

# THE LEXICON OF SU\*\*\*\*\*TY FAUX, ECO, VEGAN, BIO LEATHER

**CLIZIA MORADEI**

Università Iuav di Venezia, Italy

*cmoradei@iuav.it*

*Orcid: 0000-0003-3692-2122*

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## Abstract

This Fashion Lexigraphy interrogates the linguistic and cultural dimensions of sustainability in the Italian fashion industry, focusing on how terms such as ‘faux’, ‘eco’, ‘vegan’, and ‘bio leather’ shape material narratives. While sustainability was once a revolutionary concept, its overuse has diluted its meaning, often serving as a vague moral signifier rather than a precise descriptor. The legal framework in Italy, which restricts terms like *eco leather* to animal-derived materials while permitting ‘faux leather’ as a more transparent term, illustrates how language is both regulated and contested. As consumer interest shifts toward using non-animal materials, linguistic clarity becomes crucial for distinguishing between the various types of leather alternatives. Beyond technical innovation, the cultural legitimacy of new materials depends on their ability to develop distinct identities rather than relying on conventional leather as a reference point. Industry discourse, legal terminology, and marketing practices collectively influence how these materials are perceived, normalized, and regulated. By analyzing their genealogies and rhetorical uses, this Lexigraphy highlights the performative power of language in shaping the sustainable transition and argues for more precise fashion lexigraphy as a tool to foster transparency, trust, and cultural adoption.

**Keywords:** *Sustainability; Faux leather; Eco leather; Vegan leather; Bio leather.*

## IN THE AGE OF SU\*\*\*\*\*TY

The title of this Lexigraphy – *The Lexicon of Su\*\*\*\*\*ty* – is deliberately provocative.

The term sustainability has become so omnipresent in fashion discourse that it risks becoming an empty buzzword. Scholars, designers, and consumers frequently express a sense of fatigue, irritation, or even mistrust toward what is increasingly perceived as a “bad word”: an umbrella term stretched so wide that it loses specificity and critical edge. Sustainability is invoked to signal moral virtue, but rarely accompanied by precise definitions, measurable impact, or linguistic transparency. The importance of fashion lexigraphy in the context of sustainability is attested by experiences such as *The Sustainable Fashion*

*Glossary*, launched in 2020 and updated biannually, developed through a collaboration between Condé Nast and Centre for Sustainable Fashion - London College of Fashion, University of Arts London.

This Lexigraphy interrogates animal- and petroleum-free leather alternative lexical inflation and semantic ambiguity, focusing on how its specific offshoots – faux, eco, vegan, bio leather – have become central to the way the industry frames material innovation and ethical claims.

These terms are not neutral: they shape the symbolic, cultural, and economic landscapes in which materials emerge and circulate.

By examining their genealogies, legal definitions, and rhetorical uses, this Lexigraphy seeks to expose the tensions embedded in the language of

sustainability – both in Italian and English – and contribute to a more critical, transparent fashion lexicography. The terminology employed in this study has been drawn from the Italian regulatory lexicon as well as from reports produced by organizations and research centers specializing in next-generation materials. It is important to emphasize that the temporal focus of the study is the last decade, a period marked by the most significant advancements in material innovation and by ongoing challenges in legislation related to these developments. Within fashion, scholarly and public debate has increasingly focused on the transition from animal leather to alternative materials, as reflected in works such as Simona Segre Reinach's *Per un vestire gentile. Moda e liberazione animale* (2022), which examines the ethical, cultural, and material implications of this shift.

