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Mobilizing the Responsible Consumer: Multi-Level Risk Narratives in Subpolitical Debates

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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

Risk consumption has become part of consumers' lives and the ability to assess risks a central quality of consumers (Beck 1999; Giddens 1991). On a daily basis, consumers are confronted with risks related to food consumption (Halkier 2001, 2010; Tulloch and Lupton 2002), health (Chandran and Menon 2004; Menon, Block, and Ramanathan 2002), the environment (Humphreys and Thompson 2014; Roper 2011), and many others. While consumers can control or avoid some risks, they cannot control others. Often, they rely on expert systems traditionally charged with minimizing risks for mankind (Giddens 1991; Humphreys and Thompson 2014). Eventually, expert systems "negotiate the criteria of what is 'rational and safe'" and what is risky, and fabricate the right thing to do (Beck 1999, 32).

With the rise of the responsible consumer (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), a shift in decision-making responsibilities occurred. In many consumption fields, such as the consumption of GM food (Tulloch and Lupton 2002), expert systems obliged consumers to handle risk on their own and introduced consumers to politicized consumption (Clarke 2008; Halkier 1999). In other cases, in which consumption practices are not directly related to risks, consumers are still not involved in risk assessment processes. Thus, though consumers have many responsibilities (Henry 2010), their decision-making rights are still limited. This has led to numerous subpolitical debates, in which consumers express their doubts about the risk assessments of expert systems and aim to shape societal development outside official political frameworks (Beck 1999). As such, risks can play a vital role in subpolitical debates; Beck even argues that risks are a "major force of political mobilization" (1999, 4). Consumer research so far investigates how the media shapes risk narratives and amplifies consumers' perceptions of risk (Humphreys and Thompson 2014) and how other factors influence consumer risk perceptions (Celsi, Rose, and Leigh 1993; Dowling and Staelin 1994; Menon, Block, and Ramanathan 2002). However, consumers, together with other actors, such as NGOs or activist groups, are not mere perceivers of risk but part of the collective construction and dynamic shaping of risk in the public realm. Yet, how do consumers take part in the construction of risk narratives in subpolitical debates?

This study addresses this question through an empirical investigation of a subpolitical debate expressing doubt about environmental governance. More specifically, this study investigates public discourse surrounding the impending merger of two ski areas in the European Alps that would necessitate changes to nature reserve regulations and thus subvert the authority of nature conservation law in general. Findings contribute to consumer research by shifting the attention to consumers' multi-level risk production and mobilization in the public realm, and by highlighting the relevance of risk in consumer citizenship.

THEORY

Reflexive Doubt and Subpolitical Debates

The rise of the risk society has witnessed an increasing consciousness of risks (Beck 1992, 1999, 2009; Giddens 1991) and "societal demands for environmental and social protection" (Roper 2011, 70). Thus, many governmental and non-governmental institutions are charged with risk management; they monitor sources of risks and impose laws, regulations, and industry standards that are based on previously defined criteria of acceptable risk levels. These and other expert systems (Giddens 1991) operate based on the assumption that risk can be controlled (Wong and King 2008) and that consumers are relieved from risk anxieties because they can trust in expert knowledge and decisions (Giddens 1991; Humphreys and Thompson 2014; Thompson 2005; Tsoukas 1999).

However, due to increased cultural awareness of risks, consumer responsibility (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), and complexity of interwoven risks, consumers developed a level of skepticism and critical reflection regarding risks and their assessments. Actual crises resulting from failures of expert systems and the multiplicity of actors supposedly trying to influence risk assessments for their own benefits, further raised consumers' reflexive doubt toward expert systems (Giddens 1991; Humphreys and Thompson 2014; Thompson 2005). Inevitably, this lack of trust leads to public debates, in which expert systems are required to legitimate their actions vis-à-vis the public, and responsible consumers challenge and question the decisions and actions of expert systems. These public debates can become subpolitical debates, in which actors try to shape "society from below" and influence political decisions "outside and beyond the representative institutions of the political system of nation-states" (Beck 1999, 39). Roper underlines the power of subpolitics when she argues that "the subpolitical (Beck, 1997) uprising of society in response to risk can present an ultimatum [to corporations and the government]: change or suffer a fundamental loss of trust, reputation and legitimacy" (2011, 71). While previous research focuses on subpolitical risk narratives produced in media coverage (e.g., Tsoukas 1999), this article argues that other actors, such as consumers, governmental actors, NGOs, and activist communities, are not mere passive receivers of media amplifications (Russell and Babrow 2011), but contribute actively to subpolitical debates. Considering these unmediated voices together with media coverage allows for a more differentiated perspective on debates of reflexive doubt and the role of risk in shaping political action (Russell and Babrow 2011).

