

## The iPhone 16 rush reveals an evolutionary trait: Humans must fit in to survive

Devina Mehra | 09 Oct 2024



iPhone 16 and Tumi bag purchases are linked with our hunter-gatherer ancestors living in caves. (Hindustan Times)

### SUMMARY

*While we may have logical reasons to behave otherwise, humans often do irrational things like splurging on luxury items because of our need to belong to a tribe. Even herd behaviour in markets is hardwired into us by evolution.*

A couple of weeks ago, I was on live television. It turned out to be the day of Apple's iPhone 16 launch and the anchor showed me the crowd of people queuing outside an Apple store and asked me when I was going to buy it.

As a never-switched-from-Android user, I knew the answer. Incidentally, this column is being dictated using the Google speech-to-text keyboard on an Android phone.

But this set me thinking.

First of all, most people queuing outside the store would barely be able to tell you how the newest launch differs from the iPhone's previous generation.

Also, there are some statistics showing that 70% of iPhones are bought on credit in India. So, why are people willing to stretch themselves financially for something that barely gives them any additional functionality?

And it is not just about iPhones. Earlier this year, I read a LinkedIn post about someone who splurged a lot on a Tumi computer bag (not being quite 'with it', I had to Google it) because he wanted to 'fit in' and was happy that it did help him belong.

These stories triggered off this train of thought.

As with many things, especially the irrational activities that we find ourselves doing, it all goes back to human evolution. I have written and spoken extensively about various cognitive biases—mostly deriving from Daniel Kahneman's work.

As the psychologist also mentions, no matter how well we understand these biases intellectually, we are unable to get rid of them from our thinking and behaviour.

Kahneman spent a lifetime studying these and won an Economics Nobel prize in 2002 for his work in precisely this area, but also said that for all his research and study in this field, his own decision-making had barely changed.

These biases are practically impossible to get rid of because they are hardwired into us through tens of thousands of years of human evolution. They literally helped us survive as a species through the millennia.

Biases exist because they served a purpose. Human evolution has no interest in the health of our portfolio or our career—it is essentially geared towards two major areas: procreation and survival.

But where do expensive phones and fancy bags come in?

And it is not even about branded goods on which you are spending a lot of money. In another set of circumstances and people, Tumi and Gucci bags may be an absolute no-no and the only acceptable attire may be a ragged kurta and torn jhola. And, trust me, you will follow that unwritten dress code equally assiduously.

What is driving us is not that we want bright shiny objects or that we want to live beyond our means.

The key is that we want to belong—belong to our tribe, whatever that tribe may be. Whether it is the cool gang at school, suited investment bankers or NGO jholawaalas out to change the world.

Why is this herd instinct, this need to belong, so very strong? Simply because not so long ago in human history, if you did not belong, you were history!

There was a very heavy price to pay for choosing not to follow the group. To be thrown out of a tribe meant that you would not be able to procreate for sure and may not have been able to easily survive either.

We are products of ancestors who won the survival game by belonging to a tribe, and that remains hardwired into us humans—whatever we define as our tribe.

We want to do things that conform with tribal behaviour and it is extremely uncomfortable to not fit in or be pushed out of the tribe. The need to belong is extremely strong.

Intellectually, we do understand that not owning an iPhone 16 will not harm us, physically or otherwise. But for our brain, it is panic time if we do not belong in the set of people we hang out with.

In the investing world, this translates to a desire to jump onto the latest bandwagon, the area where ‘everyone’ is making money. Else, there is an intense feeling of FOMO (fear of missing out). More on this another time.

Evolution is a hacker. It does not seek to optimize. It wants to expend minimum energy on ensuring we get to the next generation for gene transmission. Hence, the brain takes a number of short-cuts.

For example, a number of optical illusions rely on the fact that our brains assume that light comes from above, which was a good enough thumb-rule for several thousand years.

Believe it or not, iPhone 16 and Tumi bag purchases—not to mention Telegram groups that discuss markets—are linked with our hunter-gatherer ancestors living in caves.

As an aside, because I did not have school friends from ages 5 to 9, I got used to sitting alone during recess and figuring things out for myself.

The benchmark of what the tribe wants has a relatively weak hold on me, personally, as the question itself occurs less often to me.

The law of unintended consequences acts in strange ways!

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