Role of the Third Place in Building Communities and Social Capital : Contributions of Coffee Shops as Third Places in Kuwait

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Third places are those that offer a space outside of work and home for people to escape the stress associated with the primary spaces of their lives. Through social interactivity these help in acquiring some emotional support provided by a close and intimate attachment. Such social support can turn into social resources for individuals and can lead to forming communities that may become incubators for social capital through regular visits to shared socializing places. This paper focuses on social interaction that takes place through the third place and the communities that are being created as a contributing factor to knowledge management.

The study being reported in this paper investigated the role of coffee shops as third places in building communities and social capital in Kuwait. A mixed-method approach was used to conduct the study. These methods included qualitative methods such as extended conversations in the form of semi-structured interviews and quantitative methods of using questionnaires distributed to coffee shop staff and visitors. Results indicated that importance attached to providing facilities by coffee shops reflected that the owners perceived these as third places. The facilities attracted customers to coffee houses where interactions took place that helped to build communities. The pattern of visits by customers showed that mostly they come in groups and have meetings and gatherings that facilitated and encouraged interactions. The communities that are being built in the coffee shops are indicative of these being perceived as third places by owners, customers, and staff. This study shows the potential of coffee shops as a major sector of the food industry promising a valuable contribution in transformation and transition to a knowledge-based economy in Kuwait.

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1. Introduction

The concept of the third place is being practiced in Kuwait but is not clearly known to most people. The third place is a location outside of home or work that allows social interaction and emotional support (Saey & Foss, 2016). The public sphere is another term used for the third place. Sohrabi (2015) indicated that the public sphere is a place that is free of power and is equally available to all for dialogues and chats based on common factors.

Social interactivity is another related concept that is used for individuals or groups engaged in improving their actions and point of view about certain issues. In Kuwait, there are many places that can be considered as a third place, for example the Niu collaborative community, the Tribe co-working space, the Kommunity co-working space and the The Hub Gallery are considered galleries for activities and social interaction (Memarovic et al., 2014).

Coffee houses or specialty coffee shops are enormously increasing. Their services vary from one coffee shop to another. In general, coffee bars offer drinks and snacks. Some coffee shops go beyond these services and help build communities and facilitate social interaction between the visitors. They provide a comfortable atmosphere and convenient space that visitors use to do their work and feel as if it was their home.

Coffee houses are deemed as suitable incubators for generating ideas, creating networks and exchanging experience through social interaction. These days, social media also plays a role through advertising and announcing about the activities that take place in the coffee houses.

This study was conducted to review the role of coffee houses as the third place and sought feedback from coffee house owners, customers and staff. The study examined the contribution of coffee shops to community building and social capital focusing on the following research questions:

1. What social and physical features encourage people to gather at coffee shops?
2. What ambiance is desired in coffee shops to become attractive community-gathering places?
3. Do customers perceive that coffee shops in Kuwait exhibit the qualities of third places?
4. What type of social interaction takes place in gatherings at coffee shops?
5. What factors attract customers to feel attached to coffee shops as third places?

What benefits do people perceive from visiting coffee shops as third places?

2. Literature Review

This project focuses on social interaction that takes place through the third place and the communities that are being created.

> *"The third places are defined by contrast to other places in people's lives: homes are first places, work is the second place, and third places are those that offer a s pace outside of work and home for people to escape the stresses associated with th e primary spaces of their lives" (Blank & Van, 2007).*

People might be attached to visit coffee shops as these places offers an appropriate atmosphere, drinks & snacks, and other facilities. This should be adequate to create a good vibe for building a community for social interaction.

The place attachment is can be seen from many aspects; the interplay with the regular customers the affiliation of the coffee shops itself and so on (Qingjiu & Maliki, 2013). Also an attachment for the place would result from the time participating and sharing knowledge and ideas with regular customers. The convenient environment offered by the coffee house may be another attraction as well. Waxman (2006) has explained in his study that the word attachment refers to affect, where the word place refers to the environmental settings to which people are emotionally and culturally attached.

