

Introduction	2
What are tweet chats?	2
How can tweet chats be used in research?	2
Ethical considerations	3
Preparing the tweet chat	5
Basic considerations	5
A clear, focused topic	6
A dedicated hashtag	6
A date and time	6
A host with a prominent account	6
Questions for the tweet chat	6
Brainstorming questions	7
Editing and ranking questions	7
Finalizing the questions	8
Sample tweet progression	8
Testing questions	11
Promoting the tweet chat	11
Webpage for the tweet chat	11
Essential information on the tweet chat	11
Background information on the topic	12
Ethics information for the tweet chat	12
Resources on how to use Twitter (optional)	12
Promotional campaign	12
Running the tweet chat	13
Possible problems	14
Lack of engagement	14
Inappropriate engagement	14
Hashtag hijacking	14
Locked accounts	14
Debriefing	15
Compiling data	15

Strengths and weaknesses of tweet chats for research	16
Strengths	16
Weaknesses	16
Conclusion	16
Tweet chat checklist	17
Appendix A: Numbering system for tweet chat data	19
1. Number each of the host’s tweets sequentially	19
2. Label the replies to each tweet by using that tweet’s number as a prefix	21
3. Label quote tweets by appending “QT” and a number	23
Cautions	24

Introduction

What are tweet chats?

Tweet chats, also called Twitter chats, are informal conversations about a specific topic that take place at a set time on Twitter¹. They’ve been used as marketing tools by brands hoping to engage their customers and by groups of people with a shared interest—such as a profession², a hobby, or a social cause³.

Typically, they involve a host posing a series of questions to the community. Community members participating in the tweet chat reply to those questions, interacting with the host account and with one another. Tweet chats usually run no longer than an hour.

Often they are recurring conversations (for example, chats that happen on the second Tuesday of every month), but they can also be one-off events.

How can tweet chats be used in research?

Because Twitter is a widely accessible platform where users can easily and casually interact with other accounts, tweet chats can be a useful tool for researchers who want to directly reach and have informal conversations with members of the public and people who are affected by

¹ Flerackers A (2019) “How to host a successful Twitter chat,” Hootsuite Blog. <https://blog.hootsuite.com/a-step-by-step-guide-to-twitter-chats/>

² American Occupational Therapy Association (n.d.) “What Is a Twitter Chat and How Do I Participate?” <https://www.aota.org/practice/manage/social-media/twitter-chat.aspx>

³ Healthcare Leadership Blog #hclidr (n.d.) “About,” Healthcare Leadership Blog. <https://hclidr.wordpress.com/about/>

their area of research.⁴ This direct access to a diverse group of stakeholders, including those who may be traditionally underrepresented because they face barriers to accessing research environments, is especially helpful for community-based research, including patient-oriented research. People with lived experience of a health condition, for example, may feel more comfortable engaging in an informal, conversational exchange of ideas via Twitter than participating in focus groups or interviews.

Some reasons researchers may use a tweet chat:

- to engage community members and research stakeholders
- as part of priority-setting exercises to see what issues are important to the community involved in the research
- to generate research questions
- to disseminate and discuss research findings
- to share tools and resources

For example, in health research, the BC SUPPORT Unit's Patient Engagement Methods Cluster used a tweet chat to consult with the patient-oriented research community about what they considered the most important issues in patient engagement in research.⁵ Oncology researchers used a tweet chat for stakeholder engagement and did a content analysis of participants' responses to better understand their opinions on quality of life and palliative care for people with brain tumours.⁶ *Physician's Weekly* hosted a tweet chat to disseminate the results from a series of articles on workforce gender equity and saw a seven-fold increase in article shares.⁷

Tweet chats should be used in conjunction with other methods and not on their own (see [limitations](#) below).

Ethical considerations

Twitter has been used extensively as a data source in social media research, and researchers have debated the necessity to obtain informed consent from the platform's users to use their

⁴ Markham MJ, Gentile D, Graham DL (2017) Social Media for Networking, Professional Development, and Patient Engagement. *American Society of Clinical Oncology Educational Book*. 37:7 82–787, https://ascopubs.org/doi/full/10.1200/EDBK_180077.

⁵ Michalak E, Hoens A (2018) BC SUPPORT Unit Patient Engagement (PE) Methods Cluster Report on Stakeholder Consultations for Methods Cluster Development.

⁶ Salmi L, Lum HD, Hayden A, et al. (2020) Stakeholder engagement in research on quality of life and palliative care for brain tumors: a qualitative analysis of #BTSM and #HPM tweet chats, *Neuro-Oncology Practice*. Dec; 7(6): 676–684, <https://doi.org/10.1093/nop/npaa043>.

