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RESEARCH PAPER

Coworking Spaces and Alienation

Two Qualitative Case Studies of Post-Pandemic Work Infrastructure
in Northern Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates coworking spaces as ambivalent infrastructures within the landscape of digital capitalism. Through a qualitative case study of *Fabbriche Binarie* and *Sugar Paper* in Modena, Italy, it explores how these spaces mediate experiences of alienation, spatial disconnection, and social recognition. Drawing on theories of alienation (Rosa, 2013, 2019) and recognition (Honneth, 2014), the study identifies three interrelated forms of estrangement (temporal, spatial, and relational) amplified by remote work. While coworking is promoted as a flexible and inclusive alternative to traditional offices, the findings reveal underlying contradictions: symbolic over-coding, weak social ties, and selective inclusion. The paper argues that coworking hubs can either reproduce or resist forms of alienation depending on their governance and integration into the urban fabric. Ultimately, it calls for a rethinking of such spaces as civic infrastructures, capable of fostering democratic presence, spatial justice, and social resonance in an increasingly fragmented work environment.

KEYWORDS

alienation \ coworking \ digital capitalism \ labor \ technologies \ sociology

1 Introduction

Over the past two decades, the organization of work has undergone significant transformations, driven by the proliferation of digital technologies, the rise of platform economies, and the spread of new spatial configurations of labor (Bardmann et al., 2023; Bertolini et al., 2023; Bianconi et al., 2024; Bruni et al., 2020; Miele and Tirabeni, 2020a; Vincent et al., 2024). Within this evolving landscape, coworking spaces have emerged as emblematic of contemporary labor imaginaries. Advertised as hubs of creativity, autonomy, and collaboration, these spaces have become increasingly prominent across global urban centres (Capdevila, 2015, 2022; T. Howell, 2022; Ivaldi et al., 2018; Mariotti and Akhavan, 2020; Merkel, 2015; Montanari et al., 2022). They promise a solution to the challenges of isolation and precarity faced by freelancers, self-employed workers, and digital nomads, offering not only infrastructure but also a curated sense of community and identity (Radman et al., 2023; Rese et al., 2022). Yet, beneath these optimistic narratives, coworking spaces reveal tensions that demand closer scrutiny. They are not neutral containers of work, but highly designed and ideologically saturated environments. Far from being simply alternative workspaces, they function as infrastructures that mediate and shape subjectivities, social relations, and temporal regimes (Bouncken and Reuschl, 2016; Garrett et al., 2017; Gonzalez-Chouciño and Ruiz-Callado, 2020; Johns et al., 2024). This article explores these tensions through the conceptual lens of alienation, asking how experiences of detachment, fragmentation, and disconnection persist or are reconfigured within settings that are explicitly designed to counteract them (Glavin et al., 2021a).

Our central argument is that coworking spaces operate as ambivalent infrastructures: they simultaneously offer resources for autonomy and impose subtle forms of discipline and control. They are embedded in the ideological and material conditions of digital capitalism, where the promise of flexibility is often intertwined with regimes of responsibilities, performativity, and aesthetic management (Cornet et al., 2022; Fai et al., 2025; Yakoub and Haefliger, 2024). In this sense, coworking spaces can be seen as material expressions of a broader contradiction: the simultaneous desire for liberation from traditional organizational forms and the reproduction of normative demands for productivity, adaptability, and self-governance. To investigate these dynamics, we revisit the concept of alienation, a notion historically rooted in Marxist theory but one that has been subject to important reinterpretations in contemporary critical thought. Marx's early writings framed alienation as a structural consequence of capitalist relations (Marx, 1990, 1993): workers become estranged from the products of their labor, from the labor process itself, from other human beings, and from their own human potential. However, more recent theorists have rearticulated alienation to capture the subjective, affective, and relational dimensions of disconnection under late capitalism (Fuchs, 2016; Hassan, 2020; Ivanova et al., 2025). Axel Honneth (2014), for instance, emphasizes the role of recognition and its denial in constituting experiences of alienation. Hartmut Rosa (2013, 2019) foregrounds the role of acceleration and the loss of resonance, while Christophe Dejours (2022, 2024) draws attention to the psychological effects of contemporary work environments, including suffering, silencing, and moral injury.

Rather than adhering to a single theoretical tradition, we take an eclectic but coherent approach that uses alienation as a heuristic device to analyse how spatial, temporal, and relational dynamics in coworking spaces produce ambivalent effects on workers, both in social and economic aspects. We are particularly interested in the contradictions between promised autonomy and experienced constraints, between curated sociability and perceived isolation, and between temporal flexibility and unrelenting acceleration. These contradictions are not simply conceptual: they are empirically lived, negotiated, and contested by individuals working within coworking environments. The empirical foundation of this article rests on a qualitative research project conducted between March and April 2025 in two coworking spaces located in Modena, Northern Italy: *Fabbriche Binarie* and *Sugar Paper*. These two sites differ in terms of design, clientele, and governance model, yet both are embedded in the discourse of innovation, flexibility, and community. Our methodology combined ethnographic observation, semi-structured interviews (24 in total), and document analysis, including policy reports, marketing materials, architectural plans, and media coverage. By triangulating these sources, we sought to capture both the discursive construction of coworking spaces and the subjective experiences of those who inhabit them.

In analysing our data, we identify three primary dimensions of alienation that recur across narratives and observations: temporal, spatial, and relational. These dimensions are not exclusive or exhaustive, but they provide a productive framework to understand the layered and intersecting ways in which alienation takes shape.

