

# From Policy to Practice: Developing Airline Guidelines

## Communication for the Safety of Asian Passengers in Flight

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### ABSTRACT

Although commercial aviation is widely regarded as one of the safest modes of transportation, safety challenges persist, particularly concerning passenger behavior during emergencies. While extensive research has been conducted on pilot and crew error, there is limited attention on how cultural factors influence passenger preparedness and response, especially in the Asian context. This study examines the influence of two key factors: (1) identifying the factors that influence the survival of Asian passengers during an emergency, and (2) studying how Hofstede's cultural framework enables airlines to communicate safety protocols to Asian passengers during flight effectively. Using document analysis, comparative case studies, regulatory analysis, accident case studies, academic articles, research, psychological theory, and the synthesis of Hofstede's cultural framework, this research identifies key behavioral tendencies that affect evacuation effectiveness and compliance with airline safety procedures. The outcome demonstrates that current airline communication practices often lack cultural sensitivity, relying on Western-centric models that may be misaligned with the values and expectations of Asian travelers. These constraints can hinder emergency responses when passengers misinterpret or fail to internalize critical safety instructions. This study proposes culturally adaptive airline safety guidelines tailored for Asian passengers, incorporating clear, authoritative, and culturally resonant messaging. The recommendations emphasize the importance of multimodal communication, culturally familiar symbols, and crew training on cross-cultural nuances. By bridging the communication gap between safety protocols and passenger behavior, this study contributes to the growing body of research on aviation safety, cross-cultural

policy, and emergency preparedness. The outcomes aim to assist regulators and airline operators in a more inclusive and effective safety culture in Asia's rapidly expanding air travel markets.

**Keywords:** aviation safety; passenger behavior; cross-cultural communication; Asian cultures; emergency preparedness

## Introduction

The airline industry is a global connector, facilitating mobility across countries, cultures, and continents. However, the universal nature of air travel often clashes with the cultural diversity of its passengers. Nowhere is this tension more apparent than in safety communication, where uniformity is vital, but cultural sensitivity is indispensable (Bielefeldt, 2013; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). While international safety standards, as provided by organizations such as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), are essential for operational uniformity, their implementation often overlooks the linguistic and cultural nuances of non-Western passenger groups, particularly those from Asia.

Asia accounts for over 35% of the global airline market and is expected to be the fastest-growing region for air travel (IATA, 2023). Despite this growth, safety communication onboard flights remains largely standardized and Western-centric, with limited adaptation for cultural and

linguistic diversity. This disconnect may hinder comprehension and compromise both in-flight safety and overall passenger satisfaction. Given the high-context communication styles prevalent in many Asian cultures, which emphasize indirectness, collectivism, and sensitivity to authority, existing airline safety communications often fail to meet the expectations and comfort levels of Asian passengers.

The present study addresses this gap by investigating how airline safety communication can be more effectively tailored for Asian passengers. The research identifies current limitations in airline safety practices, explores culturally embedded communication challenges, and proposes a set of guidelines that translate policy into culturally adaptive practice.

## Background and Rationale

Aviation safety communication has traditionally prioritized clarity, uniformity, and compliance with regulatory mandates (ICAO, 2018). Flight

attendants are trained to deliver pre-flight safety briefings and manage emergencies using protocols developed primarily by Western aviation authorities. However, in practice, these messages may not be effectively received by all passengers due to cultural barriers, such as language proficiency, differing interpretations of authority, and variations in risk perception (Hofstede et al., 2010).

The relevance of culture in safety communication is particularly acute in the Asian context. Passengers from East and Southeast Asian nations, including Thailand, Japan, China, and Korea, often exhibit high power distance, low individualism, and high uncertainty avoidance—traits that shape their responses to authority figures and perceived threats (Hofstede et al., 2010). In such contexts, passengers may hesitate to ask questions, appear non-compliant, or misinterpret messages delivered in overly assertive or overly casual tones. (Gradiyan B, P, and Carlo C, 2024)

Despite increasing awareness of multicultural dynamics in service industries, academic research has yet to examine how these cultural factors influence in-flight safety communication adequately. Highlight cultural misalignment in service delivery, but

focus predominantly on customer satisfaction rather than safety. Furthermore, much of the existing literature remains Western-centric, offering limited insight into the specific needs and expectations of Asian airline passengers.

