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Consumers explore sustainable leather alternatives at first Fabulose Co-Creation Workshop

Workshop participants showed strong interest in bio-based materials, while highlighting performance, transparency and material feel as key factors for acceptance.

Mannheim, Germany – How do consumers perceive vegan and bio-based alternatives to leather? Which material properties influence purchasing decisions, and what expectations do people have for future sustainable materials? These questions were at the centre of the first Fabulose Co-Creation Workshop, held at the Melina Bucher Atelier in Mannheim on 19 September 2026.

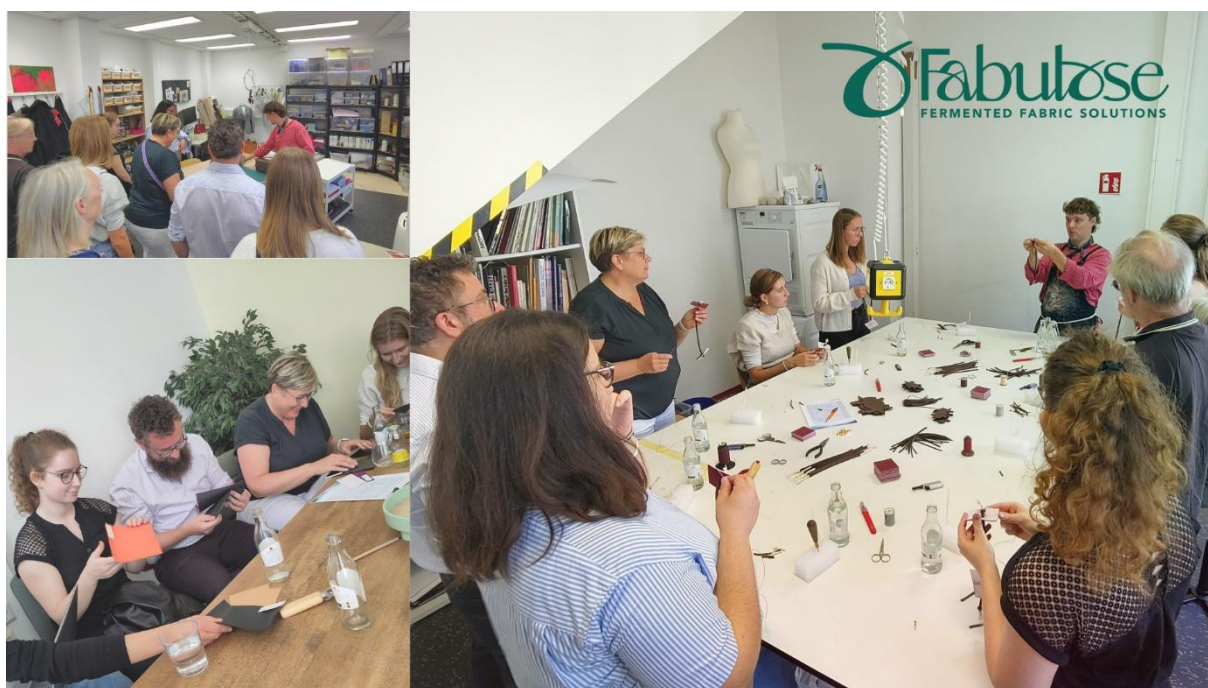


Figure 1 – Participants compared the appearance, feel and flexibility of different vegan and bio-based leather alternatives.

The workshop brought together consumers, designers, sustainability-minded participants, and users of conventional leather products to discuss their experiences and perspectives on leather and alternative materials. Organised by partners of the EU-funded Fabulose project and hosted by designer Melina Bucher, the event aimed to gather user feedback to support the development and future market uptake of bio-based leather alternatives.

What workshop participants value: Longevity, comfort and quality

Participants brought and discussed leather products they regularly use and value, ranging from wallets and handbags to jackets and shoes. Many of these items had been used for years or even decades, highlighting the importance consumers place on durability and long product lifetimes. Across the discussions, participants associated leather with qualities such as durability, comfort, aesthetics, emotional attachment and the development of a distinctive patina that adds character over time.

Openness to alternatives depends on product performance

Participants evaluated a range of vegan and bio-based leather alternatives and discussed their suitability for different applications. Material acceptance was strongly influenced by haptics, flexibility, durability, appearance, and smell. Materials perceived as having a natural feel and appearance generally received more positive feedback, while those perceived as artificial, plastic-like, or insufficiently robust were viewed more critically.

The discussions also revealed that expectations vary depending on the product category. While many participants considered alternative materials suitable for bags, wallets, and accessories, higher expectations were expressed for footwear and products worn directly on the skin, where comfort, flexibility, breathability, and durability are particularly important.

Transparency about material origins can support acceptance and trust

One of the most notable findings was the influence of material information on consumer perceptions. Participants responded more positively to materials when they learned about their origin and production process. Innovative feedstocks, such as mycelium-based materials and materials derived from recycled resources, generated particular interest and curiosity. The discussions highlighted that sustainability claims alone did not determine participants' acceptance of a material. Participants want sustainable materials that also deliver convincing quality and performance. At the same time, transparent communication about material origins and sustainability benefits can help build trust and increase acceptance.

Insights for future Fabulose activities

The workshop demonstrated participants' interest in bio-based alternatives to leather and provided valuable insights for future material development and communication activities within Fabulose. The results underline the importance of combining sustainability benefits with the comfort, durability, functionality, and aesthetics that consumers expect from everyday products.

ABOUT FABULOSE

Fabulose is an EU-funded project developing animal-free leather alternatives from bacterial cellulose, cyanophycin and bacterial pigments. By combining biotechnology, artificial intelligence, and digital twin technologies, the project aims to create biodegradable materials while improving transparency, efficiency, and circularity throughout production.

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