

# Teenagers and Facebook: A Content Analysis of Status Updates

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## Abstract

There is always a conflict between peers and parents in the case of the adolescents. Psychologists are of the opinion that usually adolescents go for peers when it comes to the case of a choice. Social Media play a very significant role in the lives of teenagers today. Twitter, blogs and Facebook are ways they find to keep in touch with their loved ones and to make new friends. This is done through messages, scraps and frequent status updates. This study aims at finding out who take the top spot - friends or families - in their priorities related to status updates. It also analyzes the content of the posts made by the teenagers. How much they talk about their parents or family members? How much they interact with their family members through Facebook? The study was conducted using a content analysis method, in which the Facebook status updates of 30 teenagers were analyzed for the months of October 2011 to January 2012.

## Keywords

social media, teenagers, Facebook, family, status updates

## Introduction

There is always a conflict between peers and parents in the case of the adolescents. Psychologists are of the opinion that usually adolescents go for peers when it comes to the case of a choice. Social Media play a very significant role in the lives of teenagers today. Twitter, blogs and Facebook are ways they find to keep in touch with their loved ones and to make new friends. This is done through messages, scraps and frequent status updates. The teenagers and children are using it very frequently and lively for certain gratification needs too. It gives them immense chances to keep their inner thoughts posted and updated.

Early adolescence or teenage is a critical period of change in children's relationships. There is a tendency seen in the teenagers for more closeness to the peer group and a resulting distancing from the parents and family. But this "waxing of peer orientation and the waning of closeness with parents" is not a permanent phenomenon but just a temporary one (*source: <http://www.oppapers.com/essays/Adolescent-Relationships-With-Parents-And-Peers/502768>*). Though the teenagers do not wish to withdraw completely from their family, they would love to have more freedom and greater control over their own lives. It is clear that if the teenagers get both these (freedom & control over their lives) somewhere they would love to be part of it. The social media platforms provide such an occasion for them.

Researchers and Psychologists are of the opinion that it is erroneous to assume that parents have little or no influence on their adolescent children (Hayes, L., 2004). Both parents and peers act as a dual force in the development of the children's socialization. Evidence suggests that well-adjusted adolescents tend to have high quality relationships with their peers (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Research on decision-making has shown that whether parents or peers are more important depends on the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship (Noller, 1994) Lindsay Clandfield says that the members of many social networking sites have the option of keeping their friends informed of their current circumstances by posing a brief 'status update'. If somebody likes to update it or not, people are eager to know what their friends are up to (Clandfield, 2011).

### **Review of literature**

The study by Carla Seal reveals that teenagers go to certain media in order to find their own 'personal space' (Wanner, 2006). This issue of personal space is very important for teenagers since at this age they want to have some degree of personal freedom and privacy no matter which culture they are coming from. Here the teenagers are finding this 'space' in their 'Facebook' or 'MySpace' accounts. In the report of a research titled 'A Day without Media', Research conducted by ICMIPA and students at the Phillip Merrill College of Journalism, University of Maryland, College Park, USA, the teenagers were asked to write about their ideas on Media Dependence. The teenagers then wrote about the role of media in establishing and cementing social connections – how they used their laptops and phones and myriad devices to communicate with friends, families, and others in their lives. A study, conducted by Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project, found that social media use is most widespread among teens, with 95% of the respondents who participated in the survey use the Internet regularly. Among them more than 80% said they use social media sites daily. "Social networking sites have created new spaces for teens to interact. For most teens, these are exciting and rewarding spaces"(source-<http://netaddictionrecovery.blogspot.com/>).

Teenaged students can "develop relationships online devoid of the anxiety found in face-to-face relationships," and they "can take on any persona (mask) they

desire, without fear of judgment on appearance or personal mannerism, and can avoid racial and gender prejudice" reveals a study published in the website of Centre for Internet Addiction as part of their series of researches on this issue (*source-<http://netaddictionrecovery.blogspot.com/>*). Sonia Livingstone's book 'Half a Century of Television in the Lives of Our Children' reviews evidence over five decades regarding the changing place of television in children's lives in the families. It argues that the family relied more on television as the medium of instruction for the children in these decades. Now it has become the stage for the Social Networking Media (Livingstone, 2007). Another interesting study was conducted by the Ypulse Research on the Status Updates and the Facebook fatigue. They came out with findings as stated below:

1. 53% of female teenagers said they cannot live without Facebook. Many are curious to know what would be the next status update of their friends.
2. Status updates are only second to chatting, another relatively recently added feature, in favorite activities among high school students. (*Source: <http://www.ypulse.com/ypulse-research-status-update-facebook-fatigue>*).

