



Leather has every right to claim its place in the circular economy. Makers and sellers of synthetic materials that misuse the term 'leather' to confuse the public and make money under false pretences present a threat to the industry. More regulation is required to protect the producers and consumers of the genuine article.



RENEWABLE



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A yearning for the real thing

For the leather industry properly to claim its place as a perfect example of how the circular economy works, it needs a little protection from governments and other bodies that seek to make global trade fairer. For years, and still today, e-commerce company Amazon has ignored its own criteria in searches for products such as handbags. Shoppers are able to choose 'leather' as their preferred material, but you only have to look at the first two or three bags that come up in a search to see products that, instead, are made from synthetic alternatives.

In our Amazon search for leather handbags, for the purposes of research, the fourth bag to come up on screen is, in reality, made from "select, high-quality PU shell". Finding this out takes no detective work or investigative journalism skills; it is in the product description that Amazon provides for the bag. The team at Amazon cannot think "select, high-quality PU shell" is the same as leather. It must simply think that no one cares.

Difficult though it may seem to argue with a company that achieved revenues of \$280 billion in 2019, its attitude to this is wrong. People do care. It is true that, with the synthetic items in our search, potential shoppers paying close attention will find a tell-tale reference to 'PU' or 'imitation' or 'faux' somewhere in the small print, but there can be no denying that Amazon presents plastic bags to customers who have asked to see leather bags and suggests that they buy the synthetic ones instead.

Footwear has it right. Directive 94/11/CE means only shoes and boots with at least 80% leather in the upper can lay claim to leather's prestige.

CREDIT: DEICHMANN





The real thing. Anything less misleads consumers. The time has come for legislation that will ensure materials labelled as leather really are leather. CREDIT: LINEAPELLE

Leather and the law

In the European Union and many other places around the world this breaks no laws, although this is not to say it is fair. Perhaps Amazon has a different practice in countries where this would break the law, rather than merely damage consumer trust. In places where it can get away with this, it is clear that the e-commerce company has no intention of mending its ways of its own volition. A good response, therefore, is to change the law.

Portugal's tanning industry association, APIC, organised a workshop in Alcanena at the end of January as part of its contribution to the wider Social & Environmental Reporting 2020 programme, which has the support of the European Commission. APIC president, Nuno Carvalho, opened the day, explaining that the association had decided to make 'Leather and Authenticity' the theme of the workshop. Maurizia Contu, representing Italian association, UNIC, and the European leather industry association, COTANCE, was one of a number of speakers on the day who addressed this subject head on.

Five millennia later

This matters because leather's deserved place in the circular economy pantheon has taken at least five millennia to earn. Its status is precious, a treasure that needs taking care of. It is under threat for reasons we have documented before: people making, selling and buying shoes, clothes, sofas, car interiors and handbags that are made from plastic often still believe that the term 'leather' lends prestige to their choices and that they can use it, or misuse it, with complete impunity.

In more recent times, some have begun to tack on the

fallacy of animal cruelty to pretend that their synthetic products are somehow "better" (ethically) than the leather originals they openly seek to imitate. This is cognitive dissonance because if they really believe their products to be better than leather, why do they immediately undo any so-called advantage by stealing the term 'leather' to describe their goods, albeit with the oxymoronic prefixes they like so much?

The truth concerning cruelty to animals is that almost all of the mainstream leather industry uses hides and skins that are waste from the meat and dairy sectors. Those industries generate hides and skins as a by-product: humanity can use that by-product or lose it, turn it into beautiful, infinitely useful leather or dump it in landfill. Plastic, meanwhile, is clogging up the oceans of the world and, as we know, is drastically affecting fish, seabirds, whales, turtles and countless other living organisms, from coral reefs to curlews.

The truth about synthetic materials

A campaign group called Plastic Oceans predicts that more than half of all the sea turtles in the world have ingested plastic and says ingesting a single piece of plastic has a 22% chance of being enough to kill one of these creatures. The same group says that, at the current rate at which the problem of ocean plastic is worsening, it is possible that 99% of all the seabirds in the world will be ingesting plastic by 2050. Its chief executive, Jo Ruxton, said recently: "We need to stop thinking that we can recycle our way out of this mess. Plastic production must decrease, yet it is currently increasing exponentially and recycling does nothing to abate this. Most plastic decreases in quality each time it is recycled until it loses its value entirely."

