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Original Research Article

The Use of Mobile Phone and the Internet in Obtaining Local News in GCC Regions: University Students' Perspectives

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This article reports a study of mobile phone and Internet use by young Arabs in the GCC region. It examines how GCC university students obtain local news and information about their communities using mobile devices. With the expansion of mobile phone penetration in the region, some evidence has emerged that the mobile phone is being used as a local news reception device. New research reported here attempts a systematic analysis of this phenomenon. A sample of 1221 media and communication students from across the GCC region completed a survey questionnaire, reporting how they access news and information. The study found that most respondents were active mobile phone users and also enjoyed keeping up with news about their communities. Mobile phones catered for a range of functions and were used, in particular, as a platform for accessing local news and receiving local news alerts. Respondents indicated that they engaged in other news-related activities when they were online, including posting, contributing, and commenting on news. These findings are discussed in relation to the growing impact of mobile phones in the Arab world and the emergence of mobile phone usage as a platform in young people's lives.

Keywords: Mobile devices, Local news, Young arabs, Social media, GCC region, News consumption, Internet.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile phones are widely used across the Arab world, and young adults have emerged as among the most enthusiastic adopters of this technology (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu, & Sey, 2007; Salem, Mourtade, & Alshaer, 2014; Wei, 2008). As in other parts of the world, mobile phones are used in the region for a wide range of communications, information and entertainment purposes (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Mohsen, 2013; Verclas & Mechael, 2008). The latest high-tech mobile phones not only transmit voice communications but also offer interactive interface, voice, text, video, music and graphics functions. Smartphones using 3G, 4G and/or Wi-Fi technology are equipped with a microphone, camera, and high-speed Internet connection and have triggered high demand (Ozcan & Kocak, 2003; Wei, 2008). It has been observed that young Arabs regularly use their mobile phones to seek various kinds of information (Ghonim, 2012; Miliany, 2013). There is further evidence that mobile phones are also changing the consumption of local news in the Arab world (Ghannam, 2011; Ghonim, 2012).

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Despite its near universal use as a crucial part of everyday life, there remains much to be learned about how the mobile phone fits into people's lives (Ghannam, 2011; Madianou & Miller, 2012). Mobile phones have been found to bring a host of social and economic benefits to people's lives, especially in the developing world (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Tully, 2003). The mobile phone has emerged as a principal interface for engaging with the Internet in countries that previously lacked fully developed wired telecommunication networks (Jagun, Heeks, & Whalley, 2008). It is not surprising, then, that mobile phones have been rapidly adopted in the Arab world not only for their voice telephony functionality but also to accelerate the uptake of the Internet and its many information and transactional applications.

This paper aims to discover how GCC university students obtain local news and information about their communities using their mobile devices and online services. It focuses on reported use of new technologies both in a broad sense and in relation to local news consumption. In so doing, it aims to answer questions about emerging patterns of use of news sources in these countries, which have arisen following the rapid growth in the use of mobile devices as a new platform in the Arab world (Dennis, Martin, & Wood, 2013; Ghannam, 2012; Ghonim, 2012). This paper offers a brief contribution to the analysis of mobile ~~phones~~ phone usage in the GCC region. This study is not based on a theoretical approach, which of course it needs to, rather than calling for a new theoretical module to examine the matter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The seeds of mobile telephony were sown in the mid-20th century with the development of local Citizens Band radio communications in the United States. Initially the technology was used only by the military, emergency services and enthusiasts (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). During the 1970s and 1980s these closed communications systems were opened up with early mobile phone experiments in countries such as Japan and the US, and the technology was regarded mainly as a business tool (Aoki & Downes, 2003). The early devices were large and cumbersome and had to be carried around in a briefcase. As computer technology advanced, the technology both reduced in size and became more powerful and versatile. By the final decade of the 20th century, the mobile phone emerged as a truly mass applications technology. Later, mobile phone networks quickly spread to mass user markets in developed countries and then also to developing nations where they enabled general populations to become linked to telecommunications networks for the first time (Al-Qaisi, 2000; Castells et al., 2007).

Today, mobile phones represent the most prevalent piece of information and communication technology developing in the world, according to the report provided by Portio Research (2013). The report estimated that 1.2 billion people were using mobile applications at the end of 2012, with predictions that this figure would grow by 29.8% each year to reach 4.4 billion users by the end of 2017. In the Arab regions, 410 million users subscribed to mobile phones, with a coverage of 109.9% per 100 people. In 2014, the ITU (2014) reported that access to information and communication technologies continues to grow at high speed and, more importantly, the gap separating the developing and the underdeveloped countries has decreased in terms of mobile use.