⁷ Cawcutt KA, Erdahl LM, Englander MJ, et al. (2010) Use of a coordinated social media strategy to improve dissemination of research and collect solutions related to workforce gender equity. *Journal of Women's Health*. Jun: 849–862. <http://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2018.7515>.

tweets in their datasets.^{8,9} Much of the social media research has involved large-scale harvesting of users' public tweets using application programming interfaces (APIs), and the research community seems to have decided that the volume of tweets collected would make obtaining consent from users infeasible, not to mention unnecessary, because Twitter's terms of service state that people's tweets are public and could be shared with third parties. However, some researchers have argued that the research community should take a more reflexive approach and aim for a higher ethical standard.

In tweet chats, engagement may be more analogous to a focus group, where smaller amounts of data are collected from people with specific perspectives, which may be analyzed qualitatively and used to inform further work or research decision making. Researchers should inform potential participants that the tweet chat is for research purposes and explain how they intend to use the data they collect. Researchers should also consider reminding participants that regardless of whether or how the data are de-identified, their responses on Twitter will remain publicly available, unless they later delete the tweet or [“protect” their tweets by making their account private](#).

Researchers may want to consider applying for ethics approval from their Research Ethics Board/Institutional Review Board to conduct a tweet chat, perhaps as part of an application for the larger overarching project that includes the tweet chat as one of several engagement methods. The Research Ethics Board may offer additional guidance on whether securing explicit consent from participants is necessary on a public platform such as Twitter.

Researchers should also be aware of possible conflicts of interest (or potential perceived conflicts of interest) that may arise based on their choice of host account (see [below](#) about the host account). For example, using an organization's account to host the tweet chat could be considered a gift in kind because the organization is granting you access to their followers, which might pose a conflict of interest that must be managed. The organization's reputation among your intended participants might also influence who participates and what participants choose to contribute to the discussion.

Finally, if the topic for discussion risks being potentially distressing for participants, researchers might consider developing a policy on how to handle crisis situations, which may include practices like:

- adding a content warning,
- preparing a list of resources like distress lines that participants could access, and
- explicitly stating what the research team will *not* provide participants—for example, counselling or direct referrals to services.

⁸ Williams ML, Burnap P, Sloan L (2017) Towards an ethical framework for publishing Twitter data in social research: Taking into account users' views, online context and algorithmic estimation. *Sociology*. Dec;51(6):1149-68.

⁹ Ahmed W, Bath PA, Demartini G (2017) Using Twitter as a data source: An overview of ethical, legal, and methodological challenges. *The ethics of online research*. 2017 Dec 12.

Research teams may have to decide, based on the topic, audience, and possibly other factors, whether to make this policy public to participants or to keep it internal within the team.

If the research team includes community members, such as patient partners, who will be prominent participants in the chat and possibly facilitate or steer the conversation, research teams should confirm, before and at regular intervals during the chat, how much the community co-researchers would prefer to engage, especially if the topic is contentious or possibly distressing. Community co-researchers should have full control over their participation based on their level of comfort, including the option of not answering certain chat questions or leaving the chat if necessary, and research teams should ensure that community co-researchers are aware of these options.

Research teams should also ensure that all team members, including community co-researchers, who want to participate have access to the technology they need and, if necessary, support in the form of training or [information](#) to become familiar with Twitter's interface and features like replying, retweeting, threading, and hashtags. Remind all participating team members that what they post will be public and that they should take care to avoid posting any details they want to keep private.

Before and during the chat tweet chat, researchers may wish to:

- tell possible participants how their responses will be used for the research,
- remind participants that their participation is voluntary and that they can choose which questions to respond to and to what extent, and
- link to a [webpage](#) where participants can learn more about the project to decide if they should participate.

For example, a common practice after a tweet chat is to compile all participants' responses to each question into an easy-to-read thread or story and make this compilation publicly available. Telling participants about your intent to create such a compilation at the start of the chat would allow people to opt out if they aren't comfortable with their tweets being used in this way.

Preparing the tweet chat

Basic considerations

To run a successful tweet chat, you will first need to decide on:

- a clear, focused topic,
- a dedicated hashtag,
- a date and time, and
- a host account.

These will form the basis of your [promotional efforts](#) and should be solidified early in the planning process.

A clear, focused topic

Tweet chats are most effective if participants come prepared to discuss a specific topic.

A dedicated hashtag

Check on Twitter that the hashtag isn't already being used. Choose a relatively short but descriptive hashtag that describes your topic. Capitalize every word in the hashtag for accessibility—for example, #KidneyTransplantChat instead of #kidneytransplantchat. Capitalizing each word is easier for both humans and screen readers to read.

A date and time

Choose a date that allows you to raise awareness of the upcoming tweet chat for at least one month. Where possible, choose a date that coincides with a special day to increase engagement (for example, an awareness day related to your topic), or you might choose to avoid days where your chat might conflict with another event that could draw your intended participants' attention.