There were many petitions by students sent to Facebook creator Mark Zuckerberg to prevent nonstudents from joining the site. "For instance, the creator of the Facebook group "Don't Let My Parents onto Facebook!!" sent an e-mail to Zuckerberg before the change to general admission, detailing the reasons why parents shouldn't be allowed on the site. (*Source: <http://www.freeonlineresearchpapers.com/Facebook-isnt-everybody>*). The teenagers and the youth have a marked sense of privacy, says Nick Eaton. They get this privacy through Facebook, Twitter and MySpace. But most of the parents see Facebook as a public space and are afraid that their children are posting personal information to a wide world through their status updates in it. According to Microsoft researchers Danah Boyd and Alice Marwick, teenagers tailor specific messages to specific audiences (likely not to their parents), and expect them to be received that way (Eaton, 2011).

## **Methodology**

The study was conducted using a content analysis method, in which the Facebook status updates of 30 teenagers were analyzed for the months of October, November and December 2011 and January 2012. These teenagers were followed online daily to read and assess the content of their posts and status updates. Among the 30 teenagers followed 21 of them were heavy users of Facebook, i.e., they were logged in to Facebook more than once a day. Three others were visiting Facebook at least once daily. Four of them were seen in Facebook once in two or three days and that too for a very limited time. The other two were not frequent visitors of Facebook. They post something or change their status once in a month or so. These details about the usage patterns were obtained from the respondents through a mail.

## Analysis & findings

More than 80% of the teenagers had status updates related to their own thoughts or states of mind. They also have status updates related to their friends. But only less than 10% of the teenagers had status updates connected with their parents and family members. Their updates related to family were mainly about the family outings and pilgrimages or family functions like marriage.

## Subjects of status updates

Teenagers had a wide range of subjects for their status updates. It ranged from their inner thoughts (most number of entries) to the family outings (least number of entries). Here we display them according to their ranks in the Teenagers' Status Updates.

### Inner thoughts & philosophy of life

The most common subject of their status updates were their own inner thoughts in the form of poetry or prose or some simple phrases. Again there were different subjects for their thoughts. Some of them had written on the natural calamities, some others on the plight of their own life, some on ways in which God takes their life through and some others on an imaginary world of theirs. One of them wrote on the New Year eve: *"My new year resolution is to make better bad decisions"*

One of the boys wrote about the way in which he looks at the problems in his life. He wrote: *"Loneliness is d most difficult & pain staking period in our lifetime. I think nw 'm having somebody 2 get rid of d situation! It wil b always make our mind lighter wen v share our difficulties to other, so that @ least v could get some relaxation 4 that situation. ;)"*

Teenagers have their own philosophy of life. They view life in a different angle. There were many quotes posted as status updates. There were quotes from great philosophers, super hit music albums, dialogues in their favourite movies or from some books they read. These are some of the examples of teenagers' philosophy:

*"some one askd god "If everything is already written in destiny, thn y sholud we wish for somthing?" God smiled and said may b in few places i have written "AS YOU WISH"*

Many comments were seen in a melancholic note which says that *"life sucks"*. Many of the teenagers seem to be affected badly by even a very simple incident in their lives. They were not able to digest certain dialogues by their friends or parents. There was a comment: *"I am not lazy i am highly motivated to do NOTHING :D"*

### Studies & exams

Another usual theme of comments was regarding the boredom of studies. The repetition of studies and exams make them think that they cannot have an escape from this. Somebody commented:

*“Class, tuition, study, exams..... it is a vicious circle.... When can I get out of this?”*

*“I love my Facebook.....but I don't like to face my book”*

### Friends

They discussed openly about many of their friends with or without mentioning their names. In case of appreciation they mentioned their friends' names. If it was for open criticism, they used some clues which gave others an indication about the name of the 'friend' in question.

*“realizing lyf wot i am ,i am totally imperfect... thankz to ma frndz they r helpin me understand thingz.....!!!!!!!!!!!!”*

They really understand the value of a real friend. It is clear from the following dialogue: *“I may lose something today I may get anything else tomorrow. But, I can never lose ... and ever get one thing and thats'YOU' So, be d bst f minE !!”*

*“going to miss all of u.....:(.....can't believe i have to stay for 10 days wid out seeing or talking to u guys..”*

There were pictures and comments posted about their outing with friends and having food from some leading restaurants. There were pictures of friends having a cup of tea and snacks from a local tea shop on the way side too. Many had the courage to post their pictures in front toddy shops or beverage stores.

*“love those MOMENTS buddies...after the school days these will be the only MEMORIES....”*

### Romance

Love failure was a leading subject for both boys and girls. Many had the courage to openly discuss their romantic life. Many were seen asking for help from others who are regarded as 'experts' in this field. Many were sad that their love life didn't click as they wanted.

