


Conceptualising the World Risk Society thesis of Ulrich Beck in the context of the discipline of Marketing

Dr Cornelius H. Bothma
University of South Africa

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2256-5056>

bothmch@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The World Risk Society thesis put forward by Ulrich Beck has generated considerable debate around the topic of global risk, mainly in the social sciences, but to a limited extent in the marketing sciences. His thesis outlines his concern that society has reached a third epoch of development which he refers to as reflexive modernity in which society is inadvertently manufacturing or creating 'uncertainties or risks that are so catastrophically severe that they may destroy humankind. Marketers would typically be tasked with marketing the creations of industry, including these same products that unwittingly could destroy our world or the society in it. This article posits that responsible marketers should strive to be aware of these risks, in as far as they can, and their respective roles in promoting such risks. The paradox is that we do not know what these risks are – they are unknown unknowns. The challenge society and the marketing community within society, has, therefore, is how to become aware of potentially globally catastrophic unknown risks. Beck puts forward his vision of a cosmopolitan society that is aware of and capable of dealing with such ubiquitous global risks. Other authors have also touched on ways of coping with the World Risk Society in the context of their respective fields. This article reports on a discussion of the World Risk Society thesis and related literature and urges that attention to be given to this challenge, particularly by the marketing community, otherwise the inaction on the part of society to deal with the World Risk Society may be the very risk that destroys society.

Keywords: World Risk Society, Ulrich Beck, global catastrophe, global risk, unknown risk, marketing and risk

JEL Classification code: D81

1. INTRODUCTION

This article examines the World Risk Society thesis of Ulrich Beck in the context of marketing and proffers suggestions for the marketing community going forward. 'Risk Society' is a term first introduced by Ulrich Beck (1986) in his German-language book entitled: *Risikogesellschaft – Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne*. This book was translated into English as: *Risk Society¹: Towards a New Modernity* (Beck 1992). Beck later expanded the Risk Society concept to refer to the World Risk Society (Beck 1996, 1). For the sake of brevity this article will use the term Risk Society in lieu of World Risk Society. Beck argued that in the era of modern society, global risks have arisen, or could arise, that are likely to threaten the world and humankind. He further argues that society does not know what these threats are – they are, as yet, unknown (Beck 1992, 19). Beck draws on the work of Giddens (1998, 94) on 'modern modernity' ("a shorthand term for modern society"), and others, to explain his views on 'reflexive modernity'. He argues that 'reflexive modernity' is about "self-confrontation"; a society that "through the automatic operation of autonomous modernisation processes, which are blind and deaf to consequences and dangers, ... produce hazards [global risks] which call into question – indeed abolish – the basis of society", essentially a circular relationship between cause and effect (Beck 1996, 28).

Drawing on his definition of reflexive modernity, Beck (1992, 131) refers to "manufactured risks" which are risks that have paradoxically arisen because of modern society striving to address the challenges and known current risks of modern society – the reflexive modernity referred to in the previous paragraph. Thus, for example, as the health sector strives to find drugs to fight a new pandemic, so, unwittingly, these new drugs may hold risks for society that are not yet known. Reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been much written in the academic literature about the possible long-term risk of the vaccine, resulting in what is referred to as vaccine hesitancy (that is, reluctance to use the vaccine). Indeed, Scopus and Web of Science (WoS) each have more than 5 000 articles dealing with vaccine hesitancy in the COVID pandemic – this is in less than five years highlighting the perceived threat of the supposedly life-saving vaccines. It should be noted, however, that Beck's manufactured risks do not include the reality of the COVID-19 virus, which health authorities are adamant had natural origins (Roose 2020), but only the response to the virus. This suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic was rather a *Black Swan* event as articulated by Taleb (2007). Black Swan events are discussed later in the article.

This example of man-made drugs resulting in a global risk not yet known, can be extrapolated to other sectors; consider the risk of nuclear energy which is used to address the problem of energy shortages, or the risk of genetically modified foods that are being developed to address food shortages, or the risk of artificial intelligence developed to address the need to automate human and machine activities, and the risk of unabated greenhouse gasses from manufacturing activities to quell humankind's consumption needs, that have led to climate change. These 'solutions' to current problems may hold global risks that ultimately destroy society even though the risks are not yet known.

The importance of the Risk Society thesis in the context of marketing, is evidenced by the growing focus on societal marketing. There is an increasing awareness of the importance and impact of society on marketing activities as can be exemplified by the definition of marketing by the American Marketing Association who state that "Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." (AMA 2024). The focus on society is not present in earlier definitions of marketing such as that of Kotler (2005) who describes marketing as "the science and art of exploring, creating and delivering value to satisfy the needs of a target market at a profit."

Despite the increasing awareness and importance of society at large for marketers, and although the theories of Beck are extensively discussed in the academic literature, the marketing literature contains very little discussion of the Risk Society² thesis. A search³ on the Scopus and WoS bibliographies (title, abstract and keywords), reveals only six unique articles dealing with Beck's Risk Society thesis. These are discussed in the literature review section below.

1 For the sake of clarity 'Risk Society' (and later 'World Risk Society') are generally written without 'The' as part of the title.

2 The search was limited to journals with 'marketing' in the title, combined with the key phrase 'risk society'. 'Risk society' was used rather than 'world risk society', as the former would result in a wider set of results compared with the latter). Risk Society instead of World Risk Society is also generally used in the discussion of this paper.

3 The search algorithm used was ("risk society" AND "Beck" AND "marketing").

None of these provide any universal guidance on how this risk should be dealt with by marketers. This shortcoming – the lack of any guidelines for marketers to address unknown global risks – is the ‘information gap’ or problem that this paper attempts to address.

2. RESEARCH QUESTION AND OBJECTIVE

Derived from the problem identified above, namely the lack of a practical solution to addressing unknown global risks, the research question that this study attempts to address is: *What conceptual marketing approach can be put forward to deal with the ‘unknown unknowns’ as embodied in the Risk Society thesis?*

Based on the research question, the primary research objective of this study which draws on the related literature, can be said to explore conceptual ideas that can be used as a starting point to develop a way forward in managing the challenge of global risk as envisaged in the Risk Society thesis, from a marketing context. It should be noted that Beck’s work is embedded in the world of sociology, as is much of the commentary surrounding his work. This article, in contrast, strives to take a marketing perspective on his work and to challenge the marketing community to consider solutions on how to deal with the Risk Society thesis.

The discussion that follows is divided into four parts. The first describes the Risk Society thesis, followed by possible broad responses to the Risk Society. This Risk Society focus then turns to a focus on marketing in the Risk Society, ending in a discussion on the way forward for the marketing community in terms of the Risk Society.