However, initial research into the use of early mobile phones focused on the use of the technology as an interpersonal communications device and how it became integrated into people's domestic lives (Dimmick, Sikand, & Patterson, 1994; Haddon, 2004; LaRose, 2001; Silverstone & Hirsch, 1992). Later, as the technology evolved and began to offer a much wider range of functions, including the ability to interface with the Internet (Ozcan & Kocak, 2003; Ruggiero, 2000; Salem et al., 2014), research questions broadened to include interest in the use of the mobile phone as an organizational hub in people's lives, a factor that emerges during childhood (Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2008; Livingstone, Haddon, Gorzig, & Olafsson, 2011; Madden, Lenhart, Duggan, Cortesi, & Gasser, 2013). For example, studies have examined the opportunity for Internet access via mobile devices, which greatly enhances the gratification sought from mobiles by transforming the traditional limits of one-to-one communication afforded by the telephone (Blinkoff, 2001; Ibahrine, 2008; LaRose, 2001; Ozcan & Kocak, 2003). Livingstone et al. (2011) found that the most common location of Internet use by children aged 9 to 16 was the home, followed by school. They found that 33% accessed the Internet via their mobile phones. Thus, the increase in the practice of accessing the Internet through mobile phones is seen as the main recent change, along with the early age at which usage now begins.

From a theoretical perspective, media functionalists argue that the media (e.g., mobile devices) serve a variety of needs such as communication, cohesion, social control, and cultural continuity in a society (Wright, 1986). However, the media also fulfil the audience's needs for surveillance, personal guidance, personal relationships, and diversion (Blumler, 1979; Swanson, 1987). Other studies (e.g., Fortunati, 2001; Gant & Kiesler, 2001) have examined how mobiles have come to define personal identity, redefined the distinction between the individual's private and public lives (Bond, 2010), and restructured users' concept of time by enabling social arrangements to be changed on the move (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2007). For instance, Roos (1993) found that Finnish users identified work-related and social uses as their main reasons for using mobile phones. Blinkoff (2001) and Ling (2000) found that social networking and peers, family, and security were the motivation for young Norwegian adults to use mobile phones. This emerges as evidence of the increasing access to and use of the Internet from different mobile devices (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Mobile Phones and Media Reception

In the early days, mobile phones were used for making calls and receiving messages before quickly emerging as a multimedia platform for communicating and receiving news, information and entertainment; they have recently been used for viewing TV programmes, listening to radio, reading the press, and linking to social media (Ghannam, 2011). From a media perspective, mobile devices are already being used by Pan-Arab news suppliers (e.g., Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya TV) to reach their wide audiences, especially young adults (Cook, 2013; Yuan & Kosicki, 2003). They have engaged viewers, listeners, and readers, who are able to follow and contribute content through mobile devices, and they are increasingly able to make content available for mobile devices (Deloitte, 2013). For example, Al Jazeera's coverage and accessibility has increased since 2006 when its mobile service was launched. It enables its consumers to subscribe to SMS-based news updates and features a platform for interactive engagement with the channel (Ghannam, 2011; Verclas & Mechael, 2008). Users have established the mobile as a key way of keeping informed about the news. The same is true for TV programmes

such as *Super Star,* with viewers using their mobile phones to vote for their favourite characters (Kraidy, 2006). In 2005, for example, the Lebanese channel LBC broadcast the *Star Academy* programme, an Arab talent show. During its transmission, young Arab viewers voted by sending more than 15 million SMSs (The Economist, 2005). This shows the popularity of using SMS for entertainment rather than as a voice telephone service and for emails (Ghannam, 2011; Ibahrine, 2008).

Furthermore, in countries in which the main news media are tightly controlled by the government, there is an additional incentive for people to go online though their mobile devices for their news if they believe they can access more uncensored information in that setting. Evidence has emerged that young adults are increasingly expressing their individuality through their ownership of mobile phones, personal computers and iPods, and by going online. These devices allow them to express their own identity and gradually move away from the control of their parents (Correa, Hinsley, & de Zuniga, 2010; Lin & Lu, 2011; Powell, 2009) or their governments (Dennis et al., 2013; Ghannam, 2012). Consequently, the mobile devices are an environment in which users can gain access to multimedia content and engage in interpersonal transactions. Obtaining news, information and entertainment are just some of the activities that can be pursued using this environment. The use of social media sites is also a subcomponent of mobile phone user behaviour and has multiple purposes including gaining access to different news (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009).

Mobile Phone Use in the Arab World

In the early 1990s, the Arab people began to use mobile services, but only to communicate with one another (phone calls). The earliest mobile phone subscriptions began in the region in 1987, in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia, followed by Mauritius and Algeria in 1990 (Castells et al., 2007). In those days, the first and second mobile phone generations were very expensive pieces of technology (Ghannam, 2011; Ibahrine, 2008). Businesses, elites and rich people, however, were likely to have a greater diffusion of mobile communication devices (Castells et al., 2007). Moreover, in most Arab countries, mobile services were run and controlled by government bodies or allied companies that operated, monitored and provided the services to the public before mobile services were privatized and become more affordable to the public (Ghannam, 2011).

