THE INFLUENCE OF TRENDS IN SOCIETY ON DESIGN AND PRODUCTION

H2.1 explains the influence of trends in society on design and production

Students learn about:
- trends in designing and producing, including those which are influenced by social, global, political, economic and environmental issues
- historical and cultural influences on designing and producing, including:
  - changing social trends
  - cultural diversity
  - the changing nature of work
  - technological change

Students learn to:
- discuss the issues arising from trends in design and technological activity
- identify and acknowledge historical and cultural influences on design and technological development

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Trends

Social, cultural, global, political, economic and environmental influences each directly and indirectly affect trends and in turn impact on design and production.

Social issues

'Social issues' is an umbrella term that encompasses subtopics such as multiculturalism, social class, egalitarianism and social conscience. As we consider each of these more closely, we will come to understand the importance and relevance of social trends and their impact on design and production.

Multiculturalism

A large percentage of Australians (or their parents) were born overseas. There are many cultures represented in our population. The trend to cater for our multicultural society has impacted on design and production activities. Although English is the national language, numerous other languages are spoken throughout the country. Instructions may need to be written in a number of languages. In the workplace, safety instructions are presented in graphical form so that workers of different nationalities can understand them. If you were designing a new school uniform, you may need to include clothing that respects the cultural requirements of traditional followers of a number of faiths. Multimedia products will sometimes have a warning that images of deceased people may be present, in respect of the beliefs of indigenous Australians.

Social class

A person's socioeconomic status is determined by the interaction of their social and economic situations. An implication of socioeconomic status is the amount of disposable income an individual has. People in higher socioeconomic groups have more funds to allocate to non-essential and luxury items. People in lower socioeconomic groups have to allocate most of their funds to basic needs. Difficulties arise when there is social pressure, to purchase products beyond a person's means. In some countries class structure may be based on race or religion.

Egalitarianism

Egalitarianism adheres to the principle of equal rights and opportunities for all. Minority groups, including people with disabilities, non-English speakers and underprivileged, deserve products, systems and environments designed and produced to ensure that their needs are met and that they are accessible in both affordability and practicality. Not only must minority communities be catered for, but impact on such communities of all products, systems and environments should be assessed to ensure no further marginalisation is created.

Social conscience

Social conscience refers to values; to individual's and society's sense of right and wrong in reference to the wellbeing of the society and community. Individuals, depending on their social, environmental, and political persuasion, support different causes and some seek to ensure that they remain on the social agenda. Sometimes groups in society have moral or ethical opposition to some innovations (such as cloning). It is helpful for designers to be aware of this, and to assess the ethicality of their design.
Globalisation

Globalisation is often described as the process of the world becoming a smaller place. Designers are both affected by and contribute to that process. Technological advancements have created easier, quicker access to distant or remote places, making trade, communication, and travel much easier. Satellite communications via phone, fax, email and even online conferences are faster and simpler means of communication between nations. Teams in two or more different countries can undertake design and production projects cooperatively.

Design and production for an international market can translate into competitive prices for the consumer. The global reach of the internet means consumers can purchase goods from the other side of the world and have them delivered without ever leaving their homes. This places designers in competition with foreign enterprises, and places pressure on them to find less expensive ways of producing their designs. Producing on a large scale for a larger market is often more cost-effective for the designer, but it also presents a new set of logistical and cultural challenges.

Political issues

There are many government agencies and acts of legislation that influence design and production, operating to protect consumers and manufacturers. Laws in Australia operate on local, state and federal levels. Politicians must ensure through consultation with appropriate community groups that the laws that are enacted meet community needs as well as foster the nation’s economic development.

Government funding can be a contentious issue for designers. At a time when global warming is high on the political agenda, there can be more funding available for environmentally friendly designs. Government grants are
provided for the development of sustainable technologies like wind farms. In the ‘fight against terrorism’, governments will offer support for anti-terrorism and border protection technologies. The advantage of financial support from government bodies has meant that political trends often impact on the kinds of designs which can pass into the production stage.

