

Through the Mirror

Exploring connectivity, escapism and memory in Black Mirror

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the globally influential series *Black Mirror*. It is an anthology series that features different characters, settings and storylines each episode. This series is known for its dystopian and dark portrayals of technology. Each episode features a different form of a highly advanced technology that redefines what appears to be a normal society. The series has been widely interpreted as a critical perspective on the dangers of technological progress. However, this thesis looks beyond its dystopian reputation and examines how the series portrays technology as a tool for connectivity, escapism and memory. It answers the central research question: ‘How does the series *Black Mirror* portray technology as a tool for connecting, escaping and remembering?’ It uses a qualitative methodology, specifically a thematic analysis. This thesis uses a deductive approach and analyses the concepts of connectivity, escapism and memory. It analyses a selection of twelve relevant *Black Mirror* episodes that are relevant to the core concepts. The episodes analysed span all seven seasons, from the first to the most recent, which aired this year. Three overarching themes emerged from the analyses, touching on the concepts of connectivity, escapism, and memory. Each main theme consists of two subthemes. The findings indicate that digital connectivity or intimacy influences real-world presence and (romantic) relationships. Digital escapism arises from unfulfilled psychological needs. This temporary refuge can serve as a liberating space for self-reflection, but it can also lead to entrapment. While mediated memories can act as psychological shields, they also recontextualise memories. Overall, this thesis shows that *Black Mirror* presents a more nuanced narrative than is generally recognised. The idea that the series portrays technology as inherently harmful is challenged. The criticism is not directed at the technology itself. The narrative exposes the underlying psychological motivations and vulnerabilities of its users. It addresses people's inadequacies in reconciling their online and offline presence, the tendency to avoid confronting problems or self-reflect and to accept the past without clinging to it. Technology in itself is not the cause of dystopia. This thesis shows that it can also facilitate meaningful connections, encourage personal reinvention or evoke nostalgia and give meaning to life.

KEYWORDS: *Black Mirror, connectivity, escapism, memory, technology*

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1. Introduction

1.1 *Black Mirror*

A pulsating loading circle emerges in the emptiness of a black screen, followed by flashing geometric figures forming the title: “*Black Mirror*.” The letters crack and shatter as a broken mirror, scattering fragments in the void. First broadcast in 2011 (Cirucci & Vacker, 2018, p. vii), this opening marked the beginning of the television series *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011-2019). It symbolises the fractured and fragmented future that awaits us when we continue to technologically advance (Cirucci & Vacker, 2018, p. ix).

This anthology series explores far-reaching technologies and their impact on reality. Each episode features a different cast and depicts a different society. The overarching genre is science fiction. However, each episode has its own storyline and often features a different genre, such as romance, thriller and even horror. Each episode deals with a different type of technological development and its consequences. The narratives begin in a normal setting with normal people, in a society that, at first, seems similar to contemporary society. Gradually, it becomes apparent that this society is different. The technological devices in each episode lead to a plot twist that pushes human behaviours and societal norms to their extremes. The series addresses various questions, but primarily focuses on how technology redefines the meaning of human life (Tanner, 2020, p. 100).

The series has become a global phenomenon. It first aired in December 2011 on Channel 4. On this channel the first two seasons were broadcast (Channel 4, 2011), before it switched to Netflix. More seasons were produced on Netflix, which helped increase the series’ international audience. *Black Mirror* launched its seventh season in May 2025. Now the series counts seven seasons with a total of 33 episodes. Additionally, it released one interactive film in 2018 (IMDB, 2025). According to streaming data from Nielsen (2025), *Black Mirror* was the eighth most streamed content worldwide in April with 734 million viewers. The relevance of the series contributes to its popularity. Charlie Brooker is the creator and author of *Black Mirror*. He describes how he began writing the series in 2010, in a completely different technological era, in which the perspective on technology was optimistic. He repeatedly experienced how *Black Mirror* scenarios gradually come to life in reality (Brooker, 2018, p. 12).

The series is known for its dystopian mirror to reality in the relationship between humans and technology. It has gained a reputation for its dark tone and pessimistic prediction of a society that is becoming more technologically advanced (Baritci & Fidan, 2018, p. 38). According to academia they are scenario’s: “in worlds only a few minutes from our own” (Tanner, 2020, p. 100). As a result, the series can be understood as a critique on technological development. This turns *Black Mirror* into more than just entertainment; It is a critical narrative about modern digital culture.

This thesis goes beyond the dystopian reading of the series and explores how *Black Mirror* portrays technology as a means of connecting, escaping and remembering. Connectivity, escapism and memory are three concepts that are rooted in human existence and that intersect with the impact of

digital technologies on daily life. In an increasingly technologised world, relationships, emotional coping mechanisms and memory are affected by digital tools. *Black Mirror* depicts these changes and shows how digital technologies mediate these aspects of human existence. By analysing how the series interacts with these concepts, this thesis provides a new perspective on how *Black Mirror* reflects broader social and psychological mechanisms. This concerns not only the future of technology, but also its current impacts. The relevance of these three concepts is explained in more detail in the following sections.

1.2 Academic and social relevance

The importance of studying television is grounded in the ability of television to influence an individual's social, political and emotional perceptions of the world (Gorton, 2009, p. 4). Furthermore, television is a relevant media market to investigate as it is the most widely available form of communication (Gorton, 2009, p. 1). According to Barry (2005, p. 47) media influences how individuals perceive and interact with the world. Media narratives, such as *Black Mirror*, do not merely entertain; They also influence how individuals relate to reality and subsequently determine their future behaviour. Therefore, it is important to examine what these media narratives convey to the public.

Black Mirror has been discussed in academia, but it is mostly analysed through a narrow lens. Much of the academic conversation on *Black Mirror* focuses on criticism of advanced technologies, for example on surveillance and control (Facchetti, 2021, p. 184); interpretations of the series as an apocalyptic warning (Mazurek, 2021, p. 65); or its portrayal of technological, social and climatic determinism (Sarlos, 2021, p. 310). Furthermore, the destructive effect of social networks is strongly criticised (Giraldo-Luque, Carniel Bugs, & Tejedor, 2021, p. 166) and comparisons are drawn between today's behaviour on social media (Baritci & Fidan, 2018, p. 38). Consequently, the series has gained a dystopian reputation in relation to many aspects of life that are influenced by technology.

The concepts of connectivity, escapism and memory are underexplored in discussions of the series. Therefore, this thesis contributes to a new perspective and expands the existing academic discussion. It fills a gap in the academic discussion on the representation of technology in *Black Mirror*, as this research examines these nuanced dimensions of life in the digitised world. Furthermore, the continued relevance of *Black Mirror* is reaffirmed with the release of a new season in April 2025. This thesis incorporates two episodes from this new season that align with the core concepts of this research. By incorporating recent episodes, this thesis remains relevant and contributes to current academic discussions.

These three concepts are socially relevant as they address aspects of digital existence that are connected to pressing societal concerns, such as digital loneliness, the rise of digital escapism and to the process of remembering that is increasingly influenced by technology. These concepts are relevant to examine in a modern world in which daily lives are datafied and in which artificial intelligence is

becoming more prominent in various spheres of life. Each concept that this thesis addresses will be discussed individually to clarify their relevance more specifically.

The first concept of connectivity is relevant as in this increasingly technologised world, it is important to understand how technology can facilitate, distort or replace human connections. People are more connected than ever, as technology allows them to connect with each other at the touch of a button. However, Turkle (2011, p. 1) notes that this not only facilitates online relationships, but also redefines offline relationships. People are distracted by their technological devices and they hide behind them. This shifts the balance between online interaction and in-person connection, redefining relationships between people (Turkle, 2011, p. 1).

The second concept, escapism, is a human tendency that has existed for a long time (Katz & Foulkes, 1962, pp. 379-381). People tend to escape reality and turn to art, music or entertainment, for example. However, with the advent of digital technologies, escapism has taken on new dimensions, evolving into what researchers describe as digital escapism: a growing trend in which people turn to online spaces to disconnect from the problems of the real world (Demetriou 2016, p. 4). Virtual environments, social media, online games, and streaming services now provide people with accessible ways to temporarily leave stress, dissatisfaction, or unhappiness behind (Subudhi, Das, & Sahu, 2020, p. 37). Traditional forms of escapism are complemented by more advanced techniques, such as algorithms that create addiction and physical immersion that lure people into alternative worlds (Siricharoen, 2019, p. 6). This makes the act of escaping more tempting and accessible. Additionally, new tools are intertwining escapism with everyday life (Siricharoen, 2019, p. 3).

Lastly, the process of remembering is also increasingly being influenced by technology. Where people once had to rely on organic memories, they can now store memories externally through digital devices (van Dijck, 2008, p. 47). Memory is an important dimension to explore as it influences how individuals and societies construct meaning. *Black Mirror* introduces technologies that alter both personal and collective memory. These technologies not only convey memories, but also show how characters construct meaning from them.

Taken together, these concepts are not individual constructs, but interwoven dimensions of digital existence. These three processes mutually impact each other. For example, social media platforms are used to connect people, but simultaneously feed a form of escapism. Additionally, scrolling through someone's social media account means scrolling through their mediated memories that serve as archives of the past. These concepts are inextricably linked and are therefore analysed together in this thesis. Their interdependence will become clearer in both the theoretical framework and the results.

At a time when technology is more advanced than ever before, alongside the rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) techniques, there is growing concern about its impact (Röcker, 2010, p. 61). This makes the series *Black Mirror* (Brooker, 2011-2019) more relevant than ever. This thesis contributes to the ability to uncover how media narratives portray digital existence. At a time when

media functions as both entertainment and a mirror of societal values, it is necessary to critically examine the messages that popular television series, such as *Black Mirror*, convey.

1.3 Chapter overview

This thesis investigates the central research question: “How does the series *Black Mirror* portray technology as a tool for connecting, escaping and remembering?” To answer this central question, this thesis employs a qualitative approach and analyses the content of the series through a thematic analysis. It uses a deductive thematic approach to analyse the portrayal of these three predefined concepts within *Black Mirror*. The theoretical framework draws on existing literature to provide an understanding of the central concepts. The concepts of fictional media, connectivity, escapism and memory are theoretically grounded and form the basis for the analysis. The methodology chapter provides a detailed description of the data collection, operationalisation and sampling. It also outlines the analytical processes and discusses considerations such as validity, reliability and positionality. The analysis chapter presents the analyses and interpretation of the series’ content, organised by three themes with each two subthemes. The first theme is: *Connectivity: Technology as facilitator and inhibitor of relationships*. This theme is divided into the following subthemes: 1) *The Paradox of Digital Intimacy: Opportunities and Challenges in Building Intimate Connections* and 2) *Disconnected Realities: Online Connection at the Cost of Offline Relationships*. The second theme is: *Escapism as a manifestation of psychological needs and its consequences*. This theme is divided into the following subtheme’s: 1) *Escapism as a desire for recognition, control and meaning* and 2) *The paradox of digital escapism: freedom and entrapment*. The third and final theme is: *Memory: nostalgia and the constructed past*. This theme is divided into the following subtheme’s: 1) *The paradox of nostalgia: Nostalgia as a psychological shield against existential issues or as a fixation on the past* and 2) *The programmed past: Mediated memories redefine history*. Finally, the conclusion combines the findings and provides an answer to the central research question.

2. Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework first examines the relevance of analysing fictional media, as it can shape reality. Secondly, it examines the three interrelated core concepts of this research: connectivity, escapism and memory. Connectivity looks at the way how technology can function as a tool of connection, but can also lead to isolation or disconnection from the physical world. Then, the concept of escapism is examined, as technology gets not only portrayed as a way to connect, but also to escape from reality. In this section the concept of nostalgia emerged as a form of escapism: an escape into the past. Finally, it examines the concept of memory, particularly mediated memories. By examining existing literature on these concepts, this chapter creates a framework to analyse how these concepts are portrayed and engaged with in *Black Mirror*.

2.1 “Fictional” media

According to Barry (2005, p. 47) media impacts the way individuals interact with and view the world. Their emotions, attitudes and behaviours are influenced by the narratives that are told and repeated in the media. Therefore she argues that it is important to understand the influence of the media and captures this in the “Perception Theory” (Barry, 2005, p. 47). She states that emotions play a central role in an individual’s response to certain media, such as television, and that this is often an unconscious process. However, this unconscious reaction can serve as a basis for future actions (Barry, 2005, p. 45). This aligns with the reception theory of Barbatsis (2005, p. 271), which emphasises the importance of the interaction between the viewer and the medium. It states that “meaning” is not inherently embedded in a medium, such as in *Black Mirror*, but is constructed through the interaction between the viewer and the content. Barry (2005, p. 47) emphasises the (unconscious) influence of media narratives, while Barbatsis (2005, p. 271) highlights the interpretative processes of meaning-making. Both perspectives emphasise the active nature of media engagement through meaning making processes and view the audience as emotionally and cognitively engaged. Therefore, it is important to study media narratives as they influence the viewer and ultimately reality.

Goodman (1976, pp. 21-27) expands on this idea and argues that images and narratives in media such as television not only depict reality, but are arranged to create meaning through the viewer’s engagement. The idea of fiction is to help viewers see the world differently. Fiction rearranges and reshapes reality and therefore stimulates new insights (Goodman, 1976, pp. 21-27). This view is further reinforced by Fiske (1987, p. vi) who argues that television is not a neutral transmitter of content but an influential cultural force. Television creates and disseminates meanings in society. These meanings are not only shaped by the producers, but also by the social context of the audience. Fiske (1987, p. 14) emphasises that television texts are inherently polysemic; they can be interpreted differently depending on the viewer’s background. Audiences are therefore active agents in meaning-making, rather than passive consumers. As such, television influences cultural dynamics through which social values and ideologies are both upheld and challenged.

Taken together, these perspectives argue that meaning-making is an active process between the viewer and the content. Barry (2005) and Barbatsis (2005) focus on the interpretive side of the viewer, while Goodman (1967) and Fiske (1987) show how media content itself is designed to influence the viewer's interpretation. These are important dynamics to understand when analysing series such as *Black Mirror*, as meaning-making depends on the viewer's active engagement with the content to turn its messages into something productive.

