



University of St.Gallen

Center for Aviation and Space Competence

Carbon Labels and Flight Choices: Insights from Experimental Research

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Henrik Wittwer & Nick von Felten

From insight to impact.

Management Summary

- **Carbon labels influence flight choices:** In our randomized, between-subjects online experiment (N=939), two treatments (Colored and FEL) significantly shifted bookings toward the lower-emission flight.
- **Trust–behavior paradox:** Despite booking the lower-emission flight, the respective label treatments reduced passengers' trust in the flight-related information.
- **Adoption challenge:** Carbon labels in aviation require careful communication to overcome greenwashing concerns and build public trust.

Theoretical Background

Nudging and Information Presentation

- **Nudges (choice architecture interventions) shape decisions without restricting choice** by structuring environments to encourage desirable outcomes (Mertens et al., 2022; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008)
- **Carbon labels in booking interfaces are a “decision information” nudge** that makes emissions visible at the point of choice (Münscher et al., 2016; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008)
- **Policy rationale: disclose previously hard-to-access emissions information** to enable more informed consumer choices. (European Commission, 2024)
- **Mechanism: increased salience + easier integration of information** (better understandability, lower cognitive effort, broader reach beyond already-engaged audiences) (Beyer et al., 2024).
- **Label design evidence: familiar, simplified formats reduce information asymmetries** (e.g., discrete, color-coded energy labels help rapid comparisons) (Heinzle & Wüstenhagen, 2012).
- **Study implication: test formats aligned with familiar frames of reference, including contextualization via mental accounting** (e.g., framing flight emissions as % of average monthly EU footprint to support intuitive magnitude understanding) (Johnson, 2021; Thaler, 1985; Hahnel et al., 2020; Beyer et al., 2024; Thøgersen et al., 2024).

Carbon Labelling in Aviation

- **Aviation carbon labels provide per-passenger emissions per flight option**, but adoption is cautious due to competitive concerns (Carroll et al., 2022; Gössling & Buckley, 2016; Baumeister et al., 2022; Atabekov et al., 2024; European Commission, 2024; Taufique et al., 2022).
- **Evidence base is still limited and often comes from hypothetical choice experiments**, but results generally suggest labels can shift demand toward lower-emission flights – especially for environmentally minded passengers (Taufique et al., 2022; Carroll et al., 2022; Baumeister et al., 2022; Atabekov et al., 2024).
- **Effectiveness depends on credibility + comprehensibility**: users must understand and trust the information to act on it; unclear communication can undermine impact (Darnall et al., 2016; Gössling & Buckley, 2016; Baumeister & Onkila, 2017).
- **Design insight: pairing numeric emissions with color schemes improves understandability**, broadening accessibility beyond highly engaged consumers (Feucht & Zander, 2018; Gössling & Buckley, 2016; Thøgersen & Nielsen, 2016).
- **Trust is a key determinant of behavioral response**; skepticism and greenwashing concerns reduce reliance on labels, while third-party/government verification tends to increase trust (Perrini, 2010; Taufique et al., 2017; Atkinson & Rosenthal, 2014; Testa et al., 2015; Darnall et al., 2016; Gorton et al., 2021).

Study Design & Sample

Study Design Overview

Research Questions

1. How do different formats of carbon labels affect passengers' flight choices?
2. How do different formats of carbon labels affect passengers' perceived trustworthiness of the flight-related information?

Method

- Between-subjects, randomized Online Experiment
- Control + 4 Treatment Groups

Experimental Conditions

- Control: No carbon info
- Neutral: CO₂eq in kg
- Colored: CO₂eq in kg (traffic-light colors)
- Context: Colored + % of avg. EU monthly CO₂ footprint
- FEL: Colored + EU FEL

Task

- Simulated booking interface (modelled after Google Flights)
- 3 nonstop flights (Munich → Tokyo, artificial airlines, almost same times, realistic prices)
- Only carbon label varied across conditions
→ to provide causal evidence of mean differences

Measures

- Behavioral: Flight choice
- Perceptual: Trust in the flight-related information