This paper fills a critical gap by linking aviation safety with cross-cultural communication theory and practice. It builds on interdisciplinary frameworks to analyze how culturally nuanced communication strategies can bridge policy-practice gaps and ensure that safety messages are not only delivered but also received and understood in contextually appropriate ways.

The study contributes to aviation safety, cross-cultural communication, and public policy from a grounded perspective, based on document analysis, comparative case studies, regulatory analysis, accident case studies, academic articles, research, psychological theory, and the synthesis of Hofstede's cultural framework. This study identifies key behavioral tendencies that affect evacuation effectiveness and compliance with airline safety procedures by offering evidence-based strategies to enhance airline safety communication practices tailored to the Asian context.

## Objectives

1. Identify key factors influencing the survival of Asian passengers during an emergency.
2. Studying how Hofstede's cultural framework enables airlines to communicate safety protocols to Asian passengers during flight effectively.

The study contributes to aviation safety, cross-cultural communication, and public policy by offering evidence-based strategies to enhance airline safety communication practices tailored to the Asian context.

## Literature Review

A range of psychological and cultural influences shapes passenger behavior in aviation emergencies. A significant body of research suggests that individuals respond to emergency cues differently, depending on their cultural norms, stress responses, and perceptions of authority (Sjöberg, 2000). Hofstede's cultural dimensions framework provides an essential framework for examining regional behavioral patterns, particularly in terms of the concepts of power distance, collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance. (Hofstede, 2001)

High-power-distance societies, prevalent in many Asian countries, accept hierarchical structures and defer to

authority figures. This can lead to strict adherence to flight crew instructions during crises but also reduced proactive engagement with safety information (Helmreich & Merritt, 2001). Collectivist cultures further emphasize group harmony, which may foster cooperative behavior but discourage individual initiative in unfamiliar or high-risk scenarios. High uncertainty avoidance may also prompt compliance with rules, but it can inhibit improvisation or rapid decision-making in ambiguous emergencies. (Gradiyan B, P, & Carlo, C, 2024)

These dynamics contrast with Western, low-power-distance, and individualistic cultures, where passengers may take personal responsibility for safety actions but also question or ignore flight attendant guidance (Phenphimol, 2018). Understanding these cultural differences is critical for designing safety communication that resonates across cultural boundaries and promotes passenger preparedness without assuming uniform behavioral responses.

Several studies have identified barriers to effective passenger safety behavior, including limited attention to pre-flight safety demonstrations, inadequate understanding of evacuation

procedures, and the tendency to retrieve carry-on baggage during emergencies (Phenphimol, 2018; Alpo et al., 2025). Psychological components, including nervousness, cognitive overload, and conditioned helplessness, complicate responses in high-stress situations.

Consequently, there is a growing consensus on the need for culturally adaptive communication that addresses these variations. Prior literature suggests that integrating culturally relevant symbols, localized language options, and scenario-based demonstrations can improve message retention and behavioral compliance among diverse passenger groups (Gradiyan B, P, & Carlo, C, 2024)

This study builds upon these findings to examine how culturally grounded communication strategies can be translated into airline safety guidelines that improve passenger outcomes during emergencies.

### Data Sources and Materials

Primary data was sourced from publicly available accident reports, safety investigation summaries, and regulatory documents issued by civil aviation authorities (e.g., ICAO, CAAC, and JTSB). Key incidents in 2024, which

ranked among the most significant disasters in six years of aviation, involved Asian airlines, including Japan Airlines Flight JL516, the evacuation of Singapore Airlines Flight SQ321, and Jeju Air Flight JJA2216. Additionally, the crash on the runway of Japan Airlines Flight JL516 (2024), which evacuated all passengers and crew members safely, along with Aeroflot Flight 1492 (2019) that made an emergency landing with fire, resulting in the deaths of 41 passengers due to their concerns about retrieving their baggage, were selected as case studies for their relevance to cross-cultural passenger behavior.

Secondary data included peer-reviewed journal articles, books on aviation psychology and human factors, official airline safety manuals, and in-flight safety content. Hofstede's cultural dimensions provided a theoretical lens for assessing national cultural tendencies that influence behavioral responses.

