). The role of an 'overt ethnographer' and 'participant as observer' (Van Maanen, 1979) was undertaken where the purpose and intentions of the researcher were fully disclosed. The overt ethnography permitted an open relationship with coworkers regarding the nature of the research and provided a credible explanation for questioning and participation at informal social events (see appendix 2 for events attended). The fieldwork was conducted over a 3-month period in 2017, the researchers undertook 125 hours of observations (Garrett et al., 2017), working in the space and

participating in events and socials. This enabled researchers to ‘hang around, ‘forge relationships’, engage in informal conversations, gather perspectives on coworking, and observe how social support was displayed. During the observation, researchers regularly spoke to the coworking community, engaging in ‘water cooler’ conversations. At each event, the researchers observed activities and spoke to between 5 and 10 coworkers to gather various perspectives and behaviours.

Semi-structured interviews enabled the in-depth exploration of members thoughts and experiences of coworking. In total, 14 coworkers were interviewed (see appendix 1 for detailed descriptions). Participants interviewed worked as entrepreneurs, although some were employees of micro-businesses that were based in Community Space. To capture the wider context, the ‘hosts’ of the coworking space were also interviewed. Participants were approached to be interviewed during the ethnographic phase, either face to face or by email. Interviews, lasting between 30 minutes and one hour, included a combination of face-to-face discussions or via phone or email depending on interviewee preferences and availability. Topics covered included reasons for joining the space, how it compares to previous workspaces, their relationships and interactions with others, and their experiences of coworking. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis of the interviews and ethnography involved an interplay between the collection and the analysis of data to identify concepts and themes. The interviews were coded using the data analysis tool Nvivo. This involved reflective reading of the text and assigning new codes when new themes emerged. As the initial codes were detailed, numerous, and specific, these codes were then grouped into larger categories as the relationships between the codes and the theoretical explanation began to reflect the desire for social support, how social support was enacted, and the types of support offered within Community Space.

During the ethnography, notes were taken in situ highlighting the interpretations of accounts and emotions gathered during the fieldwork, after each visit more detailed notes were taken to add further information and reflect the nature of exchanges in Community Space. The data analysis drew on the procedure of the first order and second order concepts to understand the rituals and actions at Community Space (Garrett et al., 2017, Van Maanen, 1979). Broadly, this entailed organising the

‘facts’, or descriptive properties from fieldwork data (first order concepts), and considering how theories could be used to organise and explain those facts (second order concepts). During the later stages of the ethnography, it became clear that the actions and attitudes towards others and their work conditions could be partially explained by the established practices within the Community Space. First order concepts included practical ways in which coworkers supported each other to deal with isolation, companionship, and a focus on enterprise. After developing these concepts, the desire for social support became apparent and the dimensions of social support represented a theoretical framework to explain our findings. This was complemented during the analysis of the interviews, as respondents highlighted how others in the coworking space provided social support and assisted them in dealing with challenging and precarious conditions.

Findings

The analysis will begin by introducing Community Space to provide context on the activities and interactions in the workspace. It then focuses on the coworker's desire for social support highlighting factors that drew individuals towards Community Space. We do not suggest that these factors are unique, moreover, they provide the context to examine social support. The analysis will then turn to consider how Community Space was a site for emotional, informational, and instrumental support.

Introducing Community Space

Community Space was organised across several floors. A social space, kitchen, and hot desks were located on the ground floor, with hot-desking space and meeting rooms on the other floors. The décor was reflective of stylish office space with tiling in the kitchen, colourful seating, wooden tables with murals decorating some walls. The space mirrored ‘google-esque’ workspaces, meeting rooms were glass-walled, and ceilings were stripped back to show light fittings and copper pipes to reflect the ‘openness and transparency’ of coworking. The kitchen and reception were hubs for most social interactions as ‘comfy’ seating, a breakfast bar, and a pool table encouraged coworkers to interact and play. The owners of the Community Space acted as hosts, ‘curators of the community’ and caretakers

(Gregg and Lodato, 2017), taking responsibility for welcoming members, cleaning, solving technical problems, and cultivating the community. The fieldwork took place recently after Community Space opened, therefore the hosts were actively growing the membership base. Sold under the premise of 'less than a cup of coffee per day', pricing options included permanent desk space with 24/7 access, 'Flexi desk space (hot desking) with access at set days, and times and 'community membership' where members were given access to online channels, events, training courses, social meetings and hot desking could be purchase at an additional cost. By the end of the fieldwork, Community Space grew from 30 to 80 members with approximately 15 members with permanent desk space, 25 with flexi space, and 40 community members.

