



## Millennials and Boutique Hotels: An Exploratory Study

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**Abstract:** Boutique hotels emerged in the late 1970s and since then the product has become more mainstream. The draw of boutique hotels is more personalized services. When marketing and providing services to a niche market, it is smart to be able to differentiate potential guests to best meet their needs. The generational cohort theory states that a population may be divided into segments based on their generation. This research focuses on millennials to find out what they are seeking in a boutique hotel product. Based upon how they chose their travel destination there were significant differences between culinary experience, attractions/activities, and cost/budget.

**Keywords:** Boutique Hotels, Millennials, Culinary Traveler, Marketing

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As the hospitality industry continues to evolve based on their offerings and different generations aging into the target market, it is imperative to keep up with what people are seeking in a destination and lodging selection. The boutique hotel industry has grown in popularity and is showing no signs of slowing down (IBIS World, 2024). As this segment continues to grow, research should keep up with the demand to ensure the market is captured. Millennials are a significant part of this market seeking a more unique travel experience. They are a sought-after market considering their level of travel. On average, this generation took nearly five trips and devoted 29% of their income to travel in 2023 (McKinsey & Company, 2024). This generation is also seeking culinary experiences, with 81% of survey respondents of the American Express 2023 Travel Trend Report noting looking forward to trying local food and cuisines on vacation. This research will be exploratory in nature to help shrink this segment to assist boutique hotel owners in discerning what millennials seeking culinary experiences are looking for in their product.

### 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1. Boutique Hotels

Boutique hotels differ from traditional hotels based upon their size. While there is no consensus regarding the number of rooms they contain, most boutique hotels offer no more than 150 rooms. The smaller size is key because the fundamental goal is to provide a more personal service and unique experiences for guests (Schrager, 2015). Another characteristic of these hotels is that they are apt to have a distinct theme that often represents the community where they are located. The theme may be present in the décor, amenities, and staff uniforms. They are known for their trendy design and attention to detail (Agget, 2007; Hollander, 2022).

While there is no universally accepted definition of the term "boutique hotel," it is generally understood to represent a unique, one-of-a-kind hospitality experience that places a high value on personalized attention, exceptional service, and distinctive design (Countryman & Jang, 2006; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005). A recurring theme that appears in the research on boutique hotels is the importance of delivering a memorable and immersive experience to guests (Lea, 2002; McIntosh & Siggs, 2005; Van Hartesvelt, 2006). McIntosh and Siggs found that boutique hotels do not necessarily have to be luxurious or

expensive (2005). Many are affordable and prioritize personalized service over extravagant decor or luxurious amenities. They identified five key dimensions that distinguish boutique hotels from other offerings, including a unique character, personalized touch, high-quality standards, and value-added location and cultural experiences provided by the hosts. Boutique hotels originated in North America and the United Kingdom (Olga, 2009). The concept of boutique hotels emerged in the late 1970s to cater to travelers that wanted to get away from the standardized experience provided by large hotel chains. Today there is a market of travelers with mid to upper income levels seeking unique, personalized hospitality experiences (Aggett, 2007; Rogerson, 2010; Sarheim, 2010). The intimacy of these hotels is a key feature that sets them apart (Henderson, 2011; Friedman, 2014). Guests are seeking a more memorable stay than they would get from a standardized hotel (Phillips, 2004; Loureiro & Kastenholtz, 2011; Zaman et al., 2016).

### 2.2. Generational Cohort Theory

The concept of generational cohorts emerged from sociology (Mannheim, 1952). The theory proposes that a population may be divided into segments based on their generation. This theory finds that the same generation shares common social and political events as well as social, political, and economic factors that shape their values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. These factors create a distinctive generational identity that remains constant over time (Arli & Pekerti, 2016; Ingelhart, 1977; Strauss & Howe, 1997).

This concept describes how individuals who are born during the same time or generation share related experiences of some major external events during their late adolescent and early adulthood years (Meredith & Schewe, 1994; Ryder, 1965). These events can shape beliefs and behaviors and may lead to shared values and attitudes within a cohort. These can differ from those of other generations and impact their lifestyles and choices (Strauss & Howe, 1991; Rogler, 2002).

### 2.3. Millennials

A great deal of research has been conducted on millennials because of the size of this segment and their purchasing power (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Viswanathan & Jain, 2013; Loroz & Helgeson, 2013; Young, 2015). This segment describes people that have been born between 1982 and 2002 (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials have become an attractive market for tourism destinations because of their high interest in travel. Millennials have more opportunities to travel than previous generations (Valentine & Powers, 2013).