### Analysis Procedure

The analysis consists of a two-step coding process. First, incident narratives were examined to extract behavioral indicators, communication breakdowns, and outcomes. Second, these patterns were interpreted using a cultural framework to explore how values such as

power distance and uncertainty avoidance shaped actions during emergencies. Recurring themes were categorized by cultural dimension and mapped against recommended communication strategies from existing literature.

## Findings and Discussion

The main objective of this study is to develop culturally sensitive communication guidelines for airline personnel to improve the safety of Asian passengers during flights by addressing the following questions;

1. What are the cultural barriers to effective in-flight safety communication for Asian passengers?

2. How do Asian passengers perceive current safety communication practices onboard international flights?

3. What strategies can airline staff implement to enhance communication effectiveness in multicultural flight settings?

The findings of this study confirm that cultural dimensions have a significant influence on passenger behavior during aviation emergencies. Case analyses reveal consistent patterns that align with Hofstede's framework, especially among passengers from high-power distance and collectivist societies.

## 1. Behavioral Patterns in Case Studies

In the Japan Airlines JL516 evacuation (2024), all passengers followed flight attendant instructions and successfully evacuated. Reports highlighted the passengers' deference to crew authority and orderly behavior, consistent with Japan's high power distance and uncertainty avoidance scores.

Conversely, the Aeroflot Flight 1492 incident (2019) demonstrated how deviations from safety protocols, such as retrieving baggage, delayed evacuation, and other factors, resulted in increased fatalities. While cultural factors were not the sole determinant, insufficient enforcement and ambiguous communication may have contributed to non-compliance.

The Singapore Airlines turbulence incident (2024) further illustrated varying passenger responses based on cultural background. Western passengers reported taking initiative (e.g., securing oxygen masks and assisting others), whereas Asian passengers more commonly waited for flight attendant directives.

The Korean Air Flight 801, the First officer was afraid to directly inform the Pilot about the dangerous weather

conditions and broken radar until the disaster, and all died because of Korean culture and the Professional culture of pilots in Korea, they always respect and follow authority. (Winner, K., 2015)

## **2. Comparative Analysis of Asian vs. Western Passengers in Cultural Context**

Cultural attitudes toward risk influence behavioral responses (Helmreich & Merritt, 2001). Individuals from collectivist cultures tend to exhibit more cooperative behavior in emergencies than those from individualistic cultures (Hofstede, 1984PE; Gradiyan B, P, and Carlo, C, 2024)

Cultural and regulatory differences between Asian and Western populations significantly influence safety awareness in air travel contexts. A study of student pilots found that significantly more Korean participants than Western participants were able to recognize unsafe instructions, while significantly more Western pilots denied the unsafe instructions. (Song, J.Y., 2018). This study suggests that Asian culture tends to follow authority more closely than Western culture.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory identifies Asian culture as follows;

**Power Distance (PDI):** This dimension reflects the extent to which

a society accepts and tolerates unequal distribution of power and authority. An Asian country has a high PDI, which indicates a hierarchical structure where individuals are more likely to accept the authority of those above them.

**Individualism vs. Collectivism (IDV):** This dimension examines whether individuals prioritize their interests and those of their immediate family or the collective interests of a larger group. An Asian country has a collectivist cultures that prioritize group harmony and loyalty.

**Masculinity vs. Femininity (MAS):** This dimension examines the distribution of roles between genders and the values associated with each. An Asian country that values achievement, competition, and assertiveness. (Tom, 2022)

**Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI):** This dimension measures tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. An Asian country that indicates a preference for structure, rules, and procedures, except Singapore's UAI of only 8, which suggests a more comfortable acceptance of ambiguity and risk-taking.

**Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Orientation (LTO):** This dimension examines a society's emphasis on the future and its inclination to postpone

gratification for long-term benefits. An almost Asian country is perseverance, thrift, and adaptability, while the

Philippines prioritizes immediate results and personal satisfaction. (Tom, 2022)

Cultural Dimension	Asian Passengers	Western Passengers
Power Distance	High: defer to authority	Low: Question authority
Individualism	Collectivist: follow a group	Individualistic: act independently
Uncertainty Avoidance	High: prefer structure, rules	Low: tolerates ambiguity
Response to Safety Demos	High attention, passive reception	Low attention, active questioning
Emergency Initiative	Wait for direction	Take initiative
Risk Perception	Trust the authority to manage	Self-manage risk

These patterns suggest that Asian passengers may excel in structured evacuations with clear leadership but may lack adaptability in ambiguous or rapidly evolving crises. In contrast, Western passengers may act more decisively but potentially resist structured guidance.

### 3. Communication Gaps and Cultural Mismatch

Existing safety materials have frequently been standardized for Western comprehension—e.g., simple, text-heavy instructions or humorous videos. These may fail to engage Asian audiences, who respond better to authoritative tones, repetition, and multimodal formats (e.g., diagrams, demonstrations).

Moreover, collectivist passengers may rely on peer behavior or wait for social cues before acting, underscoring the need for group-oriented messaging rather than solely individual directives.

### 4. Implications for Airline Policy and Communication Design

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory can explain Asian passenger behavior concerning safety protocol as follows.

**4.1 Attention to Safety Demonstrations:** Research indicates that individuals from Asian cultures tend to exhibit higher engagement during safety demonstrations, reflecting cultural norms that emphasize respect for authority and

collective responsibility. In contrast, Westerners may perceive these briefings as routine, leading to lower engagement (Hofstede, 1984).

**4.2 Safety Compliance:** Compliance with safety regulations varies across cultures. Western populations adhere strictly to safety protocols, driven by a combination of personal responsibility and legal implications. Asian populations are often inconsistent and influenced by varying enforcement practices (Kim & Park, 2017).

**4.3 Risk Perception and Behavior:** Risk perceptions diverge between these groups. Westerners tend to actively verify safety information, while many Asians rely on flight attendants for guidance, indicating greater trust in authority (Gradiyan B, P, & Carlo, C (2024)

**4.4 Cultural Influences on Safety Awareness:** Cultural dimensions, such as power distance, impact safety consciousness. Asian cultures, characterized by higher power distances, often delegate safety responsibilities to airline personnel, whereas Western cultures promote individual initiative in matters of safety.

**4.5 Behavioral Responses in Emergencies:** Perceived risk affects passenger behavior during emergencies. Underestimating risk can lead to negligence during evacuations, while

overestimating it may trigger panic responses. Compliance with safety procedures is crucial for effective evacuations (Phenphimol, 2018)

**4.6 Impact of Communication on Passenger Anxiety:** Clear and empathetic communication from flight attendants is vital for reducing passenger anxiety. Comprehensive training in emergency protocols and communication techniques is necessary to enhance adherence to safety measures (Phenphimol, 2018).

**4.7 Increasing Passenger Safety Awareness:** Educating passengers on emergency procedures and safety behaviors can improve preparedness and response efficacy. Familiarity with safety measures and proximity to emergency exits are critical for improving survival rates during evacuations (Lee & Kim, 2018; Brennan, 1998). Providing clear safety information through demonstrations and manuals enhances passenger engagement and readiness.

To foster greater compliance and preparedness among Asian passengers, it is essential that airline communication strategies closely align with local cultural norms and expectations. This involves incorporating culturally resonant visuals and metaphors that passengers can easily relate to,

thereby enhancing message clarity and acceptance. Communication should also highlight collective responsibility and the importance of mutual safety, values deeply embedded in many Asian cultures. Furthermore, airline crew members must be equipped with training in culturally competent communication to ensure that interactions are respectful, effective, and contextually appropriate. Finally, key safety messages should be consistently reinforced through various channels, including safety cards, instructional videos, and in-flight announcements, to ensure a comprehensive understanding and retention.

These insights inform the development of culturally adaptive safety guidelines that increase engagement, reduce confusion, and ultimately improve survival outcomes.

## 5. Psychological Responses to Aircraft Emergencies

Individual Differences: Personal characteristics and mental health history significantly affect psychological responses. Individuals with pre-existing anxiety may respond more intensely (Oakes & Bor, 2016).

Fear and Anxiety: Fear is a natural reaction during air emergencies, often heightened by confined spaces and

uncertainty, which can lead to physiological symptoms such as increased heart rate and sweating.

