Curating salutogenic spaces in post-pandemic hybrid work environments: A photo-elicitation qualitative study

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the lived experience of hybrid working and the impact this has on knowledge workers' psychosocial health and wellbeing. Specifically, we focus on how the workplace can promote or hinder wellbeing and how hybrid working is experienced after the pandemic. We draw on salutogenic theory – which considers the factors that support and enhance health and wellbeing – in the context of workplaces, to help us understand individual's experiences of hybrid working spaces. This draws attention to new critical insights into the relationship between workspaces and wellbeing. This article is based on empirical, visual data gathered from a case study of university academic and professional services staff, who were asked to take photographs of their hybrid working practices. Our findings highlight the paradox that individual curation of workspaces represents both personalisation and depersonalisation as employees seek to anchor self-identity and a sense of belonging to the workspace. We offer three contributions in this paper. First, little is known of the experiences of those attending hybrid work environments following the pandemic; therefore, our research contributes to this by using salutogenic theory to emphasise the importance of individuals having control over how they shape their environments to promote personal wellbeing. Second, we demonstrate how the use of visual methods to explore hybrid working highlights *how* individuals mobilise resources within their workspaces to develop a self-responsibility for health. Third, we highlight the importance of how organisations should recognise individual circumstances when developing hybrid working policies.

1. Introduction

As the Covid-19 pandemic spread across the globe, workers in many parts of the world were urged to stay at home and lockdown restrictions were enforced. In the UK, 'key workers' continued to attend the physical workplace, but anyone who was able to work from home was required to do so. A range of hybrid working models emerged post-pandemic (Chafi et al., 2022; Karanika-Murray and Ipsen, 2022), with 29 % of people in the UK 'working from home some of the time' (ONS, 2023), and 78 % of UK workers citing improved work-life balance as the main advantage. Recent statistics indicate that workers now attend the office in-person only 1.75 days per week on average (Brand, 2023). This situation has arguably led to the most widespread remote working experiment in human history (Kniffen et al., 2020) and highlighted the workplace's significance in impacting population level health and wellbeing (Wood et al., 2021; Xiao, 2021; Schifano et al., 2023).

The pandemic played a key role in shaping the future of work as trends become accelerated (Peters et al., 2022) and it has offered an unprecedented opportunity to trial future working models (Chafi et al., 2022; Karanika-Murray and Ipsen, 2022). It has also brought uncertainty and challenges to how different workforces will engage with and experience forms of hybrid-working in the future (Appel-Meulenbroek, 2021; Appel-Meulenbroek et al., 2022). Here, we define hybrid working as choosing to work in different spaces in a typical week, both physically and virtually (Dale, 2021). Hybrid working may play an important role in workforce recuperation, decompression, and in the promotion of mental health and wellbeing. However, the ways in which hybrid working is experienced may differ for workforces, and there are aspects of the lived experience of hybrid working that are unclear within existing literature (Petani and Mengis, 2023), such as determining the wider impact of hybrid working on psychosocial health and wellbeing. Here, lived experience refers to experience as it is subjectively lived by

individuals (Moustakas, 1994).

The workplace has long been seen as a key setting for health and wellbeing (Schulte and Vainio, 2010; Ridge et al., 2019., Colenberg et al., 2020). Such rapidly changing working arrangements post-pandemic provide an important backdrop in thinking about the relationship between workspaces and wellbeing, in ways that move beyond traditional concerns around disease and injury risk to consider the positive impacts that work can have on workers' ability to flourish and do well (Van der Walt and Lezar, 2019). 'Workplaces can be important engines of wellbeing in the communities they support' (Peters et al., 2022: e192), so it is important to consider how *all* workspaces, including the traditional 'workplace', can help individuals and communities thrive in the future. Traditional population-focused public health has focused on what works from the perspective of communities avoiding ill health, as opposed to considering the assets that communities need to create and sustain health and wellbeing - the 'salutogenic' approach (Antonovsky, 1979, 1996). Curation of workspaces, for example - how individuals choose and use material artefacts to enhance belonging to a space – has been viewed as one way of promoting a sense of wellbeing. Curation has conceptual linkages to the personalisation of spaces (Knight and Haslam, 2010; Dominoni and Scullica, 2022).

