# Steering discourses in a complex world
- A case study of a multinational corporation's crisis communication in a product recall

**MATTIAS PETTERSSON & KARL ÅGÅRDH**

Lund University

Department of strategic communication

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# Abstract

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This study aims to problematise if and how an organisation can steer discourses in a crisis situation. The study brings knowledge to the field of strategic communication from a single case study regarding a product recall made by a multinational corporation. Previous research on the topic covers the proactive planning and strategies used during the crisis, but does not cover the complexity concerning the communication. We have discovered two main schools of thoughts, the first is the traditional view that focuses on the managing of the crisis. The second one is the post-modern view, that could be seen as created as a reaction to the traditional. It problematises the simplification that a crisis can be solved by proper planning and not take the complexity of the situation into account. This study uses various analysis methods to make sense of the empirical material consisting of press releases, Facebook posts including comments, news articles, and interviews. Text material was analysed through textual analysis, with rhetoric and discourse in mind. The interviews gave a deeper understanding of the organisation and the way they managed the situation. The result shows that discourses can be steered with proper planning, the right people in place, and by learning from past crisis experiences. The study brings practical knowledge regarding the managing of crisis communication in a complex world. The knowledge can be used by communication professionals that act on the global, multinational arena.

Work on this bachelor thesis is in equal parts performed by both authors.

*Keyword*: crisis communication, public relations, complexity, steering discourses, image repair, product recall

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# 1.0 Introduction

*In this part of the thesis, an introduction to strategic communication regarding a product recall is presented. Later a background to the reputational crisis case will be given. After that, the purpose and the problem of the study will be presented.*

We are living in a fast moving society with an extensive information flow. With one click on social media, thousands of people can take part of your thoughts. These digital solutions have made it possible for people to engage themselves, however, there is a complexity with more messages than ever to process since everyone can have a voice. When a corporation has to make a product recall they need to think smart and strategic to get their message through, otherwise they might end up in a crisis harm the brand. This could be called a reputational crisis, which Sohn and Lariscy (2014) define as:

> "A major event that has the potential to threaten collective perceptions and estimations held by all relevant stakeholders of an organization and its relevant attributes." (Sohn & Lariscy, 2014, p. 24)

As we understand this definition, we need to distinguish the difference between a reputational crisis and a reputational problem. Sohn and Lariscy (2014, p. 25) explain a reputational crisis as a "consequence of a specific critical incident" and a reputational problem as not only related to a single event, but more to the image of the brand as an ongoing process. The crisis as such is defined by the magnitude of the single event. Within this view, the stakeholders are defined as anyone that could be harmed or benefit from the event caused by the organisation. Furthermore, Sohn and Lariscy (2014) point out that each stakeholder group differ from each other since they have different expectations of the organisation based on their relationship. This means that if one stakeholder group thinks there is a crisis, you should treat it as such, even though other groups would not consider it that way. Talking about the organisational attributes, meaning that an organisation has a reputation because of something, for example: high quality products, safety or great prices, are essential to keep in mind when reviewing a specific corporation.

A company can be known for its high-quality products and a product recall might, therefore, have a significant impact on multinational corporations. A product recall could be seen as a crisis because the impact it might have on a brand is significant. Previous research shows that a product recall can represent a major crisis for a manufacturer and can severely damage the brand integrity, the corporate reputation, and profitability (Laufer & Coombs, 2006). Therefore, product recalls can be seen as a reputational crisis. To take control over the crisis, multinational corporations should consider factors that might affect the outcome of a crisis, then organisations could manage crisis situation to minimise negative outcome (Vassilikopoulou, Lepetsos, Siomkos, & Chatzipanagiotou, 2009). Since the digitalisation, new possibilities to interact with stakeholders have opened up. Even though the platforms present these opportunities, previous research shows that few companies utilize them (Benoit, 2013; Hsu & Lawrence, 2016). Messages can spread globally in an instance which can cause harm to the companies. One reason that companies might downplay the impact that the crisis could have is that they think the crisis might not spread to a significant amount of stakeholders and simply do not answer the comments on social media. Despite that product recalls are common and multinational corporations are aware of the consequences that it might have on the organisation, many are unprepared to manage the crisis strategically (Magno, 2012).

Since messages might spread worldwide in an instance, it is essential to understand how people write and talk about the crisis. Looking into discourses, Ekström and Larsson (2010) use a basic approach and define a discourse as verbal expressions, dialogue, and often include a way to understand and interpret the reality. A discourse is created when two, or more, persons are communicating with each other. This definition originates from the science of linguistics and takes its stand from language as a creator of relationships between people. Furthermore, this definition points out that different spheres (groups of people) do not speak the same language. In this case, language refers to the specific use of words and expressions not used in the everyday communication. Ekström and Larsson (2010) continue their discussion about discourses arguing that both social background and the situation itself makes an impact on what and how something is expressed. Discourses can be used to distinguish the language within and between institutions. It could be interesting to study when two discourses meet, like in the meeting between a doctor and a patient, or a corporation and its customers. What a discourse looks at, is the power relations and values between different groups. Gillian Rose (Rose, 2016) presents a more in-depth definition arguing that discourse refers to "groups of statements that structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking." (2016, p. 187).

## 1.1 Problem and aim

In today's fast-moving society, digitalisation has opened up possibilities to reduce the gap between corporations and their consumer. It is easier for the two to have a dialogue, mainly because of social media. Social media has in that way opened up the possibility for more people to engage themselves in the rhetoric arena. Frandsen and Johansen (2017) describe the rhetoric arena as a space where multiple voices start to communicate when a crisis occurs. Furthermore, they argue that the voices are represented by all people with access to the arena, for example, companies, politicians, NGOs, media and citizens. In that way all people could be seen as PR-specialists.

In a reputational crisis, of course, a corporation wants to manage the discourses to minimise the damage, one could ask if that is possible? Consumers today are exposed to a lot more information from many different sources than ever before which means that it is more difficult for corporations to get their messages through. Jan Van Dijk (2012) argues that since the introduction of social media, corporations have problems reaching their audiences since they are informing themselves using their own network instead of the original source of information. Van Dijk (2012) also argues that information and communication overload is a part of the problem since the number of messages competing about the receiver's attention has increased immensely. Instead of managing discourses, perhaps a corporation should try to engage themselves in the rhetoric arena and in that way repair its image. Frandsen and Johansen (2017) argue that by going through any type of organisational crisis, it creates possibilities to gain knowledge. By evaluating and examining the crisis, the learnings can be implemented when dealing with a new crisis. There is a lot of research trying to figure out how to manage the crisis communication and how to control discourses, at the same time there are scholars pointing out that you cannot control them (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). Organisations working with crisis communication face a lot of complexity. This complexity makes it harder for the organisation to form their messages and make them relevant to all their stakeholders. There are a lot of things organisations need to consider in today's fast moving society and cannot react imprudently, they need to be smart and strategic when managing a crisis. But how is it done? This study aims to examine, via a case study, crisis communication in a complex world. These thoughts lead to the overall research questions:

What is a multinational corporation's perception regarding the possibilities of steering the discourses concerning a crisis situation? How do communicators try to steer discourses given the imposed impact by the environment outside?

To gain more in-depth knowledge of the subject, this study is conducted as a case study looking into the reputational crisis of IKEA in the US connected to the recall of the MALM drawer in 2016 and 2017. The study is executed by in-depth interviews with concerned communicators within IKEA and textual analysis of press releases, articles and comments on social media.

## 1.2 Case background

June 27th, 2016 IKEA announced the recall of MALM. The recall was announced after seven children had passed away after the drawer tipped over. The recall was conducted since the drawer did not comply with the requirements of the U.S. Voluntary Industry Standard (ASTM F2057-14) and were conducted together with U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, CPSC. They are an administrative authority that is charged with protecting the public from potentially dangerous consumer products. The re-announcement of the recall was published November 21th, 2017, after another child had deceased by a tipping MALM drawer in May, the same year. Since a large amount of the drawers was not returned to IKEA, they had to re-announce the recall. Many articles have been published regarding the MALM recall, and the news has generated a lot of comments on IKEA owned social media accounts. The recall was published on the IKEA webpage (IKEA.com), and on social media.

## 1.3 Limitations

This thesis is conducted within the field of strategic communication and public relations. If it was conducted within another field of science, other findings could have been retrieved. The case could also be studied with an internal communication approach, which could provide additional knowledge to the subject. We limited the scope of our thesis to cover the managing of the case, and not the separate markets. With more time and resources it would have been possible to look into specific markets and study the distinction between them. However, the study will look at the dialogue between IKEA, media and the US citizens.

## 1.4 Disposition

This part of the paper aims to give the reader an overview of the structure of the study so that the reader effortlessly can navigate through the text. The first part of the paper consists of an introduction, problem definition, and limitations. In the second part of the paper, we will present the theoretical framework that outlines our research. At the end of chapter two we will also share our thoughts concerning the theories. The following chapter will describe the scientific methods that have been used to collect the empirical material and the methods used to analyse it. Chapter four covers the analysis of the empirical material and will be based on the second chapter of our thesis. The last part of the thesis, chapter 5, will present the results of the analysis and aim's to answer the research questions. We will also give our thoughts regarding the outcome of this paper and also propose what further research could aim to examine within the field of crisis communication.

# 2.0 Theoretical framework and previous research

*In this section, we will present previous research and the theoretical framework that outlines our research. From traditional theories to postmodern theories. First Image repair theory will be presented. Second, the complexity theory will be presented and the contextual distortion theory. The fourth and final theory which is presented is the rhetoric arena. Finally, we summarize our thoughts about the theoretical framework.*

## 2.1 Previous research about product recalls

Looking into previous research, there is a lot of research covering product recalls. However, Warner (1980) argues that a lot of it covers how to make product recalls more effective, but that there is a lack of articles covering the communication with the public. This is something that Laufer and Jung (2010) agree on and argue further; recall communication with consumers is important, but an area within crisis management that is not explored enough. Courtright and Smudde (2010) argues that previous literature focuses on how to manage product recalls from a traditional perspective and they argue further that it is important to look at the discourses regarding the product recall and how to create the right key messages. Courtright and Smudde (2010) provides an idea on how to manage key messages, from a rhetorical point of view, and they take a stand that an organisationon sometimes can control discourses and sometimes not. However, they do not problematise the complexity in these kind of issues, which is something we have discovered as a research gap. Looking at the discourses between organisations and consumers regarding product recalls, adding to the complexity, is something we have not found and that we argue is interesting to look further into. This is something that can be connected to Gilpin and Murphy´s (2008) complexity theory which will be presented in section 2.3. They argue that researchers often seem to underestimate the complexity of a crisis situation. Is it that simple to manage a crisis?

## 2.2 Image repair theory

Crisis communication has engaged scholars for many years. Since crisis communication in part is aimed at defending an organisation's image or reputation, the start of this chapter will cover a theory that discusses how it can be done. Frandsen and Johansen (2017) describe the idea of image repair theory as based on different case studies that examine how organisations and public persons defend their reputation via different strategies. The authors argue further that this theory could be used to understand the behavior of the organisations or persons in a crisis communication situation but also as a practical tool for managing crisis. The theory has been popular in crisis management for many years and still is (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017).

William L. Benoit (2013) argues that image repair theory is useful when your image or reputation is threatened, adding that the theory assumes that image or reputation is a key asset because it is important to individuals and organisations. The theory is a resource to repair this valuable asset. An event becomes a threat when someone believes that you are responsible for it, meaning that you may be innocent, but get the blame for it. That you are innocent could be an important fact in the repairing of your image, but the truth may not overcome the misperceptions. What Benoit (2013) points out as important is the difference between offensive and blame. You can be held accountable for your offensive acts, for performing, encouraging or permitting that act to occur. As said above, you can also be blamed for an act you have not committed. But your image or reputation is only at stake if the relevant audience thinks you have done it and blames you for it.

Furthermore, Benoit (2013) argues that strategies to manage the repairing of your image take place either to reduce the offensiveness in the act in question or the attempt to deny blame or evade responsibility. There are also strategies saying that you should take the blame and admit to committing the act, to apologize for it. It is essential for the image repairing process to understand the nature of the threat. Benoit (2013) describes the strategies for image repairing as plenty and there are four general strategies with 12 different variants of those. You find an overview in table 2.1 below. The first strategy is *denial* with the two variants *simply deny* and *shift the blame*. In the first one, you simply deny that you committed the act and in the second one you shift the blame to the "real" culprit, blaming them instead. The second strategy could be effective since you actually can blame someone else, but keep in mind that you need to have some kind of evidence to make it work.

