

Fashion greenwashing glossary: what do ‘circular’, ‘sustainable’ and ‘zero waste’ really mean?

Vague, technical-sounding terms are often used in fashion to make clothing sound environmentally conscious. Here experts decode the meaning behind them.

It’s hardly news that greenwashing is rife in the fashion industry. The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission and the European Union have vowed to crack down on businesses using environmentally friendly marketing messages to mislead consumers.

The problem is the misapplication of vague, technical-sounding terms to products in an industry with little regulatory oversight...

Carbon neutral

To be “carbon neutral” (or net zero) a company must take as much carbon out of the atmosphere as it emits. Dana Thomas, European sustainability editor for British Vogue, and host of The Green Dream podcast, draws a distinction between companies that do this outside their supply chains – by offsetting through carbon credits or cleaning up polluted rivers – and those that build better systems to actually reduce the emissions within their supply chains.

“Companies hide behind carbon neutral [by] making their numbers on paper and in annual reports look better through offsetting,” she says. “Offsetting doesn’t mean you are neutral or negative. You must physically reduce your impacts. Not carry on polluting, then clean up something else, somewhere else.”

Circular

In fashion, “circularity” should refer to items made from reused materials that can themselves be reused, repaired and recycled again and again – in a circle. But there are a few ways the term is misused. Most commonly, “circular” is used to describe products that have components that are recycled or downcycled (converted from one material into another that is usually less useful or structurally strong). This alone is not accurate, says Harriet Vocking, chief executive of Eco-Age. To be truly circular, there has to be a viable end-of-life solution in place – such as take-back programs to ensure the product will be recycled again.

“Another extremely important element of circularity is a long, useful life that enables repair and rewear through durable products, designed to last and free from trends,” she says. So, if a product is made using recycled materials that compromise the quality, it is not circular...

Organic

The term “organic” has been misapplied to identify natural fibres such as cotton, linen or hemp, St James says.

According to Thomas, when the term is used correctly, it means no pesticides, herbicides, defoliants, genetically modified organisms, synthetic dyes or petroleum-

based materials are present in an item .“So that GMO ‘sustainable cotton’ you’re sourcing from the Better Cotton Initiative, meaning most cotton today? Forget about it,” she says...

Regenerative

Vocking describes “regenerative” fashion as fashion that gives back more than it takes from the planet...

When applied to fashion, the term usually denotes a specific type of agriculture. Thomas says: “It means you are reversing climate change by rebuilding organic matter in the soil, restoring biodiversity, reducing carbon and improving the water cycle. You must tick all of those boxes to be regenerative.”

There is a global standard for [regenerative organic certification](#), established in 2017, but there are only 129 farms worldwide that have achieved this to date.

Sustainable

“‘Sustainable’ may be the most misused term of all,” Thomas says. She says the Oxford Dictionary defines environmental sustainability as “the degree to which a process or enterprise is able to be maintained or continued while avoiding the long-term depletion of natural resources.”

To actually run a business this way “you’ve got to think holistically”, she says. “Green practices must be incorporated in everything you do. Installing LEDs and solar panels is a start but it does not make your company sustainable.”

To put it another way, the product designer Beth Esponnette argued that the overwhelming majority of sustainable fashion initiatives could more accurately be described as [“less bad”](#).

Zero waste

St James says often “zero waste” is “used to describe a brand philosophy or business model” when that’s not really how it should be used. On its face, it seems simple enough – for example, nothing gets thrown away – but there are a few different practices it can refer to.

The most common “zero waste” practice is developing products using zero waste patterns, so fabric is cut in the most efficient way to minimise offcuts and leftovers. Other zero waste practices include reclaiming waste materials for recycling or upcycling.

2

Biodegradable

The term “biodegradable” is often used to suggest a product will disintegrate into smaller pieces at the end of its life instead of clogging up landfills. While there have been some [innovations](#) around biodegradable [synthetic fibres](#), generally speaking materials like polyester and nylon will take hundreds of years to break down.

