The Hidden Cost of Cutting Costs:

How Corporate Shortcuts Undermine Consumer Trust and Safety

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On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

Product recalls are a persistent issue across various industries, from medical devices to household goods, often exposing critical failures in manufacturing, regulatory oversight, and corporate accountability. In November 2023, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) took action against Jiangsu Shenli Medical Production Co., Ltd., a Chinese manufacturer of plastic syringes. The FDA blocked all plastic syringes from this company from entering the U.S. because they failed to meet quality and safety standards. This raised concerns about how unreliable medical products could put public health at risk (U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 2023).

Another example of a major recall involves Stanley mugs. In early 2024, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) recalled nearly 2.6 million mugs because their lids shrank when exposed to heat, sometimes popping off and causing burns. These defective lids were made in China, and reports show that 91 incidents have been recorded worldwide, with 38 leading to burn injuries (U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2024). This case shows that even well-known brands can run into serious problems when manufacturing quality isn't closely monitored. Even though agencies like the FDA, CPSC, and the Department of Agriculture work to make sure products are safe, recalls keep happening. This raises important questions: Why do these recalls keep happening? What is causing these safety failures? And most importantly, how can companies prevent them in the future?

In this paper, I focus on a key question: How do cost-cutting choices—like using cheaper materials or reducing product testing—affect consumer trust and corporate responsibility? To explore this, I look at three major product recalls: Mattel's 2007 toy recall due to lead paint, the Takata airbag recall that led to serious injuries and deaths, and the Chinese drywall incident that damaged thousands of homes. Each of these cases shows how cutting costs at the expense of safety can lead to dangerous consequences—loss of consumer trust, bankruptcy, fatalities, and burning bridges between the company and its global manufacturers. I present the background of each case, analyze each one individually, and then tie them together and answer why these cases tie into my research question. By studying these cases, I highlight how companies prioritize profits over safety and discuss ways to hold them accountable for better manufacturing and product quality.

Methods

These three cases were selected based on their access to global manufacturing or due to their consumer safety risks. All three cases involve large-scale recalls and cost-cutting issues. The following information was extracted from mainly government reports, academic research, and news articles.

To analyze these incidents, I use Actor-Network Theory (ANT), a framework developed by Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and John Law. ANT views technology as a network of interconnected actors—both human and non-human. ANT introduces a heterogeneous network where different elements collaborate to solve a problem or achieve a goal, using translation as a process to align the values of the various actors involved. Callon highlights the importance of heterogeneous networks where "although sociologists are unable to account for all changes, it is their responsibility to meet the success of those developments

in their networks." (Callon, 1987, pg. 97) I used ANT as my framework for analysis because we can observe the key "actors" in these incidents that are not as obvious when initially looking.

Results

Case 1:

The 2007 Mattel toy recall is a clear example of how cost-cutting in manufacturing can lead to serious safety risks and damage consumer trust. That year, about 967,000 toys were recalled because they contained lead paint levels that exceeded FDA safety standards. Two more recalls followed, all linked to Mattel's Chinese manufacturing partners. This raised major concerns about the safety of offshore manufacturing, something Mattel had relied on for over 15 years to lower costs. As Mary B. Teagarden pointed out, "offshore manufacturing is an important option for companies trying to contain cost… however, companies using this strategy must trust but verify" (Teagarden, 2009, pg. 12). Mattel placed too much trust in its long-term partners without strong enough verification, which led to dangerous products reaching the market.

The recall also exposed problems in the global supply chain. At first, Mattel's CEO, Bob Eckert, blamed the recall on a subcontractor who had used unauthorized paint from a third-party supplier, violating Mattel's policies. However, the company quickly changed its stance. When Mattel's executive vice president for worldwide operations met with China's product safety chief, he took full responsibility for the issue, saying, "Mattel takes full responsibility for these recalls and apologizes personally to you, the Chinese people, and all of our customers who received the toys" (Thottam, 2007). This apology was not just about

admitting fault—it was also about maintaining Mattel's relationship with China, which produces 65% of its toys.

This case highlights a major issue: when companies focus too much on cutting costs, they can overlook safety and quality control. While outsourcing manufacturing can help businesses maximize profits, weak oversight and a lack of strict testing can lead to serious risks for consumers. Mattel's failure to properly monitor its supply chain resulted in a massive recall, hurting both its reputation and consumer trust. While some blamed gaps in regulations or design flaws, these explanations miss the bigger picture. The real problem was the pressure to save money at the expense of safety. This isn't just about Mattel—it's a pattern seen in many industries that rely on international factories. The 2007 recall is just one example of how companies must find a balance between saving money and keeping their products safe for consumers.