For all these reasons, dissembling about leather content in the products we make, sell and buy is far from being a victimless offence and if we are to make the case well for leather's place in the circular economy, authenticity is an important point of discussion.

Maurizia Contu's conviction is that a mandatory definition of leather is needed to tackle what she calls, without referring to any particular retail group or brand, not just unfair but fraudulent practices. She argues that a lack of protection for leather's authenticity causes damage to consumers. "Consumers are being misled," she says. "Imitation products use 'leather' as a term to be more attractive to consumers, convincing people to pay more, when their products do not contain any leather." She explains that the ideal model would be similar to one that covers textile regulation, which names the fibres that have gone into making textile materials. The regulation in question is number 1007/2011.

She acknowledges that the European footwear labelling directive of 1994 gives a good definition of leather shoes, states that manufacturers must only describe their footwear as being made of leather when the materials they use in the upper are at least 80% leather. This is directive 94/11/CE. She points out, however, that this is not enough because it is only applicable to one sector and does not apply to leathergoods, garments, furniture, automotive interiors and so on.

Portugal to push ahead

If a global solution is unfeasible at the moment, perhaps there is a European answer, or at least a local Portuguese one, in the offing. Preparations are already advanced for Portugal's assumption of the presidency of the European Union (EU), which it will take up for six months in January 2021. Officials have confirmed that one of the proposed items for its programme is a new law defining how much leather finished products need to contain before they can use 'leather' in their product descriptions.

The head of the enterprise policy department at Portugal's national agency for innovation and competitiveness (IAPMEI), António Oliveira, has told *World Leather* that a lot of work and thought have already gone into the proposal but that it is still too soon to say if there will be space for it in the programme that Portugal eventually presents. He explains that it is important for Portugal's programme not to contain any element that would overlap or clash with those of the member states that will have the presidency immediately before and after, in this case Germany and Slovenia. "We work in an EU context," Mr Oliveira says. "That means there is a lot of regulation. We need to try to use that as best we can."

In Maurizia Cantu's view, to have a leather law emerge from the Portuguese presidency would be an important step in the right direction. "The value of the European leather industry is the highest in the global leather sector," she explains, "higher than those of Brazil and China [countries that already have domestic leather laws]. This is because, in Europe, leather is closely linked to fashion and luxury. And those links are strong because leather is sustainable; it's the perfect example of the circular economy."

She insists that all the data and all the definitions needed are already in place, pointing out that the International Council of Tanners (ICT) defined leather as long ago as 1966. The definition reads: "Leather is the hide or skin of an animal that has gone through a process called tanning, which turns it into a stable, long-lasting material." But the



The interior of the Lexus RXL Takumi. It is not always as easy as this to tell if the interior of a car has as much leather as original equipment manufacturers like to suggest.

CREDIT: LEXUS

ICT definition makes it clear that if the hides, skins or leather have been ground up into fragments and re-formed, with or without other components, this material is not leather and will not perform like leather and, therefore, no brand, retailer or finished product manufacturer ought to be allowed to pretend to consumers that these materials are leather. The organisation says most regulations and standards governing the labelling of leather make all of this clear, but it says these rules "aren't always rigorously enforced". There seem to be few disincentives in place to halt offenders in their tracks, although there is directive 2005/29/EC, which demands "a high level of consumer protection" against unfair product descriptions.

Price to pay

President of one of Europe's largest automotive tanning groups, Alcanena-based Couro Azul, Pedro Carvalho, says he



thinks labelling for footwear was an important step in protecting consumers from confusion. “Most of the time, the confusion exists because manufacturers want to sell cheaper material and make more money,” he explains. “If you buy shoes, you are protected, but if you buy a car, 25% or 30% of the interior being leather is enough to say the car has leather upholstery. It’s important to bring labelling to automotive, too.”

Ms Contu agrees that the automotive leather sector would benefit particularly from a change in the rules. “Regulatory failure causes the market to be fragile,” she continues. “The EU may say that consumers have a right to education and the correct information, as well as protection. But what has the European Commission actually done? Nothing up till now.”

