



IPSOS VIEWS

THE NEXT BIG THING

Exploring the EDGE for
high growth opportunities

April Jeffries
Ajay Bangia
Sandro Kaulartz
Karin O'Neill





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Innovation teeters on the precipice of convention, where the ordinary meets the extraordinary.

Historically, multibillion-dollar industries have emerged from niche beginnings, with enthusiastic clusters of pioneers addressing problems the wider world had yet to encounter. The \$16B doula industry emerged from a fringe group of women seeking alternatives to traditional hospital birth experiences. Plant-based milk seeped into the mainstream from a niche need to address milk allergies and is now estimated to exceed \$22B in 2025 at a projected CAGR of 7.5%. These journeys from fringe to mainstream showcase how outlier ideas overcome obstacles to become trends.

It is often difficult to identify those budding ideas with the highest probability of success. Some ideas fizzle or stay comfortably within the niche. Some take off too late, years behind introductory capital and marketing investment. Appearing to be a failure, one may be considered “an idea before its time”. Others miss the early leadership advantage and struggle to compete for market share in an overcrowded field.

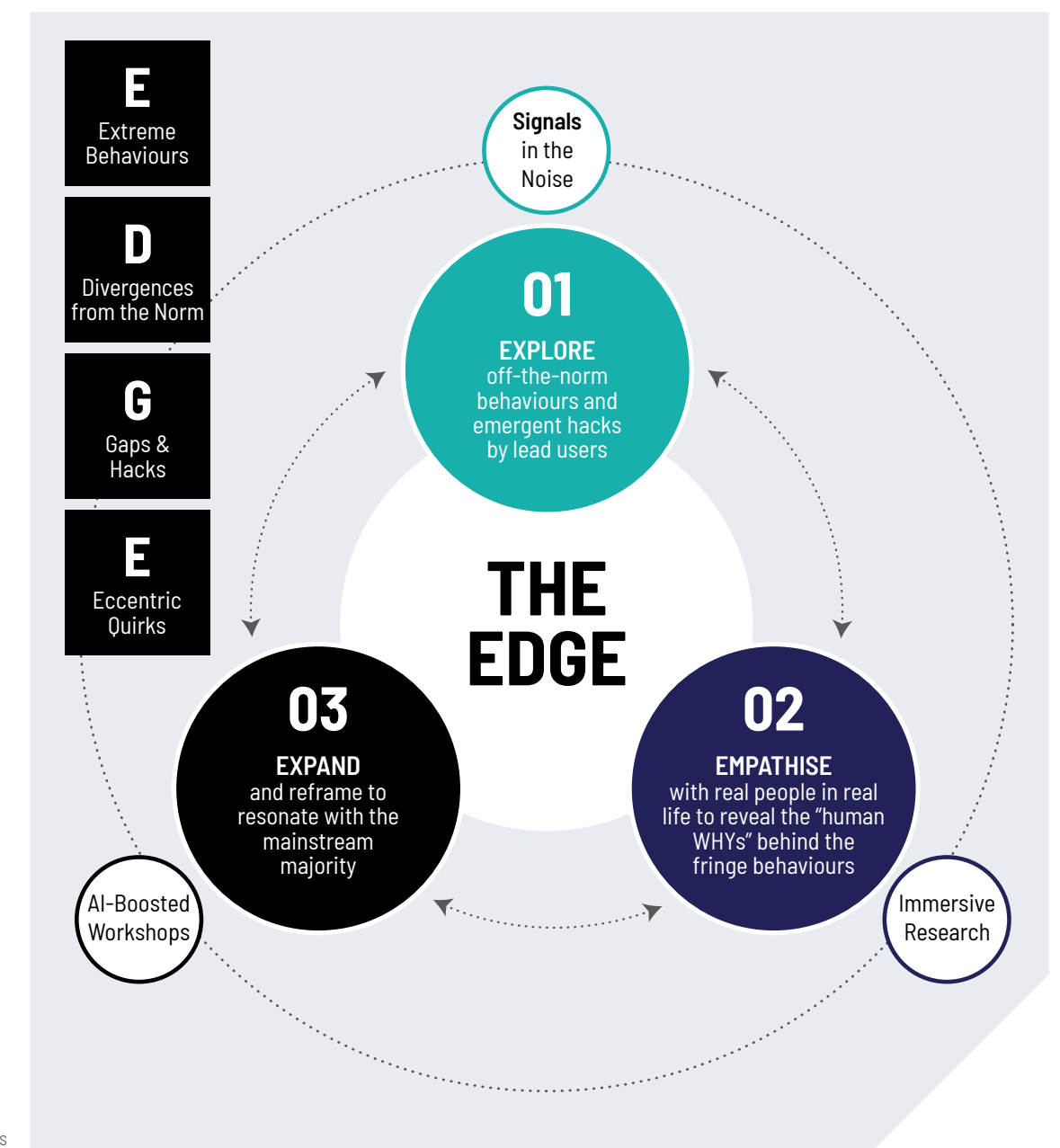
Marketers yearn to unearth the golden opportunities hidden within untouched markets at the perfect time. Yet, fear of failure shackles innovative spirits. This fear is often warranted; 75% of innovations do not have the power to change behaviour². Three challenges persist: 1) identifying viable opportunities, 2) mitigating risks, and 3) expediting timing. Left unaddressed, these become strategic chasms, as misguided focus, unreasonable risks, and sluggish timelines for emerging behaviours to gain traction are simply unacceptable³. On the other hand, too often we have heard clients frustrated by concepts and ideas that seem to be wordy regurgitations of what has already been explored, longing to push further from those close-in ideas.