3. RISK SOCIETY

In his 1992 book referred to earlier, Beck proposes a theory of Risk Society. In later articles, Beck (1996) expands this term to ‘World Risk Society’. By this he means a world that is constrained by global risks that society has unwittingly created in its attempt to deal with existing problems and other risks that exist at the time. Thus, as an example, in attempting to create solutions to the shortage of energy, society has adopted nuclear energy as one source of energy, but in doing so this ‘solution’ has already brought with it new global risks as reflected in the Chernobyl (Beck 1987, 153–165) and Fukushima nuclear disasters (Beck 2013a, 4). Matten (2004, 377) points out that Beck’s first work, Risk Society, was largely driven by the environmental context in the middle of the 1980s (1986 was the year of Chernobyl, the carbon dioxide disaster in Cameroon, an extensive chemical spill in Basel, Switzerland, and the Green Peace sinking of two whaling ships [Environmental History Timeline 2016]). The general concerns with undesired ‘side-effects’ of environmental disasters at the time, served as the context for Risk Society (Matten 2004, 377).

3.1 WORLD RISK SOCIETY

In his writings, Beck (1992) envisaged three epochs of risk and society. In the first epoch – which he referred to as traditional society (also referred to by others as ‘pre-modernity’ [Jarvis 2007, 30]) – he deals with early man prior to the era of capitalism and industrialisation in the 18th and 19th centuries. During this period, risk as a concept was generally unknown to humankind. Catastrophes, almost exclusively natural disasters and epidemics outside of the control of humankind, occurred and early humans largely accepted their lot (Beck [1992] referred to these catastrophes as ‘hazards’) (Sørensen & Christiansen 2013).

In the second epoch, which Beck refers to as ‘modernity’ (or early modernity [Roxburgh n.d.]), Beck (1992) argues that humankind entered the modern era of individualisation, social classes, nuclear families, integrated societies and nation states, as well as of capitalism and industrialisation. Churches, which were often at the centre of feudal life, gave way to new institutions and structures, namely businesses and organisations that came to dominate the second epoch (Roxburgh n.d.). In this second epoch, “...hazards would come to be gradually replaced and supplemented by man-made risks...”, although these man-made risks were limited in range and impact (Sørensen & Christiansen 2013). A worker may lose his hand in an accident in a factory, and this may be a disaster for his family that depend on him, but the risks in this modernity had limited impact on society as a whole.

The third epoch is that of late modernity, also referred to as 'reflexive modernity' by Beck (1996). Other authors have termed this era differently: 'postmodernity' (Lyotard 1984; Baudrillard 1993), 'liquid modernity' (Bauman 2000) and 'high modernity' (Giddens 1998). According to Beck, the features of this era include the following (Roxburgh n.d.; Sørensen & Christiansen 2013, 16-18):

- The deepening of the self – taking control of one's own life (breaking away from institutional control and life-long jobs);
- structural reflexivity – reacting to and even rejecting structures;
- extending knowledge and improving education of most of society;
- improved communication networks and the establishment of the information society; and
- globalised organisations both at a micro and macro level.

In this later work on a World Risk Society (Beck 1996 & 1999), Beck expanded his earlier thinking to focus on a range of contemporary issues such as transformation of politics, wage labour, the family, the welfare state, as well as civil society in the emerging 'world risk society' (Rasborg 2012, 5). It was at this point when the concept of reflexive modernity entered his work that his thesis was refined. Subsequent articles by Beck have added 'flesh' to his original thesis (Beck 2002; Beck 2006; Beck 2009b; Beck 2013a).

The academic articles identified drawing on the Risk Society thesis as backdrop, irrespective of discipline, tend to do so from a narrower geo-economic perspective than envisaged by Beck. Beck's thesis was about a world-destroying risk, while many if not most articles deal with global risks but within a field of activity, such as antimicrobial resistance (Jensen, 2024), cybercrime (Rughiniş, Bran, Stăiculescu, & Radovici, 2024), sustainability (Borne 2023) artificial intelligence (Neyazi, Ng, Hobbs, & Yue 2023), mass public transportation (Lindegard & Back 2023), or within a particular geographic area such as the Fukushima nuclear disaster in Japan (Abe 2023), plastic waste in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Nadiruzzaman, Shewly & Esha 2022), and the youth in Indonesia (Nilan 2019). The focus of this article on marketing, is therefore in keeping with the current direction of the academic literature on the Risk Society.

3.2 REFLEXIVE (REACTIVE) MODERNITY

Reflexive modernity is a term that Beck does not initially use in his first book. Instead, it is a phrase proposed by Giddens (1990:38) after the publication of Beck's 'Risk Society'. 'Reflexive' is a term that is quite confusing for those outside of sociology. For some it means 'reflecting on', but instead, Beck provides a different view using the term to describe the third epoch of society and risk, and explains that (1997:6):

Let us call the autonomous, undesired, and unseen, transition from industrial to risk society reflexivity (to differentiate it from and contrast it with reflection). Then 'reflexive modernisation' means self-confrontation with the effects of risk society that cannot be dealt with and assimilated in the system of industrial society.

Aiken (2000, 5) argues that reflexive should rather be used in the context of 'reflex' (that is, reacting to) rather than in the context of 'reflection'. In other words, it refers to a modern society that may undertake some or other enterprise which in turn may give rise to an unintended or surprising consequence, which, in turn, may impact again on the society in question, creating a bidirectional cause-and-effect relationship in which neither can be assigned as causes or effects. This concept of a bidirectional cause and effect relationship is a key component of Beck's reflexive modernity, but also of the world at risk. This reflexivity is what marketers need to consider.

3.3 UNKNOWN UNKNOWNNS

In a more recent article entitled 'Living in the World Risk Society', Beck (2006, 335) alludes to "unknown unknowns". He argues that the modern "scientific-technical society" (2006, 329) has the potential to, indeed, is likely to, "threaten mankind" (Beck 2006, 329). This potential is due to society being reluctant to or unable to (perhaps because of witting or unwitting misinformation – consider the role of marketing in this regard) contemplate the risk associated with society's actions. Beck uses the example of the cooling agent Chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) used from the 1930s onwards primarily in refrigeration and its unexpected impact on the earth's ozone layer, as an example of modern society

developing an apparently very useful product, only to find out years later that it threatens the world by contributing to global warming (Beck 2006, 329-330). It should be noted that catastrophes associated with manufactured risks are unlikely to happen instantly, that is, overnight or within days or months. Such manufactured risks are instead likely to be identified but with little heed paid to the those raising the alarm. It is the tendency to ignore the risks (as mentioned above) that allow risks to become catastrophes but probably over several years. Natural disasters are a different matter; they can occur in an instant.

3.4 CATASTROPHIC RISK

It needs to be emphasised that the risk discussed in Beck's thesis relates to catastrophic risk (Beck 1996; Beck 1999; Beck 2006, 332). These are risks that, if they are realised, may destroy groups, societies, nations and even humankind. They are serious and require our attention. It is also important to note that risk and catastrophe are not the same. Beck explains that risk is merely the anticipation of catastrophe – it may never happen. Also, when the catastrophe occurs, the risk in question disappears instantly.