Recently, the Arab world has witnessed a rapid diffusion of mobile phone usage, especially among the young Arabs ~~young~~ (Ghannam, 2011; Ibahrine, 2008; Salem et al., 2014). The mobile ownership percentage rates range from 3% (Sudan) to 85% (UAE). Most mobile subscribers (80%) use prepaid phones rather than fixed-term contracts (see e.g., Castells et al., 2007, for similar accounts). This is because prepaid services are more likely to be used by those with lower incomes and of lower educational levels (Ghannam, 2011; ITU, 2014; Livingstone et al., 2011), and also by those who prefer to communicate via the sending and receiving of SMSs (Ozcan & Kocak, 2003). Mobile phones are also used in places where landlines are not available (Ghannam, 2011). Thus, young adults use mobiles just to receive calls from their parents (ITU, 2014; Wei, 2008).

Africa has experienced the highest mobile phone growth rate globally (Ghannam, 2011; ITU, 2014). In terms of business, for example, mobile phones have a positive impact, increasing business profits in North Africa (BBC, 2005), and they have become a vital tool for businesses in the region (Ghannam, 2011; ITU, 2014). They also help to reduce travel costs (Jagun et al., 2008). In many Arab regions, mobiles have been increasingly adopted as a social media platform and have played a role, for example, in the recent Arab uprisings by mobilizing mass protests and giving voice to demands that have been heard globally (Ghannam, 2011, 2012). Culturally, the mobile phone has become something of a status symbol for many Arabs. Many young Arabs show off with their mobile devices, and their social status is enhanced by the unique ringtones they use and the quality of the messages they store on their devices. Young Arabs use mobile phones to sustain and enhance their communications and keep in touch with their social networks (Ghannam, 2011; Salem et al., 2014).

Arab people, like many others, use mobile phones not only for personal communication but also as multifunctional personal devices. Features such as accessing the Internet, cameras, videos and MP3 players via mobiles have become very popular, particularly among young Arab adults. In 2014, around 20% of Arab users gain access to the Internet via their mobile devices (Salem et al., 2014). This has risen by 8% since 2013, and 42% of them have smartphones. Arab Advisory Group (2005) also found that young Arabs use SMS for receiving notifications, chatting, voting in contests or participating in TV entertainment show polls (Kraidy, 2006). Mobile phones have become part of people's social lives (Ghannam, 2011; Ibahrine, 2008).

Mobiles have received great attention in the Arab world because this technology aids social and economic developments in the Arab regions (Dennis et al., 2013; Ghannam, 2011). Besides, mobile phones can reach anywhere in the Arab world without the need for an expensive landline infrastructure (Jagun et al., 2008). Mobile phones have been seen as unique in creating opportunities for sending and receiving information anywhere and everywhere that is covered by the network (Jagun et al., 2008; Zuehlke, 2012). To use a mobile phone, generally speaking, one does not require a high level of education and literacy as one might need with other technologies such as computers, although mobile phones are most popular among young/teenage people (Bond, 2010; Madden et al., 2013; Salem et al., 2014). This makes mobiles accessible to a vast number of young people as well as adults (Kyem & LeMaire, 2006). In the mid-2000s, WiMax and Wi-Fi carriers offered a variety of mobile content services, including news, weather, sports scores, stock updates, games, music, email, and the Internet. Free Wi-Fi has been seen as a great success in many Arab regions, where users can easily gain access to news, information and entertainment in public areas such as universities, hospitals, cafés and restaurants (Castells et al., 2007; Ghannam, 2011).

Against this background, the current research addressed a number of questions concerning the use and importance of local news among well-educated news consumers in the Middle East. The key questions examined here were as follows:

RQ1: Are young Arab mobile phone users interested in news information?

RQ2: How do young mobile phone users use and access local news and information?

RQ3: How do young mobile phone users describe their Internet access and speed?

RQ4: Do young mobile phone users consume their local news?

RQ5: Are there any correlations between mobile phone use and online activities?

RQ6: Do young mobile phone users engage interactively with news online?

METHOD

Sample

A self-completion questionnaire survey was carried out in January 2014 with a random sample of 1221 students from universities in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman, with either the first author or an assistant as moderator. The sample comprised 331 respondents from Bahrain University, 141 from Kuwait University, 274 from the Universities of Jazan and Dammam (Saudi Arabia), 190 from Ajman University (UAE), and 285 from Muscat University (Oman). Of 1221 responses, 12 were cancelled because a few respondents said they did not possess a mobile phone; therefore, these were dropped, resulting in the sample for analysis consisting only of mobile phone users. This survey mainly targeted media and communication departments in these universities to collect the data. In each department, a random sample was selected from different year levels. Students from each year level were asked to fill in the survey questionnaire voluntarily.