Work is profoundly associated with psychosocial health and wellbeing; it provides income, social status, a sense of belonging and identity: how we do in life is intimately tied up with what we do (Frost and McClean, 2014). As organisations continue to implement hybrid working 'models', it will be important to understand the lived experiences of those models on the health and wellbeing of workers. Although studies have been conducted on aspects of spatial resilience; that is, the physical/material and design/aesthetic aspects of the environment (mostly relating to social ecology), a significant gap exists in the research on understanding specifically how the environments and spaces for work can promote or hinder resilience and wellbeing. Furthermore, there is little understanding currently on what is the lived experience of hybrid working coming out of the pandemic. That said, a recent Special Issue of Culture and Organization (2023) - 'flexible lives: spatial, temporal, and behavioural boundaries in a fluid world of work and home' - specifically draws together papers that examine the everyday lives of workers navigating the work/ home divide. In addition, the use of visual methods more broadly has been used in the field of organisation studies to better understand everyday life in the workplace for the last fifteen years or so (Shortt and Warren, 2019; Bell et al., 2013). Nonetheless, there are few studies that combine the use of participatory visual methods and the exploration of hybrid working practices through the eyes of participants with a particular focus on wellbeing.

Our paper draws on well-founded visual research methods but offers a unique perspective on how these methods can be used to reveal new critical insights into the role that hybrid workplaces can play in workforce recuperation, mental health, and wellbeing, focusing specifically on knowledge intensive workforces – in this case, a university's academic and professional services employees. Salutogenic theory (Antonovsky, 1979, 1996) help us understand the lived experience and phenomenology of hybrid spaces which allows for new insights into the relationship between workspaces and wellbeing. We go on to explore and advance understanding of curation practices in workspaces and their relationship to wellbeing and identity, and we explore the paradox that individual curation of workspaces can also represent movement towards depersonalisation as employees seek to anchor workspaces to specific work identities (Elsbach, 2004; Kenny et al., 2011; Greenaway et al., 2016).

1.1. Salutogenesis and the personal curation of workspace wellbeing

An evidence-base has emerged on how a hybrid working environment can be manipulated and personalised to improve employee wellbeing (Colenberg et al., 2020; Appel-Meulenbroek, 2021; Peters et al., 2022), but also to improve productivity (Greenaway et al., 2016). As

such, there is increased interest in the impact that workspaces have on health, productivity, efficiency, and wellbeing as comfort considerations such as design, lighting, ambience, acoustics, and biophilia (an architectural practice connecting workplace occupants more closely to nature) all play a role (Araya León and Abella, 2022). There is an increased body of work on changing perspectives about spaces and healthy environments (e.g. Chafi et al., 2022). The perception of physical and mental wellness is also shifting, especially as a result of the pandemic: 'The meaning of wellbeing and comfort are modifying their characteristics, addressing the shape and personalization of the spaces.' (Dominoni and Scullica, 2022: 7).

Studies have explored how built environment and aesthetic design interventions can impact wellbeing (Keeling, Clements-Croome and Roesch, 2015; Altomonte et al., 2020; Golembiewski, 2022). This literature draws upon a range of comfort metrics in environmental design research, for example air quality, thermal comfort, and visual and acoustic comfort. Here, comfort is generally defined as the absence of negative stimuli (Altomonte et al., 2020). This links to theories of positive spaces such as refuge theory, that people need a place to hide while maintaining a wide field of vision (Dosen and Ostwald, 2013). Work on the phenomenological responses to space also note the need to match the acoustics, lighting and thermal comfort of a space (Goldberg and Hargrave, 2014). In this paper we consider how and why our participants attempt to create a balance between curation of the overall look and feel, with appropriate local customisation and personalisation where possible.

In considering the environments that produce workplace wellbeing, we can focus more generally on the factors that support and enhance wellbeing through the individual curation of workspaces. These factors are often referred to as salutogens (Antonovsky, 1979, 1996). Coined by the sociologist Aaron Antonovsky, salutogenic denotes the salutary factors/mechanisms that promote (Mittlemark et al., 2022) as well as create (Lindstom and Eriksson, 2006; Lindstrom, 2018) health (as opposed to pathogenic factors, what creates illness). Salutogenesis highlights the importance of self-care as a form of health promotion. Central to this process are the agentic actions of the individual as they engage with their environment. Here, wellbeing is seen as the dynamic interplay of different elements involving individuals and environments. Wellbeing is a more comprehensive term than comfort, but we can see that curating comfort is about positively cultivating healthy and well environments so that individuals can thrive at work and in work-related environments (Martin, 2017; Van der Walt and Lezar, 2019).

The theory of salutogenesis also allows one to consider the relationship between stress and wellbeing and how individuals can develop either a positive or problematic relationship to stress – what Antonovsky calls a 'sense of coherence': not everyone responds the same way to stress/stressful environments, and this may depend on manageability and meaningfulness of the current situation (coherence). Health and wellbeing are therefore about the ability of individuals to mobilise resources to cope with stressful events and develop a self-responsibility for health. We argue that a sense of coherence in one's relationship to workspaces often derives from the 'anchoring' of self-identity to both material and non-material aspects of the workspace, which helps the person feel belonging to that space. Attention to this 'anchoring' of identity to the external and inner phenomenological life of workspaces is a key gap in the literature and provides an important contribution of the paper.