3.5 MANUFACTURED UNCERTAINTIES

This concept is another important component of Beck's thesis (quoted in Culver et al 2011, 8) with direct relevance to the concept of marketing. He argues that "manufactured uncertainties are those risks that emerged as answers to the uncertainties introduced by modernity" [consider the reflexivity of this argument] (quoted in Culver et al 2011, 8). Beck further suggests that "science, even good science, even the best science, is always producing numerous alternative risks" (Culver et al 2011, 8). An extension to this discussion, comes from the research of Antonilli (2022, 907), who suggests that uncertainties (risks) can be fabricated (manufactured) either unwittingly or on purpose. Consider terrorism, nuclear weapons, biological weapons, CFCs, plastics, asbestos, etc. With this thought in mind, perhaps future research should turn to these scientists and industrialists and demand that they ponder the possible alternative risks that they may be creating, when engaging in their science. Indeed, this responsibility is being thrust upon scientists and innovators/industrialists in the context of the Precautionary Principle which is discussed later in this article.

Although Beck's thesis speaks of 'manufactured uncertainties', these risks can encompass any human activity, including socio-economic or socio-political activities, or in the case of marketing, could include service offerings, agricultural products and mining, in addition to manufactured goods. The literature uses the term 'Anthropocene' to describe the current epoch where humans have had a major impact on the environment (Mahaswa 2022, 41).

Marketers need to be aware that the product element of the 4Ps (or 7Ps) of marketing is directly responsible for identifying products that satisfy customer needs or wants. While marketers do not make the product, they do provide the inputs to the engineers, industrial designers, and artisans that produce the products, and marketers' roles in possibly producing products that could destroy society as we know it, needs to be understood. In addition, one must ask whether marketing's role in facilitating the pursuit of profit, by obfuscating the risk of products or overselling the ability of products or services to achieve what they 'promise' to do, does not contribute to 'manufacturing' the global risks this article warns of.

3.6 THE WORLD RISK SOCIETY VERSUS THE BLACK SWAN THEORY

The Black Swan theory put forward by Taleb (2007, 61) describes those high profile and difficult to predict rare events that nevertheless do occur with surprising, but "unpredictable regularity". Taleb (2007, 292) stresses that it is easy to learn ways of dealing with Black Swans. He argues that as long as one can convert knowledge (of the existence of Black Swans or catastrophic risks) into action (how to live with the risks), then one stands a chance. Green (2011, 5) proposes strategies for managing Black Swan events, such as focusing on the facts, taking a team or community approach to dealing with the event, use R&D and engineering to solve problems, develop fast risk response, and optimise communications (keep everyone informed and keep the content simple and easy to digest). These suggestions could also be applied to a marketing response to the Risk Society.

In a later article, Taleb (2009) proposes ten principles for developing robustness towards Black Swan events. However, these principles were formulated considering the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States that contributed to the global financial crisis from 2007 to 2009. The solutions are thus problem-specific and are not general solutions to all crises. The key difference between the Black Swan theory and the World Risk Society thesis is that the World Risk Society deals with man-made (that is, 'manufactured') disasters, whereas Black Swan events also include natural disasters. Black Swans may also be of a smaller magnitude compared with the humankind-destroying impact envisaged in the World Risk Society thesis. The COVID-19 pandemic, a natural disaster, can therefore be argued to be a Black Swan event, rather than Risk Society event, although some scientists have argued that COVID-19 was laboratory created, but this view has largely been refuted (Yee *et al* 2021, 120).

3.7 PARAMETERS OF RISK SOCIETY

Ekberg (2007:345) presented six parameters of the Risk Society in the form of a conceptual map. The first is the omnipresence of risk inherent in the Risk Society. The second is the different understandings of risk and related to these various understandings is the third parameter, namely the proliferation of risk definitions. Parameter four deals with the reflexive orientation to risk, followed by parameter five, namely risk and trust. Finally, the sixth parameter deals with the politics of risk. This conceptual map could help frame marketing's response to the Risk Society.

3.8 CLASH OF RISK CULTURES AND RISK RELIGIONS

Beck (2006: 337) also refers to 'risk cultures' and 'risk religions.' These are communities – essentially global communities often spread across national borders – that reflect a power of belief in threat (the risk), to the extent that this belief becomes a 'religion' and in this way a risk culture is created (Beck 2009a:69). He draws on the example of Al Qaeda and argues that it was the United States of America's, and to some extent the United Kingdom's, absolute belief in this threat that turned a relatively small conspiratorial organisation into a worldwide political movement (Beck 2009a, 69). Beck argues that these risk cultures differ considerably across the world from region to region. He uses the example of the risk differences between the Europeans and Americas. Using risk parlance, their 'risk appetites' are different. He raises his concern about the massive differences in risk appetite and risk focus between groups and warns that in reality risk is indifferent to who you are or how you view or anticipate risk. The unknown unknowns can happen at any time, in any place and may affect those who had no hand in creating the resulting catastrophe.

Thus risk cultures and risk religions are possible barriers to coping with a world at risk. Currently, right-leaning nationalism taking hold across the global, and the West versus the expanding Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (BRICS) community, set to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and The United Arab Emirates (Friedrich Naumann Foundation 2024), is likely to polarise the global community, highlighting the clash of risk cultures and risk religions. Marketing's role may need to take a more global perspective on geopolitics and socio-economic developments, with the appreciation that marketing is no longer a localised task but takes place in a dynamic and risky society where global events could impact on local businesses and their respective marketing efforts in an instance. Consider the threat of global nuclear war because of the Ukraine-Russia conflict (Street 2022) and how this would impact on marketing across the globe in an instant. The authors headline, "Thinking about the Unthinkable", has an eerie similarity to the 'unknown unknowns' mantra of Beck.

3.9 EXAMPLES OF GLOBAL RISKS

Beck's vision of a world of risk, of unknown unknowns, is already a reality. If one considers fields such nanotechnology, biotechnology, nuclear energy, robotics, artificial intelligence, genetically modified foods, chemicals and pesticides, mining, health sciences, financial services, all these sectors (and probably many others) are busy with research and development and may already have developed products available in the marketplace currently, that threaten modern society in ways that cannot yet be known (i.e. they are unknown unknowns). The same is true of many modern developments such as cloning, terrorism and security, global warming, drones (think of how drones have changed and extended warfare in the last few years), remote and intelligent armaments, pollution, human waste, greenhouse gases, climate change, overpopulation, urbanisation, public health, the current waves of immigration, and the many

'small wars' around the world (as in Afghanistan, the conflict in Iraq, the Boko Haram insurgency, the Syrian civil war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the war in Somalia, the actions of the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant [ISIL], and many more).

In the context of marketing, these potentially harmful endeavours and their associated risks need to be documented with the aim of tracking and quantifying the risks, and most importantly creating awareness of the risks, with general society being the target audience. Risk insurers probably already track these risks, but for commercial gain and are not likely to share this information in detail as it is their commercial intellectual property. The idea is to create and promote (that is, market) a world risk *society*, a global organisation or association/society rather than a global description as espoused by Beck. Such a society would probably be virtual and have a global opensource membership that could become a clearinghouse of information on global risks that everyone can participate in and be forewarned of.

