academicJournals

Vol. 6(11), pp. 165-173, November, 2014
DOI: 10.5897/JMCS2014.0409
Article Number: FCF5DF048455
ISSN 2141-2545

http://www.academicjournals.org/JMCS

Journal of Media and Communication Studies

Full Length Research Paper

Interactivity in Saudi online journalism

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Received 17 July 2014, Accepted 23 October 2014

The research aims to investigate the interactivity of four Saudi Online Journals. Two of these online journals were the Riyadh and Okaz Online Journals, which are also found in the printed versions. However, the other two journals used in this research paper are the Alweeam and Sabq Journals, which do not have print versions, and are only published online. The data were collected based on an analysis of the existing content and research on the interactivity in the Online Journalism in Saudi Arabia. The study uses a questionnaire, in order to investigate the content of journals and the responses of the readers. The findings of the study demonstrated varying levels of interactivity among study journals. The study also revealed that the online-only journals stimulated more interactivity than online journals with a print version. Two predictors for interactivity were identified with respect to the Riyadh and Okaz Journals: the source of information and the type of journal content (news or commentary). The study revealed a great interactivity for the journals that are online-only. However, the printed journals, which can also be viewed online showed a comparatively lesser interactivity. During the study, the researcher observed two predictors for interactivity in both types of journals. These predictors were the source of information and the type of journal content.

Key words: Interactivity, Saudi Online Journals, Okaz Journal, Riyadh Journal, Alweeam Online Journal, Sabq Online Journal.

INTRODUCTION

Interactivity is a recent concept, which requires further clarification through research and studies. It has been viewed by certain studies as a very general concept accompanied with various implications for mediated communication of all types; the most common type is journalism, Heeter 1989; Loosen and Weischenberg 2000. Other studies have conducted in depth research and analysis on interactivity, and identified four related dimensions: the complexity of choices that are available, the responsiveness to the end user, the facilitation of interpersonal communication and the ease of adding information (Massey and Levy 1999; Rafaeli 1988). The findings of this study are consistent with other studies such as Larson (2011), who notes the perception component of interactivity. The researcher also agrees in part with McMillan (2000), who reports his view that interactivity may lie in the user's perspective and that interactivity is not a purely functional dimension.

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The old theories of communication considered two kinds of people (Craig 1999). They were either the sender of the information or the recipient. However, research on the topic has helped in exploring the fact that it is not always the receptor, which uses the information over the digital media (Piscitelli 2005). There may be a sender, a receptor and a third interactive agent, known as the user. In this case, the receptor does not use the knowledge; rather works as a messenger. The user involves interactivity, which limits the passive role of receivers. There is a possibility that the reader might be either a receiver or a user, or both at the same time. The role of user has been modified; he could be a user, reader and transmitter of the data and information at the same time over the digital media. Digital Communication follows a specific procedure for transmitting information from one end to another.

Deuze (2003) identified three interactivity options for the different websites that we use over the internet for many different purposes. These interactivity options are

(i) Navigational Interactivity,
(ii) Functional Interactivity, and
(iii) Adaptive Interactivity.

Navigational Interactivity means where the user has the permission to navigate throughout the content of the website. Functional Interactivity relates to the situations where the user can participate in the actual production and design process of the website. The users can do so by interacting with other individuals, who use the website or are a part of its design team. However, Adaptive Interactivity deals with all the actions of a user and their consequences. In this type of interactivity, the user has consequences with respect to the site content because site programming adapts itself to the surfing behaviour of every individual user and 'remembers user' preferences (that allow users to upload, annotate and discuss their own content and that offer chat rooms and personal customization through smart web design).

Online journalism offers numerous benefits to the users, including enhanced level of freedom to express one's personal views over the internet, where other people can also see and comment on one's viewpoint. The Arab online population has also received the freedom to express their personal thoughts online, where they can expose their feelings and viewpoints, which cannot be publicly stated (Al-Saggaf, 2006). In his study, Boyd (1993) reported that Arab countries have been associated with censorship of traditional mass media. The technological development of the 1990s has made it possible to establish new media, which has started to mould the relationship between the government and the media, particularly with respect to cyberspace. Individuals are also free to comment on the online journals, blogs, websites, articles, news, opinion pieces and columns published online, which gives them more tendency towards a greater freedom (Dashti, 2009).