We believe that the secret to meaningful and successful innovation is finding, observing, and understanding the people and behaviours playing at the fringes. The fringes are where you will find the fresh thinking required to create high potential yet realistic opportunities, innovative products or usage ideas, and creative communication strategies.

Today’s unprecedented opportunity from the combination of agentic AI and genuine human understanding paves novel paths to unique opportunities. By investigating what we call the EDGE - Extreme behaviours, Divergences from norms, Gaps and workarounds, and Eccentric quirks - we can wager on where

to focus and how to allocate resources with increased confidence. Collaborating with the MIT Innovation Lab⁴, we employed creative prompting, empathetic experiences, insightful trend analysis, and science-based analytic frameworks to tackle the challenges of discovery, risk, and time.

Figure 1: The EDGE method



Source: Ipsos



In order to identify and distinguish between long-term disruptive trends and short-term fads we unveiled a process built on three areas of development:

01 EXPLORE: AI-powered social intelligence and information curation can discern market signals from the noise, where trailblazing users indicate emerging needs and trends.

02 EMPATHISE: Human interaction, profound listening, and contextual observation are vital to grasping the

rational and visceral connection to a given divergent behaviour. These dialogues furnish deep, human-centred insights, dependent on inclusive design and open-minded engagement.

03 EXPAND: A pattern of driving forces – passionate connection, reframed opposition, and accelerating trends – when observed through the appropriate frameworks are strong indicators of behaviours most likely to achieve mainstream status⁵.

Our Method

Scan for Signals of Change from Lead Users

Explore: Find the EDGE.

