



## Preface

Sociology sets out to develop the sociological imagination of those who study it, allowing us to think critically and reflexively about the social world around us and make sense of the relationship between our personal experiences and wider society. This approach to interrogating the world is embodied in this collection of critical reflections written by final year students on the Sociology degree programmes here at Leeds Beckett University. The reflections in this volume underline both the breadth of the subject and its power to shed light on the familiar and the taken for granted. They tackle a wide range of contemporary issues such as greenwashing, social media, mental health, school education, and reality television. To do this, they apply theory as an interrogative and explanatory tool, tackling these subjects through the lens of, for example, neoliberalism, surveillance, risk society, commodification, and cultural production, underlining its central role in Sociology.

This collection is a testament to both the students and staff of the Sociology degrees. For the students, each of the reflections emphasises the knowledge and skills they have developed individually – in applying the tools of the social sciences to analyse and interpret current trends and developments and, just as importantly, communicating incisive, critical commentary; the end product is also a collective editorial effort. Each essay also underlines the strong commitment the course team have to developing students as active producers of knowledge and the support that they provide as part of this to enable them to develop their intellectual skills and abilities.

I hope that readers of these reflections enjoy the perspectives offered, and are themselves further challenged, encouraged or inspired to reflect on the contemporary social world.

Dr Matt Badcock  
Head of Sociology  
School of Humanities & Social Sciences

**For more information on our sociology courses at Leeds Beckett University see:**  
<https://courses.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/sociology/>

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## Editorial

Whilst the COVID crisis has abated the academic year has been marked by another economic crisis, manifest in *cost of living crisis* and high inflation. Despite constraining external structures our students continue to produce thoughtful work in their 3<sup>rd</sup> year module *Contemporary Society and Social Futures* and we proudly mark the 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our student journal. These students' university experience has been the most disrupted of our cohorts with their entire first year being online in the first thrusts of the COVID crisis and lockdowns. It is therefore to the credit of these students that they have persisted and developed their critical thinking skills and embarked upon using the sociological tools from the module to apply these to a social phenomenon they deemed to be worthy of closer investigation and analysis.

The nine contributions this year can be found here: <https://ojs.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/index.php/SOC/index> and we are proud that students develop a range of different themes and below the reader will find an overview of the contributions as compiled by the student authors who were also involved in the editorial process. Continuing our efforts to give voice to our students we hereby hand over to the student editors to describe the contributions.

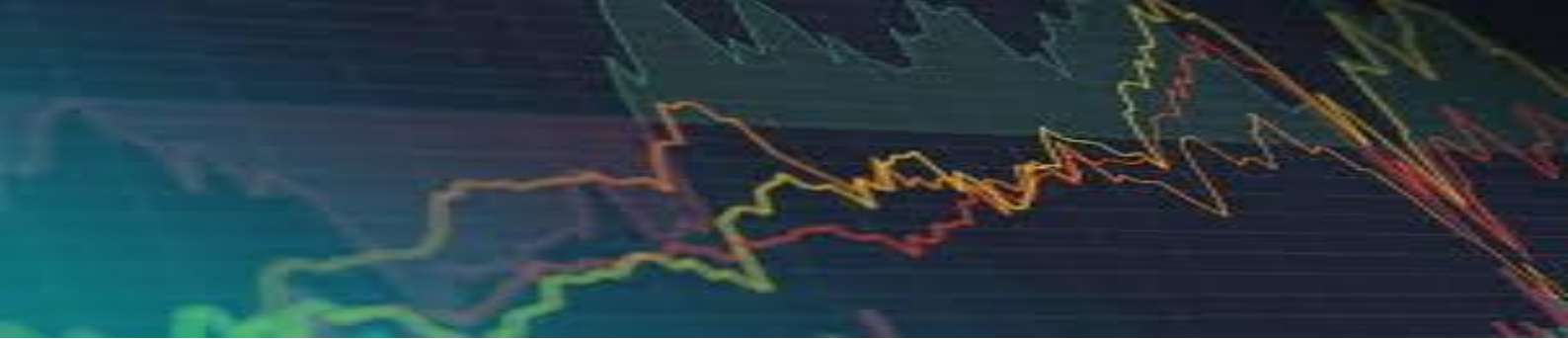
Dr Darren Nixon & Dr Natalia Gerodetti

The opening piece by Lily Nicholson looks at the effects of the growth of surveillance in contemporary society and how this shapes the way we interpret the world. More specifically, this reflection focuses on self-surveillance in women, due to the growing beauty culture in society, where individuals 'view' and 'critique' themselves more than ever before. From this, Nicholson explores the risks specifically for young girls, due to unrealistic beauty standards being reinforced through social media, through numerous of ways such as different platforms and content within these.

