

Millennial Consumer Behavior and Classical Concert Design

OUTSTANDING ABSTRACT – Arts, Music & Entertainment Marketing

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Abstract

In 2019, the Millennial generation – which includes consumers born between 1982 and 2002 (Pendergast, 2010; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2009; Kruger and Saayman, 2015) – is predicted to overtake Baby Boomers as the United State’s largest living generation as immigrants expand the size of the Millennial generation and death diminishes the size of the Baby Boomer generation (Fry, 2018). With members between the ages of 16 and 36, the Millennial generation gains spending power each year as the consumers move further into their careers. Millennials are the future benefactors, patrons, performers, and supporters of live music events (Curbello, 2015) and, as such, marketers charged with “selling” the classical concert experience must fully understand how to create value for Millennial consumers and, accordingly, update their marketing mix, including product design. The purpose of this research is to provide classical concert planners with an understanding of Millennial consumer behavior and preferences and, via case study, an exploration of ways various classical music organizations have modified their product to attract these consumers.

The Millennial Audience

Across the literature, the birth years associated with the Millennial generation vary. For the purposes of this project, Millennials includes consumers born between 1982 and 2002 (Pendergast, 2010; Schiffman and Kanuk, 2009; Kruger and Saayman, 2015). A number of events and characteristics define Millennials, including globalization, increasing diversity of demographics, and rapid advances in technology (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2010). These consumers are team oriented, generally preferring groups and interaction with others as opposed to being alone, and consider themselves unique and confident in their choices (Martin & Monaco, 2007). To these consumers, computers are an “assumed part of life” (Oblinger, 2003, p. 40) and delays, such as waiting in line or suffering through unproductive processes, are unbearable (Sweeney, 2006).

While Millennials are interested in almost every genre of music, their interest in classical music noticeably falls on the lower end of the interest spectrum (Kruger & Saayman, 2015). According to Earl (2001), benefits of live music performance attendance include satisfying curiosity, experiencing joy and entertainment, engaging in social interaction, and an opportunity

to be in close proximity to celebrated artists. Through survey research, Kruger and Saayman (2015) found Millennial concertgoers consider entertainment and socialization the most important benefits of concert attendance. This need for socialization aligns with assertions Millennials are team oriented and desire groups and interaction more than time alone (Monaco & Martin, 2007).

Millennials' need for socialization – including both face-to-face socialization within the venue and digital socialization via smart technology – is unmet during traditional classical concerts. Inside the concert venue, musicians are typically disconnected from the audience, communicating with attendees only when taking a bow once the piece concludes (Sun, 2017, p. 21). The typical classical concert venue and norms of concert attendance exacerbate the problem, as the often plainly-decorated concert hall is designed to discourage socialization and direct concertgoers' complete attention to the performance (Kolb, 1998), with participants sitting “in darkened silence watching mostly anonymous performers while keeping their attention focused solely on music” (Kolb, 2000). Younger consumers wish to use their free time for activities incorporating a stronger social element than typically found in a classical concert (Pitts, 2005), attending primarily to relax and fulfill basic social needs (Baker, 2000).

Research from Eventbrite (2017) states more than 80% of Millennials participate in music festivals so they can connect and interact with community members who have similar mindsets. During a standard classical concert, concertgoers are expected to not make any unnecessary noise, including tapping their feet to the music, engaging in conversation, or looking through a purse for an item, and to clap only at the conclusion of a piece or performance (Christiansen, 1984). Even mistimed clapping during a classical music performance results in “disapproving frowns and eyes like daggers to seek out the offenders. If looks could kill, there'd [be] a line of body bags carried out the concert hall doors” (Inaba, 2014). While Inaba provides an amusing description of the situation, it is important to note this harsh reaction to behavior that does not align with classical concert norms further deteriorates the Millennial consumers' ability to enjoy the classical concert environment, as audience members are expected to not only listen, but listen with the purpose of understanding, deconstructing, and analyzing the music (Curbello, 2015). Millennials worry about being considered stupid if they make a wrong assumption about the quality of a piece (Kolb, 2000). They enjoy the freedom to “participate and socialize in a concert performance” (Sun, 2017, p. 23), but classical concerts confine these consumers to recognize the divide between audience and performer, sit in absolute silence (Botstein, 1999), and feel the pressure to intently and knowledgably observe a performance relatively devoid of visual stimulation and wholly devoid of socialization, and avoid “inappropriate” concert hall behaviors.

Perhaps one of the most taboo concert hall behaviors is the use of smartphones during the performance. This is particularly problematic for Millennial consumers who rely heavily on text and instant messages to engage in digital socialization. More than 90% of Millennials own a smartphone, and about 85% use social media (Jiang, 2018). Technology such as smartphones enables Millennials to stay connected with others (Sun, 2017). In English-speaking

countries, approximately 70% of Millennials and younger members of Gen Z prefer digital communication (particularly via text message) to face-to-face communication and keep their phone within reach when sleeping, with about half report they check their phones for notifications when they wake in the night (Hyken, 2017). Millennials use their phones from the moment they wake until they go to bed, engaging in pleasurable habitual behavior as they automatically respond to notifications regardless of time or place (Experian, 2015). This usage is driven in part by perceived loneliness and a desire to experience feelings of belonging, with Millennials using their electronic devices primarily for entertainment, social interaction, companionship, and to pass the time (Pearson, Carmon, Tobola, & Fowler, 2009). Millennials and young members of Gen Z would rather leave their wallet at home than their smartphone (Hyken, 2017) so it stands to reason Millennials would avoid classical concerts due to complete and severe restrictions on use of the smartphones on which they are so dependent.

Classical Concert Modifications for Millennials

Classical concert audience development requires concert planners to view the world from the perspective of those the consumers they wish to engage (Baker, 2000). With concert attendance decreasing substantially in recent years (Graham, 2015), classical music organizations seeking to attract Millennial concertgoers must examine ways to provide entertaining, engaging live music experiences that allow for socialization and take into account Millennial preferences. Millennials “expect other people and institutions to give them more flexibility” and “to have as much customization and personalization of features as possible to meet their changing interests, needs, and tastes” (Sweeney, 2006). For classical concert marketers charged with maintaining and growing ticket sales and charitable contributions, it is important to consider classical concert modifications that take into account Millennials’ dependence on smartphones (Hyken, 2017), preference for groups and interaction as opposed to being alone (Monaco & Martin, 2007), and desire to engage in concerts that provide entertainment and socialization (Kruger & Saayman, 2015). A number of classical music organizations have modified their concert experience through changes to the concert venue, use of alternative venues, abandonment of traditional classical concert norms, and other changes. This project, when complete, will use a qualitative case study approach to examine modifications to the classical concert experience that align with Millennial needs for socialization.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

This study will provide practitioners and educators with an understanding of the misalignment between Millennial consumer behavior/preferences and the traditional classical concert product. The fully-developed research project will include a case study of organizations that have modified their classical concert product to meet the needs and preferences of what will soon be the United States' largest generation of consumers.

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