



# THE ROSE-COLORED WORLD OF *BLACK MIRROR*'S “NOSEDIVE”: COLOR AND GENDERED EXPECTATIONS OF SOCIAL CREDIT SYSTEMS

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The anthology television series *Black Mirror* (Netflix 2011–2023) has been praised for exploring ways that technology, left unregulated, can potentially affect our lives. While the series originated in the United Kingdom, it has become quite popular amongst Netflix viewers throughout the world, especially in the United States. Many episodes feature popular American actors such as John Hamm, Miley Cyrus, and Aaron Paul. Additionally, the themes presented in the series, such as Artificial Intelligence, privacy, and security, are important to the transnational audience, as these issues are present in many communities.

Season three of the series (2021) opens with the episode “Nosedive,” which looks at how social credit systems (SCS) might affect individuals in negative ways. In looking at systems put in place in China, the items affecting one's score are either gender neutral, such as accruing debt or poor driving, or aimed mainly at men, policing actions such as harassment on public transportation, playing too many video games, or watching pornography. However, the episode shows that the “work” of social credit largely falls on women, especially in connection with social media usage and its commodification of positive attitude and behavior.

Color is used throughout the episode to bring attention to the gendered aspect of such systems. The world is presented in pastels, light colors, and images that are often associated with femininity. This paper will explore the ways in which “Nosedive” uses color to reinforce the gendered aspects of these technologies. The episode presents social credit systems as exacerbating the existing harm caused by technologies in the modern world. In addition, the paper will look at how color is used to reinforce these gendered expectations as well as explore how the palette contradicts the dystopian world shown in the episode.



“Nosedive” explores how technology like eye implants and mobile devices are paired with social media to create a social credit score. The protagonist, Lacie Pound (Bryce Dallas Howard), is attempting to raise her score from 4.2 to 4.5 on a five-point scale, to qualify for an apartment in an exclusive community. The audience sees her constant attempts to raise this score, by smiling and being pleasant, rating others positively, and creating highly produced social media posts. She even consults a paid expert for ideas of how to raise this score. One post catches the attention of former friend Naomi Blestow (Alice Eve), who is considered elite, as her score is 4.8. Lacie is invited to be a bridesmaid at Naomi’s wedding, which will surely help to raise her score. While traveling to the event, she experiences a number of misfortunes, and each event lowers her rating. As the numbers drop, she begins to experience negative consequences, such as not being able to book a flight and only being offered a dilapidated car at a rental agency. Eventually, she finds herself frantically trying to participate in the wedding reception, even though she has been disinvited because of her plummeting score. These antics lead Lacie to jail, and the conclusion of the episode.

## SOCIAL CREDIT SYSTEMS

The social credit system is a relatively new phenomenon, and most discussion of such programs focuses on China, which announced its plan to create such a system in 2014. The State Council (2015) declared, “A social credit system is an important component part of the Socialist market economy system and the social governance system.” Much of the document is focused on creating systems that foster “sincerity,” “harmony,” and “traditional virtues.” Since the system was not fully operational until 2020, there is very little research into its usage, although it has been widely criticized for its significant violations of privacy and propagandistic elements. There are also concerns about how such a system would stifle the public exchange of ideas, since the “granular monitoring and targeting of individuals that big data technology enables jeopardizes free and open debate in society, even through seemingly innocuous applications” (Cho 2020, n.p.). Such systems would limit criticism of the government in online and real-world spaces, encourage individuals to associate with only with acceptable peers, and could create situations of individuals reporting on their neighbors and co-workers in order to protect themselves or to boost their own scores.

While most discussion of social credit systems is negative, there are some who see positives in such programs. Mirjam Mueller writes in her article “Is a Social Credit System Good for Women?” about the possibility of elevating the worth of tasks deemed women’s work:

[T]his could be good news for feminists: tasks that are distributed along gendered lines could be valued differently if they are rewarded in the social credit scheme. For instance, in one of the local social credit schemes in China, purchasing diapers for a



child increases the social credit score of a person. Consequently, there is a potential that feminine-coded tasks that often go unnoticed, such as child-care, will become more visible and differently valued as a result. This, in turn, could have significant effects on how stereotypically female tasks are valued and understood more broadly. (2019, n.p.)