Questionnaire

A pre-structured questionnaire included questions about local news consumption habits, general news interests, local news issues, opinions about place of residence, online activities, mobile phone and computer use, and personal details. This paper will present findings only for reported mobile phone and Internet usage-linked local news habits. Survey questions were obtained with permission from the Pew Research Center and some rewording was deployed, where relevant, to reflect local news market circumstances.

The local news consumption questions asked respondents about the frequency with which they kept up with news in general. They were also asked about their mobile ownership, use and online access. Further questions asked about how respondents gained Internet access at home and how they described the Internet speed in their place or region.

A second set of questions asked respondents about mobile local news consumption. Respondents were asked about their use of mobile phones and laptops to seek local news information, whether they have ever received SMSs or emails regarding their local community news, and whether they used their mobiles to check news and information about their local communities and sports activities.

A third set of questions asked respondents to indicate their regular online activities and whether they have ever engaged in any of the following activities online: Contributing to an online discussion or message board about their local community; customising their homepage to include their favourite local information or news sources or issues; emailing a link to a local news story or local news video to someone they know; contributing their own article, opinion piece, picture or video about their local community to an online news site; commenting on a local news story or local blog they read online; and posting news or information about their local community on a social networking site such as Facebook or Twitter. These activities were measured on a three-point scale: 'yes', 'no', and 'don't know'.

A further set of questions asked about local community interest and engagement. Finally, respondents were invited to indicate details of their gender, family monthly income, and living place. In all, 58.1% of the final sample was female and 41.9% was male. 80.5% of the sample lived in families earning more than $1001 a month, 17.4% lived in middle-income families earning from $501 to $1000 a month, while only 2% lived in families earning less than $500 a month. With regard to the descriptions of place of residence, 70% of respondents described their community as a large city, while around 16.7% said they lived in a small city or town, or a suburb near a large city (11.5%). Only 2.2% said they lived in a rural area.

RESULTS

Basic descriptive results for mobile phone uses, Internet access and mobile local news consumption habits are presented below and are supplemented by statistical tests designed to reveal significant differences in mobile local news consumption profiles of respondents from different GGC nations and between specific demographic groups.

General News Interest

Local news information can now be received via a number of different platforms in the Arab world. Within the past decade, television and the Internet have been the news sources most frequently used by young people in both the Western and Arab worlds (Barakat, 2011; Elareshi & Gunter, 2010).

In this survey (RQ1), around half of all mobile users (52%) said they enjoyed keeping up with the news in general; 31% said 'some', 16% 'not much', and only 1.3% 'don't follow'. Male users (84%) were more likely than females (29%) to say that they enjoyed keeping up with the news 'a lot'. While 43% of female users said they had 'some' interest, only 14.5% of males said as much (X^2=666.40, df=4, p<0.000).

By country, around three fifths of Bahraini (63.7%) and KSA (61.3%) mobile users said they enjoyed keeping up with the news 'a lot', compared with 47% of Omani, 46% of UAE and only 25% of Kuwaiti users. Less than a quarter (23% Oman, 18% Kuwait, 17% UAE, 14% KSA, 10% Bahrain) said they did not much enjoy doing so (X^2=114.04, df=12, p<0.000). Other studies in the Arab world have confirmed that young Arab adults are keen on keeping up with news and information (Elareshi & Gunter, 2010; Ghannam, 2012).

Local, National and International News Interest

When asked about local news, around three fifths (60.1%) of all users indicated that they followed local news closely when something important was happening, while 40% of them did so most of the time, or when something important was happening. Male users (83.2%) were more likely than females (43.4%) to follow local news closely only when something important was happening, while females (56.3%) were more likely than males (16.8%) to follow local news closely most of the time (X^2=195.61, df=2, p<0.000).

By country, Bahraini users (81.7%) were more interested in following local news closely only when something important was happening, compared with 59% of KSA, 56% of Omani, 46.1% of Kuwaiti and 42.6% of UAE users. However, following local news most of the time, regardless of whether something important was happening, was reported by more UAE (57.4%) and Kuwaiti (54%) users than others (Omanis 44.2%, KSA 40.5% and Bahrainis 18.3%) (X^2=107.66, df=8, p<0.000).

