"Uh-Oh, Where Is Our Brand Headed?" Exploring the Role of Risk in Brand Change
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This paper presents an interpretive study of comments from brand enthusiasts in regard to brand change, as expressed in an internet discussion forum. Contributing to the theory and practice of brand meaning management, it highlights how consumers generate and circulate risk-imbued accounts of brand change. The findings indicate new facets of risk that brand loyalty brings into play. These extend beyond the traditional view of risk in consumer research. Examining risk as a pivotal concern to brand enthusiasts, the paper adds to knowledge on the complications of strong consumer-brand linkages.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12546/volumes/v34/NA-34

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INTRODUCTION
Imagine your reactions to the news that one of your favorite singers is recording a new album in a style that is very different from the kind of music you usually enjoy. Perhaps you would feel uncertain and concerned that the record would flop or that the artist would lose its appeal to you? Like artists, certain brands have the power to engage consumers, who rely on them for reassurance and their symbolic meanings. When such a brand seems to be changing, for example upon introducing a product that challenges established brand meanings, how do consumers respond? Uncertainty, concern, and expectations of loss might figure in this situation as well. These reactions are all related to perceptions of risk. This perspective on risk is somewhat different from the one traditionally embraced in consumer research, where risk is typically studied as an input to purchase decisions. The interpretive study presented in this paper offers observations on consumer responses to brand change that acknowledge the relevance of risk beyond the immediate setting of a purchase decision. Leveraging the risk concept in a new context, drawing on a broader literature, is shown to unlock new insights and implications for brand change and our understanding of consumers with high interest in a brand (“brand enthusiasts”). It aligns with current work to explore complications to emotional-branding strategies designed to forge strong consumer ties to a brand (Aaker, Fournier, and Brasil 2004; Thompson, Rindfleisch, and Arsel 2006). The purpose of the paper is thus twofold: (1) to show how perceptions of risk can imbue consumer responses to brand change, and (2) to outline some implications of recognizing such risk perceptions for the theory and practice of brand meaning management. The intent is not to argue that risk should obliterate or supersede other important constructs in this area. Rather, the essential point is that the concept of risk can provide an additional lens through which we can view consumer responses to brand change and discover things we might miss without it.

BACKGROUND
Brands certainly differ in their importance to people. However, some brands become very important to their followers. They can evoke commitment, attachment, and strong feelings from consumers individually (e.g., Fournier 1998) and within groups or communities (e.g., McAlexander, Schouten and Koenig 2002; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). Contemporary accounts of consumer culture have firmly established the role of commercial objects in creating and communicating a sense of self (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Belk 1988). Brands are tools for social identification and identity construction, partly because they provide consistency in a turbulent world (Elliott & Wattanasuwan 1998). What happens when cherished brands take actions that challenge this consistency?

The impetus for this paper comes from an ongoing study of consumer responses to brand extensions. Examining naturally occurring comments from brand enthusiasts, I noticed how many of them expressed uncertainty, danger, and feelings of impending loss (cf. Sjödin 2006). These reactions are characteristic for perceptions of risk, which has been defined as “subjective expectations of loss” (Peter and Ryan 1976; Stone and Grønhaug 1993). From previous research, we do know that brand owners and enthusiasts may react negatively when entrenched brand meanings become challenged (e.g., Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Muñiz and O’Guinn 2001). However, risk has not been considered in such investigations. Moreover, research on brand extensions show that consumers often are skeptical towards new products if they lack a fit with the brand (Aaker and Keller 1990; Kirmani, Bridges, and Sood 2001) and that a risky purchase situation increases preference for the norm (Campbell and Goodstein 2001). However, this line of research has not explored risk beyond its role in purchase decisions (see also DelVecchio and Smith 2005). This is unfortunate, as the risk literature can offer original insights relevant to our understanding of brand enthusiasts, long-term brand loyalty, and brand management. These insights are applicable to predict and promote (or hold back) consumer acceptance of brand change. They should also supplement recent reports on the ramifications of emotional-branding and close consumer-brand bonds (e.g., Aaker et al. 2004; Thompson et al. 2006).

RISK AND BRAND CHANGE
Consumer and marketing research holds a massive, ever-growing, literature on risk and its influence on decisions and choices by consumers. As noted in comprehensive reviews by Conchar et al. (2004) and Mitchell (1999) definitions of perceived risk are manifold and varied. Still, most consumer behavior applications seem to converge on a handful of key tenets. First, consumers perceive risk when they cannot be sure of a desired outcome. In other words, risk involves two components: uncertainty and unfavorable consequences. Second, existing research links risk very closely to decisions or choices, typically regarding a product purchase. Third, different types of loss contribute to overall perceived risk. Jacoby and Kaplan (1972) mention financial, performance, physical, psychological, and social loss. Roselli and Arsenius (2001) mentions time loss. Fourth, consumers normally strive to reduce risk. Research has identified brand loyalty as one important strategy to reduce perceived risk in a purchase (Roselli 1971). Fifth, risk is considered a cognitive construct, studied from an information-processing view.

