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# Reading the mind in the touch – Part 2: Context and individual differences influence how emotions and intentions are read from (imagined social) touch

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## Abstract

**Background:** Touch is a key channel for conveying meaning in social interactions. Previous experimental research indicates that touch meaning is shaped by the physical characteristics of touch (i.e. slow vs. fast touch), but the influence of other contextual (e.g., relationship between the giver and receiver of touch) and person variables (e.g., differences in exposure to touch) remain unknown.

**Method:** We used data ( $N = 23,428$ ) from the world's largest touch survey to examine how context (touch source) and person variables (gender, degree of positive childhood touch, and attachment style) shaped positive (love, desire, support) and negative (fear, anger, warning) emotions and intentions ascribed to imagined social touch (gentle stroking touch and hugs).

**Results:** Love, desire, and support were rated more highly when participants had their partner (vs. someone else) in mind. Women (vs. men) gave lower ratings for desire regardless of source. Gentle stroking felt most arousing and conveyed most arousal when participants had their partner in mind. More positive childhood touch was associated with more positive emotions and intentions, as were higher secure and anxious attachment. Avoidant attachment was associated with lower ratings for positive emotions and intentions. Positive childhood touch and anxious attachment were related to greater discrimination between distinct emotion and intention categories. Greater avoidant attachment was associated with reduced discriminability.

**Conclusion:** Our study highlights the importance of contextual and individual factors in communicating emotions and intentions via touch. Our findings have implications for enhancing social interactions and promoting wellbeing through touch.

**Keywords:** imagined touch, emotion, intention, attachment, individual differences

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