Legal requirements can impact on design and production work. Some of these are listed below.

**Commonwealth Trade Practices Act (1974)**

The Trade Practices Act protects Australian consumers in a range of areas, particularly pricing and product safety. The Act prohibits commercial behaviour or conduct that is unfair, misleading or deceptive. Consumers have implied guarantees and warranties that their purchased goods are of an acceptable quality. The Act also supports the right of consumers to seek compensation from any injury resulting from defective goods. The Commonwealth Minister in charge of consumer affairs can also ban or recall products under the provisions of this Act. See: www.comlaw.gov.au for more information.

**Free trade agreements**

Free trade agreements allow goods produced overseas to be sold in other countries, sometimes with lower or no tariffs. See: www.dfat.gov.au/trade for more information.

**Taxes, tariffs and quotas**

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) in Australia is a value-added tax. All goods and services, except those that are considered essential, are taxed at a rate of 10 per cent. Tariffs and quotas are in place to protect local industries and to conserve foreign exchange. Tariffs are fixed taxes on goods that are imported.

### Activity 15.1

1. Discuss the importance of having government agencies and policies in place.
2. Create a mind map on how political agenda might impact on design in Australia.

**Economics**

Economics plays a vital role in the success of designers. The state of the economy, be it in surplus or in recession, will impact on sales and (most particularly) on design and production. If the economy is in surplus, people tend to be more than willing to spend money on non-essential items. Thus, when the public is confident, greater spending occurs. However, in a recession there is less public confidence and people show reluctance to use their earnings for non-essential or luxury items. They focus their spending on essential items such as food and shelter. Designers watch the state of the economy very closely.

Economics also plays a pivotal role in manufacturing. With higher costs of wages, land and insurance in Australia, many companies produce offshore. This trend is the direct result of the economic situation in Australia.

Overseas production generally involves lower costs, such as cheaper labour, thus providing companies with higher profit margins. This in turn provides the consumer with a more
financially attractive product. Some pitfalls of offshore production need to be considered, particularly ethical concerns. Sometimes cheap labour is accompanied by poor working conditions. Taking advantage of economically vulnerable communities should not be condoned.

Some consumers inform themselves about the labour conditions used in the creation of the product, and make purchasing decisions based on whether the production of the product is ethically sound. Local industry can be adversely affected by offshore production. If production is sent offshore, workers in Australia may lose employment.

In order to ensure stable employment and ethical good practice, it is in our interest to support local production. Products are often identified as ‘Australian made and designed’, by packaging and logos. The Australian government, in turn, promotes the ‘buy Australian’ message.

**ACTIVITY 15.2**

Debate the following topic in class: ‘Offshore production is crucial to the development of the Australian economy.’

**Environmental issues**

Every product, system and environment leaves an environmental footprint at some stage in its life cycle. Designers must consider the short- and long-term effects that their product, system or environment design will have on the environment. Short-term costs may have long-term detrimental environmental impacts. For this reason, it is essential to do a life-cycle analysis. The impact of a design on the environment at all stages – from the extraction of the raw materials, to production and finally to the end user and disposal of a product after use – should be examined. Designers work from the philosophy of cradle-to-grave; however, to be sustainable they need to be thinking cradle-to-cradle.

It is a growing trend for companies to be concerned about the environment (or appear to). Two major concerns are:

- **Pollution:** The level of air, water and land pollution created in the production and use of a product (focusing on the greenhouse effect and the release of carbon emissions).
- **Use of materials:** The use of raw materials, whether they are renewable, scarce or non-renewable resources. Wastage is also an issue.