Within marketing, the agreement on these tenets has been surprisingly stable over the decades (cf. Mitchell 1999). In contrast, the social sciences more broadly provide alternative viewpoints. Many accounts situate risk within the conditions of contemporary society, with “an intensifying sense of uncertainty, complexity, ambivalence and disorder, a growing distrust of social institutions and traditional authorities and an increasing awareness of the threats inherent in everyday life” (Lupton 1999, 12). In these views, risk has emerged as a key concept to understand and deal with many different aspects of existence in this turbulence. Moreover, sociocultural views highlight the cultural aspects of risk: risk is a label assigned to phenomena by people, in a social context. This implies that risk has more uses than as an input to a decision. For instance, people can invoke the concept to define appropriate behavior or to assign blame (Douglas 1966; Lupton 1999). Correspondingly, consumer cultural theory emphasizes that consumers are social actors and that purchase decisions are but one class of relevant behaviors to consider in consumer research (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Altogether, these perspectives suggest that the concept of risk could be fruitfully employed to further the understanding of brand change. The present study investigates how risk imbues consumer responses to a brand extension perceived to challenge traditional brand meanings.
RESEARCH APPROACH
The starting point for my investigation was to consider consumer responses to a controversial brand initiative. Specifically, I studied opinions towards a brand extension, as expressed in an internet discussion forum (cf. Brown, Kozinets, and Sherry 2003; Kozinets 2002). These opinions were collected in a public newsgroup for discussions among internet users interested in Porsche. They all concern the introduction of the first sports utility vehicle (SUV) in the company’s portfolio: Porsche Cayenne. For many people, this model constituted a significant departure from history and expectations. This case was chosen to allow enough consumer involvement for opinions towards the initiative to be articulated. Messages were consciously selected to give a novel understanding rather than to generalize across populations, akin to purposeful sampling (Kozinets 2002). I searched the newsgroup for comments on the Cayenne, made between June 1998, when the company first announced its plans, and December 2002, when the car reached the public. Messages expressing notions of risk were retrieved. In this assessment, I employed the aforementioned operationalization of risk as subjective expectations of loss (Peter and Ryan 1976; Stone and Gronhau 1993), as this was broad enough to suit the purposes of the research. Drawing on standard qualitative procedures (Spiggle 1994), I explored emerging themes through multiple iterations and comparison with literature. Through repeated readings of the messages, I examined the expressions of risk in consumer opinions towards brand change.

FINDINGS
The following sections detail the various expressions of risk that appear in the consumer comments. All comments are presented with idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation retained.

Risk is present beyond single transactions
The comments on Porsche Cayenne show that risk should be a relevant concept even outside the setting of an imminent purchase. The informants discuss Porsche and the new car independently of any concrete purchase decision. Still, notions of risk (again, as subjective expectations of loss), figure in the posts:

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 separate their cars from all the other cars on the market, they essentially lose “Porsche”. I love Porsche and don’t ever want to see that happen. Without Porsche, I may not be the autoenthusiast that i am. And I cannot imagine life like that. (posted by “Barry,” alt.autos.porsche, July 2001)

This expressive quote talks about the risk of “Porsche” getting lost. It also connects concerns over the future of the brand with the risk of a less enjoyable life for the poster. Risk for the company is intertwined with risk for the enthusiast. This link exists because the brand is a part of the poster’s life, regardless of whether he is about to purchase a new car or not. Rather, it is a relationship to the cars and brand of Porsche that is the basis for anxiety, beyond any single transaction with the company. Risk is relevant throughout the whole consumption process instead of merely at the purchase itself (Brunel and Pichon 2004); possibly even independent of any one purchase at all. Subsequent sections offer further details on this expanded view of risk.

