

On the fringe



Marketers pay little attention to the fringe, a population that conventional wisdom tells us is too small and too niche. But everything that is now mainstream once started on the fringe: It started within a subculture and propagated out to become popular culture.

For instance, if you were into comic books 20 years ago, you would have been considered a nerd. Today, however, many of the most viewed movies across the globe, such as Marvel's Avengers series, originated from comics. Twenty years ago, if you were into video games, you would have been perceived as an immature adult. Today, gaming is not only considered cool but is also a multibillion-dollar industry. Indeed, what is now normal was once fringe. Thanks to social contagion, the cultural characteristics of a community propagate from the fringe to the middle — from the subculture to popular culture. It happens from the outside in, not the inside out.

As the network scientists Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler contended, "When a small group of people begin acting in concert — displaying similar visible symptoms — the epidemic can spread along social network ties via emotion contagion and large groups can become quickly emotionally synchronized." This is the network effect that is catalyzed when you activate the collective of the willing. Don't focus on the middle: Focus on the people who see the world the way you do. Choose a side, and they will convince the bystanders, the passive, the indifferent.

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