Risk Construction and Perception

"Risk is the modern approach to foresee and control the future consequences […]. It is an (institutionalized) attempt, a cognitive map, to colonize the future" (Beck 1999, 3).

Risks do not exist independently but only become nascent in their social construction (Beck 1999). Research investigates consumers' construction of risk as part of their biographies (Tulloch and Lupton 2002) and identities (Thompson 2005) and explicates how they are linked to mindful consumption choices (Halkier 2001), values of anti-consumption (Thompson and Troester 2002), and articulations of cultural anxieties (Humphreys and Thompson 2014;

Figure 1: Timeline of Events and Risk Narratives

Timeline	Protagonist Narratives	Antagonist Narratives
April 2014		
initial expert study is published	*Deeming economic downfall* the survival of the region is at stake	doubt about economic viability of project; raising environmental and legal issues
state government cannot get to a unanimous result and delegates the decision to state parliament	"It's only about two ski lift pillars"	legal issues scaled: also other nature reserves are in danger
online petition against merger starts		"Do you really think these two pillars will change everything to the better?"
ca. 4,000 people have signed the petition		"So what? Close the ski resorts" "There are more pending problems"
ca.13,000 people have signed the petition		
activist groups form		
activist groups present their positions in public: two are against (one is more prominent in the beginning), one is in favor of the project		compromise featured on one of the activist group's website: nature park/ sustainable tourism
legal expert: project is not legal	fewer risk narratives about the economic downfall	"What is law worth today?"
survey: 2/3 of the people are against the project		
state parliament commissions expert reports		
ca. 25,000 people have signed the petition		
	new focus on the *positive impulse* of the merger	
launch of the website of activist group in favor of the project		
survey: 51% of the people are against the merger (different initiators and set up)	future perspective antagonists prohibit progress and spread anxiety "Two pillars are not the end of the world"	
Regional Economic Chamber publishes study on the project's positive economic consequences	"What is the alternative?"	
ca. 33,000 people have signed the petition		
results of the expert reports are published		
March 2015		

discussion framed as political struggle

Deeming economic downfall

A positive impulse

Civic risk narratives

Environmental destruction narratives

Disauthentication narratives

Thompson 2005). Findings reveal that consumers' perceptions of risk are influenced by message cues (Menon, Block, and Ramanathan 2002), media reporting (Humphreys and Thompson 2014; Russell and Babrow 2011; Yannopoulou, Koronis, and Elliott 2011), and expert knowledge (Wynne 1996). Consumers take up risk-related pieces of information and negotiate them, together with their direct experiences of risk (Kasperson et al. 1988), based on their own socio-culturally induced judgments (Halkier 2001; Thompson 2005; Tulloch and Lupton 2002; Wynne 1996).

Actors employed this influenceability of consumers' perceptions to foster reflexive doubt in others and mobilize political action (Beck 1999). Especially "consumer activists, alternative-minded consumers, dissident scientists, and muckraking journalists" (Thompson 2005, 236) are well known for seizing single crisis events, and scaling them to systemic risks as being symptomatic of ill-functioning expert systems (Humphreys and Thompson 2014) and the interconnectedness of the global risk society (Beck 2009). While single risks are often amplified and scaled, global, systemic risk narratives and constructions of a "collective fate" also invade micro level risk perceptions and become localized and integrated into consumers' "personal biographies" (Beck 1992; Tulloch and Lupton 2002, 366). This study acknowledges not only the role of risk narratives in amplifying risk perceptions, but aims to draw attention to the multiple levels (from discrete/micro to systemic/macro) on which risks can be constructed and used in contexts of consumer mobilization.

METHODOLOGY

This study investigates a subpolitical debate revolving around the planned merger of two ski areas in the European Alps. The mobilization of multiple actors and the production of a vast amount of discourse of reflexive doubt motivated the decision to investigate this case. Central to the controversy about the merger of the ski areas is its cultural and socio-political context. Ski tourism is inherent to the region's cultural DNA and powers large parts of its economy.

News media discourses are important forces in shaping the public opinion in general (Meraz 2009) and risk perceptions in particular (Humphreys and Thompson 2014). Thus, this study examines online newspaper articles and comments on them, as well as on- and offline material provided by relevant actors. For data collection, the author chose two national and one regional newspaper (with the most detailed coverage) and made sure to include both left- and right-wing outlets to avoid media bias. Relevant newspaper articles were identified through online keyword search, which resulted in more than 100 articles and their reader comments. In addition, the author included press releases and data material provided by political parties and their representatives, the Regional Economic Chamber, and the activist groups campaigning for and against the project (e.g., pictures, website texts, video clips, additional articles referred to in primary material). The corpus of data material for the analysis spans the time period from April 2014 to the beginning of March 2015 and includes more than 300 documents.