While awareness making, as envisaged in the world risk society could be beneficial, one needs to be careful of fear mongering. Vilhelmsson (2014, 192), writing about public health and depression, already alluded to the need for a society that is focused on identifying the preconditions for disease, but where this knowledge, shared globally through modern media networks, "appears as an individual crisis". In other words, information (good or bad) about diseases, even if the diseases are only encountered in distant parts of the world, is currently playing on the minds of individuals, to the extent that this knowledge causes growing rates of global depression. Put another way, people fear diseases such as avian flu, ebola, bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) or H1N1 (swine flu) (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation 2010) to such an extent – even though they are not really at risk – that they get depressed resulting in an even greater alternative global health risk, namely growing global rates of depression. Marketing's role must be education orientated and not to sensationalise.

Climate change is currently a key research area. WoS has 486 000 articles dealing with climate change, with 86 doing so through a Risk Society lens. The earliest of the articles on climate change deals with the governance of climate change given the politics of the Risk Society (Bulkeley 2001, 430). The author's findings suggests that the partnership between governments and industry makes it difficult to bring about changes in policy to deal with new and challenging topics such as climate change, that will inevitable have cost and profit implications for government and industry. Since these early years, climate change has become one of the leading challenges facing humankind. The book entitled *Climate Change as Societal Risk: Revealing threats, reshaping values*, edited by Granberg and Glover (2023), provides a comprehensive discussion of risks associated with climate change. The Risk Society thesis is discussed in chapter 4 of their book. The various authors support the focus on climate change as a societal risk, shifting the focus "...from individual actors [that is, individuals and individual firms] to entire societies, from actors in isolation to the relationships between such actors and from the symptoms of social risk to the root causes of societal risk" (Granberg & Glover 2023, 166). Linked to this is the challenge raised by Stahel (2008, 527). He questioned the ethics of fairness in revisiting the per capita resource consumption of industrialised nations versus less-developed countries. The dangers of the Risk Society are therefore like to be more impactful on emerging societies than developed ones.

Beck (2013b) also uses the virtual realm as an example of the global risks the world faces. In his article: "The digital freedom risk: Too fragile an acknowledgement", he points out the risk that society will ultimately lose its digital freedom using a channel that was supposed to provide exactly that, namely freedom (Beck 2013b). He raises his concern that no single body can provide the protection needed to use the digital realm freely. Thus one of the greatest creations in modern society – the internet – could yet become one of the greatest risks society faces as we increasingly give ourselves over to this "New World" (Beck 2013b). Similarly, the "darknet" is argued to be a hidden part of the internet generally linked to illegal activities (Omar & Ibrahim 2020). Thus, the good internet has spawned an 'ugly sibling'.

A further example highlighting the potential catastrophe that has become apparent from an otherwise benign development is that of artificial intelligence (AI). An article published by Zolfagharifard (2014) reports that AI "could be the worst thing to happen to humanity". The article quotes Stephen Hawking who suggests that AI, disguised as helpful digital assistants and self-driving vehicles, is gaining a foothold – and it could one day spell the end for humanity, with humankind facing an uncertain future as technology learns to think for itself and adapt to its

environment. Hawking also states that “Alongside the benefits, AI will also bring dangers, like powerful autonomous weapons, or new ways for the few to oppress the many.” (Hawking 2014). That was almost a decade ago. Today, AI has arrived. Krieger *et al* (2024, 11), following a review of the literature, found that although the media’s coverage of AI is often perceived as negative, the reality is that while the discourse is more risk-aware, it is not necessarily uniformly negative. The researchers, drawing on Bergkamp (2017), further argue that to apply Beck’s Risk Society to AI, would treat perceived risk as actual risks, thus leading to “over-regulation of non-existent or exaggerated phantom risks, which could jeopardise effective risk management” (Krieger et al. 2024, 12). While Krieger et al, take a prudent view of the AI risk, there are views, both positive and negative, about the risk of AI (Tommasi, 2023, 87&93; Kusche 2024, 1; Kouroutzas & Palamari 2024, 12).

Toxic risk management in Australia is examined by Benn (2004, 399) in the context of the Risk Society. Drawing on several cases in the Australian context of toxic waste, Benn (2004) recognises the Risk Society in in this sector and raises concerns about political programmes’ lack of capacity to deliver sustainability. In a more recent article Malaviya (2023, p. 235), the researcher laments the toxic smog that turns Delhi into a “gas chamber”. He draws on Becks Risk Society to describe the current age as the “age of toxicity”. Malaviya argues for the need to promote more democracy where some privileged interests do not outweigh common societal interests. He highlights opioid crisis in the US and Canada linked to the drive for profits and aggressive marketing that kept the consumers in the dark about side effects. Consider the role of marketing as reflexive activity. Rather than just promoting the products or services of a single organisation, marketing should also, both at a global discipline and at an individual level, undertake reflexive marketing of the discipline of marketing in a global Risk Society context.

Çelikpala and Öztürk (2012, 53) discuss global terror as a risk in the context of the World Risk Society. They argue that the gap which has arisen as a result of addressing non-territory and non-state-based terrorism through state-based security measures has caused a continuation of a high level of insecurity, fear, and anxiety among the Americans following the 9/11 attacks (Çelikpala & Öztürk 2012, 53). Beck (2002, 49) adds to this view by arguing (long before the Çelikpala and Öztürk article) that as a result of global terror, security will increase (yet not make society feel safe according to Çelikpala and Öztürk) while “freedom and democracy [the very things which constitute the superiority of modernity] will shrink”. More importantly, based on Beck’s thesis, it is argued that freedom and democracy will shrink for the entire world, not just for the American people who were the target of the 9/11 attacks. In support of this assertion, one need only consider the restrictive security and visa requirements when travelling internationally that affects everyone across the globe.

A final example can be found in a 2016 article published in the Independent newspaper in the United Kingdom entitled: “Antibiotic resistance ‘could become bigger threat to mankind than cancer” (Crew 2016). The efforts of scientists to create antibiotics to treat disease are resulting in the diseases in question developing immunities to the very drugs intended to fight them. This immunity, in turn, threatens humankind – a perfect example of the World Risk Society thesis at play. In this instance, marketing has played a positive role in the form of advertising/communications that have informed the public of this risk and is thus helping to alleviate the potential risk of overuse of antibiotics (see KidsHealth 2024).

4. RESPONSES TO THE RISK SOCIETY THESIS

While Beck’s thesis and subsequent writings point to a rather bleak society facing major catastrophe from one or more global risks which society paradoxically is not cognisant of yet, the ‘solutions’ put forward by Beck and others are arguably still very limited. Beck calls upon a new *cosmopolitanism* to provide a ‘roadmap’ with which to navigate through the unknown unknown risks. As Donoghue (2011, 15) suggests in her interpretation of Beck’s work, that cosmopolitanism “makes the case for the expansion of problem-solving [of global risk] beyond state boundaries”. Cosmopolitanism is examined in greater detail below, followed by other possible solutions which are discussed in the sections that follow.

