At SmartShape, we are always on the look-out for the latest societal shifts, emerging technology, and prominent product aesthetics appearing across product lines.

This is because we know that a shift in culture can mean a shift in buyer behavior, and advancement in technology and aesthetic preference can lead to new form and function needs.

Your product’s user is being influenced right now by emerging trends in society, technology, and aesthetics—which trends should your company have on its radar, and how could each trend impact product possibilities in 2018 and beyond? Read on. We’ll highlight our top 3 trends in each category and provide a few tips to help your business tap into each one.
PART 1: SOCIETAL SHIFTS
PART 2: TECH TRANSFORMATION
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PART 1

SOCIETAL SHIFTS

LESS BUT BETTER
THE SHARED ECONOMY
CRAVING CALM
LESS BUT BETTER

SOCIETAL SHIFTS

Tighter household budgets, smaller living spaces, environmental concerns, conscious consumerism—there are many varied motivations driving an intrinsic call to live a more minimalist lifestyle.
LESS BUT BETTER
SOCIETAL SHIFTS

WHAT WE'RE NOTICING

For those not already hearing about this trend in the news or their social media feeds, they are seeing the trend in shows such as *Tiny House Hunters* on HGTV, and the documentary *Minimalism* on Netflix. Friends and media are bringing the benefits of de-cluttering and living with less to the forefront of our minds and spaces, asking us to question how and when we spend our money like never before.

78% of millennials and 59% of baby boomers would prefer to spend money on experiences over stuff, and when purchasing products, are favoring the purchase of a few higher quality items — ethical, sustainable, long-lasting and environmentally-friendly — over the accumulation of more low-quality and disposable items.

To be sure we are getting the best? We are researching—heavily—prior to purchase. According to Salesforce’s 2017 Connected Shoppers Report, 79% of shoppers research merchandise before reaching point of purchase in-store and 85% research merchandise before making an online purchase—all in favor of not just making a purchase, but the best purchase for ourselves and our loved ones.

IMPLICATIONS

Thanks to the internet, modern consumers have infinite product possibilities online, and are looking to purchase less but better products that align with individual core values and personal preferences. According to a recent Facebook survey, only about 37% of the population is “brand loyal.”

This makes integrity, branding, company ethics, and positive online product reviews more important than ever before.

TIPS TO TAP INTO THE TREND:

- In product development, put people and ethics at the forefront of the production line. Place emphasis on quality materials that are sustainably-sourced and that age gracefully.

- Use consistent and clean brand language to appeal to the minimalist lifestyle across product, packaging, and web design.

- Showcase your product and company story with dynamic, honest and transparent storytelling—look for ways to connect with the consumer.

- Punch up any product facts around ethical and sustainable sourcing, and any other points of differentiation that can help your product stand out from the crowd and connect with consumers' intrinsic values.
SOCIETAL SHIFTS

The interest in less, but better, paired with advancements in technology has made it possible for us to connect to things as we need them, and, in some cases, only when we need them.
THE SHARED ECONOMY

SOCIETAL SHIFTS

CHANGES

In recent past, service-sharing solutions (think: Uber, Airbnb, Rent the Runway, and WeWork) provided quick ways to access high-quality products and experiences, and, in the interest of the minimalist movement, keep hold of these items for only a set period of time before transferring ownership.

These types of solutions have begun rewiring how society views product ownership, how we interact with one another, and a current societal desire to move away from hoarding collections of clutter, preserving only our most favorite and necessary possessions.

Services like ThredUp have built business models around trading in used clothes, connecting someone else with items we’ve grown tired of, and companies like Patagonia, who has been a leader in sustainable clothing, are looking at ways to create buy-back programs for those looking to upgrade pieces in their wardrobe.

But the trend doesn’t stop with clothes and experiences, product manufacturers have taken note and solutions have begun rolling out to allow users to rent out and test new products, including Pley, which allows parents to rent the latest toys with a monthly subscription. Services like these can help product manufacturers gain critical feedback, as well as assist consumers in product research, identifying those items that are worth the investment to keep long-term.

IMPLICATIONS

As consumers look to both share goods and purchase less, companies are going to need to increasingly think outside of the traditional retail box to expand access to brand and product lines.

Designing for the widest range of possible users will become more important than ever before, as singular products become owned by multiple users that could range drastically in every possible way.

TIPS TO TAP INTO THE TREND:

• Prioritize user research early on in the product development process. Take the time to identify your widest range of target user types.

• Through impactful design and engineering, look for ways to leverage material types that are built to last as they are passed from one user on to the next.

• Help your target consumer research by offering trial versions of your product available for them to hold, test and try (à la Warby Parker) before making their final purchase decision.

• In design, consider opportunities for future customization and personalization, so that as products are handed down they still feel personal.

“...things as we need them, and, in some cases, only when we need them”
More and more, we’re seeking to reject the crazy and hectic way of life we’ve felt pressured into keeping up, and, now, we have a growing desire for slow-paced and calm lifestyles.
CRAVING CALM

SOCIETAL SHIFTS

CHANGES

Has “I’m so busy” become a status symbol for our time? An article published in The Atlantic early this year made the argument, sharing that today there’s a perception that busy people are the most desirable workers, full of competence and ambition. Accordingly, many began to book their calendars full of weekly obligations to keep up—work, commuting, eating, chores, volunteering and sleeping—leaving little, if any, time for pure relaxation.