Coworkers patterns of attendance varied daily. Generally, between 10-15 members attended the space per day, comprising 'regulars' who were the prominent, more active coworkers. Other coworkers use of Community Space varied, from using it regularly as their office, intermittently as they moved between workspaces and geographies, to several times a week for a break from working from home, or infrequently for networking. Attendance was heightened to 25-30 member's events or socials. Generally, members were 'onsite' between the hours of 11am and 3pm, although a small number of members used the space in the early morning or late evening. The use of the space also varied, with some coworkers using a permanent desk, to others hot-desking around the building. Many coworkers utilised the meeting rooms and breakout spaces to host their events.

Technology featured heavily in Community Space. Membership, payment, and access were managed online and via an app. Many interactions between members occurred online, facilitated by 'Slack' although often in-between physical interactions. Slack replaced emails, (and in some cases face to face chat), as was the primary form of communication. Private groups discussed thematic areas important to the community including health and wellbeing and 'foodie chat'. Entrepreneurship was also central as private groups were established to discuss new forms of enterprise such as investing in cryptocurrencies. Events often showcased the skills and businesses of members, taking place in the evening, outside conventional work hours and they included training courses, networking events, and 'socials' involving drinks and informal chats with coworkers and others in the local business community. Generally, events

were attended by between 20 and 30 people and often extended beyond the coworking membership base.

Most coworkers within Community Space worked in the digital sector, in occupations such as web design, advertising, software development. However, a small minority of coworkers worked as freelancers in health, the arts, or professional services. Community members also included public sector workers from local business support organisations. The employment histories of coworkers also reflected a variety of life stages, from those just entering professional work post-education to career changers often looking for something more ‘appropriate’ to their personal or professional needs, to those moving towards retirement. The age of those within the community also varied, most coworkers were in their thirties and forties although a small number of coworkers were in their twenties and sixties. The members of Community Space also varied in their experience of coworking, ranging from some expressing no prior knowledge or experience of this type of working, to others who may be global nomads, utilising coworking spaces in multiple countries. The gender balance reflected the broader membership of Community Space, although those with permanent and flexi membership appeared to be more male-dominated.

Push and Pull Factors Towards Social Support

The desire for social support was evident within the coworking community. This section highlights factors that drew individuals towards coworking and how the desire for social support shaped attitudes within the space.

The desire for social support often resulted from inhospitable environments in previous workplaces. coworkers recounted how long hours and difficult relationships with colleagues contributed to a hostile and stressful environment at work. coworking was a solution to unease about a lack of organisational support and limited confidence to speak up about previous office hostilities and work arrangements.

“It was really weird because when I came here everybody just opened up about their own battles in the workplace. Everybody that I spoke to whether the owners or members they all had a story to tell of a poor experience in a workplace or a serviced office that made them think you know

I'm not doing that again, it's the kind of community where these people congregate". 2, coworker

Many Coworkers at Community Space were hybrid workers, who previously worked exclusively from home. Contrasting with accounts of freedom and flexibility when working from home, members drew on the lack of social relations while working as a source of discomfort.

"If you're working from home, for like two, three days in a row, sometimes you can start to feel like 'oh my god I haven't spoken to anybody in two days". 8, coworker

The coworking community provided a source of companionship to those experiencing isolation and was often cited as an important reason for joining the space, alongside accessing perceived, 'normal' workplace relationships.