To fully understand the concept of the viewer as an active interpreter it is important to take a closer look at the process of interpretation. The interpretive responses of viewers are not solely rational but also unconscious and emotional. Research by Barry (2005, p. 47) shows that brains process visual experiences, whether fictional or not, in a similar manner as other types of visual stimuli. Therefore, visual media evoke emotional responses in the brain that are similar to those triggered by other visual stimuli. This is supported in earlier studies of Pinker (1998, p. 29), who argues that our visual system makes no distinction between the real world and visuals that are seen on a television screen. The system does not know that television is an illusion, that it is just a screen, and therefore still processes it in the same way as reality. This reinforces the argument of Barry (2005, p. 47) and reveals that perceptions, and consequently behaviours, are shaped by sensory experiences; even when these originate from a fictional television series such as *Black Mirror*.

This makes it important to analyse the narratives that television series such as *Black Mirror* tell and repeat. These repeated narratives become integrated into the (sub)consciousness of individuals. Barry (2005, p. 59) shows that when these narratives are repeatedly encountered, they form a pattern in the memory system. Repeated exposure strengthens neural pathways, making them easier to activate over time (Barry, 2005, p. 60). Thus, the more frequent exposure to certain television narratives, the more deeply it becomes anchored in the viewer's cognitive and emotional reactions. Evidence of this can be found in the "mean world syndrome," a theory developed by Gerbner et al. (1980, p. 178). This theory showed that people who often encounter violence through the media, view the world more violently than it actually is. This is an example of how the media can integrate permanent elements into the reaction spectrum (Barry, 2005, p. 59). Fiske (1987, pp. 18-19) reinforces this and states that television functions within a broader ideological framework. It not only reflects reality but also actively influences which ideologies are emphasised and disseminated. It can therefore support dominant ideologies, but has also the potential to promote oppositional or less popular ideologies. Other evidence of this can be found in the Cultural Indicators Project at the University of Pennsylvania (Gerbner et al., 1978, p. 178). They investigated how media functions as a storytelling mechanism and developed the cultivation analysis theory. They found that recurring themes and messages, such as those that are spread by television series, form the basis for shared symbolic frameworks that shape the views on reality. Fiske (1987, p. 12) points out that television series that exert the greatest impact on popular culture are typically the most widely viewed, mainstream and international series – just like *Black Mirror*.

Taken together, these researches clarify how media impacts viewers. It shows that media does not only influence the way stories are interpreted, but also how they can ultimately influence reality. This underlines the relevance to analyse the narratives that *Black Mirror* spreads into the world, as it can influence the attitudes of viewers towards technology and ultimately affects how society perceives and interacts with it.

2.2 Media and connectivity

With today's technology, people are more connected than ever. Through phones and social media, people are just one click away from each other. It connects people across great distances, but it also separates people. The concept of connectivity resonates in academic discussion. This section explores the dynamics between digital and physical existence. It uses different theoretical perspectives to argue whether digital technologies serve as a means for connection or whether it actually results in some form of disconnection.

Tanner (2020, p. 89) argues that the motivations of people to use social media are predominantly to stay connected with others. Without it, maintaining relationships would be challenging. However, he distinguishes between genuine connection and staying in touch with others. He states that social media gives the illusion of facilitating connection when, in reality, it only encourages social surveillance and the urge for control. This aligns with Turkle's (2011, p. 1) analysis of the paradox of technology: Although technology keeps us connected, it creates a community where people avoid deeper interaction by hiding behind a screen. For example, preferring texting to talking underscores how people choose digital interaction over in-person connections (Turkle, 2011, p. 1). Therefore, she states that technology exploits vulnerabilities and only offers the illusion of community and connection. Consequently, it can be argued that digital communication enables one to appear socially connected, while being emotionally disconnected.

Cirucci and Vacker (2018, p. x) extend this concern and argue that technology will always impact its surroundings. They argue that the reliance on mediated ties in a society changes the sense of self and the relationships with others. This is further elaborated on by Turkle (2011, p. 16) with her notion of the fragmentation of identity. She states that evolving technologies have created a dual existence. An existence in which the "self" is split between the digital (the screen) and the physical (the real world). She concludes that this leads to a fragmented sense of self. Turkle (2011, p. 14) expands on this with her concept of being "alone together." She notes that individuals turn to technology to cope with loneliness. They are physically separated and alone, but they are digitally connected. This way, technology enables them to overcome physical boundaries.

This dynamic is discussed as digital intimacy by Parsakia and Rostami (2023, pp. 27-28). They emphasise the benefits of accessibility and inclusivity that digital intimacy brings. In addition, it also strengthens emotional connections as the platforms make it possible to receive immediate support (Parsakia & Rostami, 2023, p. 31). However, they note that relationships are formed by algorithmic

logic, which raises questions about the authenticity of these (online) relationships (Parsakia and Rostami 2023, p. 28). Other challenges posed by digital intimacy include miscommunications, balancing online and offline presence, and emotional disconnections due to becoming too dependent on digital communication (Parsakia & Rostami 2023, p. 32). Turkle (2011, p. 3) expands on these concerns and argues that constant connection can prevent people from experiencing the benefits of being alone. She discusses it as something that can lead to a lack of solitude. It could also lead to the anxiety of being disconnected, when people get cut off from their digital networks (Turkle, 2011, p. 16).

Taken together, these different perspectives evidence the dual nature of connectivity. Technology changes how people perceive and develop relationships. It enables new connections or transforms already existing ones. Turkle (2011) and Tanner (2020) criticise the superficiality of these digital connections. Cirucci and Vacker (2018) argue how it jeopardises relationships and the sense of self. Parsakia and Rostami (2023) argue that digital intimacy can be as beneficial as it is harmful. Overall, it becomes clear that connectivity is not only about connecting people across distances; it is also about the tension between their digital and physical existence. Building on this, this thesis examines how this dynamic is portrayed in *Black Mirror*, where the boundaries between physical presence and digital existence get blurred.

2.3 Media and escapism

As Tanner (2020, p. 95) notes, advanced technologies not only connect people globally, but also offer ways to detach from reality. The fragmentation of identity and the presence of digital networks allow people to cope with the pressures of modern life, including using technology to escape real life. This tendency is increasingly associated with the digital age, as technologies fulfil the desire to escape societal pressures (Tanner, 2020, p. 39). Hennig-Thurau and Houston (2019, p. 238) describe escapism as wanting to escape something to avoid dealing with it. This could be about social surroundings, work or life circumstances or the feeling of a void due to lack of activities.

Stenseng et al. (2021, p. 320) distinguish between two dimensions of escapism: self-expansion (enhancing well-being) and self-suppression (reducing ill-being). Self-expansion is associated with positive motives. It is used to explore new experiences or one's identity. Outcomes associated with this motive are mastery or personal growth. Self-suppression is associated with negative motives. It is used to diminish (suppress) negative emotions. This manifests itself in the avoidance of negative emotions or the avoidance of self-reflection. Siricharoen, (2019, p. 5) clarifies this distinction by separating it into the “good” and the “bad” escapism. The good escapism contains helping individuals to expand their limited reality into a more enriching one. It enables minds to explore where bodies can not go. Bad escapism occurs when one retreats from the potential of a wider existence into a more confined space, evading the challenging actions that their physical self should undertake. Both the frameworks of Stenseng (2021, p. 320) and Siricharoen (2019, p. 5) substantiate the dual nature of escapism.

In line with the self-expansion motive, is the discovery and exploration motive of escapism, identified by Hennig-Thurau and Houston (2019, p. 238). The motive to explore and discover alternative realities does not stem from the desire to escape real-life problems, but rather from the curiosity to explore something unfamiliar. The discovery and exploration dimension of escapism is associated with the psychological states of transportation and immersion (Hennig-Thurau & Houston, 2019, p. 264). Narrative transportation means losing awareness of reality by immersing oneself in a story. Immersion means losing awareness of reality by being in an alternative reality (Hennig-Thurau & Houston, 2019, pp. 267-268). These constructs enable states in which one can lose oneself in an alternative world of an entertainment product. Hennig-Thurau and Houston (2019, p. 264) note that achieving these states requires strong imagery.

Technological advances and the rise of VR (virtual reality) have enhanced strong imagery. Harlt and Berger (2017, p. 2415) argue that VR has the ability to create a greater sense of presence compared to other technologies. Presence, in this sense, refers to a psychological state where individuals feel as though they are in the virtual environment (Harlt & Berger, 2017, p. 2415). This aspect is one of the three key elements that researchers identified as crucial for the users' experiences in a virtual reality. The other two aspects are immersion and interactivity (Hartl & Berger, 2017, p. 2414). The feeling of presence enhances both transportation and immersion. Users can experience an alternate environment in a tangible way, as it uses sensory involvement through visuals, auditory and haptic simulations. VR alters the way humans interact with one another. As Siricharoen (2019, p.1) notes, it enables people to go beyond their physical constraints and engage in an environment where alterations to their self-representation and surroundings can occur freely.

Immersing oneself in alternative realms is a process that is becoming increasingly prominent. Judged by the number of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) applications being downloaded, it is expected that these applications will grow substantially and are going to play a prominent role in people's daily lives (Siricharoen, 2019, p. 2). Han et al. (2022, p. 1443) regard it as the leading consumer technology for escapism. Scholars (Han et al., 2022, p. 1443; Siricharoen, 2019, p. 1) expect that VR will become more prominent in daily life, leading to more individuals seeking to spend extended periods of time immersed in the virtual environment.

Demetriou (2016, p. 4) notes that these immersive experiences, alternative realities or curated online identities, allow temporary detachment from life. They make it possible to mentally reframe and process real-life challenges in an alternative environment. She argues that therefore, escapism is not only an avoidance tactic, but is also used for cognitive and emotional processing. Early studies on media escapism (Katz & Foulkes, 1962, pp. 379–381) already indicated that people often use media to disconnect from reality and cope with anxiety in real-life. This is reflected in behaviours such as binge-watching TV shows or creating idealised online identities. Hennig-Thurau and Houston (2019, p. 238) associate such practices with narrative entertainment such as books, movies and television.

The rise of advanced technologies such as VR pushed escapism to a new level compared to

traditional forms of media. This escapism allows for a more physical immersion. This trend could lead to individuals preferring the virtual world above the real world. Especially when the virtual world allows one to present an idealised self. Users can change their appearance and behaviours, aspects that the real world limits (Siricharoen, 2019, p. 6). This touches on the desire of creating idealised online identities and engaging in fictional stories as noted by Hennig-Thurau and Houston (2019, p. 238).

Thus, VR elevates escapism beyond the traditional media. It extends from gaming to everyday social interactions and relations (Siricharoen, 2019, p. 3). There occurs a phenomenon in which technological society becomes distanced from normal society and changes the way humans interact (Siricharoen, 2019, p. 4). Although this may seem as an inherently negative development, Siricharoen (2019, p. 5) emphasises the positive aspects of this. Instead of compelling individuals to neglect society, virtual worlds change the way humans interact. He states that for those who feel out of place in the real world, a digital escape can be exhilarating. Han et al. (2022, p. 1444) add to this that it could have a beneficial impact on consumer health and societal welfare. However, Han et al. (2022, p. 1455) anticipate that negative effects will influence social relationships as well as the physical and mental well-being of consumers. Ultimately, he believes that it will impact individuals' capacity to manage their daily lives.

It can be concluded that technologies make escapism even more tempting and accessible for people. Technology's role in escapism illustrates its ability to connect people but also to create environments in which individuals withdraw from their daily lives. These perspectives underscore the dual function of escapism. Digital escapism allows people to avoid challenges. However, reliance on technology to escape is not inherently negative, as it can also offer (temporarily) relief and space for imagination. This thesis build upon this framework to analyse the motivations and consequences of digital escapism in *Black Mirror*.

2.4 Media and memory

Memory is central in the formation of individual and collective identities. With the rise of technology, media is no longer only an internal process. The following perspectives are examined to understand the changing dynamics of memory to build a framework for analysing memory in relation to the narratives in *Black Mirror*.

In media studies, memory is defined as: "either as tools for inscribing the past or as an archival resource" (van Dijck, 2008, p. 72). Van Dijck's (2008, p. 74) concept of mediated memories helps to understand how digital devices are used to create, preserve, and retrieve both individual and collective memories. She notes that the process of remembering has changed due to technology. In the past, memories could only be preserved through the mind or externally through physical objects or documentation such as letters or diaries. With the development of technology, people are now able to immortalise their memories through digital devices. Van Dijck (2008, p. 72) views electronic media as the "extensions of men", a notion that echoes the earlier findings of McLuhan (1964, p. 289). He noted

that the telephone extends the ability to hear and speak and the television introduced an even more immersive experience through affecting multiple senses simultaneously. Van Dijck (2008, p. 72) builds on McLuhan's (1964, p. 289) idea of the externalisation of sensory experiences by showing how memory too becomes extended. She views the media as a transformative force for memory. The ears are extended by audio technologies and the eyes by photography or film. From this can be concluded that through technological devices, memory can exist outside the mind.

However, digital tools not only change the process of remembering, but also influence how things are remembered. This becomes clear when examining the argument of Hoskins (2011, p. 23), who states that with the rise of technologies, remembering is not something that only happens inside the brain anymore. Memories are scattered around the world. They are externalised and organised through social media and cloud storage. Phones and social media spread them across cultures and society (Hoskins, 2011, p. 23). However, memories are not only being archived, digitalisation also affects how they are recalled. Tanner (2020, p. 89) explains this and shows how digitalisation affects memory. He argues that platforms like Instagram and Facebook create an illusion of living in the present, while the timeline of a social media account is a historical record of everything that is shared over time. When you scroll down a person's timeline, you scroll through someone's past. However, it not only documents past events, but also changes it, by constructing an alternative (more favourable) version of the past for others to view (Tanner, 2020, p. 89). From this it becomes clear that social media documents past events that influence how individuals remember and view their own history or that of others. It substantiate the argument of Hoskins (2011, p. 23) who emphasised that digital devices not only have implications for the way people remember, but also for the way memories can be curated and controlled. Van Dijck (2008, p. 72) extends this argument to the collective memory. She argues that the mass media not only preserve memories, but also influences a collective documented history. Media representations reconstruct memory by modifying historical events (Van Dijck, 2008, p. 72).

Taken together, these perspectives show that through technology, memory is no longer only an internal process. These researchers not only clarify the meaning of mediated memories, but also the tensions between technology and memory. Van Dijck (2008, p. 72) and McLuhan (1964, p. 289) note that media extends humans sensory abilities and helps human memory by extending cognitive abilities, which can enhance the process of remembering. On the other hand, Hoskins (2011, p. 23) and Tanner (2020, p. 89) emphasise that mediated memories pose a risk, by potentially distorting organic memory. This tension will be further examined in the depiction of memory technologies in *Black Mirror*.