Choose a time that takes into account the time zones of the geographic locations you are hoping to involve in your chat. If you are expecting mostly participation from one time zone, holding the tweet chat at lunch hour on a weekday could allow people to participate without interfering with their work day or demanding their attention after work.

A host with a prominent account

Accounts with relatively few followers or that don't have an established reputation on the topic may not be able to engage enough participants to have a rich discussion. If this account held regular tweet chats on the topic, it might be able to build up a following over time.

For one-off tweet chats, it may be most efficient to host the chat as a guest on an account with an established following, such as an organization with credibility in the topic.

The research team should carefully consider if and how the choice of host account may encourage or discourage engagement from specific groups of people. For example, an advocacy organization might already have an audience, but people who don't share the organization's values or approach might not participate in a chat that the organization hosts, which could limit the perspectives you hear. A host account that is able to engage a diverse group of interested parties and create an environment where participants feel comfortable candidly sharing opinions is more likely to facilitate participation and elicit relevant insights.

Questions for the tweet chat

Your research team members should familiarize themselves with the existing literature on the topic and meet to decide which questions to ask during the tweet chat. Community co-researchers, such as patient partners, can help the team choose questions that are most relevant to the community and therefore the most likely to encourage engagement. They can

also give feedback on whether the questions are phrased in a way that the community will find understandable and respectful.

Brainstorming questions

Your first meeting could focus on brainstorming possible questions and defining roles (who will host, who can moderate, and who will engage in other ways and how—see [“Running the tweet chat”](#) below).

Ensure that all research team members have the opportunity, at the meeting and for a period afterward (perhaps a week), to send you ideas for questions they would like to explore during the tweet chat.

You can expect to issue one question every five minutes within the tweet chat, to give tweet chat participants time to think and respond. Posting questions at these regular intervals helps the conversation flow and may help keep participants engaged as they anticipate the next topic. With tweets at the beginning for housekeeping and to introduce the topic in a general way, as well as standard questions to end the chat, you have time for 9 to 10 substantive questions to explore the topic itself.

Editing and ranking questions

It's likely that your brainstorming will result in more questions than the tweet chat will accommodate.

Edit your questions to be clear and focused on a single idea that people can easily respond to in 5 minutes or less. Tweet chats share many characteristics with focus groups, so your questions can draw on best practices for developing focus group questions.¹⁰ For example, avoid double-barrelled or leading questions, and ensure that questions are understandable to your intended audience. Using plain language is important, particularly when you are seeking to engage diverse participants. If you ask questions that anticipate a yes or no answer, ask participants to explain or elaborate on their answer.

Group your questions into logical subtopics so that you can ask all of the questions about one subtopic before moving on to the next.

Arrange your questions into a logical order—for example, where topics progress from simple to complex, or where people need information from one question to answer the next.

Continue to meet with your research team to discuss how to prioritize the list of questions and narrow them down to the 9 or 10 that you will have time to ask. Your team may decide that some questions can be consolidated, for example, or that some questions are less likely to yield meaningful responses.

¹⁰ Krueger RA (2014) Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research. Sage publications.

Your research team might also decide that the list of questions is long enough to consider hosting more than one tweet chat on different subtopics.

A helpful, free tool to help your team prioritize your questions is Google Forms: Enter all of your questions into a Google Form and ask your team members to select the top 9 questions they would like participants to answer. The results from this exercise can help you decide which questions to ask.

Finalizing the questions

Before the tweet chat, have all of the tweets in the tweet chat formatted and ready. Include the hashtag in each tweet.

As you prepare, paste each draft tweet into Twitter to make sure all tweets in the chat are within the 280-character limit. (Some characters, like the ellipsis, and some emoji look like a single character but take up multiple characters, for example.) If necessary, edit the tweets down to fit. Cutting tweets down to size and being succinct is preferable to breaking up the content over several tweets.

Sample tweet progression

The progression of tweets below is an example only and is not meant to be prescriptive. Adapt it to your needs.

The introductory and housekeeping tweets should include instructions on how to participate. (Individual tweets in a series are separated by asterisks)

Welcome to the [Host organization] #Tweetchat! Over the next hour we'll be discussing the issue of [topic].

We'll use the hashtag #[TweetchatHashtag], so follow along or mute as desired!

A few definitions and housekeeping items before we get started: #COLinPOR

1. [Give context for the topic and a link to any background information—like a [web page](#) (see below) or information video—that participants might need before they can meaningfully participate.]

#[TweetchatHashtag]

2. We'll have [number of questions] questions today, and we'll label our questions Q1, Q2, etc. Please label your answers A1 (for question 1), A2 (for question 2), etc. and tag your tweets with #[TweetchatHashtag] so that we can keep track of the conversation!

