



# Employing humour and celebrities to manipulate passengers' attention to pre-flight safety briefing videos in commercial aviation



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## ABSTRACT

Passengers' attention to the pre-flight safety briefing video prior to commercial flights has been described as poor, at best. This has resulted in some airlines employing creative marketing techniques such as using humour or celebrities to improve passenger' attention to the material. The effectiveness of such techniques remains unknown and therefore was the main aim of the present research. 45 participants were randomly divided into three groups (standard safety video, humorous safety video, and celebrity safety video), and each group were asked to watch a series of videos with the target pre-flight safety briefing video embedded at the end of the video sequence. Eye gaze as well as key safety messages recalled were analysed and compared between groups. The results revealed the humorous pre-flight safety briefing video to be the most effective in maintaining participants' attention as well as recall of key safety messages. Alarming, recall of key safety messages between the three videos averaged fifty per cent, suggesting that the airlines and aviation authorities need to rethink the way in which they convey safety critical information to passengers.

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## 1. Introduction

For airlines and governing authorities alike, passenger safety remains paramount. For passengers however, there is little evidence of the systems, processes and defences in place to protect them from harm. One obvious safety measure though is the safety briefing provided prior to each flight. For many passengers, the pre-flight safety briefing is considered repetitious and boring (Parker, 2006). For males, and in particular young educated males, paying attention to these safety briefing videos is particularly challenging (Johnson, 1979). This has led some airlines to be creative about the way they deliver the important information in this safety briefing videos (e.g., including humour or celebrities). What remains unknown, and is the central aim of the present research, is the effectiveness of such methods in gaining and maintaining the attention of passengers.

Humour and celebrity endorsements are popular methods employed by advertising professionals to market products or services (Madden and Weinberger, 1982; Banyte et al., 2011). Humour is primarily useful in obtaining the attention of the target audience (Sterthal and Craig, 1973; Speck, 1991). Celebrities on the other hand are most beneficial in persuading (i.e., selling) the

opinion of the viewer (Wang et al., 2013). If either is used inappropriately, the marketing advantage of employing one or the other could be lost.

While humour in advertising has repeatedly been shown to positively affect attention, primarily because the humorous message is perceived as more interesting (Stewart and Furse, 1986), if employed at the wrong time, it can disrupt the processing of the target message (Smith, 1993). Chan (2011) found precisely this when he tested five different advertisements (2 humorous, 2 non-humorous and 1 neutral) with 254 university students. The humorous ads were successful in gaining the attention of the students however, their ability to persuade the students was inferior to the ads without humour.

The effectiveness of celebrities in advertising is underpinned by the public's fascination and obsession with sport personalities and movie stars (Mehta, 1999). Spry et al. (2011) contend that it is often the attractiveness and credibility of these celebrities that gain the attention of the general public. Advertisers then heighten these traits (i.e., influence the image and identification of the celebrity) and link them to the product being marketed. For this to be most effective, it is best to carefully select the celebrity, matching the target segment and brand values with the features of the celebrity (McCracken, 1989; Mukherjee, 2012). Failure to do so, or choosing a celebrity who is not widely known can result in consumers not being attracted to the advertisement (Wang et al., 2013).

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For airlines wanting to attract and engage passengers in the safety briefing, employing humour or celebrities would appear to make good sense. Molesworth (2014) found precisely this when he tested the effectiveness of three different commercially available pre-flight safety briefing videos (no humour, humour, and celebrity), in terms of memorability of key safety messages. Moreover, participants who watched a safety briefing video which employed either humour or a celebrity recalled more key safety messages than participants who watched a safety briefing that was devoid of the two. While these results are encouraging, they leave open this important issue about attention and how humour or the use of celebrities in such briefings affects individuals' attention to this information. Therefore, the main aim of the present research was to examine the effectiveness of three pre-flight safety briefing, each employing a different marketing technique such as no humour, humour or a celebrity, to answer the following questions.

1. Does the method in which safety related information is delivered affect passengers' attention to this information?
2. Does the method in which safety related information is delivered affect passengers' recall of safety information?
3. Does the impact of prior exposure to another airline's safety briefing affect participants' recall of key safety information?
4. Do gender and age affect participants' decision to attend to the pre-flight safety briefing?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

A total of 45 participants (26 female) with an average age of 22.20 (SD = 4.36) years were recruited from the student population at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Australia. All participants were reimbursed for their time in the form of a bookshop gift voucher to the value of \$20. The research was approved in advance by the UNSW Ethics Panel.