"Obviously I've worked on my own for two years, I don't have colleagues, I don't have that kind of thing anymore where you used to go out for a beer on a Friday with friends and stuff". 8, coworker

The opportunity to participate in the community was openly encouraged by the owners of the space and enabled them to commoditise Community Space as a site for social support. Rather than emphasising the physical workspace when 'selling' space, the hosts discussed their interpretation of community, which promoted friendship and companionship to mitigate isolation. This was emphasised as the hosts welcomed new members to online channels. When joining the space, hosts introduced members to other coworkers, illustrating the communal nature of the community, promoting opportunities to socialise through regular socials and events. This was reflected on by one new member of the community through Slack,

"I've been made so very welcome. I know that I'm going to be very happy here". [coworker, Slack observation notes]

The focus on the supportive elements of community was combined with an instrumental focus. The 'selling' of the community met the desire for the informational and instrumental features of social

support in multiple ways. As hosts walked prospective coworkers through Community Space, they openly discussed how they were promoting an alternative to conventional office space through access to networks, help, and advice. Collaboration was seen by some coworkers as an attraction of working in the space, which would offer the opportunity to gain access to knowledge, information, and experience in the future.

“At the moment we’re teleworking a lot, which can be very insular. With a coworking space we can interact with other people, other people in other organisations, with other experience, so we see it as more of a networking and knowledge-sharing experience as well as a place to work”. 5, coworker

For others, joining the space offered an opportunity to gain instrumental features of social support, such as the opportunity to access talent and grow their business.

“We saw it as an opportunity to access talent in the areas we needed and that was our main driving thing”. 6, coworker

The desire for social support drew many coworkers towards Community Space, in response to the inhospitable conditions of previous workplaces or their recent spatial conditions. Coworkers highlighted frustration with the ‘normal’ office environment but also wanted to escape the isolation of working at home. In response, they sought community, which for them carried meaning of companionship and emotional support. The capacity of Community Space to offer informative and instrumental support also drew members to the space. Perhaps reflecting coworking’ ubiquitous nature, coworkers also saw the space as a way to grow their business and further their interests. The desire for support presented a dualism in the community, it was about finding emotional support and supporting others, but also about self-interest and developing their businesses. The next section will now consider how social support was enacted, and the consequences for this group of coworkers.

Emotional Support: Trust, empathy and ‘hugs’

Coworkers provided emotional support to those within the community. Reflective of the community values the hosts promoted and emphasised, offering emotional support was a way to be part of a

community and assisted coworkers in managing the feelings of uncertainty, risk, and isolation associated with entrepreneurship (Neff, 2012). The open physical layout of Community Space supported the development of the community. The close desks, glass-walled meeting rooms and discussion boards on Slack encouraged behaviours of openness such as the sharing of personal information, in-person and online. It appeared coworkers recognised mutual trust was necessary, in part due to close spatial relationships with other coworkers within the community.

“The point is you do feel as though generally these are people that, it’s a bit like a fellowship... There’s a lot of trust placed and if you think about it there has to be, because if someone did you wrong they are not going to go anywhere, are they?” 6, coworker

Support within the community offered motivation and inspiration to coworkers. Coworkers often compared their entrepreneurial journeys and prominent members of the community were revered for their entrepreneurial prowess. This was emphasised by ‘motivational’ messages such as, ‘live, work, create’, written on walls and reinforced by words associated with entrepreneurial discourse such as bravery, success, ambition, and talent being regularly used on company house style. A series of ‘meet the entrepreneur’ events where prominent members of the community discussed their work experiences discussing their pathway towards what the community defined as ‘success’. The event recounted stories reinforcing mainstream interpretation of the enterprise, as individualism risk, bravery, and rebellion were encouraged and portrayed as essential to ‘make it’. The gendered tone of these discourses of enterprise reflected a reproduction of the masculine norms of entrepreneurial behaviour (Marlow and McAdam, 2012) and was normalised within the space. Rather than being uneasy or reject entrepreneurial clichés, many members espoused how the ‘positive energy’ provided inspiration and the reassurance to “take risks”.

“Been working here since April, great people and excellent support and lots of likeminded energy to tap into” 7, coworker

Speakers described how quickly their businesses had grown, how they were taking on more staff, and how the coworking space had enabled this growth. This further reinforced the perceived characteristics of enterprise.