In the first stage of data analysis the author scanned through the data and, in an open coding process, identified major actors and themes (Corbin and Strauss 2008). In the second stage the author conducted a discourse analysis based on poststructuralist assumptions, thus aiming to incorporate the "sociocultural and institutional" backgrounds of actors (Humphreys and Thompson 2014, 884; Thompson and Haytko 1997). The next stage comprised the development of a timeline of events (see figure 1) that included information on relevant actors and quotations (Humphreys and Thompson 2014). The focus of analysis was the actors' construction and framing of risk narratives and the level those narratives referred to (discrete/mi-

cro vs. systemic/macro; see table 1). While data exhibited two basic discourse coalitions (for and against the merger), the author further analyzed narrative patterns with the help of three central characteristics suggested for stakeholder identification: power, urgency, and legitimacy of actors (Mitchell, Agle, and Wood 1997).

FINDINGS

Deeming Economic Downfall

First reflexive doubt about the planned merger of two ski areas arose when an expert system, a task force commissioned by the state(*) government (*Landesregierung*), presented a study claiming that the merger across the nature reserve was the only economically viable solution for the economic survival of the region. The state government and the task force show high levels of power and urgency. From the beginning of this controversy, expert systems in favor of the merger, such as representatives of the conservative party and the task force, use a discrete and dominant risk narrative about the impending economic downfall of the region to maintain legitimacy. A politician argued: *"Each of the ski areas will not be able survive on its own"* (Mittelstaedt 2014). A local newspaper reported about the planned merger and added comments by locals and members of the task force arguing that people in the region depended on ski tourism and were fighting for their existence. Over time, the narrative of the deeming economic downfall is weakened by the opposition and gradually taken over by a more positively framed narrative.

Antagonists put forward a multiplicity of risk narratives aimed at mobilizing against the expert system and reframing protagonists' arguments (Benford and Snow 2000). Several activist groups against the merger formed; the most prominent one consists of individuals, NGOs, and companies, all featured with statements on their website. Especially NGOs involved enjoy high levels of legitimacy and claim high urgency due to their local orientation. They aim at mobilizing people to sign a petition against the merger, but their power is limited, as the petition is not legally binding. In the end the state parliament is going to make the final decision. Risk narratives were also nourished by individual consumers with different levels of urgency writing reader comments for regional and national newspaper articles. Overall, opposition against the merger reveals three thematically unified strands of risk narratives varying on a continuum between "discrete/micro" and "systemic/macro" levels: *civic risk*, *environmental destruction*, and *disauthentication narratives*.

CIVIC RISK NARRATIVES

Civic risk narratives are the most dominant narratives among antagonists. They revolve around the general economic, legal, and political risks of the region. On a discrete level, mostly used by activist groups and political parties, civic risk narratives argue that the merger would not support people living in the region, but rather reinforce their dependence on tourism. Even in the case of these discrete narratives, actors employ a long-term perspective, envisioning the future consequences of touristic dependence and accusing protagonists of shortsightedness. One fringe party continuously pointed toward the partial tax financing of the project; thus revealing a systemic risk in public financing. Media coverage contains the controversy by reducing it to a political issue, but also scales civic risk narratives by picturing the case of the financially stricken region to be symptomatic for an overall failure in tourism development and relating it to several examples of politically motivated interventions into nature. An expert on ecological regulations agreed in the press that it was unbelievable how, in today's society, it could be possible to question an environmental regulation and that this case would

set precedent. Similar risk narratives are visible among reader comments discussing what consequence it would have if laws no longer had any authority and nature was not assigned any (monetary) value. Overall, civic narratives of systemic risk diagnose a failure in regional politics and legislature.

Environmental Destruction Narratives

Environmental destruction narratives in subpolitical discourse range from discrete to high-consequence risks (Giddens 1991). On a micro level, actors regard the building of the ski lift and the subsequent increasing *invasion* in the nature reserve as a risk, because flora and fauna of the *jewel of nature* would be destroyed. On a meso-level, the merger could entail the building of more lifts in other nature reserves and, consequently, further destruction of nature (which would not benefit tourism either). Whereas activist groups and political actors mostly use micro- and meso-level risk narratives, individual actors and the media discuss large time frames and scale risks to a macro, high-consequence level. They link ski tourism expansion, energy expenditures, higher temperatures, rising snowlines, and further energy expenditures for artificial snowing. *"It reminds me of Noah's ark! We don't mind what happens in the future. No matter if snowfall decreases, and snow cannons use vast amounts of energy and water…"* (reader comment, national newspaper, July 17, 2014).