Consumers worry about their brands: Brand risk
The data shows how consumers are concerned about risk pertaining to the company they depend on. Under the broad heading of Brand risk, three types of risk can be discerned, each affecting the Porsche company. Firstly, some posters draw attention to potential economic problems that they associate with the brand extension, such as insufficient demand, poor profitability, or financial instability. Such comments might be said to express an Initiative risk:

I honestly don’t see where they got the idea that the world needed another SUV and wanted it from Stuttgart. This project has just sucked away resources from the areas the company is already strong in, to an area where there’s nothing but risk for the company. (posted by “D.J.,” alt.autos.porsche, January 2002)

It’s an abomination. I predict the biggest flop in automotive history. (posted by “DMD,” alt.autos.porsche, April 2002)

Other messages cover perceived threats to the public reputation and image of the company brand. The data contain numerous comments on the risk that other people’s perceptions of the brand will change. These express Image risk:

Years down the track, when you think of buying a new sports car, the Porsche name might not be as “illustrious” as it once was due to cashing in on the SUV craze… (posted by “Dan,” alt.autos.porsche, August 2001)

Finally, Integrity risk captures fears that the extension violates a company essence or identity. The concern over the company “selling out” or disgracing the name does not depend on what other people will think about this (as in Image risk), but is more about principles and values:

Even my 81-one year old grand father could drive one, is that a positive thing??????? Porsche shouldn’t sell their soul, but it is happening in every new model they come up with……. (posted by “Adam Larsen,” alt.autos.porsche, January 2002)

This isn’t a Porsche vs. VW question, it’s a VW vs. dressed up VW question. It’s also a disgrace to the Porsche family name and an insult to me as a Porsche owner. (posted by “D.P.,” alt.autos.porsche, October 1998)

Consumers worry about their future with the brand: Relationship risk
In the previous section, consumers were shown to care about the risks facing a brand. The data examined also expresses risks that pertain more directly to the consumers themselves and their relationships with the brand. Mainstream literature on perceived risk recognizes the “performance risk” of a product not working properly or delivering functionally (e.g., Jacoby and Kaplan 1972). The present study suggests a need for a broader conceptualization such as Relationship risk, as new brand initiatives can make consumers wonder if the brand will be able to satisfy relevant needs in the future. These needs could be functional, as well as intangible, aesthetic, or hedonic:

Right now Porsche has pulled engineers from doing what they do best at Porsche (race and build those cars for their custom-
ers) to working on this truck so they can serve “the masses”. I don’t need another car built by a company to serve the masses.

(posted by “Barry,” alt.autos.porsche, July 2001)

[It] seems that it is a more of a Volvo Turbo Wagon on steroids; with a spiritless morphing of some select Porsche ‘accents’ or ‘styling cues’ just to gussy it up for the consumeratti. (posted by “noid,” alt.autos.porsche, March 2002)

The messages also express fears that the Image risk facing the brand will spill over and affect the consumer’s relationship with the brand, as their social needs will be less well served:

Man I hope they don’t produce those. I kinda like the idea of people knowing that when I say Porsche I own a sportscar! Porsche= Sportscar (posted by “JKL,” alt.autos.porsche, July 2001)

Consumers invest mental and material resources in relationships with brands, partly because they expect certain benefits. The comments illustrate how doubts about a brand’s ability to keep delivering these benefits introduce risk into the relationship. Such risk can also come from the threat of the brand taking on characteristics that are in conflict with the beliefs, values, or self-image of the consumer. Consumers who perceive the risk of subjective loss as too great may need to reframe their relationship to the brand. The following quote illustrates how substantial redefinitions can be triggered:

In my opinion, it’s disgusting that porsche would consider producing a truck. God, I hate those dam SUV’s enough already. How humiliating... ... If I’m ever in the market for a new performance car, Porsche will be automatically removed from consideration because of a stupid move like this. (posted by “Ultraforce,” alt.autos.porsche, February 2002)

These meaning-based risks bear some resemblance to the classic outline of social and psychological risks that Jacoby and Kaplan (1972) have put forward. The crucial distinction is that they consider only the purchase decision, explicitly discussing unfamiliar brands. In contrast, the notions that emerge in my study reflect the role of well-known brands in market relationships, identity work, and symbolic consumption (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

Using risk to make sense of brand disorder

What is the function of risk in consumer reasoning? The findings on Brand risk and Relationship risk indicate that consumers put the concept to further uses than only to inform purchase decisions. Consider also these quotes from posters in the Porsche newsgroup:

I (happy 996 owner) would not be CAUGHT DEAD in a Porsche SUV. That is even more pretentious and stupid that the Mercedes SUV. How many North Shore moms can get them and how fast?? (posted by “DanKing,” alt.autos.porsche, October 1998)

I still hold out a shred of hope that Porsche will have second thoughts and at least not market a version as a Porsche. What a gaffe! What a blunder! (posted by “S T Jones,” alt.autos.porsche, November 1998)

