Dirt! - an Interpretive Study of Negative Opinions About a Brand Extension

Henrik Sjödin, Center for Consumer Marketing, Stockholm School of Economics

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Henrik Sjödin, Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden

**ABSTRACT**

How can researchers and managers understand the notions and feelings behind unfavorable responses to a brand extension? Using a sociocultural perspective on purity and impurity (Douglas 1966), this paper explores the usefulness of thinking about negative opinions in terms of reactions to dirt. The metaphor informs an interpretation of negative comments in an internet discussion forum, on the introduction of a new car model from Porsche. Conceptions of dirt as disturbing and upsetting; risky and dangerous; and immoral and blameworthy, are employed to develop new insights into the intersection between brands, brand extensions, and consumers.

“Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death.” (Douglas 1966, 6)

**INTRODUCTION**

Monstrosity, atrocity, disgusting, ugly bastard, abomination. What commercial object provokes such agitated descriptions by consumers? The answer: the introduction of a new car model from Porsche. How can researchers and managers understand the notions and feelings behind such unfavorable responses to a brand extension? This study draws upon sociocultural theory on purity and impurity (Douglas 1966), to explore the usefulness of thinking about such opinions in terms of reactions to dirt. Putting poor evaluations of brand extensions in a novel perspective can produce new insights into the requirements that contemporary consumers put on brands. Relating brand extensions to dirt introduces a viewpoint that gives richer meaning to low scores on the attitude scales used both in theoretical and applied research on brand extensions. Such a deeper understanding may be required to appreciate what is in the balance upon introducing brand extensions and to judge how brands can remain relevant to consumers over time (cf. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry Jr. 2003; Holt 2002; Kates 2004).

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

**Brand Extensions**

Understanding consumer attitudes towards brand extensions is high on the agenda for many marketers. It has also been a popular research topic over the last decade and a half (e.g., Aaker and Keller 1990; Meyvis and Janiszewski 2004). Recent reviews are provided by Czellar (2003) and Grime, Diamantopoulos, and Smith (2002). One important goal has been to find out why some extensions get favorable evaluations from consumers, whereas others get unfavorable evaluations. The greater part of this research has been carried out with experimental approaches, grounded in cognitive psychology. A typical finding in these experiments is that extensions need a good “fit” with the original brand to fare well with consumers (Czellar 2003; Grime et al. 2002).

However, as a research community, we do not have a very good understanding of what is behind the low scores on attitude scales that some extensions provoke. More interpretive efforts to appreciate the notions and feelings associated with unfavorable responses have been missing from the collective work. Indeed, as the reviews above reflect, qualitative methodologies in general are all but absent from the scholarly literature on the topic. Accordingly, Czellar (2003) argues that new approaches could prove fruitful. He urges researchers to offer original theoretical views to advance a more “holistic understanding of the relation between a consumer and a brand extension” (Czellar 2003, 112–3). This paper puts forward an interpretive analysis of consumers’ negative opinions about a brand extension, making one contribution towards such a rich understanding of the consumer-extension connection. The focus on negative responses allows reflection on challenges for brand management. Studying claims of brand disorder is a means of probing the significance of order for the welfare of brands and consumers.

**A Sociocultural View on Purity and Impurity**

The point of departure for the analysis is the work on pollution, rules of purity, and dirt by anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas 1966). In her writings, Douglas takes an interest in why some things are considered unclean in a given culture. Her basic argument is that dirt is disorder in relation to some system; nothing is dirty in itself:

Shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom, or food bespattered on clothing; similarly, bathroom equipment in the drawing room; clothing lying on chairs; out-door things in-doors; upstairs things downstairs; under-clothing appearing where over-clothing should be, and so on. In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications. (Douglas 1966, 37).

The quote highlights the link between symbolic systems and ideas of impurity. Defined as matter out of place, dirt is that which threatens the existence of a stable pattern in a system, be it in nature or in modern beliefs of what a particular brand is all about. It contradicts norms, rules, and harmony. In this light, dirt and impurity are the same. Consistent with this, Ger and Yenicioglu (2004) report how people base notions of clean and dirty on both material and conceptual grounds. The latter refers to “abstract and ideological issues” such as purity or sacredness, exemplified by how “the purity of a newborn baby or unconditional love are regarded as ‘clean’, whereas disturbing the balance of the world [is] interpreted as being ‘dirty’” (Ger and Yenicioglu 2004, 463). Thus, while dirt is “unclean matter that soils” (Concise Oxford dictionary of current English 1990), it is clear that this uncleanliness and soiling can be conceptual (e.g., social, moral, or cultural) as well as material.