Online interactivity has created an environment that has forced most local newspapers to create online versions of print publications or to establish online-only newspapers (Dashti, 2013). Public's preference of the online journalism and the availability of access of past and present articles and journals over the digital media has forced all local and international newpaper agencies to publish their material online. People give less preference to printed material as compared to online journalism, which has a distinguishing feature; readers are invited to comment. This feature, in turn, has created two-way communication between the senders (newspapers) and the receivers (online readers). The viewpoints that individuals are hesitant to share in person, can be shared over the internet.

METHODOLOGY

This study was based on the interactivity of four Saudi online Journals. The journals that were selected included the Riyadh Journal, the Okaz Journal, the Alwaeeam Journal, and the Sabq Journal. The Riyadh Journal and the Okaz Journal are available in printed as well as online version. However, the latter two journals only appear in the electronic format over the internet. This research investigated the interactivity of these journals by uploading a questionnaire over the website of these online journals, where the readers could fill the questionnaires with their comments. The interactivity was analysed with respect to the answers of the readers and the online journals' users. Based on the questionnaire and the results, different graphs and charts were produced, and the statistical analysis allowed the researcher to conduct an in-depth analysis of the data that was input by the readers in the questionnaires. Different questions in the questionnaire asked about the readers' interactivity of over the website content, the effect of geographical location on interactivity and the information source, type of journal content and multi-media effects. The study also investigated the effects of electronic discourse on interactivity. The researcher followed a descriptive analytical approach that was based on a comparison of journalism experience that measured the interactivity of electronic journals and receiver response.

Study instrument

The researcher designed a specific questionnaire for analysing the content and interactivity of readers on the online journals in comparison to the printed journals, which are also published online. The questionnaire was based on 56 questions, which were self-comprehensible and quite clear. The researcher divided this questionnaire into two parts: the first part analyzed journal content, and the second part analyzed reader response. The readers filled this questionnaire based on their experiences while reading the online journals. This option was given to the readers while reading a specific online journal. They were also able to read the comments of other readers and post their own comments on the journals.

Content analysis

This research study analysed the website content in order to obtain

Table 1. The relationship between the level of interactivity among readers and the studied journals.

Journal	No interactivity	Low interactivity	High interactivity	P value
Riyadh	73 (40.6%)	68 (37.8%)	39 (21.6%)	0.004
Okaz	117 (65%)	48 (26.7%)	15 (8.3%)	0.000
Alweeam	43 (23.9%)	79 (43.9%)	58 (32.2%)	0.000
Sabq	5 (2.8)	55 (33.6%)	120 (66.6%)	0.004

terms of frequencies, percentages, and averages. At an alpha level $\leq$ 0.05, Chi-square test enabled the researcher to determine the relationships between variables.

RESULTS

The researcher created different tables and graphs in order determine the interactivity of the readers and users of the four specified online and printed-and-online-published journals. Table 1 demonstrates the option levels for interactivity, which consisted of 'no interactivity', 'low interactivity' and 'high interactivity'. Approximately 41% of journal items in the Riyadh Journal did not induce any interactivity, whereas low interactivity was generated by approximately 38% of journal items in the same journal, and high interactivity generation was induced by approximately 22%. With respect to the Okaz Journal, 65% of items did not induce interactivity, whereas approximately 27% of the items generated low interactivity, and approximately 8% of items induced high interactivity. Note that both Alweeam and Sabq showed a rare and different trend that exhibited no interactivity from journal items. Interactivity from low to high levels was generally exhibited. In all cases, the level of interactivity with respect to the journals was statistically significant (Figure 1).

Table 2 serves a summary of the level of interactivity for the content provided in the journal. The research found that with respect to the local news, interactivity levels were highest for the journal Sabq (100%), and interactivity levels then decreased with respect to the Riyadh Journal (79.3%). The figures in the tables were translated into a graphical representation, which is shown in Figure 2. The research made it clear that the Sabq Journal has the highest level of interactivity, which is 100% in most of the cases. This shows that the readers use the Sabq journals in most of the cases, such as times when they need to use the local content and when they need content related to terrorism, culture, Arab economy, and even any content on the international level. Even in the cases where the Sabq Journal does not have a percentage of 100%, it is the highest as compared to other online journals. This is shown in the case of the Arab Springand Democracy and Miscellaneous content in the journals, where Sabq has an interactivity of 94.7% and 95.8% respectively.