Case 2:

In 2013, Takata Corporation, a Japanese automotive parts company, was the primary supplier of airbags for several major U.S. automakers. It was discovered that Takata's airbag inflators had a fatal flaw: they could explode upon deployment, spraying metal fragments into the vehicle cabin and causing severe injuries or death. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated that 67 million airbag inflators were defective (NHTSA, 2021), leading to recalls affecting over 42 million vehicles from eleven automakers, including Honda, Ford, BMW, and Subaru (Ashley, 2015, pg. 62).

Over time, exposure to heat and humidity caused the chemical propellant-inside the airbag inflators-to degrade, leading it to burn too quickly and generate excessive pressure during deployment. This resulted in ruptured steel inflator housings, turning them into

shrapnel that could seriously injure or kill vehicle occupants (Atiyeh, 2014). Honda, one of Takata's largest customers at the time, has confirmed 20 deaths and more than 200 injuries in the U.S. linked to these defective airbags (Honda, 2025). Despite the severity of the issue, the U.S. recall completion rate remains only about 88% (NHTSA, 2024), meaning millions of cars with potentially deadly airbags are still on the road.

The most alarming part of this case is that Takata executives knew about the defect for years and actively covered it up. In January 2017, U.S. prosecutors charged three Takata executives with fabricating test data to hide the flaw (Segal, 2019, pg. 12). Evidence of reports revealed that the company had been manipulating safety test results for over fifteen years and was aware as early as 2000 that its metal inflators could explode (Puzzanghera, 2015). Instead of addressing the problem, Takata falsified reports and continued selling its airbags to automakers worldwide. The consequences were severe—prosecutors fined the company \$1 billion, and Takata pleaded guilty to wire fraud for knowingly providing false safety data. Honda, its biggest client, ultimately severed ties after discovering that the supplier had "misrepresented and manipulated test data for certain airbags" (Puzzanghera, 2015).

At the heart of the Takata scandal is the issue of corporate cost-cutting and its impact on consumer safety. To reduce manufacturing costs, Takata used ammonium nitrate as the primary propellant in its inflators, despite knowing it was unstable over time. Safer alternatives existed, but they were more expensive, and Takata prioritized cost efficiency over long-term safety. This decision led to one of the largest and most deadly product recalls in history.

This case also raises concerns about corporate accountability. Automakers like Honda and Toyota relied on Takata's safety reports, assuming their supplier was meeting regulatory standards. The recall forced many companies to reevaluate how they oversee suppliers and implement stricter quality control measures. However, the fact that millions of recalled cars remain unfixed suggests that even after massive failures, corporate and regulatory responses may still fall short.

Takata's downfall demonstrates the risks of prioritizing profit over safety. It also highlights the challenge of maintaining consumer trust in industries where cost-cutting pressures can lead to catastrophic consequences. The key question remains: How can companies prevent these failures without sacrificing efficiency? And how can regulatory bodies enforce stricter oversight before tragedies occur rather than after?

Case 3:

In the mid-2000s, during a nationwide housing boom and the rebuilding efforts after Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. faced a severe shortage of domestically produced drywall. To keep up with demand, builders and suppliers turned to imports, bringing in large quantities of drywall from China. However, this decision would later lead to one of the most widespread product failures in U.S. housing history.

According to Hester Thaviphoke, an estimated 100,000 homes were built using defective Chinese drywall (Thavinphoke, 2008, pg. 121). By 2009, homeowners in at least 30 states had filed nearly 2,000 reports about strange odors, property damage, and health issues linked to the material (Trotta & Gill, 2011, pg. 13). Many reported a persistent "rotten egg" smell, which was later found to be caused by sulfur compounds present in the drywall. These compounds released corrosive gases that damaged electrical wiring, home appliances, and

air-conditioning systems (Boles, 2009). Beyond property damage, residents suffered from headaches, nosebleeds, respiratory problems, and other health issues, raising serious concerns about the drywall's long-term effects.

Investigations revealed that the defective drywall contained unusually high levels of sulfur, which were not adequately tested or regulated before being imported into the U.S.. Unlike American-made drywall, which must meet strict standards, the imported drywall was produced with little oversight. This case highlights a major risk in international manufacturing: when companies prioritize cost savings and rapid production over quality control, consumers are often left to deal with the consequences.