*“Missing someone special in life is only due to two reasons  
♥ “Either that person was always with you” ♥  
OR ♥ “You always wanted to be with that person”*

*"I love how I am loved by the person I love. :) ♥♥♥"*

*"If You Can't FOrget YOur 'EX' YOu Will Never Trust YOur 'next'"*

### **Freedom**

One of the major complaints the teenagers post in the Facebook pages is their lack of freedom even in their personal matters. Teenagers would love to have freedom at least in deciding what to wear. When parents make decisions even on dressing styles, they feel that they are regarded as little kids. On the Republic Day one of the respondents put a status update which brought out all these emotions. The post read like this:

*"what republic? what independence? who is independent? I am not any way....don't know when I can be independent????"*

### **School life**

Once they left the school they started commenting on the glorious days in the school. Only when they started studying in some colleges many of them could realize the beauty of the school days. Most of them confessed that they were posting bad comments about the school when they were in the school. There was a comment put by some of the respondents in another respondent's page when the former commented about the agony of finishing the school life. The comment went like this: *"Only when you come out of this school you will realize that it was not a school but a real COLLEGE"*.

### **Leisure talks**

Teenagers had detailed discussion about a Sports star they liked or about a film they watched. There were many who made status updates about Sachin's 100<sup>th</sup> century. Many were seen sad because he couldn't achieve the feat in Australia. A leading 'online war' was between the fans of cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar and his Australian counterpart Ricky Ponting. There were slogans in favour of Tendulkar saying:

*"East or west Sachin is the best....Day or Night Ponting is to Rest"*

There were many discussions related to the performance of their favourite stars in a recently released movie. There were fights even in the name of these super stars. Fans of one star will attack the other star and his fans through pictures or comments. In Kerala an interesting online crusade is seen for Super stars Mammootty and Mohanlal. When the big budget Mohanlal film produced by the Confident Group turned out to be a flop in the theatres, the fans of Mammootty came up with posts and comments like: *"Confident Group has started new project of building toilets after the release of the film Casanova.....what a confidence??? OMG!!!"*

### Family

The last theme of discussion, according to the popularity or number of entries in the teenagers' posts, was related to their families. There were only very few comments or posts about the family members or their whereabouts. There were exceptions too. But in general the only updates about the family were the news or pictures of some family outing to some places of interest.

In all these updates, the youngsters revealed their mind and their attitude towards life. Though we may discard them as teenage talks, there were many comments with clear vision about life and world.

| No. | Occurrence of Themes |                |         |         |                 |             |               |        |
|-----|----------------------|----------------|---------|---------|-----------------|-------------|---------------|--------|
|     | Inner Thought        | Boring Studies | Friends | Romance | Freedom in Life | School Life | Sports & Film | Family |
| T1  | 17                   | 12             | 14      | 3       | 7               | 9           | 2             | 2      |
| T2  | 13                   | 7              | 5       | 1       | 11              | 7           | 9             | -      |
| T3  | 7                    | 13             | 9       | 3       | 7               | 4           | 3             | 4      |
| T4  | 29                   | 12             | 27      | -       | 6               | 17          | 8             | 4      |
| T5  | 14                   | 9              | 14      | 7       | 12              | 11          | 5             | -      |
| T6  | 2                    | 1              | 3       | -       | -               | 1           | -             | 3      |
| T7  | 19                   | 3              | 6       | 1       | 7               | 3           | 5             | 2      |
| T8  | 28                   | 10             | 12      | 8       | 14              | 12          | 7             | 4      |
| T9  | 16                   | 4              | 14      | 5       | 8               | 8           | 5             | 1      |
| T10 | 23                   | 4              | 17      | 11      | 6               | 12          | 9             | 4      |
| T11 | 17                   | 3              | 11      | 4       | -               | 19          | 8             | 2      |
| T12 | 24                   | 12             | 13      | 2       | 3               | 7           | 3             | 3      |
| T13 | 9                    | 17             | 8       | 13      | 6               | 5           | 9             | 5      |
| T14 | 14                   | 12             | 21      | 8       | 4               | 13          | 7             | 3      |
| T15 | 2                    | 1              | -       | -       | 1               | -           | 1             | 3      |
| T16 | 23                   | 11             | 1       | 5       | 7               | 18          | 14            | 2      |
| T17 | 17                   | 9              | 12      | 6       | 3               | 9           | 4             | 4      |
| T18 | 12                   | 8              | 14      | 12      | 7               | 14          | 7             | 1      |
| T19 | 14                   | 5              | 8       | 8       | 5               | 7           | 9             | -      |
| T20 | 17                   | 11             | 6       | 7       | 9               | 11          | 6             | 3      |
| T21 | 9                    | 11             | 12      | 8       | 14              | 12          | 7             | 1      |
| T22 | 1                    | 3              | 9       | 5       | 2               | 8           | 5             | 3      |
| T23 | 11                   | 3              | 7       | 11      | 6               | 12          | 9             | -      |
| T24 | 16                   | 7              | 12      | 2       | 7               | 9           | 7             | 1      |
| T25 | 4                    | 5              | 3       | 8       | 2               | 4           | 8             | 3      |
| T26 | 12                   | 14             | 4       | 12      | 9               | 8           | 3             | -      |