The Okaz Journal generated the lowest interactivity level (35.7%). Education and learning interactivity reached its peak (75%) with respect to the Riyadh Journal, and education and learning activity reached minimal levels with respect to the Okaz Journal (20.8%). Interactivity towards the Arab Spring and democracy reached maximal levels in Alweeam (87.2%) and Sabq (94.7%). Religious issues induced significant interactivity levels in all the studied journals. Interactivity concerning terrorism decreased to a level of 66.7% in the Alweeam online journal; however, this was higher than the levels demonstrated by the Okaz and Riyadh journals. Cultural issues induced interactivity in a quarter of the Okaz topics, whereas the level in the Alweeam online journal was 60%, and a level higher for the Riyadh Journal.

Media induced interactivity was at 80% for the Riyadh Journal and 50% for the Okaz Journal. Environmental topics were observed only in the Alweeam online journal and its associated interactivity was 75%. Miscellaneous topics induced a level of interactivity that varied from 47.7% for the Riyadh Journal to 53.8% for the Okaz journal. Both the online journals, Alweeam and Sabq, were associated with higher interactivity ratios (82.1% and 95.8%, respectively). Considering certain factors, a good level of interactivity with respect to religious issues can be observed, varying from 50 to 88.9%. This can be explained as a reflection of the importance of the topic to the reader, which stimulates interactivity from an initial level to the application level. Sports issues also created high interactivity among readers. Such a phenomenon points to the characteristics of the user. These findings are similar to those of previous studies, including Alhaqeel (2012) and Wu (1999).

Table 3 presents the data that indicate the effect of geographical location on the interactivity of these four types of journals. It helped in determining the relationship between the geographical location of the reader and his or her interactivity. The Riyadh Journal has approximate ratios of interactivity for both local (65.6%) and regional locations (63.2%); however, this level dropped to 44.7% for international locations. This outlines that the Riyadh Journal is not very popular in the international readers. The interactivity induced by the Okaz Journal followed a similar trend but with lower interactivity levels. Both the

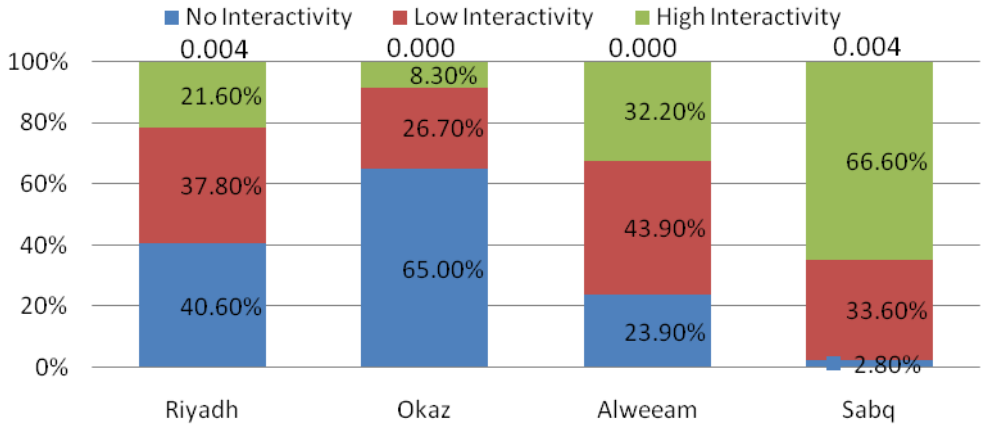

Figure 1. Level of interactivity among readers of Riyadh Journal, Okaz Journal, Alweeam Journal and Sabq Journal.

Table 2. Interactivity level for journal content.

Journal content	Interactivity Percentage (Alpha)			
	Riyadh	Okaz	Alweeam	Sabq
Local	79.3 (NS)	35.7 (S)	65.3 (NS)	100 (NS)
Education and Learning	75 (S)	20.8 (s)	60 (NS)	-
The ArabSpring and Democracy	42.1 (S)	25.8 (S)	87.2 (S)	94.7 (S)
Religion	71.4 (NS)	50 (NS)	87.5 (NS)	88.9 (NS)
Terrorism	28.5 (S)	57.1 (NS)	66.7 (NS)	100 (NS)
Culture	69.3 (S)	25 (NS)	60 (NS)	100 (NS)
Economy	50 (NS)	30 (NS)	-	100 (NS)
International Relations	57.9 (NS)	19 (S)	73.3 (NS)	100 (NS)
Sports	83.3 (NS)	71.4 (NS)	100 (NS)	-
Media	80 (NS)	50 (NS)	-	-
Environment	-	-	75 (NS)	-
Miscellaneous	47.7 (S)	53.8 (NS)	82.1 (NS)	95.8 (S)

