

Testing Evolutionary Psychology as a Foundation for Strategic Brand Building

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Abstract: This Work-in-Progress study conducts a theory-guided exploratory mapping of brand-following motives onto evolutionary motive systems (prestige/status, affiliation/belonging, resource security/trust, and leadership/followership). The purpose is to provide initial, preliminary evidence on whether brand-following motivations show patterns consistent with evolved coordination motives, and to outline implications for strategic knowledge management (KM). Building on the knowledge-based view, the study treats brands as socially distributed knowledge assets that compress reputational information and reduce uncertainty. Evolutionary psychology provides a candidate mechanism for why such symbolic knowledge structures scale and persist. Empirical evidence comes from a survey of marketing students (N = 113; Bachelor n = 37; Master n = 76). Respondents named a brand they actively follow and evaluated motivational drivers of that behavior. Motivations were grouped into four theory-derived clusters: resource security/trust, prestige/status, affiliation/belonging, and leadership/inspiration. Descriptive comparisons across educational levels and brand categories provide preliminary pattern evidence. Results suggest that brand following is not explained by security/trust motives alone: social-symbolic motives (prestige, belonging, and leadership) appear salient alongside trust/security. As a WIP contribution, the paper offers a focused empirical proof-of-concept and a lean theoretical bridge, with deeper KM integration planned after conference feedback.

Keywords: Strategic knowledge management, Competitive advantage, Evolutionary psychology, Branding, Consumer behaviour

1. Introduction

This Work-in-Progress study conducts a theory-guided exploratory mapping of brand-following motives onto evolutionary motive systems (prestige/status, affiliation/belonging, resource security/trust, and leadership/followership). The aim is to provide initial, preliminary evidence on whether reported brand-following motives show patterns consistent with these evolved coordination motives and to outline implications for strategic knowledge management (KM).

Strategic KM research argues that sustained advantage increasingly depends on intangible, socially embedded knowledge assets (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1992; Nonaka, 1994). Branding research likewise shows that brands operate as shared meaning structures that shape relationships, community, and consumer cognition beyond product attributes (Fournier, 1998; Keller, 1993; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Hirschman, 2010). Yet both streams often describe brand value without explaining why symbolic markers can coordinate beliefs and behavior at scale.

This paper proposes evolutionary psychology (EP) as a candidate explanatory layer: brands may become influential because they align with evolved motives guiding imitation, affiliation, and trust calibration under uncertainty (Cosmides and Tooby, 1997; Griskevicius and Kenrick, 2013). In particular, prestige-biased learning predicts preferential attention to respected and competent targets, a mechanism that may generalize to symbolic targets such as brands (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001), consistent with evolutionary consumer research on status and social motives in consumption (Saad and Gill, 2000; Taheran et al., 2024).

Research question (RQ): What motivational patterns underlie brand-following behavior, and how do these motivations map onto evolutionary motive systems (prestige/status, affiliation/belonging, resource security/trust, and leadership/followership)?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Strategic KM and Brand Knowledge as an Intangible Asset

In the knowledge-based view, organizations are repositories and coordinators of knowledge, and competitive advantage arises when knowledge is valuable, difficult to imitate, and socially embedded (Barney, 1991; Grant, 1996; Kogut and Zander, 1992; Nonaka, 1994). From this perspective, brands can be treated as socially distributed knowledge assets: they stabilize expectations, compress reputational information, and help market participants coordinate interpretations and choices under uncertainty (Grant, 1996; Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001;

Fournier, 1998). However, KM and branding research often describe these functions without specifying why humans are so responsive to symbolic reputation markers such as brands (Keller, 1993; Hirschman, 2010).

2.2 Evolutionary Psychology and Consumption Motives

Evolutionary psychology explains behavior as the output of domain-specific motivational systems shaped by recurrent coordination challenges in ancestral environments (Cosmides and Tooby, 1997). In modern consumer settings, these systems can be activated by symbolic cues and expressed through consumption, social preference, and learning from others (Griskevicius and Kenrick, 2013; Saad and Gill, 2000). Prior work in evolutionary consumer research highlights motives that are directly relevant to brand following, including attaining status, forming and maintaining social ties, managing risk and resource security, and engaging with leadership or guidance cues (Griskevicius and Kenrick, 2013; Taheran et al., 2024).