## FAUX, ECO, VEGAN, BIO LEATHER

In June 2020, the Italian Council of Ministers renewed and updated the legislative decree Decreto Legislativo n. 1112 (1966), stating that only materials of animal origin may legally be labeled *cuoio* (leather), *pelle* (hide), or *pelliccia* (fur) and not anything that artificially reproduces their appearance. The renewed decree, the Decreto Legislativo n. 68 (2020) issued by ICEC - *Istituto di Certificazione della qualità per l'industria Conciaria*, specifies that the certification of leathers with a low environmental impact, called eco or ecological leather, must be based on the UNI 11427 standard. This certification implies the use of animal raw materials, primarily by-products of the food industry. The term *faux leather* (*similpelle* in Italian) has long been associated with synthetic substitutes for animal leather, typically made from PVC or PU, and appears to represent the most transparent and widely accepted descriptor for imitation leather. These distinctions go beyond a mere matter of language: they reflect how the semantics of sustainability are regulated and contested. Faux leather is often accompanied by or replaced with the prefixes *ecological* and *vegan*, terms that explicitly evoke environmental and ethical values. While the former has been declared illegal, the latter can be misleading with regard to environmental impact. As a result, this lack of clarity or greenwashing may obscure the actual composition or processing of the material being sold. In contrast, faux leather explicitly signals its non-animal and fossil fuel-derived or man-made

composition, making it – paradoxically – a more transparent and legally robust term, even if strongly subject to bias.

As this section argues, bio leather plays a pivotal role in the tanning industry's sustainability transition. Since 2020, online searches for “leather” have declined by 3.5%, while interest in “vegan leather” has increased by 69%, as witnessed by the 2023 report by Collective Fashion Justice and Material Innovation Initiative: 75% of Australians, nearly 78% of Britons, and 90% of Chinese respondents would opt for next-generation, non-animal leather if given the choice (Hakansson et al., 2023: 13). This reflects a broader awareness of the environmental and ethical costs of traditional leather production. When comparing the climate impact of different materials, the contrast is striking: per square meter, bovine leather emits approximately 110 kg of CO<sub>2</sub>, compared to 7–15.8 kg for PU/synthetics, 8.2 kg for bio-based PU, and just 0.8–2.1 kg for bio-based plant-derived Mirum (Hakansson et al., 2023: 19).

Recent years have thus seen growing interest in bio-based alternatives to both animal and fossil fuel-derived leather.

According to Material Innovation Initiative, next-generation materials include bio-based polymers, where biomass accounts for more than 50%, which often fall into the category of bio leather. These are produced through biotechnological processes using plants, agri-food waste, mycelium, fungal fruiting bodies, microbial cultures, cultured animal cells, recycled materials, or blends (Hakansson et al., 2023: 11).

They are typically divided into two categories. The first includes biopolymers that combine plant- or fungal-based biomass with 30–80% polylactic acid (PLA), a biodegradable thermoplastic of biological origin, or sometimes conventional fossil-based polymers. The second group, still largely experimental, involves microbial cultures produced through the natural fermentation of microorganisms, such as bacterial cellulose. The industry landscape has evolved rapidly: between 2013 and 2022, the number of companies developing next-generation leather grew from 18 to 65 (Hakansson et al., 2023: 23). After a downturn in 2022, investment in plant-based and lab-grown material start-ups rebounded in 2023, reaching \$500 million – an increase of almost 10% over the previous year (Material Innovation Initiative, 2024). While still below the \$1.1 billion peak of 2021,

this renewed funding signals continued confidence in the sector despite recent challenges, including Bolt Threads' discontinuation of production in July 2023 (Kent, 2024). Global investments reflect a belief in their potential to reshape material economies: The Carlyle Group has invested in Spiber Inc., a Japanese biomaterials company collaborating with The North Face for a collection featuring Brewed Protein™ fiber, while Kering Ventures has financed Squim (home to Ephea™ and Mogu pioneering products) to scale mycelium-based materials (Rezk, 2024).

## INDUSTRY DISCOURSE IN THE SHAPING OF IDENTITIES

The 2024 Biofabricate Summit in Paris highlighted the ongoing debate over the scalability of alternative leather materials and their integration into mainstream fashion. As Géraldine Vallejo, Sustainability Program Director at Kering, noted: "If you asked the average consumer, I don't think they would be particularly excited about wearing algae or fungi;" Suveen Sahib, co-founder and CEO of K18 Hair, added: "Material innovation needs to start with a great product" (Kent, 2024). Journalist Sarah Kent, echoing these perspectives, reiterates that brands have primarily invested in new materials for their performance rather than out of consumers' enthusiasm for the science behind them. Yet the success of these materials depends on more than their technical properties.

