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Lessons Learned from Using Twitter Chat for Educational Research

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ABSTRACT

The current pandemic has allowed us to tap the resources we might not have explored otherwise. While we were under lockdown in Saudi Arabia, we considered how Twitter could be used as a part of potential research methodology in educational research. We used the Twitter chat to explore, from pharmacy students' point of view, how the suspension of on-campus learning activities and shifting to online mode affected their learning experience and how they would like to see their education shaped in the future. Due to the wide use of Twitter, we could reach out to a significant number of respondents from different regions of the country, inviting different perspectives. The pros and cons we have derived from our experience can be applied to a wider context for utilising Twitter chat in educational research.

Keywords: COVID-19, Educational research, Twitter chat, Online learning and assessment, Hybrid campus

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INTRODUCTION

The current pandemic has hit the world adversely. However, on a good note, it has led us to tap the resources which we might not have explored otherwise. In March 2020, we were only halfway through the second semester of the academic year, when partial to complete lockdown was imposed in the majority of the cities in Saudi Arabia for three months. This made us complete the rest of the semester and the final examination online, which was a different experience for all of us. Following the final

examination, we wanted to explore, from pharmacy students' point of view, how the suspension of on-campus learning activities and shifting to online mode affected their learning experience and how they would like to see their education shaped from that point onward. It was paramount to explore this from the students' point of view as they experienced the direct impact of these drastic measures and gaining an insight into the direct experiences of students which can help redesign the pedagogy leading to improved quality of education (1).

Traditional quantitative and qualitative online methods such as online interviewing and online questionnaires have been explored previously; however, there has been less focus on the “live” engagement of the respondents in the research (2). Twitter is one of the most widely used social media platforms in Saudi Arabia, especially among youngsters, and was more so during the lockdown period (3–4). Therefore, we aimed to capitalise on this and planned to collect the data, in order to meet our aims, using Twitter chat with “live” interaction with the participants.

WHAT WE DID

We created a specific Twitter account (@TChatResearch) and planned the chat to be conducted over three days (one-hour each day) at a suitable time covering the topics: pharmacy learning and assessment during lockdown (11 questions), online examination during lockdown (6 questions), use of technology during lockdown (6 questions), and what we have learnt from the experience (6 questions). We started advertising and promoting the chat three weeks before the chat days with instructions regarding how to participate and announced that a lucky winner, selected via a draw would receive SAR100 bookstore vouchers each day of the chat. The participants were probed by the chat moderators wherever any further exploration was required during the chat.

Subsequently, we downloaded the chat responses and removed the respondents’ identities and any confidential information from the responses that could identify any individual person or institution, or incident. We also intended to remove any irrelevant

responses; however, this was not required. We then qualitatively analysed the responses generating the codes and overarching themes (5).

WHAT WE HAVE PUBLISHED

We have presented our findings in two publications:

- a. What just happened? Impact of on-campus activities suspension on pharmacy education during COVID-19 lockdown – A students’ perspective (6).
- b. Returning in “new normal” – a thematic analysis of Twitter chat by pharmacy students (7).

The readers are referred to these references for further details and recommendations drawn from the findings.

WHAT WE LEARNT

Based on our experience of using Twitter chat for educational research, we present here some lessons we have learnt from this approach. Due to the wide use of Twitter, we could reach out to a significant number of respondents from different regions of the country, inviting different perspectives. The respondents were able to probe each other and “like” the responses of other participants, which created a highly engaged environment. The private message facility of Twitter was used to request the responses should the participants had any confidentiality concerns. In addition, we have put together some pros and cons of this approach in the Table 1, based on our experience.

Table 1: Pros and cons of using Twitter chat in educational research

Seven Pros	Seven Cons
May combine aspects of both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.	Poor advertising or promotion can lead to significantly fewer participants and, thus the waste of resources and time.
A maximum number of people can be invited to participate and contribute.	Too many questions can distract the participants or may drive them away.
People from different locations can participate easily.	Ambiguous questions can lead to incoherent responses by the participants.
Participants can probe each other or “like” each other’s replies to endorse them.	People who do not meet inclusion criteria (for example, in our research, students other than pharmacy or from other countries) can participate in the chat (chat crashers), which can lead to bias in responses.
Participants can Retweet the questions or replies to promote the chat further and invite more people (snowball effect).	Some participants may only reply to some questions and leave the rest of the questions unanswered. Consequently, we may have some questions in the end which are not answered at all.
Different hashtags can be used during the chat for different topics/questions, which can be employed later to sort the responses.	Confidentiality is a serious issue. Some participants may not provide an honest opinion due to the risk of being identified.
It saves a significant amount of time as opposed to interviewing different people separately.	Participants’ opinions can be influenced by the opinions of others.

WAY FORWARD

Online research using social media platforms is valuable in taking new approaches to data collection that would otherwise be difficult to obtain. Our use of the Twitter chat for the purpose of educational research was an innovative approach. Though it is not perfect, and it has its own disadvantages, it can replace or even complement face-to-face interviews, focus groups, or online questionnaires in some instances for educational research. We experienced that engaging the students, especially in the context of social media, was the main challenge and we mitigated this challenge by avoiding ambiguous questions, probing at the right level, and conducting the chat at the appropriate time. Careful and meticulous question writing, planning and running the chat at a suitable time are the determinants of a successful Twitter chat experience. The pros and cons derived from our experience can be applied to a wider context for utilising Twitter chat in educational research.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

This commentary is based on the research project that was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Umm Al-Qura University (KSA) [HAPO-02-K-012-2020-06-400].

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