2. Material and methods

This study used participatory visual methods, namely, participant-led photography. The aim of the study was to gather personal, visual and reflective accounts of participants' perceptions, knowledge and experiences of hybrid working. This method provided participants with an opportunity to capture the everyday tensions and ambiguities felt between work/nonwork, professional/personal, public/private, work

life/home life and all the complexities associated with hybrid working. This approach, therefore, foregrounds their feelings, emotions, and stories that were lived, felt and seen and as such capture an 'aesthetic sensibility' (Chaplin, 2004: 43). Indeed, rather than relying only on words and traditional interviews, the use of images helped to '. . . mine deeper shafts of different parts of the human consciousness than do words-alone . . .' (Harper, 2002: 22). Relying on words alone, we feel, does not adequately capture or understand the physical, spatial, material transitioning that was occurring when hybrid working. Our study had 4 phases, each of which we describe below.

2.1. Study phase 1

In study phase 1 we recruited staff/ participants from across the university using adverts in internal webpages and newsletters. Although participants were therefore largely self-selecting, as a research team we ensured that the final case selection for this study were as diverse as possible, according to gender, ethnicity, age, length of employment, and role at the university. As the participant group were self-selecting, some were known to members of the research team, and others were not. In total we worked with 17 participants, which comprised 10 academic staff (based in all faculties at the university), and 7 professional services staff (working in Careers, Student Advice, IT Services, Apprenticeship Hub, and Research and Innovation at the same university) - Table 1 below gives details of our participant group:

We asked each participant to take 3 photographs that captured a sense of what hybrid working has been/is like for them. We asked them to reflect on their lived experiences of post-pandemic working, what it is like working at home, their feelings about returning to the 'office-based' workplace, and their working practices. Once participants sent their 3 photographs to a member of the research team, they were then invited to talk about their images in an online photo elicitation interview (Shortt, 2012), via Microsoft Teams. In total we completed 13 photo elicitation interviews, (2 of which were conducted in pairs - the participants chose to have their interviews together because they worked on the same team and the interview schedule suited them both). Given the dialogic aspect of the photo interviews we felt this paired-up approach facilitated a rich discussion and, in fact, encouraged participants to share experiences. We did not feel this negatively influenced or inhibited participants responses as each person was given time and space to discuss their individual photographs). In total, 54 photographs were made by participants.

2.2. Study phase 2

In study phase 2, we used Grounded Visual Pattern Analysis (GVPA) (Shortt and Warren, 2019), to make sense of our visual data. This process starts in phase 1 where the meaning of the image must be established as part of the 'dialogic phase' - in the photo interview (Shortt and Warren, 2019). In the interview, people describe why they took the photograph and what it means to them – this is important since the meaning to the participant cannot usually be guessed at from a literal interpretation of the photo; thus, the meanings of the images are grounded in the participant's lifeworld.

We took a collaborative approach to the GVPA process and as a

researcher team of 4 people (SM, HS, CvB and GP), we discussed and coded each photograph, adding post-it notes to each image (see Fig. 1 below). Working together as a research team helped our coding decisions significantly since we could sense check and discuss the merits of focusing on different interpretations of participant voices. Part of this coding process was to then group images into themes – these are called 'image sets' (Shortt and Warren, 2019) – Fig. 1 below shows the image set for the 'curating comfort' theme. In line with traditional qualitative thematic and/or coding methods such as template analysis (King and Brooks, 2017), codes that were too niche or too similar were clustered together, and more densely populated codes were expanded into more fine-grained classifications. Following our analysis, three key themes emerged: challenging environments, ritual at work, and curating comfort. It is the latter theme that we explore in this paper.

The next step in the analytical process was to read the image sets for patterns with regards to what they are 'of' and how they have been 'taken' to see if field-level visual patterns could be recognised across the themes. Shortt and Warren, 2019 call this an 'archaeological analysis' where researchers look at the content and composition of the images – how and what have participants captured to communicate the meaning they have assigned to the images. This draws out the cultural precedents and aesthetic considerations that come into play when people take a photograph. As a team, we discussed our collective impressions of the image set as a whole. We recorded the patterns - noting symbolism/content (the objects, subjects, places, events depicted) and composition (camera angle, lighting, aesthetic effects, point-of-view and so on.). Following this, we added an additional step in the GVPA process (Shortt and Warren, 2019) and took the image sets back to our participants to extend the pattern analysis in a more participatory way, through focus group discussions.