Regarding national news, more than four fifths (85.3%) of males reported following national news closely only when something important was happening, compared with 35.2% of females. However, 62.5% of females followed national news closely most of the time regardless of whether something important was happening, compared with only 15% of males (X^2=302.8, df=2, p<0.000). Kuwaiti users (92.2%) were most likely to follow national news closely only when something important was happening, compared with the others (Bahrainis 55%, Omanis 52.3%, KSA 50.4% and UAE 47%). Following news closely most of the time, regardless of whether or not something important was happening was claimed by around half of respondents across all countries (53% UAE, 50% KSA, 48% Omanis, 41% Bahrainis). The lowest level of national news interest was found in Kuwait (7.8%) (X^2=119.04, df=8, p<0.000).

Around half of all users (52%) indicated that they followed international news closely regardless of what was happening (76% Kuwaitis, 62.4% Bahrainis, 49% UAE, 40% KSA and Omanis) (X^2=79.6, df=4, p<0.000). More males (80.6%) than females (30.2%) followed international news closely when something important was happening, while 70% of females were more likely to follow international news closely most of the time, regardless of whether or not something important was happening, compared with only 19.4% of males (X^2=300.4, df=1, p<0.000).

Mobile Phone Usage

In these oil-rich countries, it is not surprising that all the users were the most technologically *plugged in* (RQ2). The results are summarized in Table 1. Respondents were most likely to have a smartphone (99%) such as a BlackBerry, iPhone or cellphone, a modern-technology computer such as a laptop or tablet computer (86.6%), and a touch PC (84.8%). Male users (98.4%) were more likely than females (78%) to have laptops or tablet computers (X^2 = 106.42, df=1, p< 0.000) and were also more likely to have a touch PC (90.2% vs. 81% respectively) (X^2 = 19.69, df=1, p< 0.000).

By country, no significant differences were found among users who had smartphones, while significant differences emerged among those with laptops or tablet computers and Touch PCs. Omani users (54%) fell behind the others in terms of laptop or tablet computer ownership (Kuwaitis 100%, Bahrainis 98.5%, UAE 97.4%, KSA 92%), (X^2=353.32, df=4, p<0.000). Omani users (73.4%) also fell behind Kuwaitis (99.3%), UAE (98.4%) and Bahrainis (90.3%) but were slightly ahead of KSA users (73.3%) in terms of high-tech gadget ownership (X^2=115.38, df=4, p<0.000).

With regard to new mobile technology, users indicated that they used their cellphones or devices to make calls and also obtained news and information about their communities. Around three quarters of respondents (77%) used cellphones for other things (e.g., emails). Significantly, female users (85%) were more likely than males (74%) to use their phone devices for other things (X^2=20.94, df=1, p< 0.000).

By country, most of the users indicated that they used their mobile devices for other things (in decreasing order, Bahrainis 98.5%, UAE 94%, KSA 87.6%, Kuwaitis 84%, Omanis 26%). Omani users (74%) were the only participants to report that they used their mobile devices mainly for making calls (X^2=553.74, df=4, p<0.000).

When asked about their use of the Internet to search for and view material and send or receive emails, the results indicated that all users (99%) reported similar high levels of interest in Internet use in general. Moreover, similarly high percentages of both male and female users in the five countries reported using the Internet.

The majority of users (53%) reported that they accessed the Internet via their mobile devices most of the time. Less than a fifth of all users (19%) accessed the Internet at home, university (16%) or café net (12%). While female users (65.6%) were more likely than males (37%) to access the Internet via their mobile phones at home (30% vs. 13% respectively), male users (16.4%) were slightly more likely than females (15.5%) to do so at university and café net (17.6% vs. 3.7% respectively) (X^2=371.53, df=3, p<0.000)

By country, UAE users (94%) were more likely than the others (Kuwaitis 84.4%, Bahrainis 63%, Omanis 36%, KSA 17%) to access the Internet via mobile phones. Omani users (32%) were more likely to access the Internet at home than were the others (Bahrainis 27%, KSA 10.2%, Kuwaitis 8.5%, UAE 5%), and also at universities (31.2%) compared with the others (KSA 23.4%, Bahrainis 9%, Kuwaitis 6.4%, UAE 1.6%) (X^2=773.38, df=12, p<0.000).

When asked how they accessed the Internet at home (RQ3), 72% of all users indicated they did so via their mobile devices, followed by 25.1% via dial-up landline and only 2.9% via wireless connection (Table 2). Female users (90%) were more likely than males (47.2%) to access the Internet at home through mobile devices. Females (4%) were also more likely than males (1.6%) to use wireless connection, while males (51.3%) were more likely than females to use a dial-up landline system (X^2=319.05, df=2, p<0.000).

By country, Kuwaiti (96.5%) and UAE (93.2%) users were the most likely to use their mobile devices at home to access the Internet (KSA 71%, Bahrainis and Omanis both 60.4%). Dial-up landlines were used more by Bahraini users (38.7%) than the others (Omanis 35.4%, KSA 22.3%, UAE 6.3%, and Kuwaitis 3.5%). Wireless systems received less usage by most of the users (X^2=154.79, df=8, p<0.000).