2.5 Media and nostalgia

When looking back at a mediated memory, a photograph or even a social media post, a common feeling of nostalgia may arise. The sound and images can take someone back to that time,

even when the media depicts a past that one may not have personally experienced. Memory and nostalgia are two closely related concepts, but they are not interchangeable. Whereas mediated memories are about preserving and retrieving past events, nostalgia adds an emotional layer.

To fully understand the concept of nostalgia, it is important to take a closer look at the process of remembering. Remembering plays a role in the emotional experience that leads to nostalgia. Batcho (2007) clarifies this connection by stating: "One can remember without being nostalgic, but one cannot be nostalgic without remembering" (p. 362). Nostalgia, derived from *nostos* (return home) and *algia* (longing) (Boym, 2001, p. XIII), is a multifaceted concept that academics interpret in different ways. Boym (2001, p. XV) explains it as a desire for another time or a romance with one's imagination (2001, p. XIII). He notes that, like escapism, it is rooted in a longing for continuity amidst fragmentation (Boym, 2001, p. XIV). Some academics consider nostalgia as an "escapist" emotion (Tanner, 2020, p. 68). While escapism disconnects people from the present, nostalgia connects them to an idealised version of the past. Therefore, it can be viewed as a more emotional form of escapism.

The way in which nostalgia is experienced has changed due to digital media. Tanner (2020, p. 99) points out that technological developments, such as virtual realities, create nostalgic utopias that enable an escape from the constraints of time. Digital media not only facilitates nostalgia, but also commodifies it. This is what Tanner (2020, p. 12) refers to as the "nostalgia industry." This industry uses digital tools to commercialise both personal and shared memories. Examples of this are Snapchat's flashback feature, which brings back old photos and memories, or the *#throwback* tag on social media. These examples show how nostalgia merges the past and the present in digital environments and shape the way people engage with memories.

Digital devices shape how people remember the past. Digital devices and social media do not only evoke past (personally experienced) moments; They also enable people to view content from the time before the digital age, for example through television series that depict the past. This evokes nostalgic feelings for a past that was not personally experienced. However, this content often does not show the whole picture. It glorifies this time neglecting the negative aspects (Tanner, 2020, p. 19). The romanticisation of the imagination or the past noted by Boym (2001, p. XV), aligns with Tanner's (2020, p. 19) criticism that media content often presents a more favourable version of the past. From these perspectives it can be argued that nostalgia is not only about remembering the past; it is also about reconstructing it in a way that better suits current emotional and commercial needs.

Additionally, Routledge et al. (2008, p. 133) found four different psychological functions of nostalgia. These are: the enhancement of positive feelings, self-image and social belonging. Lastly, it offers life purpose and diminishes existential issues. They refer to the last function as the terror management theory (Routledge et al., 2008, p. 132). With this theory is meant that nostalgia reminds people of meaningful experiences. This creates a mental protection against the fear of death. They found that the more nostalgic people are, the more meaningful they view their lives, and the less they think about death. Consciously evoking nostalgic feelings reduces anxiety. Therefore, nostalgia can be

viewed as a shield against the fear of death; a psychological protection against existential anxieties (Routledge et al., 2008, p. 132). Technology makes nostalgia accessible by offering tools that allow people to revisit meaningful moments. Therefore, it can be argued that nostalgia can serve a meaningful psychological purpose through digital environments.

Nostalgia is also considered a coping mechanism (Boym, 2001, p. XIV; Tanner, 2020, p. 19). It is a form of emotional escapism as a response to the pressures of modern life. People have access to content that depicts “simpler” times, times before the digital age, free from the interruptions of mobile phones. Tanner (2020, p. 17) notes that the more people become dependent on media devices, the more a longing grows for those “simpler” times before Big Tech. A possible explanation for this is the heightened expectation to be constantly available and engaged. It often appears as a defence mechanism, especially in times of rapid social or political change (Boym, 2001, p. XIV; Tanner, 2020, p. 19). This makes it clear that nostalgia is not only centred on the past, but also on dissatisfaction with the present.

Taken together, these perspectives show the multifaceted dimensions of nostalgia. They suggest that nostalgia adds an emotional layer to memories and can easily be influenced by technology. Digital devices not only recall past events, but also modify them and reframe individual and collective memories. As such, nostalgia emerges out of different motives. It serves as an emotional and psychological mechanism, but is also driven by commercial strategies.

2.6 Conclusion

To conclude, media plays a crucial role in shaping how people engage with and perceive the world around them. Therefore, it is essential to analyse the narratives portrayed in series such as *Black Mirror*. The recurring themes and messages of television series create a collective symbolic framework that influences perspectives on reality. This theoretical framework examined the concepts of connectivity, escapism and memory that appear in *Black Mirror*. It revealed that connectivity is more than just connecting people across distances. It is also about the conflict between digital and physical life that affects relationships. Furthermore, technology serves as a means to escape from reality, driven by the desire for self-expansion or self-suppression. Advanced technologies such as virtual reality make it increasingly appealing to withdraw from everyday life and immerse oneself in an alternative existence. Technology is also changing the way in which memories are formed and recalled. Closely linked to this is the concept of nostalgia. Nostalgia can be mediated by technology. It enables individuals to relive or reconstruct the past. This theoretical framework forms the basis for analysing these three interrelated themes in *Black Mirror*.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological framework. It explains the decision for a qualitative and predominantly deductive approach with a thematic analysis. It presents the steps of data collection utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis. A predominantly deductive approach is used, drawing on the theoretical framework. It also presents the sample of episodes that are analysed for this research and clarifies their relation to the research aim. Additionally, this chapter discusses the operationalisation of the concepts. Finally, it addresses how validity, reliability and trustworthiness as well as the awareness of the researcher's positionality are ensured in this thesis.

3.1 Justification of the method

This research used a qualitative approach. The data was analysed using thematic analysis as outlined by Braund and Clarke (2006, pp. 92-100). Qualitative analysis provided a comprehensive investigation and understanding of the content and visual aspects in the episodes of *Black Mirror*. This method facilitated an evaluation and interpretation of the visual and linguistic components in *Black Mirror*'s episodes. This adaptive and iterative methodology revealed both explicit and implicit aspects of meaning embedded in the discourses related to connectivity, escapism and memory. It was well-suited for this thesis, as the aim was to interpret the data and derive meaningful insights (Flick, 2014, p. 19). Furthermore, it is compatible for handling large amounts of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 114), which was particularly relevant when analysing numerous scenes in these episodes.

This thesis employed a deductive thematic analysis. This method allowed for the examination of predefined concepts from the theoretical framework within a structured approach. It analysed the portrayal of the three predefined concepts (connectivity, escapism and memory) in *Black Mirror* by identifying and interpreting patterns within the data. The deductive approach ensured that the analysis was guided by the core concepts and the codes were derived from the indicators of the theoretical framework. This method was suitable because it provided the flexibility to explore subjective interpretations while organising the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82) and enabled a comprehensive and structured description of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). By coding and categorising the data, thematic analysis facilitated the identification of recurring (more specific) themes and meaningful patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85) within the broader context of the three main concepts. This made this method particularly effective for managing and analysing the complex content of the episodes. Through an iterative approach, the data was constantly reviewed and the codes were expanded and refined with progressive insights. This process ensured that the analysis was continuously refined, while maintaining alignment with the theoretical framework and capturing all relevant insights.

3.2 Data collection

This thesis conveyed a purposive sampling strategy. It is a nonprobability approach in which

units were studied based on their usefulness or representativeness (Babbie, 2014, p. 200). This method was used to ensure a representative and valuable sample of episodes from *Black Mirror*. It enabled a selection of episodes that are related to the research question. The episodes that were selected touch on the concepts of connectivity, escapism and/or memory. They were chosen according to their relevance to these concepts, which was determined through an initial examination of their narratives and evaluations in the literature. Close attention was paid to the technologies in each episode. Their functions were analysed and categorised based on the predefined concepts (facilitating connection, providing escapism or enabling memory replay). Each *Black Mirror* episode features different characters. Therefore, different characters were analysed each episode.

The selected episodes were analysed in their entirety through the streaming platform Netflix. Each episode was watched multiple times to ensure a thorough understanding of its content. First, the episodes were watched in their entirety to understand the general storyline. Subsequently, while watching the episodes, I paused and replayed scenes to take detailed notes on the storylines, the character's behaviour and interactions, and the audio and visual material of these episodes.

Twelve episodes were analysed that are relevant to the concepts related to the research question. These were selected based on several criteria, including how the particular technology mediates human relationships, offers alternative realities, evokes nostalgia or mediates memories. The table in the appendix (*Appendix A: episode overview*) presents per analysed episode its title, details, synopsis and connection to the research question.

3.3 Operationalisation

After grounding the theoretical concepts in the theoretical framework, this chapter translated them into measurable variables. The concepts central to this analysis (connectivity, escapism, and memory) were translated from abstract ideas into observable indicators. These indicators enabled to systematically identify and analyse them in *Black Mirror*. The first concept, connectivity, was defined as: the extent to which technology connects people and environments, both physically and emotionally (Turkle, 2011, p. 1). Indicators included technological devices or services that enable social interaction between people, such as virtual worlds, communication tools and any form of social media. Digital intimacy referred to the emotional connection that individuals experience through digital technologies. This included both romantic and platonic relations. Indicators of digital intimacy included platforms that facilitate the formation of connections, expressions of emotional closeness, reliance on technology to initiate or maintain relationships and algorithmic mediation of interactions. The second concept, escapism, was defined as: the tendency to escape current reality through technology (Tanner, 2020, p. 95). Indicators included characters that use technology to withdraw from their current circumstances (for example from social pressures or unpleasant life events), such as binge-watching, gaming, or using social media. It also included characters that use technology to create or explore alternative realities, such as: digital memory worlds, immersive experiences, curated online identities and

immersive experiences (virtual reality and augmented reality). The last concept of mediated memories touches on the concept of memory and was defined as: the externalisation of memory through digital technology. Indicators included devices that digitally create, preserve, retrieve or manipulate memories (van Dijck, 2008, p. 74). Nostalgia was conceptualised as a sentimental longing for the past, often evoked by media, memories or familiar environments (Boym, 2001, p. XV). Indicators included technologies that simulate memories; reconstructions of the past through visual style (retro or vintage aesthetics), audio (old songs) or fashion (vintage clothing); and plot elements that referred to the past (digital recreations and memories).

3.4 Data analysis

The six phases of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 92-100) were followed to conduct the data analysis: Immersion, creating initial codes, grouping into broader themes, refining, naming and presenting. (1) First I immersed myself into the data. The episodes were watched multiple times and the theories of the theoretical framework were revisited. The content of the episodes were thoroughly examined with a focus on the storylines, character behaviours and interactions, and audiovisual elements. (2) The following phase focused on finding patterns and creating the initial codes. Both a deductive and inductive approach was used. Through a deductive methodology, initial codes were defined and derived from the theoretical framework on the concepts of connectivity, escapism, and memory. These codes were systematically applied to the data to identify relevant patterns. To evaluate the episodes systematically, these codes were organised into the initial coding framework, with indicators linked to specific aspects of the theoretical framework. For any data that did not align with the predefined codes, an inductive methodology was used to analyse and categorise this data. New codes were assigned to ensure all data was covered. (3) In the third phase, similar or related codes were grouped and organised into broader themes. (4) In the fourth phase, the themes were examined. During this phase, themes were merged, split, adjusted or discarded to ensure they created a cohesive structure. (5) Once refined, the final themes were defined and named. (6) The final step was presenting the findings, organised by theme.

The following themes emerged from the analysis:

Main theme 1 - Connectivity: Technology as facilitator and inhibitor of relationships.

Subtheme 1.1 The Paradox of Digital Intimacy: Opportunities and Challenges in Building Intimate Connections.

Subtheme 1.2 Disconnected Realities: Online Connection at the Cost of Offline Relationships.

Main theme 2 -Escapism as a manifestation of psychological needs and its consequences

Subtheme 2.1 Escapism as a desire for recognition, control and meaning

Subtheme 2.2 The paradox of digital escapism: freedom and entrapment

Main theme 3 – Memory: nostalgia and the constructed past

Subtheme 3.1 The paradox of nostalgia: Nostalgia as a psychological shield against existential issues or as a fixation on the past.

