

TOUCHWORTHY



What's the Trend?

Overwhelmed by digital, consumers turn back toward products and experiences that they can touch, feel and sense to deliver a much needed sense of calm, simplicity and humanity.

In 2015, a few months after the first edition of this book was published, my wife and I decided to celebrate by hosting a big launch party. Of course, the party had to be “non-obvious”—and we had plenty of ideas. Inspired by the balloon on the cover, everything was themed yellow: including my brightly colored shirt, branded sunglasses and even some of the food.

To inject some fun, one of the signature cocktails on the menu that evening was a “Rohito” (a raspberry mojito) and we had lots of other fun little details. The biggest was right next to the entrance to the bar: a large photo booth. Outside were a variety of props and fun décor, and inside you would pose for a picture and then that photo would be printed and you could take it

home with you.

Years later, the thing people remember most about the party is that photo booth and the pictures they took (and kept). What only some of them knew was that the entire idea for the booth was inspired by a trend I had written about nearly two years before. A trend that has had so much longevity, I decided to bring it back again in 2017: *Precious Print*.

Precious Print is a trend that describes our tendency to value the things we have in print more than digital items because we can hold them in our hands. Since I first published this trend, there have been new reports on how studying books in print might aid learning and retention.¹ Some researchers even believe that a return to learning cursive and writing by hand might have hidden benefits in our overly digitized world. The point is, there are many believers in the power of print.

Over the past year of seeing these examples, our team started to wonder if perhaps this trend might encompass more than just print. What if people just wanted more experiences where they could touch something in the real world for themselves? As we slowly uncovered over the course of a year of research, this is indeed the case—which led us to define a new trend we call *Touchworthy*.

Touchworthy describes a growing human desire to engage with real world experiences, products and people that they can *feel* through touch (and sometimes other senses).

To see the powerful impact of this trend, let's return to the example of the photo booths and how the memorable experiences of our friends at the launch party is mirrored every day by thousands of Japanese teens.

The Japanese Purikura Experience

Taking photos with friends inside a *purikura* (Japanese for “print club”) machine is a uniquely Japanese experience. These unique photo booths are available across Japan inside of shopping malls and they are thriving. The usual *purikura* experience starts with taking a photo together with friends (usually in front of a green screen). Then you come out to interact with a screen that lets you add backgrounds and use Snapchat-style filters to do everything

from applying fake eyelashes, to making your legs look longer. You can draw on these images or customize in other ways – and then you order them to be printed immediately as stickers to share.



Photo Credit: Jon Åslund (Flickr)

This is a great example of the power of touch but it, too, is print-centric. Earlier this year I challenged my team to dig deeper and see if we could find examples of this trend of *Touchworthy* across the world in ways that had nothing to do with print. We found many, like the fascinating usage of therapy pets in unique places. We discussed the growing field of haptics, reviewed sensory product development and we were even inspired by the strange popularity of slime, a product that seems to be spawning its own economy.

The Slime Economy & ASMR

It was about eight months ago that I discovered a different slime than I expected in my house. Thanks to my two boys, we have plenty of “Crazy Aaron’s Thinking Putty” and “Barrel-o-Slime” around the house. We have enough varieties of slime that I am embarrassingly well informed about its different consistencies, from firm to gooey. The slime that surprised me, though, was not like the others because of one big difference: my boys had made it themselves. Of course, I saw this as a curiosity to be investigated further (and hopefully kept off the carpet).

Making slime is simple – just combine everyday household items such as school glue, baking soda, and food coloring together with a variety of other creative materials to add individuality, like glitter or scented hand lotion. The “industry” of making slime (if you can call it that) has exploded recently, with hundreds of thousands of social media posts sharing #slime creations. Many of them are inspired by a single YouTuber named Karina Garcia, also known as the “slime queen.”

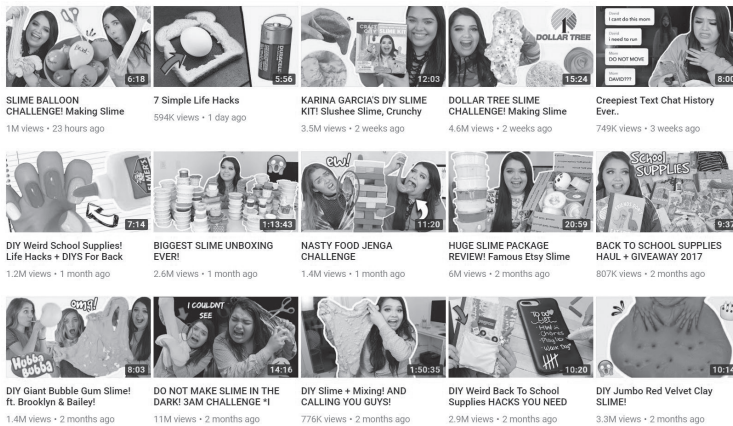


Photo - YouTuber Karina Garcia (aka Slime Queen)

Garcia, 23, is widely credited with being one of the influencers who first started the slime craze. Her YouTube channel has more than 6.5 million subscribers and helps her make an estimated \$200,000 per month. She has a newly released slime recipe book and a “make-your-own slime kit” that was released exclusively at Target.

