



Tapping twitter: A meta-method of the qualitative health literature using social media as a data collection tool

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Background Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, are modern web-based platforms that facilitate communication and information-sharing. Approximately 70% of Canadians use social media – a percentage that is even higher among young adults. Online content is a primary source of healthcare information for internet-using adults. A 2012 survey indicated that 89% of adult Canadians use the internet to find information about health issues and symptoms. There is an ideal fit between those who use the internet as a primary channel for accessing health information and those who want to track user groups and compare information concerning individual attitudes and behaviour about health issues. Thus, social media are fast becoming an innovative data source and data collection tool for researching health issues. What is less clear is how qualitative health researchers design and execute studies using social media, the quality of data generated, the trustworthiness and credibility of results, and necessary ethical considerations. **Objectives** This paper will present the findings of a meta-method of qualitative health studies that used social media as a data source and/or data collection tool. **Methods** A meta-method examines the epistemological and methodological underpinnings and the procedural rules for engaging in qualitative research. Our primary goal is to provide insight into the methodological strengths and limitations of using social media when engaging in qualitative health research. This meta-method was conducted according to the guidelines advanced by Paterson et al. Six databases were searched for English-language articles published between 2006 and 2012 using search terms to identify qualitative research studies that used social media as a data collection tool and/or data source. Eligible studies were analyzed thematically and compared for credibility, trustworthiness, transparency, and clarity of design. **Results** Major themes emerging from the inductive comparative analysis of the selected studies will show how and under what conditions social media were used to collect data to study a health issue, the associated ethical and other challenges associated with executing the study, and observations concerning the quality of the research process. **Conclusions** This meta-method indicates that social media as a data source and/or collection tool can make a valuable contribution to health knowledge if methodological standards for qualitative health research are rigorously followed.