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IKEA: Ego and its Alter in intercultural communications

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Abstract

The present article discusses how the Swedish furniture company IKEA deployed its communication strategy in Germany, and how it became established in the German market as a Swedish brand. In 2012 Germany still is the top-selling country for IKEA. In fact, today, many people in Germany directly associate IKEA with Sweden, mainly due to its audiovisual advertisements. By analyzing audiovisual advertisements which were aired by IKEA in the mass media of television and the Internet, including YouTube, during the period 1997-2007, it will be shown in detail how the company draws on, but also how it constructs German stereotypes about the Swedes and the Nordic countries. But the company also picks up important and frequently discussed themes, which can be encountered in contemporary German society. In order to grasp the interaction between the Swedish company and the German consumer culture, Göran Sonesson's cultural semiotic approach and particularly the concepts of Ego- and Alter cultures are employed.

Keywords: IKEA, Swedishness, ego- and alter, dialogue, culture, Germany.

0. Introduction

Modern consumers show an increasing interest in home design and in designing their own homes. Amidst a highly competitive landscape, it is often hard for companies to stay in business. They have to invest time, money and effort to reach out to different targets successfully. Building a brand name and a differentiated brand image, which is connected to positive feelings and associations, is therefore one of the most important issues for companies competing in the home design market. This is achieved through intensive public relations, the recruitment of trend-setting agencies, ongoing market research and the launch of innovative advertising campaigns. A crucial communication vehicle for the achievement of this objective is the audiovisual commercial, which contains explicit and implicit messages. From a semiotic perspective commercials contain verbal, visual and audio elements, which form different signs and are used intentionally. Not only do commercials express direct messages about products, features and prices, but they also contain underlying messages, which reflect different cultural values and beliefs. Messages are therefore dependent on social and cultural norms and value systems.

Semiotically speaking, every culture may be seen as a system with a set of rules or its own supply of signs that make life understandable and create a sense of belonging. Members of a specific culture generally use typical signs produced in that culture to communicate and interact with each other to make life easier, to gain organization and structure in life. A culture may be seen as a group of members who create, accept and share specific traditions, values, laws, norms, languages, dialects, religion, etc. Such groups range from entire countries and organizations to political parties and football fan clubs. Occasionally members from different cultures with a different supply of signs engage in dialogue, which may or may not work. When it comes to advertising, the makers of commercials make use of the supply of signs from the target culture.



1. IKEA and the construction of the “Swedish” culture

The Swedish company IKEA, which is famous worldwide, managed to carve a unique niche with its “Swedish” construction. IKEA calls this “Swedishness”. Today IKEA has about 298 stores in over 29 countries. Over 154.000 people work at IKEA worldwide and their total revenue for the year ending 2012 was over € 27 billion. In Germany, which is still its top selling country, the company attained a very prominent status with its construction of “Sweden” and “the Swedish way of life”. In fact, due to well-planned and executed communication strategies as part of a consistent marketing mix over the years, IKEA reached a top position in home furnishing market-share among German consumers. Today IKEA stands for Swedish innovation and a modern life-style concept in Germany and, for German consumers, it is almost a “must” to choose IKEA. Indeed, for the younger generation in Germany, IKEA is a symbol of Sweden – or at least the German perception of Sweden. Over the past years, some of the communicated commercials have even given rise to spontaneous “new traditions” within the German culture. How did it become feasible for a German target-culture to adopt habits, norms, communication skills and “traditions” from another, more or less familiar, “Swedish” culture and make it, in the terminology used by IKEA, a “Swedish Solution” (“Schwedische Lösung”)? Furthermore, how “Swedish” is this IKEA construction?

In my thesis *Die “schwedische” Lösung*¹ (The “Swedish” Solution) I examined the process of establishing IKEA as a “Swedish” brand in Germany through its audiovisual advertising in the mass media of television and the Internet, including YouTube. The analysis of 48 audiovisual commercials, published by IKEA during the period of 1997–2007, shows that the company intentionally and purposefully draws on various notions of “Swedishness” and on Nordic stereotypes. A striking example of this “Swedishness” is the campaign launched by IKEA on St. Knut’s day, the date that traditionally ends Christmas holidays in Sweden. In its German advertising, IKEA “reinvented” an old Swedish tradition of throwing the Christmas tree out of the window in order – as IKEA explicitly puts it – to create more space for IKEA furniture at home.² In the following I will discuss some of the most important aspects of this “Swedish” construct from IKEA and how it affected German consumer culture.

In the above mentioned humorous commercial from IKEA, one can see a man in boots and a fur coat walking down a house block at wintertime, somewhere in “STOCKHOLM”, as explicitly stated. The man just walks there alone and doesn’t notice that a number of Christmas trees are falling down from the

¹ Jennie Mazur, *Die “schwedische” Lösung. Eine kultursemiotisch orientierte Untersuchung der IKEA-Werbepots in Deutschland* (Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2013).

² Since I have only been given permission to publish images from the commercials in my dissertation, I refer in this article to my thesis (2013) and a few commercials available on YouTube. Jennie Mazur, *Die “schwedische” Lösung. Eine kultursemiotisch orientierte Untersuchung der IKEA-Werbepots in Deutschland* (Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann 2013) p.190-208, and YouTube, “Knut, IKEA, Werbung”. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge9HiWdGBOo>, accessed June 2013.

sky. At the same time, a friendly male off-speaker with a slightly Swedish accent tells the viewer “his” story (actually the IKEA-story) about how “we Swedes” celebrate “Knut” and more indirectly that IKEA now offers extra low prices in Germany. At the same time, as the trees are falling from the sky, the off-speaker happily says: “Kein Wunder” (“No miracle”) and explains that it is just “St. Knut” that cuts the prices in Germany. Then a Swedish traffic warning sign, very well known to and beloved by the German audience appears, but instead of the expected black elk there is a black icon of a falling Christmas tree. In the end, when the man finally reaches the porch, he stumbles on a Christmas tree that is lying on the ground. Ironically, the friendly off-speaker adds: “Also schau auf IKEA.de” (“Look out/up for IKEA.de”).

