

Global Leather Industry Position Statement on Leather Alternatives



There are more and more new materials appearing on the fashion, design and upholstery for transport and interiors markets, with the stated ambition of replacing leather as the material of choice. This is usually on the basis of claimed improvements in sustainability, which are rarely, if ever, substantiated.

While the quest for greater sustainability is a necessary one, the presentation of leather, a long-lasting biodegradable material made from a renewable residual product of another industry, as unsustainable, is unwarranted and unsupported. Particularly when juxtaposed against emerging materials that are largely comprised of fossil fuel-based plastics.

Every year, on a global level, tanneries recover and valorise at least 8 million tons of raw hides and skins from the food sector. Without the leather industry and its upcycling activity, this residual material would simply become waste and would be disposed of in landfills or incinerated. Destroying this waste instead of using it, releases around 5 million tons of green-house gases¹. As such, the recovery and recycling of this waste by the leather industry reduces greenhouse gas emissions while creating a valuable and versatile product.

Are any of these new materials capable of doing this? The answer is far from clear as, despite the wide media coverage that supports each new release on to the market, little or nothing is known about the performance and composition of these materials (not to mention the sustainability of the related production processes).

A recent comparative analysis between eight of these new products and leather², conducted by the German institute FILK, demonstrated that technical performance of these new materials and leather have little in common. Leather was far superior to the examined alternatives in most of the relevant functional performance parameters and none of the alternatives could equal leather for all of them.

In addition, the claimed sustainability of the majority of these new materials appeared to be deeply compromised by the need for large quantities of synthetic materials such as polyurethane, to try to equal the functional performance of real leather.

If the functional performances are lower, if the composition is largely synthetic and if nothing is known about the environmental impacts of the manufacturing processes, is it really feasible to make claims around sustainability? Particularly when compared to leather?

The driver for this state of affairs can largely be attributed to fashion marketing and its endless quest for the novel and ever improving claims of sustainability. However, it is counterintuitive to replace a durable, biodegradable, circular material, leather, with materials that are largely synthetic. Furthermore, this ignores the upcycling solution that leather manufacture provides for what would otherwise be a waste material.

There is enough space in the market for a diversity of material choices and the leather industry has no issue with competition, provided it is fair. However, it will not stand for the simultaneous appropriation of the image of leather and denigration of the genuine article for the promotion of alternatives with questionable performance and sustainability claims.

¹Leather Carbon Footprint - Review of the European Standard EN1687: 2017, 'Leather - Environmental Footprint - Product Category Rules' (https://leatherpanel.org/sites/default/files/publications-attachments/leather_carbon_footprint_p.pdf)

²Comparison of the Technical Performance of Leather, Artificial Leather, and Trendy Alternatives (<https://www.mdpi.com/2079-6412/11/2/226>)