

The proliferation of coworking spaces in Vietnam's transitional urban economy – moving towards adaptation or resistance?

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Abstract

Situated in Vietnam's transitional vacuum in its urban cores Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, this study is rooted in the aim to understand the emerging variants of coworking spaces currently proliferating across the country. This aim is realized by conducting a multiple case study and semi-structured interviews with nine founders, community managers and users of coworking spaces from heterogeneous backgrounds. Situated in interdisciplinary coworking research and place-based theory, the concepts Sense of Place (SOP) and Placelessness are operationalized to develop three hypotheses to explore the expected variants of coworking spaces. Analyzing the interviews through thematic analysis (TA) and assessing findings considering the hypotheses and earlier research, this study finds that coworking spaces as 'places of urban resistance', that allow to challenge and break free from cultural and work-related constraints, are niche occurrences. Most spaces are 'places of business development', serving workers' needs to conduct work productively and to accommodate work challenges. Simultaneously, many spaces co-exist that do not live up to workers' needs and are considered 'inauthentic' as they build on minimum services. According to the studied sample, the drivers responsible for the proliferation of identified coworking space variants feed back into real estate speculations, cultural preferences, economic dependencies and governmental agency.

Keywords: Vietnam, Coworking Spaces, Urban Economy, Transitional Vacuum, Sense of Place, Placelessness, Adaptation, Resistance

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List of Abbreviations

FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
H	Hypothesis, Hypotheses
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IT	Information Technology
NPO	Non-Profit Organization
ODA	Official Development Assistance
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprise
SOP	Sense of Place
TA	Thematic Analysis

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1. Introduction

1.1 Contextual background

Transitional crises do not bare solely risks, but also offer chances for adaptation and resistance to novel challenges faced. The world has witnessed the proliferation of a new form of shared urban workplace coined ‘coworking spaces’, which emerged as forms of resistance against felt isolation and capitalist pressures after the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 (Merkel, 2015; *ibid*; 2018; de Peuter, Cohen and Saraco, 2017). In escaping employment at traditional firms and in standing against the constraints of constant competition and dictated management hierarchies, freelancers, micro-enterprises and other members of the contingent knowledge labour force have started joining communities at coworking spaces, while embracing shared values of “Community, Openness, Collaboration, Sustainability and Accessibility” (Coworking.com, 2021). Yet, over the years, this initially grassroots-inspired workplace type emulated into more commercialized variants with providers rationalizing originally promoted values (Moriset, 2013; Water-Lynch et al., 2016). Intersecting with interests of corporate firms, international capital and real estate sectors, these hybridizing variants serve well to foster innovative business development, branding purposes and efficiency gains, and assume an accommodating role for its users to compensate the costs of increasingly precarious, flexible and atomized work (Gandini, 2015; Brown, 2017; de Peuter, Cohen and Saraco, 2017; Nakano et al., 2020).

Originating from the Global North, the popularity of coworking spaces has long reached the Asian continent, with a global majority share of around 6000 actively run organizations in these spheres alone (Coworking Resources, 2020). Both on a global and Southeast Asian scale, Vietnam is the arena for one of the most impressive industry developments: With the first coworking space only introduced in 2012, the country assumed rank 20th in global industry rankings by 2020, with approximately 250 active spaces operated by both local and foreign operators and industry growth of 50% per year (Coworking Resources, 2020; Vivid Invest, 2020; 2021a; 2021b). Yet, the local context against which this development unfolds is determined by a ‘crisis’ of a different kind: In the past years, the speed and implications of Vietnam’s miraculous economic growth, urbanization and international integration have arrived at a crucial tipping point, as the country’s leaders struggle to provide the supporting infrastructure, resources and policy environment to attend to the needs of its aspiring working population, especially in digital, creative and knowledge-intensive sectors (Ly, 2014; 2016; Goldblatt et al., 2018; Gasparin and Quinn, 2020a; 2020b).

Situated in Vietnam's transitional vacuum, where new socioeconomic mobilities and technological change disrupted the meanings, needs and expectations of work, the puzzle arises of what drives these developments, and how we can classify the emerging coworking space variants – and whether they present sites of adaptation or resistance amid structural changes and altered work environments (Brown, 2017; Nguyen, 2019a; 2019b; d'Ovidio, 2021). As argued by de Peuter, Cohen and Saraco (2017), “part of what makes coworking distinctive is the significance ascribed to it” (ibid: 693). Those who articulate such significance within their context are those who choose to engage with coworking spaces in their everyday life, namely those who run and use these spaces (Castilho and Quandt, 2017). Consequently, understanding how these two groups perceive the meaningfulness of coworking spaces as novel workplaces, and how coworking spaces are favoured over its alternatives, may help to identify the variants currently proliferating across the country.

1.2 Purpose, research question and roadmap

Against this background, the overarching aim of the thesis is to understand the emerging variants of coworking spaces in Vietnam's two urban cores Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi, and how the perceived affordances of these variants relate to workers' needs and challenges within Vietnam's transitional urban economy. The principal research question to guide this study is the following:

“Do the emerging coworking space variants serve as adaptation or resistance to work challenges in Vietnam's transitional urban economy?”

Three sub-research questions are explored in different stages of the thesis to build up sufficient knowledge to respond to the core question:

Sub-question 1: *“How do coworking space users and providers make sense of coworking spaces as meaningful workplaces?”*

Sub-question 2: *“What do these place meanings reveal about the variants of coworking spaces emerging in Vietnam?”*

Sub-question 3: *“Which are the driving forces for the emerging coworking space variants?”*

The aim is realized by employing a multiple case study and conducting semi-structured interviews with nine founders, community managers and users of coworking spaces from

heterogeneous backgrounds. Situating the study in interdisciplinary coworking research and place-based theory, the concepts Sense of Place (SOP) and Placelessness are operationalized to formulate three hypotheses to explore the expected variants of coworking spaces. Subjecting the interviews to thematic analysis (TA) and discussing findings considering the hypotheses and previous research, this study elucidates that coworking spaces as ‘places of urban resistance’ represent an exception to the norm, with the majority being ‘places of business development’, serving workers’ desire to conduct work efficiently and to foster business conduct. Parallely, coworking spaces co-exist that do not live up to workers’ needs and are considered ‘inauthentic’, as they offer no more than basic infrastructure and lower quality services. According to the studied sample, the demand and push factors responsible for the proliferation of identified coworking space variants can be traced back to real estate speculations, cultural preferences, economic dependencies and governmental agency.

1.3 Relevance and academic contribution

Answering the posed questions is relevant for advancing knowledge of changing work perceptions, needs and preferences of Vietnam’s aspiring urban working class, while casting light on how the global coworking phenomenon unfolds and emulates in a local context. This study contributes to the limited literature on interdisciplinary coworking research in the Global South and provides a directly targeted case study of coworking spaces in Vietnam, which have so far only been covered as a sub-topic in creative class and creative ecosystem research strands (Ly, 2014; 2016; Cook, 2020; Gasparin and Quinn, 2020a; 2020b; Tintiango and Soriano, 2020). Moreover, in employing place-based theory, this study offers a theoretical contribution to urban theory building in Southeast Asia’s new edge cities, by supporting that place attachment and dependence of local populations is strongly rooted in economic and cultural considerations amidst rapid change (Bunnell et al., 2012; Ujang and Zakariya, 2015).

1.4 Delimitations

The study is contextualized in Vietnam’s two major urban cores, namely its political and cultural capital Hanoi in the North, and in Ho Chi Minh City in the South as the country’s hub of international investment, real estate and IT industries (Cong-Huyen, 2015; Goldblatt et al., 2018). Being cities that channel major shares of its population, income and higher-skilled human capital pools, they represent typical locales for coworking spaces to emerge (ibid). For

the study's purposes, both cities are treated equally while keeping in mind that different developmental forces are at work, which would have to be considered for a more nuanced understanding of the given context. Lastly, the results of this multiple case study do not strive to paint a generalizable picture of the nature of coworking in Vietnam as this would require studies with a larger set of participants.

1.5 Disposition

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 outlines previous research in the field and elucidates the research gap. Chapter 3 introduces the theoretical framework consisting of Sense of Place (SOP) and Placelessness, which is operationalized by formulating three hypotheses to guide the analysis. Chapter 4 elaborates on methodological considerations linked to the aim and research questions. Chapter 5 presents the findings drawn from data collection and thematic analysis. Chapter 6 discusses the findings considering the working hypotheses and previous research. Chapter 7 concludes the study and suggests directions for future research.

2. Literature review

The following chapter presents previous interdisciplinary and English-speaking research on coworking spaces, names the research gap and highlights aspects relevant for the context of this study. Due to the vast number of non-academic outlets publishing on coworking spaces, this review quotes selected reports and websites alongside academic research.

2.1 The changing nature of work

Over the past decades, the diffusion of Information and Communication technologies (ICT) and the rise of remote, distributed and flexible work have turned the workplace into a site of change (Foley, 2007; d'Ovidio, 2021). With the shift towards knowledge-intensive industries and new demands of employers to upgrade profitability, there has been a surge in non-standard, project-based and outsourced employment (Spinuzzi, 2012; Friedman, 2014; Brown, 2017; Cook, 2020; Nakano et al., 2020). For some workers, these changes provide opportunities to free themselves from the constraints of traditional employment. Simultaneously, concerns over rising social and economic precariousness and its impacts on workers' well-being have started to emerge (Friedman, 2014; d'Ovidio, 2021).

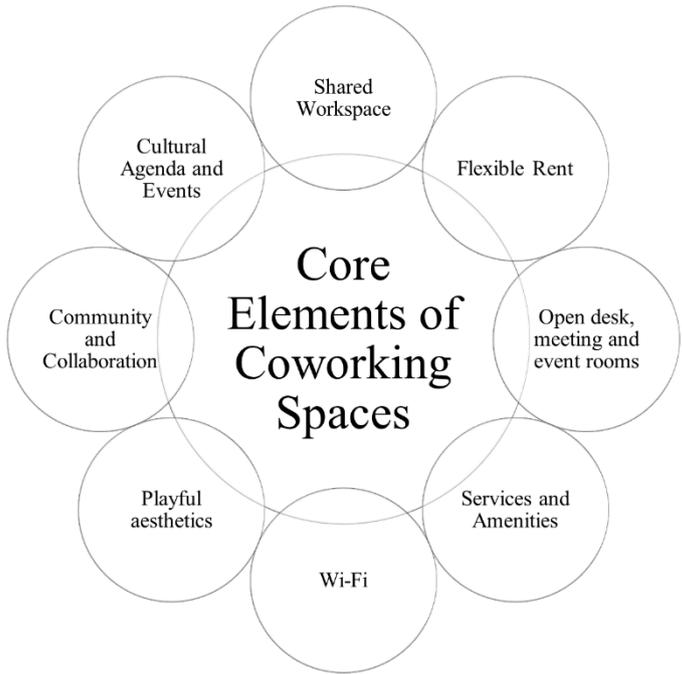
Despite fears of the 'death of the city' once workers are free to work 'anytime and anywhere', large cities have remained anchors of life, absorbing large shares of innovative, technological and financial capacities (Zhu, 2013; Merkel, 2015). Predominantly workers of the knowledge economy seek work in these urban cores due to their need for face-to-face contact to foster innovative ideas and to find new sources of social support when being confined to working in front of screens all day (ibid). Hence, novel spatial constructs for organizing socioeconomic activities have emerged as a consequence of changing work patterns (Merkel, 2015; Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). Hereby, the diffusion of coworking spaces and the associated practice of coworking is rapidly turning into a global urban phenomenon (Brown, 2017). As of 2020, the world counted approximately 20.000 coworking spaces with nearly 6000 spaces in Asian countries alone (Coworking Resources, 2020).