The SCS contains a combination of elevating the importance of women’s unseen labor while punishing bad behaviors usually associated with men, such as smoking in public places, excessive video game playing, watching pornography, and consuming too much alcohol (Lilly 2018, n.p.). While this combination may seem to even the social playing field for men and women, there is still concern about what the end results of such policies will look like. Mueller (2019) cautions, “Yet, if nothing changes with regards to the division of labour, and hence if women continue to be the primary caretakers, the way in which these tasks are valued might merely take a different form” (n.p.). Will men perform more caretaking duties to increase their scores, or will they settle for lower rankings in exchange for not changing their behaviors? And if men refuse to change, will the rating systems be modified to no longer rate tasks seen as female oriented as highly?

While the discussion of social credit systems largely focuses on China, there are similar systems throughout the world, although not formalized through government. Social media apps create informal SCSs, as users are ranked by numbers of likes, followers, blue checkmarks, and more. In 2019, Uber announced that it would bar passengers with low scores from using the service. The company stated in a blog post that “Riders will receive tips on how to improve their ratings, such as encouraging polite behavior, avoiding leaving trash in the vehicle, and avoiding requests for drivers to exceed the speed limit” (Lilly 2018, n.p.). In addition to banning low rated passengers, the app’s algorithm matches higher rated drivers to higher rated passengers. Even though the company maintains that lower passenger ratings are caused by problematic behaviors, there are many anecdotes found online of users receiving lower scores for not talking to the drivers, talking too much, mentioning a politically leaning topic, and more. Since the passengers’ access to Uber’s primary service, receiving a ride, is determined by the score, the app is enforcing its own social credit system.

## SOCIAL MEDIA AND GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

While Uber’s passenger rating system is currently the most prominent example of SCSs, nearly all social media sites contain less obvious forms of the practice. In 2018, Facebook announced that the site would create “trustworthiness” scores for all users but would not make this information available to the public (Leetaru 2018, n.p.). In addition to these formalized structures, there is also the “soft” or “unofficial” social



ranking created by the content one shares on social media. Another complex layer to this issue is the intersection of social media and commerce, as the sites sell both products to the users and personal data to third parties. One's social media presence becomes both an online identity and a commercialized product. The rise of influencers on Instagram and Tik Tok show just how lucrative that carefully crafted online presence can be. One of the most well-known examples of influencer pay is model Kendall Jenner's \$250,000 payment for posting one tweet advertising the ill-fated Fyre festival (Voytko 2020). While this is a significantly higher rate than most influencers are making, it demonstrates how common the commodification of social media content is. William Davies (2021) writes about the dangers of combining the two, stating that platforms can now serve as credit-rating devices in a literal sense, allowing creditworthiness to be evaluated on the basis of a wide range of behaviour, not just limited to the economic sphere, but potentially including social connections and the credit scores of one's friends" (94). The various forms of social ratings created by the digital services create a negative feedback loop, as users never reach a specific goal or status.

Social media posting has largely been viewed as a "feminization" of the world wide web, which was previously viewed as a mostly male space. Sites like Instagram and Pinterest have significantly larger numbers of women users than men. In 2016, 58% percent of Instagram accounts were owned by women (Seligson 2016, n.p.). That year, Hannah Seligson interviewed several sociologists for an article in *The Atlantic* about gender roles in social media. She found an interesting connection to the non-digital world, including Katri Tiidenberg, who noted that "more women may use Instagram because mothers, in particular, have historically been responsible for family photos." (n.p.). Posts are often highly curated to create an image of perfection, whether it be the young, beautiful model on a beach or a happy family at Christmas, and creating these posts take a great deal of time. A 2013 study from Facebook indicated that men are more likely to search the site for news, whereas women are looking to make connections; the study also found that women create twice as many posts as men (see Wang et al. 2013). 'Nosedive' reinforces this gender divide, since the episode features a decidedly feminine ethos, which shows viewers the "'feminization of the Internet,' its transformation from an open wilderness to a domesticated web of social performance and consumerism." (Greer 2020, 99).