“I’ve just spoken to Mandy, it’s the same, her journey to where she’s got is phenomenal and yeah, I think the more you speak to people like that the more you’re inspired to really push and drive on and yeah, and look back and think yeah you’re not alone and actually taking risks is good and taking risks really work out, so don’t be fearful of it”. 9, coworker

Coworkers talked positively about their experience engaging with other coworkers, drawing a contrast to their experience of working alone, working in the space ‘gave them someone to talk to’, even if the conversation were mundane or fleeting. The kitchen became the focal point of conversations as coworkers congregated around the coffee machine (even though there were kitchen facilities on other floors). This represented the ‘water cooler’ conversations the hosts encouraged as coworkers to openly discussed their personal lives while making drinks, despite the open plan nature of the space meaning that others could easily hear their conversation. Although some conversations were fleeting, these represented meaningful interactions, having someone to talk to provided solace and reassurance. Having people around was an important feature of the space.

“I sometimes do get a bit stir crazy from at home. But that was one of the nice things about this place that even if I’m in on my own there are still people around to say good morning. If I died, somebody might notice that I hadn’t turned up for a week”. 2, coworker

Coworkers talked positively of the work-based relationships at Community Space and described how empathy among coworkers enabled them to deal with challenges at work.

“It’s going to sound a bit weird, but I’ve been self-employed for a long time and it’s a lonely job sometimes, so I think the fact that you can walk in and it brings you back into normality. So actually it’s, when you’re having a bad day, it’s a pacifier and when you’re having a great day it’s an amplifier.....there’s complete empathy that if I’ve had a terrible day I could guarantee if I said I just need someone to give me a hug I reckon I could probably get one. I’ve

not done it yet [laughter] but I probably could because we all seem to have had challenges”. 2,
coworker

This extended to out of office hours as regular monthly socials were organised and heavily promoted by hosts in Community Space, via online networks ‘in or out’ messages, and stopping coworkers on entry to ask if they were attending on the week of the event. The hosts were intent on emphasising the importance of socials to facilitate the sharing of business and personal experiences and develop friendships. Personal and occupational problems were openly shared and discussed at the socials as coworkers supported others within the community. The Friday socials, which started at around 4pm at Community Space often ended late at night in local bars. The socials started with the hosts moving across the floors encouraging coworkers to finish work and have a drink in the kitchen area of Community Space. Attendance reinforced hierarchies in the space, as prominent members of the community promoted the event and made up a significant proportion of attendance. Alcohol was the focal point of the evening, the hosts bought beer and Prosecco for members of the community. An ‘eating is cheating’ mentality was encouraged among coworkers by the hosts. During the socials, one-upmanship over the consumption of alcohol and late-night binges were celebrated as stories of previous socials and members of the community ‘waking up the next day on a park bench’ represented folklore, setting the tone for the nature of the social. ‘Hangovers’ formed the basis of the conversations the next day and alcohol consumption was revered by prominent members. The activities and rituals around the socials reflected a white male characterisation of coworking (Lorne, 2020), further reproducing gendered undertones within the space, resulting in a masculine form of camaraderie. Coworkers that ‘fitted’ into this form of camaraderie developed relationships underpinned by trust and empathic understanding. However, the gendered tone of the rituals and discourse in Community Space, at best, presented an inhospitable environment for coworkers that didn’t prescribe to this masculine culture, at worst, it could have been exclusionary.

Informational Support: Favours within ‘the tribe’

Informational support resembled the sharing of tacit knowledge and skills empowering coworkers to mitigate challenging aspects of their occupation. Informational support was provided through guidance

and expertise to help solve coworkers problems or navigate through the entrepreneurial ecosystem. This extended onto the online platform Slack, which was used by members to promote their businesses, enhance networks, and request information and help from each other. For example, Slack groups were set up to discuss and leverage knowledge on crypto-currencies, in which members were able to share their experiences, advise on investing and selling, and discuss ways to ‘mine’ currency. Information support within the community was underpinned by the willingness to help each other out. Thus, values of altruism and mutual support were embedded with the community and seen as a collective strength by those working in Community Space.