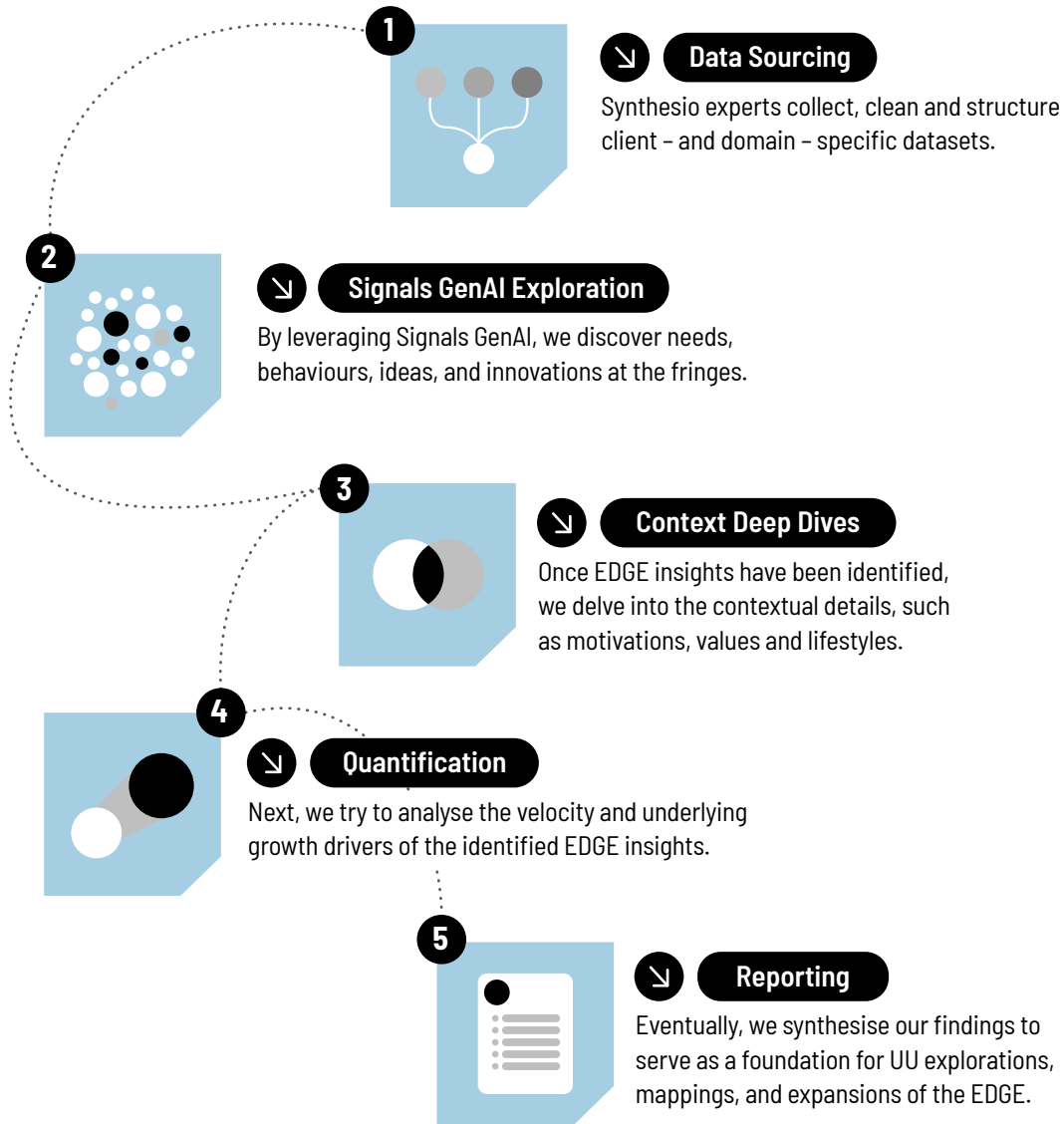
People in the EDGEs, what we call lead users, are constantly solving for unmet needs that often migrate to the mainstream⁶. These leading-edge consumers experience needs well ahead of the category mainstream. As

a result, they create novel solutions for previously unknown problems, fostering emerging trends. Those signals of change are therefore the first accessible signifiers of potential change. These lead users exchange ideas, hacks, and prototype solutions about behaviours

that many would consider unusual and attract others who feel the same using grass roots techniques. Our Synthesio social intelligence team has developed Signals GenAI, a dedicated Agentic AI empowered process that enables us to discover, analyse and understand these behaviours and solutions from millions of social data consumer signals in less than 60s seconds^{4,7,8}. Our approach is focused on the EDGEs where the first flickers of

tomorrow appear – fringe behaviours, DIY solutions and emergent hacks that might become the next big thing. We begin by scraping social and search data from those hunting grounds into a single, giant data corpus. From that corpus a dedicated generative AI agent sifts millions of consumer signals in real time and surfaces the fringe ideas and user-developed solutions that depart from the category norm.

