

: Township Status

 By [Jason Stewart](#)

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Our purchase decisions are largely made by proxy - by our peers, rather than directly by ourselves. Peer pressure is a key component to why we buy whatever, irrespective of our age. We always try to make what we believe is the right decision in the eyes of others regarding the brands we use. (video)

There are two major psychological drivers behind why we make the decisions we do. The first is that we have a strong desire to 'fit in' and belong to a group. The second is that we want to be seen as 'right' by others and having made the right decision. Both drivers rely on peer judgment. It's a worrying fact, but true in that what matters most to us is not what we think, but what others think about us. And so it is with brand choice within the township environment too.

However, the dynamic of peer pressure in the township environment is more acute due to the dramatically increased peer group size as well as the visibility and exposure individuals have to others. There is an intangible but very real hierarchical ladder of status upon which all brands and products are placed, including the township relative to other communities. People's incredible hunger to achieve a certain material status means that brands have taken on an even more important role in everyday lives.

A flashing neon sign

Brands are like a flashing neon sign communicating an individual's personal success or lack thereof. The shoes you wear, or more importantly, the shoes your children wear, broadcast your job status to your neighbours. The whisky you drink, the car you drive, the shopping bags you use, the nappy on your child - everything points to your personal success in comparison to your community standards. The 'better' the brands, the better the perception others will have of you and therefore the higher social status you will derive - which, for 99% of people, means the better you will feel about yourself.

It's essential to understand how a brand is perceived in the marketplace and how it directly influences people, particularly how they feel by using it (and having other people see them use it). One market survey identified a lady who said she could never use coffee creamer, because while growing up, poor people used it as a substitute for milk and she didn't want to be viewed as 'poor'.

Illogical behaviour is quite normal

Nappies are interesting as they are the most talked about product category in the world, with more word of mouth being spread than any other single product type. In the townships we see purchasing behaviour in this category affected mainly by status. Mothers generally buy the lowest cost nappy when they are looking after their own child. However, if the child might be seen by others, they will put on the most expensive nappy to make a statement to other mothers.

According to behavioral economics, this seemingly illogical behaviour is quite normal. It has been proven that we operate from what is best for us based on the perceptions of others, rather than what we truly think might be best for us in isolation. Brands that operate within a township environment need to be cognisant of this. Knowing where your brand has been 'placed' in terms of the perceived status hierarchy means that you have a peg against which to measure your competitors. From this vantage point you can assess your brand's health and plot its future growth.

ABOUT JASON STEWART

Jason Stewart is the co-founder and MD of HaveYouHeard (www.haveyouheard.co.za), a communications agency immersed in culture to influence it. With 11 years' trading experience and offices in Johannesburg, Cape Town and London, HaveYouHeard uncovers unique insights to create innovative ideas that influence the audience by bringing the brands it partners with to the centre of culture.

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