

# Exploring the Relationship Between Millennials' Perception of Preferential Treatment and Brand Intimacy: Empirical Study on Hotel and Tourism Industry

**Riba K John**

Research Scholar, Dept. of Business Administration, St. Berchmans College, Changanacherry, Kerala. Email:ribakjohn@gmail.com

**Mathew Joseph**

Professor, Dept. of Business Administration, St. Berchmans College, Changanacherry, Kerala

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## Abstract

From generation to generation, it is evident that on and off changes are observed in individuals' characteristics, values, and consumption patterns. These changes invariably occur for various reasons, including; global transformations, technological advancement, changes in views and attitudes of people, progress in education and so on. The age cohorts, being exposed to these changes, develop a momentous difference in attitudes, perceptions, likes and dislikes, consumption patterns, loyalty factors, etc. Millennials are considered as emotional and least loyal, yet they are economically robust, technology savvy and heavy online shoppers, which makes them engaged with brands. This paper aims to study preferential treatment's impact on millennials' brand intimacy factors. Data were collected from individuals in the age group of 26 to 41. The result showed that the right type of preferential treatment significantly impacts the development of customer-brand intimate relations.

**Keywords:** Preferential Treatment, Relationship Marketing, Brand Intimacy, Millennials, Generation Y.

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**Corresponding Author:** Riba K John, Research Scholar, Dept. of Business Administration, St. Berchmans College, Changanacherry, Kerala. Email:ribakjohn@gmail.com.

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## Introduction:

We are in an era where the marketing process is much obliged to value co-creation while witnessing the switching loyal behavior of customers. Seemingly, the loyalty factor is different for different age cohorts and different generations. Nowadays, loyalty is fickle among customers; especially for millennials, loyalty towards brands changes hastily due to fashion,

trends and popularity of the brand and the focus of millennials is more on style and quality rather than price - (Lissitsa & Kol, 2016). The young generation of millennials holding a super buying power is a critical segment for business firms to cater to.

However, businesses are striving hard to engage customers because of the stiff competition and fickle loyal behavior of customers. At this point,

the question of treating customers in a different manner arises. Indeed (Sheth & Parvatiyar, 1995) says customers are different, so there is no need to serve all consumers in the same way. Now, the challenge here is how to serve customers in different ways keeping in view the overall cost, discriminated expenses, the interest of customers, pre-determined goals and other parameters. To address these issues, businesses need to concentrate on customer selectivity and proper focus on valued customer groups, the key factors that make a business firm stand out from its competitors. To make a difference in serving all consumers under one roof, relationship marketing offers certain practices. Preferential treatment is one such practice, which comes under the purview of relationship marketing and essentially deals with providing unique treatments to selective customers, not to all of them.

Preferential treatment is associated with treating some customers with “extra” benefits and others with no benefits or some benefits. (Jiang et al., 2013). Preferential treatment is also defined as “giving selective customers elevated social status recognition and/or additional and enhanced product or services above and beyond standard firm value propositions and customer service practices”(Lacey et al., 2007)

Preferential treatments can be earned twofold. Either it can be earned through effort or loyalty, or it can be earned just by the factor of luck or chance. The former is earned preferential treatment, and the latter is unearned preferential treatment (Jiang et al., 2013). For Instance, shops issue privilege cards for their frequent customers, which come under earned preferential treatment. Getting rewards as the customer is one billionth customer account for the latter type of preferential treatment. The two-fold type of preferential treatment could bring forth in different means; it could be (i) Economy based

Preferential Treatment and (ii) Customization based Preferential Treatment (Kim & Baker, 2020). The paper aims to study the impact of economic-based preferential treatment and customization based preferential treatment and the effect of its various types, on a specific age cohort called Generation Y, also called Millennials. Millennials are a set of people who shows unique and distinct characteristics from other generations and is an exciting segment to study on. Millennials are a generation of young people, and they are described as social, innovative, open-minded, motivated, and intelligent people (Ordun, 2015).

Generation Y, being the highly attractive market that is technology centered, has a different and unique set of behavior compared to other generations. They prefer unique shopping experiences and are emotional and less loyal to brands. -(Bilgihan, 2016; Lissitsa & Kol, 2016).

## Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

It has been proved that customer relation gets stronger with preferential treatments why because, Customer Relationship Management (CRM) Technologies, now a days makes it possible to organize and remember individual customers, their preferences, choices, special days and so on. By doing so, firms can make strategic advantages, which any competitor cannot follow (Lacey et al., 2007) and on the other end customers get the feeling of receiving a particularity. For that, a firm must be able to identify the most valuable customer base, identify their consumption patterns, provide them with unique purchase experiences and preferential treatments, continuously engage them to be close to the business, ask them to share their feedback and finally make them intimate to the brands.

## Preferential Treatment

Preferential treatment is defined as “giving selective customers elevated social status recognition and/or additional and enhanced product or services above and beyond standard firm value propositions and customer service practices” (Lacey et al., 2007). Preferential treatment is being popularly followed in service settings, especially in hotels and restaurants (Jiang et al., 2013). Preferential treatments are of different types, and the past works of literature summons it in different terminologies and categorize in different manner. (Gwinner et al., 1998; Lacey et al., 2007) emphasized the two aspects of preferential treatments, i.e., economic-based preferential treatment and customisation based preferential treatment. (Drèze & Nunes, 2009) made a study on the two benefits of loyalty programs for consumers, hard benefits (rewards) and soft benefits (recognition). Another classification used by many researchers was earned Preferential treatments and Unearned Preferential treatments. Earned preferential treatments are given on the basis of past purchases, loyalty points, long-term relationships with firms and repeat purchases (Kim & Baker, 2020). Unearned preferential treatment includes how preferential treatment is given spontaneously or by luck or chance (Jiang et al., 2013). Another study points out the customer preferences on the impact of luck based and loyalty based rewards on customer loyalty (Hwang & Mattila, 2018). Even though the terminologies are different, all of them point out how businesses can offer preferential treatment to their customers to embrace them. Scant literature also shows the reaction after getting preferential treatment in customers is different, and the outcomes include relationship commitment, increased purchase, the share of commitment, positive word of mouth and customer feedback (Lacey et al., 2007). Thus, the study aims to find out the possible impact of preferential treatment on

brand intimacy of customers, who fall in the category of millennial.

H<sub>1</sub>: Preferential treatment has significant impact on brand intimacy of millennials.

## Earned Preferential Treatment & Unearned Preferential Treatment

The method of preferential treatment differs depending on the consumer base. Preferential treatment may have financial consequences for a company, even if it improves the value proposition for customers. However, preferential treatment may be viewed by customers as regular treatment provided by the company.

Unearned preferential treatments, as the name suggest, is not earned through previous purchases or past relationships. Instead, its awarded spontaneously or by chance (Jiang et al., 2013) and has been a common phenomenon in the marketplace practicing since before. For Example, spot winning promotions, anniversary giveaways, seasonal giveaways, Contests and so on. It is like the two sides of a coin; on one side the customer gets easily connected and emotionally attached and on the other side the business gets the opportunity to grab and hold the new customer base.

Earned preferential treatments are purely based on history of purchases and loyalty points, which is actually an uncomplicated way to attract and hold loyal customers. It includes elite memberships, better treatment, special services, reward points claim. Despite the fact that providing such preferential services will harmonize customer journey, - (Ma et al., 2018), claims that loyalty programs sometimes acts as a double edged sword. The customers start expecting more and more offerings and services which will eventually imbalance the financial track of the business.

### Economic based preferential treatment

(Gwinner et al., 1998) identified economic benefits as a relational benefit that initiates a long-term customer relationship with the company. Such benefits include monetary and time saving benefits like special deals, discounts or price breaks, cash backs, priority service provider appointments. In the case of any service failure, it can take the form of service repairs return and refund policies (Lacey et al., 2007). For instance, Complimentary product and service upgrades, discounts, gift certificates, cashback offers while using certain payment cards and gateways.

However, millennials characteristics shows that they are less sensitive to price and more sensitive to deals and offers (Moreno et al., 2017; Smith, 2011). Thus, the hypothesis is developed to test the effect of economic based preferential treatment has on brand intimacy of millennials.

H<sub>2</sub>: Economic based preferential treatment has significant effect on brand intimacy of millennials.

### Customisation based Preferential Treatment

“For their regular customers may service providers may tailor their service to meet particular needs” (Gwinner et al., 1998). Customisation based preferential treatment makes the solid potential for keeping competitive advantage to the firm; the reason behind this is competitors cannot replicate the customised offers which are diverse and exclusive. Here, the treatments are designed out of customers' perceptions and choices, figured out by the help of digital devices and artificial intelligence.