This invented tradition is remotely grounded in real-life: until some decades ago, it was certainly common to throw the Christmas tree out of the balcony, to avoid the tree shedding all its needles in the staircase, but this custom has been completely forbidden for security reasons, although the scenes shown in the video spot with numerous trees dropping down on the passers-by in the narrow street have never taken place. In any case, the objective was certainly not to make place for new IKEA furniture, but simply to terminate the Christmas season. More significant, however, is the fact that the German target audience appreciated the commercial to the point of starting their own local “Knut-traditions” by actually throwing out Christmas trees from their own balconies and windows. Different media like radio, television and other companies also started to use the “Knut”-theme of IKEA in their own shows and commercials.³ This is a good example of how IKEA has constructed a model of itself as a “Swedish brand” and – when reaching the target consumer – how it enters into a dialogue, not only with the German furnishing market, but also with several discourses within the German society. How could this be established and why was it so successful?

To identify how IKEA created a model of itself – an “Ego culture” as the semiotician Göran Sonesson⁴ calls it – how the company projected its “Swedish” self-image in Germany and how it engaged in a dialogue with the German market/culture (“Alter culture”), I conducted research within an interdisciplinary framework of primarily modern cultural semiotics⁵, intercultural communication studies

³ For example YouTube, “Bäumschen raus, Schnäpschen rein!!!”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=koj-Svx71rM>, accessed June 2013, YouTube, “Werbespot IKEA Knut mal anders!”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUGBEXUwTVw>, accessed June 2013 and YouTube, “Mömax - Unsere Tannen leben noch”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDYGpXtRBBY>, accessed June 2013.

⁴ Göran Sonesson, “Ego meets Alter: The Meaning of Otherness in Cultural Semiotics.” *Semiotica* 128 (2000): 537-539.

⁵ Göran Sonesson, *Bildbetydelse* (Lund, Studentlitteratur 1992), “Livsvärldens mediering. Kommunikation i en kultursemiotisk ram.” *Medietexter och medietolkningar. Läsningar av massmediala texter*. (Nora: Nya Doxa, 1995):33-78, “Ego meets Alter: The Meaning of Otherness in Cultural Semiotics.” *Semiotica* 128 (2000): 537-559 and Anna Cabak Rédei, *An Inquiry into Cultural Semiotics: Germaine de Staël’s Autobiographical Travel Accounts* (Diss. Lund: Division of Semiotics at the Department of Art, History and Musicology, Lunds universitet, 2007). Also see Roland Posner “Kultur als Zeichensystem. Zur semiotischen Explikation kulturwissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe”. *Kultur als Lebenswelt und Monument* (Frankfurt/Main, Fischer 1991) p. 27-74, and Winfried Nöth, *Handbuch der Semiotik* (Stuttgart –



with a focus on Sweden and Germany⁶ and advertising research⁷. Especially the theoretical concepts of “Ego culture” and “Alter culture”, as characterized by Sonesson and used by Anna Cabak Rédei were employed in order to grasp the interaction and communication between the Swedish company and the German consumer culture. In order to analyze such a complex sign as an audiovisual commercial, I also developed an analytical model, primarily based on key insights from Stefan Müller-Doohm, Klaus Kanzog, Lothar Mikos, Anders Björkvall and Bo Bergström.⁸ I will return to this model later in this article.

A fundamental task of cultural semiotics is to study cultures as part of a semiosphere. Every culture is a dynamic sign system created and changed by its members in order to make life understandable, organized and more manageable. A sign can be seen as a unit, which consists of two dimensions: the signifier (material substance) and the signified (mental concept) – and the relation between them

Weimar, Metzler 2000). Also compare Klaus P. Hansen, *Kultur und Kulturwissenschaft*. (Tübingen – Basel: Francke. K. P. 2003 [1995]).

⁶ Important for the study were for example Margit Breckle, “*In Schweden ist die Kommunikation weicher*“. *Zur deutsch-schwedischen Wirtschaftskommunikation unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Imagearbeit* (Göteborg: Institut für Deutsch und Niederländisch, Göteborgs universitet 2004), Bernd Henningsen et. al. *Wahlverwandschaft. Skandinavien und Deutschland 1800 bis 1914* (Berlin: Jovis Verlagsbüro 1997), Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, *Interkulturelle Kommunikation. Interaktion, Fremdwahrnehmung, Kulturtransfer* (Stuttgart – Weimar: Metzler 2005), Sylvia Schroll-Machl, *Die Deutschen – Wir Deutsche. Fremdwahrnehmung und Selbstsicht im Berufsleben* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007 [2002]), Stefan Müller and Katja Gelbrich, *Interkulturelles Marketing* (München: Vahlen 2006), Jürgen Gerhards, *Kulturelle Unterschiede in der Europäischen Union. Ein Vergleich zwischen Mitgliedsländern, Beitrittskandidaten und der Türkei* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2006 [2005]), Gert Hofstede, *Lokales Denken, globales Handeln: Interkulturelle Zusammenarbeit und globales Management* (München: dtv 2006), Thomas Winkelmann, *Alltagsmythen vom Norden. Wahrnehmung, Popularisierung und Funktionalisierung von Skandinavienbildern im bundesdeutschen Modernisierungsprozess*. (Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 2006).

⁷ Especially important were Gabriele Bechstein, *Werbliche Kommunikation. Grundinformationen zur semiotischen Analyse von Werbekommunikaten* (Bochum: Studienverlag Dr. N. Brockmeyer 1987), Alf Björnberg, “Sign of the Times? Om musikvideo och populärmusikens semiotik.“ *Svensk tidskrift för musikforskning*, 72. (1990): 63-84, Erling Bjurström, Lars Lilliestam, *Sälj det i toner. Om musik i TV-reklam* (Vällingby, Konsumentverket 1993), Hermann Sottong & Michael Müller, *Zwischen Sender und Empfänger: Eine Einführung in die Semiotik der Kommunikationsgesellschaft* (Berlin: E. Schmidt 1998), Guy Cook *The Discourse of Advertising* (London – New York, Routledge 2001), Angela Goodard, *The Language of Advertising. Written Texts* (London – New York, Routledge 2002), Jürgen Felix, *Moderne Film Theorie* (Mainz Bender 2003), Anders Björkvall, *Svensk reklam och dess modelläsare* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 2003), Bo Bergström, *Effektiv visuell kommunikation. Hur man far ett budskap i text, bild, film, form och färg att nå fram* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2004).