Subtheme 3.2 The programmed past: Mediated memories redefine history

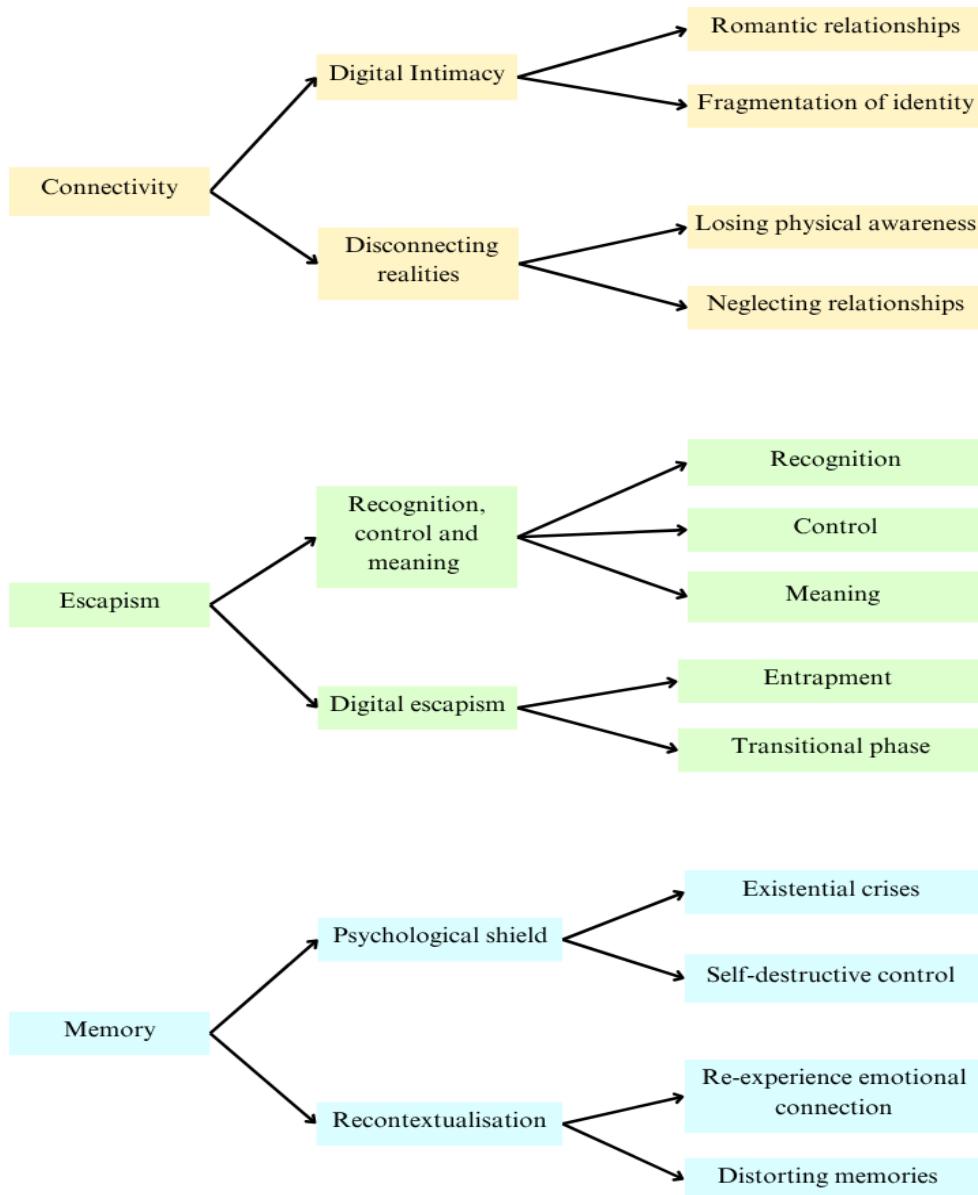


Figure 3.1 Visual coding tree

3.5 Validity and reliability

Validity refers to whether the measurements captured what the research aimed to study (Babbie, 2014, pp. 154-155). In the context of this research, validity was demonstrated by rigor,

consistency and trustworthiness, credibility and transferability. This thesis is valid when it investigated what it intended to investigate and when the results adequately answered the research question. To increase validity, this thesis used literature from different sources to get an understanding of the different concepts measured.

Reliability refers to whether a certain research method produces the same outcome when repeated (Babbie, 2014, p. 152). In the context of this research and its interpretative nature, it might not be possible to repeat it in exactly the same way. However, in order to enhance reliability, this research aimed to make the process of data collection and the results transparent. I kept a detailed documentation on the research process. This entailed a detailed explanation on the methodology, coding steps, and analytical choices. The results were presented with specific examples from the episodes that supported the interpretations. This has made the connections between the data and the conclusions transparent.

The trustworthiness of this research was enhanced by following the guidelines to ensure credibility: thick description, triangulation and multivocality (Tracy, 2010, p. 840). I will explain how this thesis meets each criterium.

Thick description was used to describe in detail the scenes and the context from which my insights and interpretations were derived. This way, the reader can easily follow the analytical process and understand how I arrived at certain conclusions. Thick description also enhances the transferability of the research results. These detailed explanations of the episodes, scenes and characters examined make it possible for the reader to get an understanding of the bigger picture and apply it to other contexts.

Triangulation serves to minimise the subjectivity bias. Adhering to triangulation meant that I used a variety of data sources and theoretical viewpoints to cross-verify the findings. More specifically, I analysed a variety of scenes from multiple episodes across different seasons. I also used a variety of literature and concepts. This also means that contrasting results were analysed and identified to ensure that all data was accounted for.

Multivocality extends the concept of triangulation and means that the research should include multiple voices and perspectives. By looking at a variety of representations and from different angles on the concepts in this series, this thesis enhanced multivocality. Furthermore, the research ensured that a single deterministic interpretation is avoided by considering how different characters, situations, and narrative structures contributed to different views on the same concept.

3.6 Researcher's positionality

This research also takes into account my own position and perspectives as a researcher. Due to the interpretative nature of qualitative research, investigating *Black Mirror* involves subjective assessments. Therefore, it is important to be aware of a researcher's bias. My position as a researcher, with my own background and knowledge of the series, can influence the interpretation of the data. A

common pitfall is the unintentional identification of results that are consistent with previous expectations, even though these results may not reflect the full data (Babbie, 2015, p. 433). To prevent this, I followed the guidelines of Babbie (2015, p. 433): I remained aware of my own position and background, adhered to data collection and analysis procedures, incorporated concepts from the literature, and constantly sought and incorporated feedback from experts and peers.

4. Results

4.1 Theme 1 - Connectivity: Technology as facilitator and inhibitor of relationships

“People don't even look up anymore. The sky could turn fucking purple and you cunts wouldn't notice for a month” – Chris (Brooker, 2019b, 00:13:29)

This theme argues that technology can maintain and facilitate connections, but can also interfere with and undermine relationships. This tension is examined through two subthemes. (1.1) The paradox of Digital Intimacy: Opportunities and Challenges in Building Intimate Connections. (1.2) Disconnected Realities: Online Connection at the Cost of Offline Relationships.

4.1.1 The Paradox of Digital Intimacy: Opportunities and Challenges in Building Intimate Connections

This subtheme argues that technology has an active role in shaping intimate relationships between people. Technology creates opportunities that initiate new connections or change existing ones. It provides new opportunities for (digital) intimacy and deepens emotional connections. However, it also presents challenges in balancing online and offline presence and in maintaining authenticity. This theme uses the episodes *Hang the DJ*, *White Christmas* and *Striking Vipers* to illustrate how technology is portrayed as a double-edged sword in human relationships.

Technology mediates relationships and offers the opportunity to form new connections, to deepen or to transform already existing relationships. Online platforms remove physical barriers and enable people to connect with each other in a more accessible way. This creates the opportunity to form new connections with others or allows people to easily reconnect with each other. In addition to initiating new connections, existing relationships can also be deepened as technology provides new ways of communication. It strengthens connections through shared digital experiences or intensified contact. Furthermore, online environments redefine relationships as digital environments change the way people interact with each other. All three of these dynamics are evident in *Striking Vipers*, where Karl and Danny, two childhood friends, reconnect in an online gaming environment. Despite their busy schedules, the online environment enables them to stay connected more often, which deepens their relationship. *Striking Vipers* suggests that technology not only facilitates connections, but also changes them as the online environment redefines their friendship. In the online game environment they experience a level of intimacy with each other that they would not have experienced in real life. In one scene (00:08:20), Danny's and Karl's online characters meet for the first time. Karl picks a female character, while Danny picks a masculine character. This choice changes the dynamic between them. It becomes clear that “the game emulates all physical sensations” (00:18:62). This enables them to experience an intimacy that goes beyond their offline identities. In one scene (00:20:09) Karl's character passionately kisses Danny's character (figure 1.1). This technology allows them to explore sides of their identity and relationship that they would never experience in the real world. Another example of how technology offers the ability to form new connections is Amy and Frank in *Hang the DJ*, who meet for the first time through a medium that connects people romantically

to help them find their perfect match. This medium can be understood as a more advanced dating app, with an algorithm that assesses compatibility based on predefined relationships that simulate real-life interactions. These findings illustrate the theory of Parsakia and Rostami (2023) who argued that technology facilitates new connections or changes existing ones.

Figure 1.1 Karl and Danny's virtual characters kiss passionately



Note: Screenshot of Striking Vipers (2019) (00:21:17)

Furthermore, technology facilitates romantic relationships through technological media, which changes the human experience of finding romantic connections. Technology used to connect people romantically makes it possible to avoid conventional uncertainties in relationships. However, it also leads to a fragmentation between personal intuition and algorithmic logic, as *Black Mirror* societies often prioritise algorithmic logic over personal intuition. This dynamic is illustrated in *Hang the DJ*. People are matched by a system that determines not only their match, but also the expiration date of that connection. The same mechanism that facilitates the connection also restricts it. The system is presented as a tool for finding true love, but at the same time it reinforces a reliance on external validation that undermines personal feelings and organic connections. Love is seen as a measurable and predictable thing. This is also argued by Parsakia and Rostami (2023, p. 28) who observed that relationships are being shaped by algorithmic logic. This is also evident in the relationship between Amy and Frank. They are paired through the system and experience a brief connection that expires after twelve hours. Both are sad that their relationship has expired, but they trust the algorithm more than their own feelings. The disagreement with the forced parting is evident in their lingering eye contact and hesitant facial expressions (00:09:20). These expressions clearly reveal that they did not want to say goodbye and longed for more time together. This is further emphasised when Frank asks the device: "but how do I know she was not the perfect match for me? She was..." (00:10:38). This captures the inner conflict between his feelings and the authority of the algorithm. It illustrates the authority of technology as they question their own feelings rather than the algorithm. The mismatched

relationships that follow underscore this. The system creates superficial connections for them with others, deepening their emotional resilience and the realisation that they are each other's ideal partner. Frank's relationship is portrayed as monotonous and emotionally draining, illustrating what can happen in mismatched relationships. This becomes evident in scenes where he sits in silence with his partner. Their exchanges lack genuine connection or happiness (00:12:45). Amy has a partner who seems perfect on paper (good-looking, intelligent and fulfils all the criteria she should want). Yet, her relationship lacks the genuine connection and emotional intimacy that she had with Frank. This becomes clear when Amy often drifts off and seems uninterested during conversations (00:21:30). This illustrates her disengagement despite her partner's ideal traits. This substantiates the concerns of Parsakia and Rostami (2023, p. 28) who question the genuineness of relationships that are formed through digital technologies. Although Frank and Amy live in a fictional world, a parallel can be drawn to reality, particularly the reality of dating apps. As in the episode, many people in the real world are increasingly relying on algorithms to predict compatibility between people. While this can simplify the search for love, it also risks ignoring the unpredictable aspects of (initial) human connections. In *White Christmas* technology is used to create a real-time coach that helps users interact with people they are romantically interested in. The technology enables this coach to see through someone's eyes and also transmits the user's hearing. These are examples of how romantic instincts and genuine emotional connections are being undermined and transferred entirely to technological devices. This underscores the challenges of digital intimacy outlined by Parsakia and Rostami (2023, p. 32), who stated that reliance on digital communication can lead to emotional disconnection.

Meaningful connections can occur when technology and personal intuition work together. *Black Mirror* shows that the real challenges of human relationships often lie in small, intangible details that cannot be instrumentalised or captured by algorithms alone. These are indefinable intuitions; seemingly "useless" things that a computer can not be trained to grasp (yet). This is evident when Amy and Frank eventually rebel against the system. Their rebellion against the system becomes a sign of the strength of their true love. By defying the algorithm, they show that their inner feelings transcend the dictates of the system. This suggests that people ultimately trust their personal intuition more than they prioritise the authority of the algorithm. However, *Black Mirror* reveals a deeper level of complexity here, because paradoxically, this rebellion also confirms the effectiveness of the algorithm: genuine feelings, which are stronger than the algorithm, overcome the dependence on the system, revealing their true match. The algorithm causes them to rebel, which proves that the system has correctly identified their perfect match. Thus, *Black Mirror* shows that algorithms can indeed be successful, not by replacing personal intuition, but by provoking it. This becomes even clearer in *White Christmas*. It shows again that technology is helpful, provided it is used in combination with personal intuition. When personal intuition gets completely abandoned and people rely solely on technology, the consequences are detrimental. This becomes clear in the scene in which a man goes on a date with a woman while being coached and given instruction through a device in his ear (00:07:11). Instead of

relying on his personal intuition, he blindly follows the instructions he receives. This results in him going along with a mentally unstable girl who ultimately kills him. This emphasises that, although technology is very useful, it is incapable of fully understanding human complexities and can therefore not completely replace personal intuition.

Digital intimacy also presents challenges in balancing one's online and offline presence and raises questions about the genuineness of online connections. As noted by Turkle (2011, p. 16), online environments cause a fragmentation of identity between the online and offline presence. She argued that this existence reflects a division of the "self" between the digital environment and the physical world. This division can be observed in Karl and Danny. They become intimate with each other in the online game and discover aspects of their identity and relationship that they were previously unaware of. When they both wake up back in their physical lives, it becomes clear that they are both confused by what has just happened in the game. Karl (00:39:39) steps into bed and realises that it had turned him on in the real world. From that moment on, they embrace a dual existence. This means that their sense of self is fragmented between the virtual game and the physical world (Turkle, 2011, p. 16). However, the genuineness of this connection is questioned when Danny and Karl meet in the physical world and find out that their redefined relationship does not transcend the virtual game. They face the boundary between virtual intimacy and real-life intimacy. Here, *Black Mirror* portrays technology as a facilitator for emotional and physical exploration. At the same time it questions whether a connection in a virtual environment is as real as a physical connection, and whether a fragmented identity is possible. Striking Viper suggests that a fragmented identity is not only possible, but also enriching – when in the end, they find a way to embrace their dual identities. They satisfy their sexual needs through the game. Therefore, it can be argued that this technology enriches their lives as it expands their identity. This counters Turkle's (2011, p. 16) more negative view on the fragmentation of identity, as *Black Mirror* shows that this duality is not inherently negative, as it is often viewed in the existing literature (Tanner, 2020 ; Turkle, 2011). *Black Mirror* shows that it can instead be enriching.

Black Mirror illustrates the paradoxical effect of digital intimacy. Technology opens up new possibilities for intimate connections and exploration, while simultaneously creating uncertainty about authenticity and reliance on emotional intuition. The episodes show how technology creates opportunities for new connections by removing traditional barriers. It removes physical constraints and new forms of emotional intimacy are explored. However, the episodes also expose the vulnerability of human connections that technology can easily influence. The algorithms in *Hang the DJ*, the virtual dating service in *White Christmas* and the virtual space in *Striking Vipers* offer new possibilities for connection, but also reveal the fragility of human relationships when the line between reality and fiction gets blurred.

4.1.2 Disconnected Realities: Online Connection at the Cost of Offline Relationships

This theme shows that while technology promises to bring people closer together, it can also isolate them. The appeal of online connections that offer instant gratification and control comes at the expense of offline authentic human interactions. Through technology, people can easily become obsessed with their digital lives that neglect their physical surroundings and the people that are part of it. *Black Mirror* shows what happens to human relationships and a sense of reality when online connections take precedence over offline interactions. It not only affects relationships, but also the ability to live in the moment and appreciate reality. This subtheme uses the episodes *Be Right Back*, *USS Callister*, *Nosedive* and *Striking Vipers* to exemplify this.