S: significant at alpha level $\leq$ 0.05; NS: not significant at alpha level > 0.05

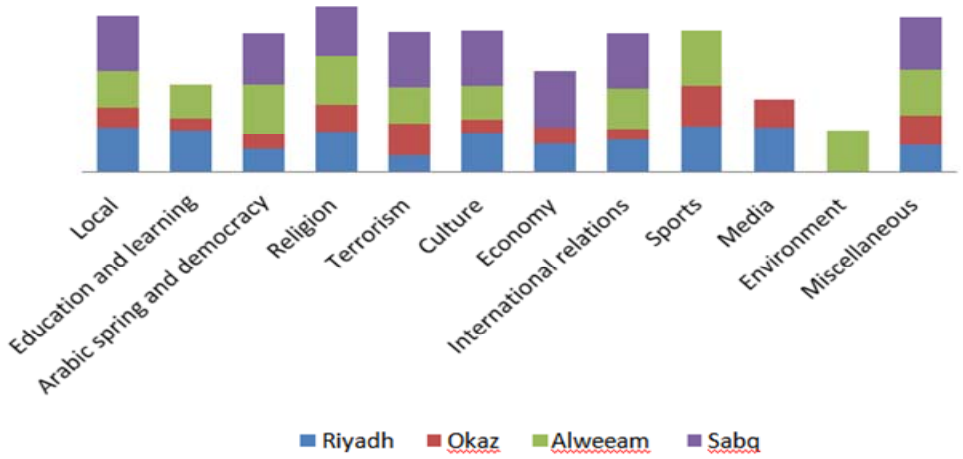

Figure 2. Interactivity level provoked by the journal content.

Table 3. The effect of geographical location on interactivity.

Geographical Location	Interactivity Percentage			
	Riyadh	Okaz	Alweeam	Sabq
Local	65.6	41.5	68.9	96.9
Regional	63.2	41.2	100	93.8
International	44.7	23.4	84.5	96.3

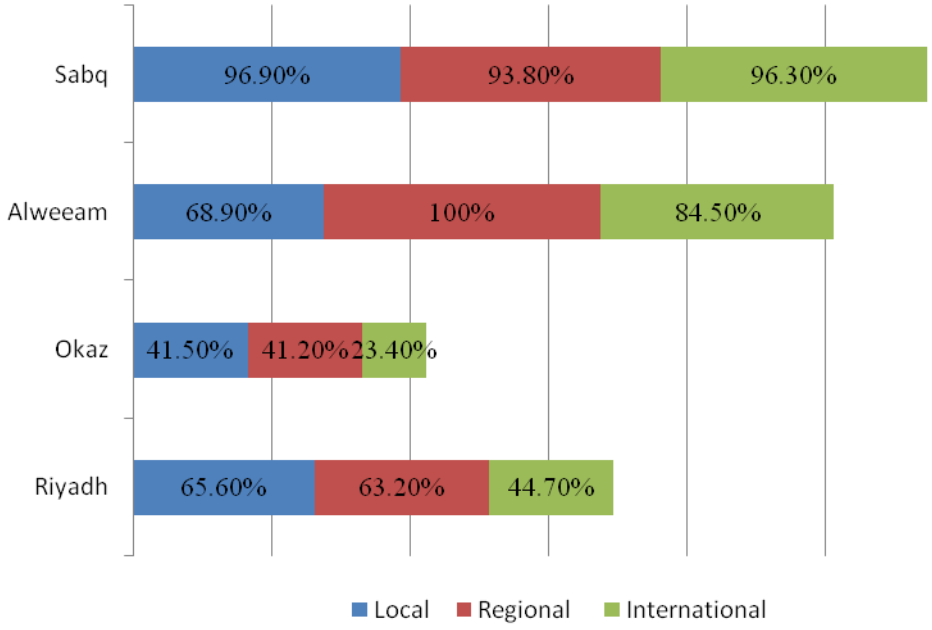

Figure 3. The geographical levels for the interactivity.