Sometime the regular customers who visit coffee shops for social interactivity would approach it for acquiring some emotional support which is being defined according to Rosenbaum, et al. (2007, p. 44) as the support that is typically provided by a close, intimate attachment. Regular customers might seek social support which is being defined as "social resources that individuals perceive to be available, or that are actually provided to them" (Rosenbaum, 2006, p. 59). There are more characteristics for the third place to be considered while deciding to go for it; the third place is not just a place so interact with people but also to "hang-out" therefor the coffee shop owners need to focus more to renewing the atmosphere to be more convenient with what customers need and seek for. Lots of factors has to be taken into account while designing the coffee shop to be the perfect third place to the customers such as: the layout, flooring, seating, tables, lighting, aroma, acoustic, views, and visual appeal (Waxmam et al., 2007, pp. 431-432). Also another study by Waxman, Huber and McLane had assured the type of customers whether they were daytime customers or evening customers need to be taken in consideration while designing the third place (Waxman et al., 2007).

The reason behind building these communities and creating such environments is to motivate and encourage visitors to extend their time for staying and socializing (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012). One of the special traits of a coffee house is that they are open for all segments of the community regardless of their age and gender, they require no fees for entry and become a sharable place for social interaction.

These places are being considered as a hybrid between home and the work place. The simplicity of the decor and furniture gives the sense of a good atmosphere to perform work or business and provides a feeling of relaxation as if you were at home (Griffiths & Gilly, 2012). Coffee houses have become an essential brick in the society, where a lot of social events are carried out.

The role of coffee houses today go beyond only offering drinks and facilities to customers. They are shared places, socializing places, social event incubators and a lot more than that (Waxman, 2004). There has been shift for the regular usage of coffee houses. Rather than just entering the coffee house for having a drink, these public spaces are now used for socializing, exchanging ideas, work and productivity (Woldoff et al., 2013).

Coffee houses as a third place is a great space for entrepreneurs to plan their businesses. With a perfect combination of a restful place and a sip of a warm coffee, planning for a business goes

smoothly and ideas are generated in a less stressful manner. The flexibility of the third place gives the freedom for visitors to decide how long they are going to stay and how helpful the facilities are to them (Fuzi, 2015).

When entrepreneurs go to coffee houses on a daily basis, it provides them with a great opportunity to share knowledge with other entrepreneurs about their experience in the business field. Regular visitors may participate in conversations with business owners and be interested or enlightened in new ideas.

Area selection could dramatically affect the increase of the right crowd for the right coffee house. For example, selecting certain neighborhoods in Kuwait city helps more in building communities as most working places such as ministries, public authorities, governmental agencies and banking sectors are concentrated in this area. Consequently, employees can finish their work and rather than returning home they would pass by to have a coffee and fulfil other pursuits (Woldoff et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the use of social networking and the presence of social media applications being used through smart phones has also a great effect on reaching third places (Memarovic et al., 2014). Majority of coffee houses have a profile on social media networks. Viewing the coffee house profile on social media networks allow visitors to view the facilities that the coffee shop offers, the atmosphere, the location, the upcoming events and workshops that will take a place at the coffee house.

Smart phones and social networking services such as Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook and Twitter are now used on a daily basis (Memarovic et al., 2014). Coffee house owners can now reach more customers through certain features on social networking applications such as the sponsor feature on Instagram and Snapchat. Instagram allows certain posts to appear for Instagrammers even if they do not follow the coffee house profile. In Snapchat, advertisements appear surprisingly while viewing somebody's Snapchat story. In these advertisements, coffee shop owners may advertise and announce about upcoming events and workshops that will take a place in their coffee house.

Social places are influenced by the socio-cultural and ecological changes (Sohrabi, 2015). Coffee houses are designed according to the climate of the country. In Kuwait outdoor seating is seasonal due to the hot climate lasting most of the year. Coffee shop owners cannot be planning events outdoor all the time, they must put in consideration that a free wide space indoors in the coffee house should be an alternative for creating events in it.

Most of the coffee houses are adopting the foreign culture as observed in two thirds of the local concept for coffee houses. Although, this should not have a big effect on the visitors, as they have the right to choose which coffee house they prefer to go to and which one gives them the feel of home so they can work properly in it. After all it is a matter of personal preference (Waxman, 2004).

At a first glance, coffee houses might be considered as a place for leisure and entertainment (Sohrabi, 2015). With the enormous spread of coffee houses, they have become a place to study, develop businesses and provide many more functions for its visitors. Coffee houses have been unexpectedly involved in the social lives of the consumers, they host all people regardless who they are, whether they are regulars, voluntary, employees, entrepreneurs, any happily gathering

of individuals beyond the restrictions of home and work (Saey & Foss, 2016).

