


Chapter 25

Significant Complex and Non-Complex Objects During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

If, over time, the capacity and ability to make objects is replaced with importing products from other nations; then, when international borders are restricted or even closed, the provision of goods becomes a significant challenge. Observation of the response by Australian manufacturers as they pivoted their activities to address shortages of key objects needed during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the value of this sector in the making of objects that are both complex and not so complex. Complex objects have long been revered due to their high value, and non-complex objects are generally less valued. However, non-complex objects have an equally important role to play, as was highlighted when borders and supply chains were disrupted due to the pandemic. This chapter will shed light on how the making of objects both complex and not complex should together be supported to maintain and grow the ability and capacity for a nation to provide for its object-based needs, particularly during difficult times.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of how Australian manufacturing responded during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a little over half a century Australian manufacturing has fallen from a key part of the national economy in terms of employment and earnings to currently sitting behind other sectors such as mining and tourism. This has led to a reliance of imported goods as a way to meet the needs and demands of its people. During times of open movement and unrestricted trade this model has proven to be functional and beneficial to both supplier and end user. However, the ability to make objects has been a part of humanity for centuries as our need for physical objects has remained an integral part of life. The process of making objects is as varied as the objects themselves, some are straightforward others are very

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demanding. The ability and know-how associated with object making is not easily gained; it requires dedication and investment. Examples of manufacturing excellence are evident in various parts of the world; achieving this status demands an appreciation of the value of object making. Observation of the particular response to COVID-19 by local Australian object makers during particularly challenging times serves to highlight the importance of maintaining the ability to make things. To make or manufacture objects requires both ability and capacity and also, the understanding that the value of this endeavour goes beyond the economic drivers of supply and demand.

The significant disruption to supply chains brought about by COVID-19 has allowed object makers an opportunity to showcase their capabilities and flexibility to respond in times of need. Even in seemingly simple and single material objects, the production process is challenging and demanding. This complexity is tacitly understood by those involved in object making, but perhaps not always fully understood or appreciated by those not directly involved. The objective of this chapter is to shed light on the value of object making and how COVID-19 has highlighted the fact that being self-sufficient in terms of object supply is an important and sometimes vital activity. The primary objective however, is to demonstrate how the notion of complexity is present in both complex objects and objects that are not so complex and that both types (complex and not so complex) are important parts of the manufacturing sector.

Background

‘The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems and the world of work’ (World Health Organization, 2020). Australia has managed to avoid the high numbers of COVID-19 contaminations and casualties experienced in other parts of the world. Early implementation of physical distancing protocols, our geographic isolation, the stable political environment and generally good national economic position are thought to be behind Australia’s success in managing the pandemic (O’Sullivan, Rahamathulla, & Pawar, 2020 p.147). On the back of these measures Australian infection rates are lower than other developed nations and the rate of new cases has been in the low double figures and even single digits. This meant that there was minimal community transmission (Sivey, 2020 para. 3) and indicates that Australians have generally adhered to the strategies implemented by the government.

Australia did not escape the negative impact on the economy, which was felt broadly across the nation. The implementation of social-distancing measures resulted in the closure of potential locations of mass gathering such as cafes, bars, restaurants, gymnasiums, cinemas, conferences and sporting events (Bagshaw, 2020). Some businesses, such as restaurants and cafes, were allowed to continue operating in a reduced capacity by offering takeaway food and beverages. Other businesses had no choice but to lay off staff which resulted in a dramatic rise in the rates of unemployment (Deady et al., 2020). Some sectors of the economy however, witnessed an increase in demand. The desire to stockpile certain items saw panic buying of toilet paper, flour, pasta and cleaning products. This resulted in supermarkets with shelves being emptied as quickly as they could be stocked and to keep up with this sudden increase in demand, more staff were employed. Similarly, related industries such as truck and courier drivers also experienced a surge in demand (Schubert, 2020). The health sector (Dennon, 2020) and cleaning services (Florez, 2020) experienced increased demand for workers as these sectors were placed under significant strain due to increased demand for their services.

As part of the social distancing protocols and general lockdown, some services were deemed essential and therefore were permitted to continue operating such as supermarkets and pharmacies (Dunn, 2020).

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