Most of the users described their Internet connection as high-speed (85.3%). Male users (93.3%) were more likely than females (79.6%) to have high-speed Internet access (X^2=45.47, df=3, p<0.000). UAE (98.9%), Kuwaiti (96.5%) and Bahraini (90.9%) users were more likely to have high-speed access to the Internet compared with Omani (76.8%) and KSA users (72.3%) (X^2=111.72, df=12, p<0.000).

Mobile Local News Consumption

The surveyed respondents were also asked about their use of local news alerts (RQ4). They indicated that they received news alerts about their local community via their mobile devices, texts or emails (80%), while 20% said 'no'. Female users (84.8%) were more targeted than males (74%) to receive news alerts about their local community through their mobile devices (X^2=21.94, df=1, p<0.000). More than nine in ten Bahraini (98.5%), UAE (94.2%) and Omani (94%) users received news alerts about their local community, compared with 65% of KSA and 21% of Kuwaiti users (X^2=484.52, df=4, p<0.000). This is a clear indication that people in the GCC region are in touch with their local communities and are using new technologies to do so.

Use of mobile devices to gather news or information online about local communities, local sports scores or local sports updates and the like were very common among most of the users. Overall, male users (98.4%) were more likely than females (89.7%) to use a cellphone or tablet computer to obtain local news or information online (X^2=36.45, df=1, p<0.000) and were most likely to check local sports scores or

Table 1. Mobile Ownership, Use and Online Access

Mobile Ownership	**N**	**%**
Smartphone (e.g., BlackBerry, iPhone, cellphone)	1209	99.0
Modern technology (e.g., laptop, tablet computer)	1057	86.6
Touch PC	1036	84.8
Mobile Use		
Use for other things (e.g., emails)	937	76.7
Only use to make calls	284	23.3
Online Access		
Phones	654	53.0
Home	229	19.0
University	194	16.0
Café net	144	12.0

Table 2. Reported Home Internet and Speed Access

Internet Access	**N**	**%**
Mobile phone	879	72.0
Dial-up landline	307	25.1
Wireless	35	2.9
Internet Speed		
High speed	1042	85.3
Good speed	141	11.5
Moderate	30	2.5
Slow	8	0.7

Table 3. Correlations between Mobile Phone Use and Online Activities

Post news or information about your community on social media	.584**
Go online for information or news about your local community	.374**
Contribute to an online discussion or topics about your local community	.305**
Use of Facebook	.279**
Use of Twitter	.272**

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Pearson *r* Correlation. All *Ps<0.01* (N=1209)

Table 4. Reported Online News-Related Activities

	N	**%**
Post news or info about your community (e.g., Twitter)	1192	97.6
Contribute to an online discussion or topics about your local community	1103	90.3
Email a link to a local news story/video to someone you know	950	77.8
Comment on a local news story or local blog you read online	820	67.2
Customize your homepage to include your favourite local info	801	65.6
Contribute your own article/opinion/picture about your local community	769	63.0
Post news or info about your community (e.g., Facebook)	756	61.9

get local sports updates (9.6% vs. 71.4% respectively) (X^2=169.14, df=1, p<0.000).

By country, a great majority of users in all these countries (UAE 96.3%, Bahrain 95.5%, KSA 94.9%, Kuwait 93.6%, Oman 87.4%) used their mobile devices to search for information and news about their local communities (X^2=22.63, df=4, p<0.000). As for checking local sports scores or getting local sports updates, Bahraini users (62.5%) were less likely to do so than the others (Kuwaitis 98.6%, KSA 97.4%, UAE 90%, Omanis 81.4%) (X^2=171.76, df=4, p<0.000).

Relationships between Mobile Phone Use and Online Activities

Mobile technology is emerging as an important online interface technology. As reported earlier, the majority of users indicated that they used their mobile devices to access the Internet and receive local news alerts. It was found, as presented previously, that respondents with more devices tend to enjoy following the news more.

Here, the Pearson *r* correlations were computed to explore the relationships between using a mobile phone and various

online activities (RQ5). The results are summarized in Table 3. Using a mobile phone was positively associated with posting news or information about the local community via social media sites (*r*=.58), going online for information about the local community (*r*=.37), contributing to an online discussion or topics about the local community (*r*=.30), and using Facebook (*r*=.28) and Twitter (*r*=.27). These correlations indicate that, regardless of the device used, users tend to carry out different activities with their mobile phones and, more importantly, receive news from online sources via their mobiles.

