



## What Got Us Here, Won't Get Us There

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# The mental health and well-being benefits of craft: a practice-based research project through social probe as a response to work-related stress.

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**Abstract:** This article explores the issue of work-related stress and its negative impacts on mental health and well-being. The concept of alienation is used to understand these effects, and the emergence of the Lying Flat movement in China and other similar concepts worldwide are discussed. It is examined that the mental health benefits of craft making are generated through the making process itself and expressing social opinions. The author further discusses the unproven possible well-being benefits of after-making interaction with craft, and its potential. The article then describes a craft project aimed at transferring the joy of craft from the maker to the user, which involves creating a small hand-sculpted glass figure called the Little Guy. Using cultural probes and participant interviews, the author verifies the well-being benefits brought by the Little Guy, as participants used it as a vehicle for self-expression and bonding, ultimately gaining health and well-being benefits.

**Keywords:** Craft, Lying flat, Mental health, Stress, Interaction

## 1. Introduction: Work-related stress and lying flat as its response

This paper is linked to a Year 2 doctoral practice-based research project, which explores how craft and the interaction with craft objects influence mental health and well-being. It is related to the conference theme of 'Extreme making' in design research as a response to present-day challenges. The challenge focused in this article is work-related stress.

Work-related stress, anxiety or depression is widely experienced by modern society (International Labour Organization, 2016). Work-related stress has been widely discussed since the industrial revolution of the 19th century when William Morris (1900) criticized industry as turning people into less than machines. In the present day, similar examples can be observed in many parts of the world, from research finding out that the most common type of stress experienced by the British was work stress (Stewart, 2020), to Japan being known as the birthplace of 'karoshi' (death from overwork), a word invented to describe deaths caused by work-related stresses and pressures (Demetriou, 2020), to the controversial 996 working shift culture in China where people work from 9 in the morning to 9

in the evening, 6 days a week (Yip, 2021). Work-related stress, anxiety or depression has caused serious damage to mental health and well-being, and even led to human rights issues in some particular areas.

This stress, anxiety or depression can be related to alienation. Alienation is a concept originated from Karl Marx (2007), who suggests that in the capitalist mode of production, the worker is forced to engage in a series of discrete, repetitive movements that do not give him the psychological satisfaction of well-done, but rather mental and physical torture. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. Although the content and environment of the work are different, the concept goes beyond Marx's original idea and still remains a useful lens. Research by Deci and Ryan (2000) reveals that people are more likely to experience positive emotions, including happiness and satisfaction, when they have the autonomy and control over their work. Conversely, if people lose their freedom at work, they are more likely to experience negative outcomes, such as feelings of alienation.

Meanwhile, I discovered the similar pattern when I was observing the Chinese craftspeople. Whilst studying in the handmade glass workshops in Boshan, Shandong Province, China, I saw first-hand how the workers there dislike their job: they worked slowly and reluctantly, sighing and shaking their heads frequently, and had no smile on their faces. From the work scene shown on Figure 1, we could see the obvious dejection of the workers, which was fair enough because the job was exhausting, dangerous and not well paid. I thought the first thing they would do when they got off work was to stay away from the furnace. However, I was far from correct, one of their favourite lunch break fun was to gather around the furnace and make something of their own. The things they made were generally related to their childhood toys, smaller and less pretty than what they did at work, but I have never seen them happier than these moments.



Figure 1. Glass factory in Boshan, Shandong, China. The worker in the middle was visibly tired and depressed (Author, 2018).

Various measures or strategies have been conducted to avoid the work-related pressures or even hard work itself. One of the latest responses is the Lying Flat movement, which first appeared in China in date. According to People's Daily (Cao, December 8, 2021), lying flat originally refers to lying on their back, and by extension refers to rest. Nowadays, many young people are talking about "lying flat", which mostly refers to a life attitude of doing nothing, "not resisting", "not spending" and "not working hard". Lying flat can be seen as a nonviolent, non-cooperation movement against "techno-capitalist authoritarianism" (Liu, 2021, para. 8) or simply capitalism. It has since rapidly expanded to all walks of life or awaking of leisure, relaxation and joy of nature, a hippie-like spirit (Isackson, 2021). Not only on the Chinese mainland, but this movement is active in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the young across East Asia are all resonated (Jeong, 2021).