A number of environmental issues have become a focus of widespread concern. The use and disposal of plastic bags affects all Australians. We consume about 6.9 billion plastic bags every year. Up to 80 million of these find their way
onto our streets, parks, and into our waterways. Another issue of concern to Australians is the depletion of our natural resources – particularly water. Given Australia’s propensity to drought and our ever-decreasing water supplies, it is important that suitable technologies are developed to use water wisely and sustainably. The cost of oil fluctuates unpredictably – it is a finite resource – and its production and use creates a lot of pollution. This has stimulated a real need to develop alternative energy sources such as solar energy and biofuel.

The trend to be ‘green’ has impacted on design and production. It is important that we produce products that are ecologically sustainable. Using environmentally sound energy sources will ensure that we are making a positive step towards cutting down water, air and land pollution. Using biodegradable or totally recyclable by-products will ensure that waste disposal is significantly reduced. Government agencies monitor industries to check their compliance with environmental laws.

**ACTIVITY 15.3**

1. Form a team of 3–5 students to respond to an environmental problem.
2. Your first task will be to agree on an issue, remembering that everyone needs to feel committed to the project.
3. Then you should investigate ways to respond to this issue such as an educational program; a model of the solution; an interactive website; a plan or drawing.
4. Once this is decided you can determine the roles and tasks for each member of the group. Methods of communication between members must be identified and agreed upon.
5. Don’t forget to develop a timeline in order to ensure everyone remains on track.
6. At the conclusion of this project, evaluate your role as a team member. How did you help your team to do all of the following?
   - Break the task into smaller tasks
   - Identify ideas and resources
   - Sequence the tasks to be done
   - Allocate tasks to appropriate members
   - Ensure clear communication between members
   - Complete your own tasks
   - Help others with their tasks
   - Continually evaluate the process
   - Evaluate the final solution and make changes
   - Present the completed project
7. Analyse the effectiveness of the team as a whole and consider the concept of design teams.
8. Compare and contrast the processes of working in a team and working as an individual.
Historical and cultural influences on designing and producing

As discussed earlier in this chapter, social issues directly influence present-day design and production. In order to appreciate the state of design and technology today, we should consider the influence of social issues over time, such as changing social trends, cultural diversity, the changing nature of work and technological change. Some of the most significant historical factors that have impacted on social trends include: the introduction of new cultures (migration), economics, changing lifestyles and changes in family structures.

European settlement of Australia occurred from 1788. Prior to that, the traditional owners of the land, the Aboriginal peoples, had their own social order. They were self-sufficient and utilised the land for their needs, constantly moving to ensure that the land was protected and minimise their impact on it. They took care of their needs and did not exploit their land. They produced all their tools and clothing from the local environment.

Modern immigration to Australia began with the first settlers. World events and various government policies over the years have focused immigration intakes on people from various countries, with surges occurring during gold rush eras, after World War I and World War II and other conflicts. Our immigrants have introduced many different customs, foods and cultures into Australian society. Therefore we have seen new products and innovations not seen previously, such as the electric wok.

Changing social trends

The way we conduct our day-to-day lives, from work-time to leisure-time and the composition of families has changed considerably over time. With these social shifts come opportunities for creation and design ideas to suit new situations. The women's liberation movement saw women take more prominent positions in society. Women obtained more access to jobs, politics and education. The number of women returning to work after childbirth has increased, and the age of women having their first child has risen. The percentage of women not having children has also increased. Family structures have changed with extended families, single parenting, grandparent and kinship parenting, and same-sex parental households added to the mix.

We have also seen the cost of living rising and average working hours increasing. Advancements in communication technologies have enabled people to work from home (telecommuting), and some people take part time work as a lifestyle choice. These changes in the social fabric of our society have led to design opportunities.

Let us consider the rise in divorce rates and single parent households in our society, for example. As care providers, many single parents have to work and have less time at home. This has created a need for convenience products and time-saving devices. Any number of designs cater to these needs.