The popularity of slime has spawned its own economy, with some entrepreneurs as young as 10 years old creating slime and selling it on platforms like eBay and Etsy. Most sell for between \$5 to \$10 per batch and feature recipes like “Fluffy Liquid Metallic Gold” slime and rainbow colored “Unicorn Poop” slime. By now whether you have seen this slime for yourself or not, you’re probably wondering why it has become so popular.

As you play with the material, it makes a variety of squishing, popping, cracking and yes, even farting, noises. It is oddly satisfying to touch. The slime is so fun because it triggers an autonomous sensory meridian response

(also known as ASMR)—a feeling of relaxation caused by the combination of the sounds made by specific movements. This too, is a fast-growing genre on YouTube.

The Strangely Soothing World of ASMR

One of the most popular creators of ASMR videos is a 30-year-old Russian expat known only as Maria (to protect her identity) – who is better known online by her YouTube channel name: GentleWhispering. Called one of the Internet’s “Most Fascinating People” by *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Maria describes ASMR as “a comforting [feeling], an intimacy with another human being.” Before you get the wrong idea, she is quick to add that “it’s not meant to be sexual – just relaxing. Maybe it’ll even put you to sleep.”²

The relaxing properties of this genre recently inspired IKEA to create its own 25-minute ASMR video targeted towards college students heading back to school as part of its’ “Oddly IKEA” campaign. ASMR is moving from virtual to physical as well. This past year a team of Singapore and UK-based entrepreneurs created a traveling show called the Whisperlodge to offer an immersive theatrical ASMR experience in real life.

The ASMR genre, as well as the popularity of slime, are examples of how *Touchworthy* experiences are helping us connect in more human ways and in some instances, battle the stresses of everyday life. There are products that are based on this same principle.

Sensory Friendly Products and Services

The “Gravity blanket” seems too good to be true.

From its beginning, overblown ads promoted the \$279 blanket as a “weighted blanket for sleep, stress and anxiety.” While these claims have been widely discredited as lacking any real scientific evidence, for the people who love them, there is a very real sensory benefit to being able to snuggle under a weighted blanket.³ Even if you have never tried it, the idea of a heavy blanket *seems* like it would be comforting.

The Gravity blanket is just one of many products that have attracted attention and sometimes gained notoriety over the past year for how they use the power of touch to trigger an emotional response. A company called Nesel Packs created a line of backpacks that use a weighted vest with a “hugging strap” to help autistic kids feel more at ease. Kozie Clothes is a brand that makes tag-free clothing with soft and “tactile-pleasing” fabrics and comforting inverted seams.

Stacey Monson, a designer at Target, was inspired by her autistic daughter Elinor to help the retailer add a selection of “sensory-friendly” clothing items (removing the labels and other uncomfortable elements) to help make getting dressed for school less of a trying experience for families with autistic children. The clothes are part of the fast-growing private label Cat & Jack brand at Target, which has become a \$2 billion brand in its first year alone.⁴

The resurgent popularity of board games is another sign that real life tactile experiences matter.⁵ Not only are sales of these sorts of interactive real life games on the rise, but there are also a range of new destinations like the Brooklyn Game Lab in New York which offer memberships and hold events to help bring people together to play board games and enjoy some time away from their devices.

Professional Cuddlers and Touch Therapy

Sometimes this need for the empathy of touch goes beyond products. For those times when you just need human contact, professional cuddling is an industry that offers “touch therapy” on demand. Through marketplaces like www.thesnugglebuddies.com, you can find a professional cuddler trained from a guide called “The Cuddle Sutra” (yes, it’s actually a real book) in over 50 platonic and supposedly non-sexual cuddling positions.

Though “Sutra” is probably not the best branding for a book that is meant to teach people about a non-sexual activity—the Snuggle Buddies website shares more details about how this unique service actually works.

According to the site, participants must sign an agreement that no sexual activity of any kind with the cuddlers will take place. Cuddling sessions are

allowed in someone's home or in a public place, such as a movie theater or park. They are not allowed in vehicles.