Through the Lying Flat movement, we can see shadows of many similar movements or concepts. The first is quiet quitting, which emerges almost at the same time. Quiet quitting stems partly from the gloomy expectation of the future and the pressure of work, and similar to lying flat, it mostly happens to young people (Forbes, 2018) but it does not content opposition to consumerism. Another example is the Italian concept of Farniente, dolce far niente, which means the sweetness of doing nothing, sweet idleness, to take time to relax completely and contemplate nothing too serious or thought provoking (Alpert, 2014).

## 2. Context review: Possibility to Foster Positive Social Change through Craft Interactions

### 2.1 The known benefits of craft to mental Health

Craft can be used to gently express social opinion and influence commentary on social issues. Starting with William Morris (1834-1896), who historically championed the early meaning of craft as we know it and his thinking and making had a profound effect on those who followed his ideas and continues to influence many scholars. Morris (1900) claimed that art should be the expression of man's joy in labour. He believed that all medieval workers were artists. This situation changed in the 16th century, when a division of labour between workers and artists emerged. As a result, the workers' status started to become lower and lower. By the 19th century, workers "were now slaves to machines" (Krugh, 2014, p. 283). Morris described his ideal future world in the book *News from Nowhere* (1995): People derive joy from crafts and various other manual labour and sports. And sports, games and labour are no longer different. Through doing crafts together, people share a closer relationship. Morris wanted workers to experience joy and social connections in labour rather than feel alienated, the labour in which workers were able to control the whole design and making process rather than only small parts of it, rather than being controlled by others (Krugh, 2014).

In contemporary times, *Craftivism*, written by Betsy Greer in 2003, describes a combination of craft and activism. Its purpose is to make the world a better place through "promoting challenging conversations instead of silencing them" (Greer, 2014, p.12). Craft with its ability to empower people could lead to a better understanding of democracy (Greer, 2014). According to Sarah Corbett (2017), the definition of craftivism is "the art of gentle protest" (p. 11). Corbett was a professional activist and became a craftivist in 2008 when she felt "like a burnt-out activist" (Corbett, 2017, p.11) and started her craft practice. She had an instant success. After she gave a hand-embroidered piece to a local politician as a sign of support and critical friendship, the politician brought positive changes to injustice (Corbett, 2017).

In addition to its relationship to political issues, art and craft making have direct and positive benefits to mental health and well-being. David Gauntlett (2018, p.33-35) first sums up Peter Dormer's and Ellen Dissanayake's views, that craft has an essential dimension: the inherent satisfaction of making. Many researchers have explored the impact of craft on psychological well-being in various aspects and have formed some pretty instructive summaries. The article *Why our brains love arts and crafts: Implications of creative practices on psychophysical well-being* (Huotilainen et al., 2018) and many of its cited studies, provides strong scientific-based support for the idea that craft is good for mental health and well-being. It reveals that arts and crafts practitioners have personal experience of the benefits of creation, through interaction with materials which can help regulate our mental state by providing a way to reach a state of flow (complete immersion in an activity). Arts and crafts seem to play an important role in combating stress and enhancing relaxation and can benefit health and well-being. In addition, arts and crafts help many people who are in danger of social isolation to promote and share their activities.

However, not everyone under work-related stress has the time or skill to practice craft making. We need to look deeper if we expect to use craft to help society. There are some phenomena that should be observed: craft maintains physical and mental interaction with people after its creation. Glenn Adamson (2007, p.14) notes that fine art keeps a distance from its audience, while craft is the opposite. It connects with the audience and can form a lasting relationship.

## 2.2 After-making Interactions: a possibility

The use of crafts is often considered as adding new characteristics to them. Unlike fine arts, patina of craft objects, some signs of wear and tear, are not regarded as damages to a craftwork, but make them more precious and meaningful, like tea stains in the Yixing teapot, the smoothness of little carvings after being caressed many times, or the dull but soft lustre of an old violin.

The most extreme example may be Juci (铜瓷, staple repair) and Kintsugi or kintsukuroi (金繕い) inspired by the former, two kinds of porcelain repair craft from China (Juci) and Japan (Kintsugi or kintsukuroi), evolved from pure practicality into unique beauty and philosophy. The traces of use are not hidden, but also carefully decorated and highlighted by building another craft on the worn out ones. See the Bakōhan (馬蝗絆) (Figure 2), the Chinese porcelain that was circulated in Japan and later was restored with Juci. "The bowl became valued even more highly because of this large clamp" (National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, n.d., para. 1) and opened the exploration of kintsugi. Creativity and interaction in craft that can help people's mental health and well-being would not stop after it leaves the hand of its maker and can act as a metaphor that things can be fixed and cherished.