The cultural background might even affect the visitors' choice in selecting which coffee house he or she might choose to go to. According to a study of Saey and Foss (2016), rural users attend coffee houses for social and emotional support, whereas urban users go to coffee houses for more practical reasons.

These coffee houses had a role that goes beyond serving drinks and snacks; they embrace, incubate and hold activities that takes a place at them. This might be a reason why these third places became strongly associated with customers feeling more attached to these places (Alansari, 2016). Taking care of the interior environment and understanding the social and physical attributes would be a key feature for encouraging people to visit coffee houses. Interior décor of coffee houses need to be studied carefully.

Knowing factors such as what colours to be chosen, which accessories to use can reflect on how the comfortability will be perceived so as to attract more customers to stay for a longer time, building an active coffee house community and culture. When customers come regularly to a certain coffee house and stay for a long time to do their business and share ideas with other regulars; this indicated to the increase of the level of satisfaction of the visitors. As stated by Alansari (2016, p. 51), "Designing a third place with special emphasis on fostering socialization and networking is essential for the life of the community".

This paper highlights the important role of coffee shops in Kuwait as third places. No previous studies on this phenomenon in Kuwait could be found in the literature. Results of this study is expected to make contribution in this aspect.

3. Methodology

Fourteen coffee shops were selected for this study based on their ambience, seating and location. All are located in the central business district of Sharq, in Kuwait. A mixed-methods approach was adopted for collecting data. A qualitative approach of extended conversation was employed to collect information from coffee shop owners.

These conversations were in the form of semi-structured interviews conducted at the coffee shop itself similar to what Alansari (2016) did in his study with a short questionnaire which was distributed to twenty-two staff and the visitors of the coffee shop. This provided an opportunity to use a naturalist inquiry method (Glaser, 2007).

Five general questions were formulated to facilitate the conversations. The questions were based on the following topics:

A. *Facilities provided by the coffee shop*
B. *Type of communities that are being created*
C. *Social responsibility*
D. *Pattern of visits and customers activities*
F. *Customers feedback*

Questions based on these topics were sent to the interviewees before the meeting to give them an idea about the focus of the discussion. Some new questions emerged during the discussion that helped to refine and expand the conversations even more.

The conversations therefore helped build a grounded theory as these progressed on to having meetings with more coffee shop owners (Noble & Mitchell, 2016). The Apple iPhone X was used for recording the conversations through a voice recording application named Rev. Voice Record which has a feature of transcribing the recorded conversation. A questionnaire was distributed to staff and coffee shop visitors in order to support the information collected.

4. Findings

4.1. Facilities

Coffee shop owners were asked about the facilities that their coffee shops provided for customers. All coffee shop owners agreed on the importance of providing more facilities. They were convinced that in addition to their standard drinks and snacks services, customers felt more attracted to coffee shops when additional facilities were provided. They stated that guests stay longer and socialize more if the ambiance is attractive. The additional facilities which could be provided by coffee shops to make them more attractive are:

- A cosy and comfortable atmosphere.
- Availability of power plugs near seats for charging laptops and mobile phones.
- Wireless Internet Technology (Wi-Fi). Many customers have this facility already on their mobile devices, but its availability can attract more customers who do not have the facility on their mobile devices.
- Stationary which is considered important by customers who are students.
- Shelves that contains variety of books and magazines for customers and some customers also donate books for the coffee shop book collection.
- Meeting rooms are considered as another facility among coffee shop guests. Some of the coffee shops that have space provide meeting rooms that can be booked by customers to hold meetings, group-study, and other purposes.

During the discussion on facilities available in coffee shops, one of the coffee shop owner's stated, *"we have different facilities in this space, we have the outside L-shape terrace and the front balcony, we only lack in having meeting rooms and we are taking it in consideration on requests of our customers"*.

Coffee shops with small spaces have the facility of reserving the whole coffee house as another coffee shop owner mentioned;

"The whole coffee shop can be reserved for holding meetings and events. Some companies and groups booked the coffee shop for Graish which is the last gathering for having food and drinks

in daytime before Ramadhan starts. The employees come to socialize and interact with their colleagues in a stress-free environment in comparison to their work place. Several companies booked our place being on a convenient location".

Some coffee houses have two floors; the first floor can be booked for events or special occasions.

As expressed by one coffee shop owner, *"the atmosphere on the ground floor differs from the first floor, downstairs is more like a lounge, unlike upstairs which is more like private and quite zone and we also provide books and magazines for people to read"*

My extended conversation with coffee shop owners showed that they appeared to be quite certain about providing attractive ambiance and meeting facilities for their customers. This indicates that they are aware of the importance of coffee shops as third places and their potential as a contributing factor to community building and social capital.