⁸ Stefan Müller-Doohm, “Visuelles Verstehen. Konzepte kultursoziologischer Bildhermeneutik.“ “*Wirklichkeit*“ im Deutungsprozess. *Verstehen und Methoden in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1993) p. 438-457, Klaus Kanzog, *Einführung in die Filmphilologie* (München: Diskurs-Film-Verlag Schaudig und Ledig, 1997 [1991]), Anders Björkvall, *Svensk reklam och dess modelläsare* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 2003), Bo Bergström, *Effektiv visuell kommunikation. Hur man får ett budskap i text, bild, film, form och färg att nå fram* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 2004). Lothar Mikos, *Film und Fernsehanalyse* (Konstanz: UVK Verlagsgesellschaft 2008 [2004]).

creates meaning, as Saussure described it.⁹ Social coexistence within a culture presupposes a classification of signs, which is shared and valued by its members. Signs are therefore connected to each other by arbitrary conventions within a certain culture. Sonesson built his cultural semiotic concept against the background of the theories of the Tartu School, the Russian Formalists, Bakhtin and the Prague School.¹⁰ In the original theory of the Tartu School, for example, culture can be understood as “order” and “structure”, as something “familiar” and “usable”. It is also about the perception of “otherness”. For the Tartu School, culture necessarily stands in opposition to a “Non-culture”, which for the Tartu-School also means “chaos, “not understandable” and “disorderly”. Sonesson writes:

It is taken for granted that, in the ordinary case, members of any Culture will think of themselves as insiders, while persons from other Cultures are outsiders. On the inside, life is ordered and meaningful; outside of it, it is chaotic, disorderly and impossible to understand. Also, the inside is normally more highly valued.¹¹

According to Sonesson, there can be perceptions of this “otherness” and at its best also an interaction (dialogue) between culture and its “otherness” – that is if two cultures perceive and accept each other as at least another culture or “Extra-culture”. Extra-culture, according to Sonesson, represents a certain degree of disorder, but not to the same extent as Non-culture. A culture is social, material and mental. It is dynamic and constantly changing. It also includes a cultural memory with past texts and a generative mechanism for concepts both in the present and the future, already found in the storehouse of the past. Therefore, culture is both synchronic and diachronic. Diachronic, because a cultural heritage continues from generation to generation, while being modified and developed. Some issues lie in the center of a culture, while others move in the periphery or disappear. Occasionally, new or modified influences from outside are integrated – if they are accepted by the members of that culture. Culture is therefore always in the process of excluding and including. Since it is the members of the “own culture” who decide what constitutes culture, culture is always egocentric. The own culture, or the Ego culture, is often defined as “better” than the other. In my study, this is indeed a very interesting aspect because of the fact that the German customers, as part of their own Ego culture, really seem to think that this “other” – that means the communicated message from IKEA about “a Swedish better culture” – is already something good, meaningful, understandable and already “inside”, that is within the German Ego culture. One might expect that a German consumer will look at the “other” (Swedish

⁹ The two parts (signifier and signified) are not separate entities but exist together. It is the relationship between them that creates meaning. Signs are arbitrary and motivated by social conventions. Each sign must therefore be put into a cultural context to generate meaning (it arises within a cultural context and is something collective). A language for example is a sign system, which is shared within a culture and comes from thoughts, ideas and values within that culture.

¹⁰ See Göran Sonesson, *Bildbetydelser* (1992) and ”Livsvärldens mediering. Kommunikation i en kultursemiotisk ram.” *Medietexter och medietolkningar. Läsningar av massmediala texter* (Nora: Nya Doxa, 1995): 33-78.

¹¹ Göran Sonesson, “The Notion of Text in Cultural Semiotics.” *Sign System Studies* 26, (1998): 84.



way of life) with more critical eyes, perhaps as something totally strange and “outside” the own Ego culture. This is obviously not the case here.

To some extent, this phenomenon corresponds to what Sonesson has called the “inverted model” of culture, according to which it is the culture in which the subject itself is not located that is treated as being ordered and meaningful or at least most highly valued. Sonesson exemplifies this view with the attitude of Peter the Great towards the Occident and with Americanization as a trend in contemporary societies.¹² The case with Sweden and Germany, however, is special in this respect, for these are two countries, which have many common traits and a long history of exchanges.¹³ After World War II, however, this special relationship became more tenuous.

The main concern for Sonesson was to describe cultural semiotics theoretically and secondly to examine the different models that members of a culture construct in order to understand cultures (their own and others’). For Sonesson and Cabak Rédei the Ego culture is a construct or a model and a portable center (stationed where the Ego is situated mentally). It does not even have to be “true” – yet members often try to live up to the components of the model to some degree, for different reasons and purposes. For Sonesson cultural semiotics is therefore not just about culture per se but about:

the model members of a Culture make of their Culture; and that this model itself is more involved with relationships *between* cultures (as well as subcultures, cultural spheres).¹⁴

To this “model-making” Sonesson adds the very important aspect as to what cultural semiotics is about – the human interaction, the communication between different cultures. In his inverted model this aspect is emphasized. In a communication situation with another more or less foreign culture, specific aspects are selected and constructed into a self-image, which is intentionally projected onto the foreign culture. When the communication succeeds, a dialogue between cultures is established – between the Ego culture and the Alter culture, as Sonesson describes it.

The sender (culture X), in this study IKEA, by presenting as I see it, a “deformed” and idealized “Swedish culture” establishes a dialogue with Germany (culture Y) by choosing certain “artifacts”¹⁵ from

¹² Göran Sonesson, “The Globalisation of Ego and Alter. An Essay in Cultural Semiotics”, *Semiotica* 148 (2004), p.153-173 and “The Pronominalisation of Culture. Dyadic and Triadic Models of Interculturality in the Conceptions of the Tartu School, Bakhtin, Cassirer and Peirce.” Conference contribution. *Les signes du monde: Interculturalité & Globalisation: Actes du 8^{ème} congrès de l’Association International de sémiotique*, 07.12.2004. Lyon. 2007. <http://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordId=975566&fileId=975594>, accessed June 2013.