The next contribution by Laura Howard looks at how Special Education Needs or Disability (SEND) pupils face a constant disadvantage in our neoliberal, marketised education system, where competition has become a primary concern. This critical reflection explores how intense surveillance and scrutiny from audits, Ofsted reports, and peer observation has resulted in a drastic change of what it means to be a teacher; an identity which holds uneasy prospects for SEND teachers. Whilst modern education is now focused on raising standards and commodifying results, SEND pupils – Laura Howard argues - are limited in their performance improvement and therefore become devalued within the education system.

Turning her attention towards a different area Josie Thompson uses a post-modern perspective to examine the commodification of the pride flag. She provides an interesting critique of whether corporations under the rise of mass consumption, culture and society really are as ethical and progressive as they claim. Key theorists such as Veblen (2005), Bauman (1992), Marx (1915) and Klein (2000) are used to explore how the intersection of commodification, neoliberalism and globalisation has led to the distortion of the original meaning of the pride flag - free-flowing nature of sexuality and the rejection of heteronormativity. Further, Thompson highlights the contradictions between the intended purpose of pride and the alienating and exploitative labour process in the production of pride merchandise through the use of Marx's (1915) theory of 'commodity fetishism'.

Also occupied with postmodern society is Charlotte Lewis who crafts a strong argument as to why the monopolisation of mental health is illogical within a postmodern society, in which the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) is an attempt at fulfilling modernity's need for producing objective truths and a tool of risk management (Beck, 1992). She outlines the change



from modern to postmodern society using theorists such as Lyotard (1984) and Giddens (1991) to argue that society is fragmented and the removal of social structures has allowed for the reflexive creation of the self and institutions. Thus, this piece provides a critique of the DSM by suggesting the medicalisation of social problems and pharmaceutical interventions become a method of social control.

Examining the contemporary landscape of media productions Lucy Storey look at *Love Island*. In this culturally relevant critical reflection, Storey uses the reality show as a contemporary example of theories of surveillance. They comment on how the behaviours and aesthetics of the few culturally influential figures featured in the show influence wider social behaviour. This is insightfully developed with theory of modern society and Storey observes how reality shows, such as *Love Island*, feed into a merger of the 'real' and the constructed. The hegemonic beauty standards presented as what is objectively attractive in the show is commented on through Beck's theory of risk and what viewers will do to live up to these standards.

In another reflection on education Rebecca Howard explores the extent to which neoliberal reforms have effected education and thus, teaching and policy applications through the implementation of market principles. Howard applies this critical debate to Beck's (1992) conceptualisation of the risk society to institutional risk environments, secondary schools and at-risk youth. She concludes that school children with additional needs internalise neoliberal values, taking responsibility for a system where equity is not prioritised. The application of this contributes to the continuation of academic failure amongst at-risk youth.

In a return to the rich pickings of our digital landscape Ella Tuck takes a look at *Mukbangs* – or broadcast eating; a phenomenon started by South Korean You Tubers whereby content producers consume – here in literal terms in the form of

eating – in front of cameras for an audience. "The many watching the few" is not a new phenomenon as attested in Mathiesen's concept of the synopticon, or viewer society. Tuck examines the popularity of *Mukbangs* against a range of reasons as to why audiences might engage with them in such significant numbers but also sets them against ideas of risk society, thereby exploring how surveillance and consumerism collide in the fashioning of celebrity online producers.

The penultimate reflection tackles the meaning behind "girls boss". Here Leone Robinson argues that lifestyle consumption and consumerism have allowed "the girl boss" to become co-opted through the use of neoliberal anti-feminist discourses in contemporary society. The mechanisms by which this is achieved are explored through an examination of the loss of meaning in information societies. Robinson argues that "the girl boss" has developed into a substitute for real feminist progress by benefitting mostly neoliberal capitalism.

In the final piece of this issue Eve Hilton critically reviews the concept of *Greenwashing* by applying multiple contemporary theories. Using examples of Greenwashing and drawing on capitalist and neoliberal values of individual responsibility, Beck's theory of 'Risk society' and reflexivity of contemporary society, and the desensitisation as a result of the information society, she argues contemporary society is contradictory in the dealing of its biggest threat of the climate crisis through the practice of greenwashing. Eve Hilton ends this critical review with the question 'Can reflexivity be claimed when capitalism sees climate catastrophe as a commercial opportunity?', suggesting greenwashing is an example of capitalist consumerism rather than reflexivity.

Editors: Eve Hilton, Laura Howard, Rebecca Howard, Lily Nicholson, Leone Richardson, Lucy Storey, Josie Thompson, Ella Tuck