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Making sense of risk together: a dissertation on the social factors that drive risk talk

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Making sense of risk together.
A dissertation on the social factors
that drive risk talk.

Proefschrift

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Making Sense of Risk Together

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Preface

“If I tell you I will not eat British beef, and you will, I could be saying I know something you do not know, or that you are gullible about government reassurances, or that I have some right to comment on what you eat, or that you and I differ in our interpretations of statistics, or that you and I differ about what is healthy, what is edible, what is clean, what makes up our bodies.”

Greg Myers

Overview of Work Division by Article

Ch.	Citation	Task division
1	<i>Perlstein, S. (2024). Risk perception and interpersonal discussion on risk: A systematic literature review. Risk analysis, 44(7), 1666-1680.</i>	All roles were performed by Perlstein, S. Conceptual feedback and manuscript comments were provided by Kuipers, S.L., Kantorowicz, J.J., and Liem, M.
2	<i>Perlstein, S., Kantorowicz, J., and Kuipers, S. (2025). Preferences for risk conversations in everyday life: a conjoint analysis. Journal of Risk Research, 28(6), 611-627.</i>	Perlstein, S.: Conceptualization; methodology; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; visualization; writing—original draft; writing—review and editing; project administration. Kantorowicz, J.J.: Conceptualization, methodology; writing—original draft; writing—review and editing. Kuipers, S.L.: conceptualization; writing—original draft; review and editing.
3	<i>Perlstein, S. (2025). Risk talk—but not if it rocks the boat. Perceived social risk acceptability and risk talk engagement in the Netherlands. Accepted by Health, Risk and Society on Nov 19, 2025.</i>	All roles were performed by Perlstein, S. . Feedback and manuscript comments were provided by Kuipers, S.L. and Kantorowicz, J.J.
4	<i>Perlstein, S. (202X). “Come now. The human body doesn’t get skin cancer from a single sunburn.” – the motivations and perceived outcomes of risk talk among laypeople. Submitted to Health, Risk & Society on December 12, 2025.</i>	All roles were performed by Perlstein, S. Feedback and manuscript comments were provided by Kuipers, S.L. and Kantorowicz, J.J..

Brief Overview of the Research

EN The research of this dissertation answers the question: *Which social conditions drive interpersonal communication about risk among laypeople?* Risk talk—that is, interpersonal discussion on risk—is the smallest unit through which risk information is socially processed and thus deserves the attention of risk perception scholars. Nevertheless, risk talk has traditionally been treated as simple, often neglected, concept—usually as part of an ecology of information-seeking media avenues alongside mass media, social media, and expert conversations, and often operationalized as a binary variable—and is seldom studied on its own terms. This dissertation studies risk talk as a complex social process that is impacted both by content and context. In addition to undertaking a systematic literature review on the relationship between risk talk and risk perception, I studied people’s preferences for the content and context of risk conversations, the role of social normalization of a given risk activity, and how people narrate their own motivations for, and perceived outcomes of, risk conversations. Together, this dissertation paints a picture of risk talk as a complex tapestry of social processes that is shaped to a substantial degree by the risk it concerns.

NL In dit proefschrift wordt de volgende vraag beantwoord: *Welke sociale omstandigheden beïnvloeden interpersoonlijke communicatie over risico bij leken?* Risk talk, dat wil zeggen, interpersoonlijke gesprekken over risico, is de kleinste eenheid waar risicoinformatie sociaal mee wordt verwerkt. Het verdient daarom de aandacht van onderzoekers op het gebied van risicoperceptie. Desalniettemin wordt risk talk traditioneel behandeld als een simpel, vaak verwaarloosd, concept, en wordt het vaak gezien als een vorm van informatiezoekgedrag, waarbij de invloed gelijkgesteld wordt aan massamedia, sociale media en gesprekken met deskundigen. Verder wordt het vaak als binaire variabele geoperationaliseerd en is het zelden als zelfstandig fenomeen bestudeerd. In dit proefschrift wordt risk talk onderzocht als een complex sociaal proces dat door zowel inhoud als context wordt beïnvloed. Naast een systematische literatuurstudie over de relatie tussen risk talk en risicoperceptie, zijn de voorkeuren van mensen over de inhoud en context van risicogesprekken onderzocht, evenals de rol van de sociale normalisering van bepaalde risicoactiviteiten en hoe mensen zelf hun motivaties voor risicogesprekken en de waargenomen uitkomsten ervan verwoorden. In totaal schetst dit proefschrift een beeld van risk talk als een complex geheel van sociale processen die in substantiële mate wordt gevormd door het specifieke risico waar het om gaat.

Acknowledgments

It takes a village to raise a child, as the adage goes. A similar statement could aptly be made about PhD dissertations. While I am beyond proud of the work I did to get this dissertation to where it is today, I would never have made it this far without all the people who supported me in my PhD journey.

First, I am immensely grateful to my supervisors for their unwavering support, intellectual sparring, and constructive feedback. I have been incredibly fortunate to have Dr. Sanneke Kuipers as my first promoter. I deeply appreciate everything, from your encouragement of my academic pursuits—even when they took detours or hit dead ends—to your always direct and to-the-point advice, as well as your care and kindness when things were challenging. I am similarly grateful to have had Dr. Jaroslaw Kantorowicz in my corner as my daily supervisor. I have been moved by your continued interest in my growth as an academic, and I will be remembering our sparring sessions fondly. I would also like to extend my thanks to Dr. Marieke Liem, my first promoter during the initial two years of my PhD candidacy. I could not have asked for a warmer welcome and introduction to academia.

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Of course, I would like to thank my dear friends outside of academia, who have been a constant source of support and encouragement—not to mention distraction whenever the situation called for it. All my love and appreciation to Anna, Emilia and Thomas, Mostafa, Chris, Royzer, Valentina, Ernest, Wouter, Leah, Koen, Giulia, Okan, and Filiz. I am beyond lucky to have you in my life.

Finally, I am sending warm thoughts to Bobbie the Jumping Spider, wherever she may be hiding in my mother's apartment. You are a brave and beautiful soul. May your five legs boldly take you where no spider has gone before.