The next general strategy, *evasion of responsibility,* is described by Benoit (2013) as an approach with four variants, *provocation, defeasibility, accident* and *good intentions.* The first

one argues that another organisation is the one causing the accused to perform the act. The second points out that the accused had a lack of information or control over the act. The third claiming that the act was an accident, and the fourth is about admitting that you performed the act, but that you meant no harm performing it, trying to reduce the blame.

The third general strategy is *reducing offensiveness of the event* and has six variations *bolstering, minimisation, differentiation, transcendence, attacking accuser* and *compensation.* Starting with bolstering, meaning that you focus on good qualities and good deeds hoping that it will compensate for the offensive act. The strategy of minimisation focuses on comparing the act as not as bad as it seems while differentiation comparing the act with other "more worse" acts. Transcending the act means that you admit that you did something bad, but for the greater good. Attacking the accuser is self-explaining meaning that you should minimise the accuser's credibility. The final one, compensations, tries to make the act right through compensating the victims.

There is one more strategy, not belonging as a subgroup to the general strategies, which is *corrective action.* This strategy, according to Benoit (2013), does not address blame, and the accused can either try to fix the damage caused by the offensive act or make sure that the act does not happen again. This strategy is often combined with the strategy where you admit the offensive act.

However, there is one more general strategy that Benoit (2013) address. It is called *mortification,* where you admit the blame and ask for forgiveness. There are plenty of ways to execute this strategy, you could, for example, apologize, admit doing wrong or express regret. Also, you could say that you are sorry, but this does not necessarily mean that you actually admit the wrongdoing, but you show sympathy.

These strategies can be used both separately and together in combination. What Benoit (2013) points out is that there are not one that is more important than another, it depends on the situation. Some of the strategies are even contradictory. Also, it is important to be aware of your different audiences since you might need to use different approaches to get through in the discourses. In some situations, it could even be necessary to choose between your audiences, since you might not be able to address and repair all of your relationships.

| Strategy | Key characteristic |
| --- | --- |
| **1. Denial** | |
| *Simple denial* | Did not perform act |
| *Shift the blame* | Another performed act |
| **2. Evasion of responsibility** | |
| *Provocation* | Responded to act of another |
| *Defeasibility* | Lack of information or ability |
| *Accident* | Mishap |
| *Good intention* | Meant well |
| **3. Reducing the offensiveness of event** | |
| *Bolstering* | Stress good traits |
| *Minimization* | Act not serious |
| *Differentiation* | Act less offensive than others |
| *Transcendence* | More important values |
| *Attack accuser* | Reduce credibility of accuser |
| *Compensation* | Reimburse victim |
| *4. Corrective action* | Plan to solve / prevent recurrence of problem |
| *5. Mortification* | Apologize |

Table 2.1 Corporate image repair strategies. (Benoit, 2013)

The image repair theory has been a part of the crisis management for many years and there are scholars addressing their concerns about this and other more traditional theories. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) argue that this kind of theories are too narrow since crises are far more complex. They argue further that there are a lot more to a crisis than just the obvious signals that have an impact on the outcome. The complexity comes from a pressure to change, both from within and outside the organisation, therefore it is hard to foresee the outcome of the crisis (Kennan & Hazelton, 2006). Coombs (2006) argue that some of the solutions described within image repair theory do not have a proven impact. For example, he points out that there was a lack of support for mortification and corrective action response towards a crisis. In some specific cases, it had little or none effect at all.

## 2.3 Crisis management in a complex world

After studying the image repair theory, an alternative theory to IRT is the complexity theory. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) have a different approach towards crisis communication than Benoit, some previous literature takes an approach the decision environment and standardising decision making is simplified. Caroll (2016) argues that complexity theory focuses on change in organisations and what patterns can be seen within it. In short, it can be argued that the theory illustrates the difficulty of predicting and intervening in a reputational crisis. Kennan and Hazelton (2006) discuss that complexity theory builds upon the idea that organisations are self-organising and have a pressure to always change. This pressure comes from both within the organisation as well as the outside environment. Furthermore, Kennan and Hazelton (2006) discuss that elements are different systems that are complex and in that way it is hard to foresee the future. The environment demands an immediate response from the organisation, which means there is a great pressure on them. Those in favour of this theory argue that the success lies in creating an adaptable structure to react to change (Kennan & Hazelton, 2006).

However, Gilpin and Murphys (2008) theory takes its standpoint from "a vision of the changeable and complex nature of crises" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 4), meaning that they look for ways to manage in today's complex society with unforeseen events and missing information. In the introduction, they address the question: "*To what extent can communicators actually perform their expected role to anticipate and head of crises or to guide their organizations through crises with the least possible damage to reputation?"*(Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p.4). It is essential to have in mind that previous research concludes that successful crisis management is not "guaranteed by scientific planning and prescriptive decision making, but by the nature of the organization, the crisis, and the environment" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 5).

Furthermore, the authors argue that there has been a paradigm (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008) where organisations try to be as prepared as possible for a crisis, and this is also something you can find in the crisis literature. This means that organisations should monitor and analyse their environment, proactively, before a crisis occurs. Many scholars argue that this is the best defense to conquer a crisis. They suggest that organisations should prepare themselves and invest in material and human resources to stay ready for a potential crisis. During a crisis, they argue that organisations should spread information and monitor the stakeholder's reactions and concerns. Then after a crisis, the organisation should learn from the event(s) and make use of it in the future.

However, Gilpin and Murphy (2008) argue that it is more to crisis management/communication than what has been said above. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) further argue that successful crisis management "is not guaranteed by scientific planning and prescriptive decision making" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 5), meaning that there are many more items that influence the outcome of the crisis communication, for example: the nature of the organisation, stakeholders, and the crisis itself. Furthermore, they argue that too detailed planned procedures to manage the crisis communication could even be counterproductive. This can be a problem for the communicators since they will appear as incompetent since the outcome of the crisis did not match what the plan tell. Some crises cannot even a senior professional foresee or control, but should learn from instead. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) argue, together with other scholars, that crisis planning often see crises as predetermined and objective events. However, the authors see this as a limited view of crises, looking to simple factors like crisis types and responsibility. They also argue that this view of crises are the results of external forces to the organisation and should be handled as such. This means that a lot of previous literature does not look into how information and, or knowledge is spread within and between organisations. Then, it could be argued that we should put more focus on how organisations "find out about, make sense of, make decisions for, and learn from rapidly changing situations such as those encountered in a crisis" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 5). Which means that the ability to manage future crises is connected to the organisational learning.

What does this then mean? Gilpin and Murphy (2008) argue that the scientific management of crisis focus on prediction, and control can easily overstate predictability. Furthermore, they argue that detailed planning often oversimplify what is complex. Crises are uncertain, perilous and the planning tries to frame this to make the world appear more controllable when there, in fact, are many other factors that can aggravate organisational crisis. This means that it is hard to foresee and control a crisis, even for a skilled professional.

Then what is complexity theory? Gilpin and Murphy's (2008) model study the interactions within and between complex systems. A complex system could be any social system, like an organisation. The fundamental definition of a complex system follows:

> "The interaction among constituents of the system, and the interaction between the system and its environment, are of such a nature that the system as a whole cannot be fully understood simply by analyzing its components. Moreover, these relationships are not fixed, but shift and change, often as a result of self-organisation" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 6)

This definition captures the contingency of rapid change, of limited predictability and control, that characterise organisational crises. The theory focuses on the relationships of the organisations with its stakeholders. The difference between this and other theories is the embracing of "uncertainty, ambiguity, conflict, and error to an uncomfortable extent for those accustomed to seeking linear predictability and control" (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p. 6). Instead of simplifying crises, complexity theory presents a tool that is relevant because of its focus on uncertainty and unpredictability in connection with the organisations relationships and its communication. What it really does is to connect crisis management and organisational learning.

What is essential in the model is the flexibility and staying alert when a crisis occurs and then learn from this. It is important to maintain good relationships with your stakeholders, but it can be complex, since sometimes organisations do not know who their stakeholders are. You have both internal and external stakeholders that you need to address in a crisis, but in what ways? What Gilpin and Murphy (2008) argue and point out is that crises are complex and should be treated as such. There is no handbook on how to predict them, nor manage or control them. But you can learn from them and be prepared for the next one via maintaining your relationships and becoming a learning organisation.

## 2.4 Contextual distortion theory

Although a crisis may be complex and unpredictable, it is worthwhile taking learnings and plan for a future crisis. A part of the complexity lies in understanding implications from outside influences affecting the intended messages. In *The Routledge handbook of strategic communication*, Murphy (2015) discusses two crucial questions regarding outcomes of what is communicated, from an organisation's perspective. The questions cover "how strategic can strategic communication be, given the distortions imposed by the environment outside" (Murphy, 2015, p. 113). She also covers what "organisations do to maintain some semblance to the original content, and intent of the message, after it leaves their hands?" (Murphy, 2015, p. 113). Since there are questions regarding how, and even if, organisations can control the message after it reaches customers or other stakeholders, scholars have looked into what causes such implications. Some of the studies show that there are a couple of similarities when looking into the possibilities of controlling the messages outcome. They show that the outcome is "unruly,

dynamic, and temporary, constantly needing to be renegotiated with multiple interest groups" (Murphy, 2015, p. 114).

Furthermore, Murphy (2015) argues that her research shows that the message competes with other messages within the public sphere. In today's society, the published message has to be adjusted to the context it exists in, since there will be many other messages competing with the original message. To conceptualise the distortions of messages, Murphy (2015) uses social network theory, which means that many factors affect the receiver's perception of the message, there is not only one that can be analysed to understand the outcome. The network theory also describes the importance of strength and possibilities in networks that can help to manage or lose the control over the outcomes of the message. Van Dijk (2012) writes that networks break old traditions and have created new ways to manage and control. This is an explanation to what digitalisation has done to the complex networks that build up today's societies.

Murphy (2015) also discusses and argues for the different paths through networks that the message will travel that will affect the outcome. The term centrality is used to describe the importance of an actor that can monitor and manipulate the network flows. This means that the actor can act as a gatekeeper through whom the message is spread. There are different ways of measuring the ways an actor can manage or lose the control over a network's resources. The easiest way is to measure centrality is to use degree centrality, which means looking at how many actors that are directly connected to a certain actor (Murphy, 2015). An actor with a high degree of centrality is placed in the center of the network and has an advantage over less central actors. If the recipient has a high degree of centrality, she can be seen as an opinion leader by other actors. This means that for an organisation that is the market leader, in its segment of business, a high centrality might be favourable since they can be dominating the public opinion. Furthermore the network configuration is discussed as an important part of centralisation patterns of an entire network (Murphy, 2015). The problems and advantages with homogenous groups within a network are discussed as a part of why actors tend to associate themselves with the actor with the highest centrality. For strategic communication practitioners within organisations, the network configuration and centrality concept can bring insight into the possibilities of controlling the message. Murphy (2015) also covers the term ties within networks. Ties are defined as the strength and character of the relationships within networks. Previous research has shown that strong ties between organisations can affect an entire industry's reputation, even if the main reputational crisis started with one single organisation. This means that the ties within the network can affect the outcome of the message, both if the organisation is the transmitter or receiver. Some of these arguments are also mentioned within

the rhetoric arena theory (see next section, 2.4). For example, Frandsen and Johansen (2017) argue that the relations between voices within networks have different power. This means that in regard to economics, political or symbolic capital, and how strategically placed each individual are, the outcome of what is communicated will differ.

Another part of the theory that further complicates the message control is multiplexity (Murphy, 2015). The term is defined as the actor's multiple memberships with other actors that can affect the messages outcome. Strategic communication practitioners might not only think of multiplexity in a negative way since having multiple relationships with different actors in a wider sense can help to communicate to, or with, a broader audience. But the complexity lies in the relationships that organisations have that can affect their own business when an organization within the same industry have a crisis; it can drag in the own organisation. Multiplexity also has a side effect which is called contagion, which is the process that ideas flow through the network. The ideas, or messages, affect the actors they pass, whether they want it or not and even if the idea is true or false. Studies also show that contagion works to homogenizing a network, which means that even though the ideas that spread throughout an organisation through a network are false, the actors will believe that they are true and attach it to the reality in which they work.

