

Hitting net-zero without stopping flying

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One of the largest producers of carbon emissions is air travel, yet many view flying as a necessary enabler of tourism and international business. One promising way for consumers to take responsibility for their carbon emissions are voluntary carbon offsets (VCOs), which offer air travelers the opportunity to make a small donation to neutralize their carbon

footprint. Yet there are conflicting recommendations as to how to encourage consumers to opt into these green initiatives.

Researchers from Copenhagen Business School designed three online experiments to test strategies for increasing consumer participation, which contribute to the aviation carbon offset literature and offer useful new insights for [airline companies](#).

In this study the researchers argue that VCOs have the potential to balance the practical need for [air travel](#) with the larger considerations of sustainability, yet current VCO programs are not effective.

"Despite their potential, few existing studies have explained how to present VCOs so they can effectively appeal to the sensibilities of individual travelers with different travel requirements. More broadly, more participation in VCOs may also increase collective awareness and creates market pressure on institutions to decide to behave responsibly," says Associate Professor Qiqi Jiang, Department of Digitalization, Copenhagen Business School.

The main findings

The evidence from the research shows that travelers booking flights in the near future are more likely to opt-in to VCOs when they are presented with concrete messages that emphasize specific actions.

In contrast, the research found that travelers flying in the distant future are more likely to opt-in to VCOs when they are presented with abstract messages that emphasize general initiatives.

"We also found choice is useful, especially for those travelers flying in the near future and receiving concrete messages," adds Qiqi Jiang.

Specifically, the study suggests that airlines should adjust the presentation of VCO programs according to the temporal distance to the flight during booking and provide travelers opportunities to select their preferred way to neutralize their carbon footprint.

The study has been published in the *Journal of Travel Research*.

Promoting sustainable behaviors

"At present, most airlines present only one project that individuals can support with their VCO contribution. Our findings highlight specific conditions (consumers booking flights in the near future) in which multiple options can help encourage consumers to opt in," says co-author Associate Professor Rob Gleasure, Department of Digitalization, Copenhagen Business School.

The researchers point to the fact that current research on VCO mainly focuses on how personal attributes affect intention to opt into VCO. For example, a certain [socioeconomic status](#) or psychological factors were found to significantly influence individual willingness to opt into VCO. Besides, some studies discussed which remedies, e.g., reforestation, renewable energy or helping local communities, can best promote VCO opt-in for specific groups of users. Despite the importance of these findings, the researchers argue they offer limited practical value for practitioners in aviation, as much of the insights require extensive personal data.

"Our proposed strategies only require the airlines to know the date of the flight being booked and provide the options to offset carbon footprint," adds Rob Gleasure.

Creating actionable solutions

The findings afford actionable solutions for both airline companies and policymakers. "For airline companies, they can adopt our suggestions on the dynamic presentation of VCO messages to increase the likelihood of VCO opt-in. Consequently, the airline companies can raise more money from VCOs to fight against the climate challenge and boost social responsibility. Growing adoption of VCOs may also highlight the practice and motivate policymakers to enforce additional regulation on corporate VCO projects and expenditures," adds Qiqi Jiang.

In addition to the practical focus of the research, the researchers highlight that much of what persuades consumers to opt into sustainable behaviors is not the projects themselves but the manner in which they are presented.

"We also reconcile some contradictory advice by showing why appealing to principles is useful in some circumstances and not in others, why providing details is useful in some circumstances and not in others, and why providing options is useful in some circumstances and not in others. This helps to accommodate a range of green causes and users with different values and interests," Qiqi Jiang concludes.

More information: Yi Liu et al, Hitting Net-Zero Without Stopping Flying: Increasing Air Travelers' Likelihood to Opt-in to Voluntary Carbon Offsetting, *Journal of Travel Research* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/00472875211057607](https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875211057607)

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