Local Community Interest and Engagement

Respondents were also asked to indicate their regular online activities and whether they went online to engage in certain activities (RQ6). Respondents stated that they went online sometimes, for example for social media activities such as Twitter (39%), emails (83.2%), and Facebook (80.8%). MySpace (28.3%), Google Maps (21.4%) and LinkedIn (14.7%) were less frequently utilized by the respondents.

There were several significant differences regarding online activities. Male users (99.6%) were more likely than females (88.2%) to say that they tweeted (X^2=59.40, df=2, p<0.000), emailed (94.7% vs. 74.9% respectively; X^2=97.22, df=2, p<0.000), Facebooked (98.4% vs. 68.2% respectively; X^2=175.76, df=2, p<0.000), used MySpace (62.2% vs. 3.8% respectively; X^2=578.53, df=2, p<0.000), used LinkedIn (34.4% vs. 0.6% respectively; X^2=420.62, df=2, p<0.000), and searched on Google Maps (47% vs. 3.0% respectively; X^2=501.67, df=2, p<0.000).

The majority of users reported (Table 4) that they engaged in several online activities, such as posting news or information about their local community on Twitter (98%), contributing to online discussions or topics about their local community (90%), emailing local stories to others (78%), commenting on a local news story they had read online (67%), customizing their homepage to include their favourite local information (66%), contributing their own articles and opinions about their local community (63%), and posting news about their community on Facebook (62%).

Respondents distinguished between the use of Twitter and Facebook. This result, in particular, confirmed several recent studies undertaken in the Arab world indicating that Twitter is a more popular platform in GCC countries than Facebook (Ghannam, 2012; Ghonim, 2012; Salem & Mourtade, 2012; Simsim, 2011).

On most of the individual items measured here, male users were more likely to say they engaged in these activities than were females. Males were slightly more likely than females to post news about their local community on Twitter (99% vs. 96% respectively; X^2=12.12, df=1, p<0.000), contribute to an online discussion (99% vs. 84% respectively; X^2=72.56, df=1, p<0.000), email a local news story to others (96% vs. 64% respectively; X^2=196.51, df=1, p<0.000), customize their homepage to include their favourite local news (96% vs. 44% respectively; X^2=352.66, df=1, p<0.000), contribute their own articles and opinions (96% vs. 39% respectively; X^2=413.10, df=1, p<0.000), post news about their community on Facebook (96% vs. 38% respectively; X^2=420.30, df=1, p<0.000), and comment on a local news stories (74% vs. 62% respectively; X^2=19.58, df=1, p<0.000).

By country, Bahraini users were more likely than the others to post news about their community on Twitter (99% vs. 98% KSA, 97% Omanis, 95% both Kuwaitis and UAE; X^2=11.56, df=4, p<0.000), contribute to an online discussion (99% vs. 98% Kuwaitis, 93% UAE, 86% Omanis 78% KSA; X^2=90.70, df=4, p<0.000), email a news story link (97% vs. 78% Kuwaitis, 73% both Omanis and KSA 52% UAE; X^2=161.30, df=4, p<0.000), comment on a local news story (99% vs. 88% UAE, 75% KSA, 67% Kuwaitis 8% Omanis; X^2=648.02, df=4, p<0.000), and customize their homepage (82% vs. 76% Kuwaitis, 68% KSA, 65% UAE, 40% Omanis; X^2=131.15, df=4, p<0.000). Kuwaiti users (79%) were more likely than the others (71% KSA, 65% Bahrainis, 56% UAE, 45% Omanis) to post local news via Facebook (X^2=65.36, df=4, p<0.000). KSA (95%) and Kuwaiti (94%) users were more likely than the others (84% UAE, 36% Bahrainis, 34 Omanis) to contribute their own articles and opinion pieces about their local community (X^2=422.91, df=4, p<0.000).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to investigate how university students' use mobile phones to obtain local news and information in different GCC countries. Those students were asked to state their opinions regarding their use of mobile phones and online services to obtain their local community news. In general, the use of mobile phones for news or as a source of news and entertainment seems common, especially among young Arabs (Ibahrine, 2008; Nield, 2004; Salem et al., 2014). Most users, for example, indicated that they enjoyed keeping up with news and information, including local, national and international news (RQ1). This is an indication that young adults still retain an appetite for consuming news and using their mobiles to do so. It is also an indication that they use everything a mobile phone offers, from news to entertainment. Consistent with previous research studies (e.g., Dennis et al., 2013; Miliany, 2013; Salem et al., 2014; Salem & Mourtade, 2012) the findings of this paper support those who found that young Arabs are keen on news and information. In addition, they use their new communication technologies to obtain local and non-local news (Elareshi & Gunter, 2010; Salem & Alshaer, 2013).