As the network theory shows, the tightly linked opinion environment that strategic communicators work in, outcome of messages might not be able to control. But, it can be purposeful and mindful. This means that when looking at the possibilities to control a message the communicator's role is to manage the message, not control, so that they can participate in issue arena and help determine public opinion (Murphy, 2015).

## 2.5 Rhetorical arena theory

Most of the previous research that has been conducted on organisational crises have focused on crisis response strategies to maintain or rebuild the organisations reputation or image. Frandsen and Johansen's (2017) rhetorical arena theory, focuses on the many actors (voices) that start communicating in various ways when a crisis occurs. Many different actors might be involved in an organisational crisis, for example, news media, consumers, citizens, PR experts, and so on. Coombs (2017) writes that the theory takes a multi-vocal approach, since othetheoriesis has lack of this perspective. These theories focus more on the crisis response of the organisation, and not from all of its stakeholders. Coombs (2017) further writes that the theory builds upon the idea that there are many crisis communicators during a crisis, the actors. Rhetorical arena theory aims to study the communicative complexity that characterises organisational crisis. Since there are multiple actors the main focus is to understand what communication processes take place within the arena and what keeps them going. This means that the message that is published on an organisation's Facebook page is not only communicating between the organisation and a receiver, it also contributes to the receiver's communication with other stakeholders.

Within Frandsen & Johansen's (2017) model, there are two perspectives on crisis communication. In the macro perspective, focus is on all the voices and the processes that take place within an arena. The micro perspective focuses on the individual communicative processes in the arena. Frandsen and Johansen (2017) describe the perspective as the part where the analytical and practical part of assessing the patterns of voices within the arena are made. The micro perspective is described as where each individual process can be characterised in terms of context, media, genre, and text.

Frandsen & Johansen (2017) claim that when a crisis occurs, an arena opens up where multiple voices communicate. It does not mean that the voices interact with each other, they can also communicate at or past each other, which makes up the complexity of crises. The voices also have different attributes that affect the outcome of the communication. The authors discuss the relation of power, politics, economics, and access to the media, to describe the impact the communication might have. Also, the importance of how strategically well placed each actor is in regard to the public sphere. This means that the links between voices, actors, networks, and attributes have an impact on the outcome of the communication during a crisis.

The micro-component of the arena is built up from three elements (crisis communication, sender, and receiver). Frandsen & Johansen (2017) define crisis communication as both the

products (messages) and the process of the sender's and receiver's effort to make meaning of the context. The sender's and receiver's are described not only as the voices within the organisation, but also the many voices that can have an impact in the arena from outside of the organisation. The authors argue that each communicative process is mediated by four parameters: *context*, *media*, *genre*, and *text*. They argue that the voices within the arena will influence the production and reproduction of crisis communication based on the choices the voices take regarding the parameters above.

Frandsen and Johansen (2017) describe the *context* parameter as the most complex of the four. It contains a specific set of "internal or psychological and external or sociological context that 'filters' each individual communicative process" (2017, p. 150). The authors define three parameters within the sociological context that are important to understand:

1.  The national-cultural context, important within global crises and intercultural or multicultural publics.
2.  The organisational context, for example, open or closed communication culture that might affect the crisis.
3.  The situational context. Covers the specific circumstances of the particular situation.

The *media* parameter describes the carrier of the crisis message. Spoken and written word and even the human body can be the message. Frandsen & Johansen (2017) also describes the importance of choosing the right media for the right purpose and how that might influence the receiver. That is why the communicated message needs to be adjusted to the format. The *genre* parameter is defined as the groups of texts that share the same communicative purpose and which have common features in forms of strategies. The *text* parameter is the result of the sender's choices regarding the message, such as strategies, words, pictures, and so on. This parameter is important, since the result of the choices are the possibilities of how we reach the receivers in the best way.

The conclusion of the rhetorical arena theory is that we have to take into account all the multiple voices that act in the arena and not only think of communication as information being sent from a sender to a receiver and that they accept the information as it is. "Crisis communication can no longer be reduced to a communication produced by the organisation in crisis" (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017, p. 158).

## 2.6 Theory reflection

To summarise the theoretical framework that outlines our research, we can conclude a series of thoughts that is important to keep in mind throughout the analysis. Communication is often discussed as something that can be controlled or aimed at a specific direction. But the comprehensive research that has been conducted prior to this study shows that different scholars have different approaches to the term controlled. Scholars argue that the complexity affects the outcome of crisis communication and that the focus should not be aimed at the whether the term control or manage is used.

We have examined both traditional and newer theories covering crisis communication. The traditional theories see the crisis as a single event contained within frames. Furthermore, those theories argue that you can manage a crisis with the correct methods and planning. However, the more recent theories are more reductive to what could be seen as "easy solutions". For example, within contextual distortion theory, the network plays an essential role in the outcome. This means that the outcome is affected by the relationship that organisations have with central actors, both in the public sphere and in the same market segment they work in. However, it could be argued that this theory, as well as the theory of complexity, was created in reaction to the simplicity of the more traditional ones.

# 3.0 Methodology

*In this section we will guide you through the methods of this study and why we conducted it in this way.*

## 3.1 Research design

Since our aim is to study the perception of a multinational corporation's possibility of steering the discourses concerning a crisis situation, we want to get in-depth knowledge from within the organisation. That is why we choose to conduct a case study, researching the IKEA recall of their MALM drawer as well as other chests of drawers on their US market (publicly known as the MALM recall). It is an interesting case to study, from a communication point of view, since it has a global perspective. This global perspective brings a certain complexity when it comes to how to communicate and how to address a crisis. This complexity is not only specific for IKEA, but for many other multinational corporations and organisations (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). There are many other cases that could give us similar knowledge, however, we gained access to people handling the MALM case on a global level, which made it possible for us to conduct this study, giving us deeper knowledge why they managed the crisis in a certain way. We did not gain access to co-workers on the US market, but choose to look into the textual dialogue between IKEA and the US citizens since most communication efforts were executed there. Therefore, we can get a global perspective on the communication efforts, however not a local.

This research is conducted within the field of Strategic Communication and more specifically public relations and crisis communication. We are going to conduct the research through a single case study with an abductive approach (Bryman, 2016). This will help us gain the knowledge to answer our research questions, since a single case study can provide us with in-depth knowledge regarding the MALM case. Since our research has a social constructivistic ontological standpoint (Bryman, 2016), is this kind of study relevant since it provides us with the knowledge of how people interact between and within the organisation and the organisation's perception of the interaction. In other words, the research will give us a certain perception of the reality within the case, but not all aspects of it. From an epistemological

standpoint (Bryman, 2016), we see ourselves as co-creators of the material since our interpretations and perceptions will affect the analysis, also known as interpretivism.

Ekström and Larsson (2010) describe a single case study as a qualitative method, concentrating on a specific case, an organisation, or texts and others. However, Bryman (2016) points out that even if it is more common to use qualitative methods, case studies is also often combined with quantitative methods. The single case is described through many different methods, like interviews, texts, and pictures (Ekström & Larsson, 2010). What you want to do is to describe what is specific and complex in the case, but also try to find what are the general and more fundamental connections in the specific case. What is interesting, as Ekström and Larsson (2010) describe it, is that through a single case study you have the possibility to see the connections in how the specific circumstances for one case make an impact on conversations, dialogues, and communication as such. This is why a case study is suitable for the purpose of our research since it gives us the possibility to discover the outcome of the communication efforts regarding the MALM case.

What we are going to analyse is both interviews and texts such as press releases, articles, posts on social media and its comments. By combining these two materials we get the knowledge of what perception the interviewees has on the possibilities to manage discourses and on the other hand get to see the outcome through the text analysis. To analyse the texts we are using two different kinds of methods, one is textual analysis and one is an nethnographic analysis. The textual analysis will be used, with the help of rhetorical and discourse analysis, for both press releases and articles. To analyze the commentary field, we will use an nethnographic approach together with the same two analysis as the previous method. This analysis gives us the possibility to interpret how and why people comment the way that they do. With the help of these analysis and the perspective, we created a guide (Appendix 1) to use when looking at the material.

## 3.2 Data collection method and selection

To be able to collect the data, providing the necessary information for the paper, we need to have the appropriate method. We will collect data with a purposive sampling method, meaning that we do not seek data and interviewees on a random basis (Bryman, 2016). Bryman (2016) argues that the goal of purposive sampling is to find samples in a strategic way that are relevant in connection to the research questions. This means that we cannot generalise to the population. However, it is relevant to do so in this specific case. Since the paper is conducted through a

single-case study, it is more important to get the hold of the relevant data than a random sample. More specific to this kind of method could be called generic purposive sampling, which Bryman (2016) explains as a way to find data that is relevant to the research questions. The author argues that the data is collected with criteria set by the researchers in connection with the research questions.

### 3.2.1 Choosing interviewees

Starting with our interviews, readers need to have a brief introduction to the structure of IKEA and how they organised during the case. IKEA as a brand is owned by the franchisor, Inter IKEA Holding B.V. (Inter IKEA Systems B.V., 2017) There are many companies working with the IKEA brand and there are two important for this specific case:

- IKEA of Sweden, IoS, (part of Inter IKEA Holding B.V, the owner of the IKEA Concept and worldwide IKEA franchisor). IoS are the developer of MALM (and the other chests of drawers included in the recall) and owner of the MALM case.
- IKEA Group (Ingka Holding B.V. and its controlled entities, IKEA franchisee). Operates 355 stores in 29 Retail markets, with support functions to the markets, including communication support.
- Retail Markets/US Retail market (part of IKEA Group). Runs the operation in a specific market. (Not a subject for interviews, but good to be aware of since the interviewees refers to these companies).

These three organisations are important since they are working with the MALM case. We got in contact with them after reaching out to IKEA. When choosing the interviewees, it was important to get communication professionals in the two companies working on a global level with the specific case. After reaching out to the specific organisations we got names and contact details to relevant people that could provide us with the information/knowledge regarding the case. We interviewed one communication manager, one senior communicator/press officer, one social media manager, and one risk communication leader. The four interviewee's will be named a, b, c, and d, to keep them anonymous.

**3.2.2 Choosing documents**

To be able to see connections between the interviews and the outcome of the communication efforts, we wanted to examine text documents as well. These documents consist of texts published by the CPSC, IKEA, and news media, but also comments made on their social media accounts. When we choose documents it was essential to find texts that could provide us with relevant information in connection to the research questions. To limit the data we had a few criteria. First, all content needed to be published on social media, since we wanted to study how people comment on it. Second, it needed to cover the recall in 2016 or the re-announcement in 2017, since we wanted to be able to see and compare how IKEA and the media wrote about it. Looking at the comments section of each post we chose to analyse the most relevant comments (a maximum of 20 comments per post, some of them had less). Facebook (2018) defines the most relevant comments as those who get the most attention from other users (likes, sub comments, etc.) Because of the time frame to write the paper, we choose to analyze the five largest newspapers in the US (Cision, 2017), (excluding commuter papers) based on audited circulation figures below:

1. The Wall Street Journal, 1 180 460
2. The New York Times, 597 955
3. Chicago Tribune, 438 015
4. New York Post, 433 114
5. Los Angeles Times, 431 076

This gave us seven articles published in news media, two posts from IKEA published on Facebook including links to the press releases. The press releases covering the recall were published on the IKEA webpage. However, the press releases were not posted in social media as a whole, but give important knowledge in how IKEA uses the language. We also analysed the CPSC press release, which was the same as the first one published by IKEA. Links to all text material is presented in Appendix 3.

## 3.3 Description of investigation process

Before the interviews, we created an interview guide (Appendix 2) based on the information we gathered while reading the press releases, articles, and the social media comments, as well as theories presented under 2.0. We used the guide to conduct the interview. However, it was important to us to make the guide semi-structured, so that there was room to address new findings with additional questions. Bryman (2016) describes the advantages of the semi-structured interviews as the researchers have a clear focus on the topic since they have prepared the questions prior to the interviews. This means that we had the possibilities to gain more specific answers regarding the topics that were of interest to the subsequent analysis. The semi-structured interviews that were conducted was suitable for the type of information that lay the foundation for our analysis. In the interviews, the interview guide followed a predetermined guide that helped to somewhat structure the outline of the interview. But the possibilities to steer the dialogue in a certain direction and to follow up the questions with more questions regarding the topic where additional information is needed. The interviews were conducted by both researchers face to face with the interviewee's, at the IKEA Group and Inter IKEA Systems' offices in Malmö. This gave us the possibility to see their expressions and body language during the interview's and also to small talk before the interviews to get a relaxed atmosphere.