Younger adults tend to pursue more new experiences than older adults which should be noted by destinations that would like to attract this generation (Genoe & Singleton, 2006; Hudson, 2010; Iso-Ahola et al., 1994). Millennials have been established as an important tourist market because most members of this generation already have travel experience and spend more when they travel than previous generations (Benckendorff et al., 2010).

Compared to other generations, millennials are familiar to smart technology (e.g., social media and mobile technology), which allows them to search information any time and any place when making decisions. They are also more receptive to different cultures including languages (Benckendorff et al., 2010). Indeed, millennials are described as tech-savvy, optimistic, assertive, goal-oriented, and confident (Chen & Choi, 2008). Accordingly, those millennials are willing to understand and admit diversity comprising ethnicity, lifestyle, and cultures in a society and easily take the dissimilarity compared to other generation cohorts.

Currently, millennials form almost one third of the world's population, are the greatest working generation ever, and are one of the most influential generations when it comes to consumer power (Hamed, 2017; Bochert et al., 2017; Schiopu et al., 2016). Additionally, the research illustrates that millennials:

- are very much informed and educated, even being called the hero generation for their belief in making the future better;
- postpone life milestones such as marriage and having children;
- are not as materialistic as previous generations in relation to owning properties, cars, etc.);
- prefer spending money on interesting experiences such as traveling and leisure;

- are price-sensitive and consider themselves to be smart consumers, expecting value for their money;
- are highly tolerant to change and believe in seizing the day;
- are interested in sustainable development and may be considered disloyal consumers due to unpredictable purchasing habits – especially younger millennials (Bochert et al., 2017; Ruspini & Melotti, 2016; Garikapati, 2016; O'Connel, 2015).

Ultimately, it is believed that the millennial generation is set to redefine every aspect of demographic, social, political, economic and technological environment (Garikapati et al., 2016). Growing up in the period of swift change has made their priorities and expectations much different from all previous generations (Goldman Sachs Report, 2016).

Current trends indicate that millennials are consistently looking for experiences rather than a product itself and are looking to break the monotony of work-life, so they expect to receive this through their hotel stay experience (Ramgade & Kumar, 2021). Millennial consumers are looking for authentic, locally inspired lodging experiences (Gensler, 2016).

### **2.4. Destination Selection**

Researchers have found that tourism growth might be related to how service providers understand the social and demographic trends that influence a traveler's preference (Horneman et al., 2002). Generational theory studies show there is a correlation between a generation and their travel preference (Huang & Lu, 2017). Responding to traveler age can help the tourism industry provide a more satisfying and appropriate travel experience for different market segments. (Cohen et al., 2014) This can be addressed by interpreting the factors that influence tourist behavior, engaging in more effective marketing strategies, ensuring maintainable destination management, and improving tourism products and services that match tourist expectations and needs (Octaviany & Mardiyana, 2024).

Hotel selection attributes are the features of products or services that lead customers to choose one product over others (Lewis, 1984). In other words, it can be described as determining components for hotels to enhance in building guest satisfaction and gaining market share. Many studies in the hotel context have historically revolved around the important attributes that guests seek in hotel selection. The importance of attributes is regarded as a person's general assessment of the significance of an attribute for a product (Chu & Choi, 2000). When a customer perceives an attribute as important, the customer will believe that the attribute will play a significant role in influencing his or her product choice (MacKenzie, 1986). Wuest, Tas, and Emenheiser (1996) defined perceptions of hotel attributes as the degree to which travelers find various services and facilities important to customers' satisfaction. According to Oliver (1993), there are two related but distinct dimensions of satisfaction, which include overall satisfaction and attribute satisfaction. Overall satisfaction is concerned with the overall assessment of a total purchase experience, whereas attribute satisfaction is concerned with particular facets, or attributes, of products or services (Chi & Qu, 2009). Attribute satisfaction can lead hotels to choose service directions and a specific product by identifying the dimensions that indicate a strong or weak impact in customer satisfaction. In addition, attribute satisfaction can be used as an independent variable to predict the likelihood of a person returning and recommending the experience to others (Phillips et al., 2013).

### **2.5. Food Tourism**

People incorporating the appreciation of food and drink has become more mainstream, with 53% of leisure travelers choosing their next destination based in part on the food and drink options offered by the community (Wolf, 2020). These tourists are among many discovering that the enjoyment of a destination's food and beverage offerings creates a better destination experience (Henderson, 2009).