¹³ See Bernd Henningsen et.al. *Wahlverwandschaft. Skandinavien und Deutschland 1800 bis 1914*. (Berlin: Jovis Verlagsbüro, 1997).

¹⁴ Göran Sonesson, “Ego meets Alter: The Meaning of Otherness in Cultural Semiotics.” *Semiotica* 128 (2000): 537.

¹⁵ For Sonesson an artifact is a central idea and implicates everything, which is produced by a certain Culture. An artifact can therefore be something material like a book, a movie, a law, a picture and so forth but could also be immaterial like norms, traditions etc. Everything that exists in a certain culture means textuality, organization, and understanding for its members.

a mutual “source of knowledge”. In order to develop specific messages, the sender IKEA transforms and develops artifacts into a message for a predefined German model reader before actually sending the message. To be as successful as possible in creating specific and suitable messages, the sender should find out about the desires and thoughts of the general receiver. IKEA often claims that it develops messages that are typically “Swedish” and does not pay attention to what is typical for the target country. However, my study demonstrates that the company really knows the “other”, the Alter target culture very well and therefore develops messages accordingly by just using artifacts especially known and used in that specific country. The chosen artifacts of what IKEA designate “Swedish culture” do not even have to be authentically “Swedish”, but are often based on real stereotypes in the target country about Sweden and the Swedes. Interestingly, the IKEA commercial makers also often make use of artifacts, which already exist in the German culture. The Christmas tree and the Maypole are indeed examples of this, but so are other issues, such as gender themes and family politics.

If one takes a closer look at Sonesson’s inverted model, Sweden and Germany know each other quite well from hundreds of years of interacting with each other, even though stereotypes are also included. There also exist many notions and views about one another, which are sometimes positive, sometimes negative – and sometimes without factual grounding. The two neighboring countries already have had and still have a close relationship in different respects. At least they look up to each other as Ego and Alter cultures, and not as “Non cultures”. They are already in dialogue.

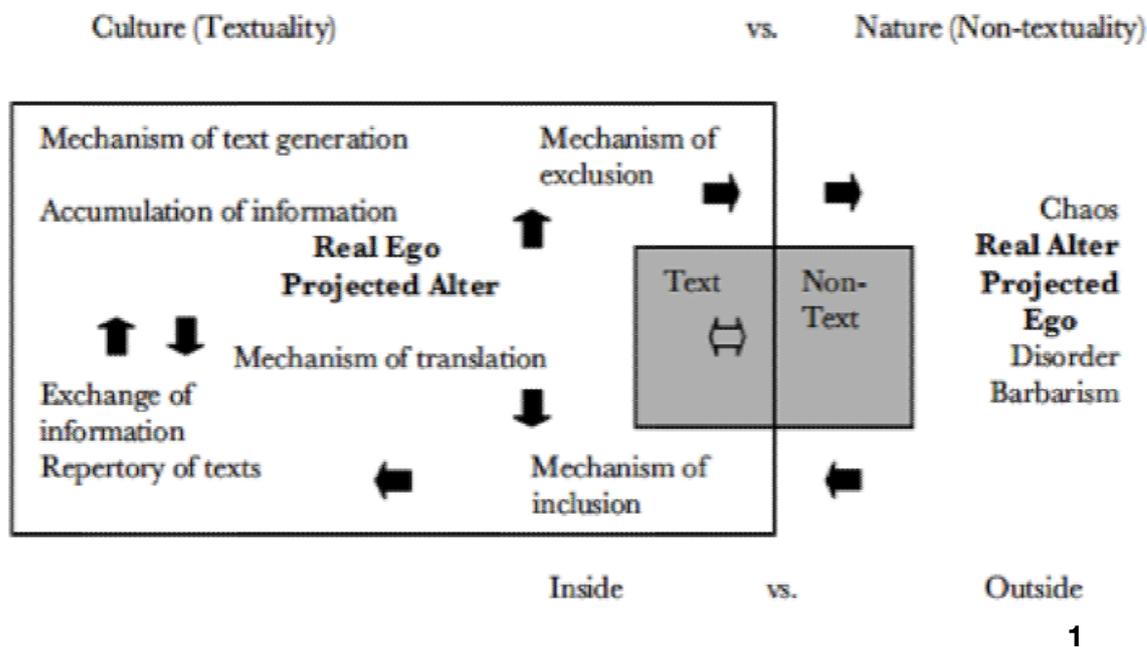


Figure 1. Sonesson’s inverted model (projection of Ego onto the other culture), reproduced from Anna Cabak Rédei.¹⁶

¹⁶ Anna Cabak Rédei, *An Inquiry into Cultural Semiotics: Germaine de Staël’s Autobiographical Travel Accounts*. (Diss. Lund: Division of Semiotics at the Department of Art, History and Musicology, Lunds universitet, 2007), p.54.



A German receiver lives in his or her real Ego culture, which is naturally “German”. From an IKEA point of view (as an Ego culture) of course this is known. The message, which IKEA creates, is therefore intended for a model receiver that is German (Alter culture: German). At the same time the message is organized or built on the assumption that this is a much better and also a “Swedish solution”, or a “Swedish” better alternative. This strategy holds considerable risk and could end up being a disaster. Another target culture (as an Ego culture) would probably have resented this strategy. In Germany this is obviously not the case. Perhaps because IKEA initially presented this “Swedish way” with a fair portion of humor and self-irony, which attained to circumvent any offence to the German receiver. Secondly, as mentioned above, IKEA only works with positive artifacts already established in Germany about Sweden, and makes them its own.

2. Germany and Sweden – two cultures with a history of interactions

The positive image of Sweden as a country with its healthy, beautiful nature, its light, tall and kind, blond people, the welfare system, neutrality, equality between genders, democracy, individual liberty, quality of life, cool attitude and naturalness, old traditions, openness, modernity, innovation, sense of affiliation, still resonates with certain consumer segments in Germany. Even though it’s a construct, this is the Swedish-Image, which even today is communicated and also perceived in other countries.