“I think there’s a kind of a tribe. If this was Mad Max where we’re all living in one place, and the thing is like for example [another coworker] will come over and ask for help or we’ll go and ask for something....and there’s this willingness just because you’re one of the team you’re part of the community” 6, coworker

Providing informational support also meant sharing contacts of recommended business support services, providing informational support was an important part of the expectation of being ‘part of the community’. However, informational support also shaped and framed other coworkers experiences of the ‘right’ kind of entrepreneurial activity. It also served to reinforce power relations in the community. Contacts were a currency where influence could be gained and leveraged.

A key interpretation of collaboration at Community Space was the trading and sharing of information about relevant skills needed to respond to changing market forces. This provided coworkers with an understanding of what key skills were required to stay ‘marketable’. As most coworkers worked in digital or creative occupations, conversations often revolved around how to stay updated with the latest technology platforms or discussing new techniques to ‘win’ clients in a competitive landscape. Events hosted by Community Space branded as ‘Lets Chat’ aimed to reinforce the necessity to constantly reevaluate the skills required to sustain themselves in a competitive business environment. These often involved ‘thought leader’ talks from those prominent businesses either in the coworking community or

within the wider regional entrepreneurial ecosystem. This framed 'community' as central to accessing knowledge, and was valued by coworkers,

"it's good to be around because you're picking up these skills, you're picking up this information". 3, Host

Coworkers sought help with specific tasks and looked to the community to solve problems. Finding reliable and economically viable support was a challenge for coworkers, therefore advice was sought on how to manage relationships between workers hired for specific tasks, often learning from each other's experiences,

"So being here and just being able to have conversations with people around, I'm having an issue with an accountant or do you know anyone that could support me in this" 5, coworker

Members of the community also provided advice regarding the benefits of business support groups, sharing their previous experiences to help others make informed choices.

"Being open and honest with people in here 'I don't know if I can afford that business support membership, I'm not sure if it's right for me...' You get that 'you don't need it yet, you're still only a few months in'. Some of them have been through the hard sell of members clubs and they'll sort of pre-warn you be careful" 2, coworker

Instrumental and informational support were combined as coworkers provided practical solutions for the problems the community faced. Although this provided coworkers with the means to access skills, knowledge, this practical support could lead to more undesirable outcomes. The practical support provided was celebrated by the hosts, as it reinforced community which could then be marketed and commodified. Also, it gave members of the community enacting support influence in shaping the entrepreneurial activities of others in the community. In turn, this influence provided additional currency in setting the terms of who should be revered, looked up to, and followed, despite no clear indication of the efficacy of this advice, or what benefits were gained.

Instrumental Support: Trading Time and Expertise

Instrumental support was often provided free of charge and was normalised within the community, positioned as either community obligation or working for future reward. Members ran ‘clinic’ support sessions to assist coworkers in gaining skills, often by taking advice from ‘experts’ within the community. The ‘clinic’ sessions were particularly valued by members and seen as community support, as this type of guidance would normally have to be sought via paid professional services. During the fieldwork the recent changes to data protection legislation concerned members, therefore sessions were provided around legal advice on how to become compliant with upcoming legislation.

“One of our members, he's running a data protection course ...he's going to come one day a month he's going to be of an open resource to anybody that wants to book a half-hour slot with him to go through their requirements what they might need to do. Our accountant he wants to come and do the same thing as well be like an open house, obviously a little bit of publicity there but also kind of that community aspect”. 1, Host

This activity set the tone for others in the community and encouraged an informal economy where skills and expertise were traded. Coworkers would actively seek out help from others in the community as a strategy for saving money and getting the job done quickly.

“I take time away from my desk and go and talk to people. So, I'll go up and say look, I'm looking for this can you help me, and I always get it.....So, if I've got a little problem and I don't want to pay seventy pounds to have it sorted, I can always go up and ask someone and they'll say, 'it's easy, this is how you do it' and that is really good“. 2, coworker

Rather than being framed as working for free, this was openly supported and promoted by the hosts and leveraged as a selling point to new members. At events to showcase the coworking space, coworkers within the community gave talks about why they worked at Community Space. They described the benefits of giving other coworkers ‘mates rates’, therefore saving coworkers money when compared to going outside of the coworking space to procure services. They also demonstrated how a reciprocal arrangement enabled them to access different types of support and grow their business and described

this as “selling growth through Community”. This normalised working for lower pay, despite there being little evidence regarding who set ‘the rates’ of pay. This also reinforced the unbalanced notion of community, ‘mates rates’ were utilised as an additional commodity to ‘sell’ coworking and the community.