Alweeam and Sabq journals demonstrated high interactivity levels for all geographic locations and the Sabq journal provoked the most interactivity, which helps in claiming that the Sabq Journal is the most popular journal in the international readers. The results from this study also provide a strong base to the claim that the readers enjoy the Sabq Online Journal; may it be the local reader or the international ones. In Alweeam Journal, regional and international news scored higher than did local news (Figure 3). In Sabq Journal, the interactivity was also high but independent of geographical location.

The researcher has illustrated Table 4, in the form of a graph which is shown in the Figure 4. This table and figure demonstrate the ability of information sources as the predictors of interactivity. With respect to the Riyadh journal, the highest interactivity levels were a result of the journal itself (64.5%); the next highest interactivity level is attributable to international media (50%) and news agencies (38.3%). There is a statistically significant relationship between information sources and interactivity (p 0.002). With respect to the Okaz Journal, the interactivity level was associated positively with the information source (p 0.05). Items by international media did not induce any level of interactivity, whereas items by news agencies increased the level of interactivity to 27.5%, and items from the journal itself induced an even greater increase in interactivity levels. Both the Alweeam and Sabq online journals showed high activity levels irrespective of the information source. No significant correlation was observed in both journals, Alweeam and Sabq ($p > 0.05$ for both). The highest level was associated with the type of journal, while readers at both Alweeam and Sabq Journals showed highest levels in the international media.

Table 5 and Figure 5 illustrate the results of the predictability of interactivity by the content of a specific journal. News content or analytical comment was correlated with interactivity levels in the studied journals. In both Riyadh and Okaz journals, the content correlated positively with interactivity ($p < 0.05$ for both). In the Riyadh and Okaz Journals, the levels were higher for analytical comment than for news. In Alweeam Journal,

Table 4. The effect of information source on interactivity levels.

Information source	Interactivity percentage			
	Riyadh	Okaz	Alweeam	Sabq
Journal	65.4	39.6	72.9	97.3
News Agencies	38.3	27.5	90	95.6
International Media	50	0	100	100
P value	0.02	0.05	0.093	0.109

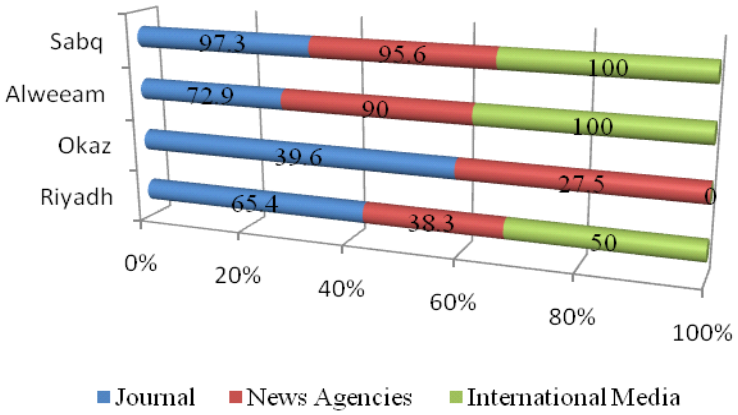

Figure 4. Information source of interactivity level.

Table 5. The relationship between type of journal content and interactivity level.

Type of journal content	Interactivity percentage			
	Riyadh	Okaz	Alweeam	Sabq
News	45.8	21.1	79.5	96.4
Analytical Comment	86.7	63.9	69.5	98.3
P value	0.000	0.000	0.263	0.950