The interactions between Sweden and Germany have a long history. Even though it is primarily Sweden, which has often been inspired by German institutions, values, habits, and traditions over the past centuries, especially during the period of national romanticism (at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century), the image of Sweden and the Scandinavian countries as a “pre-capital idyll” was intensified and communicated. The red cottage on the countryside, cows living in nature, the stone church in the background were popular Swedish-Images, which back then were spread through new media like photography. Famous Swedish authors and painters like Selma Lagerlöf, Carl Larsson and Anders Zorn became extremely popular in Germany. The works of Ellen Key was also internationally well known because she stood for a new type of home style associated with simplicity, functionality, naturalness, space and for bringing light into the home. Other positive images were spread through world exhibitions, movies and so forth. Later, with the advent of the social democrats, changes in social policy became widely known, such as social pensions, unemployment insurance, health insurance system, parental leave, child care, rent control, longer holidays and so on. The German political scientist Bernd Henningsen speaks about “Wahlverwandtschaften”¹⁷ or elective

¹⁷ Bernd Henningsen, “Das Bild vom Norden. Eine Einleitung.“ *Wahlverwandtschaft. Skandinavien und Deutschland 1800 bis 1914* (Berlin: Jovis Verlagsbüro, 1997):15.

affinities between the two countries. According to the ethnologist Thomas Winkelmann¹⁸ “the golden age” of the social model of Sweden in BRD was during the time when the Swedish welfare state expanded and developed under the social democratic government. Today, especially ideas about a beautiful childhood, originating from authors like Astrid Lindgren, equality, education, and family policy issues are often discussed in Germany with Sweden still as a role model.¹⁹

Even though there are many affinities between Sweden and Germany, in terms of language, customs and traditions, there are still many differing cultural phenomena. Different studies show that Germany, when compared to Sweden, has a vertical societal structure.²⁰ Values such as challenge, income, prestige, knowledge, progress, performance, assertiveness and ambition are important in the German society. The German values also include structure, security and predictability. In Sweden, values like sensitivity, interpersonal relationships, and quality of life are important. Major trends in communication strategies in Germany are seriousness, directness, distance, and objectivity, whereas in Sweden indirectness, informality, subjectivity and self-irony.²¹

After this short excursus into some common aspects between Swedish and German cultures, I proceed with an exposition of the methodological framework used in this study for analyzing advertisements, and then to a more detailed analysis of how IKEA built its “Swedishness” construction by drawing on my model and on Sonesson’s cultural semiotic model.

3. Methodological framework for analyzing advertisements

Commercials are interesting to analyze for a variety of reasons. They include both visual and auditory texts, which communicate different messages and reach out to ever new audiences. A commercial is often very short and can consist of still and moving images; written and spoken text elements; music

¹⁸ Thomas Winkelmann, *Alltagsmythen vom Norden. Wahrnehmung, Popularisierung und Funktionalisierung von Skandinavienbildern im bundesdeutschen Modernisierungsprozess.* (Frankfurt/Main ...: Lang, 2006) p. 241.

¹⁹ See Christine Frisch, *Von Powerfrauen und Superweibern. Frauenpopulärliteratur der 90er Jahre in Deutschland und Schweden* (Huddinge: Södertrön Academic Studies, 12. 2003) and Jennie Mazur (2013) p.127-130.

²⁰ See Margit Breckle, “In Schweden ist die Kommunikation weicher“. *Zur deutsch-schwedischen Wirtschaftskommunikation unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Imagearbeit* (Göteborg: Institut für Deutsch und Niederländisch, Göteborgs universitet 2004), Sylvia Schroll-Machl, *Die Deutschen – Wir Deutsche. Fremdwahrnehmung und Selbstsicht im Berufsleben* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007 [2002]), Jürgen Gerhards, *Kulturelle Unterschiede in der Europäischen Union. Ein Vergleich zwischen Mitgliedsländern, Beitrittskandidaten und der Türkei* (Wiesbaden: Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, ²2006 [2005]), Thomas Winkelmann (2006) *Alltagsmythen vom Norden. Wahrnehmung, Popularisierung und Funktionalisierung von Skandinavienbildern im bundesdeutschen Modernisierungsprozess.* (Frankfurt/Main ...: Lang, 2006).

²¹ Margit Breckle (2004) p. 116, 148 and Jennie Mazur (2013) p. 123-127.



and background sounds. The aims of audiovisual commercials consist of attracting attention and generating emotions, thus influencing brand choice.²² Commercials contain a number of different signs, which provide information about both sender (the company) and intended recipient, but also give information about the current socio-cultural context.

Kanzog describes the film as a temporally organized combination of visual and acoustic signs that form specific meanings through pictures, written texts, as well as sounds, music and spoken texts. From a semiotic point of view, a film can be seen as a secondary semiotic system, which uses the signs from “reality” in order to create a fictional world. Although it is fictional, it is closely linked to the historical, cultural, and social reality, in which it was made and may therefore also influence consumers in the “real world”.²³

To generate a meaningful and interesting analysis of a commercial, it is important to methodically deconstruct it in detail. Such an approach will provide information about the intended recipient, messages and the constructed Ego culture of the company. This requires an appropriate model of analysis, which should be adjusted to the research questions.²⁴ By using a variety of models from various disciplines, it is possible to combine and develop them into a new model suitable for this research.

Klaus Kanzog²⁵ suggests in his book to set up “protocols” when analyzing audiovisual texts because it is easier to describe different aspects, such as dramaturgy, narratives, characters, aesthetics, order of sequences, sounds etc. Since it is usually difficult to obtain permission for reproducing visual material due to copyright, one often has to describe the visual text in writing. Since I have been granted permission to publish images from the commercials in my dissertation, I have also been able to include a storyboard in my model. Based on Müller-Doohm, my analysis model is divided into three main steps:

1. Description

2. Reconstruction

3. Interpretation

Step one is about obtaining an initial ‘feel’ for the commercial, by describing background information and giving a brief summary of the content. Step two is about identifying and evaluating explicit and implicit aspects and messages in the commercial. In the reconstruction, all components are

²² For more information about what each type can contribute see Jennie Mazur (2013) p. 42-50.