Temporal alienation refers to the experience of acceleration, fragmentation, and the erosion of clear boundaries between work and non-work time (Ivanova et al., 2025; Rosa, 2013; Thaa et al., 2024). While coworking spaces are celebrated for offering time flexibility and control, many users report constant time pressure, digital overexposure, and a sense of perpetual readiness (Berdicchia et al., 2023; Howell and Bingham, 2019; Kinsman et al., 2023; Leone et al., 2022). These experiences echo Rosa's (2019, 2022) concern with the temporal regimes of modernity, where the promise of autonomy often collapses into self-exploitation and burn-out. Spatial alienation concerns the ways in which coworking environments are designed and experienced. The open plans, modular furniture, and aesthetic choices convey informality and creativity, yet also enact subtle forms of surveillance and exclusion. Workers may feel observed, transient, or subject to silent norms of behaviour and performance. Despite their promise of openness, these spaces can also reproduce hierarchies of access, inclusion, and status (Blagoev et al., 2019; Boyer-Davis et al., 2023; Menz and Nies, 2024). Relational alienation addresses the nature of sociality within coworking. While many platforms promote a sense of community and shared purpose, everyday interactions are often marked by superficiality, individualization, or competitive distance (Glavin et al., 2021b). Connections can be fleeting, transactional, impersonal or performative, raising questions about the depth and sustainability of the social bonds fostered in these environments. Honneth's framework of recognition proves particularly relevant here (Honneth, 2014), as many workers describe tensions between desired acknowledgment and experienced invisibility (Del Sarto et al., 2023; Fai et al., 2025; Mariotti and Akhavan, 2020).

Crucially, these three forms of alienation are not discrete. They intersect and reinforce one another, shaping a broader picture of ambivalent subjectivation within digitalized workspaces (Choquet, 2021; Glavin et al. 2021a). The very spaces that claim to humanize labor may also intensify its fragmentation and emotional cost. Our aim is not to dismiss coworking as inherently alienating, but to uncover the nuanced ways in which alienation is rearticulated in and through spaces that explicitly promise its overcoming. This article is structured as follows. First, we present a critical review of existing literature on coworking spaces, highlighting how they have been conceptualized in relation to urban change, digital economies, and flexible labor. We then outline our theoretical framework, focusing on the reconfiguration of alienation in contemporary critical theory. Next, we discuss our methodological approach and introduce the two case studies. The core of the article presents our empirical findings, organized around the three dimensions of alienation discussed above. We conclude by reflecting on the broader implications of our analysis for the study of digital labor, workspace infrastructures, and the affective economies of post-Fordist capitalism.

2 Rethinking Coworking: From Utopian Community to Ambivalent Infrastructure

The rapid expansion of coworking spaces over the last two decades has attracted increasing scholarly attention across disciplines such as urban sociology, economic geography, organization studies, and the sociology of work (Ivaldi et al., 2018; Maclean et al., 2024). These spaces, typically described as flexible, collaborative, and open environments, are often heralded as solutions to the fragmentation and isolation characteristic of freelance and remote labor in the post-Fordist economy (Grazian, 2020; Howell and Bingham, 2019). Their proliferation reflects not only shifts in the organization of work but also broader socio-spatial and ideological transformations under late capitalism. Early scholarship on coworking focused predominantly on its novel organizational forms, flexibility, and potential to stimulate creativity and entrepreneurship. Different scholars (Capdevila, 2015; Spinuzzi, 2012) highlighted the ways in which coworking spaces provide infrastructural support, knowledge exchange, and a collaborative ethos for independent workers, particularly in the tech and creative sectors. These spaces were often conceptualized as sites of community-driven innovation, embedded in broader narratives of urban revitalization and digital transformation (Orel and Bennis, 2021; Pais, 2013).

However, more recent and critical contributions have begun to question the celebratory framing of coworking. Merkel (2015) points out that the discourse of autonomy and community frequently masks labor precarity, entrepreneurial risk transfer, and individualized responsibility for structural insecurity. Gandini (2015) describes coworking as a materialization of the neoliberal “culture of work,” in which sociality, affect, and creativity are mobilized as productive forces, but without corresponding institutional protections. Others, such as Waters-Lynch and Potts (2017: 417-433), have noted that coworking spaces often reinforce competition and commodified networking under the guise of community, while Parrino

(2015) explores how informal interactions in such spaces reproduce power differentials and gendered exclusion. In a systematic literature review, Ciccarelli (2023) identify three main critical dimensions of coworking research: (1) its spatial production as urban infrastructure, (2) its symbolic economy of affect and belonging, and (3) its articulation with broader trends in platform capitalism and digital governance. These authors argue that coworking functions not only as a workspace but as a normative dispositif, curating desirable subjectivities and relational practices aligned with entrepreneurialism and self-management. The ideal coworker, in this context, is autonomous, emotionally intelligent, adaptable, and resilient, qualities demanded by an increasingly unstable labor market. Despite the growth of such literature, few studies have explicitly examined coworking through the lens of alienation. This conceptual lacuna is surprising, considering that coworking spaces emerged precisely as a response to perceived alienating features of both traditional offices and remote work (Glavin et al., 2021b). By reviving and adapting the concept of alienation, our study contributes a critical theoretical perspective capable of capturing the complex, and often contradictory, experiences of workers in these environments (Jamal, 2018; Mariotti et al., 2023).

The past decade has witnessed a proliferation of scholarship on coworking spaces, reflecting their rise as emblematic infrastructures of the post-Fordist digital economy. Far from being merely functional workspaces, coworking hubs are increasingly conceptualized as ambivalent infrastructures (Johns et al., 2024), materially embedded and symbolically saturated environments that mediate contemporary transformations in labour, subjectivity, and urban governance. Johns et al. (2024) offer a critical synthesis of coworking literature, arguing that such spaces cannot be reduced to their architectural features or technological affordances. Rather, they represent contested terrains where ideals of autonomy, creativity, and flexibility are entangled with processes of commodification, self-regulation, and exclusion. This ambivalence is echoed in Banka et al. (2023), who situate coworking within broader shifts toward entrepreneurial urbanism. Through discourse analysis of institutional documents and coworking initiatives, they demonstrate how public-private alliances promote coworking as a panacea for youth unemployment, social fragmentation, and urban decline, while often concealing the precariousness and informality that underpin such models.