4.1 COSMOPOLITANISM

As a solution to his Risk Society thesis, Beck proposes a cosmopolitan approach to deal with the Risk Society in which a “the ethical principle of recognition of others involves a kind of cosmopolitan law of global risk” (Beck 2009a, 191). Cosmopolitanism moves beyond the concept of “universal hospitality” as put forward by Kant (1970, 105) (discussed by Derrida 2000, 3), to enable others that are likely to be affected by the risk decisions of individuals or groups (even nations), to have a say in these risk decisions. The work of Beck and of other authors that have written about the Risk Society (several of whom are discussed in this article), together are very conceptual and broad. For an individual faced with a ‘dark’ world of society-destroying risks (Korstanje 2020, 62), the notion of cosmopolitanism, while theoretically relevant, is not a very comforting solution. Individuals are sensemaking creatures (Mallender 2016; McNamara 2015) and need to have plausible solutions to dealing with the risks captured in the Risk Society thesis, or at least need to be comforted with the knowledge that work is being put into creating such solutions.

Beck suggests six issues that comprise a ‘cosmopolitan vision’ (Beck 2009b:3–4):

1. *Individual and group dynamics.* Beck suggests that individuals and groups have a set reality – a status quo or norm – that they are reluctant to abandon. Those other individuals or groups that stray from this reality (the norm) are seen as a risk and are “marginalized and threatened with exclusion” (Beck 2009a:187). Add to this, if any individual or group represents a risk, their features disappear, and the individual/group becomes defined by the risk they represent (consider ISIL; the ‘features’ of this group are no longer important – all that is in focus is their acts of terror) (Beck 2009a:187).
2. *Everyone poses more or less of a risk for everyone else.* This statement implies two things; firstly, that the risk society is a human issue – it is about the risk that a person or a group of people impose on another individual or group; and secondly, it is about the distance from an individual’s (or group’s) norm (or reality) that represents the extent of risk that the other individual or group represents.
3. *Risk can either be existent or non-existent.* Beck (2009b:3) argues that risk is not catastrophe but is the anticipation of catastrophe. While risk exists in the present, catastrophe is a future matter.
4. *Individual and social responsibility.* Risk defines a relation between two people; a decision-maker who takes the risk and thereby triggers a consequence for another (or for others). This issue highlights the human or social aspect of risk and emphasises that risk is about decisions and consequences in the context of a perceived risk. For example, if an individual believes that there is a risk of contracting flu, then he/she will decide to take flu shots. Taking or not taking the flu shots has a consequence of either catching cold and possibly affecting others, or not. So even a selfish decision where no other individuals appear to be involved may still have an impact on others. Beck (2009b:4) expands this point by highlighting the “side-effects” of risk for others and the extent to which they are involved (or not) in any decision taken in reaction to the risk.
5. *Global space of responsibility.* Global risks inherently involve social decisions because decisions taken elsewhere – often in other countries or in other parts of the world – may impact closer to home. Thus, “the meanings of proximity, reciprocity, dignity, justice and trust are transformed with this horizon of expectation of global risks” (Beck 2009b:4).
6. *Risk communities are ‘glue’ for diversity.* Global risks, suggests Beck (2009b), creates new risk communities without necessarily having any spatial presence or narrow social relationship, other than being part of the same world. Beck concludes this discussion by stating that “One of the most striking and heretofore least recognized key features of global risk is how they generate a kind of ‘compulsory cosmopolitanism,’ a ‘glue’ for diversity and plurality in a world whose boundaries are as porous as a Swiss cheese, at least as regards communication and economics” (2009b, 4).

Johansen’s book on Risk, Cosmopolitanism and Neoliberal Contemporary Life (2021), provides a comprehensive discussion of cosmopolitanism. In her book she explains the importance of communication, especially across borders, where a particular global risk leads to transitory risk communities (Johansen 2021, 9). Consider the growing concern in the global community regarding developments in Gaza, notwithstanding the widespread condemnation of the

events on 7 October 2023 in Israel. Shaw (2023, 187 & 193), in turn, discusses cosmopolitan spirit and argues that “corporatisation of help and humanitarian policies have become a commercial industry in themselves, including marketing, branding and celebrity-driven campaigns intensified by the hype and distancing effect of modern, media hierarchies.

4.2 THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

Sand (2000, 445) explains that the Precautionary Principle was first put forward in the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environmental and Development and “...calls for regulatory action in the face of serious environmental risk even in the absence of scientific certainty”. The Precautionary Principle proposes a top-down approach to risk regulation, striving to enforce it on the scientific community through global treaties and related local laws (Taleb, Read, Douady, Norman, and Bar-Yam. 2014). Guidotti (2012, 63) further explains that:

The precautionary principle is the notion that if an activity or innovation presents a risk of harm to the environment or to human beings, conservative measures such as delaying or impeding the introduction of a new action or steps to mitigate damage should be taken, even if cause and effect have not been firmly established and the risk cannot be fully characterized by scientific studies.

It is a principle that is today central to the environmental policies of the European Union and its member states (Guidotti 2012, 63).

Although the Precautionary Principle was not developed in response to the Risk Society thesis, there is common ground in terms of the catastrophic nature of the risks envisaged in both the Precautionary Principle and the World Risk Society thesis. However, the Precautionary Principle is primarily founded in the world of environmental risk, while the Risk Society thesis has a wider vision of the risks society faces. Furthermore, Guidotti (2012, 63) makes the point that the principle is in reality “only really applied to minor risks, not to the major, world-destabilizing risks for which it was originally articulated” (the sort of risks envisaged in the Risk Society). The drawback of the Precautionary Principle is that it takes a regulatory and legal approach to managing unknown risks, which arguable lends itself to abuse and disregard. It places power in the hands of lawyers and regulators and puts scientists and innovators/ industrialists under legal pressure. This approach is likely to restrict scientific discovery and innovation, or the laws and regulations may be ignored or avoided, in turn enabling further unknown risks.

4.3 CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Heim (2014) turns to the role of corporate social responsibility and argues that modern corporations should be given the power and responsibility to mitigate against the negative effects that are threatening Risk Society. She further argues that corporate social responsibility benchmarks and ratings external to companies should be used to judge and report on the quality and sustainability of firms. She draws on sustainability frameworks such as the Global Reporting Initiative, SA8000, the Europe 2020 Strategy, and various national regulations and laws, in support of her argument Heim (2014, 23–24).

4.4 PROCRUSTEAN APPROACH

Maisch (2010) draws on the Greek legend Procrustes (who stretched or squashed his guests to fit his beds, instead of adjusting the bed), and refers to the use of the Procrustean Approach by Western standard-setting organisations to adapt standards to fit their bed of knowledge. His doctoral study was in the field telecommunication standards, and he challenged the approach used by these organisations in setting standards, which he suggests are prone to political manipulation, conflicts of interest and industry influences (Maisch 2010, i). He concludes that poor standard setting has resulted in large numbers of people around the world being exposed to radiofrequency and microwaves, thus damaging their health (Maisch 2010, i). He developed his thesis with reference to the work of Beck.