Scholars around the globe have been eager to explore the drivers and affordances of coworking spaces. These predominantly qualitative studies embed coworking spaces within major contemporary paradigms such as the rise of the creative class (Naylor and Florida, 2003), neoliberalism (Lorne, 2019) or the sharing economy (Chan and Zhang, 2021). The involvement of scholars from multiple disciplines indicates the necessity for interdisciplinary explorations

of the phenomenon. Hence, we find contributions ranging from sociology (Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2015; 2017), management (Capdevila, 2013), organization studies (Vidaillet and Bousalham, 2020), building research (Weijjs-Perrée et al., 2019) to geography and urban studies (Brown, 2017; Nakano et al., 2020). Yet, the major crux across disciplines lies in defining coworking spaces and what distinguishes them from alternative workplaces.

2.2 Defining coworking spaces

While the verb ‘coworking’ represents the activity of sharing and cooperating of unrelated individuals within the same workspace while embracing social interaction, ‘coworking spaces’ are the locale for these activities to happen (Orel and Dvouletý, 2020). In short, coworking spaces can be characterized by colocation (people sharing physical space and material characteristics), copresence (people working alongside each other) and by the intention of users to leverage the first two conditions to engage in collaboration, mutual learning and knowledge exchange (Chan and Zhang, 2021).



*Figure 1: Core Elements of Coworking Spaces, simplified.
Source: own, based on cited literature review.*

For a flexible membership fee, coworkers rent a temporary or permanent desk, meeting rooms, Wi-Fi and other work-enhancing services (Garrett, Spreitzer and Bacevice, 2017; Yu, Burke and Raad, 2019). Their distinctiveness compared to alternative rentable business models such

as serviced offices lies in enhancing community-building and collaboration (Capdevila, 2013; Merkel, 2015; Water-Lynch et al., 2016; Blagoev, Costas and Kärreman, 2019; Spinuzzi et al., 2019). This sociality is realized through offering regular talks, workshops and networking opportunities (Montanari, 2019). Open space for common use such as event rooms, cafés and a kitchen present the locale for these social interactions (Moriset, 2013; Water-Lynch et al., 2016; Montanari, 2019). For a stimulating atmosphere, attention is given to aesthetic design: The playfulness of interior outfit contrasts the cold, standardized image of large corporates, inviting for less formal dress, language and culture (Water-Lynch et al., 2016).

Coworking spaces attract a wide array of individuals and organizations active in the knowledge, creative and media fields. Common users are freelancers, entrepreneurs, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and corporations from industries such as Information Technology (IT), Marketing or Arts (Gandini, 2015; Deskmag, 2019a; 2019b; Montanari, 2019). The expected benefits range from sharing of costs and risks, obtaining new ideas through (in)formal exchange to sense of community (Garrett, Spreitzer and Bacevice, 2017; Merkel, 2017; Deskmag, 2019a; 2019b; Yu, Burke and Raad, 2019; Chan and Zhang, 2021). For serendipitous encounters between diverse user bases to happen, the coworking space host or a designated community management encourages interaction (Moriset, 2013; Merkel, 2015).

Their importance in urban economies is highlighted by theorizing coworking spaces as variants of ‘in-between’ and ‘intermediary’ places’. As a “third place” (Oldenburg, 1999: 16), coworking spaces afford workers to break free from the isolation at home (first place) and to ease the burdens encountered at the workplace (second place) (Brown, 2017). As an element of the ‘urban middleground’ they represent fruitful ground for promoting innovative milieus in cities: By creating ‘communities of practice’, coworking spaces channel cognitive capacities of skilled individuals and help to transfer ideas to wider communities (Cohendet, Grandadam and Simon, 2010).

2.3 Divergence between two coworking space variants

Over the years, coworking spaces have been continuously evolving and have accumulated heterogeneous meanings, making them differ largely in terms of purpose, management and target groups (Ivaldi et al., 2020). The most distinct division between contemporary variants is captured in the following two sub-chapters.

2.3.1 Places of urban resistance

The first coworking space called by its current name was ‘Spiral Muse’ in San Francisco, opened by Brad Neuberg in 2005 with the intention to provide an open place for freelancers to work alongside each other (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016). Intrigued by the work philosophy of its first kind, the diffusion of coworking spaces outside of its North American origins picked up after the Global Financial Crisis as a collective and self-organized response to cope with newly arising precariousness, when austerity policies had daunting effects on working conditions of freelance and creative professionals (Merkel, 2015; *ibid*; 2018; de Peuter, Cohen and Saraco, 2017).

These earlier coworking spaces were established based on common interests of individuals and micro-enterprises of heterogeneous backgrounds that longed to create permanent or temporary workplaces of mutual learning and collaboration (Blagoev, Costas and Kärreman, 2019; Orel and Dvouletý, 2020). These spaces followed largely normative-oriented philosophies based on “Community, Openness, Collaboration, Sustainability and Accessibility” (Coworking.com, 2021), where complementing each others’ work was more important than competing, and where management hierarchies were either absent or negotiated (Gandini, 2015). The purpose of membership, events and offered services stood in the light of creating solidarity and community, and with less focus on generating profit (Orel and Dvouletý, 2020).

Termed as ‘movement’, the proliferation of these spaces shows ideological proximity to the open-source movement, Do-It-Yourself agendas and the sharing economy (Merkel, 2015; 2018; Brown, 2017). Such coworking spaces can be classified as “urban solidarity places” (Arampatzi, 2017: 2156) and “place-based activism” (Long, 2013: 53) by accentuating that knowledge work can be organized autonomously, outside of neoliberal and capitalist tensions. Hereby, they respond to workers’ heterogeneous needs for social support, sense of belonging and recognition, while supporting free knowledge exchange and resource sharing for the sake of community (Merkel, 2015; Jakonen et al., 2017; Blagoev, Costas and Kärreman, 2019).

2.3.2 Places for business development, productivity and branding

The worldwide popularity of coworking spaces soon motivated providers to extend and capitalize on the novel workplace ‘buzz’, not seldom blurring its grassroots-ideological core. The result is a growing number of coworking space variants with profit-oriented strategies, designated management and standardized offers (Moriset, 2013; Water-Lynch et al., 2016).

Now we find large global coworking space chains such as WeWork, allowing members to work at any of their locations and benefit from their services worldwide, and numerous providers raised from international investment and capital (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016; Mehl, 2018; Orel and Dvouletý, 2020). Even international corporations such as Google run their own coworking spaces or establish partnerships with existing spaces. Associated benefits are among others reputation gains and access to new talent (Moriset, 2013). Ultimately, other types of collaborative hubs, such as hackerspaces, start-up incubators and accelerators, have added coworking to their services to support the next generation of entrepreneurs (Merkel, 2015).

While these variants still build on notions of community, the mentality of its providers and users seems to be geared towards leveraging coworking spaces for productivity and entrepreneurial success (Ivaldi et al., 2020). By instilling values and agendas top-down and catering to increasingly homogeneous target groups, original ideas of co-creation and sense of ownership are undermined (Orel and Dvouletý, 2020). Further, the emergence of high-end and commercialized coworking spaces as offered by real estate developers increase exclusion effects, by focusing on the already upwardly mobile urban worker and the globalizing firm, and by feeding into urban gentrification and real estate speculations (Fiorentino, 2019; Yang, Bisson and Sanborn, 2019; Orel and Dvouletý, 2020).

2.4 Critical coworking research

While non-academic platforms such as the Coworking Wiki (Coworking Wiki, 2020) or the Coworking Unconference (CU Asia, 2020) adopt a predominantly enthusiastic tone towards coworking, a burgeoning strand of research situates the premises of coworking in a critical light (Gandini, 2015; Brown, 2017; de Peuter, Cohen and Saraco, 2017; Jakonen et al., 2017; Merkel, 2017; 2018; Tintiangko and Soriano, 2020). Such ‘critical research’ discusses the production logics and marketed benefits of these workplaces in the wider context of increasing precarity, neoliberalization and contemporary capitalism (Moriset, 2013; Gandini, 2015).

Evidence whether joining coworking spaces enhances the obtainment of new skills or forges new opportunities appears contradictory (Gandini, 2015; Merkel, 2015; Brown, 2017; Jakonen et al., 2017; Blagoev, Costas and Kärreman, 2019). Serendipitous encounters and participation in communities are not necessarily common, with many coworkers ending up “working alone together” (Spinuzzi, 2012: 433). Evidence whether obtained benefits transcend to local urban neighbourhoods and business communities equally points in varying directions (Nakano et al., 2020). Whatever the claimed benefits: leveraging the potential of co-location depends on the

intentions and skills of users and providers of coworking spaces, and on the policy environment they are embedded in (Brown, 2017; Nakano et al., 2020). Whether these spaces are used to express any type of activity otherwise suppressed in alternative organizational work arrangements is up to the individual (Vidaillet and Bousalham, 2020).

Coworking spaces partly correspond to workers' desires to obtain access to resources they have either never possessed or from which they have been dispossessed during labour market transformations, including access to lost sociality. In the end, however, workers are invited to pay in order to work (de Peuter, Cohen and Saraco, 2017). Providers recognized work insecurities as a market potential, and increasingly commodify social interaction, while capitalizing on precariousness instead of offering an alternative to it. Ultimately, the paradox at the heart of critical coworking space research emerges: by accommodating the flexible workforce, coworking indirectly supports the atomization of work by feeding into the same structural inequalities that brought about its hype under contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

2.5 Coworking space research in the Asian context

According to Bouncken, Clauß and Reuschl (2016), the diffusion of coworking spaces in Asian countries is driven by the search for innovation, cultural preferences and institutional factors such as the development of mega cities, digitalization and the sharing economy. Yet, the meanings that coworking spaces assume in the everyday life of workers in East and Southeast Asia are just beginning to capture scholarly attention. Several studies focus on technical aspects, for example on Asian business model design (Bouncken, Clauß and Reuschl, 2016). Other studies contribute knowledge to critical coworking research: Tintiangko and Soriano (2020) highlight how local coworking space providers showed little effort to cater to the needs of independent digital knowledge workers in the Philippines and argue that coworking spaces mostly target higher-class worker segments and exclude those already disembedded.

The paucity of research in the Asian context represents a puzzle, considering that studies in new edge cities of Southeast Asia such as Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City represent critical and revelatory cases to discuss in contrast to current coworking space literature (Douglass and Huang, 2007; Bunnell et al., 2012). This overarchingly refers to studies that contextualize the coworking boom within increased precarity and neoliberal policies in the realms of digital and contingent work (Gandini, 2015; de Peuter, Cohen and Saraco, 2017; Lorne, 2019). In the everyday life of many East and Southeast Asian workers, socioeconomic precariousness and

labour informality have been prevalent long before the era of Post-Fordism (Cruz-Del Rosario and Rigg, 2019; Merkel, 2019). Contemporary structural vulnerabilities refer more to embeddedness in global markets and being affected by regulating states with developmental agendas (Nguyen, 2019b). Hence, it is important to look for both additional and alternative drivers of the proliferation of coworking spaces.

Moreover, the prevalence of “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002: 351) in Asian countries, or whether it is a hybrid or state developmentalist version of the latter, is a topic of constant debate (see for example Gainsborough, 2010). Framing coworking in exclusively neoliberal terms might not suffice in the context of a socialist-oriented market economy like Vietnam’s. Case studies in similar socioeconomic and political contexts such as China serve as vivid example: In Shanghai, coworking spaces were utilized by government agencies to provide innovation sites for technology start-ups (Wang and Loo, 2017). A study in Shenzhen lines up with these findings, where coworking spaces have been instrumentalized as top-down ‘spatial fix’ during its transitional crisis (Luo and Chan, 2020).