Following Douglas (1966), Belk, (2005) and Ger and Yenicioğlu (2004) note how meanings of clean and dirty hinge on boundaries between inside and outside, between the familiar and unfamiliar, and between the safe and the threatening. Making sense of, and reinforcing, the difference between clean and dirty engage cultural conceptions of what is right, good, and moral. Concern over boundaries serves to protect unity within a set of beliefs and help people create safe havens from disorder (Ger and Yenicioglu 2004). In discussing “the horror of indetermination” associated with failure to neatly categorize something, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman explains a driving force behind this inclination: “At best, uncertainty is confusing and felt as discomforting. At worst, it carries a sense of danger.” (Bauman 1991, 56) He sees the effort to get rid of disquieting impurity as an integral activity in modern life: “to
suppress or eliminate everything that could not or would not be precisely defined” (Bauman 1991, 8). Accordingly, the literature connects dirt to sin, taboos, and rationalized notions of risk (Belk 2005; Lupton 1999).

The sociocultural perspective on purity and impurity has only recently attracted the attention of consumer researchers. Ger and Yenicioğlu (2004) indicate the significance of clean/dirty in daily consumption practices and consumer society at large. Belk (2005) discusses the relationship between purity and exchange taboos. These efforts suggest a potential for applying this perspective in research on the relationship between consumers and brands. In this paper, I explore its value in deepening the understanding of negative opinions towards brand extensions.

METHOD

To explore the value of the dirt metaphor in an empirical context, I studied negative opinions to a brand extension as they were expressed in an internet discussion forum (cf. Brown et al. 2003; Kozinets 2002). Investigating naturally occurring opinions allowed varied and vivid responses to be represented, which have been scarce in the literature on brand extensions (Czellar 2003). To obtain data for the analysis, the focal brand would have to inspire enough consumer involvement to actually allow negative opinions to be articulated. Getting ample data also seemed to require a brand extension that would generate discussion over an extended period of time. These considerations led me to Porsche and the introduction of the first sports utility vehicle (SUV) in their product portfolio: Porsche Cayenne.

The database consisted of messages posted in alt.autos.porsche, the main public newsgroup for discussions among internet users interested in Porsche. I searched this newsgroup for messages concerning the introduction of the Cayenne, posted in the time between June 1998, when the company first announced its plans, and December 2002, when the car was made available to the public. The negative opinions, which I concentrate on in this paper, were obtained by downloading and reviewing all the messages about the Cayenne, selecting all those that in any part expressed disapproval with the new car. This assessment was subjective but inclusive. In total, the data set consisted of 132 messages, from some 73 poster signatures. These numbers are interesting primarily as indicators of the possibility to explore a meaningful data set holding a range of negative responses. The aim for the data collection was to enable insights into negative opinions specifically, rather than representativeness in relation to the whole corpus of messages in the newsgroup or generalization across populations (cf. Kozinets 2002). The interpretation grew out of repeated readings of the messages and constant comparison with the ideas in the theoretical framework. Employing standard qualitative procedures (Spiggle 1994), I explored the emerging themes through multiple iterations until a coherent representation was achieved.

FINDINGS

As arguably the most classic brand of sports cars, Porsche is an icon in its combination of reputable history and exciting image. For decades, its high-performance cars have been successful both on racing circuits and with automotive enthusiasts. Unlike most small car manufacturers, Porsche has remained independent over the years, even though the company has at times collaborated with others. In 1998, Porsche announced that they would extend their product portfolio with the introduction of an SUV. As Porsche aimed to secure its survival through growth and less dependence on traditional sports cars, the existing 911 and Boxster model lines would be joined by an off-roader, developed in cooperation with Volkswagen (Porsche Press Release, 1998). The news set off a discussion among media commentators and brand followers that would continue for years. Below, I report on my observations regarding the negative opinions expressed in the alt.autos.porsche newsgroup, on the topic of Porsche Cayenne. The findings are organized into three interlinked themes, each expressing a different nuance of a common, underlying notion of dirt and impurity.

