

Net zero pledges: corporate buzzword or genuine commitment?

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Many of the world's largest corporations have adopted 'net-zero' carbon reduction pledges because they feel the need to conform to expected 'appropriate behaviour' or risk reputational damage, a new study reveals.

While 'net zero' has become a dominant theme for companies communicating their climate change credentials, many corporate pledges lack the substance needed to drive real change.

Publishing their findings in *Applied Corpus Linguistics*, researchers from the University of Birmingham conclude that companies' net-zero narratives often serve as symbolic reputation management rather than a blueprint for transformative climate action.

Drs Matteo Fuoli and Annika Beelitz used advanced linguistic techniques to analyse over 1,200 sustainability reports from Fortune Global 500 companies between 2020 and 2022.

The study is the first large-scale linguistic analysis of net-zero discourse among these companies. It combines quantitative text analysis with qualitative interpretation to reveal how language shapes corporate climate narratives.

They discovered that adoption of net-zero targets is driven by a mix of pressures such as legal mandates, peer imitation, and social expectations. Oil and gas companies, under intense scrutiny, appear motivated by legitimacy concerns, while financial firms emphasise alliances and peer alignment.

Dr Fuoli commented: "While net-zero pledges are a step forward, their credibility hinges on transparency and measurable progress. Our findings suggest that net zero is often used as a symbolic tool to maintain

legitimacy rather than a framework for transformative action. Without clearer strategies and stronger commitments, these pledges risk becoming another chapter in the long history of corporate greenwashing."

The study highlights recent rollbacks in climate commitments by major players like BP and Shell, raising concerns about the resilience of corporate climate strategies in the face of geopolitical and economic pressures.

Dr Beelitz commented: "Regulators, investors, and civil society must scrutinise corporate net-zero claims more rigorously. As we approach COP30, we need to move beyond aspirational talk - real climate leadership requires not just words, but measurable, enforceable action."

The researchers found that the term 'net zero' appeared in reports from nearly three-quarters of the companies analysed, but many organisations use vague, aspirational language - framing net zero as a 'journey' or 'ambition'.

Many strategies include setting emission targets and reporting. However, more impactful measures like renewable energy and structural reform are less emphasised - reflecting a broader 'techno-optimistic' narrative prioritising innovation over systemic change.

While some companies pledged to address all categories of emissions, many, particularly in the oil and gas sector, focused only on direct emissions, omitting the substantial indirect emissions generated by their products.

Financial services firms frequently referenced participation in net-zero alliances, such as the UN-convened Net-Zero Asset Owner Alliance. These affiliations were used to legitimise their climate credentials, yet the actual strategies for achieving net zero remained vague.