2.6 Previous research in Vietnam

Coworking in Vietnam has so far been spared with directly targeted English-speaking case studies. Yet several studies situated in creative class research streams incorporated coworking to small extents and provide contextual background for the emerging variants of coworking spaces: A joint research project conducted by Ly (2014) and the British Council mapped Vietnam’s creative hubs in times when the first coworking spaces were just opening. The findings elucidate the benefits of various types of creative hubs, ranging from personal fulfillment, affordable workspace to social support (Ly, 2014). Furthermore, Ly (2016) identified a supporting role in coworking spaces for Vietnam’s economy in context of the growing ICT sector. The listed hubs differ largely in business models and customer profiles and are hard to cluster into clean-cut categories (Ly, 2014; 2016). Equally, dynamics of opening and closure were still quite high in the young stage of the industry (Ly, 2014). Overall, both studies focused predominantly on artistic and cultural hubs, and little less on business-oriented variants that host segments of Vietnam’s entrepreneurs and SMEs that sprung off the country’s start-up waves (Nguyen and Pham, 2019).

Two recent studies conducted by Gasparin and Quinn (2020a; 2020b) mapped Vietnam’s creative ecosystem and explored its linkages to innovation networks and value creation. The results reveal that in Vietnam’s transitional vacuum, forged by rapid growth and the shift from

a planned to a quasi-capitalist economic system, a creative ecosystem has developed despite sub-optimal policy conditions. Actors within the ecosystem, including coworking spaces, produce economic, social and cultural value that benefit Vietnam's wider development, ranging from forging economic opportunities, keeping cultural heritage alive and alleviating social problems. Governmental agencies have not yet fully grasped the potential of ecosystem dynamics – even though coworking spaces and other types of SME clusters are supposedly discussed with interest among government authorities for the upgrading of value chains (ibid).

2.7 Positioning of this thesis

This thesis aims to fill the gap in coworking research by studying the meanings and emerging variants of coworking spaces in Vietnam. The study builds on and enhances research in Vietnam's creative sector and offers a contribution to the limited research on coworking in Southeast Asia. Selected findings within the literature review are picked up for the study's context: The exemplary studies in Asia indicated the necessity for an approach that contextualizes coworking developments within idiosyncratic structural challenges. Hence, this study is situated in Vietnam's transitional vacuum, where technological change and altered socioeconomic mobilities disrupt the needs and expectations of work in its urban cores (Brown, 2017; Nguyen, 2019a; 2019b; d'Ovidio, 2021).

Amidst structural changes, coworking spaces are expected to proliferate as places of business development or of resistance as shown in previous studies. Alternatively, they may emerge as variant of a different kind. This presents the motivation to formulate three working hypotheses linked to these expected variants to guide the study. Moreover, the contextual similarities to China invite to search for traces of governmental agency as potential drivers of Vietnam's coworking sector. In arguing that work remains a core aspect of identity and sense-making in everyday life, this thesis will capture perceptions and meanings of individuals when choosing to engage with coworking spaces (d'Ovidio, 2021). In agreeing with Moriset (2013) that "coworking is first an atmosphere, a spirit, and even a lifestyle" (ibid: 7), a place-based approach with focus on sense-making of coworking spaces as meaningful workplaces is employed.

3. Theoretical framework

This chapter introduces the theoretical framework, consisting of Sense of Place (SOP) and Placelessness. While place-based perspectives to study coworking spaces are rather unorthodox, they have proven useful for understanding individual perceptions of local environments in a context of urban change in the Asian context (McGee, 2009; Phuong and Groves, 2010; Ujang and Zakariya, 2015). Rooting in phenomenologist and social constructivist thought, the two chosen concepts are suitable to grasp the meaningfulness of emerging variants of coworking spaces through the eyes of the study's target groups. Drawing on these theoretical propositions and previous research, this chapter concludes with three working hypotheses.

3.1 Sense of Place

Scholars across disciplines of social research eagerly discuss the concepts 'space' and 'place' (Cresswell, 2014). In the present paper, debates over space are of no concern; hence, the terminology of 'space' simply refers to the coworking space, characterized by its tangible characteristics and by offering a 'locale' for social happenings (Withers, 2009; Cresswell, 2014). Instead, the thesis' interest lies with theories of 'place', which describe how spatial settings such as coworking spaces receive "social layers of meaning" (Bilandzic et al., 2013: 428), that are constructed and articulated by those engaging with them as a workplace, filling them with a "range of tasks, activities and social encounters" (Foley, 2007: 864).

To grasp the concrete meanings of place, Sense of Place (SOP) represents an intriguing concept, capturing how individuals form a bond with place (Relph, 1976; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001; Cresswell, 2014). SOP has been inspired by interdisciplinary notions, ranging from attitude research, environmental psychology to humanist geography. It subsumes multiple connotations such as the physical built character of place, the spirit of place or a feeling of rootedness (Withers, 2009; Cresswell, 2014). Scholars surrendered that it may sometimes just be an impression of uniqueness that places either have or lack (Relph, 1976; Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001).

For the thesis' purposes, SOP is defined as the perceptions and bonds that individuals develop towards coworking spaces as they assess their qualities as a meaningful workplace. Acknowledging the above shortcomings, I restrict myself to a tripartite framework of SOP for

clarity of focus, consisting of ‘place identity’ as the cognitive dimension, ‘place attachment’ as the affective dimension and ‘place dependence’ as the conative dimension (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). This framework is applied with the aim to understand what makes coworking spaces meaningful places that become worth choosing over others. As conflicting debates exist on its dimensions and parameters, a broader range of SOP studies is considered throughout this chapter to create a coherent outlook on the three dimensions and to suit the study of collaborative and ICT-informed workplaces (Foley, 2007; Montanari, 2019).

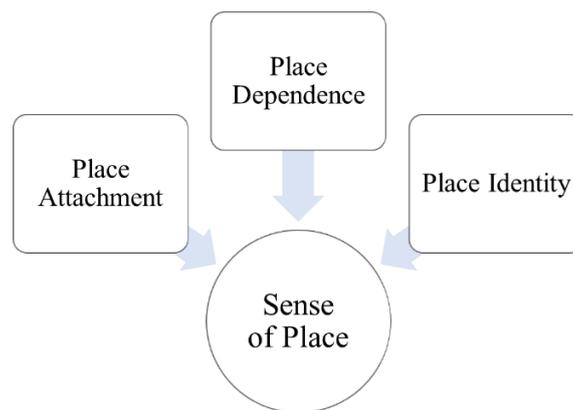


Figure 2: Tripartite understanding of Sense of Place.

Source: based on literature cited in chapter 3.1.

3.1.1 Place identity

Place identity as the cognitive dimension refers to “those dimensions of self that define an individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, beliefs, preferences, feelings, values, goals and behavioral tendencies and skills relevant to this environment” (Proshansky, 1978: 155). One can also imagine place identification in terms of one’s general self-identity or one’s group identity (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001; Ujang and Zakariya, 2015). Further, identification can strengthen over time and is more likely to be informed by social experiences and relationships fostered within the place than the perceived quality of the physical environment (Relph, 1976; Montanari, 2019). Place identity is also influenced by factors such as the perceived physical attractiveness of the place, e. g. in terms of architecture, aesthetics or the overall landscape (Lynch, 1960). For the purposes of this thesis, I extend the notion of place identity to how a place corresponds to one’s work or corporate-related identity.

3.1.2 Place attachment

Place attachment as the affective dimension describes the positive emotional connection between individuals or groups and their environment, along with associated behaviours and actions, beliefs and knowledge (Altman and Low, 1992). Such attachment is often linked to enhanced psychological and physical well-being and can spill-over to increased involvement in local neighbourhoods or communities (Mesch and Manor, 1998). For the case of coworking spaces, this may refer to the involvement in social interactions, but particularly to the interest to engage with the community and events happening at the place. Attachment can be influenced by determinants such as the availability, remoteness or accessibility of a place, gathered experiences, one's stage in life or the length of residence (Giuliani, 1991; Mesch and Manor, 1998). The importance of relationships fostered within or around the place is acknowledged across various understandings of place attachment; yet the importance of explicitly local attachment and relationships has undergone change in times of increased mobility, where one's sources of social support may be spread across neighbourhoods, cities or even countries (Massey, 1994; Mesch and Manor, 1998).

3.1.3 Place dependence

Place Dependence as the conative and utilitarian dimension focuses on the “perceived strength of association” (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981: 457) between a person and a place, and to what extent a place serves individual goals and needs given existing alternatives. This includes a comparative process and stems from considerations such as the perceived quality of the place and its potential substitutes (Smaldone, Harris and Sanyal, 2005). The main difference to place attachment is that all potential places may be perceived as negative, but the chosen option may be the best choice among poor alternatives (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). The goals and needs individuals pursue may be influenced by socioeconomic parameters such as gender, age or race (Jorgensen and Stedman, 2001). For the purposes of this thesis, place dependence refers to the work-related needs and goals of individuals and affordances of coworking spaces to serve these compared to alternative workplaces, and the motivation for engaging with coworking spaces.

3.2 Placelessness

While SOP refers to perceptions of meaningful places that individuals foster a bond with, such place meaning can also be absent. How individuals make sense of place in the light of altered mobilities, globalization and modernization is subject to rapid change (Massey, 1994; Arefi, 1999). Scholars now claim a loss of emotional attachment, meaning and identification with

place, and lastly the uniqueness of place itself. The latter becomes visible in both changing perceptions of individuals and in the rise of planned standardized, imitated architecture and landscapes, all of which offer replaceable experiences (Relph, 1976; Arefi, 1999; Long, 2013; Ujang and Zakariya, 2015). Such critique is often linked to an increased commodification of a sense of place (Arefi, 1999).

This loss of meaning, often coined ‘placelessness’, is formed by growing attitudes of inauthenticity among those engaging with place; shaped by an uncritical stance towards mass values, and an over-preoccupation with achieving efficiency in planning (Relph, 1976). Such a stance towards mass values is predominantly pushed by those creating these places; and replaceable spatial settings are produced for those assuming to have homogeneous preferences and needs. Striving towards economic and public rather than individual or community values is what Relph (1976) laments to be ‘inauthentic’. According to Relph (1976) and Arefi (1991), the root cause of these developments is linked to standardizing pressures of the global economy. Meanwhile, notions of community and uniqueness have become unique selling points and strategic place branding tactics to attract users, tourists or property developers (Poon, 2019).

3.3 Operationalization and working hypotheses

According to the thesis’ aim to understand the emerging coworking space variants in Vietnam, three tentative hypotheses guide this research. Moreover, formulating hypotheses is useful to enhance the analytical powers of the rather descriptively oriented concepts of place. Hereby, both hypotheses 1 and 2 stand for meaningful and positively perceived coworking spaces and might hint at place variants workers desire to see proliferating in Vietnam. Hypothesis 3 is considered as the ‘counterhypothesis’ and describes coworking spaces that are perceived negatively, failing to live up to workers’ needs.

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Sense of belonging and resistance

Coworking spaces as places of urban resistance provide a sense of belonging and resistance to Vietnamese workers in times of rapid socioeconomic transition, altered meanings of work and increasing precarity. When seeking these places, workers express strong place attachment and seek local involvement and relationships. For those employing mobile work and lifestyles, some do not only seek a work-enhancing environment, but also a place that may help to shape confused aspects of self-identity (Foley, 2007). Hereby, participation in cultural agendas and

events have effects on cognitive identification processes and can influence how a place is perceived as unique and meaningful, resulting in even stronger place attachment (Montanari, 2019). Ultimately, these conditions give rise to user perceptions of empowerment and well-being, allowing to break free from currently experienced work constraints. Providers simultaneously strive for offering and being perceived as a meaningful alternative to other workplaces, such as traditional corporations or serviced offices (Waters-Lynch et al., 2016).