In her article "Wages for Face-Work: Black Mirror's 'Nosedive' and Digital Reproductive Labor," Erin Greer (2020) explores the very real cost of labor that goes into social media content creation. Playing on the term "housework," Greer posits that "facework" is additional social work that is often ignored by larger society and is primarily performed by women, as "maintaining a social media identity and connections with others requires vigilant activity, digitalized social labors that have transformed 'free time' into time that might be spent clicking, responding, posting"



(99). She specifically explores a group of super-users as a sign of what social media interaction may become for most women if they continue to use these platforms without restraint: “the harbingers of our shared future might be today’s influencers—the people, mostly women (and predominantly white, conventionally attractive, young women) who maintain a brand across social media platforms through blogging, vlogging, tweeting, and Instagramming about fashion, makeup, cooking, romance, and other conventionally feminine pursuits” (93–94). Influencers craft their online identities into personal brands, which are then monetized with product endorsements and paid postings. Their online labor looks effortless at first glance, but creating these brands takes a great deal of time and money. In “Nosedive”, all of the super-users are those with high social credit scores and are nearly uniformly white, blonde, and dressed in pink.

### “NOSEDIVE,” GENDER, AND COLOR

“Nosedive” features a highly feminized aesthetic, reinforcing the notion that the effects of the social credit system will largely fall onto women. The episode features pastel colors prominently in both costumes and interior design. In an interview with *Laist.com*, costume designer Sinead O’Sullivan describes the color choices: “[Director] Joe [Wright] wanted to create a dystopia that is pristine, picture perfect, and thought the overall pastel and preppy color scheme would reflect the character’s aspirations to appear chirpy and happy at all times” (qtd. in Carlson 2018, n.p.). Walls in office buildings, airports, and cafes are in shades of pink and purple, with few characters wearing dark clothing.

Pink came to be associated with women and girls in the mid-1950s, with scholars noting that influential women such as Mamie Eisenhower and Audrey Hepburn were seen often in the color. Prenatal testing, which allowed for a child’s sex to be determined, also contributed to the growing association of gender and color, as parents could buy items for their children in either pink or blue, instead of more neutral colors (Paoletti 2012, 118). Toys soon adopted these color codes, and a further segregation occurred, as toys for boys, such as construction equipment and superhero figurines, were designed to “facilitate physicality, competition, dominance and construction.” In contrast, girl’s toys such as dolls, beauty kits, and Easy Bake Ovens “facilitate domesticity, concern with appearance and nurturance” (Fine and Rush 2018, 770). It is no surprise that these early childhood associations carry into adulthood, as the color-gender connection is prevalent in the earliest years of one’s life.

In “Nosedive,” other feminine-coded elements are included, such as a focus on selfies in social media posting, smiling to strangers, and a desire to constantly be pleasant. When viewing an apartment in the luxury Pelican Cove community, a hologram of Lacie appears with a very good-looking man, and the image recreates a couple’s morning routine. The images seem to be taken from romance literary and film





tropes, such as cuddling in the kitchen making coffee, which hints to the sexual activities of the night before. The community appears in pastel colors with plenty of sunshine, clean streets, and perfectly manicured yards, which help to invoke the tradition of showing the suburbs as an idyllic place on the surface, but one that harbors darkness underneath. Viewers are reminded of films with similar suburban aesthetics, such as *The Stepford Wives*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Pleasantville*.

As Lacie prepares for the workday, she is seen practicing her smile in front of her mirror. Images of Naomi's wedding preparations feature beautiful, blonde women, all in pink, engaging in beauty treatments. Social media posts by the main characters feature themes commonly associated with women, such as gourmet coffee, travel, animals, and childhood toys. While, in real life, men absolutely post content with these items online, in the episode they are deliberately crafted to remind the viewer of female stereotypes.