Panic Behavior: Panic can lead individuals to behave unpredictably, straying from expected responses such as following instructions. Research has shown that panic and confusion can arise when individuals struggle to process information. For example, some may attempt to open exits during rapid depressurization, disregarding safety protocols (Sjöberg, 2000). The guidance provided by flight attendants is essential in alleviating panic. (Phenphimol, 2018).

Post-Traumatic Stress: Life-threatening events that occur during flights can result in PTSD symptoms, including intrusive thoughts and hyperarousal (Brown, 2020).

Cultural and psychological factors significantly influence passenger behavior during an emergency landing. According to research, passengers representing cultures with high power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and collectivism, which can be observed in many Asian contexts, are more likely to observe safety demonstrations intently and strictly follow flight attendant instructions.

Conversely, passengers from Western cultures, characterized by low power distance and individualism, may

exhibit varying degrees of compliance with safety protocols, occasionally placing greater emphasis on personal judgment in emergencies. (Aguirre, B. E., Torres, M. R., Gill, K. B., & Hotchkiss, H. L., 2011)

Enhancing the likelihood of survival during unplanned emergency landings depends on well-established protocols and an understanding of passengers' psychological responses and cultural backgrounds. As airlines prioritize safety, ongoing training and education for both crew and passengers remain essential. Enhancing the communication of safety procedures and fostering an environment that promotes adherence to protocols can ultimately improve outcomes in emergency situations. Future studies should investigate the development of more effective training techniques that take into account cultural differences, ensuring that all passengers are adequately prepared to respond to emergencies, regardless of their cultural background.

## Conclusions

Developing airline guidelines for the safety of Asian passengers in flight relies on understanding psychological responses, cultural considerations, and safety knowledge. Psychological

responses are influenced by individual behavior, passenger background, and familiarity with the aircraft. This study demonstrates that passenger safety behavior during aviation emergencies is significantly shaped by cultural values, especially in Asian contexts characterized by high power distance, collectivism, and a strong preference for uncertainty avoidance. While passengers from these cultures tend to follow authority and demonstrate high compliance with structured instructions, they may lack the initiative to act autonomously in fast-evolving emergencies. Conversely, Western passengers tend to exhibit greater independence but may also resist authority or disregard standard protocols.

To address these disparities, airlines must implement culturally adaptive safety communication strategies that align with passengers' psychological and cultural expectations (Song, J.Y., 2018). These should prioritize clarity, repetition, and multimodal formats, while also emphasizing collective safety. Training cabin crew in culturally competent communication and revising in-flight safety briefings to reflect regional norms can significantly improve passenger comprehension, engagement, and emergency preparedness.

## Recommendations

### Managerial Recommendation

- Enhance passenger compliance and readiness during safety briefings and emergencies.
- Strengthen crew communication skills through targeted cultural training.
- Improve passenger trust and safety perception, especially among Asian markets.
- Ensure consistency with global aviation safety standards while achieving local relevance.

### Policy Recommendations

- Require cultural adaptation in safety communication, including languages, symbols, body language, metaphors, and collective instructions.
- Revise ICAO and National Guidelines in
  - Strengthen Crew Training Requirements
  - Establish Route-Based Safety Content Protocols
  - Enhance multilingual and multimodal communication.
  - Standardize Passenger Pre-Education Practices
- Support Culturally Aligned Messaging in Emergency Protocols
- Create Cultural Risk Assessment Tools.

- Public Awareness and Inclusion.

- Data Collection and Evaluation

### Academic Recommendations

- Expand Cross-Cultural Aviation Safety Research
- Develop a Cultural Safety Communication Framework
- Incorporate Cultural Competency into Aviation Curriculum
- Enhance Cabin Crew and Passenger Safety Education
- Refine Psychological and Behavioral Safety Models
- Guide Policy Reform through Academic-Policy Linkages
- Support Postgraduate Research and Thesis Work
- Create a Southeast Asia Aviation Culture Research Consortium

Further research could build on these findings by incorporating empirical data through interviews or simulations with diverse passenger groups. Greater collaboration among airline regulators, behavioral scientists, and communication experts is essential for creating inclusive safety practices.

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