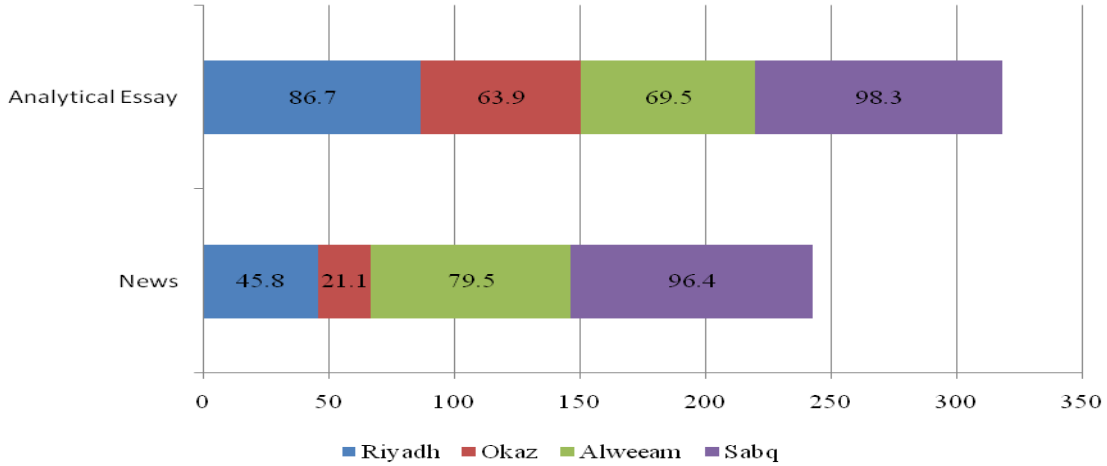

Figure 5. Interactivity levels by journal content.

Table 6. Relationship between technical effectors and interactivity level.

Technical effectors	Interactivity percentage			
	Riyadh	Okaz	Aweeam	Sabq
Number of pictures in Journal Content	54.4	55.2	76.7	97.3
Essay with picture	11.1	65.3	80.1	97.7
Picture with special key	64.3	-	-	-
Picture identifying person	50	20	69.2	92.3
Picture illustrating news item	0	25	90.9	92.4
Irritated response to photo	100	80	100	100
Graphics such as maps	100	-	100	-
Number of titles	50	18.7	76	97.3
Wide title	59.3	34.5	87.7	97.1
Columnar title	50	44.1	62.5	97.1
Fixed title	97.6	60	-	-
Text associated colors	59.5	35.4	74.2	97

the news generated more interactivity, while in Sabq Journal; the interactivity level was independent of the journal content.

Table 6 and Figure 6 explains how the technical effectors can influence the level of interactivity. In the case of the Sabq online Journal, an increase was seen in the interactivity level, due to all the effectors. With respect to the Alweeam Online Journal, a significant interactivity was seen, which varied from 62.5% with respect to column titles to 100% with respect to irritated responses to photographs and graphics. Interactivity with respect to the Riyadh journal varied from 0% for pictures illustrating the news to 100% for irritated responses to photographs and graphics. The interactivity induced with respect to the Okaz journal ranged from 20% for photos illustrating the news to 80% for irritated responses to photographs.

DISCUSSION

The researcher undertook this study to find out the relevance of the literature review and the findings of this study in the context of interactivity as a main characteristic of new media. Users, through technology, have become major contributors to news production through online interaction with news, the posting of comments and communication in chat rooms. The present study contributes to Online Journalism Research in Saudi Arabia, which is lacking with respect to interactivity. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the variables affecting interactivity between Electronic Journalism and its readers.

The present study was based on four journals; two of which are found in both printed and online versions, namely Riyadh and Okaz, and the other two are only published online, namely Alweeam and Sabq Journal. The data indicated a positive correlation between interactivity levels and the journals ($p \leq 0.05$). The researched helped in finding out that online journals stimulate more interactivity, rather than their printed versions. This is expected because online journals offer more space for comments and interactivity features, and it is easier for readers to comment online (Dashti 2013).

All the four journals depicted a pattern of interactivity with respect to their content. Sabq Journal showed interactivity of 100%; however, Okaz Journal lacked significant interactivity. The study posits reader as a key factor; if the content is perceived to be of interest then the reader is liable to interact. This assumption is supported by the observation that the highest interactivity levels were exhibited with respect to Sabq Online Journal and Riyadh Journal. This fluctuation in interactivity levels is one of the characteristics of interactivity (Alhaqeel 2012). Online Journals, in particular the Sabq Online Journal, mostly demonstrate higher interactivity levels. This may be because these journals possess features that encourage reader interaction.

While investigating the geographical dimension for the levels of induced interactivity, the results indicated a unique trend, where the local and regional locations induced approximately equal levels of interactivity for Riyadh and Okaz Journals, with less interest from international locations. However, Sabq and Alweeam journals showed a higher interactivity within the international locations. This study posits that these findings reflect the focus of the reader. Although the present data did not offer information with respect to readers, it seems that online journal readers are either younger than the readers of the Riyadh and Okaz Journals. Different researches suggest that the online journals readers are people who can meet the technological challenges associated with the advanced interface offered by Online Journals (Howard and Hussain 2011).