Results of the questionnaires that were distributed to customers are displayed in **Table 1**:

Table 1. Motivation Factor for Visiting Coffee Shops

Motivation Factor	Customer Response (N) (%)
Comfortable meeting place	40
Convenient location	30
Attractive ambiance	30

Note: N=10

Forty percent of customers seek a comfortable meeting place when they want to go to a coffee shop. Customers are also motivated by factors such as the location being convenient for them and also how attractive the ambiance of the coffee shop is. Customers were also asked about their perception of benefits in coffee shops. The findings are shown in **Table 2**:

Table 2. Perceptions of Benefits in Coffee Shops

Perceptions	Customer Response (N) (%)
Coffee shop is suitable for social interaction	50
Coffee shop is conducive for meeting friends/colleagues	30
Coffee shop is a comfortable place to relax	20

Note: N=10

Fifty percent of customers' perception of benefits in coffee shops is its suitability as a place for social interaction. It is also seen as a place for meeting friends and colleagues in a relaxed and comfortable environment. These perceptions of benefits in coffee shops help to create and build community which in return would strengthen the social capitalism through knowledge sharing. Customers were also asked about communicating with the staff in coffee shops. They were asked if they did communicate with staff and the reasons behind it. **Table 3** shows their responses:

Table 3. Communicating with Staff in Coffee Shops

Reason for Communication	Customer Response (N) (%)
Complementing services	30
Social interaction and friendly talk	30
Giving feedback	30
Never attempted to communicate with staff	10

Note: N=10

According to the results, it shows that there are different purposes for customers to interact with the coffee shop staff such as; complementary services, engaging in friendly conversations and giving feedback. Questions were also asked to coffee shop staff members. The staff were asked what requests for additional facilities they received from customers visiting their coffee shop. **Table 4** shows the results:

Table 4. Request for Additional Facilities to Staff by Customers in Coffee Shops

Additional Facility Requested	Staff Response (N) (%)
Mobile Phone/Laptop charger	75
Wi-Fi	8.3
More light	8.3
No requests	8.3

Note: N=12

Seventy-five percent of coffee shop staff indicated that the most requested additional facility by customers visiting their coffee shops was for mobile phone chargers, which also included chargers for laptops as well. Customers also requested for Wi-Fi services and for more light in the coffee shop. Some customers no additional requests for facilities.

4.2. Pattern of visits

Another question was raised about the movement of customers, do they mostly come as individuals or in groups. On observing, customers mostly came in groups and at least in pairs. Although some customers do come as individuals but overall they come in groups. It was also observed what activities customers engaged in while staying in coffee shops for a longer period of time. The activities most customers engaged in were:

- *Gathering and conversing with friends*
- *Group studying*
- *Reading*
- *"Laptoping" - using a laptop for various task at coffee shops*
- *Gaming - if the coffee shop provides participatory games like playing cards or chess*

Customers visiting a coffee shop observe the activities of other customers as well. For example, they might notice that a regular customer always come to the coffee shop and works with his laptop and might be developing a certain kind of business. This allows the customer to perceive that there may be a chance to interact and have a friendly conversation with him regarding his activity and this conversation might develop seriously through cooperation in developing his business or maybe even being a part of it! A real case scenario such as this took place in one of the coffee shops as stated by the owner;

"A lot of cases of social interactivity that has developed to become a business collaboration happened here, especially due to our location next to one of the co-working spaces for businesses. One customer who has a tech-start-up and comes here every da yat 12:00 pm because it's his coffee break and wants to work outside of his office. During his visit, he met another regular customer of my coffee shop who did not have a job. I know both of them and I learnt to know that they got to know each other through our coffee house and based on my observation they have met here several times. Now the regular customer that did not have a job has become the Head of Sales for the regular customer that has the tech-start-up. Stories such as these happen here and what makes me happy is that customers come together and sometimes, they become employees and managers."

Therefore, sharing information with people who have the same interests through friendly conversation has an essential role in building trust and out of this trust social capitalism can exist. Furthermore, people come together even if they don't know each other through participatory games that are provided in coffee shops. One coffee shop mentioned that they have some participatory games such as the Kuwaiti game Dama, cards, Jenga and a lot more.