²³ Klaus Kanzog, *Grundkurs Filmsemiotik* (München: Diskurs-Film-Verlag Schaudig und Ledig 2007) p.49.

²⁴ Also see George Rossolatos, *An anatomy of the multimodal rhetorical landscape of the world’s most valuable brands*, this volume.

²⁵ Klaus Kanzog, *Einführung in die Filmphilologie* (München: Diskurs-Film-Verlag Schaudig und Ledig 1997) p.137ff.

distinguished and described: first, in a storyboard; and then, separately. With such an approach, it is possible to determine which components occur when, where and for how long. This is important for further in depth analysis. In this way, the analytical reconstruction, gradually and systematically reaches to the very core of the commercial. The last step is the interpretation of the commercial. Here, results and issues are addressed and discussed, especially those that emerged in the reconstruction and those that lead to the constructed ego-culture. The following tables summarize the steps involved in the model:

Table 1. Description ²⁶

Background information

Product Type	
Product	
Name of campaign	
Name of commercial	
Slogan	
Year	
Minutes	
Number of image sequences	
Other	

The dramaturgical structure

Story	
Plot structure	
Narrative techniques	
Other details	

²⁶ Jennie Mazur, (2013) p.144-148.

Table 2. Reconstruction

Storyboard²⁷

Sequence	Visual text	Sound (music and noise)	Linguistic text M = monological (verbal)
Time			D = dialogical (verbal)
Setting (place/scenery)			W = written
Camera perspective			
Shot: Full-Shot Panorama			
Close-up, low-angle-shot, high-angle-shot, medium-close-up, extreme-close-up.			
Top-Shot. etc.			
Coloration			

Communicative text parts

Visual text - What you see

Spatial image elements

Size	
Perspective	
Redaction	
Camera settings	

Visual aesthetics

Color setting	
Objects	
Characters	
Other details	

²⁷ Also see Jennie Mazur (2013), p. 170-172, 194-198, 210-213, 238-240, 245-250.

Auditory text – Music, sound, noise

Music	
Noise	
Background talks	
Background/Foreground	
Other details	

Verbal text

Spoken (auditory text)

Number of spoken phrases and sentences	
Narrative components of the spoken phrases and sentences	1. Interactive in the story 2. Addressed to recipient
Monologue	
Dialogue	
Off-Speaker	
Interaction	
Product information	
Logo	
Slogan	
Other details	

Written text (visual text)

Number of written phrases and sentences	
Narrative components in the written text	1. interactive in the story 2. addressed to the recipient
Monologue	
Interaction	



Product information	
Logo	
Slogan	
Other details	

Significant rhetorical and grammatical shaping

Vocabulary	
Choice of words	
Dialect	
Morphological characteristics	
Figures/Allusions/ Slogan/ Self-Irony	
Syntax (Type of sentence, sentence structure, mode, tense, punctuation)	
Text style (narrative/informative/prompting/ inviting/ evidence-based)	
Fonts	
Secondary information	
Argumentation	
Recontextualization	

Characters

Sex	
Age	
Clothing	
Attributes	

Occupation	
Hair	
Presence of main characters /other characters	
Body language	
Kinesics	
Relations between the characters	
Image of the characters Protagonist/Antagonist	
Others	

Context

Situation	
Themes	
Social environment (traditional/modern/young individualists)	
Home style	
Relationship to the objects in the room	
Other details	

Humor/Overstatement/Under- Statement/Irony	
Other	



Table 3. Interpretation

Intended receiver

Intended receiver (Model-Reader)	
Attitude toward the Model-reader	
Other	

Symbolism

Society	
Sweden	
Germany	
Other	

Messages

Explicit Implicit	
Special advertising stimuli in argumentation	

Background

Cultural (national)	
Social	
Historic	

Presented Ego-culture of the company

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4. The Swedish Solution from IKEA

In the 48 analyzed commercials from IKEA in Germany during the period 1997-2007, I distinguished three overarching categories, which were labeled “The beginning and the ‘Swedish’ Solution”, “Swedish traditions“, and “German daily life“.²⁸ Of course, all kinds of stereotypes, “perfect life”, love stories and various plots have been communicated, which belong to a standard repertoire of commercials. But, more interestingly, it was found that the old, already well known “typical Swedish” tendencies (including prejudices) in and about Swedish culture, such as way of thinking, democracy and gender issues, communication skills and so on, are also implicitly embedded or hidden in the commercials. The three categories have many things in common. For example, they mostly show blond and “normal“-looking women and men, people in their everyday life, always blond children, irony, the off-speaker with the Swedish accent who is very informal (“buddy”) with the viewer, the blue-yellow logo “IKEA” always at the end of a spot. Many messages are also indirect and humorous, including understatements. Women – both Swedish and German – are always the “stronger” and emancipated ones, usually portrayed in leading positions. IKEA often jokes about “soft” men in the commercials – without being too rude.²⁹ Sometimes though, you can notice that IKEA – perhaps without knowing it – shows stereotypical traditional notions of men and women. One example is when a wife hits her husband and she is the “bad guy”.³⁰ The products are shown as normal parts in an “everyday” environment. Just one or two products from this surrounding are explicitly shown together with their names in capital letters and the special price in bold.

In the context of the “In the beginning” category IKEA indicated a Swedish, i.e., better solution by merely writing the text “Schwedische Lösung.” (“Swedish Solution”) in blue and yellow and by ending with the logo “IKEA” in the same colors along with the slogan “Entdecke die Möglichkeiten” (“Discover the possibilities”). The commercials in this category are very short (about 12 seconds) and humorous, but interestingly the dramatic themes are not “typical Swedish”. One example of this is the light room with a little laughing girl with blond hair in white dress with a saw in her hand, pointing at the black and white carpet (a product from IKEA) on the floor. There is a filthy old monster on the right side of the carpet, resembling the monster in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which approaches the girl (on the left-hand side) in order to eat her, but quickly falls into a black hole together with the black carpet from IKEA. Even though the little girl could be associated with the slightly stubborn, but clever and independent *Pippi Longstocking* because of her acts (she has already solved the problem with the monster by cutting a hole under the IKEA-carpet), in this category of commercials IKEA plays with well known “universal” themes and contrasts: good and bad, heaven and hell, little and big, new and old,

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 135-253.

