

Is Social Media Really Worth It?

What would you do if everyone that you ever met could publicly rate you on a scale from 1-5? Would you try to suck up to every stranger you met to ensure a 5-star rating, or would you act normal?

Black Mirror is a popular show that Netflix created. Each episode tells its own story of a distorted reality that shows uncomfortably realistic resemblances to our current society. It shows different ways our society could easily become a dystopia most of the time because of technological development.

In the *Black Mirror* episode *Nosedive*, the main character, Lacie, lives in a world where everyone is rated on a scale from 1 to 5 stars by their online as well as on social media. They can see others' ratings and their social media in real time because of a retinal implant connected to each person's electronics. Because of this, most of the interactions we see are superficial and fake. The episode's opening scene begins with Lacie practicing her laugh to be more appealing and likable. There are several characters in the show that try their best not to tailor their interactions with others for the sole purpose of getting a 5-star rating. Unfortunately, they are punished for their honesty and authenticity because others cannot handle it.

The rating system functions similarly to a credit score and Instagram combined. It controls all aspects of their life, such as what buildings they can enter, flight availability, car renting, and how people treat them. All of these things are in other people's hands without the ability to defend or redeem yourself from what others think. This type of power can have drastic consequences when it is in the wrong person's hands. Lacie's coworker Chester had a decent rating until he broke up with his boyfriend, that also worked at the office. Most of the office felt sympathy towards Chester's ex-boyfriend and decided to get revenge on Chester by rating him 1 star. Chester then tried to win everyone's favor by being extra nice and bringing smoothies, but that didn't work(Booker). The next day Chester's rating was 2.4, and he could not enter the office building because his rating was under 2.5 stars. He begged Lacie to rate him 5 stars so he could enter the office building, but she declined against her better judgment because she feared backlash from her peers.

Because the rating system is almost like a monetary popular contest, the people with higher scores, such as a 4 or higher, receive special treatment. Lacie is looking for a new apartment to move into and discovers Pelican Cove. Pelican Cove is an apartment community that advertises all its residents living traditionally happy suburban lives. When Lacie goes to look at the apartment, she falls in love but is shocked when she finds out the price. The Apartment manager tells Lacie that they have an influencer program that would get Lacie a 20% discount on rent, but only tenants with a 4.5 rating or higher are eligible. This becomes Lacie's primary motivator to get a higher rating, ultimately leading to her downfall. This causes Lacie to act even more outside of her character and follow the advice of a "rating analyst" to expand her social network and to try her best to receive high ratings from people with a rating of 4.5 or higher(Booker). The next day Lacie attempts to suck up to an old coworker Bethany who

has a high rating, but Bethany can see Lacie's shallowness and rates her 3 stars. Later in the day, Lacie receives a call from one of her childhood friends, Naomi, who has a rating of 4.8. Naomi is getting married and asks if Lacie would be her maid of honor and make a speech at her reception. Because Lacie is desperate for a higher rating since she is so close to getting a 4.5, she accepts, despite her true feelings towards Naomi.

As the wedding approaches, Lacie practices and turns her speech, which traditionally would be honest and sentimental, into a performance that she believes would guarantee her 5-star ratings from Naomi's high-rated guest list. The day she is supposed to leave to go to the rehearsal dinner, she gets into an argument with her brother Ryan, who believes the rating system is pointless. Out of anger, he rates her 1 star and ends up making her late for a taxi, which also ends up rating her one star. When she gets to the airport, she finds out that her flight is canceled and the next flight has a standby seat only available for someone with a 4.2 rating or more. Because of her brother and the taxi driver, Lacie's rating dipped below 4.2, so she could not get on the flight. She lashes out at the airline desk worker, which causes the worker to call security to escort her out of the airport premises. The security guard also temporarily lowered Lacie's rating by a whole point and put her on "double damage." For 24 hours, any negative score would count twice as much(Booker). At this point, Lacie's only option was to rent a car and drive to where the wedding was being held. When Lacie leaves the airport, her rating is below 3 stars. This limits her options of cars she can rent, and she is given one of the older models of an electric car that eventually runs out of charge. Lacie decides that her best option is to walk until someone is kind enough to give her a ride to her destination. As she is walking down the road with her belongings, strangers that pass her rate her 2 stars because of the inconvenience she is causing them. A lady that is a truck driver offers Lacie a ride, but Lacie hesitates because the truck driver has a rating of 1.4. As Lacie gets to know Susan, the truck driver, they begin to talk about their feelings toward the rating system. Susan explains that she once had a 4.6 until she realized how shallow and fake her life was after her husband died. Her husband died from cancer because he was denied experimental treatment because there was someone with a higher rating than him. After that, Susan began to live her life how she wanted to and said what she wanted, which led to her current low rating. Despite it all, Susan says she doesn't regret a thing because now she feels free. Susan tries to encourage Lacie to be honest and genuine, but Lacie says that she isn't in a position to do so because she doesn't have anything worth losing because she hasn't achieved her goal. So until then, Lacie will "play the numbers game" (Booker). Susan and Lacie have to part ways because Susan starts heading in a direction away from the wedding. Lacie then hitches a ride with strangers heading to a convention by pretending she is also interested in that show. While on the way there, Lacie receives a call from Naomi telling Lacie not to come to the wedding anymore because she has a 2.6 rating, which would be essentially social suicide for Naomi. Naomi then informs Lacie that it was advantageous for both of them,



"It was numbers for both of us. You wanted those primo votes, don't deny it"(Booker).