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Sense of efficiency and productivity

Coworking spaces as places for business development and productivity provide a sense of efficiency and productivity, based on the goals of workers to utilize the spatial setting, its amenities and social encounters to attend to one's work-related goals. Here, "efficiency markers" (Foley, 2007: 869) constitute meaning-making of workers: Next to spatial aspects, it is important how a place invites for formal and informal conversations and opportunities, which could turn into something productive. Individual place attachment is lower, and local involvement in cultural agendas, events and community present the means to an end to obtain new ideas and foster individual or corporate success (Montanari, 2019). These places are not frequented in hope to shape confused identities, as 'going local' and attaching is no personal goal in the first place, but because they correspond greatly to work-related aspects of self-identity (Massey, 1994; Cresswell, 2014).

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Sense of inauthenticity

Whether a sense of place is negative or a coworking space perceived as 'inauthentic' can be influenced both by factors on the provider and user side. Providers attempt to freeride and capitalize on the beneficial associations of coworking as described in chapter 2.3.2 (places exclusively used for branding) by instrumentalizing it for mere marketing purposes or by offering standardized, scalable offers for profit gains (Moriset, 2013; Gandini, 2015). Yet, a lack of a profound purpose and values to account for heterogeneous needs results in coworking spaces that users want to leave, that neither offer identity markers nor support the accomplishment of work-related goals linked to place dependence. On the user side, perceptions of placelessness might be brought about by a lack of interest in or awareness of the alternative potential coworking spaces offer, or by negative experiences encountered in the space (Vidaillet and Bousalham, 2020).

4. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological considerations of this thesis. The first subchapter provides thoughts on the employed research approach. The second and third subchapter dive into the choices and processes of data collection and analysis. The fourth subchapter covers reflections on positionality and reflexivity. The fifth subchapter highlights challenges and limitations faced along the research process, while the final chapter discusses ethicality.

4.1 Research approach

With coworking spaces being a novel work construct and the coworking industry being in constant evolution shaped by multiple stakeholders, this research sets within a constructionist ontology; indicating that the phenomenon under study is in a continuous stage of production through social interactions and human agency (Bryman, 2012). To suit the constructionist ontology as well as the social constructivist and phenomenologist-inspired theoretical framework, interpretivism is the adopted epistemologist stance. Hence, this research operates under the assumption that access to the understanding of the social world of studied informants and the spatial phenomenon of coworking is only given through the researcher's interpretation of subjective accounts offered by its main practitioners (*ibid*).

Rooted in the paucity of previous research in the Vietnamese context and leaning towards methodologies identified in previous coworking research, this study relies on a qualitative research approach to enter a relatively unexplored field (*ibid*). Initially inspired by the sheer number of coworking spaces that sprung up in Vietnam in a few years of time, this study started as an explorative and inductive endeavour to understand the perceived value of coworking spaces from user and provider perspectives. Intrigued by first reflections along the analysis, this paper incorporated deductive elements, narrowing the focus to understanding the coworking space variants emerging in Vietnam's transitional urban economy, and by employing theory-informed hypotheses to guide the research. For these means, perceptions of coworking space users and providers are gathered and contrasted in a multiple comparative case study, allowing to understand the emergence of coworking space variants in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (Bryman, 2012; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

4.2 Data collection

In accordance with the adopted research approach and case study design, I employed semi-structured interviewing with key informants as method for data collection (Bryman, 2012; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Interviewing was rated superior to sampling non-spoken data types, as meanings of place linked to the place-based theoretical framework tend to be hidden in oral accounts (Williams, 2014). Yet for better contextualization of interview data, previous secondary research presented in chapter 2.6, in particular the four studies on Vietnam's creative hubs and ecosystem, served as complementary.

For sampling key informants, I reached out to “exemplifying cases” (Bryman, 2012: 70) of Vietnam's coworking sphere in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, with rich experience in coworking. Hereby, I aimed for the key stakeholders of coworking spaces, namely founders, community managers and users (Castilho and Quandt, 2017). Through a mix of purposive, convenience and snowball sampling, nine individuals were successfully recruited via messaging on Facebook, E-Mail and by activating gatekeepers within my own social network (Bryman, 2012). Two individuals contacted as gatekeepers were discovered to be rich cases and were incorporated into the sample as well. The online portals *Coworker.com* and the real estate outlet *VividInvest* were hereby consulted to identify validated coworking providers. Being aware of the risks of partiality and sample bias connected to the activation of gatekeepers and convenience sampling within own social networks, the latter two approaches resulted inevitable being confronted with low response rates along the process (Bryman, 2012).

In the roll-out phase, nine interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom between February 04 and March 05, 2021, lasting between 40 and 110 minutes (see chapter 5.1). All recordings were saved on my computer and are deleted upon completion of the research. Two interview guides – one for capturing the user perspective (Appendix B), another for the provider perspective (Appendix C) – ensured that conversations followed consistent patterns (Bryman, 2012; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The first draft of the guide was revised based on the feedback gathered during one pilot interview with a non-sampled individual on February 1st, 2021, to test which type of questions generated rich answers and allowed for a natural flow of conversation (Bryman, 2012). The final guides entailed a variety of themes to gather as much knowledge as possible about the meaningfulness of Vietnamese coworking spaces, but also listed questions related to the socioeconomic context and the government's role as outlined in chapter 2.7. Depending on the answers received, the questions were asked in varying orders and adapted and extended to suit the informants' background.

Overall, the flexibility of semi-structured interviewing resulted supportive in asking questions relevant to the adopted study focus, while inviting informants to enhance the context-sensitivity of findings by adding unexpected themes in the explorative stage of the research (Bryman, 2012).

4.3 Data analysis

Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed word-by-word into written text format. Yet, according to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), verbatim transcriptions are not necessary for studying meanings and perceptions. Subsequently, selected key text passages have been denaturalized during analysis and for quoting in the findings chapter, omitting pause fillers and repetitions. The transcription process was treated as a first round of analysis as it helped to become familiar with the data (ibid). The transcripts were then subjected to iterative steps of thematic analysis (TA), consisting of inductive and deductive coding procedures to extract major themes within and across cases (Bryman, 2012). This process was assisted by the qualitative coding software NVivo and the mind-mapping tool XMind.

In the explorative phase of the research, coding was leaning towards inductive grounded theory notions (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Morse, 2016): Through constant reading and comparison of text passages, cross-cutting codes were merged into tentative sub-themes and themes. During the consolidating phase, a deductive coding framework was applied based on pre-determined points of interest drawn from the literature review (highlighted in chapter 2.7) and the theoretical framework (Table 1). Hereby I moved between a sensitizing and definite understanding of coding (Blumer, 1954; cited in Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015): the pre-defined codes offered directions for which statements to look out for and helped to proceed systematically. Simultaneously, I employed the framework as rough guidance and not as deterministic tool due to the fuzzy boundaries of the theoretical framework. Lastly, overlapping and contrasting inductive and deductive codes were reorganized into key themes, which were discussed and interpreted according to the theory-informed working hypotheses, and complemented with previous research to answer the research questions.

Theoretical Codes					
Place Attachment		Place Identity		Place Dependence	Placelessness
Positive Emotional Effects		Personal Identity Work Identity		Motivation to join	Commodification and Replaceability
Length of Residence				Tasks to be solved	Individual and Community Values
Stage of Life				Quality of Place	Appreciation of Economic and Mass Values
Availability and Accessibility				Substitutes of Place	Imitation and Standardization
Local Involvement and Social Relationships					
Additional Codes from Literature Review and Theory Section					
Rapid Transition and Development	Government	Efficiency Markers	Cultural Agenda and Events	Physical features and Design	

Table 1: Coding Framework. Structure inspired by Bryman (2012: 579).

4.4 Reflexivity and positionality

Being reflexive about my own positionality, formed by experiences of growing up as a white, middle-class European female student, and how these might affect knowledge construction and presentation, became imperative in all stages of the research (Bryman, 2012). Finding myself in an outsider position from a cultural and researcher perspective, I attempted to draw on own culturally sensitizing experiences gathered during language class in Vietnam and intercultural communication training received during undergraduate studies, to establish trust and rapport with informants during interviews (van der Meulen 2011; Turgo, 2012).

To reduce asymmetries in power relations in fieldwork, participants with academic backgrounds and international exposure form part of the sample (ibid). Moreover, with no practical experience in coworking and little opportunity to gather the latter during a global pandemic, I found myself in the position seeking to learn from those with superior knowledge levels, which tilted power relations towards informants. Besides desk research, I attempted to familiarize myself with the coworking sphere by attending public digital coworking talks, while openly revealing my intentions as a graduate researcher.

During interviews, I attempted to foster a conversation atmosphere that enabled professional distance on the one hand, and trust and rapport on the other (Bryman, 2012; Williams, 2014). Employing an understanding of ‘inter views’ where two subjects are involved in the

conversation, I offered personal remarks, particularly regarding the nature of my interest in Vietnam, when proactively asked for to allow for a sense of reciprocity (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Consequently, by subtly interfering in conversations, I might have compromised objectivity to slight extents, yet in exchange for enhancing the richness of findings.

4.5 Ethical concerns

With the direct interaction between the researcher and the researched, ethical considerations were accounted for to safeguard the interests of study participants (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). Principally, the study of workplace perceptions, along with the employed research and interview questions, targeted no sensitive issues. Nevertheless, after several interview accounts revealed personal life situations and vaguely political remarks, measures have been applied to reduce potential harm and risks for informants residing in an authoritarian political context. This involved anonymization and the use of pseudonyms to protect the identity of informants (ibid). Equally, detailed information related to business strategy were omitted after consulting with coworking providers.

As recommended by Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) and The Swedish Research Council (2017), interview participants were informed about the purpose of the study and given full disclosure of my personal background, university affiliation and contact information before roll-out. Additionally, matters of informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymization, confidentiality as well as recording and handling of the data were discussed (Appendix A). Upon request, several interviewees received the interview guide beforehand (Appendix B, C). Interviewees were given the option to decide on a provider for holding the video conversations, which resulted in the throughout use of the software Zoom. In balancing the preference of interviewees and software-related safety concerns, I ensured to use the highest safety setting the platform offered when creating the conversation rooms.

Ultimately, next to offering carefully placed personal insights, the results of the study will be shared with all interviewees and represent another means to offer reciprocity to study participants.

4.6 Limitations and challenges

Several limitations are interlinked with the adopted methodology. The first issue relates to generalizability. The study of a small sample with the employment of concepts that generate subjective perceptions and meanings cannot account for views of all coworking industry stakeholders (Bryman, 2012; Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). For grasping comprehensive views of Vietnam's coworking sphere, a larger sample, for example including real estate representatives and large firms, would be necessary. Further, the study approach highlights the role of the researcher, who is involved in interpreting and communicating subjective interview accounts (ibid).

A second limitation refers to sampling distortions (Bryman, 2012). The sample entails a strong male-bias and does not allow to draw any inferences about a gendered nature of gathered accounts. Moreover, I originally attempted to form a sample of exclusively Vietnamese-founded coworking spaces for the means of understanding local perceptions. Being dependent on the answers received during the recruitment process, I adjusted my original intentions and incorporated one foreign-funded coworking space into the provider sample group as well as one space founded by an international-Vietnamese team. Yet, given the international nature of the coworking phenomenon, adding foreign notions might add to the richness of findings.

A third limitation links to timing. In fact, not all interviewees were speaking of current experiences. While some were regularly active in coworking, others had left it in the past or just joined these spaces sporadically when the interviews were conducted. Simultaneously, all interviewees found themselves in unusual life situations due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. While the pandemic was not the focus of this study, it undoubtedly forms part of Vietnam's current transitional vacuum and workers' challenges.