²⁹ For example: YouTube, “Oh Klaus”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IUlamznIwx>, accessed June 2013.

³⁰ YouTube, “Ikea Mücke”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIYIltNpgvY>, accessed June 2013. Also see Jennie Mazur *Die „schwedische“ Lösung. Eine kultursemiotisch orientierte Untersuchung der IKEA-Werbepots in Deutschland.* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013) p. 237-243.



innovative and old fashioned, female and male etc., where IKEA in the end of course always takes the “positive” “nicer”, “winner”, “innovative”, “softer”, “relaxed”, “white and clean/natural” part.³¹

With category two, “Swedish traditions”, IKEA expands its messages about “Swedishness”. From now on the written text about a “Swedish Solution” is put aside, and instead both visual and audio texts are prioritized. These so called “obvious Swedishness” commercials – like the Knut and Midsummer spots – all take place in Sweden, but are not conceptualized and presented in disrespect of the German notion of Sweden and the Swedish traditions. From now on a most popular and quoted slogan in Germany “Wohnst du noch oder lebst du schon?” (“Are you still just living or do you live life already?”) occurs. Interestingly, there are only two “Swedish traditions” which IKEA employs while addressing its German target-audience: Midsummer and Christmas³² (theme: Knut’s day) – traditions, which by following a closer examination also exist in Germany but are practiced in a different way. In fact, the Maypole once came to Sweden from Germany, like the Christmas tree. In the commercials with “Midsommar” as a theme, there are always stereotypical happy blond Swedes – men, women and children – mostly in folk, national costumes or dressed up celebrating this (according to IKEA) “typical Swedish” tradition outside in the lovely Swedish countryside. The visual narrative always involves nature, the green landscape, blue sky and sunshine, cows, the little red cottage itself, the Swedish blue-yellow flag (like the IKEA-logo) etc. By special occasions like “lunch in the nature”, “midsummer dance around the maypole”, “cow bingo” or “moped race” something bad or strange happens, which of course has a concrete effect on the old wooden furniture (it all breaks) used for the celebration. This threatens to destroy the entire festivities, but thanks to IKEA with its “Midsommar Wahnsinnspreise” (“midsummer insanity prices”, i.e., sales) everything is solved and the party can go on as if nothing happened. In these commercials IKEA really jokes about the Swedes, the Swedish culture and about themselves, as they proudly present their innovative furniture and special prices at the same time.

In the third category, IKEA has already “moved in” to the German home.³³ From now on IKEA communicates that it is an already existing part of the German culture. It presents itself as nice and friendly, but at the same time as a traditional and innovative company with its roots in Sweden. Here, many associations to the old paintings by Carl Larsson and the works of Ellen Key are presented at the same time and often in a modern way: light, functionality, innovation, modernity – cottage style together with ultra modern living.³⁴ However, the mostly blond people, places and events at home that

³¹ Jennie Mazur, (2013) p. 164-189.

³² For example: YouTube, “Knut”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge9HiWdGBOo>, accessed June 2013, YouTube, “IKEA Midsommar”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stL0rLBC3S4>, accessed June 2013, YouTube, “IKEA Werbung: TV Spot 2007 „Kuh-Bingo an MIDSOMMAR””, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48518pEUO24>, accessed June 2013 and YouTube, “IKEA MIDSOMMAR TV-SPOT “MOPED RACE””, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxaDsbN4c2o>, accessed June 2013. Also see Jennie Mazur, (2013) p. 190-224.

³³ Jennie Mazur, (2013) p. 223-254.

³⁴For example: YouTube, “Ikea Landhaustraum”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnr7BMykYcg&NR=1&feature=endscreen>, accessed June 2013.

are represented in these spots stem from the intended German Target-culture. Interestingly, the characters do not look like or represent a stereotypical construction of the Target-consumer, even though IKEA claims that this is the aim. Instead it looks as if IKEA (again) wants to be associated with Nordic stereotypes and also with “wealth” and “innovative design” and therefore reach out to a group of people with high income, which of course at the same time is a typical method of adding “more value” to the company and its products.³⁵ Children are featured less frequently in this category of commercials, which are also more direct and extend to a larger number of products. Wherever children are portrayed, they are always the honest and wiser ones, but they do not play the “main role”, as in the first category or in IKEA’s commercials in Sweden, for example. This also indicates a new communication route, which lies closer to a more “German way”. Yet, the Swedish off-speaker and the IKEA-logotype are still present.

Overall, the IKEA commercials that have been aired in Germany share the following general characteristics:

- they describe everyday situations in Germany
- they portray everyday, mostly blond people
- they describe Swedish festive traditions
- they always have a nice, respectful, but humorous approach
- they give an idea of authenticity
- they contain self-irony
- an indirect communication style is used
- they often consist of a dramatic plot structure in which there is an issue and a certain problem that is always solved by IKEA
- they often contain pairs of opposites, a before-after principle and surprises
- the locations for “Swedish” traditions are always outdoor, preferably in the idyllic nature of the Swedish countryside
- The locations for “daily life in Germany” are in the (fictional) homes of various German-speaking people, who mostly look well-off financially
- a male off-speaker with a slight Swedish accent is IKEA's official voice. He comments on the events, speaks directly to the recipient and sets the subjective point-of-view of the commercial

³⁵ This is different from IKEA in Sweden and also from the Image IKEA has in Sweden. For example: YouTube, “Ikea Mücke”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIYlltNpgvY>, accessed June 2013.



- many products are shown in the background in their “normal” environment at home
- one or two products are highlighted and shown explicitly, together with the product name and price in written, bold and capital letters
- the highlighted products are always part of the narratives
- a blue-yellow IKEA-logo is always shown at the end; the logo is a direct reference to Sweden, but also to IKEA’s very origin, the well-known founder *Ingvar Kamprad* (the acronym IKEA stands for Ingvar Kamprad and his place of birth *Elmtaryd* in the community *Agunnaryd*, a small area in the countryside in the South of Sweden where Ingvar Kamprad grew up).