|              |            |            |            |            |            |            |            |           |
|--------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| T27          | 3          | 4          | 6          | 3          | 2          | 2          | -          | 1         |
| T28          | 9          | 6          | 8          | 4          | 6          | 3          | 7          | 2         |
| T29          | 18         | 9          | 12         | 14         | 5          | 9          | 11         | 3         |
| T30          | 17         | 11         | 26         | 3          | -          | 9          | 3          | 1         |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>417</b> | <b>237</b> | <b>330</b> | <b>174</b> | <b>176</b> | <b>243</b> | <b>181</b> | <b>65</b> |

### Specialties of the updates

Some of the features of updates are:

#### Natural

There were not many instances of artificiality in the comments and status updates of the teenagers. They seemed to be flowing from their inner hearts. This may be because they feel social media platforms are more secured or they are having an element of privacy in their talks here. They might have blocked the unwanted people (especially their parents or 'problematic' relatives) from seeing their comments and updates.

#### Spontaneous response

There was spontaneity to the responses. It is a specialty of the social media site itself. This spontaneity is seen not in the case of responses to certain comments by others but also in the case of certain life situations they are undergoing. They don't keep things for tomorrow. They settle accounts then and there.

#### Not bothered about the after effects

Whatever came to their mind, they poured out as it is. They were not bothered about the consequences of their comments posted in the social media pages. This is one of the characteristic features of the adolescence. Elders may call it the teenager's carelessness or disrespect for others. But the teenager in turn might not have thought about it in that way. They just wanted to express themselves; and they did it in their own way.

#### Fearless self expression

One element seen in almost all the posts was that they were posted without any fear. This fearlessness can be seen as an outcome of the teenagers' urge to become an adult. This fearlessness again makes them post comments which in turn may cause some troubles later.



**Ready to apologize**

The teenagers were ready to ask forgiveness if they think that they said or did something wrong. They were prompt in doing so especially if their words or comments hurt someone.

**Bold enough to discuss many things in public**

One of the interesting factors seen here is that there is no taboo for any subjects. They discussed freely and openly about their sexual interests and crushes towards somebody. They found it convenient to discuss about their teachers, parents and friends.

**Melancholic in nature**

Though the charm and thrill of the teenage was seen in many comments there was an underlying melancholic tone for many comments and updates. Many have commented about different subjects in a pessimistic way. They were cynic about the chance of attitude change in their parents.

**Apolitical**

Teenagers in general seemed to be apolitical in their discussions and status updates. There were not many posts related to any of the political leaders except for some funny pictures which were shared as innocent jokes. Some teenagers who were residing in the northern part of India put some slogans in support of Anna Hazare for a few days. But there was no political inclination seen in any of these.

**Conclusion**

The Facebook and its status update provision play very important role in the teenagers' socialization process today. They use this updating function to let others know about their whereabouts, what they are thinking or doing, what they like the most and what not. In this process they regard certain topics or subjects as more important compared to others. As it is evident from the findings more than 80% of the teenagers consider family as the least important factor to be added in the status update section. They were fearless in expressing themselves without being bothered about the consequences of their posts.

What can be the cause of such a phenomenon? As psychologists say adolescents tend to have their own 'personal fables' and they try to create more and more stories about themselves. And in all human beings there can be seen an ego-centric personality within the projected self. Here, the most important factor of status updates is the "inner thoughts" of the teenagers. This is a clear manifestation of the psychological concepts like personal fable and the ego centrism. These are two concepts which are part of the Adolescent Psycho Social Development theory.

Though we see many negative elements in these findings, we should accept that these are some of the true facts about the social media usage of the teenagers. There is no point in considering the social media or the teenagers' usage patterns of these media as something to be avoided. Instead what we need today is a better Social Media Culture, where everyone respects everyone else. This takes our attention to the fact that our teenagers are not having much freedom at home, in school or in the society. They cannot take their own decisions in many situations. They have to largely depend upon their parents. They need to vent their frustration somewhere and they find the Facebook as their best companion at least for the time being and at least for this catharsis.

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