Regarding the textual analysis, we studied both the IKEA and the traditional media's Facebook pages, searching for posts directly connected to the recall. We found two posts with comments on the IKEA US Facebook page and seven articles posted on the traditional media Facebook pages. We also examined the press releases to gain insights into how IKEA frames their messages. To make a similar analysis of all texts, we used a form created from the analysis methods. We read all texts separately to get our own perception of them and then discussed them, with the help of the form.

## 3.4 Analytical methods

*In this section we will describe more about how we analyse the empirical material. The methods are used to give a deeper knowledge and a background to why the organisation chooses to manage the crisis in a certain way. We have combined the different methods to create guides which helps us go through our findings.*

### 3.4.1 Interviews

As mentioned in a previous part (3.2) of the study, interviews were chosen to gain more in-depth knowledge of the case. Since this study want to examine the perceptions of communicators at IKEA, interviews are essential to gain this knowledge. Mats Alvesson (2011) argues that qualitative research methods is normalised in social science research and that it usually is based on interviews. He also describes the critic of the qualitative method of interviews from the positivistic, quantitative researchers. They argue that quantitative methods should be used to keep the results objective and clear but also replicable. Alvesson (2011) meets this criticism by explaining the importance of reflexivity and problematise how the interview proceed. When using semi-structured interviews, it means that the world will be seen from the eyes of the interviewed person. Eksell and Thelander (2014) describe it as seeing the world from their perspective. Scholars describe the semi-structured interview as neither an open everyday conversation or a closed inflexible questionnaire. The interview is aimed to get a nuanced description of different qualitative approach angles of the interviewed person (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). It is important to keep in mind that the people who conduct the interviews will affect the outcome since they will interpret the answers and is also the one who sets the limits regarding what the interview will cover. Rennstam and Wästerfors (2015) argues that interviews will contain ambiguity since they are based on interpersonal interactions and will contain the analyst ideas and interpretations. To make sense of the knowledge gained from the interviews, we discussed and compared the findings, in relation to the other empirical material. It is by comparing these findings, we can gain the knowledge to answer our research questions, since we want to understand what the communicator's perceptions are of steering discourses and how they think they can do it.

### 3.4.2 Textual analysis

By including text documents to the empirical material, we can gain deeper knowledge and compare the communicator's perceptions with the outcome. This gives a richer material and helps us understand if it is possible to steer discourses.

To analyse the written word, both from IKEA and other stakeholders, a textual analysis was conducted on the different texts described in previous parts of the paper (3.2). Textual analysis is, as Ekström and Larsson (2010) write in their book, a method to find patterns in your observations. There is not really a model for how to conduct the analysis (Ekström & Larsson, 2010) since all text is too different in itself. But you can use this method to see how the text integrates and creates a relation to its reader. This is done through four categories: content, relation, form, and intertextualiy (Ekström & Larsson, 2010). Content is about the theme of the text, relation about the language resources within the text creating relations. Furthermore, form is about how the text actually creates and realise its content and language resources. The last one, intertextuality is, as the authors put it, a dimension which includes all categories together.

When conducting a textual analysis, Ekström and Larsson (2010) point out that it is about deconstructing the text to its fractions. You can ask yourself questions like: What is happening within the text? What is the text about and what does it say. It is also important to look into the communication situation of the text (Ekström & Larsson, 2010), where is it published? Who has published it? Who does it aim for? This gives an understanding of the aim of the text and its rhetorical structure. Which means that we will use a rhetorical perspective combined with a discourse analysis.

To make the same analysis of all texts we will create a guide (Appendix 1) to help and guide us when looking at the different texts. It will take a stand from the above-mentioned concerns together with the discourse and rhetorical analysis. The guide will work as a lens to help us discover, for example, power structures, the purpose of the text, arguments, and the style of the text. Furthermore, the comments were categorised in positive, neutral, and negative. When categorised as positive, the comments were favourable for IKEA. Neutral comments did not ascribe the blame to IKEA or any other stakeholders. Negative comments directly or indirectly blamed IKEA regarding the MALM case. This makes it possible to repeat the analysis again and makes the findings more valid. Above all, it makes the research transparent. This guide helps us make sense of all the material and is useful when comparing with what have been said during the interviews. With the textual analysis, we can compare what the interviewees had said and the outcome.

### 3.4.3 Discourse analysis

As a part of the textual analysis, it is essential to gain insights into if and how discourses are affecting the perception of what is written. With the help of discourse analysis, we can analyse the findings in the MALM case and see what power relations there are and how the messages are interpreted. Discourses are defined by Ekstöm and Larsson (2010) as when two or more people communicate with each other. Discourses are created through language expressions and conversations. It is used to describe the difference between different institutions ways of using language. Gillian Rose (2016) presents a more in-depth definition arguing that discourse refers to "groups of statements that structure the way a thing is thought, and the way we act on the basis of that thinking. " (2016, p. 187) While conducting research, discourses are used to analyse what happens when two institutions meet that uses different language, for example, academics and factory workers. Discourse analysis can be used to analyse all the different discourses, texts, and media. When people concerned with a certain topic, read the text concerning that issue, they interpret and make meaning of it in different ways, based on experience, education, and so on. According to Ekström and Larsson (2010) the critical discourse analysis aim is to show the sociocultural processes that lie behind why a text is produced in the way it is. Which means, are there any underlying messages or values that affect the interpretation of the text. When using discourse analysis, it is also important to take into account the relation of the text to other texts and the context in which it is published (Berger, 2016). Also, what role the text has in society is considered important and how it affects the creation of communication in the society.

### 3.4.4 Rhetorical analysis

Within the textual analysis, rhetoric might affect the outcome of what is written. By looking at the material with the help of rhetorics, we can see how the material is framed and how it affects the outcome. This is important in the MALM case, since we want to compare the strategies the interviewee's talk about and the outcome of the communication efforts. Rhetorics is described, as Berger (2016) puts it, as how to persuade. This idea goes back to Aristotels and he described rhetorics as built up of three modes. These means could be seen as arguments to create a persuasive text. The terms are: *ethos, pathos,* and *logos* (Berger, 2016). Each term is a special kind of argument, where the authors refer to ethos as the argument of the writer (its credibility). This refers to your image and reputation, your personal character. People tend to believe experts

or other people of trust more than just anyone. You can also borrow someone's ethos, like we are doing when we are referring to previous literature in this paper to make it more valid. Pathos (Berger, 2016) is the argument of emotions, meaning how the text connects with your emotions. It could be both how you use the language and the use of examples in your text. An example could be to refer to the people affected in a certain way in a certain case. Then logos (Berger, 2016) is the logical arguments. These arguments could refer to scientific research and are built up with a logical reasoning and deduction. When conducting a rhetorical analysis you look at the text through these arguments, but it could also be good to define the aim (the discourse) of the text and medium of where it is published (Berger, 2016).

### 3.4.5 Netnographic method

Netnographic content analysis method will be used to analyse the comments made by people on social media. This analysis is important, because it helps us to understand how people interpreted the communication efforts IKEA made. Furthermore, it helps us see if the perception of the case and the outcome differs or not. Bryman (2016) describes that a netnographic analysis is one of the most common ways of analysing comments made on social media platforms. Netnography as a term is based on the concept of ethnographic studies, but has an online community focus. Since netnographic analysis generates empiric material from text, picture, and audio, from social media, it can provide a deeper understanding of different cases (Bertilsson, 2014). It is a good tool to study the role of communication, language, and discourses and how it creates a hierarchy, status, and a community. Since the comments on IKEA U.S Facebook page are open to the public, we conducted the collection of empirical material, as Bryman (2016) describes it, covert, which means that no one will know that the researchers are analysing the comments. Since the comments were made in 2016 and 2017 it can also be seen as a retrospective netnographic study, where all the comments are already published. The analysis will be conducted through a mainstream approach, which means that the netnographic analysis builds on the research question and the theoretical framework.

## 3.5 Method reflection

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that there is more than one perception of the perceived truth regarding the social world. This means that it is important to have in mind when reading our analysis is that the findings will be reflected in our own perception of the material. Other researchers would perhaps focus on other parts of the material, use different theories, different analysis processes, and make other connections than we do. Another thing we need to address is that both of us are employed by two different IKEA companies. Also essential to know is that none of us have worked on this specific case. However, we do have a perception of the case coloured by the fact that we work for the organisation. When looking at the material we have taken our "critical glasses" on and looked at the case as scholars and not employees. Although, complete objectivity, as Bryman (2016) puts it, would be impossible. It could also be argued that our employment is an advantage since we gained easy access to the organisation and that we have insights and understanding of how IKEA as a corporation works. When analysing the comments on Facebook we argue that since they are published on a public platform, the comments are open to anyone that has access to Facebook, and for that reason, we believe that it is possible to analyse them. Bryman (2016) discusses some of the ethical concerns that arise when conducting covert collection of empirical material online. One of the concerns regards the anonymity of the people who comment, and that they do not get used in a situation they want to participate in. Also by keeping the commentators anonymous, we are convinced that their integrity is not unhinged.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe two criteria for assessing the quality of qualitative research, trustworthiness, and authenticity. We argue that this paper is trustworthy since we are transparent attaching interview guides, forms and other material making it possible to do a similar research. Furthermore, we think that although we only had four interviewees, we got a good spread of knowledge and insights in the case, on a global level, and was able to back this up with relevant texts. Of course we would have preferred to have more interviews since it would have strengthened the paper with more perspectives and insights.

# 4.0 Analysis

*In this part of the paper, we will share our findings. To make sense of it, we will present it in chronological order, starting with a brief historical overview of the case, then digging deeper into the recall of MALM drawer in 2016, the renouncement of the recall in 2017 and then compare the two communication initiatives. At the end of this analysis, we will share the overall findings and conclusions.*

## 4.1 A brief historical case overview

In 1989, a 20-month-old girl was pinned down by a chest of drawers in her bedroom. It was one of the first tip-over reports in the US, involving IKEA furniture. This was the start, leading up to the ongoing case, know today as the MALM recall. Since the first report in 1989 until 2015, IKEA has gotten over 70 reports of accidents with furniture tipping over. Six of those with a fatal outcome. In 2015, IKEA, together with the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), launched a campaign in the US urging customers to anchor their furniture to the wall. The CPSC is an administrative authority that is charged with protecting the public from potentially dangerous consumer products. However, IKEA got reports of more accidents and one with a fatal outcome. The development of the situation and that the CPSC were stressing the issue of the furniture not complying with the requirements of the US voluntary industry standards (ASTM F2057-14) put IKEA in a position where they had to announce the recall in the US. Together with the CPSC, IKEA launched the recall on June 28th, 2016, covering 29 million pieces of furniture (8 million pieces of MALM and 21 million of the other chests of drawers). The magnitude of this recall received global attention with a significant media coverage. The recall was voluntary where customers not anchoring their furniture could get full refunds. However, in May 2017 there was another report of a child in a fatal accident with a MALM tipping over, making IKEA re-announce the recall on November 21, 2017. As written in The Wall Street Journal:

> "IKEA has agreed to recall 29 million chests and dressers in the U.S. following a raft of injuries and the deaths of six toddlers caused by the furniture tipping over." (Chaudhuri, 2016)

## 4.2 The recall

On June 28th, 2016, IKEA announced the recall together with the CPSC. The press release was published even though IKEA did not see the recall as a solution. According to interviewees, they would prefer to do a bigger campaign regarding the importance of anchoring the furniture. However, CPSC stressed the recall to be carried out. The press release was published on IKEA's US webpage and in a Facebook post on their US account. The press release was written in a formal way, informing customers and the media about the recall. When reading it, the focus lies in fixing the problem of tipping furniture and not blaming any stakeholders. Although, it could be argued that IKEA tries to shift the focus towards an industrial problem and not their own, mentioning that children and toddlers are injured every day in the US from furniture tipping over. They want to make people aware of the problem and starting a discussion within the industry to find a solution to it.