3. After our chat, we'll put the questions and answers into an easy-to-follow story, and your contributions will help us [purpose of the tweet chat, whether it's priority setting, sharing resources, etc.]. #[TweetchatHashtag]

[Optional content warning/content note] 4. Our chat will include topics such as [give concrete examples of possibly distressing or traumatic topics], which might be upsetting or trigger memories of distressing personal experiences.

If you need emotional support, contact [distress line or other resource].
#[TweetchatHashtag]

[Optional tweet to encourage respectful engagement] 5. To foster a safe environment for all participants, let's keep our conversation respectful! We'll be ignoring, muting, or blocking any accounts that use abusive, harmful, or otherwise inappropriate language, images, or media #[TweetchatHashtag]

I'm your guest host, @[Host] and joining the chat are [team members' Twitter handles]
#[TweetchatHashtag]

Our team is grateful to be joining you from the traditional territories of [territorial acknowledgement].

#[TweetchatHashtag]

You can use polls to get a general idea of who is participating. Polls are limited to four options, so give participants the option of replying to the tweet if the options don't reflect their position. These polls are far from scientific but can give you a sense of representation among the participants.

Q1. Let's start by seeing who's here. Where are you located? If you're outside of [larger geographic area], reply with where you are! #[TweetchatHashtag]

[poll]

Geographic subarea 1

Geographic subarea 2

Geographic subarea 3

Geographic subarea 4

Q2. What perspective are you providing? Reply with your role if you don't see it listed!
#[TweetchatHashtag]
[poll]
[Role 1]
[Role 2]
[Role 3]
[Role 4]

You can also use polls to increase engagement. For example, issuing the same poll before and after the chat can gauge whether you've changed minds or increased awareness.

Q3. How important do you think the issue [chat topic] is? #[TweetchatHashtag]
[poll]
Extremely important
Somewhat important
Not important

Or, alternatively:

Q3. How confident are you in your knowledge about [chat topic]? #[TweetchatHashtag]
[poll]
Not confident
Somewhat confident
Very confident

Some questions might need some context—for example, some definitions to ensure that all participants know how you're using the terminology. If possible, keep these background tweets short and succinct—that is, no more than one tweet—and label them clearly.

BACKGROUND FOR Q4 & Q5: We are using [term] to refer to [definition].
#[TweetchatHashtag]

Immediately follow this context with the questions.

At the end of the tweet chat, you can repeat the earlier question to see if the tweet chat changed participants' attitudes or knowledge.

Q12. How important do you think the issue [chat topic] is? #[TweetchatHashtag]
[poll]
Extremely important
Somewhat important
Not important

Or:

Q12. How confident are you in your knowledge about [chat topic]? #[TweetchatHashtag]
[poll]
Not confident

Somewhat confident
Very confident

Finally, give participants an opportunity to add to the discussion beyond the boundaries set by the planned questions:

Q13. Final question to close out the chat: Do you have anything to add about [topic] that we haven't covered? Please explain! #[TweetchatHashtag]

End the discussion. If you intend to post a summary or compilation of tweets, tell people when they can expect to see it.

And we are out of time! Thank you so much to everyone for participating. Feel free to continue the discussion, but we at [host account] will be signing off for now. We will post a summary of today's conversation within a week. #[TweetchatHashtag]

You may also choose to give participants and other interested parties a way to contact your team if they want to contribute ideas outside of the tweet chat or if they want to follow up on some of the issues raised in the tweet chat.

Testing questions

If possible, show the final list of questions to someone who hasn't been involved with your project, preferably someone you expect to be in your intended audience, so that they can identify any questions that they find confusing or terms that they believe should be defined.

In response to their feedback, edit your questions to clarify or add definitions as warranted.

Promoting the tweet chat

Promoting the tweet chat is very, very important for encouraging engagement, especially if it's a one-off event that people aren't used to seeing on a regular basis. People must be made aware of the tweet chat in advance, with enough time to plan to participate. You will need, at a minimum:

- a dedicated [webpage](#) with information about the upcoming tweet chat and
- a campaign to promote the tweet chat for at least one month before the tweet chat—mostly on social media, especially Twitter, but also by reaching out to community champions and spreading awareness via newsletters or other correspondence.

Webpage for the tweet chat

This webpage could be part of the host organization's own website or blog.

Essential information on the tweet chat

Include all of the relevant information participants would need to know to participate:

- the topic,
- the hashtag,
- the date and time, and
- the host account.

Background information on the topic

Your topic might require participants to understand certain terms or topics before the tweet chat. The webpage for the tweet chat is the ideal home for offering this type of background information that participants might need.

This information could be in the form of an explanatory blog post or a short explanatory video. The video should be no longer than 2 minutes, so that you can post the link to it at the very start of your tweet chat and participants have the opportunity to watch it before answering questions.

