

## As Parents Invade Facebook, Teens Tweet More

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"**T**WITTER IS SCARY BECAUSE LIKE IT'S SO MUCH MORE—like you can Google my name and it will have my Twitter account. And then it's not really as protected as Facebook ... because in Facebook, you can set a setting so it really can't see you. But like in Twitter, I always feel like that anyone can really see any tweet that I'm doing, which may be not true ... There wasn't enough privacy, so I just deleted it."<sup>1</sup> This statement was made by a teenage boy in response to a question on a Pew Research Center survey.

Twitter is an online tool that is "part blog, part social networking site, part cell phone/IM tool, designed to let users answer the question 'What are you doing?'"<sup>2</sup> in 140 characters or less.

Do teens still shy away from Twitter? Is it because of a perceived lack of privacy or lack of "cool"? Or have teens just been slower to adopt the 140-character format for tweeting than their adult counterparts? In short and in order, the answers are no, yes, and yes.

The idea that teens don't tweet was planted by one 15-year-old Morgan Stanley intern in 2009. At that time, there was a perception that parents could see what their kids were tweeting, which is not true, especially if the teen chooses a locked, private account under a screen name. Twitter was also perceived as a texting substitute for adults; teens that have grown up texting on their cell phones didn't see the need for it. At that time, the average tweet had to do with self-promotion, which is not a topic of interest to most teens.

For teens, Facebook initially met their social networking needs better than Twitter. They wanted a platform that supported multiple functions to connect with a wide circle of friends. Now, with some teens' Facebook friends numbering in the hundreds or thousands, they are looking for a more select circle of friends with whom to share their interests, and Twitter fills the bill. The ability to share links and opinions quickly and easily with a group of like-minded individuals is attractive.

What has happened to change teens' minds since 2009? The landscape began to change when teens' parents began friending them on Facebook. With a Facebook IPO pending at this writing, this social networking site is now home to 800 million users, so teens need to find a new place to go where their parents are not. Twitter is the logical choice for many teens, especially those with particular interests and those who follow celebrities. They don't have to use their real names and can have multiple accounts.

Although many studies about teen use of social networks are taking place in the United States, other researchers are interested in "whether it is just a matter of time to see the trends described for U.S. youngsters duplicated in other countries and cultural contexts."<sup>3</sup> The governance of social media sites like Twitter is also of interest to researchers: "Economic incentives, the underlying interest of many site owners, would generally

encourage website governance that conforms to legal regulations and social mores."<sup>4</sup> This becomes more important as criminals use social media to recruit teens willing to share photographs (which are then shared with the criminal's child pornography associates), and zealots use social media to recruit candidates for political radicalization.<sup>5</sup> Thankfully, most parents are talking to their Internet- and cell-phone-using teens about the elements of safe use.<sup>1</sup>

What do the latest statistics on teen use of Twitter look like? A recent Pew survey<sup>1</sup> found that the percentage of teens aged 12–17 using Twitter had doubled in 2 years, from 8% in 2009 to 16% in 2011. While that is still a small percentage compared to teens with cell phones (75%<sup>6</sup> as of September 2009), teens texting (72%), or teens using social networking sites in general (73%), by the time you read this, the percentage of teen tweeters will surely have risen again. As one teen catches on that tweeting can be anonymous and private, she tells others, and soon entire school populations begin to tweet each other.

As one teen said to a Microsoft Research focus group, "Facebook is like shouting into a crowd. Twitter is like speaking into a room."

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