Disturbing and Upsetting

Well, let’s all email Porsche and tell them to provide some factory backing for their race cars and to drop that damn*ed SUV nonsense. (posted by “Jim,” alt.autos.porsche, January 2000)

The most basic criticism expressed in the data is captured in the quotes above: Porsche and SUVs do not harmonize. Critical posters argue that Porsche is about race and sports cars, and that an SUV does not fit into this scheme. Characteristics such as weight, number of seats, and center of gravity contradict the characteristics of a sports car of the kind typically associated with Porsche. Because Porsche does not have any history of developing and producing the type of car that an SUV represents, it is argued that the Cayenne does not belong in the Porsche portfolio. The poster “Barry” explains his feelings:

What hurts me about Porsche building an SUV (something other than a sportscar) is that as of now, Porsche is the last manufacturer that is independant and building great sportscars that evoke passion from their drivers. They also still actively campaign their cars on the racetrack (though we are currently seeing something of a heitiaus from Porsche.) I love Porsche because they don’t mass produce a vehicle to suit every need I may have. They build ONE type of car that satisfies my craving—a great sportscar to drive fast and race if I choose. . . I don’t need another car built by a company to serve the masses. Porsche recently had a marketing theme that said, “Porsche, not something to everyone, but everything to someone.” That is why they are great. If they lose the ability to seperate their cars from all the other cars on the market, they essentially lose “Porsche.” (posted by “Barry,” alt.autos.porsche, July 2001)

Much like dirt, the Cayenne would obscure clarity and spoil an orderly arrangement of brand experiences. Consider this quote by “John,” who in fact accepts the idea of building an SUV as such, but still disapproves of the Cayenne explicitly because it destroys purity:

As every car maker on the planet including Land Rover turns their SUV into a grocery getting minivan/station wagon, Porsche could have come in with a Swiss Army knife on wheels, pure machine. The way their sports cars used to be pure. But Porsche has lost their way and will produce the most ridiculous creature imaginable. A 2 ton luxury SUV that thinks its a sports car, Why not make an offroading Carrera4 next with a 4” lift kit and Monster Mudder tires. Makes as much sense. (“John,” alt.autos.porsche, November 1999)

For “John” and others, Porsche Cayenne is disturbing in terms of the specific features of the car. A common grievance is the design
of the car, which many posters find unattractive or outright ugly. It is sometimes derogatorily called a station wagon or truck.

In contrast to “John,” some posters express quite strong negative opinions about SUVs in general. Complaints include that they are dangerous, have excessive fuel consumption, and that they are bought for their yuppie status rather than performance. For SUV skeptics, the Cayenne is a break with Porsche history that takes the company into a particularly offensive territory. The new car also represents trouble in terms of users and uses, compared to the traditional sports car. For instance, “Don C” states: “A sport utility is just about the furthest thing from what Porsche should be building. The last thing I want to see a Porsche doing is ferrying 4 kids to soccer practice and getting groceries. I may even shed a tear the first time I see one parked at the local grocery store.” (posted by “Don C,” alt.autos.porsche, June 2001)

The quotes suggest that Porsche Cayenne can be disturbing to both intellect and feelings. Many comments about the launch of the Cayenne feature a rather agitated language. Emotions abound. The new car is characterized as an “abomination”, a “joke”, a “catastrophe”, a “beast”, a “monstrosity”, “ugly and useless”; it “disgusts”, makes critics “sick”, inspires “rage”, and is “silly”, “foolish”, and “stupid” (see various postings to alt.autos.porsche). In sum, many reactions reflect the anxiety, contempt, frustration, and anger associated with dirt, as suggested by the literature review. The labels indicate that the responses to the introduction often go beyond mere cognitive disagreement, taking on considerable emotional load.

Dangerous and Risky

They might go bankrupt (like many a company before them) when they seek to move away from their core business. Who’s to know what will happen? Maybe it’ll be a runaway success and I’ll be proved totally wrong. But I see this whole venture as a huge risk. (posted by “Richard,” alt.autos.porsche, October 1999)

Because the introduction of Porsche Cayenne upsets the existing order of the brand, it becomes the Other, that which is different and strange. The Other is fraught with uncertainty and danger, in other words: risk (Lupton 1999). If things go bad, the polluting Other might bring irreparable harm, both to the brand and to the people who depend on it. Thus, the Cayenne might hurt the interests of the race and sports car enthusiasts of Porsche. A concrete illustration is that the new SUV is blamed for the withdrawal from the popular high-level racing (see various postings to alt.autos.porsche). Recurring fears are that the Cayenne will hurt the company finances or the brand. Some posters refer to other companies that in the past have tried to diversify and have failed. “Barry” argues differently, by turning to the history of Porsche, as he blends danger warnings and personal disappointment:

I think this thing is going to not only flop, but belly flop. Whenever Porsche builds something that they know little about, they don’t so well. Just like the 80 and early 90s. Then in 95 they started building the 993-a true race car based on racing, and came back to life. Then they build a fantastic roadster again and can’t make cars fast enough. Porsche knows nothing about trucks, much less SUV’s. I don’t believe people (especially those who consider Porsche a purchase option) want a race-car SUV. . . . Basically I am really mad at Porsche for giving up what was once their passion (racing) and letting all of us who want a pure sports car company down. Hopefully it is just a short term lapse in judgement. We can only hope and pray. (posted by “Barry,” alt.autos.porsche, December 1999).

The disquiet and uncertainty brought about by the Cayenne are articulated through a language of risk. Disorder represents danger. The new car is more than a personal annoyance: it threatens communal interests and puts the future of the company and the brand in jeopardy.

Immoral and Blameworthy

Personal liking and business merits are not the only bases for evaluating Porsche Cayenne. The frustration evoked by the car is also intertwined with moral judgments. It is clear that posters question the motives behind the launch of Porsche Cayenne. In line with the characterization of the new model as disparate in relation to the company’s history, critics refuse to see it as a natural or legitimate extension of the brand. Instead, a typical attribution is that the company is extending the brand to increase their profits. With high demand and attractive margins in the SUV market, Porsche management sees an opportunity to make more money. “Jim” laments:

My point is that I thought that Porsche was made up of people who built sports cars because they loved sports cars and that maximizing their profits was secondary.

As far as I know Porsche has been making money in the last couple of years but now they want to build suv’s, not because they have any heritage of building trucks or probably any real interest in building trucks, but solely to maximize their profits. (posted by “Jim,” alt.autos.porsche, June 1998).

The important thing to realize is that this ambition is questioned on moral grounds: “What a sell out…Shame shame shame…” (posted by “Magic,” alt.autos.porsche, February 2002). In essence, critics blame management for being greedy. The Cayenne is not developed out of intrinsic interest. The moral assessment echoes of a quest for authenticity (Grayson and Martinec 2004; Holt 2002; Kozinets 2001).

There’s something about the sound of an air cooled Porsche winding out that is a joyous thing. The whine of the cam chains, the exaut so distinctive there’s no mistaking it. The direct feel of the steering, the balance and dynamic poise of a car made to handle. All these are part of the Porsche magic for me. Sometimes change is progress, sometimes change is loss. How much magic of the marque is lost watering down the name making a car to mine the sporty mall patrol market? Half a century focused on making two door cars. When they finally break down and make a four door it’s a STATION WAGON! I wonder how much money this is going to make them. It seems somewhat like blasphemy to me. (posted by “Eric,” alt.autos.porsche, December 1998).

The pursuit of profit is thus put in opposition to keeping with Porsche principles, and a recurring question is what Ferry Porsche, the legendary leader of the company, would say about this move:

Do you really want the yuppie range rover crowd driving around in a big Volkswagen sport ute with a Porsche crest glued to the hood? Or even worse, a minivan?!? That crest is a badge of honor. Let’s try to keep it that way. No Volkswagen built sport utility vehicle could ever possibly be worthy of wearing it. Ferry Porsche’s body isn’t even cold yet, and already, the bean counters are attempting to ruin what he worked for 50 years to build. Why are we fighting ourselves when we should be fighting to save ourselves? Will Porsche
become another Chevrolet? Could the 911 become a small island among a sea of Porsche built sedans, econo boxes, mini vans, and sport utes? If the accountants get their way, that’s what we are facing. (posted by “Roberts,” alt.autos.porsche, September 1998)

In the eyes of disapproving posters like “Roberts,” the new car puts the company and the brand at risk, and this is blameworthy. The Cayenne represents an illegitimate attempt to grow the business, because it defies core beliefs about what a car from Porsche should be and because it may appeal to the wrong customers. Thus, Porsche is letting faithful followers down, bringing shame to the family name. The introduction is a wrongdoing.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings demonstrate the usefulness of the dirt metaphor to understand negative opinions about brand extensions. One significant contribution is that it highlights how disorder, dislike, risk, and morality interact to inform consumer responses. The themes in the findings are interlinked, converging on an underlying metaphor of dirt.