2.3. Study phase 3

In phase 3 we conducted two focus groups – one with the academic staff (12 participants), and one with professional services staff (6 participants). In this phase the image sets were used in group consultations/ reflections as prompts for wider conversation. We asked participants to become co-researchers by reading the image sets for patterns, and we asked, *'what more can these image sets tell us about the themes that have emerged?'* Participants came up with their own image set analysis and from this we took notes on their interpretations of the images-sets. As part of this process, we did not share our readings of the image sets but facilitated their group conversations and reflections.

This analysis enabled us to provide a more nuanced interpretation – specifically considering sub-themes that emerged within 'curating

Table 1
Participants recruited to this study.

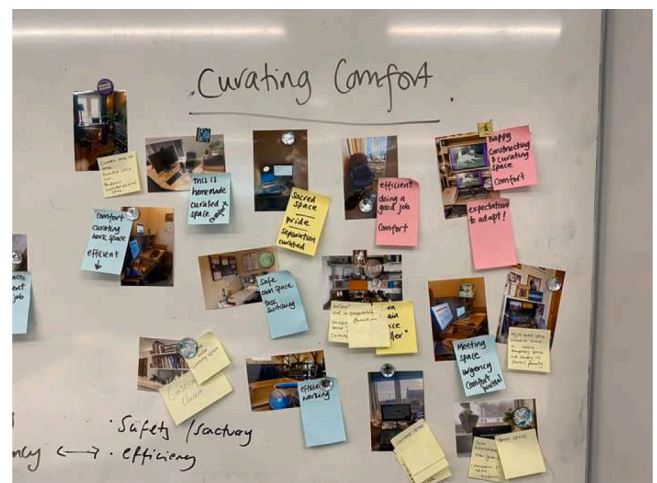| Participant Group	Team/ Faculty	Number of Participants
Professional Services	Careers; Student Advice; IT Services; Apprenticeship Hub; Research and Innovation	7
Academic	Business and Law; Health and Applied Science; Environment, Technology, and Engineering; Creative Arts and Education	10

Fig. 1. Image set for 'curating comfort' theme.

comfort'. At the core of this theme was a critical understanding of the role of personalisation (personal curation) of the workspace helping individuals feel comfortable and promoting individual wellbeing in hybrid environments.

2.4. Study phase 4

The final phase of our study of the GVPA (Shortt and Warren, 2019) process is 'theorising' broadly based on the pattern analysis (as above). At this stage we considered *'what more can the image analysis (content and composition) tell us about the theme curating comfort'?* We explore this in the findings and discussion sections below.

3. Findings

These findings report on the theme of 'curating comfort'. All the images associated with this theme have been given meanings associated with creating and curating workspaces that make people feel comfortable, that are functional, and allow people to be and feel well at work. These are associated with feelings of resilience and allow people to feel as though they can do their jobs well. A note on terminology – below we refer to home space and office space. Whilst one might consider themselves to have an office at home, we are exclusively making the distinction between home space as being any dedicated working space in the home and office space as being the working space allocated by the employing organisation, unless otherwise explicitly noted.

3.1. 'Comfortable function' or being productive

Participants spoke in detail about the relationship between workspace utility/functionality and comfort, and for some, this was simply about avoiding injury or discomfort and maintaining musculoskeletal health. For some participants, this meant acquiring specific items to help the transition to home working during the pandemic, where typically inadequate arrangements meant using whatever was to hand,

I was seeing all sorts of like back and joint, all sorts of problems, which I've always had from doing too much desk-based work. But now I have this kind of weird Star Trek chair that's, I guess, more comfortable than sitting on a kitchen chair. (Kassandra – Academic) (Fig. 2)

Others alluded to the more temporary nature of the pandemic and post-pandemic arrangements and highlighted how the most important issue was not only becoming comfortable, but also being productive –
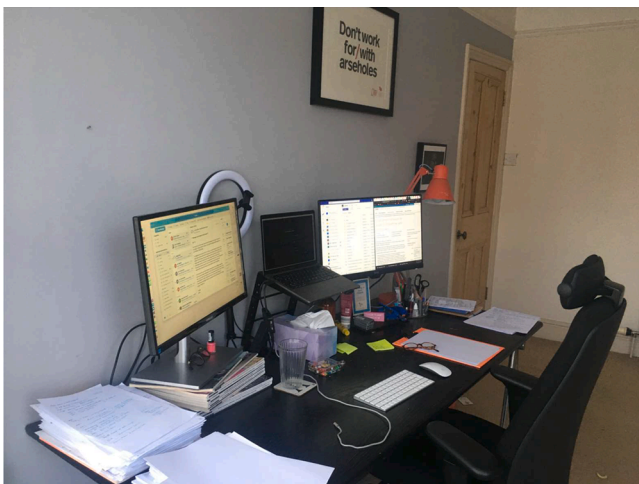

