From the Festival of Britain in 1951 to the anti-commercial festival movement of the Woodstock generation to the recent explosion of food and literary events, the festival has adapted and evolved markedly over the decades. The term has never been more diverse and difficult to define than it is today—a catch-all for all manner of events. A festival can be a one-day boutique event, a super gig, a summit for the intelligentsia, an urban street party, a fair or a fête.

The common thread through all of these variations of the festival and a key determinant of their success or failure is the experience that they provide. After all, experience is the ultimate status symbol for millennials, also known as generation Y. The millennials, aged 18 to 35, are the largest consumer generation since the baby boomers and are a crucial tool for brand engagement.

A study by Harris Poll and Eventbrite highlights the extent to which generation Y values experience and access over ownership: 78% would rather pay for an experience than material goods, compared with 59% of boomers (born 1946-1964). The survey analysis notes: “This generation not only highly values experiences, but they are increasingly spending time and money on them: from concerts and social events to athletic pursuits, to cultural experiences and events of all kinds.”

This is a conclusion supported by J. Walter Thompson’s own quantitative research into festivals conducted in February 2016, which highlights that more than half of millennials (51%) go to these events “to experience something new.” The results of the study carried out by SONAR™, J. Walter Thompson’s proprietary online research tool, garnered from 500 UK millennials, point to a festival market in rude health. Average annual individual spend on festivals totals almost £200 each year; three in four millennials go to at least one festival every year; 25% go to four or more; and more than a third have traveled internationally to visit one.

Millennial festival-goers are quick to share their experiences on social media—largely via Facebook
(72%), but also via other channels such as Instagram (35%) and Twitter (32%). According to Michelle Sadlier, head of innovation and social media at Hunter Boots, the compulsion to do so is an expression of who they are or want to be, “capitalizing on that ‘FOMO’ [Fear of Missing Out] as not all of their friends go. And it’s easier than ever with the likes of Instagram video and Snapchat. People are becoming content creators at festivals.”

This echoes back to the cultural mores and values of millennials revealed in the Harris/Eventbrite study. “For this group, happiness isn’t as focused on possessions or career status,” it suggests. “Living a meaningful, happy life is about creating, sharing and capturing memories earned through experiences that span the spectrum of life’s opportunities.”

These experiences are increasingly daring for many—something that entrepreneur Jack Huang knows all about. His company, Truly Experiences, sells luxury gift experiences. Some of these are not for the faint-hearted: a near-space odyssey into the Earth’s atmosphere, mountain biking on Death Road in Bolivia and jaguar tracking in Brazil. “People want to buy happiness,” Huang told Bloomberg earlier this year. “An experience is unique because it gives them that in three stages: the anticipation, the event itself and the memories after. Not only does that final stage last forever, but you can also share it.”

**TRENDS IN EXPERIENCES**

**Immersive tech**

Museums, retailers and restaurants are employing immersive technology to tantalize and thrill consumers.

Selfie opportunities abounded at New York’s [Museum of Feelings](https://www.museumoffeelings.com) last year. At this temporary walk-through experiential advertisement for air freshener brand Glade, visitors were handed 3D glasses and guided through a series of Glade-scented rooms with themes such as “joyful”, “invigorated” and “calm” that invited interaction.
At 2015’s South by Southwest Interactive festival, McDonald’s served up its famous Happy Meal with a dash of virtual reality (VR). Created in partnership with Dallas-based studio Groove Jones, McDo’s V-Artist installation encouraged visitors to paint the interior of a Happy Meal box using a paintball shooter, laser-guided color etcher and 3D paintbrush, before taking a photo of it using a virtual camera and printing off a branded copy of the image back in the real world.
VR is allowing retailers to create a personalized and more enriching experience for shoppers, with AT&T, Volvo and Thomas Cook already using applications of the technology to promote and sell their wares in a more immersive way.

British designer Allison Crank predicts that retail spaces will be transformed into “playgrounds for experiences” and created a vision of the shopping mall of the future using VR at 2015’s Dutch Design Week. At her Reality Theatre mall, accessed through an Oculus Rift headset, shoppers rubbed shoulders with stray giraffes and zebras, while neon signs floated overhead.

https://vimeo.com/142750175

**Rock ‘n’ roll food**

The rising tide of food festivals, a more diverse range of cuisines on supermarket shelves and the transition of chef from sweaty kitchen-dwelling cook to cultural icon, has helped elevate food and drink to rock ‘n’ roll status among consumers.

This shift has ushered in avant-garde techniques and new multi-sensory experiences that are ripe for social sharing—research conducted by Haygarth and Flamingo reveals that UK millennials already share pictures of food on social media three times a week on average.
“Food is becoming more important in people’s lives and their sense of identity,” says Sam Bompas, “architectural foodsmith” and one half of the Bompas & Parr culinary design company. The duo’s [British Museum of Food](https://www.britishmuseum.org/), which was open in London’s Borough Market between October 2015 and January 2016 and is now seeking a permanent home, claimed to be the world’s first cultural institution entirely devoted to the history, evolution, science, sociology and art of food. Using a gastroenterologist’s swallowable pill-cam, one exhibit allowed visitors to watch how food makes its way through the human body, from the comfort of chairs that stretched and contracted to mirror the movement of the gut.
Extreme experiences are the order of the day for a new generation of increasingly experimental diners. In recent years, world-class chefs have gathered at pop-up Raw:almond to bring fine dining to the frozen rivers of Winnipeg in Canada. The restaurant claims to be the “first ever outdoor fine dining restaurant on a frozen body of water.” In June 2015, architecture firm Herzog & de Meuron completed a restaurant at the summit of Switzerland’s Chäserrugg mountain.