As food tourism has grown so has the research about motivations and preferences of tourists who have a primary interest in food. Cultural tourism planners need to stay current on trends specifically targeting this dynamic market to translate the meaning of the experience to attendees (Skift, 2016). Food tourism has become more than a niche market with more people including food and beverage experiences as reasons they are drawn to a community (Everett, 2016; Stone & Migacz, 2016). Researchers have attempted to determine reasons for the increased interest in food tourism.

The varied reasons are:

- 1) Food travel engages more senses than other travel activities.
- 2) A traveler can experience multiple activities in a day compounding the experience.
- 3) While travelers may not return to a prime attraction (i.e., Empire State Building), they are likely to return to their favorite restaurants and pubs (World Food Travel Association, 2020).

There also has been an increase in heritage tourism based on the increase in education levels and increased exposure to more information (via television shows and the internet). Engaging in unique food and beverage experiences can help visitors learn more about the culture and heritage of an area. A 2020 Food Travel Monitor revealed that 79% of visitors learn about local food and drink when they visit a destination. (World Food Travel Association, 2020). Food tourists are more likely to explore off the beaten paths in a community and travel further away from their hotel for a memorable culinary experience. They equate unique culinary experiences as adding to the overall uniqueness of the travel experience (Skift, 2016).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Purpose of The Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the attraction of boutique hotels to millennials and help boutique hoteliers to better serve and attract this consumer. By narrowing the segment, the boutique hotelier will be better able to create a marketable product and experience. This research hopes to produce patterns that will assist in creating a more personalized and sought-after product.

The sample included 167 participants who were recruited using Qualtrics online survey platform. The survey included a qualifying question to ensure that the participants were both familiar with boutique hotels and were in the millennial age range.

#### 3.2. Data Analysis

To narrow the focus of the research, the sample was asked: “I tend to choose a travel destination primarily based on Cost/Budget, Attractions/Activities, and Culinary Experiences: Food and Beverage Offerings”. Forty-three percent of the sample chose Attractions/Activities, 32% chose Cost/Budget and 25% chose Culinary Experiences: Food and Beverage offerings. Discriminant analysis was utilized to determine if there were significant differences between the three groups. The Box’s M test was 939.641 with a significance of <.001 indicating statistically significant differences between the groups.

#### 3.3. Research Findings

The findings were separated into four tables based on the degree of significance and based on the differences between the three groups. It is clear patterns were found differentiating the three groups. By looking at the means it is evident the standout group are the respondents attracted primarily to a destination based on culinary experiences. They are more in agreement with what makes boutique hotels unique and specific information that may be helpful to boutique hoteliers.

The first table shows the most significant differences between the three groups. People seeking culinary experiences are more likely to prefer staying at branded hotels. They prefer to stay in a room that has standardized decor and are interested in hotels that attract locals to their restaurant bar. Shopping is a priority when they travel and they enjoy planned activities like mixology classes, wine tastings, and beer tastings.

Table 1

	Attractions	Cost/Budget	Culinary Experience	Sig.
I prefer to stay at branded hotels when you travel.	3.67	3.81	4.50	<.001
I prefer to stay in a room that has standardized decor. I like being able to stay in a similar room in another property.	3.44	3.59	4.32	<.001
I prefer to stay at a hotel that attracts locals to their restaurant/bar.	3.75	3.54	4.41	<.001
Shopping is a priority when I travel.	3.39	3.56	4.50	<.001
I enjoy planned activities like mixology classes, wine tastings, beer tastings.	3.66	3.72	4.70	<.001

Strongly Agree=5 Strongly Disagree=1

The second table also shows significant relationships between the groups. The culinary experience group tends to spend less on their lodging while they are on vacation, so they spend more on shopping and food/drinks. They like to participate in many activities while preferring off the beaten path destinations that are trendier and more authentic.

**Table 2**

	Attractions	Cost/Budget	Culinary Experience	Sig.
I tend to spend less on my lodging while I am on vacation so I can spend more on shopping and food/drinks.	3.37	3.61	3.64	.007
I like to participate in many activities when I travel.	4.17	3.90	4.52	.009
I prefer off the beaten path destinations when I travel.	3.50	3.75	4.11	.011
When I travel I want to stay in a trendy area where there is a great deal of activity.	4.05	4.02	4.52	.015
I am interested in authentic experiences when I travel.	4.14	4.27	4.61	.021

Strongly Agree=5 Strongly Disagree=1

The third table shows less significance between the groups. The culinary group considers themselves “foodies.” They believe that boutique hotels are more luxurious than a standard hotel chain. They like hotels that reflect their location with a distinct personality.