4.5 RISK PRICING

Green (2005:165), examining the risk pricing principle, suggests in her article (quoting Beck) that “the wealthy (in income, power or education) can purchase safety or freedom from risk”. If one accepts this view, then one could argue that the poorer nations of the world are likely to be subjected to greater risk, as the richer nations buy protection or mitigation from risk. Richer nations may even transfer their risk to poorer nations for a price. As an example of these rich-poor relations in terms of waste disposal, it is alleged that several poor and developing nations are being used as a ‘dumping ground’ for the waste of richer nations. These destination countries for waste include Ghana, the Philippines, Nigeria, China, India, Vietnam, Pakistan, Mexico, Haiti and South Africa (When on Earth 2015). The World Risk Society thesis is thus very relevant to poorer nations, not only as partners of the world, but also as a potential target for the transfer of risk from richer nations.

4.6 NEW LEADERSHIP APPROACH

An interesting suggestion put forward by Berry (2000, 5&10–11) is that there needs to be change in leadership approach. Instead of having leaders with a transactional focus, he proposes leaders with a transformational approach that will oversee the integration and balance of private and public obligations under the scrutiny of national and transnational governments and the general public. He further argues that the Risk Society demands more extensive attention to the inter- and extra-organisational issues that firms face, requiring wider ‘citizenship’ on the part of leaders, given the ‘limited liability’ privilege they enjoy in society (Berry 2000, 11). Also, there is a real danger that given the many contemporary political, economic and social issues that the country is faced with, global risks, especially those that are unknown and only likely to impact on society sometime in the future, will be ignored to the detriment of our future generations. These views are echoed in the work of Shaw (2023, 187) who argues that authentic cosmopolitan leaders, need to become facilitators, stewards and educators in the journey to cosmopolitanism. A cosmopolitan marketing approach arguably needs to be led by cosmopolitan leaders.

4.7 THE CHALLENGES OF SENSEMAKING

Society is essentially about sensemaking; it is about a process used by people to create a sense of shared meaning for their society, their group or themselves (Allard-Poesi, 2005; Gephart 1993, 1469; Mallender 2016; McNamara 2015). Mallender (2016) considers the challenge of sensemaking in crisis contexts. She refers to the danger of positivity and its impact on sensemaking. Positivity, she argues (quoting Maitlis and Sonenshein, 2010, 55), shapes sensemaking in crisis situations by preventing positive individuals from noticing contradictory cues until it is too late (Mallender 2016, 43). She also highlights the fact that sensemaking – particularly collective sensemaking – is difficult and complex because the participants in the sensemaking exercise have different ‘lenses’, such as different values, positions, experience and sensemaking abilities (Mallender 2016, 44). Finally, she points to the contextual complexities within which sensemaking often occurs (Mallender 2016, 44). The last two points are particularly relevant in a Risk Society context. Striving to achieve sensemaking in a global collective and dealing with sensemaking in a global context, clearly add far greater complexity to the already difficult challenge. Zinn and Shultz (2024, 309) unpack the concept of sense-making providing a useful typology to assist with the perception, communication and reasoning behind risk. Their topology discusses various forms of rational, non-rational, and in-between reasoning that can support risk communication within society. This typology could be a useful tool for marketers in the Risk Society.

5. RISK SOCIETY IN THE MARKETING LITERATURE

There are several articles identified in the literature that look at risk issues through a Risk Society lens applicable to marketing. These are discussed below.

In the context of food anxiety, China’s Vegetable Basket Project and New Retail Businesses (NRBs) have combined forces to find new ways to reach out to the hungry in Nanjing, China (Dai & Zhenzhong 2020:1). Effective marketing of hazard-free, organic, ecological, green foods is one of the main reasons why this venture has shown to be successful.

The use of technology and digital solutions, as well as community investment, business audits, traceability of food stuffs, certification of foods, has ensured that, not only are the foods of a good, affordable standard, creating a 'feel good' mindset amongst consumers and disrupting traditional retailing. As Dai and Zhenzong argue,

“NRBs are forerunners of a retail transformation embedded in China’s booming digital economy. In contrast to supermarkets, NRBs feature omnichannel shopping, cost-free delivery, and unit-based standardization in packaging and shelving. These features may appeal to China’s tech savvy and time-crunched millennial eaters. While China’s embrace of digitalization and standardization in the fresh food sector is not unique, the speed and scale of these transformations are unparalleled. A key question for further research is whether New Retail will supplant traditional wet markets to become the dominant retailing format of fresh foods in China.”

The above authors argue that the Risk Society lens needs to extend from the specific risk under investigation – in this instance, food risk – to **include financial and environmental risks**.

The research of Olatubosun, Charles and Omoyele (2021, 1&21-23) examines luxury brands in a Risk Society. They were able to provide evidence of multidisciplinary and multifaceted use of technology in support of the circular economy in the luxury fashion sector. Rather than serving as a 'greenwashing' exercise, the authors argue that the "adoption of a sustainable fashion business model may be pivotal to combating the inefficiency costs built into the fashion industry" (Olatubosun, Charles and Omoyele 2021, 1). The take-away from this study is that **adoption of the principles of the circular economy** could be beneficial for industries, not just 'window dressing'. In this regard, appropriate and authentic leadership will play a key role.

Although not directly highlighted in Beck's earlier writings, clearly a feature of the reflexive modernity concept would be the growth in social media and the power placed in the hands of the individual to (a) access information about matters of concern, and (b) to use their 'social voice' to raise concerns and bring attention to possible global risks, and to do this extremely quickly. In his later writings, Beck (2013b) raised this issue himself. Other authors that have also touched on this matter include Massa (2013) and Chen, Tu and Zheng (2014). Sundberg (2024, 151) undertook a narrative review of the literature on the digital Risk Society. He found that "intangible technologies serve as solutions while simultaneously introducing new risks", as machines take over the processing of information society suffers from dehumanisation, and new systemic governance approaches are being called for by scholars. A solution that addresses these findings, might be the establishment of a **supra-national, community-driven advisory leadership service** – a global chamber, association or federation – to advise marketing practitioners of the risks and management of risks associated with marketing in the digital world.

A study on higher education in the context of Beck's Risk Society by Impellizzeri (2024:139), argues for the need to promote the marketing of educational institutions in a way that is responsive to both socio-economic circumstances and ethical considerations. He highlights modern Risk Society as one that is "shaped by techno-scientific development and the processes of individualisation and globalisation". He explains that Beck's theories are aimed at highlighting contemporary risks, not to curtail reflexive modernity, but to ensure that reflexive modernity can pummel its way through the risks to ensure the continued modernisation of society as a whole for the benefit of all. Drawing on Beck (1997, 2000), he posits that "Marketing, if it is to be reflexive and rooted, must serve those institutional types and logics rather than seek to re-pattern those institutions after the singular image of a uniform marketplace technique" (Impellizzeri, 2024:147). To succeed, institutions (Impellizzeri was focused on education institutions, but his recommendation applies to all institutions) must proactively make themselves aware of the circumstantial conditions and dynamics of modernization that affect them, namely modernisation-individualisation risks. There is also a need to learn through institution-internal self-criticism, ideally by the very experts (that is, marketers) that are asked to respond to the risks, circumstances and dynamics they face. Finally, he argues for rooted reflexivity, an approach rooted in "substantive and intellectual moral ground" that adopts **social and ethical reflection** counterbalancing "techno-scientific rationality's knowledge monopoly" (Impellizzeri, 2024, p.148).