Figure 2: Finding the EDGE: How the Agentic AI experience works

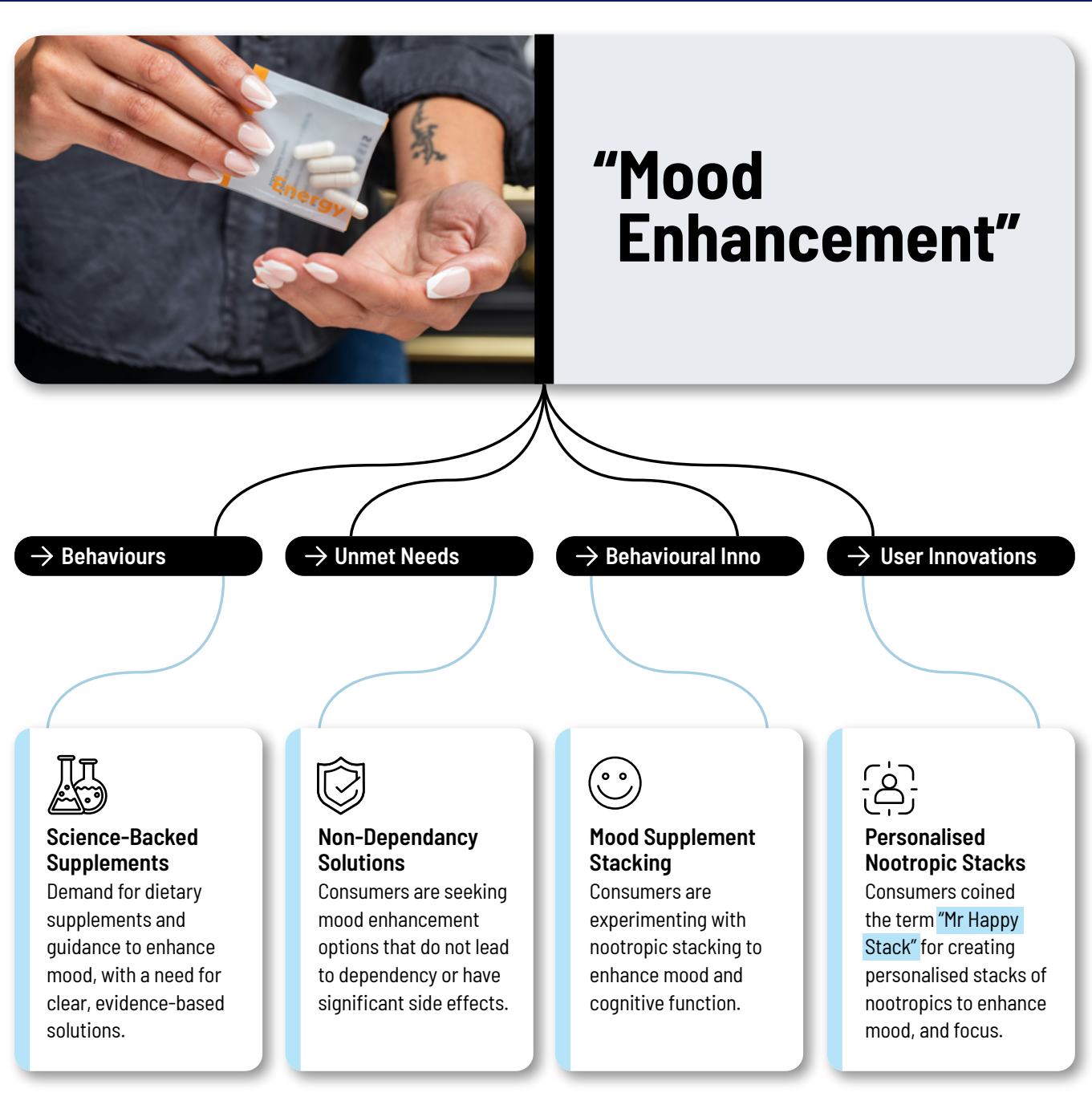


Source: Ipsos

Example Case: Exploring the EDGE on Mood Biohacking

As we were exploring unusual behaviours, we saw some interesting dynamics around mood enhancement where certain individuals were developing personalised

combinations of nootropics, substances aimed at enhancing mood, health, and overall wellbeing.