A last challenge related to language barriers. Since my own Vietnamese language skills were not sufficient to collect and interpret data, I depended on the English language to sample articles for the literature review and for conducting interviews. During the interviews, the language barrier represented less of a challenge than initially anticipated, as conversation flows were maintained thoroughly. However, one cannot trust the latter illusion since certain nuances in content might have gotten lost in translation. After all, communicating in a foreign language compromised the richness of findings to inestimable extents (Bryman, 2012).

5. Findings: Sense-making of coworking spaces as meaningful places

Both chapter five and six represent the analytical core of this thesis. The fifth chapter presents the findings obtained from TA. Hereby, the first subchapter offers a presentation of the interview sample. The key themes derived from TA follow in the second subchapter, while merging and contrasting user and provider perceptions of coworking spaces. The purpose of this section is to answer the first explorative sub-question “*How do coworking space users and providers make sense of coworking spaces as meaningful places?*”.

5.1 Introduction of sample

Four interviews were conducted with coworking space providers. Provider 1 is a foreign-funded Coworking Space Incubator in Ho Chi Minh City with a focus on binational incubation services. This space is represented by a young Vietnamese who helped to plan out the incubator space during an internship and was later a tenant himself to help build the headquarters of a foreign education start-up during another internship. Provider 2 is a local independent coworking space in Hanoi targeted at supporting social and environmental entrepreneurs, changemakers and the Vietnamese youth; represented by its former community builder from France, who supported setting up the space during a gap year. Initially, it was targeted to host a community linked to a social entrepreneurship initiative but has opened to other coworking segments over time. Provider 3 is a large global coworking space chain operating in Ho Chi Minh City, targeting higher-class segments of local and foreign companies and freelancers. This space is represented by a former Community Lead at one of their locations. Provider 4 is a local for-profit coworking space with several locations in Ho Chi Minh City, targeted at supporting the mass market of local and foreign freelancers, start-ups and SMEs. This space is represented by its Chief Executive Officer, who oversees its daily operations.

Pseudonym	Interviewee	Gender	Description	Duration in Position	Location	Date	Length of interview (hh:mm:ss)
Provider 1	Former Planning Team, Member	M	Binational Coworking Business Incubation, Education Start-Up	Each 6 months	Ho Chi Minh City	06/02	00:46:30
Provider 2	Co-Founder, Former Community Manager	M	Coworking Space, Focus: Social Entrepreneurship	10 months	Hanoi	12/02	01:11:55
Provider 3	Former Community Lead	M	Global Coworking Space Chain	1 year	Ho Chi Minh City	23/02	01:43:32
Provider 4	Chief Executive Officer	M	Local Coworking Space Chain	> 4 years	Ho Chi Minh City	25/02	00:42:17

Table 2: Interviewed Coworking Space Providers.

One interview was conducted with a Non-Profit Organization (NPO 1) focusing on accelerating smart and sustainable energy start-ups and which frequently cooperates with coworking spaces. The NPO is represented by a current program manager, who himself has engaged within the coworking space and start-up scene for more than three years.

Four interviews were conducted with Vietnamese users. User 1 is a student who came back to Hanoi during the Covid-19 pandemic and continues to study remotely at an Australian university. User 2 came back to Vietnam during the Covid-19 pandemic and currently pauses his studies in IT in the Netherlands and continues to work remotely as a part-time software developer for a Dutch company. User 3 is an IT student who came back to Hanoi during the pandemic, who first continued to study remotely at a university in the United States but is now taking a gap year. User 4 is a former English centre administration assistant and teacher who is studying for a career change into finance, while continuing to offer private English classes in the evening.

Pseudonym	Interviewee	Gender	Industry	Duration Coworking Engagement	Location	Date	Length of interview (hh:mm:ss)
NPO 1	Cooperation Partner Coworking	M	Non-Profit Organization (NPO)	> 3 years	Ho Chi Minh City	18/02	01:01:51
User 1	User	F	International Relations Student	> 1 year	Hanoi	05/02	00:41:09
User 2	User	M	Software Development	1 year	Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi	19/02	00:57:12
User 3	User	M	Information Technology Student	> 1 year	Hanoi	04/03	01:06:06
User 4	User	F	English Instructor, Finance Student	> 1 year	Hanoi	05/03	00:56:35

Table 3: Interviewed Coworking Space Users.

5.2 Coding results

The proceeding chapter presents the key themes that emerged during TA. For enhanced clarity, the themes will be presented within the theoretical dimensions of SOP and Placelessness that they were most likely to be ascribed to based on theoretical readings (Table 4).

Place Attachment	Place Dependence	Place Identity	Placelessness
1. Location 2. Flexibility 3. Belonging and Involvement	1. Convenience 2. Efficiency and Focus 3. Access to Resources 4. Affordability 5. Absence of alternative places	1. Cultural Identity 2. Shifting Cultural and Professional Identities 3. Blurring Identities	1. Commodification and Choice 2. Lack of Human- Centeredness and Sociality 3. Real Estate 4. Novelty and Learning 5. Government

Table 4: Key themes drawn from Thematic Analysis.

5.2.1 Place attachment

Interview questions targeted at describing favourite coworking spaces, factors for choosing a coworking space, interest in local interactions and overall benefits of coworking served to unravel what caused positive perceptions and emotional attachment. Most interviews revealed that positive perceptions were based on locational factors, the attractiveness of interior design and outer surroundings, and the possibility of flexible attachment – all of which indicating a lower sense of attachment. Those expressing a stronger sense of belonging tended to draw from gathered experiences and local relationships, which had developed over time and fostered interest in community involvement (Mesch and Manor, 1998).

1. Location

All user interviews revealed that coworking spaces that were easily accessible, as suggested by Giuliani (1991), and showed aesthetic design and neat surrounding areas were perceived more positively and visited more frequently. Users preferred coworking spaces that were close to their homes and centrally located, and that were easily reachable by motorbike and public transport due to the congested parking and traffic situation in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi (User 1-4). The same preference was described for coworking spaces that offered opportunities for break walks, food and coffee shops in their surroundings. Further, users cherished the availability of openly designed space with natural lighting (User 1, 2 and 4), large windows with views over the city (User 1, 2) and playful, artistic design (User 1, 3, 4). In describing his favourite place, User 3 revealed:

“That one is really close to the iconic sword lake. The sword lake is the place where every tourist comes whenever they come to Hanoi [...] So, that is a really cool place to go because first of all, it’s really close to the center so you can just go everywhere around the city and do stuff around. You don’t have to just stay at the coworking space for the whole day. You also need to walk around to go eat or just grab some coffee somewhere else” (User 3)

Providers 1, 3 and 4 equally stressed that their spaces were deliberately located in central and premium areas of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which contributed to their accessibility and attractiveness. Similar strategic considerations were made regarding high-quality, attractive and interaction-promoting design. For Provider 2, location and design factors were determined by chance and in absence of strategic rationales: The location was chosen because one of the co-founders happened to own an apartment in Hanoi and the community, that the place was originally intending to host, resided there as well. Design aspects were implemented step-by-step and partly in joint cooperation with community members.

2. Flexibility

Users 1-4 embraced the flexibility coworking spaces provided them in terms of membership, opening hours and access to facilities. Even though all elaborated on having favourite coworking spaces, such attachment never went so far as to commit to one specific place only (Users 1, 3, 4). Instead, User 3 cherished the feeling of freedom this flexibility provided him, while User 1 for example preferred exploring different coworking spaces around Hanoi for greater excitement:

“I always try to switch them up, so I get more excited at every place. There are some people who really need familiar locations to feel safe and stuff, but there are also people who just want to explore things and I’m the second type” (User 1)

Equally, all four providers highlighted that offering flexibility, particularly in terms of membership options, which ranged from one month to a year, was one of the core benefits that coworkers cherished. This flexibility was not only deemed important for the adaptation to varying individual financial resources (Provider 2) and business needs (Provider 1, 3 and 4) of members, but also for enhancing social experiences at the workplace:

“If you have no flexible location, so let’s say, 30 people are there, you have no choice. You have to make friends with them [...] But if you’re at our coworking space, you have 2000 people. You have another 1970 interesting people other than your company to talk to. So, you become very selective, you walk around, you come to the common area, you get a beer, and you talk with people you want to, you have a crush on” (Provider 3)

3. Belonging and Involvement

Accounts on both user and provider sides revealed that the length of residence mattered for developing a stronger place attachment (Mesch and Manor, 1998). User 1 and 4, who started using coworking spaces over the past year did not express strong positive emotional bonds. In contrary, they decided to step back from coworking after several months. User 2, on the other hand, had first gotten in touch with coworking during high school time while joining a youth start-up competition. Returning to Vietnam, he drew on previous experiences and arranged with his employer abroad that they covered the membership fees to conduct remote work tasks from there (Mesch and Manor, 1998). He expressed an explicit positive attachment, which he based on developing a local social network in the absence of not having his colleagues nearby:

“I’m not sure how to explain it, but first it feels like I just go there for work, but after a while it feels like it’s part of my life, I have a network there. I also do my work, but I also do lots of other stuff there and I enjoy going there. The attitude about the place changed” (User 2)

That length of residence and the resulting familiarization with the setting facilitated local involvement and interest in social interactions (Mesch and Manor, 1998), was also supported by Provider 2 and 4: if members kept meeting over time in common areas, interest in interactions often arose naturally and not seldom turned into something more productive:

“We have a very large community in each of the locations. It’s very hard for them to know each of them, but let’s imagine they are in the shared areas together everyday, they can get to know who is new in the community and who does what. It is much easier for them in the future to do business or make friends. And we have observed a lot of good partnerships across our members” (Provider 4)

The interest in local involvement and social interactions also depended on users’ ‘stage of life’ in the business process (Mesch and Manor, 1998). Provider 1 mentioned that the firms at his space were not necessarily interested in deeper interactions as they were in mature business stages and active in unrelated industries. Provider 4, however, described how involvement and interaction within the community happened more naturally as many users were similar of age and industry. Ultimately, a deeper attachment was also fostered during the participation in the local events and workshops:

“[...] they really feel at home, it gives them energy and they also want to speak to people. I think at some point people [...] they know each other on a very deep level because, you know in all the workshops we ask super deep questions. So, the way you connect with other people is super deep because you share super deep stories, you become familiar with them” (Provider 2)

5.2.2 Place dependence

Asking interview participants about the tasks they were seeking to complete and their motivation to join coworking spaces helped to unravel how different user groups perceived being dependent on coworking spaces (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981). Hereby, the interviewees assessed the quality of visited coworking spaces to support individual goal attainment, and doing so, lamented the unsuitability and lack of alternative places. Apart from the theme ‘convenience’, the emerging themes pointed at strong place dependencies towards coworking spaces. Yet, the dependence was not linked to the affordances of one specific space, but to the associated benefits and affordances of the workplace category of coworking spaces overall.

1. Convenience

Users 1-3 cherished that all needs and desires, ranging from the provision of work facilities to cleaning and available snacks and drinks, were taken care of for them so that they could focus on nothing else but their respective work tasks.

“I think the largest reason is the convenience there. I don’t have to care about a lot of stuff, it’s just there. I can just grab a coffee and take a good seat and maybe if I want to walk somewhere, I can go to the top of the building to chill there” (User 2)

This convenience was also stressed by Providers 1, 3 and 4 as one among many benefits of joining coworking spaces. For start-up, SME and corporate clients, this convenience not only refers to the provision of work facilities and maintenance, but also to all business-supporting services that were offered by the coworking spaces and their cooperation partners. Along these lines, Provider 4 elaborated in reference to his entrepreneurial and corporate customers: *“When a member registers, literally, they don’t need to invest anything. They can grow inside our platform very fast” (Provider 4).*

2. Efficiency and Focus

The theme ‘convenience’ was linked to the goals of users to finish their tasks in an efficient and focused manner, ranging from concluding assignments (User 1, 3 and 4) and coding sessions (User 2, 3) to accelerating outsourcing processes (Provider 1) and expanding business plans (Provider 3 and 4). The necessity to reduce distractions was also mentioned: User 1 chose coworking spaces that usually had no or few events and with little space for talking. User 3 cherished that there was no urgent need to talk, even though he would from time to time engage in short casual chats with other coworkers. How coworking spaces supported focused work was illustrated in comparison to alternative workplaces such as traditional offices, coffee shops, libraries and the home (Stokols and Shumaker, 1981; Smaldone, Harris and Sanyal, 2005).