This ideological framing of coworking is further problematized by Radman et al. (2023), who interrogate the inclusivity of these spaces through a mixed-methods analysis. Despite their rhetoric of openness and diversity, coworking environments often reproduce classed and gendered exclusions, privileging tech-savvy, white-collar workers over others. The authors highlight how digital fluency, symbolic capital, and entrepreneurial habitus serve as implicit entry criteria, thereby reinforcing neoliberal logics of individual responsibility and self-marketing (Ahmad et al., 2021; Avdikos and Merkel, 2020). These findings resonate with Del Sarto et al. (2023), that ethnographically explores the symbolic economy of coworking spaces embedded in start-up ecosystems. Here, spatial aesthetics and brand narratives are mobilized not only to attract tenants but to perform an ethos of innovation, resilience, and disruption. Yet this same aestheticization can depoliticize labor, mask hierarchies, and generate new forms of affective and cognitive control. The Italian context adds further nuance to these dynamics. As noted in the Regione Emilia-Romagna report (2020, 2022), coworking

in Italy has been both supported and shaped by regional policy agendas aimed at fostering digital entrepreneurship and creative labor. While these initiatives have expanded access to infrastructure and professional networks, they also risk instrumentalizing coworking as a labor-market tool, neglecting the social and psychological dimensions of shared work environments. In this sense, coworking emerges not only as a spatial response to post-pandemic hybrid work but as a symbolic vehicle for normative visions of the future of work, visions that require critical scrutiny (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2021; Brinks, 2022).

Alongside critical accounts of space and ideology, a second body of literature has focused on the promises and limitations of collaboration and knowledge exchange in coworking environments. Central to this line of inquiry is the assumption that spatial co-location facilitates the emergence of weak ties, creative serendipity, and peer learning. Drawing on social capital theory and the theory of planned behaviour, Rese et al. (2020; 2022) conducted empirical studies across multiple coworking sites, demonstrating that positive attitudes toward knowledge sharing, perceived behavioural control, and identification with a coworking community significantly predict collaborative behaviours. These studies provide evidence that coworking can, under certain conditions, enhance both individual creative performance and organizational learning. However, they also note that collaboration is not uniformly distributed: highly individualistic or competitive users may resist engagement, while structural factors, such as layout design or unequal access to informal networks, can constrain knowledge flows.

Such findings complicate the dominant narrative of coworking as inherently communal or democratic. Rather than assuming community as a given, several scholars have highlighted the performative paradoxes of coworking sociality. As Johns et al. (2024) and Banka et al. (2023) observe, rituals of participation, such as networking events, shared meals, and pitch sessions, often operate as performative scripts that demand visibility, positivity, and alignment with entrepreneurial norms. In this context, “community” may function less as a relational reality than as a branding device that blurs the boundary between the social and the economic. This tension is especially acute in environments where individuals are encouraged to constantly self-present, curate their image, and align with aspirational ideals of success and creativity. Moreover, the relational infrastructures of coworking do not exist in a vacuum: they are shaped by digital platforms, algorithmic visibility, and normative discourses of resilience and flexibility. Del Sarto et al. (2023) underscore this point in his analysis of digital self-presentation practices within start-up coworking hubs, noting how users internalize expectations around productivity, adaptability, and emotional labor. These dynamics raise important questions about the affective and cognitive burdens placed on workers in supposedly liberating environments. In this sense, coworking may reproduce rather than resolve the alienation, isolation, and fragmentation associated with precarious digital labor. Consequently, recent research calls for a more contextual and critical theorization of the coworking phenomenon, one that links material design and social interaction to broader transformations in the political economy of work.

The notion of alienation originates in classical political economy and philosophy, most notably in the work of Karl Marx (Braverman, 1974). In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx identified four core dimensions of alienation in the capitalist labour process: alienation from the product, from the process, from others, and from the worker's "species-being" or human potential. This multidimensional framework conceptualized alienation as both a structural consequence of private property and a subjective experience of powerlessness, estrangement, and dehumanization. Crucially, Marx emphasized that alienation was not a psychological pathology but a systemic condition embedded in capitalist relations of production (Marx, 1993). Contemporary scholarship has extended and reinterpreted Marx's insights to account for transformations in labour and subjectivity (Jaeggi, 2017; Marcuse, 1984; Tekin, 2023). Three strands of critical theory are particularly relevant to the present study: the theory of recognition, the sociology of acceleration, and the psychodynamics of work.

Axel Honneth (2014) reframes alienation through the lens of recognition, arguing that individual self-realization depends upon intersubjective validation across three spheres: love (primary relationships), rights (legal equality), and solidarity (social esteem). In this framework, alienation results from misrecognition or exclusion in one or more of these domains. Importantly, Honneth's theory links personal suffering to social pathologies, conceptualizing alienation as a denial of the moral preconditions for agency and identity formation. Within coworking spaces, recognition becomes a central stake. These environments promote affective labor, performative sociability, and networked visibility as currencies of value. Yet workers often report superficial interactions, exclusionary dynamics, and pressure to conform to a normative ideal of the flexible, enthusiastic, self-branded worker (Fraser, 2022; Honneth, 2014; Jaeggi, 2017). The promise of community may thus produce relational alienation, as it fails to deliver meaningful intersubjective validation.

Hartmut Rosa (2013, 2019) introduces a temporal dimension to alienation through his theory of social acceleration. For Rosa, modernity is marked by ever-increasing speeds in technological change, social interaction, and life pace. This acceleration undermines stable identities, coherent narratives, and meaningful relationships with the world. Alienation, in this perspective, is the experience of "uncontrollability" and the loss of resonance with one's environment, tasks, and relationships (Fraser, 2020; Jaeggi, 2017). Coworking spaces, often designed to optimize flexibility and efficiency, mirror these dynamics. While offering apparent autonomy over time management, they also foster forms of temporal compression, perpetual availability, and performance anxiety. The blurring of boundaries between work and life, especially in digital and creative sectors, exacerbates feelings of temporal alienation, where workers struggle to maintain a purpose and sustainable pace.

