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REAL SELF OR PROJECTED SELF: WHO SHOULD BRANDS TALK TO?

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The first business question that comes to mind when our clients look at their marketplace is, "Do we really know our target?"

Before trying to understand consumer needs and expectations regarding a specific product category, we believe there must be a clear understanding of consumers as human beings. If we want to truly understand how a category fits into people's lives, we must understand what decisions shape their personal journeys. The challenge is that people have two selves: the **projected self**, which they present to the world based upon how they want to be seen, and the **real self**, which is who they really are intrinsically.

We often see significant gaps between these two selves:

- She says she makes healthy decisions ...but her cupboard is full of junk food.

- He wears high-end running shoes ... but he is not a runner.

- He is 14 years old ... yet he only buys games for 17+, the other are childish.

- She likes the trendy chair she sees in a magazine ...but would never put it in her home.

- She is a basic cook but would rather be referred to as a woman with just no time to cook

The tension created between these two selves can either be social ("real self" relates to private values, while "projected self" is inspired by society values) or psychological ("real self" relates to constraints, while "projected self" relates to aspirations).

Some argue that only the real self drives purchase behaviors, but this is not true – both selves are very real. And purchase behavior is a direct result of the conflict between these two selves, where sometimes the projected self wins (and we buy expensive running shoes even if we don't run), and other times it's the real self who wins (and we choose potato chips over carrots).

Ipsos UU's point of view is that brands need to respect and deliver value to both the consumer's real self and projected self. While the product characteristics have to fulfil the needs of the real self, the product design, packaging and communication must first inspire the projected self:

- Running shoe producers would take into account the comfort and needs of the average urban consumer, but the design would convey the image of high-end athleticism.
- Video game manufacturers would take into account the skills of 14 year old players, but the packaging would feature older boys.
- Recipes targeting basic cooks would indeed be basic, but the communication would focus on time saving rather than simplicity.

If brands miss this distinction and talk only to the real self, their innovations will be relevant but their communications flat. In the alternative, if brands only talk to the projected self, their communications will be engaging but their innovations will not reflect the real needs of the consumer.

The REAL SELF / PROJECTED SELF analytical framework (*) is a very important part of the Ipsos UU methodological approach.

To this end, we recommend complementing interviews with direct ethnographic observations to truly understand people's lives, which is often the only way to capture the real self.

In our research design and reports, we take great care to distinguish both selves. Some dimensions relate directly to the real self (way of life) and some directly to the projected self (aspirations). Others need to be split, in cases when the projected personalities of people don't totally match their real personalities. For example, questions like "How would you describe your personality?" may not paint the same picture as "How would your friends describe your personality?"

Finally, the Real Self – Projected Self Framework impacts the questions we ask in the recruitment phase. Should the initiative be on communication, then attitudinal questions should be used to identify the right participants, based on their projected self. If the initiative is focused on innovation, then behavioral questions should be used, to capture the real self, and identify a slightly different profile of participants.

All these factors will have a significant impact on the relevance of our final study recommendations.

(*) Ipsos UU's Analytical Frameworks are a series of 12 models designed to help UU researchers all over the world design their research and structure qualitative data in consistent and relevant ways. Designed to address our clients' most relevant business questions, these frameworks are at the foundation of our qualitative practice and represent UU's core POV and philosophy.