Fig. 2. Comfortable function and productivity expressed by Kassandra – Academic.

that is, getting the most amount of work done,

It's just a pleasant work environment, that one is more about, "I can work. I've got a keyboard, I've got a monitor, I've got a phone". So, I think it's comfort and function, I suppose, or comfortable function. (Lewis - Academic)

Where participants expanded further on the nature of this environment, we noted there is the sense that participants wanted to cocoon themselves with the things that matter to them (*'my gadgets'*) but that also make them able to *'do a good job'*,

…being organised with my rota, and my gadgets, being warm and things like that, so that you are able to do a good job because you're in a comfortable environment. (Caitlin – Professional Services)

This theme focused on the sense in which workspaces are defined in relation to the business of getting work done, sometimes in a functional sense, and also in a relational sense. As participants reflected on the transition to home working, back to the office, and then some balance of the two within a hybrid arrangement, they often compared the home environment to the office and how this shaped up. For example, there was general concern about sharing spaces with colleagues. One participant expressed their concern with having *'somebody else'* in the room, expressing considerations around *'I'm going to bother them'* and *'are they going to bother me'* (Reza - Academic).

Moreover, it was clear that there was a sense in which various environmental factors would help lead towards greater comfort. Here we consider comfort metrics such as heat, light, space, etc., and some participants were clear on what they wanted out of their working environment. One participant preferred working in the office to home, which was borne out of what they realised was an unhealthy (non-salutogenic) way of working in the home environment,

I can open the window to get fresh air, and there's a blind if it's too sunny, there's consumer controls on the radiators, I can turn them on and off. I can open the door and get a through draft, and all these things I couldn't and didn't do whilst working from home, and I didn't realise at the time that was making me more stressed and more anxious and more uncomfortable. (Lewis – Academic)

For others there was a clear comparison of the home and office-based environment and a sizing up of the relative comfort metrics for both. Often home won out due to the degree to which personalising the environment could make it more comfortable and thus more conducive to working well. Control and agency over the key environmental qualities that make the working space more comfortable was a key part of the appeal and contributed to their wellbeing. Yet, control of one's personal working environment could also be about ensuring that one can work in the most optimised way. In this sense working from home, being relaxed, personal, vulnerable, made them do their best, most creative work in the home working space, which was not experienced in the office,

This room [home space] is a little sanctuary, it's quiet, I have control over my room… I never feel alone in that room [office space], and I mean that in the worst way. It's chaos. I'm not in control of that room, control is a big thing for me… I feel completely untethered from my office now… I'm always kind of alert at work… I want to feel, and I think I should feel in most conversations I have with people a level of vulnerability… but it just feels like I can never relax there (Paul – Academic) (Fig. 3)

Being productive with this sense of 'comfortable function' was a key part of the way participants thought about their wellbeing in workspaces, and that the more non-salutogenic aspects of their working environment (e.g., the level of chaos and feelings of alertness) posed a threat to both their productivity and feelings of control.

Fig. 3. 'Curated comfort' in home space (Paul – Academic).

3.2. Curation as enhancing a sense of coherence and anchoring of the self

In the previous sub-theme, we identified that the ability to control and manipulate the working environment to suit the kind of work being done was a key issue for many as they sought to be productive. In the context of home working spaces, controlling one's environment was also about the ability to pivot a sense of identity within the space,

I think the thing that it makes me feel most is that even though work has come into my home more than it probably was ever envisaged it would, I've been able to regain some element of control over it, and it's not an office… but it's still a dedicated space and gives me a feel of separation from work (Linda – Professional Services)

Being well and doing well in the working environment, particularly at home, is tied up with personal identity and how 'work' may inevitably transgress the space. Participants varied on the extent to which curation had equal value in both office and home working environment, the level of personalisation depending on what were the markers of working identity. Some reflected on how some curation had entered home working space but there were limits,

I wouldn't have any of those things at work… in the past I may have, but things change and I've never been someone who has like pictures of my baby on my desk or anything like that sort of stuff… (Kassandra – Academic)

All participants talked to some extent about the ways in which they would personalise their home working environment through the process of personal curation – that is, choosing and using material artefacts to enhance their sense of belonging to the space,

I miss elements of the office. But I actually really like… I do thoroughly enjoy working at home. I feel very comfortable. I just want to personalise my home space. (Laura – Professional Services)