But recent studies have shown that taking time for ourselves, particularly time spent in silence, can restore the nervous system, help sustain energy, and condition our minds to be more adaptive and responsive to increasingly complex environments at work and at home.

These, and other similar discoveries, paired with feelings of burnout, have many of the same individuals shifting away from such chaotic lives in favor of slowing down, getting introspective, and embracing more quiet and calm. Enter our few new favorite pastimes, borrowed from some of the happiest countries around the world: **hygge** (Danish for embracing all things cozy, homemade, and time well-spent with family and friends), **SlowTV** (recently released on Netflix, follows a 7-hour train ride through the Nordic countryside), and **ASMR** (autonomous sensory meridian response) videos that “massage the brain” with soft spoken words and calming background noises.

IMPLICATIONS

Your audience is overwhelmed, overstimulated, and struggling to keep up. This means it’s more important than ever before to understand deeply what mindset your user might have when they’re interacting with your product, and what they want to be feeling when they are experiencing it. Is there a clash, or are these emotions aligned? Is your product taking its users out of the chaos, or deeper into it?

TIPS TO TAP INTO THE TREND:

- Focus on the solution you are providing and aim to remove any negative emotional triggers.
- Be sure your product isn't adding more noise. Remove any unnecessary noises, or notifications, in the case of digital solutions. Aim for essential function and features only.
- Don't be so quick to assume you'll lose your customer's interest after a few seconds if your product isn't full of stimuli to keep their attention. They might be looking for a solution that gives them less, not more.
PART 2

TECH TRANSFORMATION

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE
INVISIBLE EXPERIENCES
VIRTUAL & AUGMENTED REALITY
As machine learning technology advances to identify, categorize, and sort information, the possibilities are as endless as the data. AI provides companies the ability to make better, more informed decisions, and provides users with a custom and personalized experience.
Artificial Intelligence
Tech Transformation

Changes

Artificial intelligence is currently a $15 billion industry, on track to become a $70 billion industry by the year 2020.

With this in sight, almost every industry has an eye on AI, predicting how the technology could make its way into our businesses, homes, and entertainment.

IBM’s Watson has now been used in multiple fields including medicine and sports analytics, Stanford’s ChexNet is helping doctors better detect pneumonia in patients, and HBO’s Westworld had us all wondering about the day when robots might consciously rebel.

Through advancements in artificial intelligence and machine learning, the hope is that we will be able to gain critical insights and make important predictions faster, and with increased accuracy, as well as leverage this technology into smart products that learn about the user with each interaction.

Implications

In a world where objects can learn and adapt based on user behavior, consumer expectations around personalization will be higher than ever before.

Products that can be tailored to the individual or automatically adjusted in use will gain favor over those designed purely in attempt to fit the widest range of possible target users.

Tips to Tap into the Trend:

• Keep human factors, ergonomics, and user experience at the top of your product’s design priorities.
• Consider how advanced algorithms could be leveraged to give specific information to specific users for a custom experience.
• Consider how AI could be leveraged to expedite information gathering and better assist in decision making.
• Consider ethical or unsavory dilemmas that could happen with an AI-integrated product and develop an action plan to combat each and every worst case scenario.
With smart products adapting to our specific and immediate needs, we no longer have to physically interact with products. Instead, these experiences, when properly designed, will become invisible to the user.
Artificial intelligence and machine learning, paired with emerging internet of things (IoT) technology, create opportunity for an entirely different type of product: those built to provide invisible experiences.

Instead of passive objects waiting for your command, these objects will learn your habits and behaviors, and act as you’d want them to automatically, without cue. Think laundry detergent bottles that know when they are running low and reorder themselves, or lights that know the lighting preferences of each person in your household and react accordingly.

Machine learning, voice and gesture-driven computing, and autonomous driving are all “invisible UI” methods currently in development to elevate the user experience of products we already know and love — forcing product developers to shape product for more seamless integrations into our days and lives.

Designers will have to walk a fine line between helpful and intrusive, as they design what is meant to be hidden or disguised, with one eye on privacy concerns and the other focused intently on the human element of the product, always keeping key the wants and needs of the target user.

TIPS TO TAP INTO THE TREND:

- Consider environmental factors that could impact or limit the design of your solution.
- Develop not just for the user, but for the machine — what will it need to learn, and how will it know to adapt?
- Invest in UX designers that can design in a holistic context, as they will be asked to create dynamic user experiences that will be more felt than seen, more anticipatory and proactive rather than reactive.
As other industries find value in VR & AR technology, there will be greater adoption from users looking for more than entertainment.
2017 also saw an increased focus on augmented reality (AR) technology, with Apple’s launch of ARKit and Google’s launch of ARCore, kits that allow software developers to start bringing AR app ideas to life. This year, we expect to see more AR products emerging as developers begin experimenting with what’s possible.

