

BOOK REVIEW

A Filtered Life

Taylor, N., & Nichter, M. (2022). *A Filtered Life: Social Media on a College Campus*. New York, NY: Routledge. ISBN: 978-1032021348. 210 pp. List price: \$32.95

Review by Shanna Hollich, retired library director

Nicole Taylor's and Mimi Nichter's *A Filtered Life: Social Media on a College Campus* provides an overview of their ethnographic research on social media use among college students. The book is essentially formatted as an extra-long research article and is primarily focused on one study performed by the anthropologists over several years. Unfortunately, all of the findings here seem to be predicated on this one study, which only saw 80 participants. Therefore, while the findings here provide an interesting glimpse into how some college students create and manage their identities on social media, the results are far from generalizable. It should also be noted that college students range in age from mid-teens to mid-nineties, but the authors seem to have only included here participants who fall in the late teens to early twenties age range, although this is not clearly specified in the text.

The content is laid out into five chapters that take key insights from participant interviews and group them into general areas: an overview of the social media landscape as a whole, the practice of editing social media photographs and posts, social media and body image, social norms around mood and affect on social media, and emerging themes arising from the onset of COVID-19. This broad organizational structure, along with a detailed and usable index, makes the work here approachable in a number of ways: while there's enough of a narrative structure to carry a reader from cover to cover, it is also

fairly simple for even a novice researcher to skip directly to the topics that are most relevant for their context.

Overall, the methodology here is sound, and even the small sample size is not in itself unusual for this type of ethnographic study. The findings follow naturally from the data that was collected and are well-situated in the literature as a whole. Key themes that the authors stress throughout their discussion include the development of social norms and implicit rules for different social media platforms; the idea of digital multiples and fluid identities across platforms and contexts; how social media relates to various aspects of self-branding, gender, and authenticity; and how much work is involved in the creation and management of our online selves. While each of these themes are useful contributions to the field of digital media studies, one is left with a rather shallow feeling after finishing the book. For anyone who has ever used a social media platform, the findings here are not particularly novel or even particularly interesting; they are, in fact, a reflection and extension of exactly the same sort of social creation that we see in our offline worlds as well.

While the work is grounded in the basics of sociological theory (e.g., Goffman), there is very little discussion of how the major findings here relate to and even mirror the exact same behavior in offline social realms. The idea of having different personas or identities in different contexts is, of course, not new. For example, young adults frequently cultivate completely different identities when they are away at school or with their friends versus at home or with their families, and people in marginalized communities have long had to engage in the tremendous amount of work that is involved with cultivating different personas in different contexts (i.e., “code-switching”). They briefly acknowledge this near the end in one sentence, identifying “social media as a mirror that reflects and magnifies everyday life” (p. 194), but it’s strange to see this be otherwise largely overlooked throughout.

There is, of course, a fundamental mismatch between the slow time scales of academic research and scholarly publishing and the near instantaneous rates at which the internet fosters societal change. Taylor and Nichter handle this well, particularly with the inclusion of their final chapter addressing COVID-19, the rise of TikTok, and emerging themes that arose after they completed their initial study. Though it’s easy to assume that

a topic like this will quickly become dated, this work is likely to stay relevant for quite some time, even if eventually it serves primarily as a snapshot in time of how young adults approached social media in the late 2010s and early 2020s.

The book is not comprehensive enough to be a textbook, but relevant excerpts would be useful and appropriate inclusions in many academic contexts where the sociology and anthropology of social media use may appear as topics. Though the book is thoroughly cited and well-researched, the inclusion of compelling anecdotes from participant interviews and focus groups make the work very readable, which means it is potentially interesting even for a general audience. There are summaries with major takeaways included at the end of each chapter that help to further contextualize the research findings. While there are minor shortcomings with the background assumptions and basic methodology in terms of generalizability, this work would make a nice companion piece when presented with other works in the digital media and sociological literature. It would be particularly interesting to compare and contrast the findings here with research performed in the earlier days of social media, when platforms such as Myspace, LiveJournal, and Angelfire were more commonly used and presumably had entirely different sets of both implicit and explicit social norms surrounding their use. It would also be compelling to place this study in conversation with research done regarding the social media use of other age groups, both younger and older than the college students represented here, to see how it may differ. Ultimately, Taylor and Nichter have created a clear and usable glimpse into the social media habits of a particular group of college students at a particular moment in time, and if that seems relevant to you or your work, I'd recommend taking a look.