Disauthentication Narratives

Disauthentication narratives are least dominant among subpolitical discourse. Actors construct this narrative both on a micro-level by specifically referring to the respective nature reserve and on a macro-level by referring to nature or the region's identity in general. These narratives often relate to a conceptualization of nature as part of our ancestors' legacy and thus as integral part of the identity of the region that must be honored. A fringe party claimed: "*We must not waste nature lavishly otherwise we are well on our way to losing the soul of our country*" (data material provided by fringe party). Also from a macro perspective, actors argued that the advertising value so far created with pictures of the pristine nature reserve would be lost. One more narrative of impending disauthentication is related to the act of hiking up the mountain—a kind of purifying practice (Canniford and Shankar 2013)—versus simply taking the lift. By making it easy to get on top of the mountain, more people would seize this opportunity and the so far untouched mountain would lose its exclusivity and authenticity. Actors produced systemic risks by addressing the role of authenticity in tourism in general. One newspaper column

Table 1: Overview of (Multi-Level) Risk Narratives

Narratives	Data Excerpts	
***Deeming economic downfall* (protagonists)**	*Without major changes, the future looks bleak.* **(additional newspaper material, Kurier, April 29, 2014)**	
	Alarm signal. The Regional Economic Chamber affirms their opinion about the [merger]. **(Regional Economic Chamber, 2014)**	
	Discrete/micro level risk narratives	**Systemic/macro level risk narratives**
***Civic risk narratives* (antagonists)**	*The whole project is not economically sustainable and wastes our taxes. Let's fight for nature!* **(statement of individual consumer, featured on website of activist group)**	*Yes, two pillars and one rope are not a big intervention into nature, but it is no longer just about that. It is about the credibility of environmental policy in our country.* **(president of national NGO, featured on website of activist group)**
	Overall, only a few people working in the tourism sector would benefit, mainly in the region, while the rest of the local people would not benefit, but rather be negatively affected. **(additional data material, Cincelli 2014)**	*They are not giving up. For years, money has been transferred from the good people (those who actually work) to the rich and to banks, without fulfilling their duty of dealing responsibly with our taxes. Now they are going for the nature. Without caring for the local people.* **(reader comment, regional newspaper, September 5, 2014)**
***Environmental destruction narratives* (antagonists)**	*[It] would be a huge crime against nature to disfigure this unique [area].* **(statement of individual consumer, featured on website of activist group)**	*Besides, the Alps, a fragile ecosystem, will soon get to feel the consequences of climate change.* **(Pircher 2014)**
		[The whole project is unnecessary.] One can only hope that climate change will soon cause many snowless winters! **(reader comment, regional newspaper, July 8, 2015)**
***Disauthentication narratives* (antagonists)**	*[The area] is unique – but we have plenty of ski lifts, ropeways, and ski lift pillars!* **(data material provided by fringe party)**	*Only the barrier of effort saves the most beautiful places on earth from profanization and sellout.* **(statement of individual consumer, featured on website of activist group)**
***A positive impulse* (protagonists)**	*A "Yes" to [the region], is a "yes" to the heart of [the region's] economy – the region is an alpine tourist region*. **(Regional Economic Chamber 2015)**	
	The merger would make a big difference. […] I believe that with the help of an attractive ski area, the economy in general will be revived. **(statement of individual consumer, featured on website of activist group)**	

argued that by losing more and more of its identity and authenticity, the country would also attract fewer tourists.

A Positive Impulse

Due to public pressure and political discord, the state parliament (*Landtag*) approved another external evaluation of the merger's financial, legal, and environmental issues that would help them in their decision. Activist groups for and against the merger continued their campaigns and refined their messages. The activist group in favor of the merger launched a website on which it exclusively refers to the positive impulse of the project for the region. The Regional Economic Chamber promoted the importance of ski tourism for the economy and prepared a study supporting the positive economic consequences of the merger. While protagonists initially addressed the cultural anxiety of depletion, they now concentrate on delivering a narrative that glorifies the project as the saving grace responsible for prosperity in the region in the first place and the remedy for present and future economic problems. Those opposed to the merger only prevent progress from taking shape.