For Example: Time saving benefits are the best example for customization based preferential treatment, which also include service without prior appointments, individually tailored

communications, Priority on the waitlist, personal relation with service personnel etc. Hence the hypothesis is developed to test the effect of customization benefits has on brand intimacy of millennials.

H<sub>3</sub>: Customization based preferential treatments has significant effect on brand intimacy of millennials.

### Millennials

Indian millennials, “Born between 1981 and 1996, roughly numbering more than 440 million, they are, without any doubt, the largest millennial cohort on the planet”. - (Marwaha, 2021). “Millennials account for a third of India's population and 46% of its workforce and contribute about 70% of total household income” - (Millennials Impact on 4 Indian Sectors, n.d.). Previous literature explicitly shows that they are the breadwinners of households and thus concludes that millennials are potent consumers and trendsetters. In this study, millennials range from age group of 26 to 41 (as of 2022) are the working-class segment. According to “—”(The Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and Gen Z Survey, n.d.), 83% of the Indian millennials are employed in either full time or part time work and in that the majority are working in middle level and senior level. Thus, the spending pattern will be comparatively higher than other age cohorts.

Millennials exhibit a very different set of characteristics when compared to other generations.

They rely on e-WOM, not on brand promotions - (B. Valentine & L. Powers, 2013) and possess a very extensive knowledge in technology and related matters - (Moore, 2012).

They prefer fresh, healthier and customizable

foods from restaurants (Weber, 2017). Millennials are found to be more travel maniacs and are expected to be the most extensive customer base for hotels and tourism industry across the globe; the generation also prefer to spend money on experiences rather than materialistic means. (Bilgihan, 2016). (Ordun, 2015) states that millennials have an instantaneous attitude in spending money for purchases and the factor of loyalty, which is based on trust, lasts for a few months only. Therefore, the hypothesis is developed to test the difference occur in millennials brand intimacy according to the type of preferential treatment received.

H4: There is a significant difference between brand intimacy of millennials and type of preferential treatment received.

H4a: There is significant difference between the mean of mental closeness and type of preferential treatment received.

H4b: There is significant difference between the mean of comfortable relationship and type of preferential treatment received.

H4c: There is significant difference between the mean of trust and type of preferential treatment received.

### **Brand Intimacy**

Brand intimacy refers to the act of closeness, affection and emotional attachment of a consumer with his favorite brand. It deals with the customer's initiative to constantly follow the brand, share feelings with the brand and support it with empathetic love (Pang et al., 2009). Brand intimacy is based on psychological solid interactions between consumer and brand, and it essentially includes the indispensable participation of both parties. The possibility of influencing customer

perceptions about their brand, and thus their attitudes and purchase intention, is dependent on the level of intimacy the brand chooses to use in its dealings with customers (Barcelos et al., 2016). Thus it is important to maintain a brand intimate relationship with customers to withstand in the challenging marketing environment.

### **Research Gap**

The existing pieces of literature covers the effects of preferential treatments among general customer segment and also the impact of preferential treatments on various outcomes like loyalty, delight and increased satisfaction (Kim & Baker, 2020) relationship commitment, increased purchase, the share of commitment, positive word of mouth and customer feedback (Lacey et al., 2007). The past pieces of literature also correlate the types of preferential treatment and the benefits on sales, word of mouth, relationships, loyalty etc. Scant literature shows the undesirable effect of preferential treatment on various outcomes (Lacey et al., 2007; Ma et al., 2018). Still a gap is found in the study of age cohorts, specifically millennials, and their attitude towards preferential treatment. So, generation Y, also known as millennials, are selected for their unique behavioral patterns from other generations. The study tries to find out, whether offering preferential treatments leads to brand intimacy or not. The study further investigates the factor of brand intimacy in relation to the frequency of purchase/visits, types of preferential benefits received and demographic factors.

### **Research Objectives**

Keeping the above in mind, the paper aims

- To study the impact of preferential treatment on brand intimacy of millennials,

- To assess the effect of economic benefits on brand intimacy of millennials,
- To examine the influence of customisation benefits on brand intimacy of millennials.
- To find out the difference in brand intimacy of millennials according to the type of preferential treatment received.