Another coffee shop owner also mentioned that they provide a pool table or billiards, and another coffee house also offered portable video games. Coffee shop owners think that through such participatory games people might join to make a team. Also, small conversations occurring during the game might encourage more social interaction to happen. **Fig. 1** illustrates a pool.
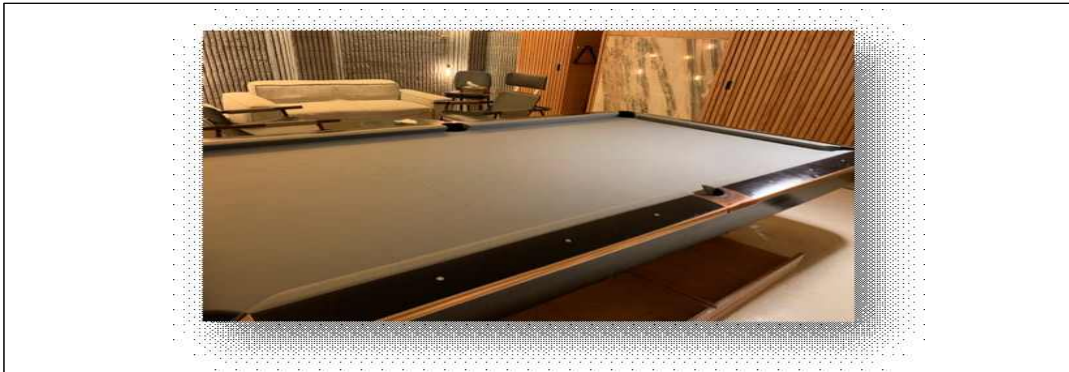
Fig. 1. Participatory Games: Pool

My conversations with coffee house owners showed that customers mostly come in groups and their activities vary from one group to another. The owners I spoke to emphasized that the groups were first formed from the coffee shops themselves. Therefore, the coffee shops had cultivated the formation of groups for some of the visitors and regular customers. A questionnaire was distributed to the customers asking them about their frequency of visits to the coffee shop. **Table 5** shows the results:

Table 5. Frequency of Visit to Coffee Shops by Customers

Frequency of Visit	Customer Response (N) (%)
Customers visit coffee shop on a daily basis	70
Customers visit the coffee shop weekly	20
Customers visit the coffee shop occasionally	10

Note: N=10

Seventy percent of customers visit coffee shops on a daily basis. Twenty percent visit coffee shops weekly and only ten percent visit them occasionally This is an assurance that the coffee shop they visit is considered as a third place to them. Majority of the staff who participated in the study claimed that they noticed a repetitive pattern in the activities and visits of customers coming to the coffee shop. Staff also mentioned that they noticed that most customers come in groups. This is an indication of communities being built at coffee houses and being perceived as third places.

4.3. Building of Communities

Some coffee shops have their own special community. These communities emerge through word of mouth and social media. Some coffee shops have built an image and identity as gathering places. For example, one coffee shop due to its location next to a co-working space and because of their Instagram profile has become known as a hotspot for business meetings and individuals who want to be part of the business community.

Photographs on their Instagram shows people working with their laptops The viewer sees the photograph and perceives that it is a place for business and business developers and the viewer might have the chance to go, interact and exchange ideas and be part of that community. **Figure 2** shows an example of a photograph showing the use of laptop at a coffee shop.

Fig. 2. Using laptops at coffee shops

Other coffee shops have a community of students. One coffee shop owner mentioned: "Most of the customers are students of the College of Engineering, I see them almost daily. They interact with each other regarding solving problems and formulas. They help each other even if they don't know each other from before, they come here to interact and socialize. It became a norm among the students that our coffee shop holds the community of the students of engineering". The owner of another coffee shop mentioned that his coffee shop's community consisted of architects and painters. Another coffee shop owner stated that most of their regular customers were travelers. Credit goes to their partner and co-owner who is a traveler himself. They hold monthly event for travelers from Kuwait and outside Kuwait to come, participate, socialize and get to know each other. In **Figure 3** a picture of such gathering is shown.

Fig. 3. Event at coffee shop

My extended conversations confirmed that coffee shop owners were sure of special communities being created in their coffee houses. They appeared to be proud of their coffee houses being known and identified as popular gathering places – serving the role of third places.

