

## Critical Thoughts on Kiva Han

By Keith Oh

### **Introduction**

Nardi and O'Day defined an information ecology as a system of people, practices, values, and technologies in a particular environment (2). According to this definition, a coffee shop is an information ecology. Located at the junction of Forbes Avenue and South Craig Street, Kiva Han is your local coffee *joint*. Looking a little rugged from age, it may not have the pristine birch-wood corporate look of Starbucks; however, it offers an assuring comfort like an old sweater. You can laze around a corner of the coffee shop, and sip coffee, read, or people-watch an afternoon away. Stay as long as you want; there is no pressure from the environment for anyone to leave. It is little wonder as to why the humble coffee shop is a popular meeting place for friends. Some friends get together to work on projects; some friends assemble to play Scrabble; some friends hang out to just talk and laugh loudly.

It is important to recognize that the coffee shop is also a member of a bigger ecology. In this bigger ecology, Kiva Han has neighbors like other coffee shops, bars, restaurants, bookshops, etc. Some neighbors are competitors, while others complement its patronage. When Starbucks first entered as a contending player into the ecology, it created a little ripple of anxiety. Other members, especially Kiva Han, had to go through a phase of adapting. A customer might have just bought a sandwich from Subway, or a rare find from Caliban Bookshop. If they want to eat the sandwich or read the book at Kiva Han, they are welcomed to do so. The minimal courtesy expected would be that they buy at

least a cup of coffee. The neighborhood, where Kiva Han resides, is also home to two universities and a museum. When some students stay up late the previous night, a cup of coffee on the next day helps keep them awake during lectures. When some visitors leave the museum, chitchat over coffee is a habitual conclusion to the day. As illustrated, members of these institutions contribute to the coffee shop's patronage significantly.

### **Characterizing Kiva Han**

#### System

Any information ecology has to be marked by strong interrelationships and dependencies among its different parts. In Kiva Han, one can observe a complicated network of such interrelationships and dependencies occurring within the space. The customers rely on the staff to take their orders, and prepare their coffee and sometimes, food as well. The staff relies on the customers' patronage for profits to keep the coffee shop operating. In turn, the coffee shop's suppliers rely on coffee shop's business to keep their sales up. While it is usually the responsibility of the staff to keep the space clean and tidy throughout the day, the customers also help to maintain a basic level of orderliness, by clearing away their trash before they leave. Local artists use Kiva Han as a channel to reach their audiences. They can post advertisements on their upcoming performances, use the coffee shop as a gallery space for their artwork, or hold concerts and recitals in the evenings.

When an element is changed in the system, its effects resonate through the system. When a customer accidentally spills his or her coffee, the staff is suddenly given an additional cleaning task. When a customer is not satisfied with a staff's attitude, the customer is going to form a bad impression on his or her Kiva Han experience. He or she might relate the frustrating experience to friends, influencing other customers of the coffee shop.

When a student band decides to hold their concert for the night at Kiva Han, customers seeking a peaceful space for coffee will have to look elsewhere. On the other hand, friends of the band members, who have never visited the coffee shop, may just visit for their first time, buy a cup of coffee, and show their support.

### Diversity

There are various kinds of people and tools in the ecology of Kiva Han. The suppliers, staff, customers, and local artists are a few of the people. The people are further divided if you look at the different kinds of customers Kiva Han receives. Some of them are retirees killing time at the joint, while some are young college students working on school projects. Perhaps, the only common thing that they share is the addiction to coffee. However, this proposition is easily disproved, as the customers can get beverages other than coffee. The customers help build a network of patronage through word of mouth, telling their friends about the coffee shop. The local artists help draw new clientele to the coffee shop through entertainment. These are some of the roles the people play.

Besides people, Kiva Han also has an array of tools, ranging from non-technological products to complicated machineries. The espresso machine makes the coffee, and is vital in supporting the core competency of the coffee shop. The music provides background entertainment, and is surpassingly helpful in regulating the turnover of customers. The notice board gives information on the happenings in the local scene.

Diversity in an ecology is one of the key properties that distinguish the system from a community, where memberships can be quite homogenous, as described by Nardi and O'Day. In the ecology of Kiva Han, though diverse its members are, they are brought together by the space and the roles they play in the space.

## Coevolution

The ecology of Kiva Han is hardly static. Given the span of a day, the staff changes shifts and different customers come and go. Some stay for a brief spell to just buy a cup of coffee, while others linger around. As the patronage comes partly from the universities around the neighborhood, its customers from the students change over time. Old students graduate and leave, while new students move into the city. Relationships between the staff and customers are built over time, however long it may be. As a patron frequents the coffee shop repeatedly, he or she is acquainted with the staff inevitably. As the staff acquires more practice in making coffee, and more interactions with a particular customer, the staff can remember the customer's preferences, make better coffee, and create a better experience for the customer.

## Keystone Species

It is hard to identify a single essential keystone species in the ecology of Kiva Han. Perhaps it is the wholesalers of the Kiva Han coffee beans who are the most important. The coffee shop will not be Kiva Han if they did not use the specific coffee beans discovered in Istanbul by Sir Edmund Moore. Perhaps the staff of the coffee shop is more important. They have the trained expertise in operating the espresso machine and know the proportion of coffee versus milk in each drink on the menu. Perhaps it is the customers who are the most important. Their patronage keeps the coffee shop operating. The interrelationships and dependencies within the ecology make it hard to identify the key species.