We think that there are two purposes of the text, one explicit and one implicit. Of course, they want to inform and calm people down. However, implicit they want to shift the focus, as mentioned, towards the industry problem, and perhaps they did not completely succeed. When talking to the interviewees, they confirmed trying to shift the focus, mentioning that they did foresee another outcome than the actual one. We find it interesting that the same press release was published on the CPSC webpage as well. This gives us more knowledge and insights on why it is drafted in that way. It could be argued that for people who know IKEA and the usual discourse/language within the company would find this format of the press release uncommon. From the interviews, we got the understanding that it was written in collaboration with the authorities, which could be argued as a problem for IKEA. This problem makes it hard for IKEA to steer the message in a more favourable way, making it an industrial problem instead. Interviewees confirmed this, mentioning that they could not steer the press release in a preferred way since it was drafted in collaboration with the CPSC. One of the interviewees said:

> "It was a collaboration, we had a lot of meetings in a big big group with managers and deputy CEO's for IoS and everyone was involved in these discussions. It was a big big thing. Because there could be different tweaks and how you put things forward. It was a lot of information in the press release. How many fatalities and injuries. At first they didn't want to put in the importance of the wall attachment in the press release and that was really important for us. So it was a lot of back and forth." (Interviewee D)

Benoit (2013) argues that dealing with a crisis often uses not only one approach, but many. We found two approaches used in the press release and in the crisis management, the first is the approach of corrective action. IKEA tries to solve the problem by making people aware of the importance of anchoring furniture to the wall, and they also hand out free anchoring kits. Even though it is not entirely obvious, it could be argued that the second approach IKEA tries to use is the blame shifting. Perhaps not directly towards the customers not following the instructions, but towards a problem bigger than IKEA, a problem for the entire industry. When talking to the interviewees, we did not get the sense that they intentionally tried to use any of these specific approaches. However, they had some guidelines in how to handle crisis situations, but a lot of the managing seems to have been reactive. A problem for IKEA and perhaps a reason to why they did not have an outspoken approach is the fact that they did not manage the crisis alone. They did this recall because of and together with the CPSC. Even though IKEA argued that the solution was not to recall the products, the CPSC stressed IKEA to go through with the recall. It could then be argued that IKEA was forced to execute this action and did not believe in this kind of crisis management. One of the interviewees said about the approach in the recall:

> "It is a hard question, but I would say that since we did a local recall and we did not really agree on doing a recall, we would have preferred to do a bigger campaign together with authorities to raise awareness. Because we didn't see a recall as a solution." (Interviewee D)

In addition to the recall, IKEA had to write the press release together with the authorities, which directly made an impact on the content and the wording. This impact on the content could then also make an impact on the reactions to the press release itself. This describes the complex situation of the case and also makes a point of Gilpin and Murphy's (2008) theory about managing crises. It is not always as simple as using the right approach to managing a crisis. IKEA needed to cooperate with the authorities, a player on the arena with a lot of ethos. Since IKEA was forced into this action and not able to steer the message, it could be argued that the CPSC had more power than IKEA to actually manage the discourse of the problem at the arena. However, even though IKEA was forced to go through with the recall, they did have a choice to be cooperative or not. When being cooperative they gave away some of their power and opportunity to manage the discourses, but it could be seen as a way to avoid another type of

crisis. If IKEA had chosen not to cooperate, they could look guilty and it could be harder to actually steer the discourses towards an industry problem.

**4.2.1 Major media attention**

At the day of the press release, and the day after, the media coverage was vast. Many news agencies worldwide covered the story in various ways, taking on different approaches, for example, the IKEA point of view, the CPSC's view, or purely informational. Not only did the articles cover why and what had happened that led up to the recall, but also there have been many articles, including statements and comments from people directly affected by the tip-overs and their representatives.

While analysing the selected news articles we could detect these different ways of framing the story. For example, at the beginning of The New York Times (NYT) article, they give a narrow point of view, only covering the negative aspects of the story. NYT frames the first part, making IKEA look bad and refers to the customers as victims. This is also represented in the way the journalist uses the quotes from the IKEA, USA Country Retail Manager (CRM). First, they present the quotes regarding that the product is not fully assembled if it is not anchored, which implicitly puts the blame on the customers, and then the quote from an interview where he apologies to the affected families. By placing the quotes in this order, we argue that the quotes are not in favor for the USA CRM, it makes him appear as harsh and cruel since he does not apologise to the families first. Further down in the text an apology is presented, but our analysis of the second part is that IKEA does not take responsibility for the outcome since the concerned customers did not assemble the product correctly. We argue that this is an example of how the media can affect the comments made in the arena, in this case, Facebook comments made in the article, that different stakeholders have access to. Frandsen and Johansen (2017) write that the voices within the arena will influence the production and reproduction of crisis communication. This is a pattern we have seen in the more critical articles, that the journalist takes the affected families and the CPSC point of view. This can be seen as a result of the journalists roll, covering the story in an investigative, objective way.

What we have also noticed is that the articles are structured to cover the most essential information regarding the case first. This is a part of the media logic strategy used by journalists since readers might not put the effort in to go through the whole text because they sense that they have gotten the full story by reading the first parts of the text.

Another way of framing the story is used by the New York Post (NYP). They took the CPSC and affected the customers' point of view strictly. They use a more verbal, informal language when presenting the recall. They include quotes from the chairman of the CPSC saying that *"These are inherently very dangerous and unstable products if children are around them."* The use of the strong wording together with mainly pathos arguments in the article is aimed at underlining the point of view of the affected customers. We argue that how they frame the article is meant to present the classic David vs. Goliath perspective, using IKEA as the "big bad" company and the affected customers as the "victims" that cannot get their voice heard. In the last part of the article IKEA statement is presented, but interestingly they do not refer to any spokesperson. Instead, they refer to "the company" as a source which further enhances the use of IKEA as a bad company. As Frandsen and Johansen (2017) emphasize when discussing the various voices within the arena that affect the outcome of the crisis communication effort, these voices will influence the production and reproduction of messages surrounding the topic. This means that how the media frames the article will have an impact on what will be written in Facebook comments, and what will be spread through word of mouth, by the readers of the articles. This can be seen as a complex network of voices that is influenced by many stakeholders, and where the gatekeeper is the journalist that writes the article.

In the articles, we can also see that the journalists have either included information from the IKEA or CPSC press release. While analysing we could see that some parts had been directly copied from either of the press releases, but since they are the same text, in some cases it cannot be determined from which of the two texts. Only if the articles refer to the specific text, it can be seen. Here we could also see that the articles most often referred to the CPSC's press release. We argue that since the CPSC is an authority, the information referring to their text might have a more significant impact on the readers since people might have more trust in authorities. At least in this case, since it is very obvious that the CPSC is working for the good of the consumers. We also argue that since the press release was written together with the CPSC, IKEA could not get their main messages through, which could have made an impact in how the news articles were structured. In the articles we analysed regarding the recall, not including the re-announcement, only two included information from an actual interview with the USA CRM. For IKEA, to get their own message out, not relying on the information created together with the CPSC, it is crucial to get these statements included in the articles.

Murphy (2015) discusses what happens to the message after it leaves the sender and what happens to it before it reaches the receiver. She argues that the message will get influenced and affected by the different actors in the network that the message travels through. In the case of

the intended message of IKEA, there are multiple actors that will affect the message before the receiver can interpret and make meaning of it. For example, the statements that had been prepared before, at first will be interpreted by the journalist, then put down in words into the context within the framing of the article. The journalist will decide on an approach that will fit her story and use the parts of the statement that suits that purpose. Furthermore, the message competes with other messages in the same context. Since all of the articles include both statements from IKEA together with the CPSC, and some of the articles include the affected families' point of view, it is not only the IKEA message that will be spread to the receivers. We argue that this is a part of the new reality that the digital social networks have created. That digitalisation has opened up new ways of creating relationships, which means that the messages have new ways of traveling through complex networks, which can result in difficulties of controlling or managing messages.

When asking about the news media's attention with the interviewee's, different aspects of the coverage appeared. When asking if the news media covered the recall in a fair way regarding IKEA's perspective, one of the interviewees answered: "No, not really." A part of the problem was communicated in the interviews. Since IKEA is structured the way it is, it can be difficult to communicate to the public with one voice. At the time of the recall, IKEA conceived it as a local recall, only affecting the US and the Canadian markets. The primary focus was to communicate to the customers from corporate communication departments on the local markets. But the news quickly spread to other countries, resulting in reactive communication instead of proactive. Since IKEA's strategy did not include a global perspective, it meant that other markets had not planned to communicate around the topic. Other commercials were planned that the markets did not want to cancel since they felt that the recall did not concern their market. As a result, the information regarding the recall was not published in all markets, which means that the message most of the stakeholders got, came from news articles. As one of the interviewees said:

> "So it was crucial for US IKEA that we took this seriously and showed that we made measures, or we took action, in different ways to make sure we addressed this somehow. But then if we look at it from the rest of the 29 markets within IKEA Group, i am sure that the same thing goes for the other retailers, I mean when you ask them to do something like this, totally unplanned, on a spot that can disturb the commercial activities during the year, you will have a very, very hard time to get that across." (Interviewee A)

We argue that by not participating in the discussion on the arena IKEA lost a possibility to communicate to a broader audience. Also, opportunities to be transparent and open about what had happened and what they were doing to solve the issues did not come out as strong as it could have if they participated on a global level. It is interesting to discuss why IKEA did not choose to make the recall global. Only in the US market the recall affected 29 million chests of drawers, seeing that from a global perspective, it is easy to understand the economic consequences of recalling all the concerned products. However, they pointed out that they are proud of the product and that it is safe if you follow the instructions. That is why IKEA saw it as a local recall, because, as one of the interviewee's mentioned, people do not blame IKEA as much on other markets. It could be argued that the local issue became global when IKEA did not communicate the recall on other markets. As previous research show, messages compete with each other, and the original message (in this case, IKEA's) since the receiver will create unanticipated or unwanted associations (Murphy, 2015), which will not happen if there is no message at all. For IKEA to be able to manage how their message is received, they need to realise that since the digitalisation, a recall of this magnitude cannot be local anymore, it will become global either they like it or not.

### 4.2.2 A complex internal structure

We have already mentioned some findings from the interviews, but it is interesting to dig a bit deeper into what they said. The overall knowledge we gained from the interviews was the complex structure of the crisis management within the case. Since there are many different legal entities working under the brand of IKEA the managing of the case gets more complex. Which of the companies own the case? That was one of the questions we asked the interviewees and they told us it depends from which aspect you look at the case from. One of the interviewees said:

> "Depends on what you mean, from a communication perspective, I would say that we (IoS) own the case, at RoS Communication. The case is about tip-over of products so I would say that we owned the initiative. And we did back then as well, then a lot of things has happened and of course you could say that retail US owns the initiative when it comes to dealing with the authorities, and media on their market, but we still own the content." (Interviewee D)

In this quote, we can see that two parts of IKEA could be considered as the owner of the case, depending on which perspective you have. Those two are IoS and the US retail market. However, it is more complicated than that. There is a third part that perhaps should not be seen as an owner of the case but as a contributor. That is the IKEA group (owner of the market) that work as a bridge between IKEA of Sweden and the US retail market (as well as the other markets). This shows that it is, on the one hand, IoS that takes the lead in creating the content and communication package including what messages should be used. On the other hand, it is the retail market that implements it and managing the contacts with the different stakeholders in the market. Adding to that the IKEA group trying to help out and give their input. This, together with the interference of the CPSC shows the complexity, which is one of Gilpin and Murphys (2008) arguments explaining the difficulty concerning crisis management. There are a lot of voices to consider when forming a message. However, the interviewees have mostly positive things to say about the collaboration, but there is a need to mention that all also said that it had been a process of learning. At the beginning of the case, they expressed their concerns when it came to misunderstandings in what communication efforts were needed. One of the interviewees said:

> "Since I entered the project, with the respect that I haven't been involved before, there were misunderstandings and lack of understanding, I would say" (Interviewee C)

This person argued that there was a problem that IoS did not understand what the market need was and that the role of the IKEA group then really was to bridge between the two organisations. Important to mention is that all interviewees agreed on that it got better when the case evolved. What was not mentioned in the case background, but is good to know, and something that the interviewees talked about is that IKEA, on a global level during 2016, reorganised with a clearer structure. The new structure made the ownership of product communication shift from the IKEA group to IKEA of Sweden. Until that reorganisation IoS had not been working with external and crisis communication. One of the interviewees at the IKEA Group explained:

> "I think it is quite difficult to handle a crisis if you are not prepared. When you normally are in a crisis situation, you try to look ahead on what could happen and then be ready with different

scenarios. All those things where not in place. And, the people did not have the right competences, they were quite junior there, totally overwhelmed." (Interviewee B)

Gilpin and Murphy (2008) do not only argue about the complexity of different stakeholders, but also the importance to have the right people in place. Furthermore, they argue that you can not be totally prepared for and control a crisis, but you can learn from it. What appears from the interviews is that IoS did not have everything in place for a crisis of this magnitude, but somehow managed it, of course with the help and collaboration of IKEA Group and retail markets. What is also interesting is how the two organisations look at the situation, the representatives from IKEA Group sees it as a crisis when IoS does not, for example on the question if they consider the case a crisis:

> "No, I would not. Because I don't think that, I mean it is still something that we can handle, and we have like solid arguments and we are doing the right thing and acting according to our values and we can, I mean, I feel really comfortable having this discussion, I can have this discussion with the US authorities why we have done things, and I would not call it a crisis actually." (Interviewee D)

The question is then how do you collaborate if you look at the situation differently? If the internal stakeholders (in this case the contributors) are not on the same page and looks at the situation differently, how can you then form a relevant message for the external stakeholders? Frandsen and Johansen (2017) argue that it is important to have a clear view of the case internally to be able to make your voice heard in the arena and in that way get your message out to the external stakeholders.