5. Concluding remarks

In the analysis, it turned out that IKEA indeed made use of already existing artifacts from both cultures (Sweden and Germany), which contributed to the company’s success. The company constructed a model of Sweden, which consists of well-known collective ideas and myths in German culture about the north and the “Nordic culture”. But they also borrow contemporary aspects from the German consumer culture, such as gender discussions. With a great sense of humor, consisting of self-irony and self-distance, but also by adopting an informal approach, it became possible to enhance likeability on behalf of the targeted German consumers. Perhaps this may be attributed to the employment of indirect communication. The chosen communication forms, the well-planned strategy of using artifacts from both cultures, resulted in IKEA’s, at least between 1997–2007, standing for youthfulness, originality, innovation, amusement, harmony, tradition, nature, Scandinavian design, fellowship, democracy, humor, “down to earth”, equality, childish, autonomous, light, goodness, as dominant among other attributes for German consumers.

However, even if it looks like IKEA presents a “whole Swedish model or solution” (because they communicate this) in all categories, this never entails an “extreme makeover”. What IKEA really does is to pick up the most important artifacts from *both* cultures, mix them and transform them into an IKEA construction and present them more or less visually as a “Swedish solution”. The term “IKEA-solution” would have been just as fitting. The dialogue between Ego- and Alter has continued. When IKEA noticed that Germans started their own “traditions” for example by filming their own “Knut-traditions” which they uploaded on YouTube, it started developing new commercials on this theme.³⁶ Many books

³⁶ For example: YouTube, “Bäumschen raus, Schnäpschen rein!!!”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=koj-Svx71rM>, accessed June 2013 and YouTube, “Bäumchen rein Schnäppchen rein” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olcDpq6yyAA>, accessed June 2013.

from authors used parts of the famous IKEA-slogan in their own titles³⁷ and as I mentioned above, even other companies started their own campaigns using IKEA's commercials as templates. The "IKEA effect" went so far that German football fans – that is in another totally different context – during the 2006 World Football Cup, when Sweden played and lost against Germany in Munich, shouted slogans like: "Ihr seid nur ein Möbellieferant, Möbellieferant, Möbellieferant" ("You are only a furniture supplier, furniture supplier, furniture supplier"). Here we can see how Sonesson's model works and functions in practice.

Today, in 2013, IKEA has become increasingly "German". For example, the typical self-irony is not as present, although still very important as a communication skill in Sweden and Swedish advertising. The company also seems to be more direct in its messages, while having shifted from insinuations towards a greater focus on products themselves. However, the construct of "Swedish culture" still accompanies the company in Germany.³⁸

³⁷ For example: *Wohnst du schon oder lachst du noch?, Stillst du noch oder lebst du schon?, Leidest du noch oder lebst du schon? Übersetzt du noch oder lebst du schon? etc.*

³⁸ YouTube, "IKEA Werbung: TV Spot "MIDSOMMAR Schlussverkauf" 2013", http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w57_3hqzn3E, accessed June 2013.



Appendix 1- IKEA facts and figures (Annual summary 2012)³⁹

Category	The IKEA Group 2012	IKEA Germany 2012
Revenue 2012	27 billion EURO	3,88 billion EURO
Growth	9,5 %	6,3 %
IKEA co-workers	154 000	15 294
IKEA Stores	298 stores in 29 countries	46 stores
Catalogue 2013	211 million copies in 62 editions and 29 languages	
Products	Approximately 9,500 products	
Top selling countries	1. Germany	14%
	2. USA	12%
	3. France	9%
	4. Italy	6%
	5. Russia	6%

Appendix 2- IKEA advertisements on YouTube

YouTube, "IKEA - Zuhause arbeiten",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZyzSatKhtM>, accessed June 2013.

"Knut"

Youtube, "Knut." television advertisement for IKEA in Switzerland,

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge9HiWdGBOo>, accessed June 2013.

Youtube, "IKEA KNUT Spot" "Bäumchen raus – Schnäppchen rein",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olcDpq6yyAA>, accessed June 2013.

Youtube, "IKEA - Bäumchen raus, Schnäppchen rein - Knut Schlussverkauf 2012 Dezember, 2012",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yOIZ-vrr1g>, accessed June 2013.

³⁹ IKEA Homepage (Deutschland), "Daten und Fakten",

http://www.ikea.com/ms/de_DE/about_ikea/facts_and_figures/, accessed June 2013.

"Midsommar":

YouTube, "IKEA Midsommar",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stL0rLBC3S4>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "IKEA Werbung: TV Spot 2007 „Kuh-Bingo an MIDSOMMAR"",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=48518pEUO24>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "IKEA MIDSOMMAR TV-SPOT "MOPED RACE"",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zxaDsbN4c2o>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "IKEA Werbung: TV Spot "MIDSOMMAR Schlussverkauf" 2013",

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w57_3hqzn3E, accessed June 2013.

"German daily life":

YouTube, "IKEA - Müll raus bringen",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyrG20B-Zk>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "Oh Klaus",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6IUlamznlxw>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "Ikea Mücke",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gYlItNpgvY>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "Ikea Landhaustraum",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnr7BMykYcg&NR=1&feature=endscreen>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "Ikea Werbung Baby (Germany)",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idMybk4w-rk>, accessed June 2013.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mnr7BMykYcg>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "IKEA TV-Spot "Sohn",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-pml5tbfko>, accessed June 2013.



Private films and commercials "Knut" on YouTube

YouTube, "Bäumschen raus, Schnäpschen rein!!!",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?NR=1&feature=endscreen&v=koj-Svx71rM>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "Ulk Werbung Ikea aus Privatfernsehen",

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_oir388d-gl, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "Werbespot IKEA Knut mal anders!",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUGBEXUwTVw>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "Mömax - Unsere Tannen leben noch",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gDYGPXtRBBY>, accessed June 2013.

YouTube, "Knuten Flug!",

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4mCIHrjc5U>, accessed June 2013.

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