THE RISE OF
GEEK
CULTURE

AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR MARKETERS

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The world is getting geekier.

The video game industry now generates more revenue than the box office, and when you look at the box office, what do you see? Movies about aliens, robots, spaceships, superheroes, and wizards topping the charts. ComicCons take place all around the world and tickets sell out within hours of going on sale. Once-niche shows like *Doctor Who* are being watched by millions of people in the U.S., and a show all about geek culture—*The Big Bang Theory*—is one of the highest-rated programs of the past several years.

While geek culture is now mainstream fare, this wasn't always the case. Years ago there was a specific segment of Millennials—now proudly and openly identifying as geeks—who were passionately into this stuff before anyone else. Just as they influenced and shaped mainstream culture, they too have transformed what it means to be a geek, and have inspired millions more to embrace the term. Geek is now defined as being incredibly passionate about your interests, even when those interests are unpopular.

Speaking of unpopular, forget any stereotypes of anti-social people hidden away in their basements. Geeks' extreme passions for their interests drive them to connect with others in online communities and real-world events, where they meet up with others who share those passions. They're seen as experts and incredibly knowledgeable, and are often sought after for their advice and wisdom.

These influential taste-makers are not only harder to reach thanks to their mastery of technology and ability to tune out standard approaches to marketing, but they also have higher expectations of the businesses who do manage to break through to them.

With this report, we cast a spotlight on how big, how influential, and how important this group is to any business who wants to be relevant in the years ahead. We hope you find these insights useful in your efforts to tap into the rise of geek culture.

Steve Patrizi
VP Marketing & Revenue

ISTOCK.COM/SAMARO

Key Findings

For Millennials, being a geek is a good thing. The generation sees the label in a different way— geek culture is cool and they're proud to be geeky.

There are more Millennial Geeks than you know, and they're more influential than you think. These are the trendsetters behind pop culture manias and online viral content—today's geeks are tastemakers.

These geek influencers are harder to reach, and have different expectations from brands. Traditional marketing just doesn't reach them— brands need to become a part of their communities to engage this group.

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Think you know what it means to be a geek?

If the word conjures up images of a small group of isolated social outcasts, think again. A new generation has ushered in a new era of geek. For Millennials, being a geek is about being passionate about your interests. They're embracing the geek label, and influencing culture in ways you don't realize. We take a look at this shift by comparing geeks versus non-geeks among Millennials and across generations.

MILLENNIALS VS. BOOMERS/XERS ON THE GEEK SPECTRUM

🟩 MILLENNIAL   ⬜ BOOMER/XER

23%	**10%**	**15%**	**8%**	**22%**	**20%**	**28%**	**18%**	**12%**	**44%**
I consider myself a geek		I consider myself a geek only around certain people		I'm not a geek, but I am into geeky things		I'm not a geek, but I have "geeked out" on my passion points		I'm not a geek at all	