Our Sample – 939 participants from the DACH region

Table 1
Structure of the Sample

Category	Sub-Category	Total Sample (N = 939)	Control Group (n = 187)	Neutral (n = 184)	Colored (n = 192)	Context (n = 187)	FEL (n = 189)
Age (average)		33.5	32.7	33.6	34.2	32.9	33.9
Gender	Woman	42%	46%	40%	34%	44%	46%
	Man	57%	52%	59%	65%	56%	53%
	Other	1%	2%	1%	1%	0%	1%
Education	Lower secondary	2%	3%	3%	3%	1%	3%
	Upper secondary	31%	29%	29%	36%	35%	27%
	Bachelor's degree	30%	30%	29%	27%	35%	32%
	Master's degree or equivalent	31%	30%	32%	31%	27%	33%
	Doctorate / PhD	4%	7%	4%	2%	3%	4%
	Prefer not to say	1%	1%	3%	0%	1%	1%
Annual Household Income (in €)	Below 20'000	18%	20%	15%	19%	20%	17%
	20'000–39'999	20%	19%	23%	17%	17%	24%
	40'000–59'999	20%	18%	20%	15%	24%	22%
	60'000–79'999	12%	13%	12%	13%	12%	13%
	80'000–99'999	9%	10%	5%	13%	9%	7%
	100'000–119'000	5%	5%	3%	5%	9%	5%
	120'000–139'000	4%	5%	4%	3%	3%	5%
	Above 140'000	4%	5%	5%	6%	3%	2%
	Prefer not to say	7%	5%	13%	9%	5%	3%
Flights per year (average)		2.9	2.7	2.8	2.9	2.9	3.3
Travel Class Private	Economy Class	84%	86%	83%	85%	78%	86%
	Business Class	2%	0%	2%	3%	3%	3%
	Premium Economy Class	6%	9%	5%	3%	8%	4%
	I do not fly for private reasons	8%	5%	9%	9%	11%	7%
Travel Class Business	Economy Class	38%	40%	34%	41%	34%	40%
	Business Class	7%	9%	8%	5%	9%	7%
	Premium Economy Class	5%	5%	5%	5%	4%	5%
	I do not fly for business purposes	50%	47%	53%	49%	52%	48%

→ Random assignment of participants to one of the five conditions ensures that uncontrolled factors (e.g., personality traits) are evenly distributed, enabling comparability across conditions.

Treatment Designs – Control Group (1/5)

Round trip 1 Economy

Munich Tokyo Sat, Sep 20 Mon, Oct 20

All filters (1) Non-stop Airlines Bags Price Times Emissions Connecting airports Duration

Best Cheapest from €639

The cheapest time to book is now Prices are currently low View price history

Track prices Sep 20 – Oct 20 Any dates Date grid Price graph

Departing flights

Prices include required taxes + fees for 1 adult. Optional charges and bag fees may apply. [Passenger assistance](#) info. Sorted by price

 Alpha Airlines	11:15 – 6:55 ⁺¹	12 hr 40 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	€639 round trip
 Beta Airlines	11:25 – 6:50 ⁺¹	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	€689 round trip
 Gamma Airlines	11:35 – 7:00 ⁺¹	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	€739 round trip

Treatment Designs – Neutral (2/5)

↔ Round trip ▾ 1 ▾ Economy ▾

Munich ↔ Tokyo Sat, Sep 20 < > Mon, Oct 20 < >

All filters (1) Non-stop ✕ Airlines ▾ Bags ▾ Price ▾ Times ▾ Emissions ▾ Connecting airports ▾ Duration ▾

Best ⓘ **Cheapest** from €639 ⓘ

✦ The cheapest time to book is **now** 🏳️ Prices are currently **low** [View price history](#) ▾

[Track prices](#) Sep 20 – Oct 20 ☐ [Any dates](#) ☐ [Date grid](#) [Price graph](#)

Departing flights

Prices include required taxes + fees for 1 adult. Optional charges and [bag fees](#) may apply. [Passenger assistance](#) info. [Sorted by price](#) ↑↓

	11:15 – 6:55 ⁺¹ Alpha Airlines	12 hr 40 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	656 kg CO ₂ eq	€639 round trip
	11:25 – 6:50 ⁺¹ Beta Airlines	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	606 kg CO ₂ eq	€689 round trip
	11:35 – 7:00 ⁺¹ Gamma Airlines	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	531 kg CO ₂ eq	€739 round trip

Treatment Designs – Colored (3/5)

↔ Round trip ▾ 1 ▾ Economy ▾

[All filters \(1\)](#) [Non-stop](#) [Airlines](#) [Bags](#) [Price](#) [Times](#) [Emissions](#) [Connecting airports](#) [Duration](#)

Best ⓘ

Cheapest from **€639** ⓘ



The cheapest time to book is **now**



Prices are currently **low**

[View price history](#) ▾



Track prices

Sep 20 – Oct 20



[Any dates](#)



[Date grid](#)



[Price graph](#)

Departing flights

Prices include required taxes + fees for 1 adult. Optional charges and [bag fees](#) may apply. [Passenger assistance](#) info.