Those with less of a head for heights are eating out at restaurants where art and food collide. Pharmacy 2 in Vauxhall, south London, is artist Damien Hirst’s new restaurant, launched in collaboration with chef Mark Hix in February 2016. Diners can feast on British and European dishes while contemplating some of Hirst’s best-known series, including his Medicine Cabinets and butterfly Kaleidoscope Paintings.

https://vimeo.com/154878586

The cult of wellness

Frazzled consumers are finding sanctuary in therapy, meditation and mindfulness, as they find new and more profound ways to counter their always-on lifestyles. Sound therapy is reverberating across major US cities, with “sound baths” popping up at Twisted Trunk Yoga and Studio Anya, both in Manhattan; at the Wythe Hotel, Maha Rose Center for Healing, and Brooklyn Zen Center, all in Brooklyn; and at the House of Intuition in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles.
Modern meditative practices are being brought to the masses with larger events such as The Big Quiet in Central Park and Serenity Gathering, which celebrated the March 2016 vernal equinox at its third annual event. Speaking to The Huffington Post, Serenity co-founder Brandon Beebe described the event as “a conscious gathering focused on creating an environment of positive collaboration among like-minded individuals specifically geared towards art and music.”

Retailers are also tapping into a growing interest in spirituality and self-reflection. The Astrolounge, Selfridges’ 2015 Christmas scheme created with “cosmic guide to a high vibe life” The Numinous, was dedicated to products and services linked to the psychic and astrological world.
Emotional wellbeing and health are also blurring as a new breed of “fitster” finds a greater sense of calm on the yoga mat and exercise bike. These days, being healthy serves as “a cultural semaphore for discipline and success,” writes Farrah Storr in the Evening Standard, and this is spilling over into the festival space with a raft of new events focused on toning up.
Reebok and global fitness brand Les Mills teamed up to launch Les Mills Live in 2015; this touring global touring fitness festival features 10 hours of music and 35 different workouts in just one day. It follows a successful UK tour, which hosted 6,500 people at each event. Online gym pass provider PayasUgym has launched a new series of fitness festivals showcasing the latest group classes from boutique studios. It hosted its first Urban Movement event in February 2016 at Village Underground in London’s Shoreditch and more than 100 participants sweated their way through a 70-minute workout.
Social summits

Leading thinkers, cultural icons and influencers are hosting summits that blend insightful conversations with luxury, leisure and sometimes high-octane experiences.

Surf Summit, part of Web Summit, whisks a select group of executives off to the coast, where they take part in an experiential program to stimulate discussion and innovation while riding the waves in surf destinations such as Ireland or Lisbon.

Startup Extreme gathers tech founders and investors in Voss, the extreme sports capital of Norway, where they can take part in intensive outdoor activities such as skydiving and glacier skiing, as well as listen to a program of thought leadership talks.

Summit at Sea aims to push attendees’ “personal and professional boundaries” on a three-day cruise through international waters. Last year’s ship, which set sail from Miami in November, included Eric Schmidt, Edward Snowden, Martha Stewart and John Legend. Delegates were encouraged to embrace “an ethos of exploration” to adapt and excel, and onboard classes included sunrise yoga, calligraphy, 3D figure painting, and even a tutorial on shark tagging—with a demonstration.
Other cruises are starting to incorporate an element of social good to appeal to mission-driven millennials. P&O’s Adonia ship sets off on its maiden voyage in April 2016 as part of Carnival Corporation’s new social impact travel cruise program. The trips are designed to immerse passengers in other cultures and enable them to work alongside local residents to tackle economic, environmental and educational issues.

![Adonia with Fathom cruiseship](image)

**Deep-dive immersion**

Consumers are flocking to events and exhibitions that allow them to temporarily suspend reality and
escape from everyday life.

Burning Man attracted about 80,000 participants last year to the Black Rock Desert 100 miles north of Reno. The hedonistic week-long event works on a “gifting culture” (no cash changes hands at the festival) and revelers can check out art installations, hail a ride on pimped-up art cars, take a class in spanking or just gaze in awe at the closing ceremonial burn of the Man, which looms high over the five-and-a-half square miles of hot sand.

At the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, artist, filmmaker, and journalist Laura Poitras presented her first solo exhibition *Astro Noise* this year, examining the weighty issues of mass surveillance, the war on terror, the US drone program, Guantánamo Bay Prison, occupation, and torture. The title of Poitras’s show refers to the faint background disturbance of thermal radiation left after the Big Bang and the name Edward Snowden gave an encrypted file containing evidence of mass surveillance by the National Security Agency that he shared with her in 2013.
Visitors are encouraged to lie on their backs on a platform in the Bed Down Location room and watch a projection of the night sky in Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan. It is only in the exhibition’s final room that they learn via real-time infra-red video that they themselves have been subjects of surveillance.

In the UK, thrill-seekers continue to run amok on carefully crafted immersive sets; the latest two to hit the capital are escape-the-room game Time Run and a recreation of the 1990s TV hit show The Crystal Maze. Josh Ford, one of Time Run’s founders, explains the appeal of the puzzles in the Independent: “These games let you experience moments you're never likely to encounter in everyday life—and give you the chance to be the best version of yourself.”

The future of festivals and experience

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