Here this sense of belonging was predicated on how they conceptualised their relationship to the home, as well as to their working identity. For some this was simply about being 'professional', a key part of the new identity forged in working from home,

I feel more comfortable at work when I have a meeting, if I'm at work, I feel, I feel more professional. It's a more professional setting … it's more professional to be at the office and I'm not very comfortable really when I have loads of meetings at home. (Reza – Academic)

Such professionalisation inevitably struck a paradox as the degree of curation was about de-personalisation and not personalisation. There was an acknowledgement of the temporary nature of the home working

environment and how working in the home space was about facilitating the most effective arrangement to be effective psychologically,

the pictures of the family around the room and it's comfortable, to me… it's about getting stuff done, to be honest… it's all positive feelings completely, it absolutely suits the way I work. (Grace – Professional Services)

These items of personal curation were frequently about anchoring the material objects to their sense of self and working identity, and this was something that was noted to help their sense of wellbeing,

there's always stuff around me that I feel connects to and from my past. I don't particularly live like that outside of my office space… my weird tat is more present in my desk environment, and I use that in terms of wellbeing, a reminder of all the different contexts I live and work in… if I'm having a particularly rubbish meeting I can look at that and be reminded of the joy my other stuff brings, so there is a sense of wellbeing carefully curated in that space (Ryan – Academic)

Anchoring the self and sense of belonging to the material objects around them was a key part of the appeal of personalised/curated space, and in the spaces (particularly in the office environment) where this was not evident there was a feeling that identity can cut adrift and make one feel increasingly placeless, losing a sense of coherence,

There's a lack of, like, historic anchors or something, to make it capture things, the pictures on the wall are all extremely generic, whereas the pictures at home I would have chosen, so it seems less like my desk at work even though I would sit at it three days a week (William – Professional Services)

In addition to the home working space we also noted this need for anchoring in the office environment. Here, the need to anchor was more restrained. In the next theme we note an additional tension between a territorial and nomadic sense of working identity that also impacted on this anchoring.

3.3. Tidying and hiding away: territorial vs nomadic construction of workspace identity

To some extent our participants varied in terms of how they felt about the relationship between belonging at work and the role of curated environments. However, an increased time spent working in the home during the pandemic made the participants rethink their 'selves', the materiality of their environment in shaping identity and wellbeing. Some extolled the virtue of de-personalisation as way of keeping their personal lives separate from their working identity,

I don't want people to see my shit behind me, no one is going to care about this stuff behind me, it says nothing about me at all, it says nothing revealing… I don't want someone to see inside my house… (Paul – Academic)

Others highlighted how during the pandemic they got used to the temporary nature of their working arrangement at home, and this sense of encroachment did not help their wellbeing,

…when we were working from home all the time, probably technically could do that [tidying up], but because of the effort involved in packing everything away if you wanted to use that as a family again… it was almost a bit of a tie, a bit of a cycle of perhaps not working in healthiest way because of operational things that needed to happen (Daniel – Professional Services)

Participants extolled the virtues of home working to some degree and how this suited their personal lives, that some merging of home and working space improved their wellbeing as it brought family life more central to everyday concerns,

There's an advantage of working from home because you can manage your work as well as your personal family life … and sometimes it actually relieves lots of stress, so it might mean some interruptions, but at least you're not stressed thinking about your kids and family … (Zahir – Academic)

As such, there was a sense that participants were clinging to either a more territorial or nomadic sense of working identity. These were not fixed positions, there was a continuum in terms of what worked and when, but there was a feeling of general preference. For some, in the territorial home space this was about personalised curation as a way of aiding hiding away, the sense of home working space as holding a deeply felt sense of identity,

I recently painted the walls, had the floors sanded and I bought a new desk, it's sort of newly configured in the last 6 months… sometimes I feel that the working practice holds me there, and sometimes I feel like I hold myself in there, because I like my little cubby hole where I hide… (Ryan – Academic)

One participant who expressed a view that many have reported about returning to the office post-pandemic focused on the role of the office space in a territorial sense, and how that this raised their feelings of wellbeing,

what coming to work enabled me to do was to feel comfortable thinking about work at work and to try and think less about work at home because the two spaces were merged (Lewis – Academic)

However, what also emerged was the changing working landscape for many knowledge-based workers, and how this had meant some transition to more nomadic ways of thinking about working identity. A key aspect of this was how it impacted their office-based environment where personalised items had to be tidied away when not in the office, as expressed here regarding locker number 37,

It's that element of tidy your identity away into a cupboard… so there's a certain sadness to it, and although it's clearly my space – space no.37 – I can see there… it's all a little disposable, it does seem sad to see your life squeezed into a tiny space like that. (William – Professional Services)

The sense of sadness communicated here comes from the transitory nature of work identity in those environments, with the participant reminding us that eventually someone else becomes 'no.37' (see Fig. 4). From hiding away (territorial) to tidying away (nomadic), there was some creativity in allowing nomadic territorialism in the role of transition material objects such as the bag that carries the working life,

Fig. 4. Space number 37 from William – Professional Services.

