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New Research Shows Majority of U.S. Consumers Surveyed Prefer Leather Alternatives Over Animal Leather

Of those who preferred animal leather, 80% were open to trying a lab-grown alternative

March 30, 2021 — A Material Innovation Initiative (MII) study done in collaboration with North Mountain Consulting Group shows that the scales have tipped away from animal leather and toward leather alternatives for many consumers in the U.S. According to the results, while many consumers value the performance and aesthetics of animal leather, the majority say they prefer leather alternatives for reasons that include environmental and other ethical considerations. The study also investigated messaging effectiveness and the willingness of consumers to pay more for alternatives.

Nicole Rawling, co-founder and CEO of MII:

"Consumers want to buy products that are in alignment with their values, and they are becoming increasingly aware that animal leather is not. Leather production contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, harmful chemical pollution, and negative health impacts for workers and surrounding communities. On top of this, leather production relies on the skins of approximately 1.4 billion animals every year, a fact that many consumers find unsettling. But animal leather still provides unique value in terms of performance and aesthetics. Creating next-gen leather alternatives that outperform leather both functionally and ethically could lead to a total transformation of the leather market away from animal options."

Top Findings:

- More than half of the study participants (55%) preferred leather alternatives over leather
- Both groups ranked animal welfare as the most appealing messaging for purchasing leather alternatives, followed by sustainability

Consumers who preferred leather alternatives explained that they sought out alternatives because of concerns about animals and the environment, and some wanted to avoid animal leather because it gave them feelings of disgust.

From respondents:

- *"It's safer for animals -- not that I'm an extremely big advocate for animals, but if the alternative functions the same, I do not see the reason not to go with it."*
- *"I think fake leather is just as nice and is usually a lot cheaper. Also, it grosses me out a little that leather is animal skin."*

In this group, 69% of respondents reported that they would pay more for leather alternatives, and 30% would pay at least 25% more. This group was highly interested in purchasing leather alternatives made from plant fibers (96% open, 67% enthusiastic), and moderately interested in purchasing leather grown from cells in a lab (73% open, 34% enthusiastic).

Consumers who preferred leather explained that they sought out animal leather because its durability, aesthetics, and conferred status appealed to them, and some wanted to avoid alternatives because of concerns about quality.

From respondents:

- *"I prefer the durability, reliability, and feel of real leather. Too many times have I had fake leather or leather alternatives deteriorate on me."*
- *"I prefer leather products because of the status. It's like choosing to buy diamonds over crystals."*

Still, 80% in this group said they were open to purchasing leather grown from cells in a factory, and 37% were enthusiastic about purchasing such an option. This group was moderately interested in purchasing leather alternatives made from acrylic or polyester (71% open, 17% enthusiastic).

These findings highlight barriers to adoption of leather alternatives and opportunities for material scientists, startups, and brands working to develop next-gen replacements for animal-derived leather. To read the full study and find more information on methodology and participant demographics, visit this link.

About the Material Innovation Initiative

The Material Innovation Initiative is a nonprofit that accelerates the development of high-performance, eco-friendly, and animal-free materials for the fashion, automotive, and home goods industries. MII serves as a critical connector along the path to market adoption for new materials, partnering with scientists, startups, brands, and retailers to direct the industry toward areas of maximum impact. MII designed the survey and collected the data for these findings. Learn more at materialinnovation.org

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About North Mountain Consulting Group

Data analysis and report writing was conducted by North Mountain Consulting Group, a firm that specializes in evidence-based message design and consumer research involving scientific topics that impact our food system. Learn more at www.northmountainconsulting.com.

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