“I know that some people really depend on that space to focus and work, because Vietnam is very noisy. It’s a developing country and it’s developing very fast, so there’s construction everywhere and the shops, they turn on loud music to pull customers” (User 1)

“You know the coffee shops, you hear a lot of noise, you see people walking, getting around, do a lot of stuff that is really not related to work at all [...] In libraries, in contrast, it’s just so quiet, it’s like you hardly ever hear any noises around [...] it can stress your mind” (User 3)

3. Access to resources for business development

Providers 1 and NPO 1 revealed that their entrepreneurial, SME and corporate members joined coworking spaces for obtaining access to the extended resources they offered for business development, which ranged from training and workshops (Provider 1, 3, 4, NPO 1), capital and investment (Provider 2, 3, 4, NPO 1), professional networks (Provider 1, 2, 3 and 4, NPO 1) to basic work facilities and physical space (NPO 1, Provider 2). NPO 1 explicitly depended on

coworking spaces as infrastructure host for its incubation programmes and as service provider for accounting, tax and legal support. Such services were for example offered by Provider 3 and 4, and were voiced to be crucial for start-ups, SMEs and corporates in Vietnam:

“We position ourselves as an ecosystem player, and we are collaborating with a lot of other partners in terms of growing the community [...] We are providing health care services, assist registration and tax accounting for everything related to business services that can help the members to take advantage from. So, they can just focus on their main business” (Provider 4)

Providing this all-inclusive and ‘kick-start’ entrepreneurial support, and freeing start-ups from the “headaches” of obtaining their own office, was also voiced as one of the core founding motivations for Provider 4. He and his team desired to represent and support the emerging entrepreneurial sector and contribute to Vietnam’s growing economy. Further, according to Provider 1, starting any kind of business is no easy task in Vietnam’s policy environment, which is why coworking spaces upheld crucial supporting roles.

4. Absence of alternative places

Another aspect was the lack of suitable study places for high school and university students (User 1, 3, 4, Provider 1, NPO 1). The few existing public libraries were described as badly taken care of (User 1, 3) and with “grumpy staff” (User 4). The interview accounts offered three explanations: a lack of mentality to perceive libraries as a place to study (Provider 1); universities did not own land or resources to provide libraries (NPO 1); and public places and public goods overall were given low priority by city governments (User 1, Provider 3).

“Public libraries and museums in Vietnam are not a priority. There’s also a lot of debate that we need to improve these places. So, that’s why there are not many public libraries in Vietnam. Even if you wanna go there to study, you can’t. I think it’s also one of the reasons why people choose coworking spaces” (User 1)

“I tried to go to library at my university in Hanoi and I told them I want to have a place to sit to work but they laughed at me and said no one does that in Vietnam, that’s weird. And I think that’s also one reason, the people they don’t have other opportunities or options” (Provider 1)

For User 4, this problem was compounded by the fact that many coworking spaces tended to cater to corporate customers and do not offer sufficient space for individuals, let alone students.

5. Affordability

While not considered a decisive factor by User 1, 2 or 3, the affordability of coworking spaces in her life situation was crucial for User 4. According to her, she had no alternative workplace other than coworking spaces to study for her career change into finance:

“My story is kind of dramatic. After I quit my job, I didn’t want my parents to know. Because I’m still living with them. I cannot stay at home and study, so I told them that I was working. But actually, I was going to the coworking space because it is the only place that lets me use their space for a whole day with the price of only a cup of coffee. It’s affordable [...]” (User 4)

Affordability for its community members was also a major factor for Provider 2, which they considered when first opening the coworking space and trying out different pricing models:

“We were trying [...] different pricing as well, because we wanted to be there for social entrepreneurs, changemakers, non-profits, who don’t necessarily have a lot of money to spend for renting a space or venue” (Provider 2)

Also, Provider 3 and 4 stressed that renting at coworking spaces was cost-saving for users compared to having their own offices, particularly for early-stage start-ups and SMEs. Provider 1 mentioned that several companies would even rent a “beautiful address” of the coworking space for enhanced reputation and branding.

5.2.3 Place identity

The interviews revealed that choices to conduct work at coworking spaces, as motivated by both user and provider perspectives, stem on the fact that these places corresponded to personal, cultural and work-related aspects of self-identity. Though presented separately, the following themes were strongly overlapping and indicate that coworking spaces invite to blur multiple aspects of self-identity. According to several accounts, coworking spaces even represented places of resistance to experiment with and break out of cultural customs and norms.

1. Cultural Identity

Both users and providers pointed at the suitability of coworking spaces to Vietnamese community culture, where individuals found comfort in being surrounded by others during work (User 1, Provider 1). The latter was suggested as potential factor contributing to the rapid proliferation of coworking spaces. User 1 and Provider 1 further likened the popularity of coffee shops in Vietnam with the growing popularity of coworking spaces, since they offered similar benefits of sharing a physical space, accessing Wi-Fi, working and drinking coffee:

“I feel like in Vietnam there’s a really strong coffee culture. So, it’s normal for everyone to just everyday go to coffee shops and to sit and drink coffee. We consider it a kind of relaxing activity. So yeah, the same thing for coworking spaces [...] it’s got to do with the fact that Vietnamese are community people. They love doing things in a community. So many people like to do things at home and they need someone and they need other people as well to not feel so lonely. I feel like coworking spaces also gives them that” (User 1)

Further, Provider 1 pointed at the familiarity of younger Vietnamese with hourly rental services, and assumed that there were little cultural barriers to using coworking spaces:

“Because many Vietnamese live with their parents until they work or get married, that’s why they just choose these hour hotels and I think this is also a mentality [...] You know the concept of this hourly rental service, and if you know this concept already, later on if some kind of this service comes the market, you know the concept immediately, so it’s easier for the people in Vietnam to accept or to adapt to this concept” (Provider 1)

However, the identification of Vietnamese with the ideas of community, and the comfort they drew from the latter, did not automatically result in interest in actual involvement and interactions within the coworking space community:

“It’s the same thing all over Asia, we don’t talk with strangers. Vietnamese just need people around them, but not with them. People always try to sit as far away from other people as possible [...] even before Covid” (User 1)

2. Shifting Cultural and Professional Identities

In the context of rapid socioeconomic transition and new work aspirations of individuals, User 1 mentioned how the perceived attractiveness of the physical setting of coworking spaces was important for cultural and professional identity aspirations (Lynch, 1960).

“It has also something to do with the culture. People want to have the feeling of achieving something, so a professional setting makes them feel like they are working and doing something important. I feel like the background and setting and location is really important for Asian people. It’s also got to do with the fact that Vietnamese are very community people. They love doing things in a community” (User 1)

Shifts in work mentalities have also become apparent during the Covid-19 pandemic: According to Provider 4, the flexibility of coworking spaces corresponds to needs of younger firms, which refrain from long-term commitments, and of established firms who wish to maintain minimum levels of team experience during split-office arrangements. Moreover, coworking spaces were described as places to temporarily break out of constraining cultural customs prevalent at traditional workplaces and at home. This enabled workers to bring personal, cultural and professional aspects of self-identity in greater balance (Provider 2, 3).

“I think it’s a need that people want to express their feelings. Because of the conservative culture. We tend to hide inside. So, when you come home, you don’t do that. But you really have a need. So, when they come to our space, they go crazy, because they pull out of the energy. So, Asian people, still people. Vietnamese people, still people. Because of their hidden feelings at home, when they come to our space, they enjoy more. Because they can express love to their colleagues, their friends, strangers, lots of people” (Provider 3)

Equally, Provider 2 stressed how the events at his place were meant for those that “are lost” and “don’t know what to do in their life” and served to re-shape lost and confused identities.

However, not each coworking space offered that according to Provider 2 and 3. This empowering potential depended on the efforts of the community team, the events offered and the ‘authentic’ social connections forged.

“I don’t say that other spaces are selfish, they just want to make money and want to steal your wallet, but I feel like connections built (at our space) are genuine, authentic, and you are really yourself. You don’t need to pretend whatever you want to pretend” (Provider 2)

“If you work for other local coworking spaces, you just come to the office, work and go home. Nobody cares about you. I mean, they care, but in very business way, they care about your electricity, your Wi-Fi, they don’t care about your personal life. But at our space, we give people the chance to care about each other [...] it’s like bringing a new atmosphere to the Asian culture” (Provider 3)

Provider 2 also revealed that his coworking space was built based on the idea to break with traditional corporate culture and Vietnamese management style, to empower individuals to be “themselves at work”. He stressed the spaces’ principles of developing a team based on flat hierarchies and authentic emotions, assigning tasks based on leadership, experience and relationships, and continuous purpose alignment.

3. *Blurring Identities*

The previous themes hinted at a growing tendency to blur personal, cultural, and work aspects of self-identity in coworking space settings. This tendency seems to be augmenting overall, as workers in large cities work increasingly long hours and even spend their leisure time at work:

“I think people tend to work in coworking space more, because [...] people in the modern cities [...] they spend more time at work because now they have to work more [...] So rather than work at a boring place, you can come to a more interesting, interactive place like coworking spaces, right? And also, because particularly in Ho Chi Minh City, there’s not many options in terms of recreational places [...] So coworking spaces become your entertaining places [...] they don’t need to go to a movie theatre with a boring movie, they don’t need to go the bar every night [...] they don’t need to socialize anywhere else. I think it’s increasingly becoming a trend in terms of working space” (Provider 3)

5.2.4 Absence of a sense of place: Placelessness

Places that are lacking in perceived meaningfulness and barely correspond to the three dimensions of SOP were coded as placeless. Asking users how they would improve coworking spaces and which spaces they had disregarded helped to identify what caused such negative perceptions. From the provider perspective, questions targeted at the uniqueness of their space compared to others unravelled what differentiated ‘authentic’ from ‘inauthentic’ coworking spaces.

1. *Commodification and Choice*

According to all interviewees, coworking spaces are available in abundance in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Such a variety of choice might not only decrease the necessity of identification, attachment and dependence on one specific space, but also encourage users to perceive the overall workplace category as replaceable commodity (Relph, 1976; Arefi, 1999; Aleya, 2012; Long, 2013; Ujang and Zakariya, 2015). However, despite low senses of explicitly positive emotional attachment, the strongly voiced place dependencies and identification processes gave no reason to believe that coworking spaces were perceived and frequented just like any other place (Vidaillet and Bousalham, 2020). Instead, users showed themselves curious to explore places, and verbalized specific expectations and observations when choosing coworking spaces. Users 1, 3 and 4 for example were looking for place atmospheres they perceived as beneficial for conducting their work, and that could not be found elsewhere, in order *“to spend a little time to study in some place that’s quiet, that’s a little bit office-like theme, but still has neat energy”* (User 3).