The promise of technology is to connect others regardless of distance or physical limitations. At the same time, this constant online presence undermines the quality of offline relationships and awareness of the physical world. A recurring detail in almost every episode is the way people disappear into their technological devices and lose sight of their surroundings. It is as if they are for a moment in another reality: the digital environment. In *Be Right Back*, this is portrayed in the opening scenes where Ash constantly disappears into his phone while Martha tries to make contact with him. Consequently, an uncomfortable distance can be observed in their interactions. In one scene (00:03:30) she asks him which soup he wants. Meanwhile, he is completely absorbed in his phone, scrolling away. Martha asks: “There is only one bowl. Do you mind having yours out of a shoe?” “mh...mh...” he nods. Martha rolls her eyes and throws a pillow at him. This snaps him back to reality. He asks Martha why she did that. “Just checking you are still solid. You keep vanishing down there. It is a thief, that thing” she responds (00:04:00). These last words emphasise the power of technology as something that steals presence. Martha conveys her frustration of him becoming mentally absent. In this scene she tries to reconnect with him, as it not only takes his attention, but also his presence in their relationship. Her words mark the first sign of the emotional cost of technological immersion. Another example of this can be observed in *USS Callister* in the scene where Daly (00:04:23) walks in the office. The woman at the desk does not even look up from her phone while talking to him. In the office people bump into each other or ignore each other because they get so distracted by their devices that they lose sight of their surroundings and do not notice the people in it anymore (00:05:00 – 00:06:25). This substantiates the concerns of Turkle (2011, p. 1) who argued that technology encourages people to hide behind screens and avoid in-person interactions.

These are seemingly innocent examples. However, the series also illustrates detrimental forms of disconnection from the physical world, due to technology or online environments. As a result, real relationships begin to suffer. This phenomenon can be observed in *Be Right Back*. After Ash's death, Martha seeks refuge in an AI version of him that replicates him, and she finds herself in a digital relationship. Instead of grieving, moving on and focusing on other relationships, she becomes isolated. Her obsession with Ash's digital reconstruction alienates her from her surroundings and human relationships. Her sister comes by to check on her as she has not been answering calls or messages

(00:37:17). In this scene it can be observed that she shuts everyone out under the guise of “being busy.” The episode shows how a digital connection impacts real life relationships, something which is also illustrated in *Striking Vipers*. Technology intended as a game becomes a space in which Danny and Karl disconnect from their physical surroundings and real life relationships. The redefined relationship with Danny in the virtual gaming environment results in Karl slowly detaching himself from his wife. This leads to a complex dynamic of guilt and loss of intimacy within his marriage. In the restaurant scene (00:37:18) his wife (Theo) confronts him with the emotional distance she has felt between them. Her words: “You go inside. Leave me on the outside” captures her feeling of being shut out by him. She asks him what is going on: “We have not done it in weeks.” Then, she begins to cry and shows vulnerability, asking him if she is no longer desirable (00:38:46). He answers without hesitation: “No, nothing is going on, I promise – I swear” (00:40:49). Karl’s face expresses genuine pity and guilt (figure 1.2). Yet, the inability to reconnect and be truthful with her captures the impact of his virtual relationship on his marriage and life. Here, *Black Mirror* shows that digital connections can lead to a loss of presence in one’s physical reality and relationships.

Not only do romantic relationships suffer from online presence, these dynamics also apply to broader social interactions. This can be observed in the status obsessed society of *Nosedive*. People in this society are obsessed with social status formed through a rating system. To fit into this social system, conformity takes precedence over authenticity. Here too, connections are made measurable and verifiable; only in this episode through a social score system. This episode reveals how technology can replace the authenticity and imperfection of human connections. As a result, people lose themselves and their true desires. Lacie’s desire to boost her social score leads to superficial interactions. She fakes a smile, acts overly happy in conversations, and constantly checks her phone (00:06:03). She is more concerned with her online reputation than the sincerity of real-life conversations. Throughout the episode she distances herself more and more from her loved ones, because she prioritises her digital validation over genuine relationships. This can be observed in the scene where she argues with her brother who tells her he misses the “normal” her (00:24:39). She tells him he has to stay out of her shit. He responds: “You are my sister” (00:24:45). This sentence marks a moment of rare emotional connection in this society. This contrasts strongly with the artificiality of her performative identity. He tries to use these words as a reminder of the real-life connection she neglects. However, Lacie perceives this as an obstacle to her social ambitions. She rejects this and they get into a big fight and they depart on bad terms. From this it can be argued that the social rating system undermines family connections. Her brother who disregards the system poses a threat to her. She cuts him off, because it is easier for her to emotionally distance herself rather than facing the duality of her online persona and her true self. This substantiates the argument of Tanner (2020, p. 89) who stated that social media gives the illusion of connection and only promotes the monitoring of social behaviour and the desire for control. Turkle’s (2011, p. 1) paradox of technology is also reflected in this episode. Even though the technology creates connections between the characters in

this story, it fosters a society where individuals conceal themselves behind a screen and avoid genuine emotions and genuine connections.

What these episodes ultimately show is how online presence undermines the quality of offline relationships and sensitivity to the physical world. Characters lose themselves in digital environments, leading to the deterioration of their real life relationships. It facilitates new possibilities for connections, but simultaneously these digital connections can deteriorate real life relationships.

Figure 1.2 Expressions of pity and guilt on Karl's face



Note: Screenshot from Striking Vipers (2019) (00:39:35)

4.1.3 Conclusion

This theme showed how technology mediates relationships. It provides new ways of connection, but simultaneously influences offline relationships. This digital connectivity impacts real life (romantic) relationships as online presence can weaken the depth of offline relationships and awareness of the physical world. Additionally, technology facilitates the search for romantic connections. However, one should not rely entirely on technology, as personal intuition also plays an important role. Furthermore, online environments lead to a fragmentation of identity. It separates a person's online persona from their real-world presence.

4.2 Theme 2 - Escapism as a manifestation of psychological needs and its consequences

“He thinks he's got free will, but really he's trapped in a maze, in a system. All he can do is consume.” – Haynes (Brooker & Slade, 2018, 00:26:45)

This second theme examines the portrayal of escapism in *Black Mirror*. In *Black Mirror* escapism is more than a simple distraction from modern life. It is a reflection of deep psychological needs of humanity that manifest themselves in different ways. It does this through the two subthemes: (2.1) Escapism as a desire for recognition, control and meaning. Subtheme (2.2) The paradox of digital escapism: freedom and entrapment. The first subtheme (2.1) focuses on the underlying motivations driving characters to escape reality. The second theme (2.2) examines the consequences of escapist behaviour. Together, these themes illustrate the underlying motivations behind escapism and its resulting consequences.

4.2.1 Escapism as a desire for recognition, control and meaning

This theme argues that escapism is presented not only as an escape from reality, but as an underlying desire for recognition, control and meaning. According to the theories of Tanner (2020), Hennig-Thurau and Houston (2019) and Katz and Foulkes (1962), escapism is used to momentarily step away from reality and the pressures or problems that come with it. This can be observed in the personal motives of the characters in *Black Mirror* who all try to escape reality in their own way: Robert Daly (*USS Callister*) avoids social challenges; Danny (*Striking Vipers*) hides from his marital problems by escaping into a VR game world; Cooper (*Playtest*) escapes from his family drama and unprocessed grief through traveling; and Martha (*Be Right Back*) escapes from her grieving process by throwing herself into an AI relationship. Their motivations are either derived out of self-expansion or self-suppression, as described by Stenseng et al. (2021, p. 320). They are driven out of the motivation to suppress pain, avoid confronting difficult emotions or out of curiosity and self-development. However, underlying these are deeper motivations: their escapism is inherently derived from the need for recognition, control and meaning.

A primary motivator of escapist behaviour in *Black Mirror* is the desire for recognition. Characters experience the psychological need to be acknowledged and valued. Escapism acts as a way to make up for the absence of this validation in reality. Characters withdraw into alternative realities where they finally feel recognised. This can be observed in the behaviour of Robert Daly (*USS Callister*). He works as a programmer for a company that produces VR games. In the office, he is socially excluded by his colleagues. Despite his status as a co-founder, he finds himself at the bottom of the social ladder. This is evidenced by scenes in which he silently walks through the office. No one truly acknowledges him or wants to engage with him. While other people converse and laugh, he watches them from a distance, visibly uncomfortable (00:09:59). The only person who shows interest in him is Nanette. But when she is warned that she should not be “too nice to him, because he gets a bit starey” (00:16:22), she also keeps her distance. His invisibility in the office is further emphasised

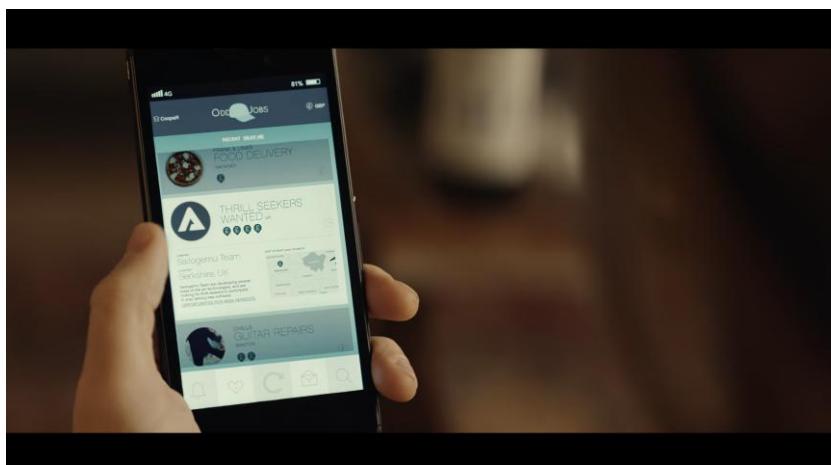
when Shania even forgets that there are two bosses, acting as if Walton is the only founder (00:15:49). The sequel of *USS Callister* (*USS Callister: Into Infinity*) makes it even clearer that he feels unrecognised and socially isolated, and how these feelings have shaped him into a vengeful person. From a chronological perspective, this second part is set prior to the events of the first part. In Daly's debut in *USS Callister: Into Infinity* (00:51:28) it becomes clear how he started out as a friendly, shy boy. The episode reveals that he is the real mastermind behind the VR game and the company, yet his colleague Walton takes all the credit. While Daly wrote the code day and night in a locked room, Walton paraded around outside as the face of the company. Daly received no recognition for his work. The motivation to behave the way he does becomes even clearer in the scene where Nanette finds him in the game world. In it, he says he feels alone (01:16:50). This reveals that his social isolation has been a long-standing pain. He tries to keep Nanette with him against her will. His actions are not only motivated by a lust for power, but also by a desire to no longer be ignored and alone. That Daly is not satisfied with his social life is also portrayed in the first part of *USS Callister*. He struggles with his place in the social hierarchy at work. After work, he escapes into an alternative reality. A reality in which he determines the rules. He developed a virtual reality role playing game. In this science fiction space simulation he is the captain of a spaceship and his colleagues are his puppets. He turned them into digital clowns and transported them to his game (see figure 2.1). According to Katz and Foulkes (1962, pp. 379-381) such immersion in alternative game worlds serves to escape reality and cope with anxieties in real life. Therefore, it can be argued that Daly's game world acts as a projection of his inner resentment, but also as a place where he finally gets the feeling that he matters. Daly's virtual identity serves as a reaction to the social invisibility he experiences in reality. Through escapism, he constructs an identity in a simulated environment that demands recognition. A similar dynamic can be found in Cooper's (Playtest) decision to participate in the AR game. The advertisement of testing a new videogame lures him in. He is persuaded by the text "thrill seekers wanted" (figure 2.2). The experiment offers him a sense of purpose and recognition; things he lost after the death of his father and strained relationship with his mother. He tries to gain control over this unpredictable reality which gives him the chance to prove his worth. In both cases, escapism is not just avoidance; it represents a search for recognition.

Figure 2.1 Daly as captain with his colleagues as digital clowns in his VR Game



Note: Screenshot from USS Callister (2019) (00:29:58)

Figure 2.2 Cooper views the advertisement “Thrill seekers Wanted”



Note: Screenshot from Playtest (2019) (00:13:09)

A second fundamental motivation for escapism is the desire to reclaim control over life. In *USS Callister*, Daly's virtual reality serves not just as a source to gain recognition, but also as a space to exert absolute control. This represents a contrast to the powerlessness he feels in reality. He exercises full control over his digitised colleagues. From this it can be understood that he uses the game as a tool to temporarily step away from the social challenges he faces at work and to reframe them in this game. This corresponds to Demetriou's (2016, p. 4) theory that technology provides this type of environment in which people can reframe and process mental and emotional challenges. Daly uses the virtual environment he has created to finally experience a sense of authority and control that he lacks in his everyday working life, and where he is finally at the top of the social hierarchy. His motives align with the self-suppressive form of escapism as outlined by Stenseng et al. (2021, p. 320). He turns his negative emotions (sadness and hatred) into an urge for control and power. He is not taken seriously in the office, but he does not dare to speak out about this. Instead, he takes revenge in this alternative reality. His working life becomes more bearable because he uses this as an outlet. Here the

series reveals another layer on its dystopian portrayal of virtual control. It reflects on the conditions (invisibility and powerlessness) that drive individuals towards such virtual worlds. *Be Right Back* portrays a similar phenomenon. Martha tries to escape grieving over the loss of Ash by immersing herself in the artificial version of him. Her escapism is focused on self-suppression. She tries to alleviate her grief and loss by seeking a connection with AI Ash. She avoids reality and desires to regain control over it. In *Playtest*, Cooper's decision is a way to gain control over his life that feels chaotic at the time.