Here, risk seems to be invoked mainly to vent annoyance. Complaining can serve an intrapsychic function of catharsis, expressing frustration and reducing negative emotions (Kowalski 1996). When a new initiative threatens to upset the existing brand order, people are troubled and risk could provide a tool for getting things off one’s chest. This suggests that risk can be helpful in making sense of the unfamiliar. Risk is a label often assigned to phenomena that violate norms or expectations (Douglas 1966) and it has been described as “the cultural response to transgression: the outcome of breaking a taboo, crossing a boundary, committing a sin” (Lupton 1999, 45). Consumers may also use risk discourses for self-exploration: to try out perspectives, prepare for the future, and dampen potential realization of loss. Social comparison is a related function, as complaints prompt information about what other people think and feel (Kowalski 1996). By using risk to discuss and give meaning to threatening events, people may regain a sense of control and deal with negative feelings (Lupton 1999).

Using risk as a rhetorical resource

Another emergent use of risk is as a key argument in consumer-to-consumer recommendations and viewpoints. It provides a rationalized vocabulary, which can impress and persuade. Consider the quote below, leveraging risk to argue in favor of the Cayenne:

I don’t disagree with you, but Porsche is getting more and more obscure in the upper echelons of racing. MB and BMW are fielding very serious cars (as is Audi) because they have the capital to play in that arena. If BMW irons out its “8 problems” it might very well give Porsche everything it can handle in its own back yard. Porsche needs more cashflow to sustain it racing heritage. If the Beemers begin beating Porsche with consistency, it will hurt Porsche sales in the long run, making it more and more difficult to stay at the top. (posted by “Mike,” alt.autos.porsche, July 2001)

This kind of risk-fuelled word of mouth may be driven by conviction, when consumers feel obliged to persuade others that their view of the brand future is right. The quote also illustrates how some commentators, although a minority, draw attention to risks that the company might weaken without new initiatives. Regardless of viewpoint, risk can provide an opportunity for self-presentation, conveying impressions of desired attributes on an audience (Kowalski 1996). By discussing risks, consumers can appear faithful to “original” brand values, or just display expertise:

“SUV’s” are the single most profitable vehicle on the market today... or were. The day of the SUV is starting is drift into oblivion... cross-wagons are the new suburban rage. Therefore, Porsche/VW better get their SUV versions to market soon and they better be something extra special, because everybody and their brother already has one. The tide is beginning to shift. (posted by “Mike,” alt.autos.porsche, July 2001)

DISCUSSION

This study is exploratory in nature, with the aim to stimulate interest and provoke thought, primarily on brand change and secondarily on the role of risk in consumer research. A specific limitation to acknowledge is that the data originates from a brand that has a more devoted following than the average brand. It should also be noted that the study deals with a brand initiative that is planned and pre-announced, so that consumer comments are based on anticipation rather than actual outcomes. Nonetheless, the study demonstrates the value in expanding the traditional view of risk in consumer research to inform our understanding of brands.
In sum, the consumer data presented makes risk a visible element in responses to brand change. A basic belief in consumer culture theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005), is that research should cover more behaviors than choice and purchases. To this end, the present study adds to current initiatives to broaden consumer research on risk (Thompson 2005). The study also calls for recognition that risk can take on shapes different from the ones prevalent in existing research. Such new shapes were discussed under two major headings: Brand risk (with sub-headings of Initiative risk, Image risk, and Integrity risk) and Relationship risk. The traditional view holds that consumers often attempt to reduce perceived risk in a purchase by being loyal to a brand (Roselius 1971). The present study suggests that such loyalty, while reducing some risks, may in fact bring on new facets of risk. Finally, the findings reflect the role of risk as an organizing construct in sensemaking and debate. Overall, the study contributes to an emerging body of knowledge on the complications of strong consumer-brand linkages (e.g., Aaker et al. 2004; Thompson et al. 2006), by examining how such bonds can create resistance to brand change and by positioning risk as a pivotal concern to brand enthusiasts.

Taking a step back, one might ask whether comments can express risk even in cases when their explicit content primarily deals with negative consequences for the brand rather than direct effects for the commentators. The question is justified as most consumer research on risk is focused on consumers who experience risk because they themselves face unfavorable consequences. On the other hand, some previous research implies that consumers can indeed experience risk also when the unfavorable consequences pertain to other people and entities, such as the environment (Ekström and Askegaard 2000), a member of the family (Stone and Grønhaug 1993), or other people who are important to the person (Freiw, Scholderer, and Bredahl 2003). Like empathy responses, such vicarious experiences indicate that enthusiasts actually could take on expectations of loss for a brand as their own (cf., Escalas and Stern 2003). Risks pertaining to brands may be relevant to enthusiasts in a similar way that risks pertaining to sports teams are relevant to dedicated fans, or even how risks pertaining to children are relevant to their parents, to extend the metaphor of a brand as a relationship partner (Fournier 1998). The more consumers identify with a brand, the more they might be expected to experience risks in a personal manner. Conversely, low personal stakes could facilitate meaningful distinctions between risks facing consumers themselves and risks facing the brands. Such distinctions are difficult to make within the scope of the present study, with the data it draws on, but could perhaps be explored in future research.