Figure 2. The Bakōhan. Important Cultural Properties of Japan, a Song Dynasty celadon tea bowl, repaired with Juci during the Ming Dynasty (G Habgood, 2021).

Furthermore, there are traces of using crafts to help mental health and well-being. Rubbing beads to improve mental health, whether religiously related or not, is practiced all over the world (Wernik, 2009), and it does work in some cases, although the evidence is not conclusive. Furthermore, The obsession with patina (or 包浆“baojiang” in Chinese) in China is a cultural phenomenon with a long history. Zhao Xudong and Sun Xiaofei (2017) explored the basis of this obsession by reviewing the research on thingness, and the history of patina, and the practice people take to create patina. They see the generation of patina as a process that change normal objects slightly but profoundly while giving them very personal meaning. This matches my observation that many small crafts are used to rub and play with to give the holder some joy or satisfaction. And a large part of this satisfaction comes from the holder's success in changing the appearance of those small artifacts, usually by making them smoother or changing the colour to show their daily interaction with the object. Song Shuhua (2014) also discusses baojiang/patina in the gardening and history context. Interestingly, these two articles all mentioned that people use various methods to generate patina in a shorter period, and in this process the objects have been given meaning, which makes it closer to making.

Therefore, I have formulated a hypothesis, which I will aim to verify in the next section: Craft can interact with people after its making process and therefore people can experience similar joy to making by using and interacting with a craft object. The core of this practice is consistent with the craft making process. This process involves experiences similar to making: tactile contact with materials, causing small changes to items (though much less than making), and can function similar to craft making, for example when objects are used to gently express social opinions and influence commentary about a social issue such as work related stress.



## 3. Research Methods

### 3.1 Glass-making



Figure 3. Little Guy lying on the grass of Princes Street Gardens, it can be seen the cutting trace of shear under its arm. (Author, 2023)

When we are not sensing something joyful, we can get joy by accessing our memory, or imagination. I am developing a way to let participants experiment with the joy of craft practice through my work, to transfer the joy of craft from the maker to the next holder. The Lying Flat movement gives me the inspiration of making *the Little Guy*, a small figure hand-sculpted in blown glass as shown in Figure 3, as an expression and direct response to the stressful working lifestyle of modern-day society. I used the research method of cultural probe and participant interview to verify whether the *Little Guy* really benefit the user's well-being and whether the joy has been transferred to the participant.

The image of the *Little Guy* came from the little figures in Chinese literati landscape painting, here are some examples from *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* (Figure 4). This is a kind of figures commonly seen in most literati landscape paintings. I find the little figures depicted in these paintings almost always in a state of idleness. The lives of ancient Chinese literati would resonate with many modern white-collar workers, as their jobs all involved a sedentary lifestyle, sitting indoors all day and doing office work. Therefore, the style they choose to maintain and balance mental happiness may be instructive to modern day people. Also, interestingly, in the Song dynasty, the era when literati landscape painting flourished, imperial power was gradually strengthened while the scholar-officials gradually lost their freedom. The famous cultural icon Su Shi was the first person developed to systematize the concept of literati painting (Silbergeld, 2015). Likewise, modern people have a feeling of losing freedom and being alienated in their labour, with many feeling isolated, depressed or anxious.