Logtenberg (2022:5) in his research on the ethics of genetic testing on 'healthy consumers' in modern Risk Society, raises concerns as to the role of the marketing associated with this practice. He argues that the promise of privacy often associated with such testing is little more than a misrepresented marketing tool instead of a genuine benefit. He suggests that this field of activity requires more **regulation of marketing**.

Research within the media sector on media and risk asks the question as to how modern society, where risks have proliferated and intensified, sees itself as a Risk Society, and what role media plays in this process. Ghosh and Sarkar (2020:3) provide an example of media's role in creating compelling visual depictions of statistical data that galvanise awareness and preparedness of the global risks that may exist. In so doing, media helps society overcome unawareness of global risk, in itself a major risk of the Beck's Risk Society. Gosh and Sarkar (2020:4) explain that:

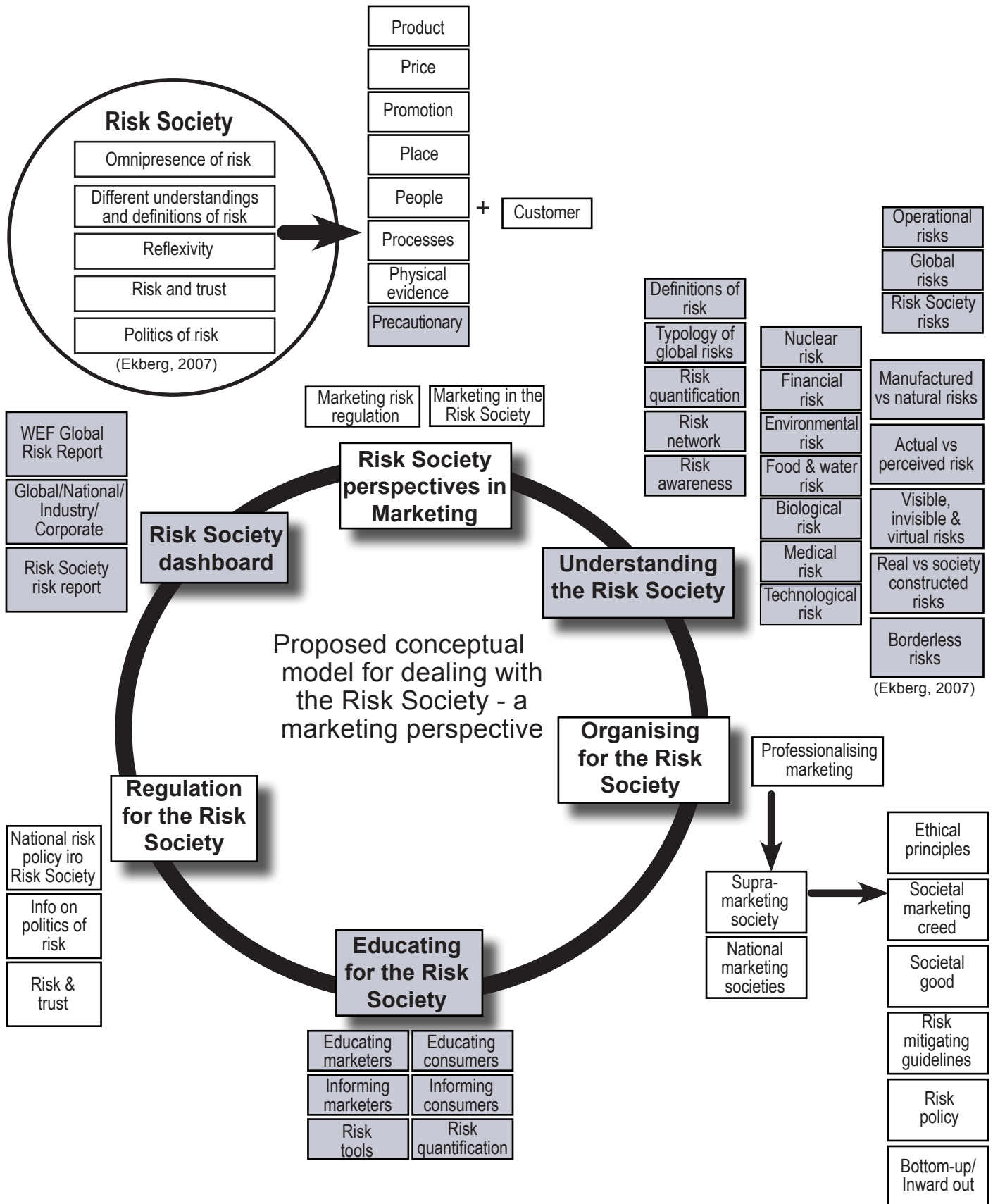
“When more ‘cases’ emerge in a demographic field, the deepening sense of collective harm instigates public scrutiny, facilitating macro-level recognition of a risk pattern. The data collection and case studies that follow impel a self-reflexive impression of imminent danger. Mediation is constitutive of this intensified risk perception.”

From this explanation, **media serves as the channel for marketing to warn society of the risks that exist and to campaign for change.**

A paper by Borne (2023) highlights the branding of an industry's receptiveness to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, although the focus of the article is specifically on a case study that examines a single retailer and their sustainability efforts. The researcher provides a **structured approach** that businesses could use to address their own unique risk goals in the context of the Risk Society thesis (Borne 2023, 616-620) The first step is to understand a firm's broad business vision and sustainability. It is unlikely that a business that is fighting for survival or faces financial pressure will have the luxury of contributing to mitigating societal risks. The second step is to consider risks that directly impact in on the firms and the firms' own risk mitigating policies. Again, it makes sense that firms would focus on what relates to them and is important to them. Few firms have the capacity for philanthropic activities outside of their field of endeavour. The third step is to decide on responsibility assignment and possible solutions. Risk solutions require champions. The final step is communicating and motivating. This is where marketing comes in. Awareness of what is being done and the impact on society are important messages that need to be conveyed to staff, customers, and the public.

6. WAY FORWARD FOR MARKETING

This article supports the view that the Risk Society thesis of Ulrich Beck is a topic that needs urgent attention. The risk of a catastrophe in the offing that could destroy humankind, even if one does not know what the catastrophe is likely to be or when it will occur, should be of sufficient concern to all – including the marketing community who are likely to be the purveyors – even if unwittingly – of the 'seeds' of the unknown catastrophe. From a marketing perspective, in the spirit of reflexivity proposed by Beck, self-regulation of marketing is proposed to ensure that marketers are not harbingers of the global catastrophe associated with the Risk Society. Figure 1 below provides a conceptual model of how marketing could address this task.



Adapted definition of marketing:

Marketing is the activity, set of institutions and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value, **at minimal risk**, for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.