Recognizing how risk perceptions can imbue consumer responses to controversial brand initiatives has practical and theoretical implications relating to brand meaning management. For instance, the risk perspective highlights why brand change so easily meets with protests: People judge risks of action worse than risks of non-action, due to an “omission bias” (Baron 2004). Even if consumers judge the fit between a brand and a new initiative as acceptable, other factors could contribute to feelings of risk. Such factors could be the scale of the new initiative (e.g., the size of investment relative to the current business), decision irreversibility, salience of similar initiatives that have failed, or alignment with moral values. The outcome of a change initiative is thus dependent on how perceptions of Brand risk and Relationship risk are managed, primarily through communication.

One might argue that general consumer audiences have other things on their minds than risk factors and that marketers be wise not to draw attention to them. However, marketers are not in full control of risk perceptions. The study findings clearly show how brand enthusiasts themselves generate and circulate risk-imbed accounts of brand change. The significance of risk is problematic for managers who are looking to secure support and advocacy from a loyal core of consumers. Brand enthusiasts might easily identify risks as the ones discussed in this paper, whereas they see direct benefits accrue to others, such as shareholders and new consumer segments. Researchers have repeatedly shown that marketers do not have a monopoly on the making of the symbolic meanings of brands. Consumers are highly involved in the exploration and co-creation of brand meanings (e.g., Arnould and Thompson 2005; Brown et al. 2003). The opinions about Porsche Cayenne illustrate how consumers can use highly rationalized arguments, cast in a language often associated with business management, in the construction of a brand story. Thus, it becomes even clearer how consumers can take on roles as “unofficial officials”, as they assume not only a task (in terms of creating brand meaning), but also a rhetoric (in terms of a risk vocabulary), traditionally assigned to company managers. The findings thus contribute to the literature on brand meaning management by showing how risk is mobilized as a resource in an argument over values (cf. Thompson 2005). Designating the Cayenne as a risk allows “genuine” Porsche ideals and idealists to be valorized.

Heritage is respected and celebrated by assigning blame to an allegedly unwise or greedy management. If engaged consumers feel disfranchised in relation to corporate power in general and the particular company management in particular, they may at least restore some pride by challenging current practices. Disputing the wisdom of a decision may then be a more potent approach than only invoking feelings about what the brand is about. Where personal beliefs appear subjective, irrational, and unconvincing, risk appears objective, rational, and compelling.

The practical influence of vocal consumers can be considerable, as word of mouth diffuses to a wider audience. Managers would be wise to consider the arousing property of risk and to seek out and diagnose brand enthusiast beliefs in internet discussions or other community fora. If risky initiatives stir brand enthusiasts to widespread expressions of their concerns, this might set off a downward spiral for the brand. Even if “pessimists” are few, their influence might be considerable if risk-imbed opinions are transmitted through the media and internet to more mainstream consumers (cf. Thompson et al. 2006). However, addressing risk perceptions head on is probably tricky. Refutations of unfavorable consumer claims have been found to easily backfire and increase the salience of the claims (e.g., Skurnik et al. 2005). Ignoring risk perceptions might be an effective strategy for broad marketing communications, but are there better options when dealing with brand enthusiasts? Inviting citizens to participate in dialog before decisions has been a strategy widely discussed in the risk literature (cf., Arvai 2003; Tuler 2000). Can risk be neutralized or even presented as a strength rather than a weakness, perhaps by exploiting the potential for pleasure and progress in risk-taking (cf., Arnould and Price 1993; Celsi et al 1993; Lupton 1999)? Future investigations should examine the consequences of different communication strategies for risk perceptions relating to brands.

Risk is a perennial construct in the social sciences. Accordingly, it is multifaceted and definitions are manifold (cf. Conchar et al. 2004; Lupton 1999; Mitchell 1999). This study used a broad definition, which admittedly leaves open the possibility of overlaps between risk and other constructs in consumer research. Efforts to systematically juxtapose them and probe the boundaries might generate additional insight into the significance of risk for an expanded range of consumer behaviors.
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