GEEK — — — **NON-GEEK**
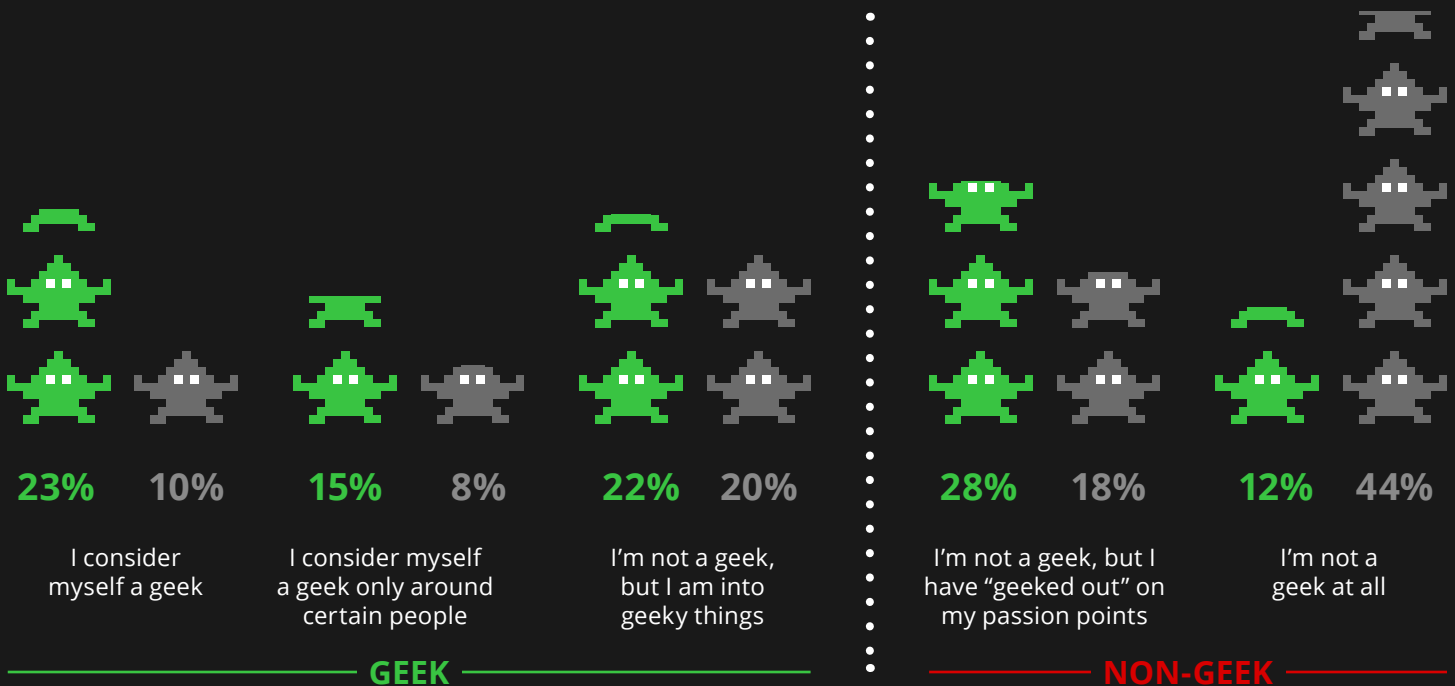
Being a geek isn't what it used to be.

**Millennials are self-professed geeks.**

While previous generations saw the geek label as an insult (or felt they had to hide their geekier interests) Millennials have embraced being geeks. They're more likely than Xers and Boomers to call themselves geeks or say they are into geeky things, and older generations are far more likely to say they don't consider themselves geeks at all. Xers and Boomers might have been embarrassed by geekdom, but that attitude has changed drastically.

Because Millennials have embraced being geeks, the world is getting geekier. The new generation has changed what it means to be a geek, and more consumers consider themselves geeks than ever before. Ignoring geeks means ignoring a huge part of Millennial consumers.

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For this generation, geek culture is cool.

The majority of Millennials don't just think being a geek is not a bad thing, they think being a geek is a something to be proud of. It has become cool to be a geek. Thanks to young consumers' shifting attitude toward geekiness, the entertainment and interests that were once considered just geeky—like superheroes, fantasy, and space—have become huge cultural hot topics, and major money makers for brands.

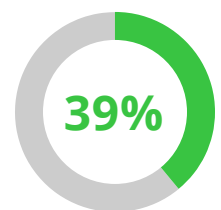
ISTOCK.COM/PAMELAJOEMCFARLANE

82%
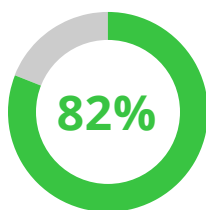
say that being a geek is not a bad thing

BOOMERS/XERS: 71%

49%
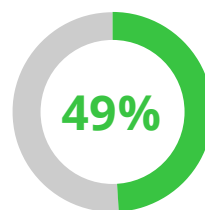
would be proud to be called a geek

BOOMERS/XERS: 37%

39%

say: "I would prefer my kids to be geeks"

BOOMERS/XERS: 26%

"Geek means being passionate about something, whether that's science or media, and having a deep and nuanced understanding of the subject."

