Restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic hit us hard. As travel, conferences, and even casual coffee hours were cancelled, many educational researchers turned to social media as a way to interact with each other and practitioners during the pandemic. In the before times, we would gather at academic conferences to hear speakers, participate in panels, and network with fellow academics. For the two of us, two graduate students working on our dissertations, Twitter provided an important outlet for sharing our own research and hearing about the research of others. We offer our story along with some important caveats of how to responsibly use social media, in particular Twitter, to share and consume academic ideas.

Benefits of Sharing Research on Twitter: Maggie

I am an incredibly social person. One of my New Year’s resolutions is, year after year, to schedule one day of the week without a social event. Every year, I do not succeed at this. So, the lockdowns that began in early March 2020 were hard for me as I lost my social outlets and activities. Harder still, I most enjoy learning by speaking with and listening to others. I felt professionally adrift with only my dog and my non-academic spouse for company. I turned to Twitter to share ideas with others in the educational inequality space and to learn from their work, too.

Early in the pandemic, my first journal article was released (Thornton, et al., 2020). I was first author on a paper examining how collaboration among school principal preparation programs lead to increases in diversity of principal candidates. Twitter provided me with a ready opportunity to share not just this good news but also our findings about working with school and district leaders to identify potential leaders of color, particularly Black and Latinx leaders of color. Although social media clearly existed as a vehicle for sharing information like this long before the pandemic began, because I had pivoted to Twitter as a larger source of personal and professional development, I had greater engagement when sharing my findings.

I also noticed a greater engagement in general on Twitter than pre-March 2020. This increase made sense when one considers how many folks are now working from home and using Twitter and other forms of social media to engage with others when in-person engagement is not safe. With these increases, I was able to connect with more and more
graduate students, professors, and practitioners. With Twitter, a user chooses whom to follow. Those people’s tweets then show up in what is called a timeline. Every time a user logs in to Twitter, one can choose to view the top tweets, which will show the most engaged tweets from those whom one follows, or latest tweets, which shows the newest tweets from those whom one follows.

Twitter also played a useful role in connecting with other researchers as conferences were cancelled or moved online. Twitter became a venue to share online conference sessions and get feedback from other presenters. I hope to keep this particular way of connecting in the future, even as in-person conferences, which can often feel unwieldy and overwhelming, resume.

Benefits of Reading Research on Twitter: Shannon

Once we knew the severity and longevity of the current pandemic, I quickly realized that I needed to make a plan for staying up to speed on current research. First, I used Twitter to make sure I was following professors and educators who were closely aligned to my areas of research. I did this because I noticed an increase in free webinars that were being produced and I did not want to miss any opportunities to hear these people speak. I also did not want to miss any current articles that they were producing.

When it was announced that American Educational Research Association (AERA) was cancelled, I needed a way to discover current research about my research topic of detracking. I used my dissertation proposal reference list to see if people I cited were on Twitter and then I followed them. Due to the complexity of detracking, often researchers and practitioners use multiple synonyms when describing their changes to their school tracking system. I started using the search bar on Twitter to search keywords like detracking, destreaming, untracking, and heterogeneous grouping to make sure I did not miss any articles or discussions about my dissertation topic.

Additionally, after the death of George Floyd and the subsequent protests around the country, I frequently discovered new education practitioners and community organizers who were doing anti-racist and equity work around the country and Twitter was the main way I learned about them and what they were doing in their school districts to address what was happening. For example, I learned about the ways they were handling hybrid instruction and facilitating discussions about the racial justice protests. Overall, my Twitter usage has increased due to the pandemic because often it is the only place that I can communicate with people I have made connections with through graduate student groups and conferences. In the past, I would use conferences to reconnect in person, but with those either cancelled or online, Twitter emerged as a new way to stay in touch. Lastly, it is often an opportunity to commiserate with fellow graduate students about the stresses of life and writing my dissertation.

Some Concerns

Twitter, like any human gathering place, has imperfections. These imperfections of course relate to sharing and consuming research there. Across social media platforms, the ways in which character limitations compress or even erase nuance are particular threats to sharing and consuming research. We both found great support in this regard in using Twitter threads to convey complex information. Even with this tool, however, nuance can be lost. Grace and sincere follow-up questions are important. Social media has also gained a reputation as a
place where people often share their highlights but not their low points. When struggling to complete our dissertations during a pandemic, we often found it difficult to see the professional highlights of others. As the pandemic continues, however, we have also found many of our academic heroes sharing their own struggles and solutions on Twitter. We have been particularly heartened by hearing other women in academia struggling with isolation, Zoom school, renegotiating chores with partners and so on. These moments of honesty have revealed solutions and solidarity in both our academic and personal struggles.

Even with these caveats, Twitter has offered us both a place to make connections with other researchers and practitioners in our field. Additionally, Twitter increases our opportunity to promote and interact regarding our published work during the pandemic. Due to the lack of opportunities to engage with people in person, our Twitter usage has increased in surprising and interesting ways. We remain mindful of the potential hazards of relying on Twitter to create an academic community and the fact that one can never learn everything there is to know about another person or an academic problem in the 280 characters that Twitter allows. Most of all, we look forward to the day when we can gather together in person again safely. We might just be checking Twitter while we are there.

References

Lessons from the Pivot