The findings provide a record of how brand enthusiasts deal with threats of disorder in attempts to maintain a reality that they espouse. Designating a marketing initiative as dirty, provides some reassurance to established views of the self and others. This account provides a link to underlying complications of life in contemporary consumer society, with the importance it puts on symbols such as brands. In a fluid world, where “the meanings that are ascribed to commodities proliferate and change so rapidly [that] it may not be possible for consumers to control what their social actions communicate” (Ger and Yenicioğlu 2004, 466), consumers need ways to navigate marketplace disorder. The case of Porsche Cayenne illustrates how consumers’ notions of purity and impurity might inform their coping efforts (cf. Belk 2005; Ger and Yenicioğlu 2004).

The metaphor may also provide focused insights relating to the managerial practice of brand extension and brand management broadly, particularly in cases where consumers have some personal stake in the future of the brand.

To begin with, dirt is not an absolute, but can only exist in relation to some frame of reference. In a given situation, different frames could compete for attention and credibility. This observation is in agreement with the growing literature regarding brands as polysemic, which argues that brands harbor multiple meanings and can be interpreted differently by different observers and in different situations (Bengtsson 2002; Kates 2004; Kozinets 2001). Brand extension strategy is often described as being about identifying and selecting new products that fit with the existing order of the brand (cf. Keller 1998). However, the sociocultural perspective suggests that there may not be an existing order, but rather several possible orders. A key managerial challenge is then to provide a convincing frame of reference that makes room for the brand extension. The study clearly shows consumers’ urge to make sense of a brand extension. Consumers will make some sort of attribution for the new product introduction and if they do not have access to cues that allow a convincing frame to emerge, they may have no choice but to question company intentions and the authenticity of the brand (cf. Kozinets 2001). The findings also indicate that such an outcome may be more than a cognitive irritation, instead being a lot more emotional and engaging than recognized in the existing brand extension literature.

Offering a convincing frame at all times involves asking not only what product that would fit in a given brand order, but also how an order can be articulated to fit given products. This would acknowledge decision-making practice, where strategies partly emerge as a pattern of actions evolves over time (e.g., Mintzberg and Waters 1985). Although this view seems to allow considerable marketing creativity, it also requires empathic consumer insight. Rather than “just” selecting products that are similar to the existing brand offering, marketers are faced with the tougher job to understand which frames that could resonate across consumers:

“[O]bjects don’t shout out what class they belong in, properties don’t jump out and announce their similarities. The human agents who are inventing strong ordering processes for their lives are ordering themselves at the same time, and ordering their world.” (Douglas 1996, 148)

The quote implies that marketers must appreciate the worldviews of their consumers, finding out how their brands can serve as resources in consumers’ construction of identity (Holt 2002). The key “fit” may be not the one between the extending brand and the new product, but between the deeper meaning of the brand in consumers’ lives and the frame constructed to accommodate the product.

Traditionally, brand management is seen as a matter of creating a tight set of beliefs that appeal to consumers (e.g., Keller 1998). However, dirt becomes more visible the stricter the order is that serves as a background. This suggests a managerial dilemma: How can strong loyalty to a set of ideas be fostered while not encouraging undesirable purism? However, perhaps there is another side to the issue. Maybe brands sometime need a little dirt to thrive in the long-term. In the case of Porsche Cayenne, the findings reveal how the controversial status of the car gives opportunity for consumers to rehearse history, to reflect on brand heritage, and to reinforce meanings of the brand. Because the Cayenne triggers celebration of all the things that it is not, it serves to confirm the qualities of the Porsche brand that bind the negative posters together. So, provided that a new product can appeal to consumers, even a “dirty” brand extension can create a win-win situation, where both old and new forms of consumption get energized. Seen this way, a little dirt could help invigorate and develop the brand:

The quest for purity is pursued by rejection. It follows that when purity is not a symbol but something lived, it must be poor and barren. It is part of our condition that the purity for which we strive and sacrifice so much turns out to be hard and dead as a stone when we get it. . . . Purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise. (Douglas 1966, 162-3)

Harnessing the creative dimension of dirt may be necessary to ensure the supply of fresh material for consumers’ identity projects (cf. Holt 2002). If brands are to remain relevant, marketers and consumers need a certain degree of tolerance for deviants and inconsistencies. If purity becomes a fixation, brands could lose the vigor that companies and consumers require.

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