Depending on the sources of information with respect

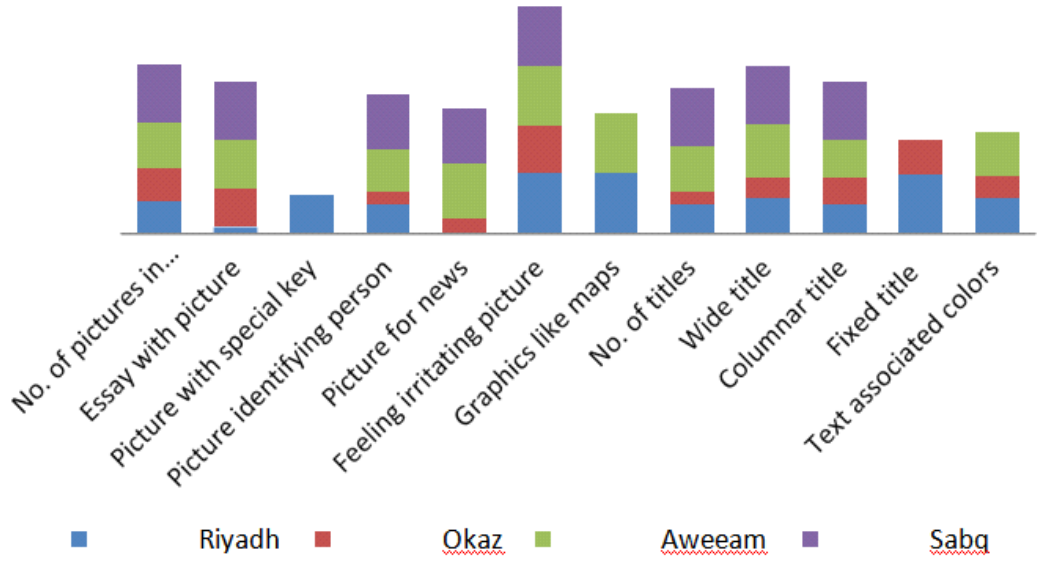

Figure 6. Influence of the technical effects on the interactivity level.

to Riyadh and Okaz Journals, the researcher retrieved a predictor for interactivity. Concerning Riyadh Journal, if it is the journal itself or international media, there is a higher chance of interactivity. With respect to the Okaz Journal, interactivity is likely to result if the source of information is the journal itself. The interactivity induced by the online-only journals did not depend on the source of information.

The researcher retrieved one more predictor for interactivity; this was based on the type of journal content for both the Okaz and Riyadh Journals (P value = 0.000). The analytical comments columns led to the highest interactivity for both journals. Interactivity induced by the online journals was independent of the content inside the journals. The researcher posited in this study that the educational level and the technological capability of reader play a significant role in the induction of their interactivity on the journals.

The researcher agrees in part with McMillan 2000, who reports his view that interactivity may lie in the user's perspective and that interactivity is not a purely functional dimension. Before the online availability of the Okaz and Riyadh Journals, they were available in printed versions; therefore, the readers of these journals are comparatively more educated in comparison to the other journals. It is also a plausible claim that the interactivity of these journals occurs more in connection with analytical essays than with news. It can also be concluded from these findings that the readers are less interested in reading the newspapers online and are more interested in interactivity with other types of content, such as essays and articles. In the same way, the distinguishing feature of the interactivity can also be the nature of the content in the respective journal. These findings are consistent with other studies such as Larsson 2011, who notes the perception component of interactivity. The researcher also agrees with Steensen 2010, who notes that technology updates dominate the journalism studies that the success of electronic journalism is measured by the extent to which technological facilities that include interactivity and multi-media.

Conclusion

Interactivity is a recent concept, which requires further clarification through research and studies. This research was conducted to study the interactivity of readers on the online journals in Saudi Arabia, which has a lack of relevant literature. Future researches can be conducted on the topic to identify the types of readers of these online journals and their effect on the online journal interactivity. However, in this study, the researcher generalised all the readers as a single entity. The study data showed that interactivity is greater with respect to online journals than printed journals that are also published online. Two predictors for interactivity in both Okaz and Riyadh Journals were observed: the source of information and the type of journal content. The study revealed a great interactivity for the journals that are online only. However, the printed journals, which that can also be viewed online, showed a comparatively lesser interactivity.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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