2. *Lack of Human-Centeredness and Sociality*

Having many coworking spaces to choose from, paired with the uncertainties the Covid-19 pandemic brings to social interaction, might expect to put competitive pressure on providers to prove their uniqueness and meaningfulness to users (NPO 1). However, all interviewees described numerous coworking spaces as fundamentally lacking. Hereby, users lamented an absence of customer-centricity, visible at multiple levels ranging from services (User 3, 4), amenities (User 1, 4) to intuitive design (User 2, 3) and absence of open space (User 2, 3, 4). This resulted in impressions that providers were pushing for ‘basic value’, without considering how their offers would correspond to varying individual needs and goals. This resulted in coworking spaces that users wanted to leave (Relph, 1976). Also, the lack of organized activities (User 2) and of other people around (User 2, 3 and 4) was lamented, both of which necessary to create an atmosphere of sociality and productivity typical of coworking spaces as outlined in chapter 2.2. This supports the impression that interviewees were describing co-offices that were misleadingly operating as coworking spaces (Water-Lynch et al., 2016). Many coworking spaces were also considered lacking in terms of business development services: NPO 1 and Provider 1 mentioned that many places did not offer suitable events for professional development and networking, or services such as legal, consulting, accounting and transportation, all of which crucial to support Vietnam’s entrepreneurs:

“[...] the team needs to research about the member experience and do some good activities because I can see that not so many coworking spaces are doing this. They just acquire customers but maintain the customer is a different story [...] they just acquire the customer and leave them there” (NPO 1)

The other providers also stressed that when opening a coworking space *“it is important who you are doing it for”* (Provider 2). Provider 4 highlighted that well-designed, targeted services is what created trust and made customers return and form a stronger attachment. At the same time, Provider 4 explained that flexibility, which could theoretically speaking promote placelessness, does not prevent place attachment. Provider 3 highlighted the importance of attending to each client in an equal and attentive manner, and extended this notion to type of organization, hierarchy within an organization and even personality types, so that each member no matter the individual background could feel “touched” (Provider 3). Ultimately, NPO 1 and User 1 also mentioned that many coworking spaces will not survive if they do not focus on what their members desired, as the upcoming workforce generation had higher expectations of a workplace.

“[...] this is not like the older generation; we are now the new founders who are younger and tech savvy. Now they have a lot of choice. When they decide to choose a coworking space, I think, they do not only find a location to work or to sit, but they are also looking for an ecosystem around it [...] the coworking space has to provide services or already has the member that suit their style of need so they can build a relationship around it” (NPO 1)

Here, NPO 1 pointed the way forward, suggesting that providers should know whom they want to attract, offer targeted services, and ultimately communicate their message clearly:

“I think the first step the coworking spaces have to really define their brand identities whether they focus on just a normal service provider, office provider, or they focus on corporate focus, corporate member or the tech start-up member. Because when I enter a coworking space who has a corporate member I can see the difference from the coworking space who focus on start-ups. About the size, decoration, the services [...]” (NPO 1)

The apparent perceptions and awareness of vast differences in quality ultimately indicated that indifference towards standardized places and appreciation of mass values, which could hint at the prevalence of placelessness, was absent among all users and providers in this sample (Relph, 1976; Arefi, 1991). Still, ‘inauthentic’ values were ascribed to other coworking space providers outside of the given sample, which were claimed to be pushing for placelessness (ibid).

3. Real Estate

Three major themes were suggested by informants that link back to the prevalence of placelessness, namely ‘real estate’, ‘novelty and learning’ and ‘government’. The first one was ‘real estate’: Provider 1 and 3 assumed that there were not only overall many, but also

particularly many poorly managed coworking spaces because of the feasibility of real estate: Provider 3 expressed his concerns about the popularity of younger generations to pursue careers in real estate, and pointed at the deterioration of values among the younger workforce in which success, profit and reputation counted more than obtaining future-oriented skills in an increasingly international, demanding and technology-intensive setting. He highlighted how offering coworking spaces fitted into this development, as it was considered one simple way to generate profit from real estate, as demand for houses, apartments and offices remained high. However, such providers might not necessarily consider how their coworking-related services matched the demand and expectations of coworking user bases. According to Provider 1, if providers would not upgrade their services to match what users wanted, coworking spaces might end up being a “temporary phenomenon” and fail once real estate prices increased.

“If you have a space, if you don’t do coworking spaces, because it’s the easiest way to do, you can do lots more, you can open a restaurant, you open other type of service, but the coworking space is the easiest service and the least investment service. It’s very easy: set up a Wi-Fi, set up a chair and a table. It’s that simple, you can charge people for that. It’s real estate [...] I can see the Vietnamese people consider real estate as a long-lasting asset and a goldmining thing [...]” (Provider 3)

Provider 3 further assumed that the government was encouraging these tendencies, by focusing more on attracting Official Development Assistance (ODA) and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and supporting economic growth rather than providing public goods such as education.

4. Novelty and Learning

While the previous theme ascribed the notion of placelessness and inauthenticity to the nature of real estate and orientation towards economic and mass values (Relph, 1976; Arefi, 1991), nearly all interviewees on the user and provider side paved way for an additional explanation: As coworking spaces are new to the Vietnamese market and have started popularizing only after 2015, both users and providers are still learning what coworking could or should entail:

“[...] we have a lot of players in this industry. But yet, we don’t have a standardized one. It’s really scattered, the quality is really varied. You know you can get a place that is 10 or 100 dollars [...] the industry is increasing everywhere” (Provider 3)

Provider 3 further claimed that other locally founded coworking space providers had learned from the community curation practices at their coworking space chain, and later imitated these community values:

“The second player in Vietnam after our space, they were like the copycats [...] So, before that, they don’t have any type of doing community event, or they don’t have the concept of connecting the tenants with each other” (Provider 3)

A similar learning and evaluation process of the benefits of coworking was observed on the user's side:

“From the customer side, because it's too new to them, they try it one year first [...] So, most of them are in [...] the evaluation phase. They do not have a clear picture of how we work [...] But then they learn about the quality, the best customer service, and then their employees move to a shittier place, and the employees still enjoy the quality, the service, at the acceptable level”
(Provider 3)

5. Government

Apart from the previous reproaches against the government, which is perceived focusing more on fostering private sector developments and inflow of investment instead of providing public services, the notion of ‘novelty and learning’ was also ascribed to the government side: In answering interview questions whether the government directly supported coworking spaces through any programmes or policies, the users either did not possess any knowledge or assumed that there were no targeted measures apart from the government's desire to support entrepreneurship (User 3). Provider 3 elaborated that there was no direct policy instrument to encourage coworking space organizations and that they were most likely treated as any other service or hospitality business. Provider 4 mentioned that their space was operating without governmental support as well but hoped that their purpose of supporting Vietnam's entrepreneurs was in alignment with the governments' aims. Yet NPO 1 revealed that several departments belonging to the Ministry of Science and Technology engaged in coworking themselves, by providing seats in coworking spaces to emerging start-ups for a reduced or no fee for a set amount of time. However, these state-owned coworking spaces were described as “uncomfortable” and “old” (NPO 1).

6. Discussion of findings

This chapter forms the second part of the thesis' analytical core and discusses the above presented findings in complementation with previous research. The first subchapter dives into the discussion considering the working hypotheses. The obtained results then provide the foundation for answering sub-research question 2 “*What do these place meanings reveal about the variants of coworking spaces emerging in Vietnam?*” and sub-research question 3 “*Which are the driving forces for the emerging coworking space variants?*” in the second subchapter.

6.1 Discussion of working hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 (H1): Sense of belonging and resistance?

The themes touched upon by Provider 2 (belonging and involvement, affordability, access to resources for business development, shifting cultural and professional identities, blurred identities) strongly correspond to H1 as ‘textbook example’ of a place that offered a sense of belonging and resistance, inviting for strong place attachment. Here, purposive-driven freelance workers and changemakers with limited financial resources, that were passionate to develop business ideas related to Social Entrepreneurship and the Sustainable Development Goals, or were active in creative industries, created a shared social workplace based on their commonly negotiated purpose. The cultural agenda and events of the space served individual business development, but even more the realignment of confused personal and work identities and were targeted at enhancing well-being and mutual inspiration. Community members are empowered to break out of constraining aspects of Vietnamese culture, but also get to experiment with the ways work happens by embracing management styles otherwise untypical. With its vision to support precarious workers who engage in project-based work that is emotionally draining and offers lower income (theme ‘affordability’), the coworking space itself, however, is in a constant precarious state as it partially struggles to operate financially sustainable. This financial struggle links to Ly’s (2014; 2016) and Gasparin and Quinn’s (2020a; b) findings that businesses in creative and innovative sectors, that produce multiple social, economic and cultural value like Provider 1 does, do not yet receive sufficient policy support to operate sustainably. Yet overall, the accounts of Provider 1 were the only of its kind that offered sufficient and explicit evidence for fully supporting H1 within this sample.

Hypothesis 2 (H2): Sense of efficiency and productivity?

Multiple themes (predominantly: location, flexibility, convenience, efficiency and focus, access to resources for business development, absence of alternative spaces and blurring identities) speak to H2 and shifted spotlight onto the dimension of place dependence. Vietnamese coworking space users both within this sample, but also those users described by the four providers, revealed that those coworking spaces affording to conduct work efficiently and conveniently were cherished the most. Users described enhanced individual well-being, but mostly related to being more focused at work, being more productive in the presence of others and being inspired through aesthetically pleasing surroundings. The coworking spaces ascribed to H2 offer aspects of a place of resistance as well; yet this mostly corresponds to emotional and cultural aspects of work. Choosing to work at coworking spaces allows for more genuine relationships and affective balance at work, while offering entertainment on top. The type of work conducted is not changed, just the way it ‘feels’, and thereby coworking spaces ‘only’ afford to make increasing workloads more bearable. Further, individuals are empowered to break free from cultural constraints found at home and traditional corporate settings, yet the feeling of ‘breaking free’ appears to be temporary. Overall, these accounts invite to deduce that what users desire to obtain from coworking spaces is access to an all-inclusive and convenient workplace as described by Orel and Dvouletý (2020). According to the interview accounts, the demand for coworking spaces similar to those described in working H2 is growing (theme ‘commodification and choice’). The supply of coworking spaces is following this demand, and supported not only by the demand push, but also by international investment and real estate speculations (theme ‘real estate’).

Hypothesis 3 (H3): Sense of inauthenticity?

Deducing from the disregarded and negatively perceived coworking spaces described by the sample, many providers seem to be freeriding on the positive associations and marketing gains linked to coworking spaces, while apparently offering nothing but poorly managed and equipped serviced offices that neither provide a sense of belonging nor of upgraded productivity. The aspects interviewees lamented as lacking (‘human-centeredness and sociality’) hereby represent parts of coworking space’s core when speaking from definitions offered in chapter 2.2. Moreover, several accounts under the theme ‘human-centeredness and sociality’ hinted at the fact that for these disregarded places to improve, they shall “clearly define their brand identity” (NPO 1) and know whom they want to attract. This again points

towards both H2 and H3, as the industry is supposed to move towards more an improved product-market fit. In line with the theme ‘novelty and learning’ and Ly’s (2014; 2016) findings within Vietnam’s broader creative sector, Vietnam’s coworking space industry is still in an early stage where providers of varying quality and success coexist.

6.2 Discussion of emerging coworking space variants and its driving forces

Since most findings support H2 and H3, it becomes justified to claim that we can observe an overall industry consolidation process towards specialized, targeted and top-down managed coworking space variants with a focus on business development and productivity. ‘Inauthentic’ coworking space variants that are lacking in sociality and customer-focused offers might be forced to resume their operations along this process, while coworking spaces that afford resistance represent only niche occurrences.

To understand the driving forces behind the proliferation of these variants, the findings allow to identify three overarching factors. The first factor links to cultural preferences (theme ‘cultural identity’): The sociality of coworking spaces, where users can “work alone together” (Spinuzzi, 2012: 428) amid a community and sometimes in cooperation, is a highly favoured aspect among Vietnamese users according to this sample. This links to Bouncken, Clauß and Reuschl’s (2016) claims that coworking spaces in Asian contexts proliferate partially due to a collectivist culture orientation, which allows for a smooth familiarization and adoption.