Listening to the different interviews you can notice the difference between the organisations; IKEA Group is more experienced with routines, guidelines, and policies for crisis management, which IoS was not, since they did not have that assignment to manage external crisis before. However, IoS did learn from the handling of the recall, and it is reflected in the ongoing case. One of the interviewees, working at IoS said about the learnings from the first recall:

> "I think that the biggest learning is that we have got to know the other markets a bit more. We were quite naive when it came to... we were so convinced ourselves that this was actually about

requirements in the US and we really believed it, that this was the case. But I think that we weren't prepared for the emotional reactions. A local recall is never local. Maybe we could have been more proactive for some of the markets, and working with them in beforehand. Maybe we could have done something about it in June for the other markets as well." (Interviewee D)

At the beginning of the case IoS, as the owner of the case, saw it as a "technical problem", since customers do not follow instructions anchoring their products. This is a standpoint IKEA took and have tried to communicate both before and during the recall. However a logical argument, logos, can be perceived as harsh when facing emotions and pathos arguments, as one of the interviewees said *"as always when you talk about children that have passed away. It was quite heavy stuff which came out on social media."*. As both interviewees reflect, the outcome was much more emotional than they had foreseen and the communication work became more reactive after this. Of course, IKEA took their responsibility and felt bad for what had happened: *"we took it very seriously, and very many of us were very sad."* However, it could be argued that IoS had a problem in the mindset when planning the communication. Most of the IoS organisation is located in Sweden without a direct connection to the markets, and they might plan the communication from a Swedish or European point of view, which does not work in the US market. This is something one of the interviewee's problematising talking about the approach:

> "I think that they should have taken the blame a bit, but they were not. Because communication in the US works a bit different than communication in EU or Asia, so I guess that they were quite protective in the beginning, really trying to move away and say, "we always told you to anchor it". So they had to change the communication strategy on the way a bit.". (Interviewee B)

To summarise the findings from the interviews about the recall it can be argued that IKEA did not have the right organisation in place to be able to handle a case with this magnitude. The IKEA corporation has a very complex structure, making it harder to manage the crisis internally and then add on the outside interference that Gilpin and Murphy (2008) talks about, making the MALM case even more complex. There are a lot of internal stakeholders IKEA needs to address before going external and on top of that IKEA had to meet the expectations and demands of the

CPSC. However, IKEA took their learnings from the recall and did manage the crisis, since all interviewees agree on the fact that the communication work got better at raising awareness.

### 4.2.3 How did the customers and readers react to the recall?

When analysing the reactions from customers on Facebook posts, we can see interesting patterns. First, we will go through the comments made on the IKEA post from the first recall and then look into the news media's commentary field. In the Facebook post, IKEA writes that they recall the products due to their efforts in addressing the problems with tip-over accidents. The post is written in a way that makes IKEA look like they want to solve the problem and that customer should act by returning or anchoring their products. There is no sign of addressing the responsibilities or blame, but they try to show their good will and efforts of solving the issue in the first place. Our interpretation is that IKEA wants to manage the discourse and steer the narrative toward safety instead of shifting the blame and that they, as a company is working actively towards securing their customer's homes. This can be seen as an example of what Benoit (2013) calls the corrective action. Since the post does not include anything about who should take the blame, or even addresses it, it is clear that IKEA has a strategy not to turn the issue into a blame game. What IKEA actually is doing is trying to make sure that the issue does not happen again and that the receiver of the message understands that. The act of corrective action is often combined with organisations admitting to the offensive act, in this case designing faulty furniture, but IKEA has not done that. Instead, they have relied on their main message, which is that customers need to anchor their chests of drawers to the wall. Explicitly IKEA does not blame the customers, but implicitly it can be seen as they do.

To see how this strategy was interpreted by the customers, we analysed the most relevant comments made regarding the post on Facebook. The 'most relevant' function on Facebook shows the comments which have been liked or shared the most (Facebook, 2018). This means that they might have been the most influential when spreading messages throughout networks on Facebook. What we found was that most of the comments were neutral regarding the recall. For an example of a neutral comment see picture 1. They did not comment on the blame or the responsibility. What they did comment on was either how the customers could return their products, the customer service, or if the recall covered their products. By problematising the issue further, we cannot see what lies behind the comments that covered the return of products. But we see it as a statement from the customers to showcase that information regarding the recall in some parts has been difficult to make sense of, or that the customers simply did not

read the press release or post. But it could also be argued for that the customers simply wanted the money back for a piece of furniture that they did not use anymore. Further research regarding this topic should be conducted as a next step regarding the MALM case, covering the customer's perception on a deeper level. A problem regarding how IKEA as a brand can be perceived is that many of the comments cover the terrible customer service regarding the recall. Many questions regarding the return, the ambiguous information on refunds, made people upset. Even though IKEA did answer those kinds of questions, on Facebook, it gives a tell that either they did not communicate it clear enough or the customers did not read the press release. This should be seen as a problem regarding communication surrounding the recall since IKEA's trustworthiness will be challenged and potentially could have turned into a double-crisis.
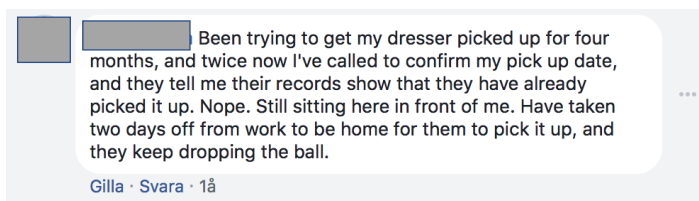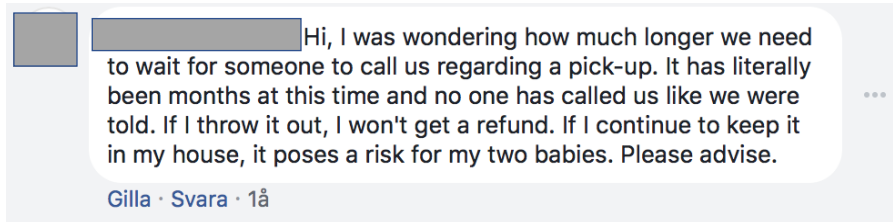


Picture 1

Three of the comments on the post was positive in the sense that they are not blaming IKEA and the product(s). When labeled as positive, the text focus on anchoring the furniture to the wall or that IKEA is not the responsible for the tipping furniture, that responsibility should be addressed to the parents. For an example of a positive comment see picture 2.
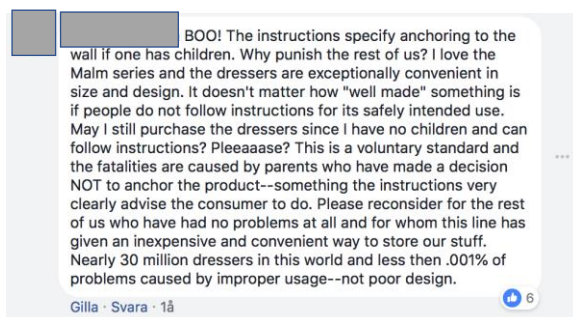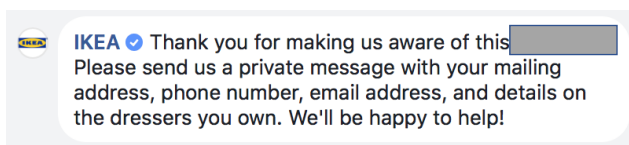


Picture 2

There was also one negative comment on the IKEA Facebook post. In our analysis of the posts, labeling the post as negative should include either blame towards IKEA or that the comment

included some of the risks that the furniture could possess. For an example of a negative comment see picture 3.



Picture 3

When responding to comments made on the IKEA Facebook post, IKEA took a neutral standpoint. They were complisaint and did not engage in any discussions with negative customers. The interviewees did not know the details of the responding strategies on social media since the markets were in the lead on this matter. We did not gain access to conduct interviews with the markets. However, our perception is that if IKEA would take another standpoint when responding, it would not necessarily be better. It could create negative associations and damage their reputation. It is hard to say if IKEA has a responding strategy, but it could be that they do not want to play up the situation more. The overall strategy could be seen as Benoit's (2013) corrective action anthereforere IKEA could face a bigger crisis if they responded in another way. This also shows the complexity in choosing a strategy.



Picture 4

The IKEA Facebook post was shared more than 4000 times, and there were over 2000 comments on the post. Reactions to the post count to 838. This is an example of an influential voice of the arena (Frandsen & Johansen, 2017). It is also an example of what Murphy (2015) describes as an actor that have the possibility to dominate the public opinion since there are a lot of people engaging themselves in the debate on a platform provided by IKEA. However, since only 20 comments were analysed, we only get a small part of the otherwise large picture. What we cannot see is if, or how many of the people who commented the post actually read the linked press release.

We also analysed the posts, including the commentary field, published by the news agencies. These findings show that the news agencies had already established their approach in the text in the Facebook post. This can be seen as a way to try to steer the discourse that they would like to create surrounding the topic. For example, The New York Times post that writes "*If you have or think you have one of these products, act immediately. It is simply too dangerous to have the recalled furniture in your home unanchored, especially if you have young children.*" This puts the affected customer in the center and tells them that they need to act fast. But it also aims to blame IKEA since the receiver of this message get the information that the IKEA products are dangerous when you have small children. This can be seen as a way to adjust the text to the context it exists in (Murphy, 2015). Since many other messages compete with the message that the news agency wants to put forth, they have to make the readers attracted to the message and actually click on the link to read more. By acting as a gatekeeper, the news agencies can frame their article and post, to present their approach to the case as a whole. They have the power to affect people's perception and how they react. This, of course, will steer the discourse regarding MALM, which will affect the comments made on the post. If the post had been written in a more positive way regarding IKEA or if the post would blame the customers for not anchoring their furniture, the outcome could be different and not generating as many readers.

By analysing the most relevant comments made in the articles, we wanted to see if any patterns could be determined from how the articled were framed. Almost all of the positive comments included comments about the customer's responsibilities to anchor the chest of drawers to the wall. This can be seen as a result of how IKEA's main message has been distributed to the press. IKEA used different ways of spreading their main messages, but the most influential was Secure It! As one of the interviewee's said:

> "Secure It! was the main tool for spreading the information regarding the wall attachments. But then of course we provided the markets with communication support like, main messages, Q and A's, and spokespersons." (Interviewee D)

When applying the contextual distortion theory on the case, we argue that IKEA can be seen as a central actor with high centrality. Murphy (2015) writes that when an actor with a high degree of centrality is placed in the center of the network and has an advantage over less central actors. Since IKEA is seen as an actor with high centrality, the company can be seen as an opinion

leader by other actors and then they can be dominating the public opinion. We argue that the actions taken by IKEA can be seen in the comments on the articles Facebook posts. Although some of the articles frame IKEA as the ones to blame, the comments are to a significant extent neutral and positive. Another part that also will affect the outcome of the message is how well the company work with tying relations to other actors. Murphy (2015) calls it multiplexity which is defined as the actor's multiple memberships with other actors that can affect the messages outcome. In one of the interviews, the importance of having good relations with many stakeholders was addressed.