Beyond recognition and control, motives out of self-expansion and seeking meaning also emerge. In *Striking Vipers* escapism is used as a means of self-expansion (Stenseng et al., 2021, p. 320). Danny and Karl use it to discover hidden aspects of their identity. For them, it is not only an escape from reality, but also a safe place for personal exploration and a chance to add meaning to their life. Even Daly's fantasy world (*USS Callister*) contains elements of meaning making. Robert Daly's alter ego is a form of identity exploration. It is a manifestation of what he lacks in real life. His alter ego in the game expands his identity into someone with strong authority. However, looking critically at his motivation, it is more derived from an attempt to suppress pain (self-suppression) rather than to enrich himself (self-expansion). Therefore it can be argued that it is not a path to personal growth, but rather a desire for recognition and control. A similar phenomenon can be observed in *Playtest*. Cooper's decision to participate initially shows signs of self-expansion (Stenseng et al., 2021, p. 320). He seeks adventure and thrill, which is related to the discovery and exploration motive of wanting to do something new (Hennig-Thurau & Houston, 2019, p. 238). However, the experiment fits into his broader pattern of escaping responsibility and emotional confrontation. Therefore it can be interpreted as an impulsive decision that is seemingly about curiosity (self-expansion), but in reality only serves as a distraction from the grief and pain he carries inside (self-suppression).

However dystopian escapism may be portrayed, what all episodes ultimately show is that escapism is rooted in deep human needs. It is a manifestation of the need for recognition, control, and meaning - even in its most distorted forms. In this sense, *Black Mirror* functions not only as a critique on escapism, but also as a reflection of some of humanity's deepest psychological needs.

4.2.2 The paradox of digital escapism: freedom and entrapment

The previous subtheme showed how escapism is derived from similar underlying motivations, though these manifest in different ways. This theme focuses on the consequences of escapism. While it may seem like a harmless temporary escape from certain life situations and emotions, this theme shows that it can either lead to liberating spaces of self-exploration or psychological prisons that trap the individual in unresolved emotional loops. This subtheme illustrates the paradox of digital escapism: what is meant to be an escape could become the very thing that traps them. It uses the episodes *Playtest*, *Hated in Nation*, *USS Callister*, *Be Right Back* and *Striking Vipers* to exemplify this.

Escapism is not a way to leave something behind. It will only postpone or even worsen the moment of confrontation. Cooper's (*Playtest*) attempt to escape, caused his death. Throughout the episode his mother constantly calls him, but he keeps ignoring her. He does not want to deal with her and flees from talking to her. When his mother calls him while he is participating in the experiment, the phone interferes with the device on his head, whereupon he dies. In a dark manner, this shows that when you escape from something, you do not just leave it behind. The moment of confrontation circled back to him in an unfortunate moment. The same thing can be observed in *Hated in Nation*. People who used the #DeathTo hashtag thought there were no real consequences. They hide behind their social media profiles and run from accountability. However, their digital deeds find them back through the "reverse" system that punishes all users of the hashtag. This shows that what one tries to escape from, will always find its way back.

Escapism can also become an emotional and psychological entrapment. In *Playtest* the experiment brings out all the repressed feelings Cooper has been running away from on his journey, locking him in a psychological prison. It brings out his deepest fears and repressed feelings. The psychological state Cooper finds himself in is made possible by what Hennig-Thurau and Houston (2019) describe as transportation and immersion, which gets enabled through strong imagery. The extreme transportation and immersion through the responsive mansion simulation, realistic projections and the collapsing layers of reality, caused Cooper to become completely captivated by the game and lose awareness of what was real and what was fake. Demetriou (2016, p. 4) shows that alternative realities offer the opportunity to reinterpret challenges and process them in a safe environment. For Cooper, however, the escape had the opposite effect. It was not a safe environment, but an environment that allowed repressed traumas become too prominent. This made escapism not a way out, but a trap within his own psyche. It represents the potential psychological dangers when people attempt to ignore rather than confront their anxieties. In *USS Callister*, Daly's escape becomes a literal entrapment when he is trapped in the alternate reality he created at the end of the episode. Daly's VR game becomes a closed system. It represents a self-imposed dictatorship. The immersion is revengeful and narcissistic. This escapism is driven by bitterness which reinforces internal confinement instead of liberating it, which the end of the episode ironically portrays. In *Be Right Back* The AI changes from a comfort to an emotional entrapment in the past. AI Ash is a version of his online presence. It is constructed through his online activities and social media account. As is also often the case in reality, on social media he constructed the best, most agreeable and playful version of himself. The gap between reality and illusion becomes apparent. The man she has fallen in love with is also self-centred and introspective. At one moment Martha yells frustrated: "you are not enough of him. You are nothing, you are nothing!" (00:41:15) this portrays that she feels that AI Ash is only a small part of the real him. This illustrates the paradox of digital escapism: the technology that allows her to escape pain prevents her from processing that pain. The robot becomes a physical manifestation of her inability to let go. As Demetriou (2016, p. 4) argues, alternative realities can provide a space to reframe and

process trauma. However, if it delays confrontation with loss, it actually risks exacerbating trauma.

However, the episode also offers an insight into how escapism can function as a liberating transitional phase. The AI Ash brings Martha into a mental transitional zone, in which she can approach grief gradually. Martha's final decision to lock AI Ash in the attic, out of daily reach, is a step back towards reality and healing. She realises that Ash's artificial presence offers no real comfort. By distancing herself, she (implicitly) chooses to face her grieving process rather than further suppressing it. In this way, *Be Right Back* shows that while escapism can devolve into psychological stagnation, it can also be temporarily functional, as a transitional phase towards emotional processing. This liberation can also be found in *Striking Vipers*. Danny and Karl's self-exploration escapism eventually enriches their lives.

Across these episodes, it becomes visible how the consequences of escapist behaviour differ. It shows how escapism is neither inherently destructive nor redemptive. It depends on the motivation behind it (curiosity or avoidance) and the degree of immersion and transportation. The latter depends on the capacity of the technology to distort reality. When it stems from avoidance, it risks to become an entrapment. However, when it stems from willingness to reflect, it could also function as a bridge towards personal growth.

4.2.3 Conclusion

What this theme showed is how escapism rises as a response to the lack of three fundamental psychological needs; recognition, control and meaning. The consequences of escapist behaviour showed that escapism is not a solution or an end in itself, but rather a temporary refuge from reality. It delays confrontation which can either hinder personal growth or serve as a helpful transitional phase. *Black Mirror* shows us that technology is not only an escape, but also a mirror of people's inner lives - and it is up to them whether they use that mirror to escape or to reflect on themselves.

3. Theme 3 – Memory: nostalgia and the constructed past

“Not everything that isn’t true is a lie” – Ffion (Armstrong, 2011, 00:29:08)

This third theme examines the portrayal of memory in *Black Mirror*, particularly in relation to nostalgia and mediated memories. The theme of escapism often intertwines with memory. In fact, nostalgia can be seen as a form of escapism, where individuals escape the present by turning towards (an idealised) past. Although closely related, this theme goes beyond escapism and shows how memory functions as both a coping mechanism and source of fixation. It does this through the two subthemes (3.1) The paradox of nostalgia: Nostalgia as a psychological shield against existential issues or as fixation on the past and (3.2) The programmed past: Mediated memories redefine history.

4.3.1 The paradox of nostalgia: Nostalgia as a psychological shield against existential issues or as a fixation on the past

This theme shows that nostalgia is more than a sentimental longing for the past (Boym, 2001). Nostalgia has a protective effect. It gives life meaning and acts as a buffer against existential issues. This is outlined in the terror management theory (Routledge et al., 2008, p. 132). It implies that recalling past memories aids individuals in dealing with the awareness of mortality. This role is exemplified in *San Junipero* and *Be Right Back*, where characters leverage nostalgia to cope with existential challenges. However, it could also lead to an unhealthy fixation on the past that comes at the expense of the present. This is exemplified in *The Entire History of You*.

Nostalgia is used to overcome existential crises. This becomes evident in *San Junipero*. In this village, people can upload their consciousness after death to live on forever in *San Junipero*. The town is set in the 1980s, which is reflected in the retro aesthetics, music and the (clothing) style (figure 3.1). It evokes memories of youth, freedom and falling in love. It offers an impression of timelessness that directly counteracts the finality of death. Yorkie and Kelly redefine their lives in this world. They immerse themselves in a romanticised past that gives their lives new meaning and eases their agony. *San Junipero* is a paradox in itself: technology makes it possible for characters to travel to a time without technology. For Yorkie, who was paralysed in real life, *San Junipero* offers more than a chance to live on. It also offers her the chance to reinvent herself and her sexuality. Her decision to permanently upload her consciousness after death shows how nostalgia provides new meaning and continuity where none existed before. Kelly is more sceptical about continuing to live in *San Junipero*. She is hesitant in the choice to leave real life behind for a programmed paradise. In the end, she too chooses virtual existence, not to escape her real life, but out of love (for Yorkie). The episode emphasises that nostalgia is not always an escape to withdraw from reality. It can be a deliberate decision for love and meaning. As Routledge et al. (2008, p. 132) argue, nostalgia reduces existential anxieties and grounds Yorkie and Kelly in emotionally meaningful experiences through their interaction with their virtual past. A similar dynamic can be observed in *Be Right Back*. Here too, nostalgia acts as an existential buffer. Martha not only thinks back to the memories of their

relationship; she can literally hold onto them. In line with terror management theory (Routledge et al., 2008, p. 132), here, nostalgia has a protective and existential function. Martha feels nostalgic for her former relationship with Ash, and clings on to it. The digital Ash represents a physical embodiment of memory, enabling Martha to hold onto a version of the past. This reduces her fear of his death. It gives Martha the illusion of continuity and avoids an immediate confrontation with the irreversible nature of time. As Routledge et al. (2008, p. 132) describe, nostalgia helps to temporarily alleviate the fear of death.

Figure 3.1 Aesthetics of San Junipero



Note: Self-made collage of screenshots from San Junipero (2019)

However, the fixation on past memories can also become a self-destructive control. *The Entire History of You* shows the other side of the coin. Characters can record and review their memories through a grain implant. Memories can be displayed and externalised. The past is no longer remembered, but constantly relived. These recordings give the illusion of control over the past. Although memories are accurate, they lose their emotional context. Liam becomes obsessed with reconstructing events in his partner's life. He needs security and a grip on his relationship, and like Martha, he tries to gain control over an emotionally unstable reality. While Martha's sense of nostalgia provides comfort, Liam's fosters suspicion and eventually causes the ending of their relationship. He becomes so fixated on the past that he becomes incapable of engaging in the present moment. This illustrates how past memories could also come at the cost of the present. A digital legacy does not always lead to better processing or understanding.

This is the paradox of nostalgic escapism. The past can serve as a comfort to ease existential issues, pain and give meaning to life. However it can also function as a place where people lose themselves to escape confrontation with the present. Here, remembering what was, prevents them from living with what is. *Black Mirror* shows that technology has the power to make memories

tangible, but that it is ultimately up to people to decide whether they cherish the past in order to move forward, or cling to it out of fear of the present.

4.3.2 The programmed past: Mediated memories redefine history

Digital media changes the organic process of remembering to a digitised process. These mediated memories (van Dijck, 2008, p. 72) not only affect organic memories, but also have the power to change the past. Through mediated memories, history not only becomes visible, it also reframes the past in a way that it gets remembered differently. This theme uses the episodes *Eulogy*, *The Entire History of You* and *Be Right Back* to exemplify this.

Technology not only facilitates memory, but also influences and distorts it. According to van Dijck (2008, p. 74), technology changes the way memories are retrieved. In *Eulogy*, this becomes tangible: Instead of remembering Carol, his ex-relationship who passed away, in an organic way, Phillip relies entirely on mediated memories in the form of photographs. Mediated memories, which are described by van Dijck (2008, p. 72) as the “extensions of men,” become quite literal in this episode. Phillip can transport himself into a photograph. The photograph is not only an extension of his eyes, but also of all his other senses. It enables Phillip to re-experience an emotional connection to the past. He remembers Carol not as she really was, but as she is composed by technology. This aligns with the idea that digital media are not only archives of memories, but also active mediators of the creation of these memories (Hoskins, 2011, p. 23). The photographs even make him remember things about Carol that he himself never knew, and which he himself could not access through an organic process. Technology confronts him with these gaps in his memory. However, it not only reproduces the memory, but also recontextualises it. This underlines the idea that technology does not solely reproduce the past neutrally, but also shapes the way in which it is remembered.

This can also be observed in *The Entire History of You*, where characters undermine organic memories and fully rely on mediated memories. These mediated memories give the illusion of objectivity: The memories seem reliable because they can be replayed precisely, but they are pulled out of their original context. As a result, memories are reinterpreted in an incorrect context, reshaping their original meaning. Another example of how memories have been pulled out of context can be observed in *Be Right Back*, where mediated memories are even given a new “life.” AI Ash becomes Ash’s mediated memories. The AI Ash version is created based on his online presence. He is composed of what he has left behind online, and thus is a direct product of his digital traces. The AI Ash is only a fragmented version of who he really was. It is a tangible memory in the form of a walking and talking robot. However, he does not reflect Ash’s full complexity. Still, it could eventually result in Martha forgetting aspects of his personality (such as his selfishness). And as the years go by, she might come to only remember Ash as the AI presents Ash to her.

All three episodes show how technology not only functions as a neutral carrier of memory, but actively reframes memories by taking them out of their original context. This results in the (emotional)

reinterpretation of memories. In this sense, memories are not only mirrors reflecting the past, but also tools that actively reshape it.

4.3.3 Conclusion

This theme showed how nostalgia is used to get a grip on existential issues. It could give new meaning to life but it can also result in self-destructive behaviour by unhealthy clinging on to the past. Technology enables people to retrieve memories in a seemingly objective way. However, by taking them out of their original context, the original meaning of memories get reinterpreted.

5. Conclusion

This thesis examined how *Black Mirror* portrays the three interdependent concepts of connectivity, escapism and memory within a technologised society. By analysing several episodes of the series, this concluding chapter reveals how each theme contributes to an overarching assumption. First, the themes are discussed separately, before they come together in an overarching insight.

The first theme argued that technology can both facilitate and undermine relationships. It changes the dynamics in the formation of romantic relationships. However, this theme also revealed that a combination of technology and personal intuition is needed to fully realise the potential for meaningful connections. Additionally, digital life splits an individual's identity between their physical presence and their digital existence. This is something that Turkle (2011, p. 16) also found in her theory of dual existence. This separation leads to tensions in real world relationships. The trade-offs between online and offline connections offer new opportunities for connection, but can also diminish authenticity and presence in the physical world. This aligns with the theory of Cirucci & Vacker (2018, p. x), who argue that reliance on mediated connections in a society alters self-perception and interactions with others. While Turkle (2011, p. 1) and Tanner (2020, p. 89) emphasise the superficiality of digital connections, *Black Mirror* shows that they can also serve as a meaningful extension of human connections. Rather than merely being "alone together" as Turkle (2011, p. 14) stated it, the findings show that technology does facilitate deeper connections.