Moving past entertainment and gaming, we will likely see more industries start to adapt the technology in a variety of new ways. We are only at the very beginning of exploring the value VR can provide to us!

It’s already given medical professionals the opportunity to practice complex surgeries, given police officers the ability to train for difficult situations in a new way, provided factory workers with next-level safety training, and given soldiers with PTSD a new exposure therapy option.

Far from a passing fad, virtual reality (VR) technology is expected to generate $2.2 billion in 2018.

In the design world, VR and AR could someday soon help us draw and sculpt prototypes in 3D, share products in real-time, and provide us with a new method of user research, immersing our target audience in a product’s ideal environment. Only time will tell how close we can get mimicking physical experiences in the digital world.

TIPS TO TAP INTO THE TREND:

• Keep an eye on the progress of VR, including its potential impact on design process and the industries you serve.

• In a time where consumers like the idea of a trial period, consider the opportunities posed by AR to bring virtual trial options to life in their own home.

• Consider how VR technology could improve your interaction with your customer-base. Is there an offering you could provide to further connect with your audience and remind them of the core focus of your business through gamification, product education, or product enhancement?
PART 3
AESTHETIC PREFERENCES

PRIMITIVE FORMS
DIMENSIONAL LAYERS
COOL COLORS
As we distance ourselves from physically interacting with products, the products’ forms have become simplistic and geometric.
PRIMITIVE FORMS
AESTHETIC PREFERENCES

CHANGES
Societal cravings of less, and low-key calm lifestyles all point to cravings for products that are more simplistic in design—not overly complicated, flashy, or complex, but rather intuitive and unassuming, and with an emphasis on high-quality material types, finishes, and timeless looks.

You already see it in the design of products like the Dyson Supersonic Hair Dryer, Amazon Echo Show and Nest’s Outdoor Camera, and we anticipate it’s only the start of the trend.

Particularly as AI, VR and invisible experiences gain in popularity, product form will need to take a backseat to features, and be able to blend in to surroundings in new, exciting and unimpressing ways.

IMPLICATIONS
Look for modern, primitive design to come to the forefront again this year, meeting current societal and tech trends head on.

TIPS TO TAP INTO THE TREND:
• Aim to design with clean lines and minimalist shapes.
• Place emphasis on the quality of materials sourced for your product. While consumers will be looking for something simplistic in design, they will also be looking for products made from high-quality, durable, and sustainable material types — built to be an object they can invest in and keep for years to come.
Dimensional layers add dynamic elements to the traditionally flat look we’ve seen in the past. This trend will become more prevalent as we move toward merging a digital interface with our physical world.
DIMENSIONAL LAYERS

AESTHETIC PREFERENCES

CHANGES

Wrapping flat graphics around photographs can turn once static UI into dynamic elements, pleasing to the eye.

Emerging technology's emphasis and need for great digital UX, and in making more aspects of the user experience pop online as more and more consumers research before purchase, we've begun elevating once simple graphics through layering.

You'll see it in Seattle's Space Needle Site and AIGA 100 Years of Design websites, and many other digital locations, and we anticipate this trend to only be evolved and enhanced in 2018.

IMPLICATIONS

Look for the flat design trend to move beyond just a beautiful aesthetic into one that leverages flat layers to improve function in another dimension (z-order), and provide features that enhance the user experience and adaptation to future interfaces (VR, AR).

TIPS TO TAP INTO THE TREND:

• Look for opportunities to build upon digital product design with intentional layering that adds meaning and depth to the design.

• Avoid adding layers to add layers — purposeful pairings can quickly become cluttered design. Walk that fine line.

• Consider ways to leverage flat technique to improve product features and functionality. Could an additional layer add a critical navigation element, or give space for a meaningful call-to-action button?
Cool colors help achieve calming and minimal spaces. Whether paired with neutrals or a bold all-over color, blues, teals, and cool purples will create the tranquil interiors we desire.
In the quest for calm, strong finishes and minimalist tendencies, we predict that products in laid-back cool tone shades, or cool with a touch of warmth, will reign.

Paint company Behr seems to agree with us, predicting shades with names like “Casual Day” and “Soul Search” (shades of blue-green), and “Unplugged” (an olive) will be some of its top sellers in the coming year. Sherwin-Williams too agrees with its “Oceanside” (another blue-green hue) color of the year prediction.

We predict neutral tones, playing into minimalist and classic trends, will also be big, pairing purposely with these cool tones for designs that hit all of the right notes.

Products will attempt to match societal empathy and emotion with color, placing emphasis on bringing consumers out of states of chaos and into calm through cool and neutral tones that have a sense of coziness and simplistic elegance.

**TIPS TO TAP INTO THE TREND:**

- Consider incorporating material types in cool tone shades with neutral accents.
- Stylize your products for emotional impact. Aim to enhance their mental state.
- Avoid too many flashy elements that could push consumers away, and simply pull your product into the noise.
Agree with these trends for 2018? See others on the horizon? We’d love to hear your thoughts. Feel free to open up a dialogue with us as the year progresses.