In the end, the expert report states that the changes proposed to nature conservation law were unconstitutional and against international law. As a result, the state parliament decided against the merger. Soon afterwards, however, another legal expert came to the opposite result and some actors argued that the merger could still be possible. This underlines the effect of the subpolitical debate in this controversy.

DISCUSSION

This article investigates how consumers among other actors engage in a debate of reflexive doubt toward environmental governance and political mobilization and outlines the dynamic construction of risk narratives. Protagonists produce the dominant and discrete risk narrative of the *deeming economic downfall* of the region to legitimize their position. Over time, this narrative is met with reflexive doubt and gets replaced by another discrete narrative focusing on the *positive impulse* of the project. In contrast, antagonists successfully mobilize for their cause by spreading a bundle of complex, multi-level risk narratives that vary on a continuum from "discrete/micro" to "systemic/macro". In response to protagonists' initial narrative concerned with the region's economic welfare, antagonists counter with *civic risk narratives* concerned with the economic, legal and political risks involved. All actors discuss the risks of *environmental destruction* and often relate them to economic consequences. Political and activist formations produce many discrete risk narratives that are backed up with immediate facts. Media coverage shows a high density of systemic risks, especially when featuring expert opinions (e.g., legal or tourism experts) and building systems of similar cases. Local actors but also actors with low urgency and legitimacy, such as readers commenting articles in the national newspapers, produce abstract risk narratives, as those discussed as *disauthentication narratives*.

This study contributes to an understanding of risk in consumer research by highlighting the importance of consumers as producers of risk narratives in the public realm. Consumers fulfill an important role in raising reflexive doubt in expert systems, as they are able to produce risk narratives on multiple levels. They are, for example, featured with pictures and statements on activist groups' websites and set risk narratives in a personal (micro) context. At the same time, however, they anticipate systemic and even high-consequence risks. Especially when the media framed the discussion as a political struggle, consumers continued to produce also economic, legal, and environmental risk narratives. Overall, the scope and variation of risk narratives seems to be decisive for the potential of risk narratives

in mobilization. This coalesces with assumptions that more people can be mobilized by addressing a wider range of issues (Gerhards and Rucht 1992). Moreover, the study finds that consumers employ a plurality of logics or social worlds (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Patriotta, Gond, and Schultz 2011), from which they are able to shape risk debates into a multiplicity of directions. Future research should dive deeper into the role of consumers in opening up the range and levels of risk narratives.

Findings further contribute to an understanding of the relation between risk narratives and consumer mobilization as they show that risk narratives play a role in framing action and winning supporters against expert systems. First, some risk narratives exhibit all three attributes of diagnostic framing (Klandermans 1984): "causality, blame, and/or culpable agents" (Benford and Snow 2000, 616). Especially systemic risks necessarily involve culpable agents; *civic risk narratives* for example blame the state government for systemic economic and legal failures in the region. Overall, most risk narratives relate (directly or indirectly) to culpable agents and rarely exploit macro-level or high-consequence risks in which both causal relations and culprits are unclear. One exception might be *environmental destruction narratives* scaled to issues of global warming. Second, the scaling of discrete risk narratives can be regarded as a frame extension, which makes frames relevant to more potential adherents (Benford and Snow 2000; Berbier 1998). The risk of *disauthentication* becomes relevant to more people by scaling it from a risk concerning a specific place to one that could affect the region's economic attractiveness. Third, risk narratives can be interpreted as motivational framings, as they inevitably point at the urgency and severity of risks (Benford 1993; Benford and Snow 2000). The narrative of the *deeming economic downfall*, with allusions to the death of the region, illustrates this perfectly.

Lastly, findings contribute to the notion of consumer citizenship and the responsible consumer (Giesler and Veresiu 2014) as they situate micro-level risk production to macro-level, sociocultural and environmental settings (Askegaard and Linnet 2011) and consumer mobilization. While so far, research concentrated on the promotion or creation of consumer responsibility by media (Humphreys and Thompson 2014), experts, and governance regimes (Giesler and Veresiu 2014), this study argues that various actors, including consumers themselves, can further consumer citizenship (Rokka and Moisander 2009). Many consumers feel empowered to make risk assessments and seek to mobilize political participation (Connolly and Prothero 2008). Thus, in line with Beck (1999) and Stevenson (2002), this study calls policy makers' attention to the need for "public forms of dialogue," in which a mutual exchange between expert systems and the public is made possible (Stevenson 2002, 312). Further research is needed to better understand how the formation of and contribution to subpolitical debates can be facilitated.

(*) The term "state" (as in "state government" or "state parliament") refers to "Bundesland," an administrative unit similar to a province or a county.

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