From a clinical and psychoanalytic angle, Christophe Dejours (2015, 2024) develops a theory of work-related suffering based on the silencing of subjectivity in neoliberal organizations. According to Dejours, contemporary management displaces moral and emotional responsibility onto individuals, producing guilt, isolation, and what he terms "pathologies of silence." Workers are expected to display enthusiasm, suppress doubt, and internalize failure as personal deficiency rather than structural dysfunction. In the context of coworking, these dy-

namics manifest in affective self-regulation, imposter syndrome, and the compulsion to appear motivated and socially integrated. The very ethos of openness and self-expression can become a source of stress, especially when not matched by actual support, recognition, or meaningful community ties. Thus, the moral and emotional costs of digital and aestheticized labor are often absorbed by workers themselves.

3 Methodology and Empirical Analysis

Building on these traditions, our study proposes a conceptual framework that identifies three interrelated dimensions of alienation in coworking spaces:

- 1 Temporal alienation: the experience of fragmented, accelerated, or disjointed time in the pursuit of productivity and availability. This includes the erosion of temporal boundaries, the internalization of urgency, and the subjective sense of “running without arriving” (Rosa, 2013).
- 2 Spatial alienation: the affective and symbolic detachment produced by curated and monitored environments. Open-plan design, performative transparency, and aesthetic branding contribute to feelings of exposure, surveillance, or disconnection from the workspace (Honneth, 2014; Rosa, 2019).
- 3 Relational alienation: the estrangement from meaningful social interaction in spaces that commodify sociability (Dejours, 2024; Fraser, 2022). Despite the promise of community, coworking often fosters instrumental networking rather than solidarity, producing surface-level ties and a sense of “being alone together.”

These dimensions are not pre-given categories but analytical heuristics that emerged through an inductive dialogue with empirical data. Rather than treating alienation as a totalizing diagnosis, we use it as a lens to explore how individuals navigate the contradictions of autonomy and control, inclusion and isolation, recognition and invisibility in coworking environments. By doing so, our study addresses three key gaps identified by the existing debate. First, it systematically integrates and critiques existing literature on coworking, going beyond descriptive accounts to theorize these spaces as ambivalent infrastructures shaped by power, design, and ideology (Fai et al., 2025; Rese et al., 2022; Vincent et al., 2024). Second, it provides a coherent and parsimonious theoretical framework, reducing conceptual noise while retaining critical depth. Third, it demonstrates how classical sociological concepts, when updated and operationalized carefully, remain crucial for understanding the lived experience of work under digital capitalism.

Rather than verifying pre-formed hypotheses, we engage in a dialogue between theory and fieldwork, allowing patterns and tensions to emerge inductively. Our guiding assumption is that alienation, as a multi-dimensional and historically situated phenomenon, must be understood not merely as an individual psychological condition, but as a structurally mediated and spatially embodied experience. We therefore focus on three intersecting dimensions of alienation: temporal (disruption of time and rhythm), spatial (dislocation, surveillance, fragmentation), and relational (erosion or commodification of social bonds). We selected two coworking environments, *Fabbriche Binarie* and *Sugar Paper*, as contrasting cases, both in terms of their socio-spatial configurations and their cultural-ideological orientations. This study is based on a qualitative research design, combining ethnographic observation and semi-structured, problem-centred interviews. Fieldwork was carried out between March and April 2025, involving participant observation in both settings and a total of 24 in-depth interviews with users, staff members, and founders of the coworking spaces. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol focused on subjective experiences of work, perceptions of autonomy and recognition, spatial and temporal organization, and the social dynamics within the coworking environment (see tables). The approach was problem-centred rather than expert-oriented, aiming to capture individual perceptions and emotional investments in their daily practices, rather than managerial or institutional representations:

Participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to reflect a diversity of gender, age, and professional background. The final sample included 14 women and 10 men, aged between 24 and 54, working as freelancers, digital creatives, remote employees, consultants, and start-up founders. Educational levels ranged from vocational training to advanced university degrees. A summary of participant demographics is provided in Table 1. Ethnographic observation focused on the material layout of the spaces, rhythms of activity, informal interactions, and spatial routines. Observations were recorded in the form of fieldnotes and analytic memos. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a hybrid approach combining inductive coding and thematic content analysis. Codes were initially generated from the interview data and later grouped under thematic categories informed by the theoretical framework (alienation, recognition, resonance). The software ATLAS.ti was used to support coding and data management. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid to contradictions, silences, and affective tones, in line with an interpretive and hermeneutic methodology.

Table 1: Participant overview

ID	Gender	Age	Occupation Type	Sector	Site
P01	Male	32	Freelancer	Graphic Design	Fabbriche Binarie
P02	Female	29	Remote employee	IT Services	Fabbriche Binarie
P03	Female	41	Entrepreneur	Communication Consulting	Fabbriche Binarie
P04	Male	45	Remote employee	Finance	Sugar Paper
P05	Female	27	Freelancer	Translation/Editing	Fabbriche Binarie
P06	Female	38	Startup founder	Marketing/Analytics	Sugar Paper
P07	Male	50	Consultant	Urban Planning	Sugar Paper
P08	Female	33	Remote employee	Software Development	Fabbriche Binarie
P09	Male	54	Freelancer	Legal services	Sugar Paper
P10	Female	26	Junior Researcher (precarious)	Academia	Fabbriche Binarie
P11	Female	36	Self-employed	Wellness & Coaching	Sugar Paper
P12	Male	28	Remote employee	Media & Communication	Fabbriche Binarie
P13	Female	31	Freelancer	UX/UI Design	Fabbriche Binarie
P14	Male	40	Startup founder	Sustainability Consulting	Sugar Paper
P15	Female	24	Freelancer	Journalism	Sugar Paper
P16	Male	42	Remote employee	E-commerce Logistics	Fabbriche Binarie
P17	Female	30	Independent artist	Cultural production	Sugar Paper
P18	Female	35	Remote employee	HR & Recruitment	Fabbriche Binarie
P19	Male	39	Consultant	IT & Cybersecurity	Sugar Paper
P20	Female	47	Self-employed	Bookkeeping & Admin	Fabbriche Binarie
P21	Male	28	PhD student (remote)	University	Sugar Paper
P22	Female	43	Freelancer	Architecture	Fabbriche Binarie
P23	Male	37	Remote employee	NGO Sector	Sugar Paper
P24	Female	31	Digital marketing specialist	Advertising	Fabbriche Binarie