Functionality alone is insufficient. For a new material to be accepted and normalized, it must be embedded in a shared cultural and linguistic framework. This is where lexical clarity plays a crucial role. Terms like faux, eco, vegan, bio leather frame how these innovations are perceived.

A vague or misleading label can generate consumer confusion, hinder regulation, and undermine trust (Ali, 2025; D'Adamo et al., 2024).

Conversely, precise language can help create stable cultural narratives: it anchors the material in a conceptual space that connects its technological properties to values, aesthetics, and practices.

As Matt Scullin, CEO of MycoWorks, put it: "If you're looking for a leather that isn't leather, you'll keep looking forever" (Kent, 2024).

His observation reveals the danger of positioning new materials as substitutes. Instead, each biomaterial needs distinct terminologies that highlight their unique identities. This is not merely a marketing question: it is a cultural issue.

Just as early plastics struggled to gain cultural acceptance when presented as "fake wood" or "fake marble," next-generation materials risk marginalization if their language remains tethered to leather. As Karana et al. argue (2015: 36) materials require narratives and identities of their own (Cfr. Dormer, 1990; Meikle, 1997; Sparke, 1990). Clear terminology allows designers, producers, and consumers to imagine these materials on their own terms. Lexical precision fosters cultural legitimacy. A well-defined vocabulary encourages educational frameworks, facilitates the creation of industry standards, and allows for legal regulation that protects both consumers and innovators. While classificatory systems can sometimes exclude or include, they can also create semantic space for new aesthetic imaginaries. In an era marked by environmental crises, it becomes particularly urgent to reconsider what materials our Age could – or should – embody. Reflecting on expressions such as the Stone Age or Iron Age demonstrates not only how human culture is structured around the invention, production, and use of surrounding materials – hence the concept of material culture (Tripaldi, 2022) – but also the functional value of revising common terminology.

Accordingly, marketing strategies, policies and policy makers, and the industry play a central role in stabilizing – or destabilizing – fashion lexicography (Ali, 2025; D'Adamo et al., 2024).

While many medium and small companies lack the resources not only for production but also for cultural scaling, major fashion multinationals are actively impacting the material language of sustainability. For example through investing in strategic innovation-based infrastructures, such as Kering's Material Innovation Hub founded in Milan in 2013. Brands like the Danish Ganni are integrating material innovation directly into their strategic identity. As its co-founder Nicolaj Reffstrup stated: "We are a fashion company, but we run it like a tech company. [...] It's in our DNA to be comfortable with chaos, failure, and change" (Kent, 2024). Ganni has pledged to phase out animal leather by 2023, implementing thirty material innovations in its collections and providing feedback to producers to accelerate market adoption. Similarly, London-based brand Pangaia has positioned itself as a leisurewear company at the forefront of biomaterial experimentation.

## THE LEXICON OF MATERIAL INNOVATION

Even though Italian lexicon in this field is affected by English – which sometimes hybridize or partially Anglicize traditional Italian terms – it remains crucial to focus on establishing a precise, contextually grounded vocabulary.

Moreover, the evolution of terms such as faux, eco, vegan, bio leather in Italy illustrates how language in fashion is never solely descriptive.

It is performative: it shapes material realities, market dynamics, and consumer imaginaries.

Ambiguous or misleading terminology – often amplified by greenwashing – risks eroding public trust and hindering sustainable transitions.

As biomaterials and other textile material innovations enter the market as an alternative to animal leather, promoted for being less harmful to the planet, their success will depend not only on technological performance but on their ability to establish coherent, transparent, and culturally resonant narratives. Fashion lexicography can help us navigate these tensions and propose more precise vocabularies that acknowledge complexity rather than masking it behind seductive ambiguous prefixes. The future of sustainable fashion will be built as much through language as through materials.

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