Despite the widespread damage, legal action against the manufacturers proved to be nearly impossible for U.S. homeowners. Approximately 5,600 homeowners filed lawsuits, but they quickly ran into legal roadblocks. Three key issues made it nearly impossible to hold the Chinese manufacturers accountable: personal jurisdiction (the ability of U.S. courts to make a foreign company stand trial), service of process (the legal procedure of notifying a foreign company of a lawsuit), and enforcement of judgment (ensuring a foreign company actually pays damages if found guilty) (Glynn, 2012, pg. 318). Essentially, even if a U.S. court ruled in favor of the homeowners, there was little way to enforce the decision in China. This left many families with no compensation for their damaged homes.

The Chinese drywall case underscores a recurring problem in global supply chains—when companies prioritize cost-cutting by outsourcing materials without strict quality control, consumers often bear the risks. It also raises critical questions about corporate accountability and government oversight. How can regulators prevent unsafe

foreign-made products from entering the U.S. market? And when failures do occur, what legal mechanisms should exist to ensure consumers can seek justice?

Analysis

I will now use ANT to analyze each case study and identify key actors and how their interactions contributed to the failures. ANT reveals how these actors interact and where the network broke down, providing a holistic perspective on the incident.

Case 1 (2007 Mattel's Lead Paint Incident):

A key actor in this case was Mattel, which relied heavily on overseas manufacturing to cut costs. It outsourced production to Chinese manufacturers, who then subcontracted work to smaller, often unverified suppliers. Through this system, a blind spot was created in oversight, making it difficult for the company to ensure quality control. Instead of implementing rigorous testing throughout the supply chain, Mattel trusted its long-standing manufacturing partners would adhere to safety standards. That trust was misplaced when a subcontractor used unauthorized cheaper lead-based paint.

Another major actor is the Chinese manufacturing industry, which operates under significant cost pressures. Due to global competition, Chinese suppliers often prioritized affordability over following international safety standards. The subcontractor that introduced the lead paint sourced it from an unauthorized supplier, revealing how cost-cutting practices can lead to serious safety failures. Gaps in regulatory oversight, particularly between U.S. and Chinese authorities, failed to enforce safety checks on exported products.

Regulatory agencies such as the U.S. CPSC and Chinese safety regulators played a crucial but ultimately weak role. The CPSC was responsible for ensuring that imported toys

met U.S. safety standards, but its enforcement mechanisms were more reactive than preventive. On the other hand, Chinese regulators had looser safety regulations, making it easier for unsafe products to enter the global marketplace. The lack of coordination let hazardous toys reach the market. Mattel initially blamed its Chinese suppliers but later publicly apologized to Chinese authorities, highlighting the power imbalances in the network. Other actors include parents and children–the consumers–whose complaints led to media exposure and the toy recall.

Non-human actors also played a role. The lead paint, due to its toxicity, directly impact consumer safety. The global supply chain itself was another critical non-human actor; its complexity made accountability difficult. Retailers like Walmart and Target unknowingly dsistributed unsafe products, playing a passive but essential role.

From the perspective of ANT, the this was a network-wide failure. The breakdown occurred at multiple levels: Mattel failed to oversee its supply chain properly, Chinese manufacturers prioritized cost saving over safety, regulators lacked strong enforcement power, and retailers unknowingly sold these hazardous products. This recall forced industry-wide reforming in testing and transparency. Although Mattel didn't intend for their Chinese manufacturers to cut corners, it was an unintended consequence of its outsourcing model.

To prevent these similar failures, companies should shift from trust-based relationships to verification-based safety measures. Stronger regulation between global agencies is also necessary to ensure that products meet consistent safety standards before reaching consumers. By understanding this case through ANT, we can see how corporate decisions, regulatory policies, and economic incentives all interact to shape product safety.

Case 2 (2013 Takata Airbag Incident):

The main network builder in the 2013 Takata Airbag Incident was the three company's executive members who manipulated the test data and allowed for the unsafe airbags to be deployed in multiple cars. They were responsible for the decisions that led to the creation of Takata's global airbag supply chain, which included its decisions to cut costs by using substandard materials and manipulating test data. The management team's actions-the decision to cut corners on product testing to increase profits in particular- set up the network in which faulty airbags could be distributed. Takata also created a network of manufacturing facilities in Japan, the U.S., and other countries, relying on low-cost production methods that ultimately compromised product safety. These decisions "created" the flawed supply chain. The defective airbags became an inevitable outcome, not an accident, because the leadership scrutured the entire network for cost-efficiency at the expense of safety.

The automobile manufacturers, including Honda, Toyota, Subaru, Ford, etc., were actors by having a relationship with Takata as their airbag supplier. These companies, by using Takata's airbags, helped establish a supply chain that connected Takata's manufacturing process to their vehicle production lines. These automotive companies unknowingly became the distributors of a safety hazard, as they integrated these airbags into millions of cars. Many of these automakers trusted Takata to provide reliable, safe airbags, and their reliance on the supplier's assurances contributed to the network's flawed foundation.