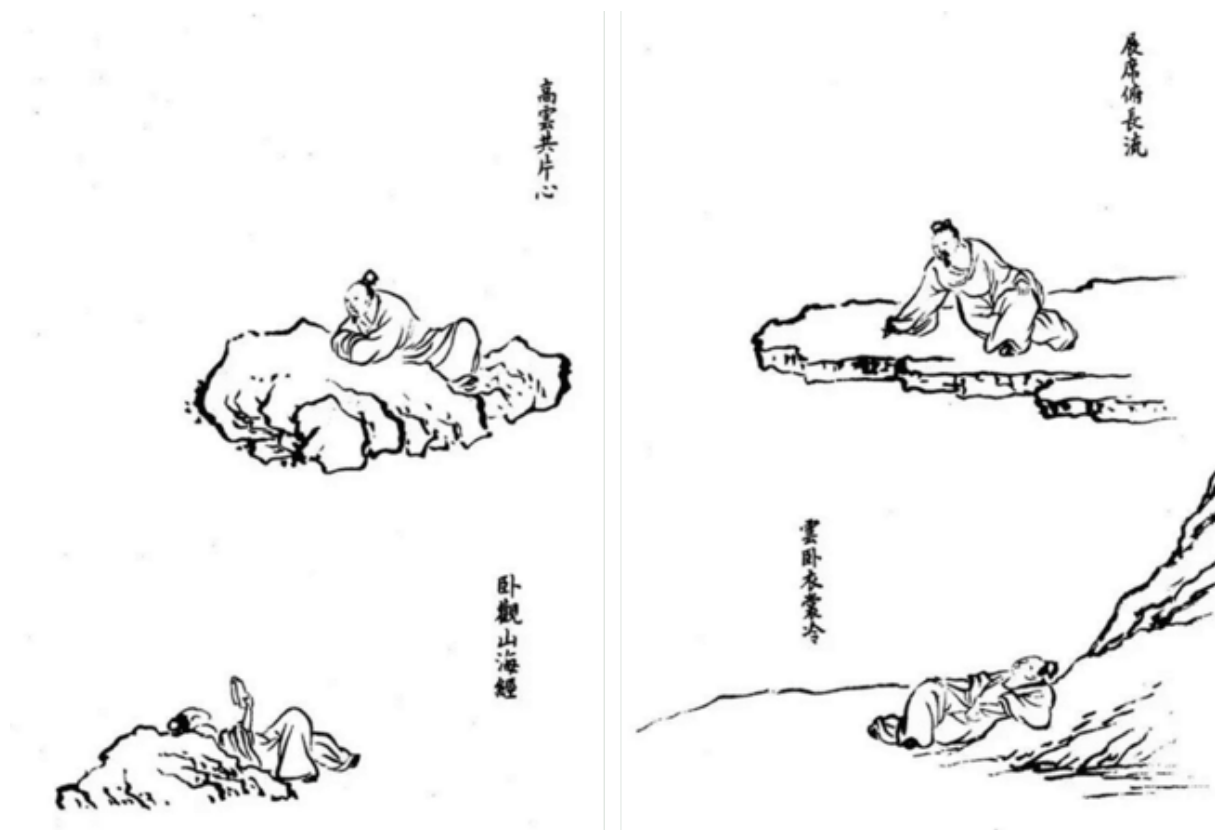


Figure 4. The little figures in literati landscape painting from *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* (Wang, 2016, p.219).

In *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden*:

(The figures) should not be too proper... It should be in harmony with the landscape, the people seem to be looking at the mountain, and the mountain seems to be looking back, making the viewer want to jump into it and compete with the people in the painting for a seat.... Figures in landscapes painting is like a topic for a composition. The connotation of a painting lies entirely in the figure (Wang, 2016, p.217).

Based on this, I further simplified the image, into the style of children's stick figures and Japanese Q-version characters. "Not be too proper", as written in the quote, I was more casual when making the *Little Guy* in blown glass. I retained traces from the making process that benefits mental health and well-being to better resonate with the participants and connect them to that moment. Although the participant does not necessarily understand glass making, these traces can connect them to memories of making things by hand.

The *Little Guy* was simple to make and required only basic glass blowing skills. I used a punty iron to take a little glass, used jacks to clamp the glass into two connected balls, and used shears to cut the two sides of the bottom ball to make the arms. This was how the mark seen in the Figure 3 was generated. Following this, I cut the bottom ball again in the lower middle to make the legs. I then heated the whole piece. The limbs formed by the shears melted into more rounded and stretched shapes. As displayed on Figure 5, the *Little Guy* looked like dancing as it spun in the fire, which was a perfect metaphor for lying flat.



Figure 5. Little Guy is dancing in fire. Screenshots of the Little Guy's making process (Author, 2022).

### 3.2 Cultural Probe and Participant Interview

I use the cultural probe methodology, first originated by Bill Gaver, Tony Dunne, and Elena Pacenti (1999), as it generates photographs as feedback and utilizes visual methods as a reflective tool (MacDougall, 2006). Additionally, employing pictures captured by participants during the research process and subsequently revisiting them can serve as a potent and transformative approach to inquiry (Pera et al., 2022).