Cultural diversity

Culture may be regarded as a set of spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a social group or society and encompasses the art, literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs of these peoples. Cultural rights are a part of human rights and provide that people have the right to express themselves and participate in the cultural life of their choice.
The cultural diversity of Australian society has resulted in various products, systems and environments based on specific needs of ethnic communities. Each culture has brought traditions and customs with them. They have influenced fashion and food, bringing with them their tools, techniques and experiences. It is important that designers are aware of the cultural diversity in our country and that we respect and celebrate cultural differences in our designs.

The changing nature of work

The way in which we work has changed significantly over the last century. Changes include workplace relations, technological advancements and an increase in the percentage of women in the workplace.

At the start of the 20th century, the average working week exceeded 50 hours. Workers were expected to labour at least 10 hours a day for low wages. At the turn of the century, many children were introduced into the workplace for two reasons: many people could not afford schooling so their children had to work, and secondly, it was not yet illegal for children to work. Leading into World War II, many professions started to form unions to protect workers’ rights. Legislation surrounding minimum wages, maximum working weeks, sick leave, annual leave and long-service leave was introduced. During the 1960s and 1970s, there was more of an emphasis on education. The trend at the start of the 21st century was for a larger number of people engaged in part-time work and flexible work hours. Workplace relations have become a political issue with governments imposing rules and regulations in regards to issues such as leave, dismissal and superannuation.

Computerisation in the workplace has meant changes in the nature of available work. In many situations the use of computers has meant the loss of jobs, such as robots on the assembly line replacing humans. At the same time, there has been an increase in employment in the Information Technology and Communications (ITC) industries. Computers can be used efficiently to do repetitive and dangerous work, while humans are employed for their creative and problem-solving abilities. Technological changes have impacted on the nature of our work both in offices and production settings, in communication and production processes in many industries.
Technological change

Technological change has had a vast historical and cultural influence on design and production. We can trace that change from times when production was completed with basic tools and equipment, and every product was made by hand. The Industrial Revolution, and the later introduction of assembly-line manufacturing, allowed designers to increase their production output. The digital revolution of the last two decades has increased that output, and reduced the costs and time in which production is completed.

![Image of an assembly line](image)

Figure 15.6 An assembly line.

Technological change has not only impacted on production, but the way in which designers work. Up until recent times, office workers were required to be physically present at their workplace five days a week. Information and Communication Technologies permit working from home or other locations. These technologies allow instant contact between colleagues, even if they are time zones apart. Technological change has had an impact on virtually every aspect of our modern lives.

Many designers have embraced technological change in their work, and all designers need to be aware of its impact.
CHAPTER SUMMARY

Trends in society impact significantly on design and technological activity. These include public opinion on social, global, political, economic and environmental issues. Governments can play a significant role in the success of production and design, and tariffs, quotas and free trade agreements protect local industries. Legislation such as the Trades Practices Act monitors and protects consumers' and producers' rights.

Over time, our lifestyles, future of work and leisure time have changed vastly as a result of technological advances. Trends in society impact significantly on design and technological activity. These include political, economic and environmental issues. With reference to an innovation you have studied:

1. Name and describe the government bodies that can influence the development of an innovation.
2. Discuss how political influences can impact on the design and production of a product, system or environment.
3. Economics plays an integral role in the success of a product. Discuss specific examples to justify your argument.
4. Outline how technological change has impacted our lifestyle and the nature of work in Australia in the 21st century.
5. Make a list of products (such as microwave dinners) and services (such as dog walking) that have become more prominent due to changes in society.
6. For a designer you have studied, discuss how technology has changed the nature of their work.
7. Discuss how social changes have allowed for developments in home appliances.
8. Identify and describe how environmental factors are being addressed in new innovations.
9. Write a short paragraph describing the ethical issues surrounding this innovation.

CHAPTER SUMMARY TASKS

- Identify and describe how environmental factors are being addressed in new innovations.
- Discuss the historical changes that have led to the need for domestic innovations.
- Discuss the ethical issues surrounding this innovation.
- Name and describe a product, system or environment and outline how political, economic and environmental issues have played a significant role in its development.
- Discuss how social changes have allowed for developments in home appliances.