Notes: Information Technology (IT), User Experience and User Interface Design (UX/UI), Human Resources (HR), Nongovernmental Organization Sector (NGO)

Drawing on semi-structured interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, and organizational materials, we explore how the categories of temporal, spatial, and relational alienation manifest in the lived experience of knowledge workers. These three dimensions, while analytically distinct, are deeply interrelated and grounded in theoretical traditions that trace back to Marx's theory of alienation, Rosa's social acceleration, Honneth's recognition theory, and Dejours' psychodynamics of work (Dejours, 2022, 2024; Honneth, 2014; Marx, 1993; Rosa, 2013, 2019). We argue that coworking spaces, often celebrated as loci of autonomy and creativity, reproduce subtle but significant patterns of alienation that reflect the broader contradictions of digital capitalism. In Marxian terms, this may be seen as a loss of control over one's labor time due to external pressures. Rosa (2013) extends this idea by showing how modern capitalist societies compress time through processes of acceleration, leading to a "desynchronization" between social rhythms and individual capacities. Within coworking spaces, alienation does not take the form of externally imposed schedules, but emerges from the responsibilities of time management under the guise of flexibility. Through this methodological approach, we aim to foreground the spatialized, emotional, and social textures of alienation in a way that is empirically grounded and theoretically informed. Our analysis underscores the need to move beyond binary assessments of coworking (liberating vs. exploitative) and instead attend to their ambivalent operations within the contemporary political economy of work.

4 Findings

Drawing on participants' experiences and the material configurations of the spaces, we illustrate how dynamics of temporal, spatial, and relational alienation emerge and vary across the two sites. *Fabbriche Binarie* is located in a repurposed industrial complex in a medium-sized city in Northern Italy. The building retains elements of its former life, concrete floors, exposed piping, tall windows, imbuing the space with a rough aesthetic that contrasts with the sanitized minimalism typical of startup hubs. Designed as a nonprofit cooperative, hosts freelance professionals, NGOs, and cultural associations. It promotes values of mutualism, informality, and local embeddedness, and offers a mix of open-plan desks, small private rooms, and shared amenities (kitchen, event room, library). The space functions as a "heterogeneous common" where multiple temporalities and work modalities co-exist. Members are encouraged to participate in informal rituals (shared meals, open assemblies) but usage patterns vary significantly.

Our fieldnotes document the spatial ambivalence of the setting: while open tables facilitate interaction, they also lead to overstimulation and disruption. Some users actively construct "micro-borders" (headphones, furniture arrangement) to manage these tensions. Observations suggest that while *Fabbriche Binarie* fosters symbolic belonging, it also generates contradictions: a sense of community is cultivated rhetorically, but day-to-day affective labour (conflict mediation, care) remains largely invisible or individualized. Furthermore, the blurring of boundaries between work and sociability can intensify feelings of entrapment. Several participants reported feeling "always at work," even when engaging in non-task-related activities.

Table 2: Dimensions of Alienation in *Fabbriche Binarie*

Dimension	Description	Observations
Temporal Alienation	Lack of shared routines; continuous availability; blurred work-life boundaries.	Participants described a sense of drift and “always being on”, without meaningful temporal anchors or collective rhythms.
Spatial Alienation	Aesthetic openness perceived as exposure and pressure.	While transparency was a design ideal, many users felt observed and performative, lacking spaces for withdrawal or rest.
Relational Alienation	Superficial ties; symbolic invisibility.	Interactions were limited to politeness, with few opportunities for emotional or professional recognition. As one respondent noted: “You are seen, but not acknowledged.”

The Table 2 synthesis for *Fabbriche Binarie* reveals patterns of temporal anxiety, especially among freelancers and self-employed individuals who lack fixed schedules and external validation. Spatially, the openness of the environment is both generative and disruptive, requiring constant negotiation. Relational alienation is partially mitigated by the cooperative ethos, but this remains unevenly distributed. The empirical data show that while some members actively co-construct the space’s identity, others perceive it as chaotic or emotionally exhausting. Resilience practices include self-imposed routines, digital disconnection strategies, and intermittent withdrawal from shared zones.

Sugar Paper is a boutique coworking hub located in a carefully restored historic building in a regional capital. Unlike *Fabbriche Binarie*, *Sugar Paper* is privately managed, highly curated, and targeted at digital entrepreneurs, consultants, and creatives. The branding of the space is sleek, drawing heavily from Nordic design aesthetics, white walls, light wood, designer furniture, ambient lighting. The space exudes a sense of exclusivity and “intentional minimalism,” supported by a selective admission process and high fees. While the infrastructure appears neutral and efficient, our observations reveal a highly performative environment. Users are constantly engaging in self-presentation, on digital platforms, in casual conversations, and during structured events. The architecture itself supports visibility: glass walls, open lounge areas, and digital screens reinforce a logic of transparency and accountability. Emotional restraint and aesthetic alignment are subtly enforced norms. Despite the frequent invocation of flexibility, several interviewees expressed a sense of emotional depletion. Informality is curated, not spontaneous; behind a façade of calm, the space generates a competitive affective climate. Users report pressure to “appear successful,” to “always be on,” and to instrumentalize every interaction. Notions of “community” are deployed rhetorically, but solidarity remains fragile and transactional.

