

Social Media and Friendship

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I. Introduction

Social media is unavoidable in today's globalized and interconnected world, and many may see it as a beneficial tool to stay connected with people one may not otherwise stay in contact with. I, however, see social media not only as a tool to stay in contact with old friends, but also a system that is slowly making friendships less meaningful and more superficial.

II. Background

In this paper, I will mostly be referencing the television show *Black Mirror*, or more specifically, I will be referencing season 3, episode 1, *Nosedive*. I will be using this episode of *Black Mirror* in reference to today's world that is increasingly obsessed with social media and the internet. In this episode, one's standing in the world is based off how other people rate them on social media, with real life consequences such as not being able to go in certain places. I will also be referencing several social media sites and services, such as Snapchat, Instagram, and WhatsApp. I will use an NPR podcast to address a new development in China of a "social credit score", similar to that in *Black Mirror*. This social credit score tracks what one does in life and can determine various parts of life, such as the cost of items/services and whether the person can travel to certain places or not.

III. Argument

Today's world is increasingly infatuated with social media, and not only is the number of users of such sites growing, but so is the level at which it penetrates our lives. This saturation of social media in our lives, I feel, lowers the overall quality of many friendships people have (or think they have). Since it is so easy to just press a follow button on someone's social media page

and pretend that that person is a friend, this has become the current state of many people's real social circle. Most people will still have a few real friends that they interact with face to face on a daily basis, but many people, however, simply call themselves friends with lots of people they just follow on social media, and have not actively communicated with that person in a very long time. Due to this, they are only seeing the best parts of other people's lives and may be comparing their whole lives to only the best parts of somebody else's, thus not only weakening friendships by giving the illusion that they are there when the friendship may be long dead, but also giving a source of depression and a feeling of inadequacy that would not naturally be there.

In the *Black Mirror* episode *Nosedive*, social media has taken on a role beyond even what we have in society today¹. In the world of *Nosedive*, everyone has a rating out of 5 stars, and this rating is what determines almost everything about that person's life. This is a bit of an exaggeration of what we are at in society right now, but it is a very real possibility for the future. This is similar to a system that has recently been put in place in China with their "Social Credit Score" system², although it is not as widespread yet. The simple existence of such a system in the real world, however, shows that the idea of a social score ruling almost the entirety of one's life is not altogether a far-fetched idea. While the social score in China is similar to the one in *Nosedive*, there are some differences. The main similarities are that one's actions are rewarded or punished them, in order to allow one to go to certain places or attend certain events. There are some differences, though, such as in *Nosedive*, all of the scores come from other people, whereas in the Chinese system, the scores also come from the government. This system being in place (even

¹ *Black Mirror*, Season 3, Episode 1, *Nosedive*

² NPR, "China Tests a 'Social Credit Score'", podcast, October 31, 2018

though it is currently only in testing) shows that *Black Mirror* may seem like an impossible dystopia, but it is not an unreasonable guess for the future.

Social media is not entirely detrimental to friendships, however. Friendships cannot generally continue if neither person talks to the other, and in today's globalized world, the simple distance between two friends may make it impossible to continue this friendship without the aid of social media such as WhatsApp, Facebook, or Instagram. For example, my best friend from high school goes to school in Providence, Rhode Island, while I attend school in Farmville, Virginia. This distance would normally be too great to sustain a friendship over, but due to social media, the same thing that *Nosedive* portrayed as to hallmark of a dystopia, has kept a friendship alive and well over many months that we have not seen each other.

Social media is a close mix between a bad and a good thing for the modern society, as it allows the world to run smoother, or allows people to start their own business campaign, and can be very beneficial to society, but if it is allowed to get too far, as it was in the world of *Nosedive*, than overall it would be a harm to society and would eventually completely control our lives. In this episode, however, there are some redeeming factors to the world. There is a character in there who seems to represent more of how the world is now, who does not care about the social media and does not care about what other people think of her. This is the voice of reason in an otherwise horrific (and potentially somewhat accurate) depiction of what social media may be doing to the world, and to our friendships. The most accurate part of the episode, is when a friend reaches out to the main character to invite her to the friend's wedding, saying that she wanted an old friend to speak there. This turns out to be a lie, and that it was just for social media, which unfortunately already happens now and then in our world, where people reach out to others that

they have not talked to in a long time in order to further their own goals, rather than in the name of friendship as they claim.

IV. Conclusion

Social media is currently neither a solely good or solely bad thing, as it does provide some benefits as keeping in contact with far away friends, but it is also slowly dissolving away our current friendships with a feeling of fake security. If society is not careful, the dystopia that is shown in *Nosedive* could potentially become our reality.