> "I think they had a lot of different communication instruments in use, meetings with politicians with key journalists and NGO's, consumer organisations. So public affairs was really important there." (Interviewee B)

Even though the studied news agencies are seen as influential actors in the arena, spreading a negative narrative, we can see that the relevant comments are more positive towards IKEA. Therefore, it could be argued that IKEA by their action got an advantage over CPSC and the news agencies (including actors mentioned in the articles) in getting their messages out. This is the top relevant comment on New York Times:



> would think it's the burden of the homeowner to properly anchor their furniture to prevent these incidents. Why are we holding IKEA accountable?
>
> Gilla · Svara · Visa översättning · 1å          👍 507
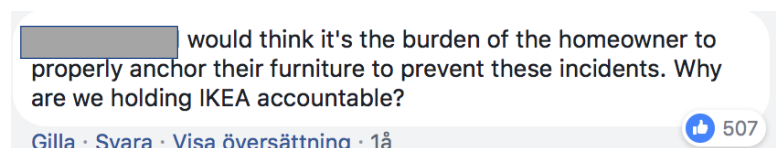
Picture 5.

## 4.3 The re-announcement including press release and Facebook comments

After one more accident with a fatal outcome, IKEA decided together with the CPSC to re-announce the recall on November 21, 2017. When talking about this announcement with the interviewees, they are all more positive towards the managing of the crisis. They argue that they had a better understanding of the needs within the case and a better setup within and between the organizations. One of the interviewees confirms this:

> "Yes, because in the re-announcement we had worked together a lot, we were more understanding within IKEA of where we were and from different perspectives. We had a good working group, we had the knowledge, we had close follow ups, we really pushed it and had answers to critical questions and stuff, so it was a much better cooperation internally for the second one. " (Interviewee C)

When re-announcing the recall, IKEA both published it on Facebook and as a press release. IKEA tried to shift the focus from the anchoring your product strategy, to the "make sure you live in a safe home" strategy. Instead of publishing a link to the press release they directed the customers to a page on their webpage dedicated to the recall and a campaign called safety first. On this page, IKEA urges customers to "participate" in the recall and make their home safe. It is very informative saying why you should act and how you can do it. The language is simple, accomplished with illustrations, making it easy to make sense of the message. The webpage does not blame anyone; however, it could be argued that IKEA could use it more effectively to get the message about an industry problem out. They do mention that the customers should make sure all their furniture are safe, but IKEA could take the opportunity to stress the issue even more. The possibilities of using this strategy were to steer the discourse towards an industry problem, but it could also have led to a counter-reaction, exposing IKEA as an organisation that only protect their own reputation and do not take responsibility for their products being unsafe.

Before re-announcing IKEA, according to one of the interviewee's, reached out to important stakeholders like politicians, authorities, NGOs and consumer organisations to get them on-board. This was really important in the re-announcement since there was a lack of these efforts in the recall and some of them also criticised IKEA for the handling of the case. This shows that IKEA learned from their mistakes in the original launch and it seems that they had both

better planning and better strategies on how to execute the communication initiatives, making their messages relevant on the arena. One of the interviewees said:

> "Yes, they really took the learning out of the first one, I guess it was a totally different strategy. They were prepared with the risk assessment, they had the different scenario analysis and I think you could not compare the first one." (Interviewee B)

All interviewees are more positive towards the handling of the re-announcement and do think they managed to steer the debate towards an industry problem. They believe that more people are positive towards IKEA and support the work they do based on their own perceptions. One interviewee mentioned that the media used IKEA as a good example of what to do since there are many retailers not taking their responsibility.

### 4.3.1 Minor media attention during the re-announcement

After the re-announcement, there was less attention from the media than it was when IKEA launched the recall in 2016. Only two of the five selected news agencies published articles on Facebook regarding the announcement. Interestingly, both of the articles was written by the Associated Press (AP) and were exactly the same text, only different headlines. The Chicago Tribune just generated 38 reactions, 15 comments, and 12 shares to this day on the social media post. The copy in the Facebook post covers the latest fatality and asks the question if IKEA has done a good enough effort to communicate the recall. When analysing the article, it is clear that the power is ascribed to IKEA, meaning that the journalist have focused more on the IKEA perspective regarding the re-announcemnet. Even though all the involved actors are represented in the text, more focus is on the customer's responsibilities when not anchoring the drawers to the wall. It starts out by describing the latest fatality and what the lawyers think about the responsibilities. But it argues against, both by quotes from IKEA US president and the chairman of the CPSC who believe IKEA has done everything in their power to secure comprehensive information about the recall. When asking the interviewees if they had changed the strategy in how they communicated around the case when re-announcing the recall we got this answer:

"No, but I think we were a little bit more clear. I mean I think that since June 2016 to now I think that we have been a little bit more clear that people who don't want to attach something to the wall should choose another chest of drawers. We don't want any unattached products in our customers homes, and I think in being a little bit more brave in saying that." (Interviewee D)

The Los Angeles Times was the second of the news agencies that published articles about the re-announcement. They published the same day as the re-announcement went public, but interestingly enough, they did not post the news on Facebook until the 26th of March, five days later. They got more positive attention this time than what they did with the recall, 439 reactions, 163 shares, and 72 comments. This might have been a result of the work that IKEA did in between the announcements.

### 4.3.2 How did the customers react to the re-announcement

When analysing the comments made on the Facebook posts the results showed that of the 33 comments, only three was negative towards IKEA, 13 was neutral, and 17 was positive. The answers to why the positive comments had increased after the recall are hard to answer, but there are multiple possible actions that can affect that number. The first one is that IKEA planned the communication initiatives in another way and executed them with other strategies than in the recall. IKEA focused on being more clear when communicating their main messages which could be a part of the increased numbers. The second possibility is that the news articles were more framed in favour of IKEA. Both that IKEA's point of view is given more attention, but also that the chairman of CPSC defends IKEA, saying that they did a good job while communicating around the recall. The third point can be as simple as that the readers were starting to get tired of hearing about the issue and simply chose the side that actually took action in solving the problem. There was really nothing new and at the same time, IKEA had raised the awareness of the problem. As one of the interviewees said:

"I think people are really tired of hearing about this. It didn't really gain so much attention, I mean the recall in June (2016, scholars note) was really like a bomb, "look at IKEA what are they doing?" but now they know why, maybe and have a little more awareness, so now it is not so interesting." (Interviewee D)

To summarise the reaction from the customers, the findings both argue for and against Gilpin and Murphy's complexity theory. By planning and executing the crisis communication, regarding the re-announcement, based on strategy, IKEA argues that they could handle the re-announcement in a better way. Gilpin and Murphy (2008) argue that some crisis cannot even a senior communicator foresee or control but learn from instead. For IKEA this is similar to what actually happened. They took the learning from the first case, worked proactively throughout the time period between the recall and the re-announcement, they put together messages based on different scenarios, and they appointed spokespersons to speak on behalf of IKEA. By better preparing throughout the organisation, they managed to steer the discourses, both for the articles and the responses they got from the customers on Facebook. However, the circumstances were not the same, and this needs to be addressed. As one of the interviewee's mentioned, people might have been tired of hearing about the case, and they already had a perception of what had happened during the recall. This might have made it easier for IKEA to manage the communication initiative during the re-announcement.

## 4.4 Assimilation of findings

*After going through the findings for the recall, we found two topics we wanted to highlight further. One is the perception if IKEA is a learning organisation or not and the other is the perception of the possibility to steer discourses.*

### 4.4.1 Learning organisations

Looking into the managing of crisis, Gilpin and Murphy (2008) argue for the importance of learning and being a learning organisation. They argue further that through the learnings from a previous crisis you can be better prepared for the next one. What are the learnings for IKEA then? How did they make sense of the learnings? Are they a learning organisation?

The interviewees were asked about their learnings from the case and they had a lot to share. Most of them talked about having the proper infrastructure in place, meaning the right people, with the right knowledge, know what to do and when. It is not only about having the right people, but also having the right tools, like strategies and spokespersons. One reflection was:

> "What we need to be aware about is that our brand is nothing if we do not actually live up to what we say that we do and we do live up to that. But it is also a hard work behind. So there are learnings

also, that when you have dedicated people knowing communication and maybe it was needed some more muscles and we have that and can make a difference since we are more people involved." (Interviewee C)

They also talked about the understanding of the market needs, stressing the importance to help them out. The last one is specific for IoS that operates mainly from Älmhult and do not have the direct contact with the markets. They also talked about the global perspective of the case. Since they mostly focused on the US market, they were not prepared in the beginning when it tipped over to other markets. It is a tricky situation when you in one market make a recall of 27 million products but do not do it in other markets, how do you then communicate? How do you create a smart message working in all markets?

These are some of the learnings the interviewees talked about when asking about their learnings. However, when listening in to the interviewees and reading the material, it becomes clear that IKEA really took their learning from the recall to the re-announcement. They had a better organisation in place with better planning and better strategies. How did they then make sense of the learnings? When talking about this, they get self-conscious admitting that they could be better spreading the learnings. One of the interviewees said about IKEA being a learning organisation:

> "No. I mean, I can say no. But my experience is that we are really good at taking actions and do things. But a lot of times we prioritise doing new actions instead of going back and taking learnings. I have seen that in all the rolls I have been working on in IKEA. People tend to be like, when you work with reactive work, there are so much things landing in your lap, that you need to handle, and it is not so common that you have time to go back and reflect, or have meetings where you share learnings. It is not the case, unfortunately." (Interviewee D)

This shows that the interviewee is aware of the importance of taking your learnings, but that IKEA do not have the structure to really make sense of the learnings. However, some of the other interviewees mentioned that they have spread the knowledge of the markets and talked about the case in some forums. This really speaks to the complexity of the IKEA organisation where they cannot know what everybody does, even though they work on the same case. Another interviewee reflected that it might even be better in the MALM case than in general when it comes to IKEA being a learning organisation:

"I think you can always do that better, actually with MALM it worked quite well because it was so dramatic. Normally we claim that we are a learning organisation but I am not 100% sure how good we are. But this was so dramatic, so painful, so I think that people really took the learnings." (Interviewee B)

IKEA might be more of a learning organisation than they actually are aware of. However, it could be argued that they should work more with the after part of a crisis, taking the time needed to reflect on the learnings. If IKEA creates a structure and an environment where the co-workers have time and are encouraged to learn from the crisis, they might be even better prepared for a crisis in the future. They should also look into how they make sense of the learnings between the organisation under the brand of IKEA, a lot of the problems regarding the MALM case could have been solved if they had a bigger understanding of one another. However, it should be said that the infrastructure is already better today, especially for IoS that might not be as junior as they were facing the MALM case. They also have better cooperation where the different media on duty teams from IKEA Group and IoS meet and share their knowledge.

### 4.4.2 Controlling, managing, or steering?

When covering the subject of controlling messages with the interviewees, we received quite different definitions and opinions regarding the topic. When asked if it is possible to steer the outcome of the communication we got this answer from one of the interviewees:

"Yes! You can not always steer 100%, we had this example with Jesper (CEO, IKEA Group, scholars note) when we were throwing him out to the media the first time, we had three key messages, and three potential headlines that we would like to see, we achieved 98% of total match, which is amazing, normally you won't get this. So it also depends a bit, but you can steer that, not always but with proper planning and people that are prepared then it is possible, yes." (Interviewee B)

This interviewee believes that it is possible to steer the outcome of the communication to a certain point. The answer also shows that they do have strategies on how to receive a preferred outcome when working with messages, at least when they are prepared. But the interviewee

also points out that you need to have the right foundation to be able to get through with the message. This is interesting since complexity theory argues that it is more complex than having the right plan in place (Gilpin & Murphy, 2008). However, the interviewee's differed in their answers, but some of them said that to a certain extent you are able to steer the outcome in the intended direction. None of them used the word control because it was a too strong word to them. Even the word steer, stirred up some thoughts about the strength and associations regarding the word. What was interesting to hear was the thoughts about how to stay humble and not interfere too much with the customers own intelligence, when assessing the case. The thoughts around this topic were quite different, since the ethical questions play a role in how and to whom you communicate. One of the interviewees was contradictory, arguing that IKEA should stay neutral:

> "So we had an interview with him (Lars Pettersson, US CRM, scholars note) put on our newsroom, and we could actually see that things calmed a bit down after that. That can be steering maybe. I think we will always be neutral." (Interviewee D)

How can one be both neutral and at the same time use strategies to get their messages out? Within the field of strategic communication, practitioners try to get their message out to the arena, with the intention of creating the foreseen outcome. Interruptions, hinders, and multiple actors will interfere with the outcome, but what would the practitioners work consist of, if they did not believe that they could steer or manage the outcome of the communication. By measuring communication efforts, results can to some extent give organisations a hint if the communication initiatives have been successful. The interviewees argued that when measuring people's trust in the IKEA brand, after the MALM case, they did see an increase in the brand trust. However, this is the interviewee's perception of the report, which we did not have access to. It could be argued, depending on what type of report that was conducted, that other factors could be a reason for the higher trust. Although this is nothing that we can confirm or deny since it would be a paper itself. The interviewee's argued that even though the communication, in the beginning did, not live up to the standard that IKEA use to deliver, they still managed to stay relevant in between the recall and the re-announcement, which helped to gain trust. The interviewees also mentioned that they had succeeded to reach out with their messages in a preferable way, making the customers see the IKEA point of view and possibly even transmitting their message forward to an even broader audience.