Regulatory agencies, such as the NHTSA in the U.S. and the Japanese regulation agencies were crucial actors in this incident. These agencies were responsible for vehicle safety but their failure to identify and address the airbag defects earlier helped build the

network in which the faulty airbags continued to be distributed. Takata's data manipulation for the safety data and the slow regulatory response contributed to a system where airbag defects could not be properly addressed in a timely manner. Suppliers and subcontractors who provide these materials like inflators and propellants for airbags are also actors. However, the decision to cut costs and use cheaper, lower-quality materials to increase profit margins built a system.

The media was also an actor in this incident. They influenced how the consumers and other actors–Takata, NHTSA, and car brands–reacted after the incident. After Takata's data manipulation of safety data came to the public, the media played a pivotal role in spreading awareness about these dangerous airbags that could cause injuries, or even worse, death. The media built a network of awareness and it shifted the public's perception of Takata. This also helped highlight the broader systemic issues within the company and the industry.

In Takata's airbag case, the key actors in the network include Takata's corporate leadership and the main three executives, automobile manufacturers, regulatory agencies, suppliers, and subcontractors. Each of these actors played a role in shaping this network that allowed the defective airbags to be produced, distributed, and installed in millions of vehicles. The model shows that one actor's choice doesn't just impact the others-they actively shape and create other actors. The decisions made by these actors, especially around cost-cutting and poor safety oversight contributed to the failure of Takata's airbags. Understanding the roles of these actors helps build insight into how a combination of regulatory failures, corporate priorities, and global supply chain dynamics can create a flawed system that has dangerous consequences for public safety.

Case 3 (2000s Chinese Drywall Incident):

The network builder in this incident are the U.S. homebuilders who actively shaped and expanded the network by deciding to import and use Chinese drywall. Their role in the network was not just as passive users but also the driving force behind the supply chain that brought defective drywall into American homes. In their pursuit of cost efficiency and rapid construction, they sourced drywall from Chinese manufacturers, relied on importers and distributors, and expanded the network by incorporating these materials into thousands of homes. These homebuilders created the demand that made importers seek Chinese suppliers, initiating the flow of defective drywall into the U.S..

The Chinese drywall manufacturers that supplied the high sulfur content drywalls were key actors in this network. These drywalls led to property damage and health issues. Although they were key suppliers, the material itself was the one that created legal and regulatory battles, as the presence of the drywall in these homes made this necessary. The U.S. importers and distributors were the middlemen actors of this network. They facilitated the entry of Chinese drywall into the U.S. but were not the decision-makers in the widespread use. They expanded the network by distributing these materials but simply were following the demand of the home developers–the network builder.

Regulatory agencies (CPSC, Environment Protection Agency, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) reacted to this crisis rather than preventing it. Their late response shaped the later stages of the network. The legal system is a non-human actor in this network. The legal system protected foreign manufacturers from liability, reinforcing the network by preventing direct consequences for the drywall producers. Additionally, the media was an actor that exposed the network's failures, bringing public attention to the issue.

By the identification of the U.S. homebuilders and developers as the network builder, we can see that the Chinese drywall crisis was not just a failure of manufacturing but a result of cost-driven decision-making within the U.S. construction industry. The case wasn't just a supplier failure–it was a network shaped by the homebuilders' decisions. The root cause was the demand for cheaper materials, which influenced all the other actors. The developer's focus on affordability and speed shaped this network in a way that allowed defective drywall to enter homes, which led to major financial and health consequences. This analysis highlights how one group's decision can create ripple effects, affecting regulations, legal systems, and consumer safety.

Bringing It All Together

Each case shows how cost-cutting choices in global supply chains can lead to dangerous product failure, loss of consumer trust, and serious questions about corporate responsibility. Using ANT, we can see that in each case, a network builder made key decisions that shaped relationships between actors. Unfortunately, these decisions often put profit over safety, leading to widespread consequences.

In all three cases, the network builders–Mattel's executives, Takata's corporate leadership, and U.S. homebuilders–focused on cutting costs by using cheaper materials, outsourcing production, or bypassing thorough tests. Mattel outsourced manufacturing to China to lower production costs, assuming their suppliers would follow safety standards. However, this decision backfired when subcontractors used lead-based paint, causing a massive recall and harming Mattel's reputation. Takata knowingly manipulated safety test data to keep producing airbags at a lower cost while keeping its automaker contracts. This led to airbags that could explode and injure or kill drivers and passengers, resulting in one of the

biggest recalls in automotive history. The Chinese drywall case followed a similar pattern, where U.S. homebuilders, desperate for materials after Hurricane Katrina, turned to cheaper drywall from China. This drywall released toxic gases that corroded metal, damaged homes, and created serious health risks. In each of these cases, cost-cutting expanded the network by bringing in new suppliers and distributors who helped companies save money but ultimately compromised product quality and safety.