Six participants were invited to the cultural probes which were conducted in China in January - February 2023. The cultural probe was originally designed just to understand people's living conditions and resting conditions as well as their attitudes to lying flat. Nevertheless, it has yielded an unexpectedly abundant data in the feedback pictures, prompting me to broaden its scope to analyze whether the participants get health and well-being benefits when interacting with this craft object. I selected people under the age of 40 and living in large cities as my research participants for they are the busiest age group. Statistics show (Wang, 2022) that the population aged 25-40 has the highest proportion of employment. They, the young people in large cities, are the main ones who suffer from the 996 working shift (Hruby, 2018). I recruited participants by posting information on WeChat, a popular Chinese social media platform. Because of its large user base, this was the best way for me to get exposure to the widest range of careers. I especially chose participants who were computer programmers and couriers, the two most representative busy groups in China today, to participate in the cultural probe. Table 1 shows the basic information of the participants:

Table 1. Participants Information for the cultural probe

Participants	Gender	Age Group	Place	Occupation
Participant 1	Male	30-40	Jinan, China	Software Project Manager
Participant 2	Female	20-30	Jinan, China	Video Editor
Participant 3	Male	30-40	Beijing, China	Screenwriter
Participant 4	Male	30-40	Jinan, China	Courier
Participant 5	Female	30-40	Jinan, China	Hospital Administrator
Participant 6	Male	20-30	Beijing, China	Programmer



All little glass figures given to the participants were chosen by themselves and under the circumstance of having other choices. The chosen glass figures had slightly different appearance features and I wanted the participants to make connection with their chosen figure by at first selecting it for themselves. As Rose (2016) pointed out, the meaning and impact of an image can be shaped by the individual interpretations of its audience. This allows the figures to fit different individual's understanding of materials, colours and shapes and then establish a more individual connection with the figure.

The probe kit included a *Little Guy*, the hand sculpted blown glass figure chosen by the participant, a participant consent form, a copy of the participant instructions and some sweets as a gift, as shown on Figure 6. The main task for participants was simple: "Please in the next week take photos of the *Little Guy* with when you are resting, relaxing, or whenever you decide that time is yours." Participants sent pictures back to me via WeChat.