Ethics information for the tweet chat

Your webpage could also include details of how results of the tweet chat will be used and a description of the larger project that the tweet chat is a part of, so that people have the information they need to decide whether to participate.

This section of the site could also include any declarations of possible conflicts of interest and an explanation of how you will manage those conflicts.

If you choose to explicitly solicit informed consent from participants, you can make your consent form available on the site.

Resources on how to use Twitter (optional)

If you expect that you may have participants who are interested in the tweet chat but have little or no experience with Twitter, you might choose to share some resources on the basics of using Twitter (such as [this help guide from Twitter itself](#)), including how to set up an account, interact with the interface, and use features like hashtags.

Promotional campaign

Create a graphic shareable via social media that includes all of the relevant information about the tweet chat:

- the topic,
- the hashtag,
- the date and time,
- the host account, and
- the URL for the webpage where people can find more information.

Write alternative text describing the graphic so that people who use screen readers, including people with low vision, can access the information.

At least one month before the tweet chat, begin sharing the graphic regularly on the host's social media accounts, with a particular focus on Twitter because that's where the tweet chat will take place. Tag in accounts you would like to see (a) participate and (b) share the information about the tweet chat with their followers. These accounts could include those of your research team members or other experts familiar with the discussion topic.

Promotional social media posts about the event should happen regularly—perhaps once or twice a week until the week before the event, then every day during the week before the event.

Concurrently, consider other ways of raising awareness of the tweet chat, such as an emailed newsletter from the host organization or a dedicated effort to contact community champions.

Running the tweet chat

You will need a team that includes:

- one person to act as host, to post the tweet progression at the prescribed times from the host account;
- one person to moderate, monitoring and retweeting relevant responses from the host account—this person may have to block accounts that are participating inappropriately;
- at least two or three research team members familiar with the topic to respond to and engage with participants, including community co-researchers with lived experience of the topic or research area (for example, a patient partner).

The host should post a planned question, once every 5 minutes, keeping all tweets threaded by posting each tweet as a reply to the previous tweet.¹¹ Keeping all of the tweets in the tweet chat threaded allows participants to see the full context of the conversation to inform their response.

Your team should be in constant contact during the tweet chat, whether that means you gather in the same physical space or you are connected through a virtual meeting or other communication platform. The host can tell the team when the next question is about to be posted, and the moderator can alert the team to possible problems. Research teams can also regularly check in with their community co-research members to confirm their level of comfort in their participation during the chat, especially if the chat topic is contentious or possibly distressing. For example, you may want to confirm verbally through your virtual meeting system that a community co-researcher would be comfortable being tagged in to a particular conversation (that is, having their Twitter handle added to a tweet to get their attention) before you do so.

¹¹ Twitter (2021) "How to create a thread on Twitter," <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/create-a-thread>

Possible problems

Lack of engagement

If the number of tweet chat participants is small, the event might not yield the level of engagement or data that you were hoping for.

If you intend to do a series of tweet chats, you may be able to build an audience over time.

For one-off events, promoting the tweet chat for at least the month beforehand and reaching out to specific people to encourage them to participate or promote the event through their networks can help drive engagement. Encouraging people to comment or respond after the tweet chat itself could allow people who couldn't attend the event live to share their opinions and insights.

Inappropriate engagement

Inappropriate engagement may include participants who use offensive or abusive language, and it might especially be a problem if the topic of the tweet chat is contentious. The moderator's role should include monitoring replies for inappropriate language or irrelevant content like advertising and either respond with a request for the offending account to stop or to block the account from participating. If the tweets in the chat will be analyzed as data, the research team should make note of which accounts had to be blocked and why.

Hashtag hijacking

If your tweet chat becomes a popular trending topic or is a recurring event, people hoping to capitalize on the topic's popularity might use the hashtag in tweets that are unrelated to the tweet chat.¹² Choosing a unique, descriptive hashtag for your tweet chat can help prevent your hashtag from becoming cluttered by irrelevant tweets. Make a plan for how to adjudicate whether you will exclude certain tweets with the tweet chat hashtag from your final data set. For example, you may decide that if the moderator and two other research team members agree that a tweet is irrelevant, you'll exclude a tweet from your analysis. You may need to keep a record of these exclusions when reporting your results.

Locked accounts

Some Twitter users choose to protect their accounts by limiting who can see their tweets. If these users contribute to the tweet chat, it's possible that their contributions will not be visible to the public. Before incorporating their contributions to the tweet chat in your analysis, you should secure these users' permission.