# 5.0 Conclusion and discussion

*In this part, we will share our conclusions from the analysis and discuss whether it is possible to steer discourses are not in this case study. Lastly, we will discuss possible topics for further research in the field of strategic communication and public relations/crisis communication.*

## 5.1 Is it possible to steer discourses?

Why would strategic communication practitioners exist if we did not think it was possible to steer discourses? This might be considered a bold statement, but we argue that it is a valid question to address while covering the subject of steering discourses.

In todays fast moving society, digitalisation has opened up possibilities and problems. Messages can spread globally in an instant giving corporations opportunities to address and communicate with their stakeholders, but also being exposed to threats that could damage their brand and possibly even become a reputational crisis. Therefore, organisations need to be smart and strategic when communicating with their stakeholders. Previous research says that it is possible to manage crisis with the right means. However, other scholars problematise this, arguing that it is more complex than to choose the right strategy for creating the message.

The aim of this study was to examine a multinational corporation's perception of steering discourses in a crisis situation and the interviewee's said, that with proper planning and consistency, the outcome can be steered in a favourable way. After examining the MALM case, analysing the press releases, the articles, the Facebook comments, etcetera, we came to the understanding of, that it is possible to influence the outcome of what is communicated, and in that way steer the discourses in a crisis situation.

However, it takes great effort to be able to steer discourses, which relates to our second research question: how do communicators try to steer discourses given the imposed impact by the environment outside? The MALM recall turned out to be an interesting case to see this. The way IKEA handled the MALM case, can be divided into two different communication efforts, the recall and the re-announcement. When looking into both efforts it was clear that the managing of the crisis had an impact on the discourses and what power IKEA had. In the recall, we could see that the organisation that were in the lead was young, inexperienced, and lacked

the understanding of the complexity. They had trouble to steer the discourses and get through in the arena. Then, in the re-announcement, they had taken their learning and were much more senior with a more strategic planning in good cooperation with all contributors. It seemed that they had a better plan and were more confident in their communication efforts, with the proper competence in place. They took a new narrative talking about safer homes, making it possible to steer the discourses towards an industry problem, instead of being ascribed all blame. However, the circumstances were not the same, and there could be other factors influencing the outcome of the announcement.

What is the concept of being able to steer discourses then? Of course, there is not one right way of how to manage a crisis communication, something the complexity theory stresses. However, there are some interesting learnings from looking at the MALM case. We argue that it is possible to influence and steer discourses with the right planning and the right strategies. How do you get there then? Looking into the MALM case we can see that the right knowledge within the organisation is important. If you provide your co-workers with the right tools, like scenario planning, spokespersons, clear messages, education and the time to learn and reflect, you might actually be able to steer the discourses. However, you need to be aware of the complexity within and around the organisation. IKEA is an example of this complexity were not only the outside world disrupts the message, but also the structure of the brand with many different organisations that you need to get on-board before addressing external stakeholders.

Our perception is that sometimes it is an either/or situation between the traditional theories and the new ones. They act as opposites, however, we would argue that it is something in between. Benoit's Image Repair Theory argues that you can manage a crisis with the right approach and Gilpin and Murphy problematising this saying it is not as simple as that. We think the MALM case shows that it is both ways. You can steer the outcome with the help of planning and strategies, but you also need to have the time for reflections and learnings after the crisis and of course be humble to the fact that things are complex. This is what the MALM case is an example of, when IKEA in the recall did not have everything in place, it did not work that well. Then they learnt from it and was able to manage the crisis better in the re-announcement.

IKEA uses a simple message to be relevant in the arena, which is more clear in the re-announcement. They focused more on making your home safer, rather than just stressing the fact that you need to anchor your furniture. When shifting the focus to safety first, people got to understand what IKEA was doing and they were able to make sense of the message from IKEA in a favorable way. Social media platforms were an important part of getting the message out on the arena influencing peoples opinion. This made IKEA gain back the power and be able

to shift the discourse towards an industry problem. Even though it is the receiver of the message that in the end will make sense of what is communicated, the information they receive will influence their perceptions. Our interpretation and thoughts about the possibilities to control a message are quite similar to other scholars, that the communicator's role is to manage the message, not control, so that they can participate in the issue arena and help determine public opinion.

The IKEA case study shows that if you have the infrastructure in place, the right people, with an open mindset towards reflection and learning and sharing your opinion with the right message in the arena, you can actually steer the discourse and influence people's opinion. Not to forget, IKEAs ethos, brand, has an impact on people's perception of course. This might have worked for IKEA and the MALM case, but in another organisation and another case it might be different.

## 5.2 Suggestions for further research

For future research, we would suggest to do a quantitative analysis of the commentary field. This would give a more accurate outcome of people's perception towards the case, in the sense of us not being able to read all thousands of comments in every commentary field. It would also be interesting to interview customers and others that comment to gain a deeper knowledge of why they comment in a certain way and what have influenced them to do so.

Furthermore, it would be interesting to dig deeper into the markets. Both look into the US market, but also other markets that were affected by the case. Looking into the market could give a deeper knowledge of how the communication efforts are executed closer to the customers and what the market perception is about the possibility to steer discourses.

It could also be interesting to look into and interview other stakeholders in the case. It could be both politicians and NGOs. This could give a broader knowledge in how they make sense on the arena and how they can disrupt or help the message of IKEA. What is their perception of the case? How are they able to steer the discourse?

We have focused on public relations and crisis communication, however, it would be interesting to look at the case from other angels. It could for example be interesting to look deeper at the organisation structure and internal communication. IKEA is a complex organisation, as many others, how do you then make sense of your communication and agree on the message? How do you organise the organisation in a way to become a learning organisation? Even though we touch upon the subject, looking deeper to the after part of the

crisis and the learnings from it could be interesting. How do you spread the knowledge and make sense of it?

These suggestions could also be of interest looking at other organisations that has gone through a similar crisis. This could give other insights and ideas problematising the complexity of crisis management.

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# Appendix 1

**Text analysis guide**

**Overall analysis questions**
- How is the case described?
    - Where is the focus?
- *What is the purpose of the text? Does it fulfil it?*
- Who is the text addressing?
- Is it formal or informal?
- Is it pro or against IKEA? Who is responsibility does it focus on?
- What kind of arguments does it use?  Ethos, pathos or logos?
    - What does it mean for the text?
- To whom is the power ascribed?
- Can it be perceived in more than one way? How?

Other reflections:


**Specific questions regarding the news articles and Facebook comments:**
- Is the respondent's pro or against the articles?
- Are the comments positive, negative, or neutral against IKEA?
- Do the newspapers answer comments on Facebook? What?
- To whom is the power ascribed, according to the respondents?
- Can we see if the articles refer to CPSC or/and IKEA press release?

Other reflections:

**Specific questions regarding the press release and Facebook comments:**
- Is the respondent's pro or against the articles?
- Are the comments positive, negative, or neutral against IKEA?
- Does IKEA answer comments on Facebook? What?
- To whom is the power ascribed, according to the respondents?

Other reflections:

# Appendix 2

**Interview guide**

**Ownership of the case**

We want to start with a few short questions to get an understanding of where in the organisation you are regarding the case

- What is your role in this case? When did you start working on it?
- Who owns this case? Has it always looked this way? How do you relate to it?
- How did you collaborate with the different people within the case? What is your take on the collaboration? Why?

**Overall question**

- To you, what are the biggest concerns with the case, from a communication perspective?
- Would you see the recall(s) as a threat to the brand and if so, why/why not? Is this a crisis? What kind? Why not?
- When deciding on an approach for a case, what do you have in mind?
  - Do you have guidelines? Policies? How important are they? Do you find them useful? Why/why not?
  - What strategies did you use to repair your image?
  - Did you use different strategies depending of the different stakeholders?
- How do you plan for the outcome?
  - Do you think it is possible for IKEA to steer the outcome? Why/why not? If not, why does IKEA have policies, guidelines and people working on it then?
- Would you say that the communication initiatives have strengthened the brand? In what way? Why not?

**Recall 1**

- What approach did you use? Did you deny the blame? Or shift it as a mishandling of the product? Or taking the blame and act upon it?

- Which part of IKEA produced the press release covering the product recall? What was the strategy behind this?
- What other communication efforts did you do?
- How did the public receive the message? What kind of feedback did you get?
- Looking back at it, what are your learnings from recall 1? How did you make sense of it?

**Re-announcement**

- What approach did you use? Can you see a difference in the approach of the case from recall 1 to recall 2? Did you deny the blame? Or shift it as a mishandling of the product? Or taking the blame and act upon it?
- Which part of IKEA produced the press release covering the product recall? What was the strategy behind this?
- What other communication efforts did you do?
- How did the public receive the message? What kind of feedback did you get?
- Looking back at it, what are your learnings from recall 2? How did you make sense of it?
- With the knowledge of recall 1 and 2, how do you use it today? How do/Do you spread the knowledge within your organisation?

**Social Media**

- What social media strategies did you have while handling the case?
- What response strategies did you have while answering comments on Facebook?
- What knowledge have you gained when evaluating the outcomes of the strategy?

**Traditional Media**

- Did traditional media in the US cover the case in a fair way? Why/why not?
- How did you collaborate with news media in this specific case?
- What strategies did you use to spread your message in traditional media? What was the outcome and what feedback did you receive?

**Overall**

- What is your take of the case overall? What are your learnings?
- How do you work with other markets? What are the concerns?
- Do you want to add anything?

# Appendix 3

## Empirical material

### IKEA + comments
Recall 1 - DOI: April 9, 2018
IKEA Press Release on Newsroom
https://www.ikea.com/us/en/about_ikea/newsitem/062816-pr-chest-and-dressers
https://www.facebook.com/IKEAUSA/posts/10154951743883066

Re-announcement - DOI: April 9, 2018
IKEA Press Release on Newsroom
https://www.ikea.com/us/en/about_ikea/newsitem/112117-MALM-and-Chest-of-drawers-Recall

Re-announcement Safety First Landing page on IKEA.com
https://www.ikea.com/ms/en_US/ikea-chest-and-dresser-recall/index.html
https://www.facebook.com/IKEAUSA/posts/10157078371978066

### CPCS - DOI: April 9, 2018
Recall
https://www.cpsc.gov/Recalls/2016/following-an-additional-child-fatality-ikea-recalls-29-million-malm-and-other-models-of

### News Articles
1. The wall street journal - DOI: April 9, 2018
First recall
https://www.facebook.com/wsj/posts/10154431723043128
https://www.wsj.com/articles/ikea-to-recall-29-million-dressers-chests-in-u-s-1467125953?mod=e2fb

2. The New York Times - DOI: April 9, 2018
First recall
https://www.facebook.com/nytimes/posts/10150837861759999
https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/29/business/ikea-recall-tip-over-furniture.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur

3. Chicago Tribune - DOI: April 9, 2018
First recall
https://www.facebook.com/chicagotribune/posts/10154319313258256
http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-ikea-dresser-recall-20160627-story.html

Re-announcement
https://www.facebook.com/chicagotribune/posts/10155923717073256

http://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-biz-ikea-dresser-recall-20171121-story.html?track=ct_social__content-promotion_facebook_fb-post_____ct-ta-off-t-test

4. New York Post - DOI: April 9, 2018
First recall
https://www.facebook.com/NYPost/posts/10157860813710206
https://nypost.com/2016/06/28/ikea-recalls-dangerous-furniture-items-that-have-killed-6-children/?utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_source=NYPFacebook&utm_medium=SocialFlow&sr_share=facebook

5. Los Angeles Times - DOI: April 9, 2018
First recall
https://www.facebook.com/latimes/posts/10154388256303010
http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-ikea-dressers-recall-20160628-snap-story.html

Re-announcement
https://www.facebook.com/latimes/posts/10156062167848010
http://www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-ikea-dresser-death-20171121-story.html