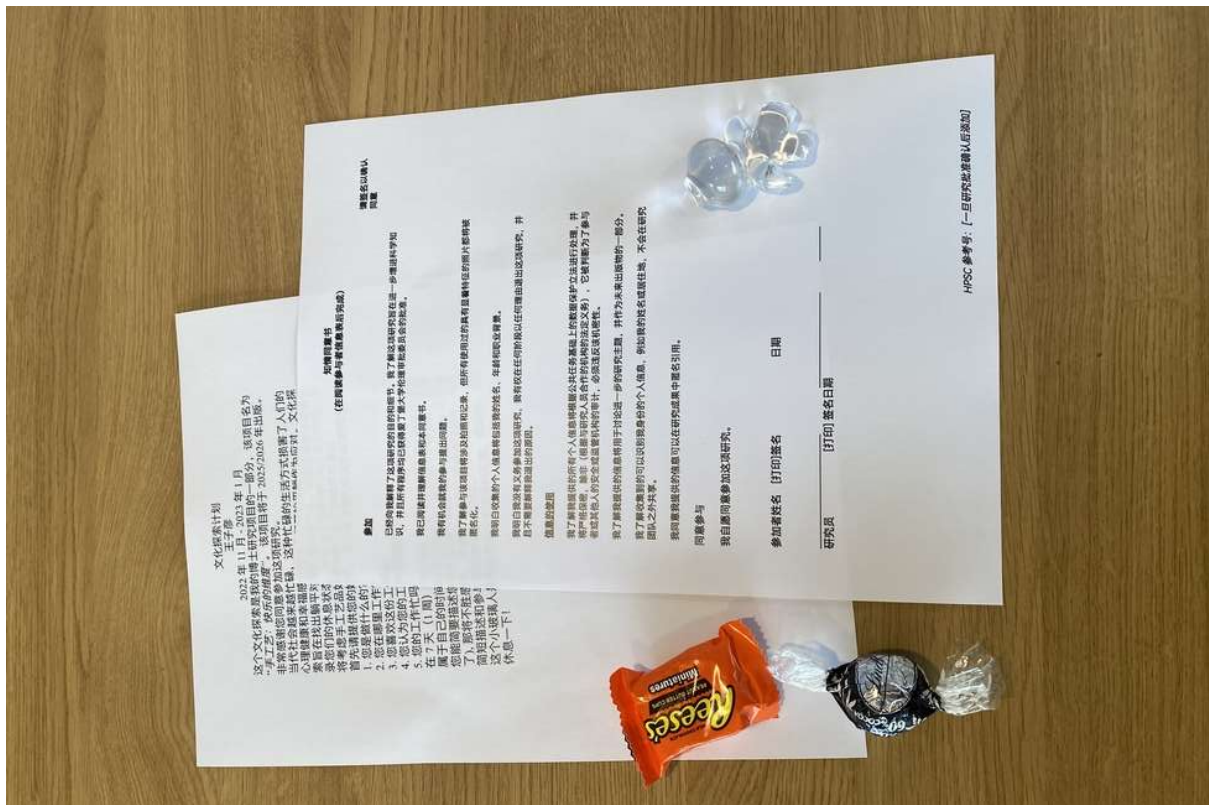


Figure 6. The Culture Probe Kit received by participants: a *Little Guy*, a participant consent form in Chinese, a copy of the participant instructions in Chinese and some sweets (Author, 2023).

To better understand the pictures feedback and their wellbeing state, unstructured interviews were conducted every time they sent a photo. A major advantage of doing this is that the participant can reflect on the picture they take and their mental state in depth and with more details. Therefore, they can give the most detailed and accurate feedback if they like. However, it did not go well with everyone, some people replied with little information or replied late.

## 4. Analysis

Through the data obtained from the cultural probe and the analysis, my hypothesis has been confirmed: The *Little Guy*, this small craft object used in the cultural probe has been found to be a powerful tool for self-expression and storytelling. Besides, most of the participants formed a strong relationship with their small craft object. The after-making interaction with craft object benefitted the participants' mental health and well-being like the craft making process.

Most importantly, people can use the *Little Guy* to create and express themselves through photography. Through the active involvement of the subject, the *Little Guy*, a composition with clear and cohesive meaning is established. Notably, Participant 1's photographs displayed his strong aversion towards his current occupation, as evidenced by the underlying sense of jest and sarcasm in point. As a case, three images (Figure 7) were selected to exhibit his discontent with his work. The images in the left and middle were taken during his lunch break in a car with a predominantly grey and black interior, featuring the participant hanging the little figure in different positions. In the background, a glass curtain wall of an office building was visible.



Figure 7. Photos by Participant 1. These are the most interesting pictures in his feedbacks.

Furthermore, the presence of two adorable yet unrealistic animal images on the car's centre console and music playing in the background heightened the tongue-in-cheek tone of these images. The central position of the *Little Guy* reflected a popular Chinese internet slang denoting feelings of helplessness, entanglement, excitement, and discomfort, which should not be construed as an act of violence. Participant 1's irreverent attitude towards his job was also evident in the right-hand side of Figure 7, where the *Little Guy* was depicted as eating puppy food, signalling his discontent with his current employment status, possibly relating to income or treatment. While Participants 2 and 6 also exhibited similar tendencies, they were less pronounced than Participant 1. Furthermore, images collected from Participants 2 and 5, as shown in Figure 8, most of them were clearly retouched. This was either a photograph habit, or the participants were willing to invest time and effort to retouch these photos. Of the two possible explanations, the latter appeared to be the more probable one. The clue can be found in the last photo of Figure 8, as this obviously busy studying scene (although she has tried to make the environment more comfortable by serving herself drinks and snacks) has not been filtered, which told that adding a filter or not was more likely to be a conscious choice, depending on how relaxed she felt. Thus, the incorporation of the *Little Guy* into the photographs serves as a tool for storytelling, illustrating the subjects' perspectives and attitudes towards their respective environments.





Figure 8. Photos by Participant 5. First two have been filtered and the last one has not.