[Sorted by price](#) ↑↓



11:15 – 6:55⁺¹
Alpha Airlines

12 hr 40 min
MUC – HND

Nonstop

656 kg CO₂eq

€639
round trip



11:25 – 6:50⁺¹
Beta Airlines

12 hr 25 min
MUC – HND

Nonstop

606 kg CO₂eq

€689
round trip



11:35 – 7:00⁺¹
Gamma Airlines

12 hr 25 min
MUC – HND

Nonstop

531 kg CO₂eq

€739
round trip

Treatment Designs – Context (4/5)

Round trip 1 Economy

Munich Tokyo Sat, Sep 20 Mon, Oct 20

All filters (1) Non-stop Airlines Bags Price Times Emissions Connecting airports Duration

Best Cheapest from €639

The cheapest time to book is now Prices are currently low View price history

Track prices Sep 20 – Oct 20 Any dates Date grid Price graph

Departing flights

Prices include required taxes + fees for 1 adult. Optional charges and [bag fees](#) may apply. [Passenger assistance info](#).

Sorted by price

	11:15 – 6:55 ⁺¹ Alpha Airlines	12 hr 40 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	656 kg CO₂eq Equals 105% of the average monthly CO ₂ eq footprint of a person in the EU	€639 round trip
	11:25 – 6:50 ⁺¹ Beta Airlines	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	606 kg CO₂eq Equals 97% of the average monthly CO ₂ eq footprint of a person in the EU	€689 round trip
	11:35 – 7:00 ⁺¹ Gamma Airlines	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	531 kg CO₂eq Equals 85% of the average monthly CO ₂ eq footprint of a person in the EU	€739 round trip

Treatment Designs – FEL (5/5)

↔ Round trip ▾ 1 ▾ Economy ▾

○ Munich ↔ ○ Tokyo

📅 Sat, Sep 20 < > | Mon, Oct 20 < >

⚙️ All filters (1) Non-stop ✕ Airlines ▾ Bags ▾ Price ▾ Times ▾ Emissions ▾ Connecting airports ▾ Duration ▾

Best ⓘ **Cheapest** from €639 ⓘ

✨ The cheapest time to book is **now** 📊 Prices are currently **low** 🔍 View price history ▾

📈 Track prices Sep 20 – Oct 20 ☐ Any dates ☐ 📅 Date grid 📈 Price graph

Departing flights

Prices include required taxes + fees for 1 adult. Optional charges and bag fees may apply. Passenger assistance info.

Sorted by price ↕

	11:15 – 6:55 ⁺¹ Alpha Airlines	12 hr 40 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	656 kg CO ₂ eq  Verified ⓘ	€639 round trip
	11:25 – 6:50 ⁺¹ Beta Airlines	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	606 kg CO ₂ eq  Verified ⓘ	€689 round trip
	11:35 – 7:00 ⁺¹ Gamma Airlines	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	531 kg CO ₂ eq  Verified ⓘ	€739 round trip

① The EU Flight Emissions Label helps passengers make more informed choices by providing standardized information on the estimated greenhouse gas emissions of their flight, expressed in kilograms of CO₂ equivalent (kg CO₂eq). Developed by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, it uses a harmonized methodology that accounts for route, aircraft used, number of passengers, onboard freight and fuel consumption, among others.

Main Findings

Main Findings – Flight choice

- **FEL** and **Colored** conditions (vs. Control Group) led to significantly **more** bookings of Gamma Airlines (lowest-emission flight).

```
## final_flight_choice = Gamma Airlines:
## contrast      estimate      SE df t.ratio p.value
## Neutral - Control 0.05444 0.0183 10  2.979  0.0810
## Colored - Control 0.08319 0.0212 10  3.927  0.0187
## Colored - Neutral 0.02875 0.0269 10  1.067  0.8188
## Context - Control 0.06417 0.0193 10  3.317  0.0480
## Context - Neutral 0.00974 0.0255 10  0.381  0.9948
## Context - Colored -0.01902 0.0277 10 -0.687  0.9548
## FEL - Control      0.07931 0.0209 10  3.788  0.0232
## FEL - Neutral      0.02487 0.0267 10  0.930  0.8790
## FEL - Colored     -0.00388 0.0288 10 -0.135  0.9999
## FEL - Context      0.01513 0.0275 10  0.550  0.9794
```

Main Findings – Trust in the flight-related information

- **FEL, Context, and Colored** conditions yielded significantly **lower trust** in flight-related information vs. the **Control and Neutral** groups.