In my bag space it will also have elements of my personal research identity, like my secret I'm actually still an academic identity, so there will be some of my personal stuff that might sneak in that I kind of cling to against the day job… (William – Professional Services)

At the heart of that debate about where and how one feels a sense of self identity at work, and how one can curate it, was the idea that feeling valued is important, and not just about being happy or productive,

I do know there's all those benefits and I'm aware I'm in a very privileged position… but for me, I mould around it, it's about where I feel valued … it's not just about where I feel happiest or where I feel most productive. (Grace – Professional Services)

Nomadic forms of working identity risk devaluing the role or the kind of work being done, prevent a sense of wellness that can come from co-joining space and working-self, and ultimately risk decreasing as opposed to improving productivity.

4. Discussion

Whilst the lived experiences of hybrid working in the post-pandemic period – and its impact on health and wellbeing – are still unclear, our findings begin to address that gap by focusing on understanding the role of hybrid workplaces in workforce recuperation, mental health, and wellbeing, particularly in knowledge-intensive workforces. Recent studies (Dominoni and Scullica 2022: 7) acknowledge the emerging evidence on how hybrid working environments can be adapted to improve employee wellbeing and productivity. The concept of salutogenesis, which focuses on the factors that support and enhance health and wellbeing (Antonovsky 1979, 1996), is central to this.

Salutogenesis emphasises the importance of self-responsibility and individual agency in shaping one's environment to promote wellbeing. Hybrid working often provides individuals with increased flexibility, autonomy and control in choosing their work environment. We see how individuals have the opportunity to personalise their physical workspace, optimise lighting, air quality, acoustics, biophilia, and other environmental factors according to their preferences, and create a sense of comfort and ownership. The importance of the built environment and aesthetic design interventions in affecting health and wellbeing is highlighted in the findings and is central to other related studies (Altomonte et al., 2020; Golembiewski, 2022).

Moreover, hybrid working may allow individuals to balance their work and personal life, which can contribute to their overall wellbeing. By having the flexibility to work from home or remotely, individuals can better manage their work-life balance, reduce commuting stress, and potentially have more time for self-care, family, and other activities that promote wellbeing. However, it is important to note that the overall picture on the benefits of hybrid working is complex and that people may adopt different strategies in managing this and may find it difficult to achieve this balance (Izak, Reissner, and Shortt 2023). While remote work allows for increased focus and reduced interruptions, in-person work facilitates face-to-face interactions and collaboration with colleagues, which can enhance social connections, teamwork, and a sense of belonging. These social interactions and the support received from colleagues can positively impact individuals' wellbeing.

Whilst our focus in this paper has been specifically on knowledge-based workforces, the findings are more widely applicable. By drawing on salutogenic theory, we gain valuable insights into the lived experience and phenomenology of hybrid working, shedding new light on the relationship between work environments and wellbeing. In this paper, we explored 'curation' and in the findings we have identified the strategies and approaches participants' use to manage space, wellbeing, productivity, and emotions, through the personalisation and curation of space, territoriality and claiming ownership over spaces, and use of technology. At one level, control and autonomy is about enhancing feelings of health and wellbeing through manipulating comfort metrics,

which can vary across home/office environments. On another level we see how there are different strategies for curation that helps anchor self to physical space, such as in the use of material artefacts. However, the management of space is not restricted to the physical realm; equally, the phenomenological experience of inner space was reflected in how individuals become practiced at pivoting their work self to different spaces, bringing a sense of coherence. Lastly, hiding away (physically and digitally) as well as tidying away reflect complementary approaches to trying to belong in workspaces, and are a key part of employees trying to increase a sense of value to the roles they have.

Our key findings are that participants differed in how they thought about this element of curation and the role it should and could play in both home and office work spaces. Increased time spent working at home during the pandemic made participants rethink their selves, the materiality of their environment in shaping identity and wellbeing, and the importance of value. Whilst curation shares conceptual similarities with the personalisation of spaces (Knight and Haslam, 2010; Dominoni and Scullica, 2022), there are nuances to this, and we highlight a paradox wherein individual curation of workspaces can lead to *de*personalisation as individuals strive to align their work environments with specific professional identities. For some, too much personalisation creates unhealthy ways of working; in these environments 'workspaces' (both territorially and nomadically defined) increasingly allow individuals an opportunity to pivot and anchor sense of self and workplace identity to whatever is at hand.