### Research Methodology

Data were collected from individuals whose ages fall in the category of 26 to 41 (as of 2022). To be specific, individuals born between the years of 1981 to 1996. The study's target was star rated hotels (three star and above) in Kumarakom, Kerala, since hospitality and tourism services are contexts where various sorts of preferential treatment are delivered, either in earned or unearned manner.

Simple random sampling was employed to collect data, and 104 completed survey questionnaires

were collected using the online google form platform.

### Measures

The variables in the study, preferential treatment and brand intimacy, were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1- strongly disagree to 5- strongly agree. The independent variable, preferential treatment was measured using a scale adapted from (Gwinner et al., 1998). The scale used for measuring dependent variable, brand intimacy was adapted from (Wang et al., 2019). Collected data was analyzed using statistical Packages for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.

### Reliability Test

A Cronbach's alpha analysis was conducted to test the reliability of scales used in the study. Reliability tests showed high internal reliability, with Cronbach's alpha for these constructs, ranging from 0.745 to 0.895.

#### Reliability Statistics

	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Preferential Treatment	0.833	4
Economic Benefits	0.745	3
Customisation Benefits	0.841	4
Brand Intimacy	0.895	3

## Analysis & Discussions

**Table 1: Sample Demographic Characteristics**

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	40	38.5
Female	64	61.5
Total	104	100
<b>Highest Educational Qualification</b>		
Under Graduate	24	23.1
Post Graduate	80	76.9
Total	104	100
<b>Profession</b>		
Business	20	19.2
Public Sector Job	04	3.8
Private Sector Job	60	57.7
Not Employed	20	19.2
Total	104	100
<b>Annual Income</b>		
Below Rs. 3,00,000	44	42.3
Rs. 3,00,000 to Rs. 5,00,000	40	38.5
Rs. 5,00,000 to Rs. 10,00,000	20	19.2
Above Rs 10,00,000	0	0
Total	104	100
<b>Preferred services in hotels</b>		
Dining	44	42.3
Accomodation/ Stay	32	30.8
Get Togethers	04	3.8
Leisure/ Recreation	24	23.1
Others	0	0
Total	104	100
<b>Preferential treatment received</b>		
Yes	80	76.9
No	05	4.8
Not Sure	19	18.3
Total	104	100

Types of Preferential Treatment received		
Priority Services	25	24
Special Discounts	27	26
Customised Services	36	34.6
Free Services	8	7.7
Others	8	7.7
Total	104	100
Follow brand pages of hotels		
Yes	82	78.8
Sometimes	14	13.4
No	8	7.7
Total	104	100

### Descriptive Statistics & Findings

Table 1 presents the pictorial depiction of demographic characteristics. Of the 104 respondents, 38.5% identified as male and 61.5% as female. 76.9% of them are post graduates and 23% had an under graduate degree. Results showed that 57.7% works in private sector. The annual income of 42.3% is below 3 lakhs and 38.5% has an annual income of Rs. 3,00,000 to Rs, 5,00,000. Furthermore, majority (42.3%) likes to dine in

hotels where 30% choose it for accommodation/ stay followed by leisure/ recreation at 23%. Majority of the respondents (76.9) opined that they received preferential treatment during hotel visits and among that 34.6% opined they got customized services in their visit with hotels and 26% received special deals. 78.8 % of the millennials follow/ interact the brand pages of hotels they stayed with in social media, which shows a good level of relationship.

**Table 2: Summary of Regression Analysis showing Preferential treatment as predictor**

Hypothesis	Regression weights	Beta Coefficient	R2	F	t- value	P value	Hypothesis Supported
H1	PT- BI	.659	.735	54.29	2.853	.000	Yes
H2	EB- BI	.554	.557	41.87	6.590	.000	Yes
H3	CB- BI	.383	.522	26.989	4.153	.000	Yes

Note: p < 0.05

PT- Preferential Treatment, EB- Economic Benefits, CB- Customization Benefits, BI- Brand Intimacy.

The results of correlation revealed that there is positive correlation between factors of preferential treatment and brand intimacy.

The hypotheses tests if preferential treatment carries a significant impact on brand intimacy. The

dependent variable brand intimacy was regressed on predicting variable preferential treatment to test the hypothesis H<sub>1</sub>.