**Table 3**

	Attractions	Cost/Budget	Culinary Experience	Sig.
I consider myself a "foodie".	3.94	4.04	4.44	.037
Based on what I know about boutique hotels I think they provide more luxurious accommodations than a standard chain hotel.	4.07	4.04	4.47	.054
I like it when hotels are tailored to their location (mold their decor to the community which they operate)	4.12	3.97	4.17	.057
I prefer a hotel with a distinct personality.	4.14	4.09	4.44	.179

Strongly Agree=5 Strongly Disagree=1

The fourth table shows the least amount of significant differences between the three groups. All agree that boutique hotels offer a more exclusive experience. They also would enjoy a hotel that has retro games. They are neutral when it comes to staying at a smaller hotel in order receive more personalized service.

**Table 4**

	Attractions	Cost/Budget	Culinary Experience	Sig.
I feel boutique hotels offer a more exclusive experience.	4.16	4.11	4.38	.303
I would enjoy a hotel that has "retro" games in the lobby (Clue, Hungry Hippo, Connect Four)	4.03	4.18	4.14	.718
I would stay a smaller hotel in order to receive more personalized service.	3.76	3.90	3.88	.803

Strongly Agree=5 Strongly Disagree=1

**4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is interesting to note that although the group seeking culinary experiences is more in agreement with all questions about boutique hotels and their offerings, the overall sample is at least neutral in their overall responses. Most brands have boutique offerings such as Marriotts’ autograph collection, Hilton’s curio collection, Starwood’s Mastercraft collection and Wyndham’s Esplendor collection. The fact that the culinary group is seeking branded hotels is great news for these brands and illustrates that

they have a group of Generation Xers they can focus upon. They are not necessarily attracted to independent hotel chains but could be drawn to the convenience and security of staying at a brand.

They expected a more luxurious experience than a mid-priced hotel, so hoteliers need to keep this in mind with their design and offerings. Although this generation did not grow up with technology, they now appreciate such conveniences as operating different devices with their phone. This group is more philanthropic-minded, so the hotel needs to participate and make known their activity within these programs.

The draw of beverage classes is a win-win. It is a more personalized option that can be offered at a hotel and can be a very profitable amenity. It is a great benefit to have guests stay on property while having them pay the prices with the largest profit margin of alcohol. Another way to draw this market to the hotel is by promoting their restaurant. Again, a benefit financially for hoteliers is to keep as much of guests' spending on property as possible.

Although this group favors brand hotels they are more interested in local businesses instead of chains and are seeking an authentic experience when they travel. A smart plan would be to maintain relationships with local businesses so guest services will be able to provide recommendations for a variety of offerings including authentic experiences.

All groups are mostly neutral on refillable amenities which is good news because it was a bit controversial when the change was implemented. They feel that boutique hotels are more exclusive which means that the hotel needs to be presented as such in both marketing material and the product.

The groups are neutral in text instead of calling guest services. This could imply that both options should be readily available. They state they would be more likely to stay at hotel where they know the employees are treated well. The hotel should include this in its marketing material. Marketing is not just selling the product it is promoting the experience. If guests know that the employees are respected, they will feel better giving their money to the hotel.

Some boutique hotels have included some novelty items as amenities. All groups tend to be neutral or agree to this offering so it may be interesting to test this in guest rooms and find out if it suits their property.

Personalized service is important across all groups, and they would stay at a smaller hotel to receive it. There is a market of people that are not looking for a mega-resort and boutique hotels should make certain that their personalized services exceed their guest expectations.

In conclusion the boutique hotel industry needs to know that the millennial seeking culinary experiences is wanting to stay at a hotel that is authentic and feels luxurious. They are more social and enjoy activities. The lobby should be the hub of activity where guests can interact with each other. Care should be taken in the shopping opportunities that are provided. Unique keepsakes that represent the community will most likely be in demand. Being "food forward" by providing classes and tastings will be a draw. Marketing to the community will help fill these during down times and will give the guests the ability to meet the locals. This research is a beginning step to help operators focus their efforts and limit waste by trying to attract the masses when drawing a specific demographic is much more profitable.

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