Female Geek

"Geek means someone who is just very passionate about what he or she enjoys doing. Sometimes they can even redefine the cultural cool in their own ways."
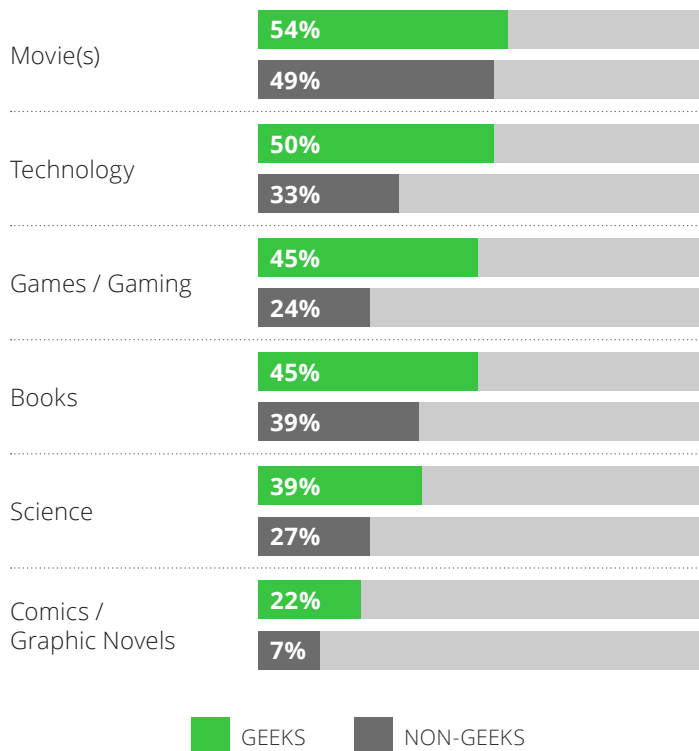
Male Geek

To Millennials, being a geek is about being passionate about your interests.

They're more passionate about movies, books, video games, and technology than non-geeks. They're also more likely than non-geeks and Xer and Boomer Geeks to participate in activities that display and celebrate those passions, like connecting with others online, wearing and buying merchandise, attending and hosting interest-based events, and creating online content. Because of their amplified passions, Millennial Geeks are the consumers fueling enthusiasm for pop culture phenomena.

WHERE THEIR PASSIONS ARE AMPLIFIED

|	GEEKS	NON-GEEKS
Movie(s)	54%	49%
Technology	50%	33%
Games / Gaming	45%	24%
Books	45%	39%
Science	39%	27%
Comics / Graphic Novels	22%	7%

GEEKS   NON-GEEKS

There are more Millennial Geeks than you know.

Millennial geeks are prolific.

There are 83 million Millennials in the U.S. and 60% qualify as a geek—that means almost 50 million Millennials are geeks. Most either self-proclaim their geekdom or are deemed geeks via their interests, while only one in ten do not consider themselves geeks at all. Four in ten Millennials say their close friends are geeks, and the same number have been in a romantic relationship with a geek. (And don't assume that Millennial Geeks are just guys: 44% are female.)

SOURCE: U.S. CENSUS BUREAU POPULATION ESTIMATES
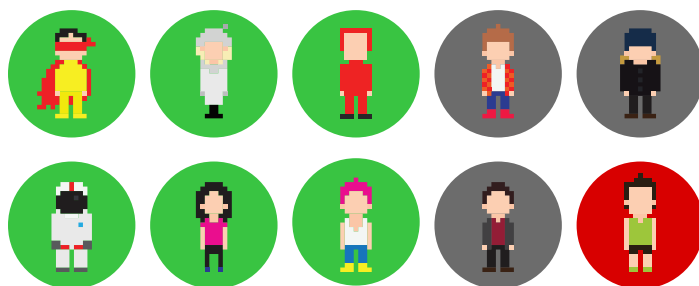
60%
consider themselves geeks or are into geeky things

ONLY **12%**
say: "I do not consider myself a geek at all"

Millennial Geeks are cultural influencers and behind the web's most viral content.

Millennial Geeks are the true tastemakers and trendsetters.

While geek culture might be more popular than ever, the interests of geeks are still ahead of "mainstream" culture. Think of it this way: if the things geeks were into ten years ago are massively popular now, what they're into today could be the next big thing for years to come. Millennials Geeks are more likely to have unique interests compared to non-geeks, they're more likely to spot trends before the rest of their peers, and they're more likely to see things grow in popularity after being interested in them first.

32%
classify their interests as quirky, niche, or unique
NON-GEEKS: 15%

41%
tend to learn about things before the rest of their friends
NON-GEEKS: 33%

81%
say: "my interests grow in popularity after I get into them"
NON-GEEKS: 73%

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Millennial Geeks are the engine behind the internet's viral content.

Today, viral topics are the conversations that captivate the entire world. (Think: The Dress, Damn Daniel, etc.) How does content go viral? Because Millennial Geeks decide to share it. They're more likely to be the first to know about what's trending and going viral online, especially since they're more active on sites like Imgur— the internet's viral hotspots.