Preferential treatment significantly predicted brand intimacy, F= 54.29, p<0.05, which indicates that preferential treatment can play a significant role in shaping brand intimacy. (β=.659, p<.005). The result clearly directs the positive effect of preferential treatment. Moreover, the R<sup>2</sup>=.735



depicts that the model explains 73% of the variance in brand intimacy.

Economic benefits is found as a significant predictor of brand intimacy ( $\beta=.554$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), 55 % of the variance in brand intimacy is explained by predictor, economic benefits. Hence it is concluded that economic benefits have a significant effect on

brand intimacy.

Similarly, Customisation benefits is found as a significant predictor of brand intimacy ( $\beta=.383$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), 52% of the variance in brand intimacy is explained by predictor. Hence it is concluded that customisation benefits have an effect on brand intimacy.

**Table 3: Independent Samples t test**

Variables	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean difference
<b>Mental Closeness</b>						
Customised Services	36	3	0.828	3.29	0.002	0.593
Special Discount	27	3.59	0.501			
<b>Comfortable Relationship</b>						
Customised Services	36	3	0.828	1.346	0.183	0.296
Special Discount	27	3.3	0.912			
<b>Trust</b>						
Customised Services	36	3.06	1.194	0.861	0.392	0.241
Special Discount	27	3.3	0.953			

As can be seen in table 1, Customized services (34.6%) and special discount (26%) contribute more to the type of preferential treatment received by millennials from the hotels they visited.

To test hypotheses that customized services and special discounts were associated with statistically significant different dimensions of brand intimacy, an independent sample t test was performed. Customised services (N=36) was associated with mental closeness  $M=3.00$  ( $SD=.828$ ) and is found significant. Similarly, special discount (N=27) was associated with mental closeness ( $M=3.59$   $SD=.501$ ) and found significant. Thus  $H_{4a}$  can be accepted. In the same way customized services ( $M=3$   $SD=.828$ ) and special discount ( $M=3.3$   $SD=.912$ ) was also associated with comfortable relationship, but is not found significant ( $p<0.05$ ), thus  $H_{4b}$  is rejected. The test was conducted on the dimension of trust, and hypothesis found to be rejected.

## Conclusion

The study looked at the impact of preferential treatment on brand intimacy among millennials, a distinctive age group. The results showed that providing preferential treatment has a significant impact on developing customer- brand intimate relations. Irrespective of the fickle loyalty behavior of millennials, the study proved that the millennials like to constantly follow the brand pages in social media and to get updates regarding deals and offers. Moreover, the study also found that providing economic benefits and customized benefits also makes a huge impact on brand intimacy of millennials. Millennials are considered as switching loyals, but the study reveals that applying right kind of treatment and keeping them engaged by providing more benefits will definitely keep them in intimate relation with brands. Especially in the context of hotels and services, customers look for strong ties for the value and

time they provide. Hence the study concludes that constant engagement, a feel of personalized treatment and maintaining intimacy can turn the target group of technologically savvy millennials into loyal millennials.

### Recommendations

The study has shown that multiple dimensions of preferential treatment definitely affect individuals brand intimacy factors. The study examined the economic and customization dimensions of preferential treatment and found the resulting effect on enhancing the brand intimacy of people. Thus, the study recommends that if businesses can make the feeling of receiving preferential treatment, among consumers, the revisit chances will be high and sale volume will go up. Unlike other segments, in hotel and tourism industry, experiences carries a pivotal role. Creating and making fond memories in the minds of customers will enhance brand image, loyalty and intimacy. Therefore, the study recommends that it is not about following the regular trend and satisfying the customers rather it is all about imprinting the brand in the minds of customers by sensing what they actually matter. Then the business will grow and sustain.

### Scope for future research

The study was concentrated only on hotels in Kumarakom with three star and above rating. Therefore, it can be replicated in other business settings and other contexts with a larger sample size of all age groups. Researchers may include variables like brand advocacy, brand love, customer engagement to study preferential treatment and its effect. Also, more dimensions of preferential treatment, trust, can be adopted to enrich the research.

### Limitations

The study has several inherent limitations. Data for the study was limited and collected from hotels with 3 star and above rating in Kumarakom alone and only millennial visitors were considered as respondents. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized and might not be applicable to all other businesses. The study only examined the role of preferential treatment in brand intimacy. Factors like revisit intentions, customer engagement, advocacy, was not considered.

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