2.3 Prestige-biased Learning, Affiliation, and Leadership Cues

A particularly relevant mechanism is prestige-biased social learning: humans tend to attend to, defer to, and imitate targets perceived as successful, respected, or competent because such learning historically offered adaptive efficiencies (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001). In markets, brands can function as scalable prestige proxies by condensing reputational knowledge into stable symbolic forms (Henrich and Gil-White, 2001; Hirschman, 2010). In parallel, affiliation motives support coalition-like behavior, where shared brand use signals group belonging and identity alignment (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001; Fournier, 1998). Leadership/followership dynamics provide an additional lens: some brands are experienced as norm-setting, inspirational, or "benchmark" targets that guide preferences and behavior beyond utilitarian evaluation (Hirschman, 2010; Henrich and Gil-White, 2001).

2.4 Bridge Claim for this WIP Paper

Combining these views, this paper conceptualizes brands as knowledge coordination targets that become influential because they align with evolved motives for prestige/status, affiliation/belonging, resource security/trust, and leadership/followership (Cosmides and Tooby, 1997; Griskevicius and Kenrick, 2013; Henrich and Gil-White, 2001). This WIP paper tests whether brand-following motivations show patterns consistent with this mapping, and uses the results to outline a focused implication for strategic KM: brand knowledge may operate as an evolved-friendly, socially distributed coordination asset rather than only as informational content (Grant, 1996; Nonaka, 1994).

3. Research Design and Data

3.1 Data Collection and Sample

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to Bachelor- and Master-level business students during a university lecture. The final sample consisted of 113 respondents (Bachelor $n = 37$; Master $n = 76$). Respondents named one brand they actively follow and indicated the brand category. In this study, "brand following" refers broadly to sustained psychological or behavioural engagement with a brand, including regularly consuming brand-related content, purchasing products, monitoring brand activity, or identifying with the brand symbolically.

The student context supports an initial WIP mapping of motivational patterns, while limiting generalizability to broader populations.

3.2 Measures and Motive Clusters

Respondents rated motive statements capturing inspiration/leadership cues, prestige/status signaling, affiliation/belonging, and trust/security (1–7 Likert scale). Items were grouped a priori into four motive clusters aligned with the EP framing used in this paper: resource security/trust, prestige/status, affiliation/belonging, and leadership/inspiration. Cluster scores were computed as respondent-level means of the items assigned to each motive cluster (1–7). Because the study is exploratory and theory-guided, formal reliability validation of the clusters was not conducted at this stage and is planned for future research.

3.3 Analytical Strategy

The analysis is descriptive and theory-guided. The paper summarizes the relative salience of the four motive clusters and compares patterns across educational level (Bachelor vs. Master) and across reported brand categories. The purpose is to provide initial pattern evidence suitable for conference feedback rather than causal

inference or confirmatory hypothesis tests. Comparisons between Bachelor and Master students are descriptive only and should be interpreted as hypothesis-generating rather than statistically conclusive.

4. Findings

4.1 Brand Categories and Motive Clusters

Respondents named brands across categories such as technology, fashion, sports and lifestyle. Tables summarize how the four motive clusters appeared across brand categories and educational levels.

4.2 Key Patterns

- Security/trust motives were consistently high across categories (approx. 5.6-6.1), indicating a strong risk-reduction component in brand following.
- Leadership/inspiration motives were also consistently moderate-to-high (approx. 4.9-5.8), suggesting that brands are often followed as guidance/benchmark targets rather than evaluated purely as utilities.
- Prestige/status motives were moderate-to-high (approx. 4.2-4.9), and belonging motives varied by category (highest in Sports among Masters).
- Descriptively, Master students show slightly higher leadership scores across categories and higher prestige scores in most categories, with Technology as an exception.