In addition, this paper provides methodological insights into how we might go about researching the subjective, lived experiences of healthy workplaces. The use of visual methods and participant generated visual data allowed us to see inside the world of hybrid working and what was important to participants. By asking them to *show* us their experiences, we elicited rich, in-depth conversations that promoted a feeling-based dialogue allowing affective elements of hybrid working to be uncovered. We also identified how specific material, physical, and environmental elements of their workplaces were associated with health and wellbeing.

Throughout the findings we can see how nuanced, and paradoxical, elements of curating workspaces serve to show how individual circumstances matter. Equally, this should matter to those organisations who are, post-pandemic, reviewing their hybrid working policies. As has been reported, there are reluctance and disappointments on both sides of an invisible divide (BBC, 2023; Innstrand, et al., 2022) and the demand to return to the office has at times worried those who have become attached to the perceived safety of a home working environment. There is a tension between individual needs of staff, and how they manage their own wellbeing, and the collective, organisational needs. Social inequalities have been exposed; the home working spaces in transformed cupboards, those that have been curated, and the empty open plan office environment that some long for and others dread. Can new ways of working address a call for self-determination and self-care within the context of organisational boundaries and external pressures? It is these questions that we are left with, having explored the importance of individual agency and control over how we shape working environments to promote personal wellbeing.

In this paper we acknowledge some limitations with the study, and suggestions for future research. As a qualitative study the sample was self-selecting, and the population of interest (university employees) represents one dimension of the knowledge-based workforce. Although we suggest that these findings are more widely applicable, we argue that a wider study would be needed to establish exactly how it applies to other situations and contexts. Furthermore, we appreciate that the use of visual methods and the narratives people attach to their photographs is a literal and metaphorical 'snapshot in time' of their workplace experience – over time these spaces and places of work and feelings about them will ebb and flow, particularly as we move further away from 'post-pandemic' ways of working and establish new and different ways of working. Nonetheless, these snapshots provide us, and organisations,

with valuable insights through which to understand the hybrid working lives of a workforce and their health and wellbeing.

5. Conclusion and lessons for wellbeing at work

Wellbeing and health at work matters but given the changing nature of workplace and the fluidity of working practices, we must now pay more attention to how this plays out, post-pandemic. Much of the literature on workspace and health makes links to wellbeing and a sense of belonging, but little is known of the experiences of those attending hybrid work environments following the pandemic. It is this focus that we have taken in this paper where we have highlighted how and where knowledge workers curate a quality workplace for themselves to feel productive, comfortable, and shape their various identities.

Taking inspiration from salutogenesis, we have drawn attention to how healthy workplaces are those where individuals have the ability to control and shape their environments and, critically, establish a sense of personal wellbeing. Importantly here, the findings show how workers use various resources to establish this, including objects, aspects of biophilia, and the material world around them. Through the eyes of our participants and the photographs they captured, we have seen the 'curation' of comfort in the context of hybrid working and how this differs in both home and office environments. We have also seen how the increased time spent working at home during the pandemic has made participants rethink their 'selves' and how the materiality of their environment shapes identity and wellbeing.

By focusing on understanding the role of hybrid workplaces in workforce recuperation, mental health, and wellbeing, particularly in knowledge-intensive workforces such as university academics and professional services, we have been able to further contribute to the emerging conversation on how environments and spaces for work can promote or hinder resilience and wellbeing. As such, and given many organisations across the world are grappling with the huge shift towards hybrid working post-pandemic, further research in this field is required. Indeed, curating salutogenic spaces for work and the individual needs that are part of this should be recognised by organisations when developing hybrid working policies. For example, numerous organisations have dissolved their real-estate after the pandemic, deeming office space redundant and promoting permanent remote working for all. But what does this mean for *purely* home-based workers and their sense of self and wellbeing? In what ways might organisations manage, support, and sustain the health of their workers in relation to this environment? With the increasing number of people working in a hybrid manner, organisations and leaders will be required to think further than simply *where* their teams work and work location – it will be essential for them to consider the wider impact this has on psychosocial health and wellbeing. Indeed, it is this future-focused insight that offers rich and fertile ground in which spatial researchers and public health researchers might further develop an interdisciplinary, contemporary theorisation of the lived experiences of workplace and its connection with health and wellbeing.

Ethical statement

The authors declare that the data collection and all research work leading to this manuscript was approved by the University of the West of England Faculty Research Ethics Committee (UWE REC REF No HAS.21.10.017).

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stuart McClean: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Harriet Shortt:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project

administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Charlotte von Bülow:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Gemma Pike:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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