Viewers watch Lacie carefully construct her identity, creating a marketable image sent out into the digital world. She is always well-groomed, smiling, and wearing attractive clothes in bright colors, but there is a lack of authenticity to her persona and her relationships with others. Each interaction with a service worker ends with her holding her phone up to show the positive score she has given. In her workplace, Lacie is admonished for giving a high rating to a fellow co-worker who has just been fired, as associating with a lower-scored individual is taboo. She abandons a colleague in need of comfort, for fear of lowering her score. Lacie is even criticized by the rental car staff, dressed in a teal uniform, for appearing inauthentic when she asks for a new battery. In the article "Algorithmic Intimacy, Prosthetic Memory, and Gamification in *Black Mirror*," Jin Kim looks at how the episode unites elements beyond gender to create this digital dystopia where "social capital, the currency in emotional capitalism, which is coupled with ideas of self-care, aesthetic labor, and 'beauty politics in neoliberalism'" (2021, 115).

It is no surprise that the standard of beauty presented in the episode mirrors the traditional standards seen in the real world. The elite women are all white, thin, and dress in traditionally feminine ways—they are rarely seen wearing pants. They allude to stereotypes associated with cheerleaders, sorority sisters, and society women. In a subtle nod to the racial element of the SCS, the episode shows the scores of non-White characters as significantly lower than their white counterparts. In addition, nearly all the service workers are from minority groups. This is a gamified culture, and those that do not meet the ideal standard are penalized, first by their scores and then by the lack of access caused by the scores. As Kim (2020) states, "The main character's journey can be read as an allegory about neoliberal subjects in a gamified society" (115).

While the vast majority of characters in "Nosedive" participate in the social credit system, the audience is introduced to a few that do not, and these characters remind Lacie, and the audience, of the flaws in the system. Color is used to signal to the



audience that the characters are outsiders, as they are the only ones seen in darker shades. Lacie's brother Ryan Pound (James Norton) is content with his low 3.7 score. He is introduced wearing a dark blue shirt, rather than pastel, and virtual reality goggles. He is a gamer that has created a community of other gamers with lower scores. While he does not eschew the system entirely, he is not nearly as concerned with his lower score as his sister is. It is important to note that, as a gamer, he is still participating in the digital landscape, and he does participate in the gamified world, but without the expectations of perfection his sister has. As a man, he is given more leeway to opt out of the system than a woman would be, as he is not subject to the social pressures that women like Lacie experience in both their online presences and real-world interactions.

Perhaps the most interesting supporting character in the episode is Susan Taylor (Cherry Jones), the truck driver who offers Lacie a ride to the wedding when her second-rate rental car breaks down. Susan is older and gender non-conforming, as she is seen with no makeup, wearing dark jeans, and has a traditionally male occupation. She stumbles upon Lacie at night, and this is one of the only moments shown without sunlight, adding another visual clue that she is different. Susan reveals that her score is an abysmal 1.7 and that she used to care greatly about her rating but lost interest when her husband was diagnosed with cancer. She attempted to be more authentic in her online and in-person interactions, which led to her score dropping and her friends abandoning her. She confesses that losing interest in her social score was liberating, as she no longer had to tailor her identity to the ratings system.

The final non-conforming character is introduced after Lacie's breakdown at the wedding lands her in jail. Another prisoner is seen in the adjacent cell. Viewers know little about him, as he is not given a name or a reason for being imprisoned. He is a Black man in a tailored, dark suit. As the episode comes to a close, he and Lacie begin screaming profanities at one another, releasing the pent-up frustration from having to present only positive images to the world. As prisoners, they have lost all social capital and have nothing to lose from being their authentic selves. The episode ends with both loudly yelling "Fuck you!" to each other, but this can also be seen as a brief but searing commentary on the entire social credit system.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, "Nosedive" uses color to address issues that are just beginning to be explored in the real world and to show the dangers of the collision of digital tracking, social media, and gendered expectations. While the Social Credit System in China is too new to gather data or results from, the softer systems such as user ratings systems on apps like Uber have already shown the problems that come with linking an arbitrary score to a specific service. In addition, the pressure to create engaging and aspirational social media presence creates additional social labor for women and relies



on sexist stereotypes of women. Lacie Pound's journey through "Nosedive" shows how tenuous such a system is for all, but especially women and minorities, and how it leads one away from authentic existence into a gamified and totalitarian world, even if that world is presented in cheerful colors.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Mendel, Jolene. 2023. “The Rose-Colored World of *Black Mirror*’s “Nosedive”: Color and Gendered Expectations of Social Credit Systems.” *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published July 18.