

Pricing Guilt: How consumers purchase voluntary carbon offsets in online retail

Katherine Rother
University of Zurich

Radu Tanase
Senior Research Associate – Department of Business Administration, Chair for
Marketing and Market Research University of Zurich

Martin Natter
University of Zurich

Luxi Shen
Chinese University of Hong Kong

René Algesheimer
University of Zurich

Cite as:

Rother Katherine, Tanase Radu, Natter Martin, Shen Luxi, Algesheimer René (2025),
Pricing Guilt: How consumers purchase voluntary carbon offsets in online retail.
Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy, 54th, (126267)

Paper from the 54th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, Spain, May 25-30, 2025



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EMAC 2025 – Conference Presentation

Abstract

E-commerce retailers now offer one-click carbon offset options at checkout, making it easier for consumers to neutralize their shopping emissions. However, despite positive attitudes toward green actions, uptake remains low. This research investigates the drivers of voluntary carbon offset (VCO) purchases in e-commerce, using a large sample of real transactional data from a pioneering European retailer. Findings reveal that consumers are highly cost-sensitive, evaluating offset costs relative to transaction values. This raises a critical marketing question: how should VCOs be priced? We propose two approaches—emphasizing either social or environmental impact—and provide pricing recommendations. A follow-up lab study reveals that price influences carbon offset decisions beyond cost savings by activating guilt, which drives purchase intent. This study advances sustainable marketing and VCO research, offering actionable insights for scholars and retailers alike.

Keywords: voluntary carbon offsetting, consumer inferences, sustainable marketing

Track: Consumer Behavior