4.4. Social Responsibility

Most coffee shops appeared to be aware of their social responsibility through letting students work behind the coffee bar as a barista. Their responsibility involvesserving coffee and contributing to the society by changing the packaging theme according to an existing event. For example, for the National Day of Kuwait, the paper coffee cups had Kuwait flags on it, also for woman's day they distributed a flower with every order. They also participate in sports events by having a booth to distribute free drinks for the athletes. An owner of a concept place that hosted several coffee shops for pop-up events that lasted for months stated that:

"We hosted some coffee shops for 90 days for a pop-up event, and now we are hosting another one. The social interactivity based on the amount of people who visited was massive, especially with a lot of events that took place like musical nights on certain days of the week. There was also a recent event supporting local exhibitions. Whenever there is an event which is announced on the coffee shop Instagram profile, people will come to socialize and interact. We care about the Corporate Social Responsibility program (CSR program) and try to participate and host in many social events as we can. It is all about empowering and embracing local community and we believe that we are the community".

Another coffee shop owner shared her experience in the aspect of social responsibility by allowing high school students to work as baristas and allocating a percentage of the sales to go towards

the preparation of their graduation ceremony. Social responsibility strengthens the bonds between individual society members as well as the bonds between the coffee house owners and the society members.

4.5. Receiving Feedback

At the end we talked about how to get and receive feedback from the customers in order to enhance, develop and know what the customers want and need. Coffee shop owners assured that customer feedback is very important. They also encourage their staff to interact with customers to get their feedback. When coffee shop owners were present at the coffee shop themselves, they interacted with customers and began conversations with them.

A co-owner of a coffee shop said;

"If you want to go to introduce yourself and ask a question or socialize or whatever, you have to do it in a certain manners and in a certain way and a certain approach because in terms of our work you don't want to scare the customers off and by now we know all the way of how we can talk and approach to customers and it's really hard at the beginning".

Conversations with the coffee shop owners revealed that it isimportant to seek feedback from customers in order to improve and enhance the services of the place. Most of the feedback coffee shop owners got other than the taste of drinks and food are about seating. Seating is frequently discussed in feedback from customers mentioning the need to provide more comfortable seats rather than benches and stools. **Table 6** displays the types of feedback and suggestions coffee shop owners received from their customers:

Table 6. Feedback and Suggestions from Coffee Shop Customers

Feedback or suggestion	Customer Response (N) (%)
More comfortable furniture	40
Better meeting facilities	20
No giving suggestions	20
More open space	10
Add healthy food to the menu	10

Note: N=10

As **Table 6** shows, forty percent of customers stated that they would like to have more comfortable furniture. Customers feel that this would encourage them to extend their visiting time at the coffee house. Customers also suggested the need for better meeting facilities, more open space and presence of healthy foods on the menu. Some customers had no suggestions or feedback to provide. Staff members of the coffee shops were questioned on their interaction with customers. Seventy-five

percent of staff members responded with yes for interacting with customers, and 83% of them had received feedback from customers through their interaction with them.

5. Conclusion

Third places are becoming popular for gatherings, where people meet and feel less stressed from work and feel at home. In Kuwait, coffee shop owners appear to be aware of their spaces playing the role as third places. Most coffee shops provide facilities in addition to serving drinks and snacks. The cosy and comfortable ambience that is provided by coffee shops gives the sense of relaxation to customers.

Results of this study showed that there was a high demand for providing better meeting facilities. This is an indication that the role of coffee shops as third places is widely known and understood in Kuwait. The customer activities differ from one to another. These include friends gathering, accomplishing work, studying and so on. Regular customers visit their favourite coffee shops on daily basis.

They are in a way attached to the coffee shop as they like the facilities and the environment. This shows that appropriate facilities can make coffee shops as attractive third places. Some coffee shops have their own communities. These are known and referred to as students, painters, business developers and so on. These communities became well known and popular by word of mouth and through social media.

Coffee shops are also aware about their participation in social responsibility programs. They participate in holding events, changing the coffee shop theme according to international events such as women's day, and invite students to gain work experience from them. These steps encourage interacting and socializing with the visitors. There is also an awareness about seeking feedback.

Staff at coffee shops sought feedback and received suggestions from customers to enhance facilities and services. Coffee shop owners also encourage the staff to seek feedback from customers. Both staff and owners make efforts to interact with customers and try to socialize and build links with others.

There appears to be an awareness and appreciation of coffee shops as third places in Kuwait. There also appears to be an understanding among coffee shop owners, their staff, and regular visitors of their role to help build communities for encouraging social interaction that has a great potential to build social capital in the country.

6. Acknowledgment

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