### 2.2. Design

The study was designed to examine the extent to which pre-flight safety briefing videos captured and maintained participants' attention. In addition, the study was designed to examine the effectiveness of these pre-flight safety briefing videos in conveying key safety messages. Therefore, the study comprised a one-way factorial design incorporating three levels of safety video briefing (no humour, humour and celebrity) as the independent variables and participants' attention to the pre-flight safety briefing video as the main dependent variable. Additional dependent variables included observation time, number of times looked away, time to first look away and information recall (i.e., key safety messages).

### 2.3. Material

The material comprised a: demographics questionnaire (i.e., age and gender); flight history and behaviour questionnaire (i.e., number of flights within five years; and attention to the pre-flight safety announcement); pre-flight safety video A (no humour); pre-flight safety video B (humour); pre-flight safety video C (use of celebrity); a comprehension test form (employed after video session), and five random videos including: a sitcom (approximately 11 min), airline advertisements (three commercially available – approximately 2 min each), and a short drama (approximately 8 min). The target video was played at the end of

each video sequence. In total, the six videos lasted for approximately 30 min.

Table 1 outlines the key components of each pre-flight safety briefing video. In brief, all the safety messages in the three videos follow a similar pattern, as prescribed by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in the United States ([Federal Aviation Regulations \(FAR\) 135.117](#)), and the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) in Australia ([Civil Aviation Orders \(CAO\) 20.11.14](#)), in terms of material that an airline must cover. As such, video A used airline employees to deliver the material. The video starts by welcoming passengers on board and thanking them for choosing their particular airline. It then proceeds to inform passengers about the safety features of the aircraft and how to behave in the event of an emergency. A variety of people deliver this information, including both male and female personnel from various areas of the airline including ground crew, cabin crew, and flight crew. The video concludes by thanking passengers for their attention during the video and for choosing that particular airline. Throughout the video there is soft music (without lyrics) playing in the background.

The safety video from airline B follows a similar script to airline A, namely an introduction, information about the safety features of the aircraft, and expected passenger behaviour in an emergency, followed by thanking passengers for choosing this airline. However, a notable difference with this video is the insertion of humour both visually (through individuals' physical movement and attire) and auditory (through the choice of words). At the start of the video, two cabin crew members (one male and one female) welcome passengers and ask for their attention during the safety video. This is followed by a male figure dressed in disco clothes discussing the safety features of the aircraft while performing choreographed disco moves. Accompanying him are other personnel who are dressed similarly and act out the required behaviour/s as dictated by the audio commentary, such as placing luggage in the overhead compartments, while dancing to the disco music playing in the background. The video concludes with the two personnel who introduced the video wishing passengers an enjoyable flight. Throughout the video there is disco music playing in the background (the lyrics are only heard in long breaks between safety messages).

Video C commences with a celebrity (a Hollywood actor who is also a pilot) introducing the airline and the pilots, and remarking on their commitment to safety. He also asks that the passengers to pay attention during the safety video. The remainder of the video is delivered by a female voice-over with the visual aids of two adults and one child. The video also has subtitles written in upper and lower case; but for the present research these subtitles were hidden by the manipulation of image position on the screen (i.e., the subtitles were not visible to participants). The video concludes with two pilots (one female and one male) reinforcing the airline's commitment to safety, and finally with the celebrity telling passengers to enjoy their journey. Throughout the video there is soft music (without lyrics) playing in the background.

The comprehension test form employed reflected that used by Barkow and Rutenberg (2002) and quite simply contained a number of blank tables with a subheading preceding each table/section. Each subheading reflected the different section in the pre-flight safety briefing video which acted as a guide to participants to facilitate in the recall of information (see Table 2). The safety messages from each video were extracted through a process that involved writing out each script, extracting key safety messages, and then categorising the safety messages. On each comprehension test form an additional section (e.g., Other) allowed participants to freely recall any item that they might have been unable to place in the appropriate section or recall spontaneously. The pre-flight safety video A had eight sections, containing a total of 41 key safety messages. The pre-flight safety video B had ten sections and 34

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