That was the last straw for Lacie, and she began to spiral faster. When she makes it to the wedding reception, Lacie is inebriated and covered in dirt. Lacie starts to give a distorted form of her speech that she has been preparing for a month with a few honest additions and her own personal opinions that paint Naomi negatively overall. However, the only person that received consequences was Lacie because everyone in the audience rated her 1 star. Lacie was grabbed by security and escorted to a prison where her retinal implants were deactivated, and she was forced to sit in a plain grey cell. She can see the person across from her, and she tries to still rate him even though she doesn't have a phone or a retinal implant. The two begin to talk and eventually start screaming at each other. Both of them were releasing emotions that they had suppressed for so long, and they both seemed to feel free.

This episode is an excellent example of a dystopia because it shows elements of both oppression and desperation of the characters. Lacie is so desperate to live a lifestyle that she thinks it would make her happier without realizing it is quite the opposite. She isn't living her life but is instead living life for others. Because of this, she will never feel true happiness like she thinks she will. Most of the characters are desperate for a high rating because it has so many positives, and it would allow all of them to live a life that they see others with high ratings live.

In some cases, this desperation for a high score can turn into an obsession where a person can lose the small amount of self-worth that she had, to begin with in the first place. The social rating scale allows society to discriminate and oppress others without any consequences, and in some cases, discrimination is encouraged by others.

Another way that this fits my expectation of a dystopia is that within the society, there are people that are not following the social norms, as well as people that do what is expected of them to the best of their ability. The people who go against the social norms by not trying to get a high rating are either ostracized from society or get the privilege to rate others taken away. Some people can stay in the mid-range level, like Lacie's brother, Ryan, who disagreed with doing things for a high rating. Ryan can live this way without being punished because he has a small circle of gaming friends who enjoy his bluntness.

Currently, with the way most of society treats social media, we are headed in a direction similar to the one shown on *Black Mirror Nosedive*. Similar to how Lacie and other people attempted to achieve high scores by taking aesthetic pictures, the real world does the same thing. But just like in Lacie's case, there are negative consequences when this is done incorrectly. This is because people will do anything for more likes or an opportunity to become internet famous, whether for a good or a bad reason. An example of this is that in 2016 a woman live-streamed her friend being assaulted on an app called Periscope. The reason that she gave as to why she kept filming instead of intervening and helping her friend is that she "got caught up on the likes" (Brownstein).

Misuse of social media can create several other negative feelings that can drive a person to do things that are outside of their character. A study by Kaspersky lab showed that "60% of the participants viewed a friend as having a better life than their own simply by seeing that friends's social media activity, and almost half were upset after viewing photos from a friend's happy holiday celebration" (Brownstein). This is even seen in the *Black Mirror* episode. Lacie gets jealous when she scrolls through Naomi's pictures on social media. She even tried to make the recipe that she had on Naomi's page to make her feel like she was living a similar lifestyle as Naomi.

In 2015 there was an app called "Peeple" with the same concept shown in *Black Mirror*. One of the app's founders, Julia Corday, intended for the app to be used positively. Corday believed that since "people do so much research when they buy a car or make those kinds of decisions, why not do the same kind of research on the other aspects of your life" (Dewey)? The other founder, Nicole McCullough, wanted to create the app to ensure that her neighbors were safe and could be trusted with her kids. Unfortunately, neither of the founders considered the immense power that comes with creating an app like this. The original version of the app allowed her people to rate others publicly without that person knowing unless they were also on the app. Users would be added to the system if someone put them there to be rated. Positive reviews were posted immediately, and negative ones were sent to the person being rated inbox for 48 hours before it was also posted publicly (Dewey). Unlike the show, the app, Peeple, forced users to comment on why the rating was what they gave them. There were also guidelines on what was and was not allowed to be said on the app. As many critics pointed out, like with many other rating apps and websites, the only users leaving a rating are those on both extremes of the scale (Dewey). The likelihood of someone leaving an average 3-star review on another person is very small compared to the likelihood that they would leave someone a 1- or 5-star rating. The reviews posted will most likely be driven by emotion and severely biased.

After the beta testers and the internet gave their feedback on the scary potential this app held, the founders made changes before they released the app. Instead, users can only rate other users signed up for the app (Mastroianni). Users can also remove their negative reviews, and only posted reviews will be public. The app's intention changed from a way to find out how others are perceived to a way for users

to get feedback from their peers. The app is currently unavailable on the app store due to its unpopularity before it was officially released. The official version of the app did not serve a desirable purpose to the public.

This fits my expectation of a real-life dystopia because having an app where people can rate others publicly can easily and quickly create a situation where social media can turn into a measurable system with value. We live in a world where social media and public perception can give you a nice life. Social media influencers make a living by marketing themselves and their lives as aesthetic and ideal. Most influencers would also not have access to certain opportunities if they weren't influencers.

Our society is already divided into many categories due to differences in race, social, economic status, gender, etc.

Allowing social media to be another factor that separates us instead of unites could be detrimental. Especially because there are already so many barriers to success for a large portion of people, adding an additional one will do nothing but make it easier for some people to succeed while also holding others back more. It also encouraged others to stop having meaningful interactions because an artificial interaction would allow them to go further. Of course, there are some instances, such as for work, where it would be best not to always be brutally honest with everyone you contact. However, it would be impossible to make long-lasting, genuine friendships without being our true selves. It also limits the happiness a person can experience because they would be living a life that is not for them.

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