FIGURE 1: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE MARKETING IN THE RISK SOCIETY

The model recognises that the Risk Society is a global phenomenon and not restricted to marketing. Every country, government, organisation, discipline, cause or individual should concern themselves with the Risk Society. With the views of Vilhelmsson (2014) in mind, it is also important that awareness of the Risk Society should not become an obsession that in itself becomes a global risk thereby stalling socio-economic development. It should instead be a guiding principle in dealing with global risks. The reasonable and ordered precautionary consideration of, as well as response to the risks identified, should become a key addition to the 7Ps of marketing, with the eighth 'P' being 'precautionary'. While this article proposes that precautionary has to do with the awareness of the Risk Society, the term is also appropriate in the wider context of the societal view of marketing that is embodied in the definition of marketing referred to in Figure 1 which has been expanded to include the concept of risk. As the unknown unknowns of the Risk Society cannot be known, the prevention of risk cannot be part of the definition. At best, awareness of risk should be included in the definition, and it is hoped that the proposed definition of marketing as indicated in Figure 1 adequately accommodates risk into the definition. Marketers (the organisations and individuals that undertake marketing) need to be precautionary that their actions do not harm society, not just precautionary about the global risks that could affect them.

The model proposes that the marketing community should actively adopt and promote risk consideration and regulation in marketing endeavours. Marketers should consider risk as part of their responsibility, not just the responsibility of risk managers. The model then leads to understanding the Risk society, followed by organising and educating for the Risk Society, and regulating the Risk Society as far is reasonably possible. Ultimately there needs to be some element of reflection or quantification of the success of marketing in dealing with the Risk Society. This process requires a global channel of information on the Risk Society, to disseminate relevant and objective concerns about the global risks that society faces. As there are already, many organisations that provide information about various aspects of global risks, this channel would include a network of information sources that together serve as a portal to the risks and proposed responses that exist. The model then envisages that marketing should have a supranational organisation, with the global body being a federation of national marketing associations. Currently, national bodies such as the American Marketing Association, the Chartered Marketing Institute in the UK, the European Marketing Confederation, the Canadian Marketing Association, the Marketing Association of South Africa, and the Australian Marketing Institute, understandably serve national interests, with the Risk Society thesis not a mainstream consideration. A search of the websites of the abovementioned marketing institutes found no reference to "risk society" with only occasional mention of risk in a few articles or posts.

The conceptual model highlights the need for the education of marketers, consumers, and other shareholders alike (for example, government). Information sharing would be an important of this education process. There is also a need to try and report on the efforts of the global marketing community in dealing with the Risk Society challenge. The World Economic Forum (WEF) already produces an annual global risk report, but this report does not deal with the unknown unknowns as envisaged by Beck. As the Risk Society risks can emerge from within any discipline, any industry, and country, or any event, this model can be adapted as a universal model for all industries, sectors, disciplines and communities. Together, this global community can work with the WEF to create awareness of the Risk Society, so that all participants can draw awareness to potentially catastrophic risks. The community would then track possible risks, and these can be allowed to 'bubble' upwards as the 'voice of concern' as a particular risk grows. Scenario planning can look at potential solutions, or policy makers can regulate the activities associated with the risk. At the very least, marketers can rethink their role in facilitating the risk.

Whether a federation of marketing associations is established or not, local marketing associations need to provide their members and the general public with information about the Risk Society, and the global risks we face. Local marketing associations need to ensure (a) that responses to these global risks are incorporated into the marketing strategies of firms, as well as ensuring (b) that the business and related marketing activities of firms take precautionary steps not to contribute to the Risk Society in terms of the products being created, marketed and sold. Information sharing and education/training on the Risk Society should become a key element of the continuing professional development of all marketing-related associations. Beck also argued that the solutions to the Risk Society can either come from above in the form of international treaties and agreements, or from below as a result of the global

'groundswell' of society or communities within societies (Benn 2004). It should be noted, however, that Beck's discussion of cosmopolitanism is considerably more complex than is alluded to above. He expands on his theory examining cosmopolitanism from various perspectives in his article together with Sznajder (Beck & Sznajder 2010).

Guidelines on the proposed 8th P of marketing – the precautionary element of marketing – should be developed. These guidelines would identify the societal and ethical issues that are seen as important and that provide guidance on how to address or accommodate these issues in the marketing endeavours of organisations. Firms that are actively involved in taking precautionary steps for societal and ethical good, could be recognised by way of an audit certification.

Perhaps the greatest threat to dealing with the Risk Society, are the deliberate untruths, alternative facts, and fake news that have become part of society today – a global risk in its own right. Galantino (2022, 971), drawing on Beck's research, recognises this challenge of "organised irresponsibility in the post-truth era". Combating this threat supports the organised response by marketing associations around the world, alluded to above, to try and inform, educate, and guide their respective marketing communities on global risks, societal sensitivities, and appropriate ethical behaviour.

Given some of the suggestions proposed by the authors highlighted above, there remains a lack of clarity as to how to deal with the World Risk Society thesis. After all, how does one deal with unknown unknowns? The authors mentioned earlier have suggested alternative solutions; a new leadership approach, a cosmopolitan approach, better standard-setting, improved corporate social responsibility and more. These are all relevant, but not enough.

Even if there are unknown unknowns as suggested by Beck, it is highly likely that humankind will attempt to make sense of these and attempt to identify (or guess) what these unknowns might be. With some possible unknowns identified, the next step would be to attempt to manage or control these identified risks. While tentative solutions for the scenarios identified can be determined, many unknowns still remain. How many? This remains unclear, but by taking the initiative to unpack and consider and 'brainstorm' these various scenarios, those doing the scenario planning will have (a) considered various alternatives and will have the experience and insight of these alternative scenarios in their 'mental armoury' and will also hopefully have (b) developed cognitive and management processes for unpacking and solving new scenarios more quickly.

The discussion above points to possible solutions such as reductionism (unpacking risks into manageable parts), scenario planning within specific sectors and fields, incorporating a futurism approach in scenario planning, implementing more rigorous regulations and standard-setting (and monitoring), and using social media and social networks to enable society to voice their concerns wherever and whenever they may arise. However the question as to what the views of our risk experts are – those whose job it is to know about risk and to find ways of managing such risks – still needs to be uncovered; this is the purpose of this article.

It was suggested earlier in this article that the nature of society is about sensemaking. The various perspectives put forward in this article on how to deal with the risk embodied in the Risk Society thesis are clearly important sensemaking perspectives that need to be considered and perhaps amalgamated into a more comprehensive global strategy of what humankind should do to tackle this challenge.

7. CONCLUSION

In an era marked by global risks, marketers have an ethical responsibility to ensure that their practices do not inadvertently harm society. This article suggests that not enough is being done on a coordinated basis to deal with the Risk Society thesis of Beck. It further suggests that inaction in this regard is a serious risk in itself. The author recognises the challenge of trying to bring together an already divided world on a topic that is esoteric (unknown unknowns) to say the least. But to do something is a necessity and perhaps requires the radical voice of a popular champion – or a coordinated community of champions (the risk community?) – in the same vein as Al Gore's "An inconvenient truth" (Gore 2006). A concerted and coordinated effort to bring together society, or communities in society such as the marketing community, to deal with the challenge outlined in this article from the bottom up using social networks is a near-term goal. Responsible marketing involves not only selling products but also being aware of their broader impact on society and the environment. The question remains, however, are today's actions (or inactions) tomorrow's risks.

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