The second theme argued that escapism is a response to the lack of three human psychological needs: recognition, control and meaning. In doing so, *Black Mirror* goes beyond a simple critique of technology and instead exposes the psychological voids that these technologies can fill. This nuances the idea that escapism is a consequence of digital media; rather, it is a response to unfulfilled psychological needs. Escapism is motivated by different motives, which makes the outcomes of escapism also differ. *Black Mirror* shows that the consequences of escapism depend on one's intentions, which underscores the theory of Stenseng et al., (2021, p. 320). If it is rooted in self-suppression, escapism becomes a trap. However, if it is rooted in self-expansion, it can lead to opportunities for personal growth.

The third theme argued how memory is affected by technology. It alters it in ways that can be comforting, which is consistent with Routledge et al.'s (2008, p. 132) theory of terror management. It provides a sense of purpose in life by reflecting on meaningful experiences. This way, it can serve as a source of comfort that alleviates existential concerns and diminishes the anxiety of mortality. However, it can also lead to a distortion of the past that creates uncertainty in the present, which van Dijck (2008, p. 72) also warns against. Mediated memories reinterpret memories by placing them outside of their initial context. This leads to a re-evaluation of those memories in a different (emotional) state or circumstances.

Taken together, these themes reveal a common thread. Technology is only as beneficial or harmful as the intentions and needs behind its use. *Black Mirror* is not a critique of technology itself.

The dystopian mirror for which the series is known for does not reflect the machines that are being built, but the psychological needs of humans that they fail to control. The real threat resides in humanity's inability to resist escapism, accept the past and maintain authentic connections amidst a world of digital distraction. The series does not present fragmented dystopian scenarios, as they are all intertwined with each other and collectively show that technology uncovers the tensions in relationships between people, the desire to escape from reality and the struggle to accept the irreversibility of time. Although the themes are addressed separately, the analysis shows their interdependence. The covered themes were not isolated discussions, but necessary steps towards this overarching insight. They reinforce and influence each other and are expressions of human psychological needs. The analysis shows that the need for connection feeds the desire to escape in digital environments in order to find these connections. However, when people escape in their digital lives they can also lose connection to the physical world and the people in it. Additionally, escapism offers not only an escape from reality, but also a way to gain control over one's own narrative. This escape can take the form of a return to the past that provides comfort. However, escapism also distorts perception, and thus reshapes memory and reconstructs it. These themes emphasise the balance that must be constantly established between the past and present, online and offline presence, and connection and disconnection.

5.1 Limitations and future research

This thesis has a few limitations. First, the analysis relies on subjective interpretations. Although existing literature is used to ground the interpretations, analysing the symbolic nature of this fictional television series allows for multiple understandings.

Secondly, this thesis focused on the content of *Black Mirror* and its interpretation. The effect on the audience remains unanswered. It would be interesting to look beyond the content and consider the audience's perspective. Future research could focus on the audience perspective and explore how audiences interpret these three themes of connectivity, escapism, and memory within *Black Mirror*. This will provide an understanding of possible individual and societal attitudes and consequences. Researchers could examine the extent to which these representations influence the viewer's attitude towards technology. Such research could provide insights into the individual and societal impact of media narratives. It could help determine whether *Black Mirror* contributes to awareness or the normalisation of certain behaviours.

Thirdly, the results are limited to specific episodes of *Black Mirror*. This thesis researched a selection of the episodes. Therefore, the findings can not be generalised to other series or films. As each episode of *Black Mirror* differs significantly in storyline, characters and genre, it is difficult to generalise the findings to other episodes of *Black Mirror* that were not analysed. Nevertheless, the analysis shows how *Black Mirror* becomes a place where meaning is created. Due to the deductive

nature of this thesis, a selection of relevant episodes was made in advance. It is therefore possible that other relevant episodes were unintentionally overlooked that could have provided valuable insights for the analysis. Future research could expand the scope of analysis, especially episodes from the new season that is released this year (2025). Analysing these episodes could provide new thematic insights. It could also reveal possible changes, for example in the narrative or in the behaviour of the characters compared to previous seasons. Furthermore, the comparison of old and new episodes could reveal how social, cultural or technological changes have influenced the portrayal of these themes in recent episodes.

Furthermore, the analysis was based on theory through a deductive approach. This theory-driven approach provides a focus, but can also lead to alternative explanations outside the existing theory being overlooked. Finally, the analysis relied solely on the researcher's own interpretation and nothing about the creators' intended meaning was explored. It would be interesting to research the meaning intended by the creators to determine the difference between how the message is encoded by the creators and how it is decoded by the audience.

5.2 Societal and academic implications

Considering the increasing significance of digital media in daily life, it is crucial to evaluate how these concepts are presented in the series, as they contribute to broader societal conversations on technological advancement. As evidenced in the theoretical framework, it can be argued that fictional television has a profound impact on individuals and societies (Barry, 2005, p. 47). Fiske (1987, p. 14) argued that television serves as a cultural force that not only spreads, but also creates meaning. When engaging with *Black Mirror*, audiences do not passively take in a message regarding technology; instead, they participate in an active process of meaning-making. The fictional narratives in *Black Mirror* offer a context for addressing anxieties about technology by intertwining them with emotionally impactful and culturally recognisable narratives. Consequently, these stories influence the symbolic landscape within which individuals learn to conceptualise technology. Fictional series such as *Black Mirror* serve not only as entertainment, but also influence societies and how people imagine the future. This perspective builds upon Fiske's (1987) idea that television serves as a "cultural agent" (p. vi). The series allows individuals and societies to explore potential futures and test ethical limits in a fictional context. These explorations, through repetition and emotional involvement, could begin to shape actual perceptions and discussions.

From an academic viewpoint this thesis extends the theories of Tanner (2020), Turkle (2011), and Cirucci and Vacker (2018) by applying them to specific episodes, thereby putting their theoretical concepts into practice and demonstrating how technology influences relationships. While these theorists had a more negative approach, this thesis shows that technology can also bring positive change to relationships. Digital connections lead not only to distance but also to new forms of connectedness. Contributing to the concept of escapism, this thesis shows that it is not a direct

consequence of digital media, as theorists (Siricharoes, 2019; Harlt & Berger, 2017) argue, but rather a result of unmet psychological needs. Escapism is not inherently dangerous as it depends on the underlying motivation. Regarding the concept of memory, Routledge et al. (2008) note that it provides comfort, which is also evidenced in *Black Mirror*. Additionally, van Dijck (2008, p. 72) and Hoskins (2011, p. 23) emphasised the power of mediation to influence memories. Their concerns are substantiated with the analysis of mediated memories in *Black Mirror*. However, it also nuances these concerns as the mediatisation of memories is not inherently dangerous as it depends on the context and intention behind their use.

Ultimately, the findings encourage a more critical view on how technology is portrayed in *Black Mirror*. This thesis argues that the series does not present technology as a force of determinism in itself as humans retain full agency over its use. *Black Mirror* is most widely interpreted as a deterministic warning, this interpretation risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. It can unintentionally normalise the idea that people have shortcomings and are therefore not responsible for their actions. In doing so, the blame gets shifted from individuals to technology. However, this thesis challenges the deterministic reading as merely a technological warning. It shows that *Black Mirror* is not a warning for the technology itself, but for the shortcomings and vulnerabilities of people. This thesis proposes a more nuanced narrative that emphasises agency rather than just dystopia. It showed how *Black Mirror* also portrays technology as a tool that can be used for the good to improve the relationship with each other, the past and ourselves. These insights contribute to a re-evaluation of *Black Mirror* as a cultural reflection and not just a warning against technological innovation. By redirecting the analytical focus from technology to the users who engage with it, this thesis offers a perspective on how technology is represented in modern media culture. It emphasises the need to understand not only the functions of technologies, but also the reasons why individuals are drawn to them in the first place. Ultimately, this thesis shows how *Black Mirror* not only reflects the power of technology, but also holds up a mirror to humanity's longing to connect, escape and remember – and in misreading that reflection, society risks self-fulfilling the very dystopias it fears.

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7. Appendix

Appendix A: Episode overview

Details	Title	Synopsis	Core themes
Season 1, episode 3, 44m	The Entire History of You (Armstrong, 2011)	The characters can remember and replay memories through memory implants. Characters connect to the past rather than engage in the present.	Memory, escapism
Season 2, episode 1, 49m	Be right Back (Brooker, 2013)	Escapism into the digital version of her dead partner - and reliving their relationship (nostalgia/remembering) lets her cope with grief. She escapes into an alternative reality to avoid dealing with her real life grief.	Connectivity, escapism, memory
Season 3, episode 1, 63m	Nosedive (Brooker, 2016d)	Critiques superficial over authentic connections formed by a social rating system. The characters escape into an alternate identity that adheres to social norms. Remembering surfaces as moments of authenticity stand out in contrast to the created artificial identity.	Connectivity
Season 3, episode 2, 57m	Playtest (Brooker, 2016c)	Escapism in VR gaming, exploring how	Escapism

		nostalgia and personal fears intertwine.	
Season 3, episode 4, 61m	San Junipero (Brooker, 2016a)	Those who embrace digital nostalgia are those who find the happy ending. Nostalgia serves as healing.	Memory
Season 3, episode 6, 89m	Hated in nation (Brooker, 2016b)	Connection can be observed in how online platforms unite people. Victims of public shaming are memorialised. Escapism is found in the anonymity of digital interactions.	Escapism
Season 4, episode 1, 76m	USS Callister (Brooker & William, 2017)	Escaping in the game as a form of liberation. The digital world is built on retro science fiction.	Connectivity, escapism
Season 4, episode 4, 51m	Hang the DJ (Brooker, 2017)	A dating app enables an escape from real world relationships. Characters form relationships (connections) through the dating app.	Connectivity
Season 5, episode 1, 61m	Striking Vipers (Brooker, 2019a)	Escapism through virtual reality, where characters can live out fantasies removed from real-world constraints. Connection is redefined when the characters redefine their relationship in a VR game.	Connectivity, escapism

Special episode, 74m	White Christmas (Brooker, 2014)	Characters revisit past events through stored consciousness and recorded memories. They escape into the digital construct of their memories.	Escapism, memory
Season 7, Episode 5, 46m	Eulogy (Brooker & Road, 2025)	Characters can step into mediated memories (photographs) and relive these moments.	Memory
Season 7, Episode 6, 89m	USS Callister: Into Infinity	This sequel to USS Callister further deepens the understanding of the escapist motives driving Daly's behaviour.	Escapism

Appendix B: Codes per episode

Initial codes per episode (Most relevant notes)	Categories
S1E3 The Entire History of You	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The technology in this episode is a memory implant (the grain). It records everything the person sees and hears and allows them to replay memories for themselves or stream them for others. 	Reliving shared experiences and reinforcing social ties.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A commercial advertises for upgrading the memory system to full spectrum memory including colours and smells, and 30 year storage. 	Safety over privacy.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The custom checks people's memory on the airport for safety reasons. 	Replaying memories to escape the present.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Liam memorises the names and relations of people he already met, before meeting them again. 	Memory as an absolute truth. One's past is always accessible and it removes subjectivity from memory.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Memories are stored and viewed by others. 	Escapism into past memories and disconnection from the present moment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ability to review Liam's presentation through his memories so others can give him feedback. 	Escaping memory through removing the grain. Liberation comes from the ability to forget.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There exists a trend of people taking out the memory implant. 	Memory as control.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A thief stole the memory implant of a girl, apparently <u>this happens a lot with hookers</u>. 	Memory as obsession and fixation on the past.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Thieves can replay every memory when it is not coded. 	Relationships are based on verification rather than trust.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organic memories are not trustworthy, because false memories can be implanted by asking leading questions. 	Constant accountability for past actions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instead of connection, the grain fuels Liam's paranoia. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The social standard is that partners should be able to review each other's memories. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sexual intimacy is altered when Liam and Amy replay past moments of intimacy rather than being present. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Memories (situations and people) can be closely analysed. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Memories gets the truth to the surface. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They replay their babies memories to check if everything went alright with the nanny. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Liam dwells on the past. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> They have the agency and ability to edit one's own memories. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The emergency number asks to literally show the situation that just happened. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People get more careful about what they say or do, as it can have long lasting consequences. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Honesty wins over lies because of the ability to objectively analyse memories. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taking out the memory implant means disconnection from all memories. 	