She insists that, since 2003, the volume of leather articles coming into the EU has doubled and that these products “have come in without protection”. The market is damaged by this because it causes uncertainty. Meanwhile, the production of imitation materials pretending to be leather has reached a volume she puts at 400 million square-metres per year, with a value of more than €1 billion. “More and more, this unfair competition will attack higher-end products too,” Maurizia Contu says. “Between 10% and 20% of turnover is what this is costing the leather industry.”

COTANCE has been putting the authorities “under pressure”, she continues, lobbying for and providing information for feasibility studies for new labelling regulations since at least 2012. This work has included commissioning market research studies on the importance of authenticity to consumers. The Commission asked for information on this again in 2016, with COTANCE submitting a formal response in 2018. Also in 2018, COTANCE achieved success with a presentation it made to a special steering committee about product environmental footprint category rules it has developed for measuring the environmental footprint of leather. Leather was one of only a small number of industries to secure the right to present its findings and the results of pilot exercises, all with a view to receiving formal recognition of leather as a ‘green’ product. This was the culmination of five years’ work that COTANCE carried out with partners across Europe, with UNIC weighing in

Oeko-Tex leather label can help consumers

In January, international research and testing body Oeko-Tex announced it was extending its Made in Green label to leather. The Zurich-based certification agency first introduced the textiles-focused Made in Green label in 2015, providing a way to track a textile’s journey through the supply chain. The label demonstrated that a textile had been tested for harmful substances, was manufactured in an environmentally friendly way and had been produced under fair working conditions.

Now that these same assurances can be made for leather materials, tanneries and retailers alike are eager to understand what is involved in obtaining Made in Green status. They may be surprised to learn that, in the case of leather, the label simply indicates a combination of two existing Oeko-Tex standards: STeP and the Leather Standard.

STeP, which stands for Sustainable Textile and Leather Production, must be completed first. This modular certification system was introduced to tanneries in 2019 to validate processes and work conditions. Certification requires assessment in chemicals management, environmental performance, environmental management, social responsibility, quality management and health protection and safety at work.

Once STeP certification is complete, testing for the Leather Standard can commence. Introduced in 2017, the Leather Standard certification demonstrates a lack of harmful chemicals. Testing is carried out by an independent institute and is based on the Oeko-Tex criteria. Limit values and test criteria are said to be stricter than the valid national and international specifications.

Both certifications are always evolving with the latest science and legislation. For example, carcinogenic N-nitrosamines and N-nitrosables were recently added to the Leather Standard testing criteria. Effective April 2020, Detox to Zero also will be an obligatory element for STeP-certified facilities that use large quantities of water and chemicals.

How long it takes to earn a Made in Green label depends on the individual circumstances of the respective supply chain and its production facilities. A spokesperson for Oeko-Tex tells *World Leather* that a STeP certification — which must be completed first — can typically take up to three months from application through to data collection, evaluation and audit.

With the labels, consumers can track leathergoods — clothing, shoes or furniture — using the unique product ID or QR code on the label. Data includes information about the facilities in which the leather article was produced, including varying stages of production, and the countries in which manufacture took place. (Oeko-Tex, which consists of 18 independent research and test institutes in Europe and Japan, says it monitors compliance of the required criteria on-site in the production facilities and checks production facilities with trained auditors.)

Oeko-Tex states that conversations with producers along the leather supply chain have started in a promising way, and that they are in the process of STeP certifying various factories. After that, those companies will likely continue on to Leather Standard certification so they can carry the Made in Green label.

particularly strongly.

COTANCE states that its work on the environmental footprint category rules is already bearing results and that tanners who want to know the environmental footprint of their leather can calculate it. It is official: there are mandatory ‘allocation rules’ for hides and skins that set their environmental footprint at close to zero, which COTANCE regards as a huge success for the global leather industry. The

authorities in Sweden, for example, are currently revising their product category rules for leather, correcting the allocation factor they had on raw hides. This could just be the beginning, the organisation says.

It is not yet clear if a Portuguese leather law could, in time, apply to all 27 European Union states, but Ms Contu says “national initiatives” can help, too. “It would send a strong signal,” she explains. 🌱