Table 3: Dimensions of Alienation in *Sugar Paper*

Dimension	Description	Observations
Temporal Alienation	Irregular rhythms and fragmentation of time.	The lack of routine was both freeing and destabilizing. Participants reported difficulty concentrating and maintaining boundaries.
Spatial Alienation	Ambiguity of function; unclear expectations.	The space's multipurpose design created confusion about norms, noise, and appropriate behaviour. One user asked: "Am I working, or hanging out?"
Relational Alienation	Informal ties without continuity or depth.	While the space encouraged encounters, these were often ephemeral. Users valued the atmosphere but lacked stable networks or support.

Table 2 highlights the centrality of digital acceleration and visibility regimes in shaping the experience of alienation at *Sugar Paper*. Temporal alienation is evident in accounts of hyper-multitasking and self-surveillance, while spatial alienation emerges in the interplay between openness and exposure. The workspace offers little opportunity for retreat or embodied privacy. Relational alienation is perhaps most acute: connections are filtered through personal branding and strategic networking, rather than affective mutuality. Interestingly, resilience strategies here tend to mirror the very logics of productivity and optimization they seek to resist, users adopt tracking apps, wellness routines, and social withdrawal as coping mechanisms. Although the two coworking spaces differ in size, aesthetics, and governance, both reveal how the infrastructures of shared work mediate and intensify experiences of alienation. At *Fabbriche Binarie*, the tension lies in the contradiction between cooperative ideals and lived fragmentation; at *Sugar Paper*, alienation is embedded in the very promise of curation, visibility, and autonomy. These findings challenge the dominant discourse of coworking as inherently empowering and reveal instead a reconfiguration of alienation within new spatial, relational, and digital architectures.

5 Discussion: Coworking as an Ambivalent Infrastructure of Alienation and Recognition

At *Fabbriche Binarie*, many participants praised the absence of rigid schedules. However, this freedom frequently translated into self-imposed pressure, as workers struggled to delineate boundaries between work and rest. The ethnographic material shows how productivity norms were internalised rather than externally imposed, manifesting in extended workdays and a persistent sense of obligation. As one interviewee noted: “There’s no off switch. Even when I leave the space, my head is still in it.” (Freelancer). Rather than interpreting this immediately through acceleration theory, the data first suggest a structural tension between autonomy and self-regulation. Workers described experimenting with “micro-strategies” to regain temporal control, time-blocking, analogue rituals such as paper calendars, or informal agreements about “silent hours.” These practices indicate that autonomy is not simply granted but must be actively managed. However, such strategies often remained fragile, particularly in contexts where professional value was associated with constant availability. The table below synthesizes how these tensions emerged at *Fabbriche Binarie*:

Table 4: Discussion and themes at *Fabbriche Binarie*

Dimension	Emerging Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Temporal	Lack of shared structure; self-imposed intensification	“There’s no off switch.”
Spatial	Overexposure; need for withdrawal	“I use my chair and plants to create a little corner.”
Relational	Community rhetoric vs. individual trajectories	“It feels performative sometimes.”
Coping Strategies	Informal routines; symbolic boundaries	“We started having silent mornings.”

Importantly, the data do not indicate outright exploitation. Rather, they show a diffuse form of pressure linked to individualized responsibility.

At *Sugar Paper*, temporal strain was less described in terms of overwork and more in terms of visibility and performativity. Participants reported an implicit expectation to appear engaged and productive. As one UX designer stated: “Even breaks feel like they need to be justified. Here, time was not merely fragmented but socially exposed. Workers described adjusting their movements, scheduling meetings strategically, or avoiding peak hours. These behaviours indicate that coworking operates as a semi-public stage where professional identity is continuously enacted.

Table 5: Discussion and themes at *Sugar Paper*

Dimension	Emerging Themes	Illustrative Quotes
Temporal	Performance pressure; visible productivity	“Even breaks feel justified.”
Spatial	Aesthetic transparency; lack of retreat	“You have to perform your role visually.”
Relational	Transactional networking	“Networking is not support.”
Coping Strategies	Selective withdrawal; rhythm adjustment	“I come in later to breathe.”

Unlike *Fabbriche Binarie*, where temporal pressure stemmed from internalized productivity norms, *Sugar Paper* reflected a more explicitly performative environment structured by aesthetic codes and peer visibility.

Participants in both coworking hubs referred to the language of community, collaboration, and shared vision. However, interviews revealed that everyday interactions rarely matched this rhetoric. At *Fabbriche Binarie*, while collective initiatives were publicly emphasized, engagement in communal practices was selective. Emotional and organizational labour tended to be unevenly distributed. Female members and more senior participants were often described as carrying responsibility for organizing events or sustaining social cohesion. As one cultural worker remarked: “It’s like community is expected, but not reciprocated. Some people do all the caring, others just show up.” This asymmetry occasionally produced fatigue and quiet withdrawal, with members forming smaller subgroups or avoiding central areas. At *Sugar Paper*, relational dynamics were more explicitly oriented toward networking. Encounters were frequent but often strategic. Participants characterized the atmosphere as “curated friendliness,” noting that conversations rarely extended beyond surface-level exchanges. While such interactions could generate professional opportunities, they did not necessarily translate into affective support or stable solidarities. Across both sites, the data indicate that coworking institutionalizes proximity but not necessarily reciprocity. Weak ties proliferate, yet sustained recognition remains uneven.