When Nardi and O'Day explained the keystone species, they wrote that the keystone species are often skilled people whose presence is necessary to support the effective use

of new technologies. Given such a scenario, the staff is definitely the most important species as they are the ones who are going to facilitate and implement the changes.

### **Evolving the ecology of Kiva Han**

In Metropolis, Fritz Lang said, “The mediator between the brain and hand must be the heart.” What does the heart tell you about the core values of Kiva Han? From the perspective of a customer and an observer, my heart tells me that the members in the ecology are proud of their individuality and the uniqueness of the environment that they shared. The aim of the coffee shop is not to provide an exquisitely polished experience, but rather to make everyone – staff, customers, and local artists – feel at home. You can see this in their cups; they are just the kind of cups you normally have at home, made up from different sets that survive the careless handling over the years. The coffee shop has a political message to its members. It wants them to be more aware and involved in the local scene. It may start from going to the concerts by local artists, and then move on to supporting and actively helping out in grassroots organizations. The coffee shop shows its support for human rights, environmental conservation, etc. openly.

According to Nardi and O’Day, we can commit folly by not appreciating the motivations behind technologies (or the lack of it) and assuming that technologies should remain the way they are just because they have always been (3). Why does the coffee taste inconsistent sometimes? Why does Kiva Han not have computer terminals around the coffee shop to let us check our emails? We have to ask the right questions, in order to avoid taking the current situation for granted. After my observations and strategic questioning, I have a few suggestions to improve the information ecology, of which I am also a member.

## **Improving the technologies (or not)**

### Coffee and cups

Unless you specifically request otherwise, coffee is usually served in paper cups that look the same. Such a practice runs a risk of mix up, especially during busy hours, where people are mostly dropping by the coffee shop to get coffee on their way to school and work. Such accidents can be avoided if each cup is personalized to each customer at the time of order, simply by scribbling the customer's name on the cup. When the drink is made, the staff can call out to the customer by name, which makes the interaction feel more personal. One of the possible obstacles to such a change might be the customers' concern for privacy, as they might not want their names to be called out in public.

The wide use of paper cups within the coffee shop is against environmental conservation, one of the values the coffee shop upholds. Perhaps, they are worried that glass mugs break easily, or that washing the glass mugs is an additional burden for the staff. More glass mugs should be used. The coffee shop can ask customers to donate unwanted mugs from home. An extra dishwasher can be used to handle the increased amount of washing. Reducing the use of paper cups conforms to its values.

### Entertainment

Currently, the coffee shop only has music as background entertainment. If the customers were to be encouraged to create their own *playlist* at home and bring in a CD, they can share their music with other customers. This can help the members of the coffee shop express their individuality through their music tastes.

What if a television or a television room were to be added to the space? Having a television set around may help to create a more homely environment and spark new conversations. However, after interviewing some fellow Kiva Han members, the response was bad. They felt that the imageries and sound would be too intrusive. Instead of facilitating interactions, it might hinder. People want to talk; they do not want to watch television.

What if a game were to be added to the space? FishPong (4) is a game that allows coffee shop customers to interact with one another. Even if the customers do not want to actively participate in the game, the soothing imageries of fish swimming on the table would still provide an active and engaged ambience. Such a change to the coffee shop's environment may be extreme, but it can be tested out in a small corner of the coffee shop first. The customers welcome novelty, as seen in the way they appreciate the local artists showing their artwork around the place. So far, the "gallery space" has not hosted any digital mediums yet, so the game can be introduced, along with other interactive installation art.

### Notice board

As mentioned earlier, the notice board allows the local artists to post advertisements on the upcoming concerts and provides patrons with information on the local scene in Pittsburgh. On first sight, a technologist may be appalled by the messiness of the board. There is no board actually. Flyers are taped onto the walls in one corner of the coffee shop. Some flyers are flapping loose, while others are screaming that they are outdated. The staff has to check periodically and tear down the outdated flyers to reduce the clutter. One may be quick to suggest an "online messy board" (1), where local artists can post

“online advertisements” that expire automatically. All Kiva Han needs is a backend server and an electronic display. That will certainly clean up the space greatly.

However, such a technological “upgrade” will remove the need to go around and physically peddle their performance to the staff and customers. The interaction between the artists and the audiences are forsaken; the persuasion power by word of mouth is reduced. What used to feel like an exclusive peak into the local scene now feels like public knowledge as anyone *outside* can assess the online messy board. If you look carefully at the disarray of posters on the walls, though haphazard, it actually embodies a lot of the ecology’s edgy character. The notice board should be allowed to remain. Perhaps, the patrons can be encouraged to help the staff keep a lookout on expired posters.

## **Conclusion**

By comparing Kiva Han as an information ecology and asking ourselves the strategic questions, a lot of insights are gained. These insights help us to pause and truly appreciate the environment we operate in on a daily basis. Through a better understanding of the environment, the HCI practitioner can then make more meaningful recommendations regarding how technology can be employed to increase the “health points” of the ecology.

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