The job, at this stage, is to discover the unexpected; unearth the unseen, the unsaid, the unheard.



Beyond Functionality – The Stories Told in the EDGEs

Empathise: Understand the EDGE.
Engaging with those who sit in the margins of defined groups brings valuable insights into our deepest current and future needs. Observing and questioning within these colourful spaces with curiosity, understanding and empathy, can help organisations to get ahead of and navigate the desires and demands of tomorrow. Nurturing fringe relationships can reveal unexplored opportunities and can unveil speculative ideas from those whose lived experience has been limited by the status quo and whose solutions may very well be beneficial to all. At this stage we uncover the "why" behind extreme behaviours and divergences from the norm.

Human observation and deep listening in these settings helps us understand what could be, rather than what is. The job, at this stage, is to discover the unexpected; unearth the unseen, the unsaid, the

unheard. We can leverage information from Signals GenAI to find these people in the "long tails" in real life, then immersive and observational techniques can be used to observe and listen deeply to them. While analysis of the data can point towards high potential opportunities, the real magic and richness comes from the deep listening, the observation of context and influences by trained moderators. Conversely, speaking to those predisposed against this behaviour helps us understand the barriers to widespread adoption.

In our biohacking example, by exploring the context and reasons behind the behaviour we could see an overwhelming need for control. It played out in excessive needs for efficiency as well as organisation which could be seen in how various drugs were inventoried and a borderline arrogance towards cheating unwanted feelings as well as death.

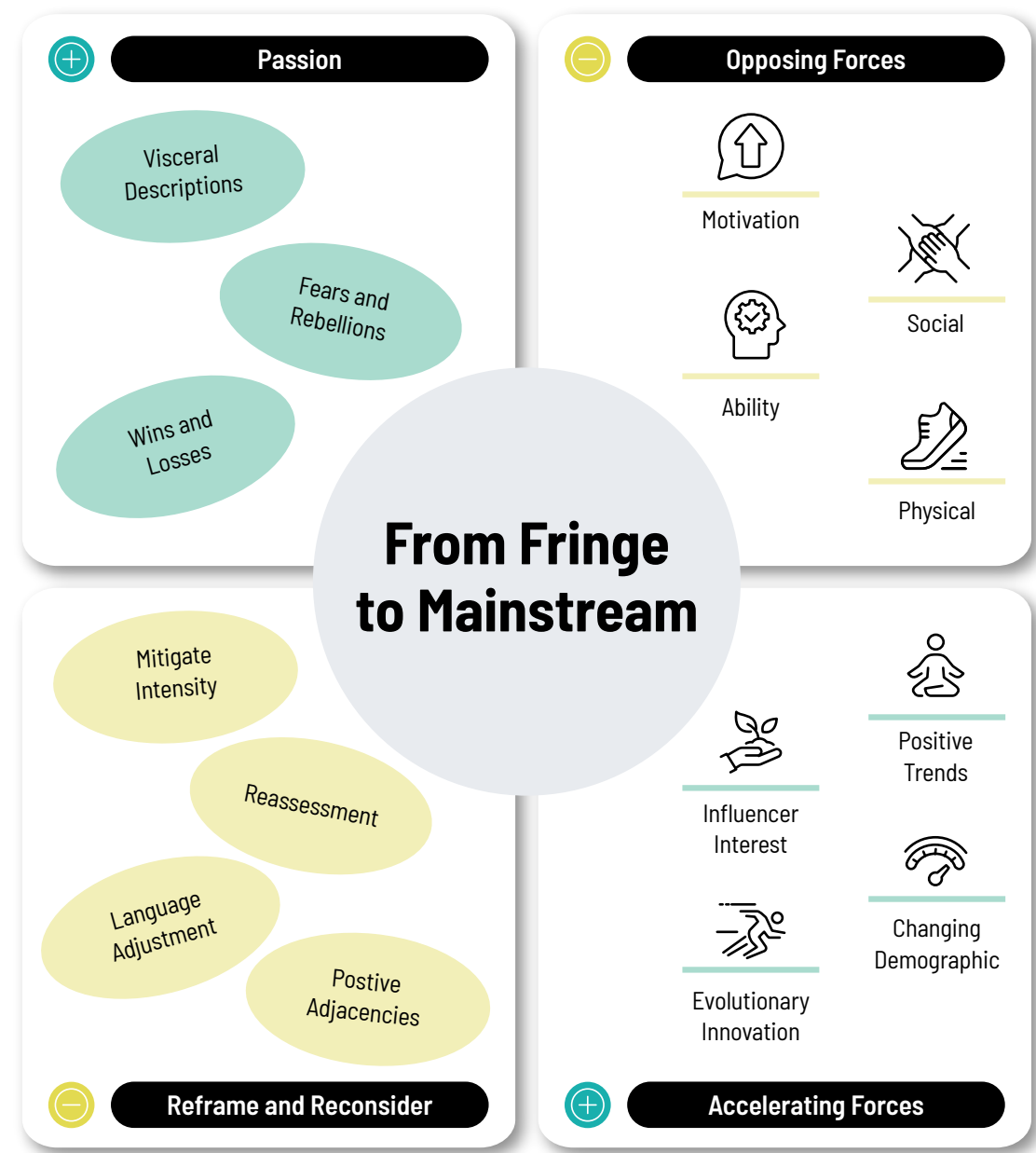
Examining Forces – Is it a Trend or Merely Trendy?