These patterns are interpreted as preliminary consistency evidence for the EP mapping: brands may function as coordination targets that concentrate prestige cues, affiliation signals, and security expectations.

Table 1: Brand category × motive cluster scores (Mean [SD]) (Bachelor students)

Category	Leadership M (SD)	Prestige M (SD)	Belonging M (SD)	Security M (SD)	N
Fashion	4.91 (0.96)	4.20 (1.07)	4.72 (1.33)	6.14 (0.62)	13
Lifestyle	4.99 (0.93)	4.23 (0.91)	4.47 (1.79)	5.63 (1.14)	12
Sports	5.29 (0.17)	4.56 (0.26)	4.33 (0.94)	5.63 (0.51)	5
Technology	5.12 (0.38)	4.89 (0.76)	5.10 (1.45)	6.02 (0.56)	7

Note: Values are cluster means (standard deviations) on a 1–7 Likert scale; higher values indicate stronger endorsement of the motive cluster.

Table 2: Brand category × motive cluster scores (Mean [SD]) (Master students)

Category	Leadership M (SD)	Prestige M (SD)	Belonging M (SD)	Security M (SD)	N
Fashion	5.11 (0.79)	4.38 (1.04)	4.24 (1.32)	5.62 (0.75)	24
Lifestyle	5.08 (1.21)	4.27 (1.06)	4.12 (1.61)	5.85 (1.27)	27
Sports	5.79 (0.30)	4.80 (0.68)	5.36 (0.82)	5.94 (0.50)	12
Technology	5.24 (1.01)	4.66 (1.01)	4.56 (1.64)	5.73 (0.95)	13

Note: Values are cluster means (standard deviations) on a 1–7 Likert scale; higher values indicate stronger endorsement of the motive cluster.

5. Discussion

This Work-in-Progress study provides preliminary evidence that brand-following motivations can be organized around evolved coordination motives—prestige/status, affiliation/belonging, resource security/trust, and leadership/followership—rather than reduced to functional utility alone.

From an evolutionary perspective, the descriptive patterns are consistent with three coordination mechanisms: (1) prestige-biased learning and status signaling, which help explain why some brands become imitation targets; (2) coalition-like affiliation motives, which help explain brand community and identity alignment; and (3) trust/security calibration, which helps explain why brands reduce uncertainty and become “safe” choices. Leadership/followership cues offer an additional interpretation for why some brands function as benchmarks that guide behavior beyond product attributes.

For strategic KM, the implication is focused: brand knowledge may be conceptualized as a socially distributed coordination asset that compresses reputational information and stabilizes expectations.

5.1 Managerial Implications

The WIP findings suggest that brand following may be driven by coordination motives (prestige, belonging, leadership, and trust) alongside functional utility. This implies emphasizing consistent symbolic cues that support trust and identity alignment, not only short-term performance messaging. These implications should be interpreted as exploratory and theory-building in nature.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This Work-in-Progress study is exploratory and based on a student sample, limiting generalizability and supporting only pattern-level inferences. Because motive clusters were specified a priori for theory-guided mapping, future work should validate the measurement structure and replicate findings in non-student samples. A next step is to link motive profiles to observed behaviors such as engagement, advocacy, willingness to pay, and brand defense in field settings. Stronger quantitative testing and deeper KM integration would further strengthen the framework.

7. Conclusion

This Work-in-Progress paper provides initial evidence that brand-following motivations can be organized around evolved coordination motives (prestige, belonging, trust/security, and leadership). The value of this approach is to propose a candidate mechanism for why brand knowledge can scale and persist beyond functional utility. Because the study is exploratory and the sample is student-based, claims are limited to pattern consistency and concept development. Future research should extend the framework using stronger empirical validation and broader samples.

Ethics Declaration: Participants provided informed consent and responses were collected anonymously. The study was conducted in a low-risk educational context in line with institutional guidance.

AI Declaration: AI tools were used for language editing and structural refinement; the author verified all content, interpretations, and references.

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