Secondly, most participants built a notable connection relationship with the *Little Guy*. Roughly half of the photographs in the study featured the *Little Guy* being held in the participants' hands. During the interview process, I inquired about the extent of participants' interaction with the object beyond taking photographs, to which most responded affirmatively and described various modes of engagement, suggesting that the establishment of interaction was not solely attributed to the cultural probe requirement. Participants 1, 2, and 5 carried the figurine with them everywhere, with Participant 1 placing it in his car, Participant 2 in her pocket, and Participant 5 in her purse. Participant 2 rubbed and played with the *Little Guy* (Figure 9). Participants 1 and 3 placed the figurine in their most private spaces, their bedrooms, with Participant 3 acknowledging that he sometimes gave "him" (not "it") a quick glance. The sole exceptions to this trend were Participants 4 and 6, who reported no interaction with their respective figurines. However, despite their verbal accounts, both Participants 4 and 6 were found to place the object in their bedrooms.

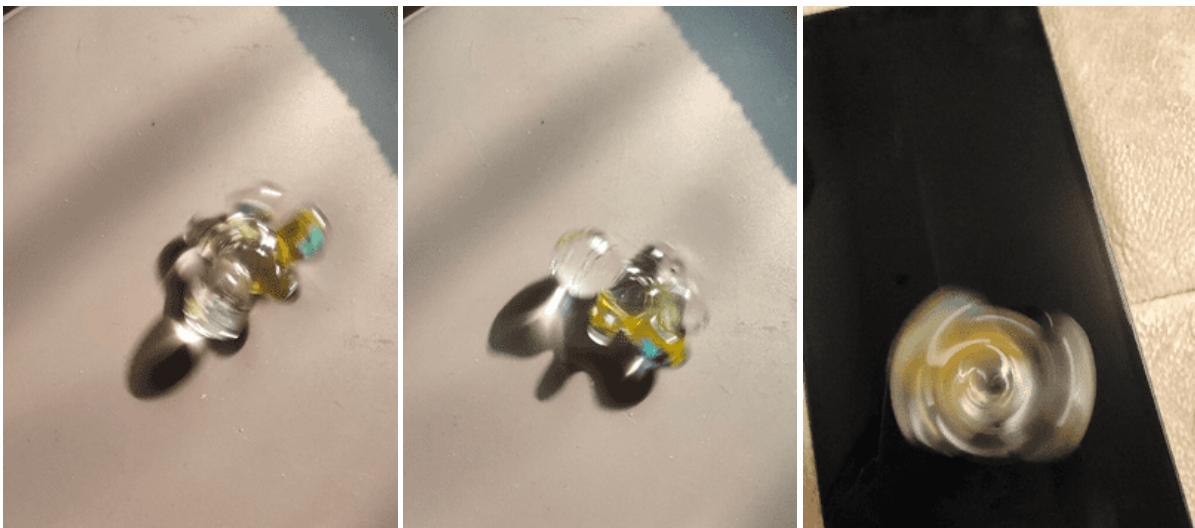


Figure 9. Playing with the Little Guy, spin it on different surfaces, even relatively expensive phone screen. Photos by Participant 2.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the mental health and well-being benefits of craft, and reviewing the historical use of craft as a gentle way for social expression and commentary. In addition, it has

explored the phenomenon of gaining relaxation and satisfaction through using craft objects as a social probe (although not all these attempts are successful, many are effective), I generated this hypothesis:

Craft objects have the capacity to engage with individuals even after the process of making is completed, thereby allowing people to experience comparable joy from using it or from other kinds of after-making interaction. This is a practice, in its core, consistent with the craft-making process, which involves experiences similar to making: including tactile contact with materials and the ability to cause changes to an object (although to a lesser degree than the making process). Such after-making interaction can function similarly to the act of craft making itself, providing an avenue for gentle expression of social opinions and influencing them.

This hypothesis has been verified to a certain degree in the cultural probe and interviews. Individuals can utilize the craft objects as a medium for self-expression, and through this process they can experience joy related to the joy of making. Meanwhile, notable connections between the craft objects and the participants have been established.

However, this study has certain limitations due to limited capacity. Firstly, it is unclear whether the observed phenomena, namely the use of craft objects for artistic expression and as tools for enhancing mental well-being, are culturally specific or universally applicable. Further cross-cultural research is needed to investigate this issue. Secondly, a larger number of participants should be involved in future research to provide more sufficient data to draw more meaningful conclusions. Finally, it should be noted that this research does not have the same level of medical validation as studies that have investigated the arts and crafts making for improving mental health. A collaboration with psychological inputs would be desirable.

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