Media Analysis of "Nosedive" (Black Mirror): A Symbolic Interactionist Perspective

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Kyle Willmott SA150 course *Introduction to Sociology*. The assignment asked students to write an essay applying the knowledge of sociological concepts learned in class to analyze a form of media. The paper uses Chicago Author-Date citation style.

Perfect pictures, perfect people, perfect lives, we often feel obligated to portray ourselves as such on social media, however, at what cost? Consequences of mental health issues, body dysmorphia, and lack of self-worth, all stem from this constant need to maintain a mere illusion. However, Black Mirror's "Nosedive" (Wright, 2016) episode demonstrates an exaggerated commentary upon society and its technological relationship with social and cultural capital, social stratification, and front-stage/back-stage dynamics (Quan-Haase and Tepperman 2018). In a society where external validation is not only internalized, but is quantified, the role of racking up 'social points' dictates the opportunities that an individual will receive. From a symbolic interactionist standpoint, this episode highlights the transformative power of symbols within the digital world, and how we enable these social structures to exist through our conditioned behaviours and values. The essay will dissect the sociological undertones about the commodification of social interactions, the implications of technology on our sense of identity, as well as the biases we form around the different levels of social hierarchy.

The story revolves around the main character Lacie Pound, a seemingly happy and charming woman (Wright, 2016). Her gleaming energy radiates wherever she goes, and as a result she receives warm praise from those around in the form of smiles and a 5-point rating system. However, as the story progresses, the authenticity of her actions becomes obscured. Rather than behaving in a

genuine sense, her actions are reduced to simple forms of personal gain. This rating system serves not only as a number, but a key to respect, a key to privilege, and a key to success. Lacie's rating sits at a 4.2, but to reach the status that she desires, she must have a score of 4.5 or higher to reap the benefits of her idols. We view how her actions shift in a way that is deemed conventionally acceptable and adjusts her behaviour in accordance to certain social ideals in pursuit of higher ratings. Criticisms aside, Lacie's behaviour cannot be blamed on her as an individual, but rather society as a whole. As everyone else does, she wants to be in the best position possible to receive good things in life, subsequently she acts in accordance with the long-standing customs and norms that will position herself higher within this hierarchal structure (Emery et al., 2023).

As people are stratified into layers categories of organization based on their rating, major disparities begin to form. Analogous to our real world, institutionalized systems work in favour of this social hierarchy, justifying and legitimizing the poor treatment of those in lower levels of the strata, and showering the rich with powerful advantages (Emery et al., 2023). When an individual fails to conform to societal expectations and expected ranges of behaviours, others rank them poorly and they are then filtered into different levels of class. Individuals must scrutinize each and every one of their actions or be subject to having lower ratings at the expense of their sanity. Real connections are replaced with a façade of interactions with the sole intent to boost one's social rating. These ratings become a form of currency (social and cultural capital) that dictates ones' access to possibilities (Warr 2006). The higher the ratings, the more opportunities and advantages will be presented to you. Conversely, having a low rating defines an individual as a social pariah, letting them be subject to prejudice, discrimination, and inability to receive equal rights and opportunities. The use of negative ratings becomes a form of social warfare and can be used strategically to damage one's reputation quite directly. This polarization is reminiscent of our real world where status, value, and worth stem from our social networks and critiques the social stratification that exists in our society today.

Goffman's dramaturgical theory (Quan-Haase and Tepperman 2018) comes into play in this episode as characters meticulously curate their public images to appeal to others, as if in a performance. Lacie is seen to fall into this perpetual state of impression management, so severe that she loses sense of self and relies her worth solely on the virtual validation of others. She becomes infatuated with the performative version of her life on the digital stage mirroring the way our current society has become infatuated with likes and followers on

social media. She exhibits a fair amount of struggle balancing her frontstage and back-stage personas, again referencing Goffman's notions of plurality within an individual. This ultimately became the catalyst to Lacie's downfall in the story, as she puts this excessive burden to manage these dynamics within herself, she ends up letting that bottled up anger from her back-stage spill to the front creating a dramatic argument with a woman at the airport.

Overall, none of these concepts would exist without the overarching lens of symbolic interactionism. We as a society form attachments and meanings to roles and social constructs. This is extremely pervasive when analysing this episode in the sense that the characters develop such strong emotions linked to digital ratings and the classes that form because of this. These digital ratings not only affect how others perceive a person, but how one views their own perception of worth (Ugwu et al., 2023). When receiving a low virtual score, although it is not 'real', individuals engage in this process of interpreting why they value less and in what ways may they change their behaviours to better navigate this societal landscape. This can in turn be reflected to our society as well where we form notions about different genders, class, socioeconomic differences, religions, and how we try to behave in different ways to cater to others surrounding us.

Symbolic interactionism also lies in this dystopian story as it shows our commodification and quantification of social interactions. Social and cultural capital can only be defined because of symbolic interactionism. The nuances, behaviours, and meanings behind the rating system are created because we give meaning to it. The characters give value to a fabricated number, a number that does not exist by itself and is only upheld by society itself. This ranking system only exists because of society's attachment and formulated conceptions towards each class, not because it itself has any intrinsic value. The end of the story culminates with Lacie being put in a glass chamber akin to a jail cell, this is where she begins screaming and yelling full of profanity at another person in the jail. Although a heated conversation, it seems as if this is the happiest Lacie has been in the entire film, finally rejecting the societal pressures and releasing the hold that those conformities once held on her before.

In conclusion, Black Mirror expressed a remarkable commentary upon society and our inherent relationship to virtual validation. Through an obscured view and portrayal on the effects of materialism, conspicuous consumption, and our reliance on status, this story plays a crucial role in providing us with a valuable lesson on offers a profound exploration and conceptualization of symbolic exchanges online and how we as a society has shifted in our impression

management. The episode expresses our loss of authenticity within the digital realm and how we need to be aware of the sociological implications that social media can have on us. "Nosedive" invites viewers to take a step back and reflect on the nuances of social polarisation and fragmented class politics within our society in real life and digitally, urging us to be more perceptive of how we treat others and ourselves within a broader sociological sense. With this newfound awareness, we must be wary of how much pressure we put upon ourselves to fit societal molds and exhibit self-actualizing rituals to find our own sense of fulfillment.

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