S2E1 Be right Back	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ash often disappears in his phone, paying no attention to his surroundings. The software connects Martha to a digital version of Ash. It maintains a connection to her lost partner The AI preserves aspects of Ash's personality based on his digital history. Martha re-experience their relationship, keeping his essence alive. AI Ash functions as a living memorial. By interacting with AI Ash, she avoids complete emotional collapse. It provides a gentler transition into accepting loss. Martha records the echo to show to "him." Martha panics when her phone cracks and gets disconnected from the digital version of Ash. She views AI Ash as a real presence. It offers a familiar voice in a time of loneliness. This presence makes her feel happier and less lonely. The connection feels more and more superficial: it lacks emotions, unpredictability and it has no history. She escapes into an artificial relationship, instead of looking for a "real" new one. Martha turns to AI as a way to escape grief. She gets a connection with the digital version of Ash. It helps her cope with grief. 	Connecting online and disconnecting from the physical world. Technology reconstructs past factual knowledge, but lacks history, emotions and unpredictability. Technology safeguards memories and preserves a person's digital legacy. Technology as emotional support. Technology as emotional avoidance. Digital preservation of identity. Technology bridges the gap between absence and presence. Technology as a tool for emotional regulation. It provides a gentler transition into accepting loss. Technology provides a way to stay connected with lost ones. Technology helps people to process grief by offering a continued sense of connection. Artificial connections feel like real ones.
S3E1 Nosedive	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social ratings are valued over meaningful/authentic interactions. The rating system preserves a digital history of interactions. Past ratings define a person's future, making it impossible to escape social mistakes or reinvent oneself. Memories are filtered through a lens of public perception, meaning people do not remember events for their true emotional value but rather for how they were rated. Constant digital connections Lacy values online connections and ratings more than physical connections 	Technology creates a structured system of social interaction. The rating system preserves past interactions, trapping individuals in a social hierarchy based on past actions. Conformability over authenticity. Ongoing connection and networking. Dehumanising real connections. Artificial Emotional connections.
S3E2 Playtest	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooper disconnects from his surroundings and escapes into a videogame while being in the airplane. 	Technology serves as a force that confronts individuals with past trauma's or unprocessed emotions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooper first connects with Sonja online through a dating app. 	The paradox of escapism: Instead of providing relief or liberation, technology (in the form of an immersive videogame) deepens anxieties.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cooper travels as a form of escapism from dealing with his mother, after his father got Alzheimer's. 	Technology disconnects an individual from real life. It alters perceptions and creates disorientation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He travels to make all the memories he can, while he can. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He doesn't want to connect with his mom through the phone. He prefers talking to her in real life. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A videogame is explained as a safe environment in which you can face your biggest fears as a form of liberation. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The horror house is set in the 19th century. (No wifi, no internet, no tv). 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The woman explains how putting on a tv makes people feel less alone, even when they are alone. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The game blurs the lines between simulation and reality. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The game escalates and Cooper loses his sense of self and reality. He finds himself in deep technological immersion. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It shows how a game that is made as a form of escape (for relief or liberation), can deepen one's anxiety. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> His personal trauma's and unprocessed past emotions resurface. 	
S3E4 San Junipero	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 80's and 90's aesthetics evident in: clothes, hairstyles, cars, music, dance styles, mindset (conventional ideas), retro gamble machine's. 	Virtual connection beyond physical limits.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The simulation offers the chance to revisit the past. (And relive the 80's, 90's). 	Escaping physical limitations through technology.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People escape to San Junipero (to enjoy themselves). 	Memory preservation through technology.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> San Junipero preserves memories, but also alters them. 	Tension between living in the past (remembering) or living in the present and moving on.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> San Junipero is an escape from aging, disability and death. 	Escaping mortality or suffering.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> People escape in the night in this party town. Real life troubles disappear for the night. You can be anything you want, with anyone you want. 	Technology as an escape from aging, disability and death.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yorkie uses the simulation to escape her physical disability and to experience physical freedom. 	Immersive nostalgia therapy through technology as a way to prevent Alzheimer's.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The beach house reminds Kelly of where she grew up. She reminisces on an old picture of her mom. 	Revisiting past decades.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The immersive nostalgia therapy helps with Alzheimer's disease, by plunging the individual into a world of memories. When someone dies. He/she escapes the real life world and his/her consciousness gets uploaded into the cloud. Kelly visits Yorkie through memory implants. They come from both real-world backgrounds, but connect inside the simulation. A genuine connection in an artificial space. The ability to connect in San Junipero is not bound by physical age, disability, or mortality. Kelly and Yorkie live on in a memory in the 80's. 	
S3E6 Hated in nation	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Drones are used that fight bee extinction The #Death to fires back and kills those who use it People use social media to stay connected with each other The system remembers all the people who used the hashtag People feel connected by having a mutual enemy People hide behind screens and anonymously participate The hashtag holds a historical record 	<p>Digital ties and mutual enemies bind citizens</p> <p>Digital actions leave permanent traces</p> <p>Pretending the virtual world has no real consequences</p> <p>Technology holds a collective memory</p>
S4E1 USS Callister + S7E6 USS Callister: Into Infinity	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The receptionist disappears in her phone and doesn't even look up while talking. People in the office are distracted by their phones, not paying attention to their surroundings. Robert escapes to a world in which he has full agency. He uses the virtual world as a form of social control. Robert connects online, and disconnects from the real world around him. Robert struggles with social connections in real life. He interacts with his colleagues in the game. Collective rebellion against the game. 	<p>Memory as a tool for resistance and rebellion.</p> <p>Memory preservation through digital replication.</p> <p>Escaping in a virtual world to exert social control and suppressed needs.</p> <p>Memories are portrayed as a mechanism for control and preserving identity.</p> <p>Digital entrapment.</p> <p>People are distracted by devices, disconnecting themselves from their surroundings.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The digital clones replicate memories and personalities. The clones use their memories and awareness of the real world to escape the game. The game becomes a prison. Virtual death is portrayed as a form of freedom. The game creates interactions/connection, but also enforces power hierarchies. Daly feels socially isolated Daly started out as a friendly boy Walton takes all credit for the invention of the game 	

S4E4 Hang the DJ	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Relationships are formed through an algorithm, instead of real life connections. The app decides with whom you connect and for how long. The app connects Frank and Amy for 12 hours. They have no memories of before the system They live in a constructed reality (simulation). Escaping challenges of real life relationships. Escaping uncertainty or heartbreak through simulation. Amy and Frank rebel against the system and escape the simulation. The final "escape" is pre-programmed. Even their rebellion is an illusion of agency rather than true choice. The system reduces emotional experiences to mere data points. The app succeeds 99.8% in finding someone's perfect match. The more dates, the more Amy feels detached and disconnected from herself and her body. Frank and Amy are a simulation/algorithm. The Frank and Amy in the real world, only experience the result. True compatibility endures, even though technological difficulties. 	<p>Coded compatibility: Algorithms are chosen over genuine romantic connections.</p> <p>Repeated encounters strengthen their bond: memory provides/shape emotional depth.</p> <p>Dating apps condition users to trust algorithms over human instincts, making them dependent on external validation rather than personal intuition.</p> <p>Technology interfering with emotional bonds.</p> <p>The System micromanages relationships, treating love as a controlled experiment over an organic process or true connection.</p> <p>Safe emotional trial and error: The System provides a safe, structured dating environment while still allowing choice in love.</p> <p>Artificial intimacy.</p> <p>Illusion of choice: The System traps users in a manufactured reality, convincing them that their actions are independent when they are merely following a scripted path.</p>
S5E1 Striking Vipers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Karl is nostalgic for the past and feels dissonance in his present life Human connections are different than interactions through a mediated world (VR) Blurring boundaries between Danny and Karl live in two different realities Tension between real-life and digital life Memory as a tool for re-experiencing emotions Virtual reality used to explore identities and sexuality Immersion in a fantasy world to escape real world challenges Escaping the real world in a virtual world The digital experience creates another connection (form of intimacy) between Karl and Danny then in real life 	<p>Digital intimacy redefines relationships</p> <p>Online environments transform existing relationships</p> <p>Online presence undermines offline presence</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The VR game gets integrated into real life, along with the relationship. The game satisfies them in their sexual desires A polygamy relationship (digital and physical) Redefined relationship through the online environment Escapism into an alternate version of oneself: into a gaming character 	
S7E5 Eulogy	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phillip has a virtual guide to help curate memories Phillip physically steps into memories On all the memories Carol's face can not be remembered The AI guide fills in the gaps he forgot Music unlocks memories Mediated memories are used over organic memories Technology composes a digital archive of memories The digital memories change his organic memories 	<p>Technology allows to escape into memories</p> <p>Digital connection through the device enables interaction with the past</p> <p>Remembering is a digitised process</p>
(Special episode) White Christmas	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The episode begins with Joe reminiscing and looking at an old picture of his wife. The episode consist out of flashbacks to memories. Through a constant connection (eye link) Matt coaches people to romantically connect with others. Z-eyes eliminate physical barriers and therefore enhance social interaction/connection Real time coaching increases social confidence, and can help those who struggle with social anxieties. Z-eyes allows to block each other. The blocked person appears in an anonymous shape. You can't hear, see or speak to a blocked person or its offsprings. Blocking provides control over toxic relationships. When blocked, every image of memories gets deleted. No one can take the Z-eyes out. The implanted "cookies" are a digital replication of consciousness. It is used as a forced connection without consent. The digital consciousness makes Joe experience time different. It leads to altered perception of memory and time. Joe is forced to relive Christmas memories. 	<p>Digital voyeurism enables constant connection and surveillance.</p> <p>Blocking as a form of disconnection, redefines what it means to be seen or invisible in society.</p> <p>Memory retrieval through interrogation.</p> <p>Memory preservation through technology allows for a form of legacy or immortality.</p> <p>Memory is no longer a personal or subjective experience, but something externally controlled and manipulated.</p> <p>Flawless digital memory vs. fragile human memory.</p> <p>Recollections from digital consciousness, accesses and weaponizes memories.</p> <p>Technology enables new forms of punishments.</p> <p>Digital isolation and real life disconnection as punishment.</p> <p>Flawless but inescapable digital recollection. Portrayed as torture, interrogation and emotional manipulation.</p> <p>Escape is an illusion: it creates new prisons (AI cookies, blocking, manipulation).</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through technology perfect memories can be retained, in contrast to subjective and unreliable organic memories. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matt is “blocked” from society. Socially isolating/disconnecting him. 	

Appendix C: Coding process

Artificial emotional connections and intimacy.	Superficial, artificial and authentic connections.	Connection: Technology as facilitator and inhibitor of relationships
Artificial connections feel like real ones.		
Conformability over authenticity.		
Dehumanising real connections.		
Coded compatibility: Algorithms are chosen over genuine romantic connections.	Technology mediated relationships	
Love as a controlled experiment over an organic process or true connection.		
Dating apps conditions users to trust algorithms over human instincts, making them dependent on external validation rather than personal intuition.		
Relationships based on verification rather than trust.		
Technology interfering with emotional bonds.		
Technology disconnects an individual from real life. It alters perceptions and creates disorientation.	Connecting online and disconnecting offline.	
People are distracted by devices, disconnecting themselves from their surroundings.		
Digital preservation of identity and legacy.	Digital immortality and continuous connection.	
Escaping mortality or suffering.		
Technology as an escape from aging, disability and death.		
Digital voyeurism enables constant connection and surveillance.		
Memory preservation through technology allows for a form of legacy or immortality.		

Technology provides a way to stay connected with lost ones.		
Connecting online and disconnecting from the physical world.	Technology as a bridge or barrier.	
Technology reconstructs past factual knowledge, but lacks history, emotions and unpredictability.		
Technology bridges the gap between absence and presence.		
Ongoing connection and networking.		
Escaping physical limitations through technology: Virtual connection beyond physical limits.		
Reliving shared experiences and reinforcing social ties.	Technology reinforcing emotional and social connection.	
Technology creates a structured system of social interaction.		
Memory provides emotional depth.		
Safe emotional trial and error: The System provides a safe, structured dating environment while still allowing choice in love.		
Replaying memories to escape the present.	Virtual reality and digital constructs as a refuge	Escapism as a manifestation of psychological needs and its consequences
Escaping in a virtual world to exert social control and suppressed needs.		
The paradox of escapism: Instead of providing relief or liberation, technology deepens anxieties.	Escapism as a double-edged sword	
Digital entrapment.		
Illusion of choice: The System traps users in a manufactured reality, convincing them that their actions are independent when they are merely following a scripted path.		
Flawless but inescapable digital recollection. Portrayed as torture, interrogation and emotional manipulation.		
Escape is an illusion: it creates new prisons.		

Escapism into past memories and disconnection from the present moment.	Emotional avoidance and regulation	
Liberation comes from the ability to forget.		
Technoloogy as emotional support.		
Technology as emotional avoidance.		
Technology as a tool for emotional regulation. It provides a gentler transition into accepting loss.		
Technology helps people to process grief by offering a continued sense of connection.		
Immersive nostalgia therapy as a way to prevent Alzheimer's.	Technological nostalgia and the commodification of memory	Memory: Nostalgia and memory manipulation
Revisiting past decades.		
Memory as a tool for resistance and rebellion.		
Memories are portrayed as a mechanism for control and preserving identity.		
Technology serves as a force that confronts individuals with past trauma's or unprocessed emotions.	Memory augmentation and its psychological consequences	
Tension between living in the past (remembering) or living in the present and moving on.		
Memory as an absolute truth: One's past is always accessible and it removes subjectivity from memory.	Memory as control, manipulation and preservation	
Flawless digital memory vs. fragile human memory.		
Memory as obsession and fixation on the past.		
Constant accountability for past actions.		
Safeguarding and preservation of memories		

Memory retrieval through interrogation.		
Memory is no longer personal or subjective, but externally controlled and manipulated.		
Recollections from digital consciousness, accesses and weaponizes memories.		

Appendix D: Extensive coding tree



Appendix E: Declaration Page: Use of Generative AI Tools in Thesis

Student Information

Name: Lissy Smeets

Student ID: 699731

Course Name: Master Thesis CM5050

Supervisor Name: Linda Kopitz

Date: 25-06-2025

Declaration:

Acknowledgment of Generative AI Tools

I acknowledge that I am aware of the existence and functionality of generative artificial intelligence (AI) tools, which are capable of producing content such as text, images, and other creative works autonomously.

GenAI use would include, but not limited to:

- Generated content (e.g., ChatGPT, Quillbot) limited strictly to content that is not assessed (e.g., thesis title).
- Writing improvements, including grammar and spelling corrections (e.g., Grammarly)
- Language translation (e.g., DeepL), without generative AI alterations/improvements.
- Research task assistance (e.g., finding survey scales, qualitative coding verification, debugging code)
- Using GenAI as a search engine tool to find academic articles or books (e.g.,

I declare that I have used generative AI tools, specifically DeepL, in the process of creating parts or components of my thesis. The purpose of using these tools was to aid in generating content or assisting with specific aspects of thesis work.

(I used it to help me translate some things from Dutch to English, but I did not use generative AI)

Extent of AI Usage

I confirm that while I utilized generative AI tools to aid in content creation, the majority of the intellectual effort, creative input, and decision-making involved in completing the thesis were undertaken by me. I have enclosed the prompts/logging of the GenAI tool use in an appendix.

(I don't have the history of DeepL to enclose in the appendix. I used it to translate some words and minor parts of sentences)

Ethical and Academic Integrity

I understand the ethical implications and academic integrity concerns related to the use of AI tools in coursework. I assure that the AI-generated content was used responsibly, and any content derived from these tools has been appropriately cited and attributed

I declare that I have NOT used any generative AI tools and that the assignment concerned is my original work.

Signature: [digital signature]

Date of Signature: [Date of Submission]

according to the guidelines provided by the instructor and the course. I have taken necessary steps to distinguish between my original work and the AI-generated contributions. Any direct quotations, paraphrased content, or other forms of AI-generated material have been properly referenced in accordance with academic conventions.

By signing this declaration, I affirm that this declaration is accurate and truthful. I take full responsibility for the integrity of my assignment and am prepared to discuss and explain the role of generative AI tools in my creative process if required by the instructor or the Examination Board. I further affirm that I have used generative AI tools in accordance with ethical standards and academic integrity expectations.

Signature: Lissy Smeets

Date of Signature: 25-06-2025