¹² Campbell A (2013) "What is Hashtag Hijacking?," Small Business Trends, <https://smallbiztrends.com/2013/08/what-is-hashtag-hijacking-2.html>

Debriefing

After the tweet chat ends, your team may wish to meet briefly to discuss how the event went and what next steps to take. Possible discussion topics include:

- how all team members felt during the chat, including whether community co-researchers experienced any distress or discomfort,
- what went well,
- what problems, if any, arose during the tweet chat (including inappropriate engagement), and how the team should address them,
- what ideas, opinions, or considerations came up that team members found especially interesting or important, and
- how the tweet chat data should be collected and presented.

Compiling data

After the tweet chat (usually at least 24 hours to give people a chance to add to the conversation if they couldn't participate at the time), collect the responses to the tweet chat.

Collect all conversations arising from the tweets the host tweeted out during the chat. Sometimes one reply can in turn receive several other replies, so tweet threads can fork and become complex. When copying a reply, make note of what tweet it was replying to so that you can keep conversations in context.

Check all retweets in the tweet chat: some retweets might have been quote tweets that prompted discussions off of your main thread. Collect any tweets that arose in these discussions as well.

Check the hashtag to see if people participated without directly replying to a question.

Platforms like [Wakelet](#) will let you organize your tweets in a single place, which can make it easier to copy the full text of the chat for qualitative analysis.

Once you've collated the tweets into a full compilation, tweet the link for the compilation, along with the tweet chat hashtag, from the host account.

If you had to omit any tweets from your final dataset because they were irrelevant and inappropriate, document the tweets and your reasoning for excluding them if you expect to publish your results.

Copy the text for storage elsewhere as soon as possible after compiling the tweets from the tweet chat. Platforms like Wakelet will store a link to the tweet but not the content of the tweet itself, and if the participant later deletes the tweet or [protects their Twitter account](#), the content of their tweet will be inaccessible to you.

Appendix A presents a suggested numbering system that gives all tweets in the tweet chat a unique identifier for data analysis in a way that lets you follow branching conversations and preserve context.

Strengths and weaknesses of tweet chats for research

Strengths

Tweet chats are relatively low-cost ways to engage members of the community; they require no registration infrastructure or need to book venues.

Twitter is free to use and so is accessible to most people with an internet connection. Its ready availability means that tweet chats can engage with a wide audience with diverse backgrounds. In health research, for example, tweet chats can reach patients, family care partners, patient advocacy organizations, community groups, health practitioners, health researchers, policy makers, and other stakeholders.

People who are not able to access in-person events may be able to participate in a Twitter chat. These chats can engage people who are not in your geographic area, contributing perspectives that you might otherwise not hear.

People who can participate anonymously may offer more candid responses.

Weaknesses

Twitter does not have a representative population, and proportionally few people use Twitter, which lags behind Facebook and Instagram in popularity. In Canada, only 42% of adults report having a Twitter account, and of those Twitter account holders, many might not participate regularly.¹³ If you use participants' responses to the tweet chat as data or in your research decision making, be aware that the data will likely not represent your population of interest and that the tweet chat should be supplemented with other engagement, like focus groups, individual interviews, or questionnaires.

Tweet chats are limited to people who have access to a computer or mobile device and an internet connection.

Conclusion

Tweet chats are one tool researchers can use to promote community engagement and interact directly with research stakeholders. They can be especially useful for community-based research teams, including researchers engaged in patient-oriented research.

¹³ Gruzd A, Mai P (2020) "The State of Social Media in Canada 2020," Social Media Lab, Ryerson University. <https://doi.org/10.5683/SP2/XIW8EW>

This resource is meant to offer research teams some ideas on how to approach planning and running a tweet chat, but it is by no means prescriptive or exhaustive. If you have ideas or insights to add to this resource or any best practices to share, please contact the authors at [contact info].

Tweet chat checklist

Prepare the tweet chat

- Choose a clear, focused topic
- Choose a dedicated hashtag
- Choose a date and time for the tweet chat
- Choose a host account
- Brainstorm, rank, and finalize a list of substantive questions for the tweet chat (9 or 10 questions for a one-hour tweet chat)
- Draft your tweet progression, including the following tweets:
 - Tweet to introduce the topic and hashtag
 - Tweet linking to any background information on the topic or project
 - Housekeeping tweet to explain how participants should expect to engage (for example, answering question labelled Q1 with a reply labelled A1)
 - Tweet explaining the purpose of the chat (for example, priority setting, sharing resources, etc.) and what you will do with the data
 - Optional content note or warning if the content may cause distress
 - Optional link to support resources if the content may cause distress
 - Optional tweet to encourage respectful engagement and explain how you will handle inappropriate engagement
 - Tweet introducing the host and research team members
 - Prepared substantive questions
 - Open-ended tweet asking participants to add to the topic anything the tweet chat questions might have missed
 - A tweet ending the tweet chat, thanking participants, encouraging continued engagement for people who want to keep the conversation going, and reminding participants what you will do with the data, including when and where you will post a summary of the tweet chat
- Test your tweets
 - Confirm that each tweet in the tweet progression has the event hashtag
 - Confirm that each tweet in the tweet progression fits within the 280-character limit
 - Show your draft tweet progression to a member of your intended audience who is not on your research team and revise any questions that are unclear