The second driver is of an economic nature, and links to the search for affordable and enhancing work environments by students and the growing entrepreneurial sector on the one hand (themes ‘affordability’, ‘access to resources for business development’ and ‘absence of alternative spaces’), and to the search for profit in the realms of real estate on the other (theme ‘real estate’). Hereby, informants repeatedly described the entrepreneurial waves the country has witnessed since 2012, which set free numerous SMEs that are searching for places to work to receive business incubation and acceleration services. This links to Bouncken, Clauß and Reuschl (2016) that the proliferation of coworking spaces in Asian spheres is co-driven by the search for innovative forces. Linking back to place theory, these two driving forces go along with Ujang and Zakariya’s (2015) observation that place attachment in Asian cities is strongly influenced by cultural and economic dependencies.

Thirdly, the proliferation of coworking spaces receives an indirect push through governmental agency (theme ‘government’, ‘real estate’ and ‘absence of alternative places’) – and its omitted

actions – in Vietnam’s transitional context by first, supporting the inflow of capital, investment and real estate speculations in desire to foster economic growth; second, by releasing policies to foster entrepreneurship and hence increasing the number of workers seeking suitable workplaces in urban cores; third, by not being able to attend to the full range of spatial and infrastructural needs of the growing studying and working populations in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. In supporting Ly’s (2014, 2016) and Gasparin and Quinn’s (2020a; b) findings that the policy environment for businesses in creative sectors is not yet sufficiently supportive, the emerging coworking space variants provide market-based ‘relievers’ to the work challenges the country is facing. However, in opposing the assumption voiced in the literature review, the state does not appear to play a proactive role in instrumentalizing coworking spaces the way that China does facing its transitional crisis (Wang and Loo, 2017; Luo and Chan, 2020).

Finally, the findings allow for a backlink to the paradox of critical coworking research, which assesses the promises of coworking spaces as a double-edged sword (Gandini, 2015; de Peuter, Cohen and Saraco, 2017; Nakano et al., 2020). In Vietnam, coworking spaces offer various ways to attend to workers’ needs in Vietnam’s transitional vacuum in the absence of alternative workplaces to conduct work efficiently and support the vast number of aspiring entrepreneurs and small and medium-sized enterprises. At the same time, the strong demand for coworking spaces and its all-encompassing services elucidates what the government does not – or cannot – take care of, such as providing sufficient places to study for its upcoming student generations and to train and support its booming entrepreneurial sector.

7. Conclusion and outlook

This thesis set out to research the emerging variants of coworking spaces in Vietnam's transitional urban economy. This aim was realized by employing a multiple case study and conducting nine semi-structured interviews with representatives of Vietnam's coworking sphere, namely founders, community managers and users of coworking spaces residing in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Rooted in place-based theory and interdisciplinary coworking research, three working hypotheses linked to the expected coworking space variants were formulated to guide the research: The first hypothesis described coworking spaces as places of urban resistance, providing a sense of belonging and serving to challenge contemporary work environments. The second hypothesis coined coworking spaces as places for business development, providing a sense of productivity and serving to adapt to novel challenges faced. The third 'counterhypothesis' described coworking spaces 'of other kinds' that were considered inauthentic, hinting at places that do not serve the needs of Vietnam's urban knowledge workers. The analysis was conducted in two major phases: first, by subjecting interviews to thematic analysis, and then by discussing findings considering the hypotheses and previous studies.

To answer the main research question of *whether the emerging coworking space variants serve as adaptation or resistance to work challenges in Vietnam's transitional urban economy*, the findings of this thesis allow to argue that coworking spaces of 'urban resistance', that help to rebound confused identities, offer a sense of belonging and allow to break with established norms, are only niche occurrences. The majority of coworking spaces 'adapt' to shortcomings in Vietnam's transitional urban economy, by being places for 'business development' that foster efficient work, provide access to infrastructure and enhance social experiences, all of which amplified by the paucity of suitable alternative workplaces. These places allow for enhanced convenience and to temporarily break out of emotionally draining aspects of culture, but also cast light on increasing workloads and the blur of work-life domains. Simultaneously, numerous coworking spaces co-exist that build on lower quality services, that are disregarded for the lack of customer-centricity and sociality usually expected to see at coworking spaces.

Three sub-questions were incorporated to give more context to the nature and drivers of the emerging coworking space variants. Overall, the coworking industry appears to be in a consolidation process towards specialized offers similar to those offered at 'places for business development'. Three major drivers for the proliferation of coworking spaces were identified: Economic factors elucidated economic dependencies among individuals, start-ups and SMEs,

as well as real estate speculations on the provider side. Cultural factors highlighted how the communal aspects of coworking spaces matched workers' preferences. Lastly, the government was found to impact coworking developments, by fostering entrepreneurship, investment and real estate sectors, and by not being able to keep up with the provision of infrastructure to accommodate the growing number of students, entrepreneurs and firms. The overall findings link to the crux in critical coworking research: coworking spaces afford to alleviate workers' challenges and attend to their needs in times of transition. Simultaneously, the strong demand for these spaces casts light on the social forces that brought about their existence, such as the government's focus on investment, shifts in personal value systems and, according to one informant, an emerging divide between international-oriented, tech-savvy workers and less upwardly mobile residents.

These findings correspond to and enhance previous research by highlighting challenges within Vietnam's creative sector in a transitional vacuum, indicating a need for an enhanced policy environment and support for grassroots entrepreneurship. The results contribute to place-based research and urban theory building in Asian cities, by confirming that attachment and dependencies towards local places root in economic and cultural considerations. Moreover, this study offers a specific contribution to the limited literature on coworking in Southeast Asia and a general contribution to interdisciplinary coworking research.

The core limitation of this study lies in the generalizability of findings. Case study design and the employed theoretical concepts do not allow to draw inferences about views of the whole coworking industry in Vietnam. Yet the study sets forth detailed knowledge about variants of Vietnamese coworking spaces, which offer a useful start for future studies interested in typologies. Another limitation links to the chosen cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, which were treated equally as sites for this study. As supported by interviewed informants, the economic hierarchies and the prevalence of distinct industries in both cities must be taken into consideration and offers a feasible endeavour for a follow-up comparative case study.

Lastly, the discoveries related to the involvement of university students with Vietnamese coworking spaces represented an unexpected discovery, indicating an unattended need of younger Vietnamese for more autonomous study places outside of their homes. Looking into this segment might not only be of practical relevance for the further development of coworking space variants in Vietnam but might also yield potential for feasible future studies as this target group has not received major attention within previous coworking literature.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview introductory statement

Master Thesis Research: Coworking Spaces in Vietnam

This interview forms part of a master thesis research project to obtain the degree M.Sc. Asian Studies at Lund University, Sweden. The purpose of the study is to explore the value of coworking spaces for individuals and firms involved in creative, knowledge and entrepreneurial work, based on the experiences and perceptions of various coworkers and coworking space providers across Vietnam. The interview will last approximately 60 minutes. For conducting the interview, I would like to obtain your approval to record the interview. The transcriptions of the interviews will be deleted completely and permanently from my device once the research has been submitted and graded by Lund University.

The inquiry involves no commercial interest, and my only affiliation is with Lund University. My research underlies high ethical guidelines informed by the Swedish Research Council; no questions shall hint at any information that is uncomfortable or sensitive for you to share. The participation in this interview is voluntary, and any question may be skipped without the need for justification. Further, the answers you will provide will remain confidential and anonymous: Unless agreed otherwise, no personal details about your identity will be displayed in the thesis. Information given during the interview may be quoted in the master's thesis, thesis defense, and the publication of the final thesis on Lund University's website.

After I have submitted and discussed the findings of the thesis with professors at Lund University, the results will become publicly available on Lund University's website in summer 2021. For participating interview partners, the findings can be used for reference and exploratory insights into the coworking industry in Vietnam. If participants would like to be informed about preliminary results and submit questions & comments, discussions can be arranged in April 2021. Such comments can be used to enhance the robustness of the overall research.

For any questions or concerns, I will be happy to provide answers and clarifications.

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Appendix B: Interview guide – User perspective

Personal Background

- Could you tell me a little about yourself?
- Can you describe how you ended up working in a coworking space?
- What are your main motivations to come here?
- How often do you work here?
- Where did you work before and why did you change the location?
- How do coworking spaces differ from other workplaces for you?

Your Coworking Space preferences

- What criteria are important for you when choosing a space?
- What's your favourite workspace like, can you tell me about it?
- What services and amenities does it offer – and how do you make use of them?
- What do you think about the management of that space?
- Can you describe the other users at that space? Can you speak of a community?

The process of Coworking

- Can you walk me through a typical day in your favourite coworking space?
- What kind of work do you normally do there?
- Is there a type of work that you find particularly suitable or unsuitable to do at a coworking space?
- How do you think being in a Coworking Space affects you in your work?

Interactions at the Coworking Space

- Do you think the workspaces that you normally go to, or your favourite workspace, supports social interaction? How, and how not?
- Do you normally come there alone or with other people?
- How do you interact with the management staff at the space?
- Have you ever made any contacts with a stranger in the space? If yes, how did it happen?
- Have you ever gotten any personal benefit out of talking to someone there?

Coworking in General

- Do you know if coworking providers receive any support from the local, regional or national government or any other type of organizations in Vietnam?
- Why do you think coworking is such a boom in Vietnam – what is it about the Vietnamese and coworking?

Final questions

- How has your coworking experience changed since the Covid-19 pandemic started?
- What have you learned about yourself while being in coworking spaces about your personality and work behaviour?
- What do you like most about coworking spaces – and what do you like the least?
- Can you imagine only working in coworking spaces for your career?
- Is there anything left you would like to say about this topic – or do you have any questions for me?

Appendix C: Interview guide – Provider perspective

Introduction

- Could you shortly introduce yourself and your motivation to engage with coworking in the first place?
- Could you describe why and how your coworking space became established?
- Which stakeholders were involved in its establishment and what was their motivation to participate?
- Why did you choose X as location for your coworking space – and how does it differ from other Vietnamese cities as business location?
- What are the core services and amenities that you offer?
- What do you think makes your coworking space's business model and work unique compared to similar workspaces?
- How would you describe the overall work climate at your coworking space?

The Users at your Coworking Space

- How would you describe the target group and users that come to your coworking space?
- How would you describe the relationship between the different users – can you speak of a community?
- What are the biggest work-related needs and challenges your users face – and how do you support them in tackling these?
- Which are alternative workplaces potential users go to, and therefore, who are your main competitors?
- How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the user profile and the community at your coworking space, and what has been your response to that?

Coworking at your Coworking Space

- How are the different physical areas and rooms in your coworking space designed – and was there any specific rationale behind?
- Which subscription models and physical areas are most popular within your coworking space – and what do you believe the reason may be?

- Do you support social interaction (e.g. personal or knowledge exchange, mutual learning or networking) between your users – and if so, how and for what reason?
- Do you offer ways to enhance creativity or innovative thinking among your users – and if so, how?
- Do you help your users to internationalize their work in any way?
- How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected coworking at your coworking space, and what has been your response to that?

External Environment of your Coworking Space

- Does the government support your coworking space in any way, e.g. through any incentives, policies, laws, cooperation?
- Do you cooperate with other organizations in the city or region – if so, how and for what reasons?

The Value of Coworking for Vietnam

- What do you believe are the major drivers of the coworking boom in Vietnam?
- What role do organizations like your coworking space play in Vietnam's start-up ecosystem?
- Do you think your work has an impact on the local, regional or national development?

Future Outlook

- What are the overall challenges of running a coworking space in Vietnam?
- What could be improved to support those running a coworking space in Vietnam?
- How do you think the Covid-19 pandemic will affect coworking in the longer run?
- What are your future visions and plans for your coworking space?

Conclusion

- Is there anything left you would like to say about your coworking space that is important to mention?

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