Taken together, the empirical material does not support a binary characterization of coworking as either emancipatory or exploitative. Instead, autonomy and alienation appear intertwined. The flexibility of the environment allowed some participants to reclaim routines disrupted by remote work. The availability of shared infrastructure mitigated domestic isolation. Informal encounters occasionally generated creative exchange. At the same time, flexibility often translated into self-regulation, aesthetic visibility into exposure, and community rhetoric into selective engagement. Alienation, in this context, does not manifest as

overt domination but as a modulated strain. Participants responded through adaptive strategies: selective withdrawal, compartmentalization of relationships, temporal self-discipline, or aesthetic resistance. These strategies did not eliminate discomfort but rendered it manageable. To illustrate how these experiences were articulated in concrete terms, the following matrix presents selected participant voices organized according to the three analytical dimensions. Rather than representing fixed categories, these excerpts illustrate how experiences of autonomy and alienation coexist in situated and sometimes contradictory ways:

Table 6: Selected Participant Voices Across Analytical Dimensions

Participant	Professional Background	Temporal Experience	Spatial Experience	Relational Experience
Simone	Digital professional	"I feel free but I must reach my schedule goals."	"I don't really have an office"	"I almost work alone"
Ilenia	Administrative worker	"I can organise my work"	"It's open, but not really ours."	"I can talk with people who are not my colleagues."
Ivan	Engineer	"I have to be fast and respect deadlines."	"A lot of space, but few people"	"I don't need to talk about work all the time"
Carlo	Photographer	"I fear isolation."	"You feel you need to be a certain type of person."	"Networking is not the same as support."

What emerges from these accounts is not outright dissatisfaction, but a form of ambivalence, a sense that the coworking model mitigates certain problems of remote work while introducing others. The freedom to choose one's hours becomes the erosion of routine; the beauty of design becomes a source of discomfort; the absence of hierarchy becomes social thinness. Even the symbolic layer of the space, designed to be inclusive and aspirational, was experienced by some as alienating. "You feel like you need to be a certain kind of person to fit in," said Carlo. The implicit aesthetic and behavioural codes (start-up culture, digital literacy, age) operated as forms of soft exclusion, shaping who felt "at home" and who felt peripheral. As Dejours (2017, 2022) would argue, when recognition is not distributed evenly, the psychic cost of adaptation is high. Some users adapt by over-performing; others retreat into silence or avoidance.

Interestingly, the moments of connection, when they occurred, were not part of the official programming of the space but emerged unexpectedly: a shared joke over coffee, a complaint about the heating system, a mutual recognition of burnout. These micro-resonances (fleeting, informal, unscheduled) pointed to an underlying desire for interruptions, for spaces of unplanned conviviality. They suggest that even in curated environments, the social cannot be entirely scripted. However, the structure of *Fabbriche Binarie*, like many coworking spaces, lacked the infrastructural support to make such moments durable. Several participants reflected critically on the governance of the space. Though *Fabbriche Binarie* was promoted as a public-private innovation hub, users felt detached from its institutional life. "It's open, but not really ours," Ilenia remarked. "You rent a spot, but you don't shape the space." The space appears as a managed commons accessible, but not participatory; inviting, but not democratically governed. This reflects broader patterns in digital capitalism, where infrastructures are offered as services rather than shared institutions (Bruni et al., 2020; Vincent et al., 2024). The affective result is a combination of gratitude and alienation, appreciation for what the space provides, but discomfort with its limits and opacity.

Spatial design, often celebrated as a key asset of coworking, emerged in both cases as a double-edged architecture. While openness and aesthetic minimalism were designed to foster transparency and collaboration, they frequently produced symbolic exposure, particularly among older, introverted, or less socially fluent users. At *Fabbriche Binarie*, the fluidity of the space enabled spontaneous interaction but also undermined the possibility of privacy or focused withdrawal. Users resorted to ad hoc coping strategies (headphones, territorial desk arrangements, avoidance of common areas) to reassert control over their spatial experience (Rosa, 2022, 2023). At *Sugar Paper*, the design was even more polished and professionalized, with glass walls, ergonomic lighting, and branding elements reinforcing a culture of curated productivity. Here, visibility became not just a feature, but a demand: workers reported a constant pressure to appear competent, composed, and engaged. These findings resonate with Dejours' psychodynamics of work, particularly his concept of symbolic recognition. According to Dejours (2022, 2024), workers require not only material conditions for productivity but spaces of subjectivation, where their efforts and vulnerabilities can be seen, validated, and shared. When environments prioritize aesthetics and function over ambiguity and emotional safety, they risk transforming transparency into surveillance, and openness into exposure. This is especially problematic in coworking contexts, where interpersonal recognition is not formally structured and must emerge organically, but often fails to.

Perhaps the most persistent theme across both case studies was a gap between the discourse of community and the reality of relational fragmentation. While both *Fabbriche Binarie* and *Sugar Paper* promoted themselves as inclusive, collaborative spaces, the social fabric within them often felt thin and instrumental. At *Fabbriche Binarie*, workers shared a cooperative ethos, and some bonds developed through shared values and long-term use. However, emotional labor (organizing events, maintaining social rituals) was unequally distributed, with certain users (often women or older members) taking on relational caretaking roles, while others remained disengaged. The result was burnout at the core and apathy at the margins.

Sugar Paper, in contrast, displayed a highly professionalized form of interaction. The rhetoric of networking and synergy dominated, but interviews revealed a curated friendliness devoid of deeper mutuality. Workers described feeling welcome but not known, accepted as long as they performed alignment with the dominant culture, but rarely invited into authentic or enduring relationships.