Promote the tweet chat

- Create a webpage for the tweet chat, including these items:
 - topic
 - hashtag
 - date and time
 - host account
 - background information on the topic

- ethics information for the tweet chat (optional)
- resources on how to use Twitter (optional)
- Create a graphic to share on social media, including these items:
 - URL for the webpage
 - topic
 - hashtag
 - date and time
 - host account

Run the tweet chat

- Choose one person to act as host
- Choose one person to moderate and retweet relevant responses from the host account
- Include at least two or three research team members familiar with the topic to respond to and engage with participants, including community co-researchers

Debrief (optional)

- Discuss these topics
 - how all team members felt during the chat
 - what went well
 - what problems, if any, arose during the tweet chat and how the team should address them
 - what ideas, opinions, or considerations came up that team members found especially interesting or important
 - how the tweet chat data should be collected and presented

Compile the tweets from the tweet chat

- Share a link to the compilation from the host account

Appendix A: Numbering system for tweet chat data

Tweet chats can be useful for research but can be hard to disentangle, especially when one conversation branches off into different subconversations. This system lets you label each tweet in a set of tweet chat data in a way that keeps track of the relationships between tweets and preserves the context of individual replies.

This system assumes that you, as the host account, have a set of prepared questions in specific order and that you've extracted your tweet chat data out from Twitter and into a more permanent and stable format, such as a text file.

1. Number each of the host's tweets sequentially

Suppose you have a tweet chat that starts like this:

Welcome to the #PrehabilitationCommunityofPractice tweet chat! For the next hour we'll be talking about prehabilitation before knee surgery. We'll use the hashtag #PrehabChat, so feel free to follow along or mute as desired.

We'll have 5 questions today, and we'll label our questions Q1, Q2, etc. Please label your answers A1 (for question 1), A2 (for question 2), etc. and tag your tweets with #PrehabChat so that we can keep track of the conversation!

After our chat, we'll put the questions and answers into an easy-to-follow story, and your contributions will help us develop patient health education materials for people preparing for knee surgery. #PrehabChat

This tweet chat is part of our ongoing project to create a living archive of prehabilitation resources. To learn more about this project and how your contributions today might be used, visit www.prehabwebsite.ca. #PrehabChat

Joining the chat are:

- @PrehabLivedExperience
 - @PrehabResearcher
 - @PrehabPractitioner
- #PrehabChat

Q1. Let's start by seeing who's here. Where are you located? If you're outside of Canada, reply with where you are! #PrehabChat

[poll]

- Western Canada
- Ontario or Quebec
- Atlantic Canada
- Northern Canada

Q2. What perspective are you providing? Reply with your role if you don't see it listed! #PrehabChat

[poll]

- Patient
- Family care partner
- Practitioner
- Researcher

You would label these as follows:

1.	Welcome to the #PrehabilitationCommunityofPractice tweet chat! For the next hour we'll be talking about prehabilitation before knee surgery. We'll use the hashtag #PrehabChat, so feel free to follow along or mute as desired.
2.	We'll have 5 questions today, and we'll label our questions Q1, Q2, etc. Please label your answers A1 (for question 1), A2 (for question 2), etc. and tag your tweets with #PrehabChat so that we can keep track of the conversation!
3.	After our chat, we'll put the questions and answers into an easy-to-follow story, and your contributions will help us develop patient health education materials for people preparing for knee surgery. #PrehabChat
4.	This tweet chat is part of our ongoing project to create a living archive of prehabilitation resources. To learn more about this project and how your contributions today might be used, visit www.prehabwebsite.ca . #PrehabChat
5.	Joining the chat are: <ul style="list-style-type: none">•@PrehabLivedExperience•@PrehabResearcher•@PrehabPractitioner #PrehabChat
6.	Q1. Let's start by seeing who's here. Where are you located? If you're outside of Canada, reply with where you are! #PrehabChat

	<p>[poll]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Western Canada • Ontario or Quebec • Atlantic Canada • Northern Canada
7.	<p>Q2. What perspective are you providing? Reply with your role if you don't see it listed! #PrehabChat</p> <p>[poll]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patient • Family care partner • Practitioner • Researcher

2. Label the replies to each tweet by using that tweet's number as a prefix

Replies to Tweet #1 could be 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, etc. For example, suppose the replies to Tweet 4 were as follows:

This tweet chat is part of our ongoing project to create a living archive of prehabilitation resources. To learn more about this project and how your contributions today might be used, visit www.prehabwebsite.ca. #PrehabChat

Reply to @PrehabHost from @Participant1

Thanks! This website looks great. I'm surprised I hadn't run into it before.
#PrehabChat

Reply to @PrehabHost from @Participant2

My patients have found the "Prehab for Hysterectomy" handout really helpful.
#PrehabChat

You would label one reply 4.1 and the next 4.2, and so on:

4.	<p>This tweet chat is part of our ongoing project to create a living archive of prehabilitation resources. To learn more about this project and how your contributions today might be used, visit www.prehabwebsite.ca. #PrehabChat</p>
4.1.	<p>Reply to @PrehabHost from @Participant1 Thanks! This website looks great. I'm surprised I hadn't run into it before. #PrehabChat</p>
4.2.	<p>Reply to @PrehabHost from @Participant2</p>

	My patients have found the “Prehab for Hysterectomy” handout really helpful. #PrehabChat
--	--

Repeat the procedure for replies to replies. For example, suppose people replied to Tweet 4.2 as follows:

My patients have found the “Prehab for Hysterectomy” handout really helpful. #PrehabChat

Reply to @Participant2 from @Participant3

Do you have a direct link? #PrehabChat

Reply to @Participant2 from @Participant4

Yes! I wish I’d had these kinds of resources when I was getting my fibroids out.
#PrehabChat

You would label one reply 4.2.1 and the next 4.2.2, and so on:

4.2	My patients have found the “Prehab for Hysterectomy” handout really helpful. #PrehabChat
4.2.1	Reply to @Participant2 from @Participant3 Do you have a direct link? #PrehabChat
4.2.2	Reply to @Participant2 from @Participant4 Yes! I wish I’d had these kinds of resources when I was getting my fibroids out. #PrehabChat

This numbering system lets you identify which tweet any given tweet is replying to, preserving context. A tweet labelled 6.7.2, for example, is a reply to Tweet 6.7, which in turn is a reply to Tweet 6.

If you are threading your tweets as the host account, your next tweet from your tweet progression will also be a reply, so it will have two labels—one from your original numbering of all of the prepared tweets and one as a reply to a previous tweet.

Suppose, for example, that the two replies to Tweet 4 were the only ones from participants. Then Tweet 5 would be numbered 5 but also 4.3, because it is the third and final reply of Tweet 4. By seeing the secondary label 4.3 on Tweet 5, you can immediately tell that Tweet 4 received two participant replies.

3. Label quote tweets by appending “QT” and a number

For example, suppose a Twitter user quote tweeted Tweet 3. You would label that 3.QT1 (i.e., first quote-tweet of Tweet 3).

For example:

Quote-tweet by @Participant5

#KneePain community! Join in to have your say. #PrehabChat

After our chat, we'll put the questions and answers into an easy-to-follow story, and your contributions will help us develop patient health education materials for people preparing for knee surgery. #PrehabChat

You would label that quote-tweet 3.QT1.

3.QT1	Quote-tweet by @Participant5 #KneePain community! Join in to have your say. #PrehabChat After our chat, we'll put the questions and answers into an easy-to-follow story, and your contributions will help us develop patient health education materials for people preparing for knee surgery. #PrehabChat
-------	--

Carry on numbering the replies to the quote tweet as outlined above.

For example, if two people reply to the quote tweet:

Quote-tweet by @Participant5

#KneePain community! Join in to have your say. #PrehabChat

After our chat, we'll put the questions and answers into an easy-to-follow story, and your contributions will help us develop patient health education materials for people preparing for knee surgery. #PrehabChat

Reply to @Participant5 from @Participant6

Oh, no! I'm going to have to miss this. But I'll catch up later.

Reply to @Participant5 from @Participant7

My surgery is scheduled for August. Will the information be available before then?

Label the replies as follows:

3.QT1	Quote-tweet by @Participant5 #KneePain community! Join in to have your say. #PrehabChat After our chat, we'll put the questions and answers into an easy-to-follow story, and your contributions will help us develop patient health education materials for people preparing for knee surgery. #PrehabChat
3.QT1.1	Reply to @Participant5 from @Participant6 Oh, no! I'm going to have to miss this. But I'll catch up later.
3.QT1.2	Reply to @Participant5 from @Participant7 My surgery is scheduled for August. Will the information be available before then?

Cautions

Twitter's interface does not always present tweets in the order they were tweeted. Unless there is a good reason for you to check the timestamp of each tweet to put them into chronological order, the order of the replies probably doesn't matter. Just ensure that each tweet has a unique identifier that lets you trace its context.

For example, it's possible that what you've labelled as Tweet 4.2 was posted before Tweet 4.1, and that should be fine for most data analysis purposes.