Expand: Map the EDGE.

We now have a more complete data corpus derived from signals within the social conversation and deeper observational data and insight from people in their natural context questioned by moderators

trained in the art of deep listening and observation. Trajectory mapping will help determine if it is a trend or merely trendy, along with identifying accelerating forces and oppositions to its growth).

Figure 3: EDGE adoption framework



Source: Ipsos



Rebelliousness could be the result of something as superficial as ego, as practical as health, or as deep rooted as fear.



- Forces of Passion - High Potential Niche Users.** These virtual tribes are passionate about their uniqueness and revel in their creative ability to create what others – often thought of as status quo or bureaucratic behemoths – would not or could not do. There can be a rebelliousness underlying this passion, often driven by a deep resistance to the way a problem is currently solved. Rebelliousness could be the result of something as superficial as ego, as practical as health, or as deep rooted as fear. Our biohackers for example, have found community with others who are “smart enough” to buck the norm and refuse to accept the limits that others assume are a given. The key is to understand the insight driving the behaviour.
- Forces of Acceleration.** The Ipsos Theory of Change framework⁹ examines how macro forces, changes in society, attitudes and beliefs, and small signals of expressions of change can point towards the future. These things work together to determine the currents that have long-term reach and predictable impact. A well-timed emerging trend can strengthen the passion, mitigate an opposing force, and accelerate a broader acceptance
- Forces of Opposition.** Niche behaviours often have within them a reason the broader population has not accepted them. Most commonly if something is too difficult or takes up too much time, it is rejected by the mainstream. Is the behaviour considered weird or unhealthy? Does it somehow make one a pariah and set up for some kind of public ridicule? Perhaps it is considered dangerous or even repulsive. Frameworks and workshopping can help determine the power of the opposing force and its impact on the trajectory of the behaviour. Biohacking, for example, could be viewed as risky with concerns about side effects or prolonged dependency not fully explored.

of the niche behaviour. Current trends of conscientious health¹⁰ and customised individualism might be strong enough to breakthrough the immediate biohacking concerns if addressed properly.