Millennial Geeks are also the ones making the images and videos that catch fire on the internet to spark those cultural crazes. They're more likely than non-geeks to create memes and GIFs (the kind of content that does go viral) and participate in spreading them. Millennial Geeks are especially creating content to share their passions, and are influencing their peers in doing so.

FIRST!

63%

say: "I am one of the first to know about something trending online"
NON-GEEKS: 54%

66%

say: "I know about things before they go viral"
NON-GEEKS: 50%

46%

say: "I participate in spreading memes"
NON-GEEKS: 32%

MEMECRAFT

32%

have created online content (e.g. an image, GIF, video) related to their interest
NON-GEEKS: 25%

35%

say they create online content weekly or more often

11% SAY THEY DO IT DAILY

HAVE YOU EVER...?

	GEEKS	NON
Created a meme	**33%**	27%
Created a GIF	**21%**	17%

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Millennial Geeks are more credible and influential than ever.

Millennial Geeks are influencers. They're considered knowledgeable sources, and influence those around them— and online—via reviews, recommendations, and advice on what to buy. Geeks are more likely than non-geeks to say they are extremely knowledgeable about their interests, and that other people consider them to be knowledgeable too. Millennials who consider themselves a geek are also more likely to say, "People tend to follow the advice I give."

They actively share opinions on brands and products.

Online reviews and recommendations are by far the number one thing that Millennial consumers look to when deciding what to buy. Millennial Geeks are more likely than non-geeks to post those reviews and recommendations online regularly, influencing opinions on major categories like movies, technology, travel, and music. They're also sharing their thoughts on branded efforts: Millennial Geeks are more likely than non-geeks to have posted about an ad in an online community.

PRODUCTS AND SERVICES THEY'VE WRITTEN A REVIEW OR GIVEN AN ONLINE RECOMMENDATION ABOUT IN THE LAST 6 MONTHS

	GEEKS	NON
Movies	28%	16%
Technology	26%	14%
Music	22%	16%
Video Games	19%	12%
Travel	13%	9%
Cars	9%	5%

73%
say there is a topic on which people look to them for advice

70%
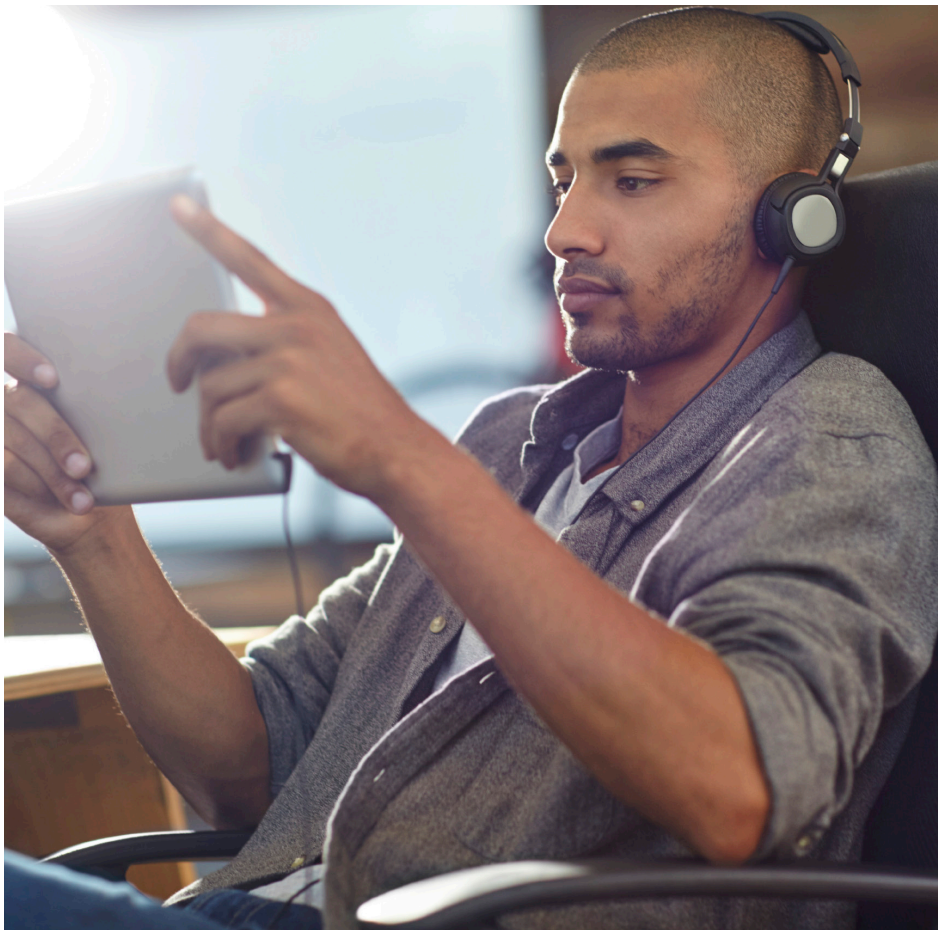**say people buy things based on their advice and influence**