A major theme across all these cases is the loss of consumer trust. Although people expect brands, automakers, and homebuilders to make safe products, when companies prioritize profit over safety, the trust is shattered. Mattel initially blamed China for the lead paint but had to apologize publicly after, making consumers question how much control the company truly had over its supply chain. Takata's deception was even worse—the company lied to automakers and regulators for years, putting millions of lives at risk. This wasn't just a case of negligence; it was a deliberate cover-up. Meanwhile, the Chinese drywall disaster exposed loopholes in the legal system, making it almost impossible for homeowners to sue the manufacturers responsible. This left many families feeling betrayed and powerless, as they had no way to hold anyone accountable.

Mattel and Takata both faced major crises due to these cost-cutting decisions that compromised product safety and consumer trust, but their responses resulted in vastly different outcomes. While Mattel managed to recover and rebuild its reputation, Takata collapsed, unable to regain trust or sustain the business. The difference between these companies lies in how each company handles accountability, regulation, and long-term trust-building efforts. After Mattel's 2007 recall, the company took immediate steps to regain consumer trust. Mattel took full responsibility and apologized to Chinese officials and

acknowledged internal failures in supply chain management. This showed consumers and regulators that the company was committed to accountability and transparency. Mattel also then strengthened its safety protocols, implementing stricter testing standards and working closely with regulators to ensure no issues arise. Over time, the efforts restored consumer confidence. By investing in better supply chain monitoring and stricter quality control, Mattel has demonstrated a commitment to long-term safety.

On the other hand, Takata failed to take responsibility in time, and the attempts of damage control simply worsened the situation. In contrast to Mattel, who quickly addressed the safety concerns, Takata actively covered up these defects for years. The company knew as early as 2000 that the airbags were prone to explosive ruptures, yet it falsified test data and continued to supply these airbags to automakers. Even when reports of death and injuries surfaced, Takata continued to downplay the issue rather than address it. It wasn't until years later that Takata finally admitted its faults. At that point, it was too late. The company faced massive fines, lawsuits, and a recall of over 67 million airbag inflators. Unlike Mattel, which worked with regulators, Takata field for bankruptcy.

These cases illustrate that corporate accountability is not just about managing a crisis. It's about how a company chooses to respond. Mattel showed that taking responsibility, improving safety measures, and communicating openly can help the company thrive and recover. Meanwhile, Takata's failure proves that hiding problems and avoiding accountability can lead to a total collapse. In a world where consumer trust is fragile and important, companies that prioritize safety, integrity, and solutions stand a better chance at survival. **Conclusion**

The cases all reveal a pattern: when companies prioritize cost-cutting over safety, consumers ultimately pay the price. Whether it's toys with lead paint, exploding airbags, or homes built with hazardous materials, the consequences of these decisions extend past companies' financial losses; They shatter consumer trust, endanger lives, and damage entire industries. These shortcomings highlight the issue in global manufacturing: corporations cannot rely on cost efficiency and outsourced production without also investing in rigorous safety checks.

Currently, regulatory agencies work to enforce safety standards, but reactive measures–like recalls and fines–come too late to prevent absolute harm. Instead of waiting for these incidents to occur, there needs to be stronger proactive regulation, requiring independent safety testing and more transparency in the supply chain. Companies must take greater responsibility in their manufacturing partners, and ensure consistent quality control. As seen in Mattel's case, those who respond with accountability and reform can regain trust, but companies like Takata show that deception and denial lead to irreversible consequences.

Moving forward, corporate responsibility must shift from damage control to prevention. This means increasing oversight in outsourced manufacturing, closing regulatory gaps between countries, and ensuring safety standards are enforced on a global scale. Government and regulatory agencies must close the loopholes that allow for unsafe products to enter the market. An area for future research is how stricter global safety regulations and increased corporate transparency could prevent these crises from happening in the first place. If businesses and regulators fail to act, history will repeat itself. Unfortunately, small businesses are the only companies we see that can balance these. Due to the nature of a smaller customer size, they can satisfy most, if not all, of their customers. Ensuring quality,

safety, and reliability in their products. The key question remains: how can we create a system where these large companies no longer see safety as an optional cost, but a fundamental business priority?

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