Pairwise Wald tests of latent trust means (Holm-adjusted p-values)

Contrast	Diff	SE	CI_lower	CI_upper	Wald_Chi2	df	p_value	p_adj
Control vs Neutral	-0.024	0.113	-0.245	0.197	0.048	1	0.827	1.000
Control vs Colored	0.338	0.109	0.124	0.552	8.760	1	0.003	0.015
Control vs Context	0.375	0.110	0.159	0.592	10.444	1	0.001	0.009
Control vs FEL	0.467	0.117	0.238	0.696	14.129	1	0.000	0.002
Neutral vs Colored	0.363	0.108	0.151	0.574	10.303	1	0.001	0.009
Neutral vs Context	0.400	0.109	0.185	0.614	12.232	1	0.000	0.004
Neutral vs FEL	0.491	0.116	0.264	0.719	16.303	1	0.000	0.001
Colored vs Context	0.037	0.106	-0.170	0.244	0.116	1	0.733	1.000
Colored vs FEL	0.129	0.112	-0.092	0.349	1.232	1	0.267	1.000
Context vs FEL	0.092	0.114	-0.131	0.314	0.613	1	0.434	1.000

Conclusion and Next Steps

Conclusion and Limitations

- **Carbon labels influence choices:** Colored and FEL formats effectively led participants toward the lower-emission flight.
- **Trust–choice paradox:** Labels that drove pro-environmental behavior simultaneously reduced trust in flight-related information.
- **Adoption challenge:** Carbon labels in aviation require careful communication to overcome greenwashing concerns and build public trust.
- **Main Limitations:** Hypothetical Booking Scenario, Simplified Design.

Thank you!

Henrik Wittwer
PhD Candidate &
Research Associate

henrik.wittwer@unisg.ch

Nick von Felten
PhD Candidate &
Research Associate

nick.vonfelten@unisg.ch



University of St.Gallen

Center for Aviation and Space Competence

Universität St.Gallen (HSG)
Center for Aviation Competence
Dufourstrasse 40a
9000 St.Gallen

cfac.ch

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Appendix: Qualtrics Experiment *excerpt* (FEL Treatment)

Introduction

Imagine you are planning a **one-month trip to Japan** this Fall with a friend.

You are about to **book your flight from Munich to Tokyo**. You are **booking for yourself**, in **Economy Class**, and you intend to **fly non-stop**.

A **list of flight options** will be displayed to you. Afterwards, we will ask you **whether you would book one of the flights now**. Finally, you will be asked to **evaluate the presentation of the information** shown on the flight booking page.

There are **no right or wrong answers** – we are only interested in your **personal impressions**. Please respond **spontaneously**, as if you were actually planning the trip.



Round trip
1
Economy

Munich
Tokyo

Sat, Sep 20
Mon, Oct 20

All filters (1)
Non-stop
Airlines
Bags
Price
Times
Emissions
Connecting airports
Duration

Best

Cheapest from €639

The cheapest time to book is now

Prices are currently low

View price history

Track prices
Sep 20 – Oct 20
Any dates

Date grid
Price graph

Departing flights

Prices include required taxes + fees for 1 adult. Optional charges and bag fees may apply. Passenger assistance info.

Sorted by price

 11:15 – 6:55⁺¹ Alpha Airlines	12 hr 40 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	656 kg CO₂eq 	€639 round trip
 11:25 – 6:50⁺¹ Beta Airlines	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	606 kg CO₂eq 	€689 round trip
 11:35 – 7:00⁺¹ Gamma Airlines	12 hr 25 min MUC – HND	Nonstop	531 kg CO₂eq 	€739 round trip

The EU Flight Emissions Label helps passengers make more informed choices by providing standardized information on the estimated greenhouse gas emissions of their flight, expressed in kilograms of CO₂ equivalent (kg CO₂eq). Developed by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, it uses a harmonized methodology that accounts for route, aircraft used, number of passengers, onboard freight and fuel consumption, among others.

If you were currently preparing this trip, would you book one of these flights?

Yes

No

Round trip

1

Economy

Munich

Tokyo

Sat, Sep 20

Mon, Oct 20

All filters (1)

Non-stop

Airlines

Bags

Price

Times

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Which one of the flights would you book now?

Alpha Airlines

Beta Airlines

Gamma Airlines