The things Millennial Geeks are interested in now will become popular next, and they're influencing the passions and purchases of their peers. Millennial Geeks are sharing their opinions of brands, services, and marketing online, and posting the reviews and recommendations that the rest of their generation listens to.
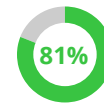
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These Geek influencers are incredibly hard to reach

81%

More likely to watch short-form online content

81% of Millennial Geeks watch video clips or short-form web-isodes online monthly to daily

NON-GEEKS: 75%

28%

Less likely to watch TV via cable

28% of Millennial Geeks watch media via antenna / cable / satellite / fiber daily

NON-GEEKS: 34%

62%

More likely to play video games

62% of Millennial Geeks play video games on a console or computer monthly to daily

NON-GEEKS: 48%

38%
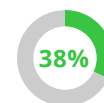
Listening to more podcasts

38% of Millennial Geeks listen to podcasts monthly to daily

NON-GEEKS: 25%

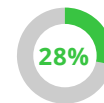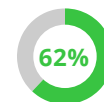## They're consuming media differently than non-geeks.

Millennial Geeks are out-cord-cutting their peers, and leading the disruption of entertainment content. They're more likely to watch digital short content, less likely to consume traditional media like cable, and more likely to illegally stream media. They're also playing more video games and listening to more podcasts than non-geeks. This all means they're not seeing or hearing as much traditional marketing.

Brands just aren't reaching them right now.

Though they're a powerful group of influencers, brands aren't necessarily appealing to Millennial Geeks. They're more likely to say that brands can't relate to them. They're also actively blocking ads, with more using ad-blockers than non-geeks. They don't want brands to be their friends, and they're more likely to say they've never seen an ad that they like.

But the difficult is not impossible.

Appealing to online communities—the places that most influence them—might be the best way to reach them. Millennial Geeks are more likely than non-geeks to say they think more highly of a brand that participates in their communities. Brands are finding that contributing to the sites they're passionate about is the best way to engage this group. On Imgur, a promoted Old Spice post asking users to vote for their favorite GIF actually created requests for *more* ads. One user commented, "I never thought I'd find myself saying this, but this is the kind of shameless ad posting I can get behind."

Mainstream marketing is not necessarily reaching this audience. The best way to reach these influencers is to respect their uniqueness and make an effort to be a part of their communities, in a way that adds value.

66%

have used an ad-blocker
NON-GEEKS: 56%

32%

feel like brands cannot relate to them
NON-GEEKS: 24%

23%

completely agree: "I wish brands would stop trying to be my friend"
NON-GEEKS: 23%

16%

say: "I've never come across an ad that I liked"
NON-GEEKS: 11%

56%
agree: "I think more highly of a brand when it participates in my community"

NON-GEEKS: 51%

Millennial Geeks are influenced by their communities, not brands or individuals

52%
are part of a group or community based on a common passion
NON-GEEKS: 47%
BOOMER/XER GEEKS: 44%

32%
browse content in online communities every day
NON-GEEKS: 23%

46%
use online communities the most to learn, search, and get opinions
NON-GEEKS: 41%
BOOMER/XER GEEKS: 38%

ONLY **10%**
rely on main-stream media
NON-GEEKS: 14%;
BOOMER/XER GEEKS: 18%

Forget about the stereotype of the solo geek in the basement.