The hosts encouraged coworkers to actively showcase their skills and donate their time to strengthen the profile of the space and recruit new members. Coworkers time and expertise were the ‘prizes’ in themed competitions aimed to enhance collaboration and promote the space to individuals outside of the coworking community. A competition offering a new recruit’s free membership and a free full business support package was provided by current coworkers. Several coworkers contributed their time and expertise to be included in a ‘package’ of business support. This was rationalised as helping the community and a way for coworkers to promote themselves to obtain work in the future, despite no guarantees of future reward.

Although coworkers providing smaller tasks were often for free, in other circumstances, for more elaborate work, bartering was used to provide tangible support and access specific technical expertise.

“So he sort of got involved with us quite early, did some work on our website and then all the kind of PR launch.....So the way it works with them we do just like a contract deal in terms of desks for their work which has been great because it’s given us a presence of people in the building and it’s a big piece of work which we wouldn’t have been able to afford in the beginning....which is quite a common sort of thing in co-working spaces that things that you need doing, you can just do a fair bit of trading”. 1, Host

This extended the informal economy in Community Space, reinforcing the culture of pro bono work. This informal exchange process was legitimised by being undertaken by prominent and trusted members of the community. However, the boundaries were unclear regarding which members of the community ‘qualified’ for bartering and thus who could reap some form of financial reward for undertaking work for others in the space, and who had to work for free or at a reduced rate.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article has explored social support in a Community Space, within the typology set out by Sias (2009) and more recently related to technology workers by Collins et al. (2016). It has explored the daily challenges and experiences of those that work within Community Space, and the support offered by coworkers to mitigate these challenges. The motivations for joining the coworking space reflected the ambivalent nature of coworking. In the context of previous experiences of inhospitable workplaces and isolation, coworkers were positive about joining Community Space and optimistic about how their new spatial work arrangements would provide them with mutual support and belongingness to a community (Merkel, 2015). However, coworkers also espoused mainstream entrepreneurial discourse, by citing future success through collaboration and access to networks, the coworking community was a facilitator to meet these aspirations. The value of working in a coworking Space went beyond a place to work. For coworkers, the value was derived from the perceived access to social relations to assist in navigating the more challenging aspects of their work. For the hosts of Community Space, this interpretation of the coworking ‘community’ was reinforced, encouraged, and then commoditised when ‘selling’ to new members. This emphasised that mutual understanding, the ability to enact the entrepreneurial discourse of self-interest and ‘success’ (Du Gay, 1996) was accessed through ‘community’.

In the context of precarity and inhospitable work conditions experienced by coworkers (Bouncken et al., 2018), community was also utilised by hosts to recruit new members. Individuals sought emotional support and companionship to replicate their perceptions of more conventional work environments. Emotional support intersected personal and professional challenges (Sais, 2009), providing coworkers with a mechanism to deal with isolation (Smollan and Morrison, 2019) through belongingness to a community. Interactions gave coworkers solace and reassurance, but also developed a sense of trust and understanding with others as problems could be openly shared. Although hosts encouraged and expected the enactment of emotional support, this was outside of conventional employment relationships, therefore was seen by others in Community Space as an altruistic, informal part of the contract between coworkers (Lorne, 2020). Inspiration and motivation from prominent members of the

community reinforced entrepreneurial subjectivities as positive attitudes towards risk and reward were encouraged. Informational support enhanced learning and provided knowledge to prepare coworkers to navigate their way around challenging aspects of their occupation. This permeated onto online channels, as coworkers sought and received help to update their skills, stay marketable and adapt to changing market forces. Instrumental support involved coworkers providing each other with specific skills and tasks, at a lower cost. This avoided going to the marketplace to solve problems and provide practical support which was an invaluable support mechanism within the community.