Users also indicated that they were the most technologically plugged-in (RQ2). Most of them have smartphones, modern technology, and touch PCs. More importantly, they use their mobile devices not only for making calls but also for doing other things such as emails, engaging in social networks, and accessing Internet content. These findings are consistent with several previous studies that have found that mobile devices are used for multiple purposes including gaining access to news (Pempek et al., 2009; Salem & Alshaer, 2013; Salem et al., 2014). Similarly, Salem and Alshaer (2013) found that 36% of Arab users access the Internet through a smartphone and 25% through a mobile phone.

In most of these oil-rich regions, mobiles were used most of the time to access the Internet (RQ3) (Dennis et al., 2013; Salem & Alshaer, 2013). Some indicated that they also used dial-up landline systems to access the Internet. In a similar vein, previous research has found that mobile and dial-up landline systems are the most popular platforms for accessing Internet content (Deloitte, 2013; Dennis et al., 2013; Salem & Alshaer, 2013; Salem et al., 2014).

There is, however, a tendency for users to engage with local news, especially in an interactive way in which they contribute their own content; this is more likely to occur among respondents who use dial-up to access the Internet rather than their mobile phones. Thus, people find it more comfortable to contribute interactively using a computer interface with a keyboard that is easier to use and a bigger screen that makes working online easier. It is, therefore, too early to suggest that

having a mobile phone makes such activities more likely. Consistent with other studies, Dennis et al. (2013) found that the most common form of Internet access in most GCC regions was broadband (73%), with only 21% using mobile broadband to access the Internet. Moreover, these oil-rich countries have paid great attention to providing high-speed connection to the Internet (Dennis et al., 2013). This may be due to the fact that, in these countries, new technologies and mobile devices have a positive impact in increasing business profits (BBC, 2005; Dennis et al., 2013), reducing travelling costs (Ibahrine, 2008; ITU, 2014; Jagun et al., 2008) and, more importantly, acting as a social media platform, especially during the recent Arab uprisings (Dennis et al., 2013; Ghannam, 2012; Ibahrine, 2008).

The use of mobile devices to gather news or information online about local communities, local sports scores or local sports updates and the like was very common among most of the users (RQ4). Respondents were found to receive local news alerts and up-to-date information about their communities. This may help to keep local citizens up to date with their communities' activities, especially when news and information are not easy to access in some parts of the GCC region due to large geographical area, such as in Saudi Arabia (Deloitte, 2013; ITU, 2014; Jagun et al., 2008; Wei, 2008). Mobile phones are useful in the region. This was clearly found in the relationship between the use of mobile phones and other online activities (RQ5), going online for local community news and information, and contributing to online discussions. Further evidence on this point comes from several Arab media studies that reported the importance of mobile devices for accessing the Internet and receiving news on local communities in the region (Deloitte, 2013; Dennis et al., 2013; Salem & Alshaer, 2013; Salem et al., 2014; Salem & Mourtade, 2012).

Regular online activities were found among most of the users (RQ6). For them, tweeting, emailing and using Facebook were the most popular online activities pursued in their free time. Since the recent Arab uprisings, Twitter and Facebook have become the preferred places for Arab users to place their postings, discussions, and updates (Cook, 2013). These sites emerged as dominant platforms because they were the most versatile in allowing users to share posts easily on the Internet and discussing ideas and material (Cook, 2013; Gillespie, 2013; Pempek et al., 2009; Wolfsfeld, Segev, & Sheafer, 2013). This is an indication that respondents engaged in several online activities. Respondents looked for news and information about their local communities as well as different types of entertainment via their mobile devices and other new technologies. In a similar vein, Arab people have been found to access and engage with their news through social media sites (mainly Facebook and Twitter) as they are simply not receiving enough information and news on current events from traditional media. They were also found to receive community news that inspired them to take action (Anas, 2013; Cook, 2013).

Mobile phones in the Arab world, like tablet computers, laptops and desktop computers, have become an important platform for accessing Internet content, including news and information about local communities and businesses. Using the mobile Internet in the Arab world has facilitated increased communication, the sharing of ideas, and socializing. These new technologies enable users to reach large audiences (Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in the recent Arab uprisings) rapidly. This not only allows them to view information but also enables them to contribute to it (Anas, 2013; Cook, 2013; Wolfsfeld et al., 2013).

The findings highlighted how students use mobile phone in obtaining local news only. Thus, there are several limitations in this paper which urge further investigation. First, to the model parsimonious, the proposed research model focused on the use of mobile phones and the Internet only for obtaining local news, not national and International news. Second, the survey respondents were all university students. The paper mainly represents student users of online social networks. Nevertheless, this research has raised several interesting questions. It is believed that the current research will trigger additional theorizing on and empirical investigation of international mobile phone use in social networks. In this context, it is important that such countries implement mobile phone policies that allow them to successfully address the needs of local citizens. Lastly, the findings on this subject must be handled with great caution as far as the political changes in the Arab world are concerned.

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