Millennial Geeks are group-oriented: six in ten think experiences are best when shared with a community of people, and they are more likely than non-geeks to want to solve problems with a group. Millennial Geeks are actively engaged in communities—they're more likely than non-geeks and Xer or Boomer Geeks to be in a group that shares their passions and interests. Millennial Geeks who belong to this type of community are also more active in it on a daily basis than non-geeks, and more likely to say being a part of that group is core to who they are.

Online communities are their biggest influence.

Mainstream media, advertisements, and celebrities just don't influence them. Communities are where Millennial Geeks turn to get opinions, and they value the ideas of the group over the ideas of an individual. Almost half of Millennial Geeks use online communities to learn about their interests, search for new things, or make a decision, compared to less than four in ten Xer and Boomer Geeks, who are more likely than Millennials to rely on mainstream media and advertisements.
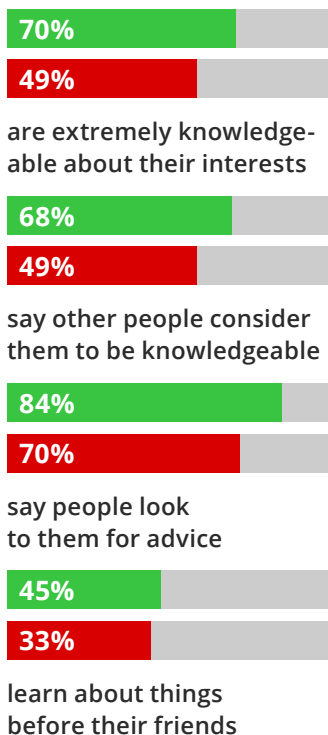
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Core Geeks

More than a third of the Millennial geek population self-identify as full-time, hard core geeks. These core geeks are even more influential than geeks overall and rely more on their online communities. Compared to true non-geeks—those that do not identify as being geeky in any capacity—core geeks are even harder to reach, and expect more information and relevance from brands.
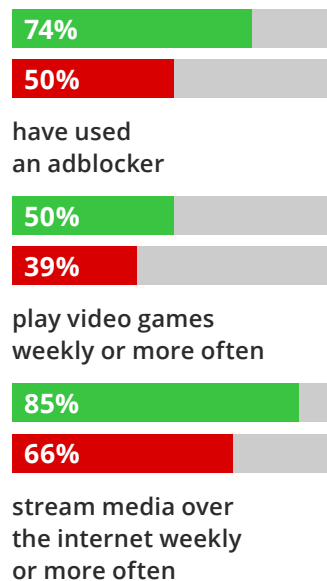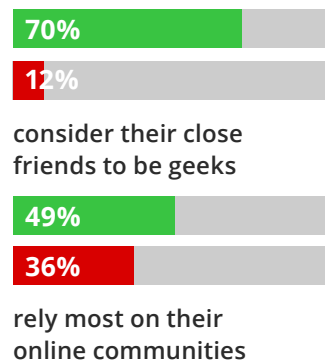
23%
of Millennials are full-time, hard core geeks

12%
are not geeks at all

83% OF IMGUR USERS SELF-IDENTIFY AS A "GEEK"

● CORE GEEKS   ● TRUE NON-GEEKS

Core geeks are more influential than other geeks

70%
49%
are extremely knowledge-able about their interests

68%
49%
say other people consider them to be knowledgeable

84%
70%
say people look to them for advice

45%
33%
learn about things before their friends

Core geeks are even more difficult to reach

74%
50%
have used an adblocker

50%
39%
play video games weekly or more often

85%
66%
stream media over the internet weekly or more often

Core geeks are more tied to online communities

70%
12%
consider their close friends to be geeks

49%
36%
rely most on their online communities

Core geeks expect different things from brands

66%
55%
wish ads were more informative

65%
49%
expect brands to be relevant to their interests
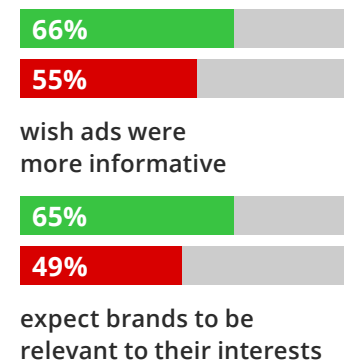
STATISTICAL ACCURACY ACROSS MILLENNIAL GEEK VERSUS NON-GEEK COMPARISONS WOULD BE REPRESENTED AS +/- 5.23%, 19 TIMES OUT OF 20 BASED ON A SUBSAMPLE OF N=351.

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