A more nuanced interpretation of the fieldwork highlights a potentially problematic side to social support at Community Space. Rather than confronting the darker side of entrepreneurship (Bouncken et al., 2018), the unintentional consequences of activities in Community Space revealed an additional lens to consider how coworking spaces reinforce the precarious conditions of Coworkers (de Peuter, 2017). Coworkers entered the space to escape the inhospitable conditions of their previous workspaces or to assist themselves in dealing with the precarity of entrepreneurship. However, despite coworkers eschewing broadly positive interpretations of their experiences at Community Space, enacting social support could expose coworkers to more challenging and potentially exploitative conditions.

Social support in Community Space buttressed entrepreneurial values, emotional support inspired coworkers to embrace a positive attitude toward risk, despite there being no guarantee that their efforts will garner future rewards (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft, 2013). Furthermore, the enactment of affective labour carried out while giving emotional support, an integral part of being part of the community, intensified work for coworkers (Beck and Brook, 2020), as committing their time and mind to others became an additional task and responsibility of coworkers. The social elements of providing support also had the potential to discriminate or exclude other coworkers, the gendered undertones of workplace practices at Community Space, including alcohol-fuelled socials events or activities that reproduced masculine norms of entrepreneurial behaviour (Marlow and McAdam, 2012). Although coworkers did not appear to dispute or be uncomfortable with such practices, the exclusionary nature of such activities could lead to an inhospitable environment for some coworkers or even be evidence of

exclusionary membership boundaries, supporting concerns around the reproduction of white middle-class male coworkers (Lorne, 2020). Instrumental support encouraged those in the community to work for free or below the market rate. In this instance, tangible support meant ‘helping each other out’, blurring the lines between altruistic actions and potentially self-exploitative outcomes as working practices and the collective values in the community could obligate coworkers in the community to engage in unpaid work or work below the market rate. In some respects, the intimate spatial relationships and the encouragement of social relationships countenanced an informal economy of bartering and working for free or low pay, thus adding an additional lens to how close interpersonal relationships can lessen economic benefits for those within creative communities (Alacovska, 2018). Social support went beyond the notion of coworkers ‘paying to work’ (de Peuter et al., 2017), coworkers also paid to contribute time and effort to the additional tasks of providing emotional, informational, and instrumental support. Encouraged by coworking culture (Bianchi et al., 2018), this became an expectation of being in the community. Although this led to enhanced trust among coworkers, the consequence was the further intensification of work for many coworkers. Rather than regulating or encouraging Coworkers not to take part in activities that intensified their work, members of the Community Space exerted encouragement under the guise of ‘being part of the community’ thus normalising and socialising coworkers to adopt these behaviours. This completed the circle around the commodification of community, what was promised to new members on entering the space was delivered by the very same members, despite its potentially exploitative outcomes.

This article contributes to literature in several ways. More broadly, it expands our understanding of coworking spaces and their infrastructural role in the contemporary economy. Additionally, it offers in-depth insights into actions and behaviours in new workspaces and reveals how coworking spaces can reinforce precarity and potentially exploitative conditions. It also responds to calls to understand solidarities in the individualised workforce (Beck and Brook, 2020; Tassinari and Maccarrone, 2020) and changing work patterns in the context of coworking (Ross and Ressia, 2015). It positions social support as an exchange relationship where individuals draw benefits from each other underpinned by reciprocity. Furthermore, it offers a qualitative assessment of social support offering an in-depth insight

to new and emerging places of work, which is comparatively absent, answering calls for further analysis of the negative side to social support.

This article also has implications for policy and practice. Although this research was conducted before Covid-19, its findings provide insights that are applicable as Covid-19 restrictions may ease. Firstly, Coworking spaces are seen as ‘soft’ infrastructure required for economic development (Bradshaw & Blakely, 1999) and ‘new community spaces’ that can foster local development and help to revitalise mid-sized cities (Jamal, 2018). Secondly, the loneliness and isolation experienced by many working from home during the pandemic (Parry et al., 2021) may provide workers with a motivation to join a coworking space, either as a freelancer worker or through hybrid or remote working (Conerly, 2020), in search of social support. Therefore, as membership may grow and policymakers look to coworking spaces to stimulate local economic development, it is important for policy and practice to consider how support is established and nurtured inside coworking spaces to make them sustainable and helpful to coworkers experiencing precarious work conditions.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request subject to privacy/ethical restrictions.

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