While this entire industry may seem like it exists on the fringe of society, the fact is many people feel a lack of *Touchworthy* experiences in their lives and it causes many issues, from loneliness to difficulty coping with conditions like autism or mental afflictions like PTSD. Luckily there is another growing industry which can help, just in case hiring a professional cuddler is not for you.

Therapy Pets

The latest addition to the staff at San Francisco International Airport only works once a month and routinely comes in with her toenails painted dressed in a pink ballerina tutu only to pose for selfies. Her name is Lilou and she's a "hypoallergenic and temperamentally-vetted" pig. Her real job is to help calm harried travelers and offer a moment of fun in an experience that too often seems anything but.

While Lilou is unique in that she's the only pig making the rounds at an airport, the uses for *therapy pets* like her is expanding. Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky Airport uses miniature horses twice a month to help greet passengers when they first arrive at the airport. More than 30 airports across the US are now using therapy dogs to wander the airports providing a welcome relief for many overly stressed passengers. At Charlotte Douglas International Airport, this group is known as the "Canine Crew" and uses eight non-barking certified therapy dogs that walk around the airport wearing blue and yellow vests that say "Pet Me."

These pets are also finding employment outside the airport. Therapy dogs are being used to help PTSD victims recover from trauma and to cheer up patients in hospitals. At one local library in Pennsylvania, therapy dogs help kids practice their reading skills. In San Diego, there is an organization called



Lilou the Pig - used with permission

SoulPaws which helps people struggling with eating disorders to find comfort through therapy pets who offer no judgement and help them to build a deeper level of self-awareness (critical in the battle against an eating disorder).

All of these uses for therapy pets and the powerful emotional transformations they can cause are another example of our need for *Touchworthy* experiences that engage us on a human and physical level. As with the other examples in this chapter, this is not about sex or sexual activity. This is about feeling more human because you have the chance to use your sense of touch to interact with the world.

Growth In Haptics

There is one more sign that creating *Touchworthy* experiences will continue to matter in the future—and (perhaps ironically) it comes from teams of researchers who are trying to add the powerful element of touch to virtual experiences through haptic technology.

I first wrote about haptics last year when introducing the trend of *Invisible Technology*—a description of how technology was increasingly being baked into everyday experiences and products in a way that we often don't see or recognize. Haptics is defined as the science of applying touch and tactile sensation to the way we control computer applications. The most common example is how you can feel your phone's touchscreen vibrate in response every time you touch a button.

More advanced versions of haptics are studying how to add the sensation of touch when you are interacting with an interface that doesn't involve you actually touching anything—like a digital projection for example. This growing field of *ultrasonic haptics* uses sound waves to simulate the sense of touch and is widely anticipated to change the way that interfaces in everything from cars to retail stores could be created.

The haptic technology market will likely surpass \$20 billion over the next five years.⁶ In that time, it is likely that the uses for it will offer surprising new insights for interface designers, product development teams and any organizations trying to create more human and *Touchworthy* experiences.

Why It Matters

Every company is spending countless hours trying to craft more engaging customer experiences. Some focus on content development while others are rethinking the interactions they have with customers. No matter what the priorities for your organization happen to be, this trend should inspire you to always ask a single question: is my experience *Touchworthy*?

Carmen Simon, a neuroscientist and author of *Impossible to Ignore* writes and speaks often about how our minds work and what it takes to have a message or story truly stick. “Strong sensory stimulation is mandatory in making a story memorable,” she says. “In my research, the stories and products that included more sensory stimulation were remembered better.”⁷ Her research points to the same conclusion our team uncovered as we interviewed organizations and tracked stories about everything from the rise of the “slime economy” to the ongoing benefits of therapy pets.

What it all tells us is that no matter how digital our lives become, the more human experiences of touch and engaging our senses will continue to be a powerful driver of attention, consumption and belief.

How to Use This Trend

- ✓ **Find your *Touchworthy* moments.** For the past four years of having this book available in print, my publisher and I have focused on creating a certain sensation when you first touch the cover of the book. Perhaps you noticed it, and perhaps you didn’t – but the people who do, always comment about it. Being *Touchworthy* isn’t just about technology or touch screens. Instead it’s about remembering that the moment when someone feels a product or an experience in their hands is your first (and sometimes most important) opportunity to make an impression ... so it is worth spending as much time as you need to get it right.
- ✓ **Let your people (or customers) make something.** One way to inspire more belief is to make sure that people feel invested. In the world of charity, this often comes when people volunteer and participate in

an activity instead of just donating money. In companies, this comes from a team that works together to build something real. Either way, the lesson is the same: when a team or group of people create something *Touchworthy* together, they can bond and get inspired a deeper way.