Ultimately, what *Fabbriche Binarie* and *Sugar Paper* offer is not a resolution of alienation, but its reconfiguration. The coworking model displaces certain symptoms (isolation, monotony) while generating new frictions (aesthetic fatigue, relational fragmentation). The empirical material suggests that meaningful connection remains possible, but fragile and unevenly distributed. Moments of spontaneous interaction (shared complaints, humour, or mutual recognition of fatigue) indicate a desire for relational depth that exceeds formal programming. However, neither space provided stable institutional mechanisms to sustain such encounters over time. The space included them formally, but not substantively. Bringing these insights together, we suggest that coworking spaces should be understood not as univocally empowering or alienating, but as ambivalent infrastructures. They mediate labor, yes, but also visibility, recognition, and resonance. Their impact on users depends not only on spatial design or policy, but on deeper social logics: how time is organized, how difference is handled, how recognition is distributed (Radman et al., 2023; Rese et al., 2020, Rese et al., 2022). The symbolic economy of these spaces matters. As Rosa (2013, 2019) reminds us, alienation today is less about material deprivation and more about the erosion of meaningful relations to time, space, and others. As Dejours (2014, 2022) argues, suffering at work can also result from the absence of recognition and not merely from conflict or exploitation. And as Fraser insists, democratic spaces are not defined solely by access, but by co-determination and symbolic belonging (Fraser, 2022).

6 Conclusion: Reimagining Workspaces as Infrastructures of Recognition and Resonance

The digital transition has profoundly reshaped the temporal, spatial, and relational organization of labor. Although these transformations long predated the COVID-19 pandemic, the crisis accelerated the normalization of remote, hybrid, and flexible work arrangements, destabilizing the office as a fixed institutional anchor (Bandinelli, 2020; Bertolini et al., 2021; Bianconi et al., 2024; Boyer-Davis et al., 2023; Homberg et al., 2023). Within this evolving landscape, coworking spaces have emerged both as pragmatic responses to logistical challenges and as symbolic propositions: that work can be reorganized in ways that promise autonomy, sociability, and renewed meaning (Capdevila, 2015, 2022; A. Howell, 2022; Johns et al., 2024; Yakoub and Haefliger, 2024). By examining *Fabbriche Binarie* and *Sugar Paper* as two empirically grounded case studies, this study has shown that such promises are realized only partially and unevenly. Drawing on a critical framework centred on alienation, recognition, and resonance, the analysis demonstrates that coworking spaces tend to reconfigure rather than

resolve the tensions associated with digitally mediated knowledge work. While they may mitigate certain forms of isolation linked to home-based work, they simultaneously generate new strains related to temporal desynchronisation, spatial exposure, and relational fragility (Avdikos and Merkel, 2020; Del Sarto et al., 2023; Fai et al., 2025; Gonzalez-Chouciño and Ruiz-Callado, 2020).

Across both sites, flexibility coexisted with temporal disorientation; openness coexisted with difficulty withdrawing; and the rhetoric of community coexisted with selective engagement and uneven distributions of emotional labour. These patterns are not incidental shortcomings but reflect structural ambiguities embedded in contemporary work infrastructures (Klur and Nies, 2023; Menz and Nies, 2024; Nicklich and Pfeiffer, 2021). Alienation, in this context, appears less as direct domination and more as fragmentation, asynchrony, and symbolic invisibility. The dis-embedding of labor from shared rhythms and collective rituals, often celebrated as autonomy, can produce forms of solitude that remain socially normalized. From a theoretical standpoint, the findings reaffirm the relevance of alienation as an analytic category for contemporary sociology of work (Miele and Tirabeni, 2020b). Rather than an outdated concept tied exclusively to industrial regimes, alienation proves useful for understanding how flexible and digital forms of labor reorganize subjectivity, recognition, and belonging (Grazian, 2020; Ivaldi et al., 2018; Garrett et al., 2017; Johns et al., 2024; Mariotti and Akhavan, 2020). By distinguishing between temporal, spatial, and relational dimensions, the framework developed here translates critical theory into an empirically grounded heuristic capable of capturing the ambivalent character of coworking environments.

From an institutional perspective, the study suggests that coworking spaces should not be evaluated solely in terms of innovation, productivity, or market efficiency (Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2021; Fai et al., 2025; T. Howell, 2022). Their social consequences depend on how time is collectively structured, how space accommodates both interaction and retreat, and how recognition is distributed among users (Johns et al., 2024; Fai et al., 2025). Where governance remains opaque, participation limited, and relational infrastructures underdeveloped, coworking risks reproducing, albeit in aestheticized form, the very conditions of disconnection it seeks to counteract (Merkel, 2017; Orel and Bennis, 2021). *Fabbriche Binarie* and *Sugar Paper* do not represent definitive solutions to the challenges of post-pandemic work. Rather, they function as laboratories in which new configurations of labour, visibility, and belonging are tested. Their ambivalence is revealing: it shows that autonomy without anchoring, openness without reciprocity, and flexibility without collective rhythms are insufficient to overcome alienation (Del Sarto et al., 2023; Mariotti et al., 2023). The question, therefore, is not whether coworking heralds the future of work, but under what conditions shared workspaces can foster durable forms of temporal coordination, spatial security, and relational reciprocity. To move beyond celebratory narratives and deterministic critiques, sociological inquiry must attend to coworking not merely as a spatial innovation, but as a normative and political project, one that shapes how work is experienced, recognized, and collectively organized in the digital era.

Finally, the study calls for a critical shift in how we imagine the future of workspaces. The dominant discourse of autonomy, flexibility, and choice often obscures the structural conditions (economic, technological, and institutional) that constrain those very choices (Kinsman et al., 2024; Radman et al., 2023; Rese et al., 2020; Rese et al., 2022). By reframing coworking as a site of relational negotiation, rather than mere convenience or efficiency, we acknowledge that the quality of work is inseparable from the quality of our shared infrastructures and the norms of recognition they embody. They are laboratories, imperfect, ambivalent, but revealing. They show that the question is no longer whether the office is dead or reborn, but what kind of infrastructures of presence, mutuality, and justice we are willing to build in its place. To move beyond alienation in the digital era, we must recover not only the space of work, but its social meaning, political form, and ethical stakes.

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