- **Reframe and Reconsider.**

The challenge becomes determining if the passion of the tribe, when considered against the strength of the opposition, is positioned to be reframed and reconsidered such

that it can move out of the realm of niche. Could the insight driving niche adoption be made relevant to a broader group? Can a given brand impact, and optimally own, this repackaging of the emerging behaviour? Are there adjacent connections that could shift the passion into a stronger growth position? We arrive at these decisions as a team in a framework-aided workshop.

Alignment – Expanding Ideas to Concepts

The final challenge then becomes translating EDGE behaviour into actionable concepts that resonate with the needs of consumers to drive category and brand success. Interactive workshoping will allow organisations to align on short-, medium- and long-term strategies for growth. When opening the door to new

thinking, teams must consider a broad range of factors including category position, stakeholder priorities, strategic fit, operational capabilities, and most importantly practical and emotional alignment among the people who will make it happen.

Summary

Innovation thrives where established convention meets the uncharted terrains of human behaviour and necessity. From the groundbreaking emergence of the doula industry to the plant-based milk market's mainstream adoption, these transformations underscore the power and potential of exploring the fringes. Yet, the path from niche to norm is replete with challenges: pinpointing viable ventures, managing inherent risks, and ensuring timely market entry. As innovation landscapes continue to evolve, the fusion of sophisticated AI with deep human

empathy offers a fresh vantage point to anticipate and respond to emerging consumer behaviours. By focusing on the EDGE – Extreme behaviours, Divergences, Gaps, and Eccentricities – businesses can better navigate the uncertainties of innovation and strategically position themselves at the forefront of industry transformation. This process not only mitigates risks and secures a competitive edge but also expands the very horizons of what brands and consumers deem possible.



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Key Takeaways

01



Innovation Originates at the “EDGE”:

The most significant and disruptive market opportunities are not found in the mainstream but at the fringes of society. By studying the “**E**xtrême behaviours, **D**ivergences from norms, **G**aps and workarounds, and **E**ccentric quirks” of lead users, companies can identify unmet needs before they become widespread.

02



AI Plus Empathy is Fundamental:

The most effective way to innovate is by combining technology and humanity. Agentic AI is powerful for scanning millions of data points to find signals of change, but deep human listening and ethnographic observation are crucial for understanding the “why” behind those behaviours and uncovering true, empathetic insights.

03



Trends Have a Trajectory:

Not every niche behaviour will go mainstream. Use trajectory mapping (forces of passion, opposition, acceleration) to separate long-term trends from short-lived fads and to identify how to reframe niche insights for broader adoption.

04



From Insight to Action:

The process doesn’t end with discovery. The final, critical step involves translating these complex insights into tangible concepts through strategic workshopping, ensuring alignment with brand capabilities, stakeholder priorities, and the team that will take the project forward into the next phase of its innovation processes.

Endnotes

1

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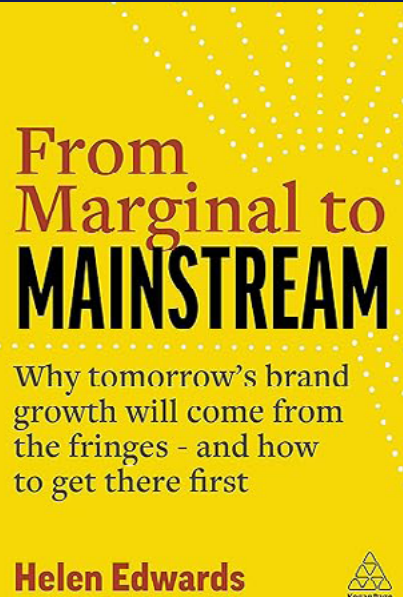
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Further Reading



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AUTHORS

April Jeffries,

President, Global Ethnography,
and Immersion, Ipsos UU

Ajay Bangia

Global Qualitative Leader
(AI Solutions), Ipsos UU

Sandro Kaulartz

Chief Innovation Officer, Social
Intelligence Analytics, Ipsos

Karin O'Neill

Senior Vice President, US
Qualitative, Ipsos UU

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