Meanwhile [natural fibres](#) such as cotton, linen, silk and hemp should decompose much faster, but the reality is not quite so simple.

“While natural fibres in their raw unprocessed state will biodegrade, once they’ve been dyed and treated, blended with other fibres and manufactured into finished goods, that’s most often no longer the case,” the senior director of sustainability at Moose Knuckles, Tara St James, says.

Additionally, natural fibres require certain conditions to biodegrade that might not exist in every landfill. According to the European sustainability editor for British Vogue, Dana Thomas, who also hosts The Green Dream podcast, “sometimes super high temperatures or moisture are needed to make something biodegrade”. And depending on what the fibres have been treated or dyed with, they might leave behind a toxic residue.

Although there are [tests](#) that show how quickly natural fibres will break down when buried in the soil, Thomas says the term “biodegradable” is used too liberally.

“For the moment, there are no requirements (except in France) on how long an item will take to disintegrate in order to label it biodegradable,” says Thomas.

A better term to look out for is “compostable”, which is a much higher bar. When something can be composted it leaves behind nutrient-rich organic material that is good for the soil. “If it’s not made of 100% organic matter and hasn’t been certified by the Compostable Manufacturers Alliance or the Biodegradable Products Institute, it’s not compostable. And that’s that,” says Thomas. In good news, there is an [Australian standard for compostable textiles](#) in the works.

Bioplastic

This term is particularly confusing because it is used to describe two different things. Sometimes “bioplastics” describes plastics made with bio-based materials like corn starch and sugarcane (as opposed to fossil fuels). Sometimes it is also used to describe biodegradable plastics. But not all bio-based plastics are biodegradable and not all biodegradable plastics are bio-based.

The founder of Sustainable Advisory Services, Christine Goulay, says the vague way the term is applied causes several problems. “Some products marketed as ‘bioplastics’ might only contain a partial or even small percentage of renewable inputs while the rest are still fossil fuel based,” she says. “So consumers mistakenly think that they are getting a non-plastic plastic, but they are actually not.”

Another issue is that since renewable inputs do not equate to biodegradability, “that bioplastic could still be on your beach for thousands of years”.

St James says these descriptions give consumers false hope that “they can throw the product in the trash and it will decompose” or that it is recyclable like PET, “which again isn’t always the case”. To make matters worse, “adding bioplastics to a recycling bin can taint the recycling stream”.

Closed loop

Like bioplastic, there are two ways “closed loop” is used in fashion. One refers to how chemicals are managed during manufacturing. The other refers to a circular system where garments and other materials are designed so they can be worn, repaired and recycled in a loop.

When the term “closed loop” is used in relation to chemicals, “it refers to processes within the supply chain, and more specifically to the processing of materials where the chemicals are reclaimed for use ... mostly this applies to viscose,” says St James. So rather than harmful chemicals being disposed in waterways, they are captured and injected back into the manufacturing process.

Goulay says this narrow application of closed loop “kind of misses the point”. The shift to a circular or closed loop fashion industry needs a broader outlook that respects [three core principles](#): eliminate waste and pollution, circulate materials and regenerate nature.

She says it’s important that products marketed as closed loop are the result of systems that respect all three of these principles, not just the second one.

Degrowth

The term “[degrowth](#)” has been [circulating](#) recently in the fashion industry. Says Goulay: “It is focused on the idea that global economic growth as it currently exists in terms of resource extraction and use is incompatible with sustainable development.”

Since it is being applied in a variety of contexts, it can be difficult to know what the word means in practice. Goulay says some brands use it “in a more limited way” to explain how they will continue to make more money without using more virgin resources. Or to describe other efforts that might be considered “responsible growth” like limiting overproduction.

“Degrowth is an important topic for society to debate at a global level,” she says. “[But] more work needs to be done to clarify how people and entities are using this term.”

Based on articles from The Guardian 17/5/2023 and 24/5/2023