

# Demand grows for antibacterial leather

Credit: Pittards

**Isabella Griffiths** examines the latest developments in leathers that feature health and hygiene properties.

**H**ygienic and health have never been more relevant or higher on everyone's agenda than since Covid-19 took hold of the world. With bacteria, germs and viruses living and spreading easily on the surfaces we touch, the focus is increasingly shifting towards materials which can help prevent contamination and can be easily disinfected, or those that feature inherent antibacterial or antiviral properties.

It is well known that leather is one of the most naturally hygienic materials around. Unlike other materials, such as textiles, which can be a breeding ground for harmful microorganisms, leather can be easily and repeatedly cleaned, hence its popularity in segments such as automotive seating and upholstery. Now, tanners and leather manufacturers are going a step further and are developing leathers with antibacterial and antiviral properties. Last year, Spanish tanner Tenerias Omega and Italian Gruppo Mastrotto were among those to have launched and patented antibacterial and antiviral leathers, which are predominantly aimed at the automotive and transport industries, though the scope is not limited to this. And it was only in February that British tanner Pittards announced the launch of a new antibacterial technology. Both Pittards and Gruppo Mastrotto's leather range is said to deliver up to 99.9% elimination of bacteria, while Tenerias Omega's leather also offers 99.9% effectiveness against bacteria and 94% against viruses.

Tenerias Omega launched its anti-bacterial and anti-viral leather in June 2020 in the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak

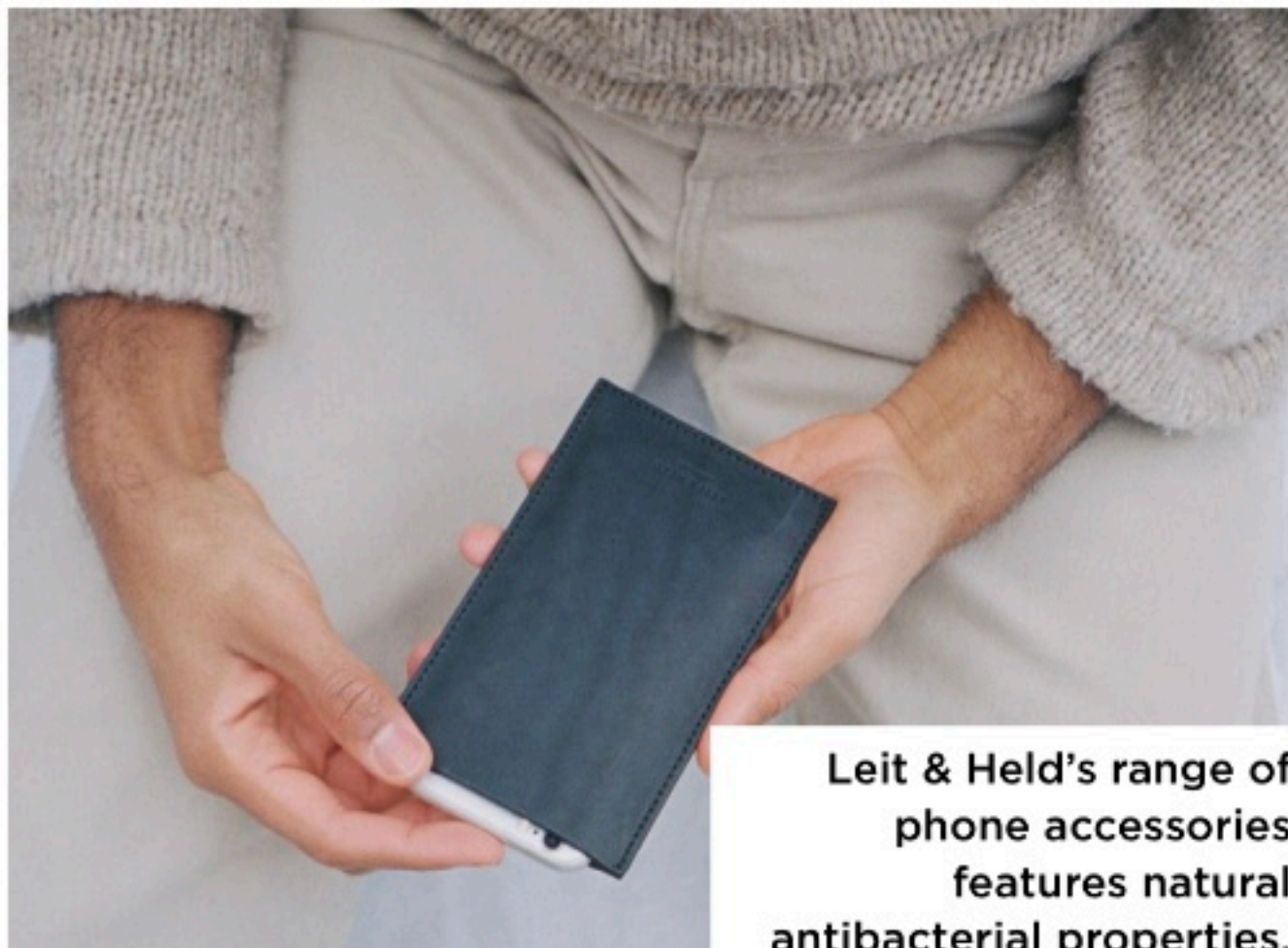
and a heightened sensibility towards hygiene and sanitation requirements in surface materials. The company's leather is anti-viral certified to ISO 21702 and was launched primarily for the hospitality and contract furnishings markets, as well as the aviation industry. "The specific formulation incorporates coatings at different stages of production, which result in the prevention of bacteria penetrating into the leather, ensuring high safety standards and reducing the presence of viruses and bacteria on the surface to almost zero. And now, in addition, these ranges have been antiviral certified. The range has been tested according to the norm UNE-EN ISO 16187 (test method to assess antibacterial activity), as well as ISO 21702:2019 (test method to assess antiviral activity). It does not contain chlorines or bleaches, is non-toxic and does not alter the technical properties of the leather, nor the aesthetic", says Patricia Ponce, Export Manager, Tenerias Omega. According to Ponce, prior to Covid-19, the focus in terms of leather treatments and material innovation was more on hard-wearing, anti-stain leather rather than antibacterial and antiviral features, but the pandemic has exacerbated calls for the latter. "The pandemic has certainly created a new demand from consumers for antibacterial and antiviral features. Our new anti-bacterial range aims to help restore confidence in air travel and public areas such as hotels and restaurants", she says. The treatment can be applied to almost all leather types currently offered by Tenerias Omega, which cover

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several divisions, including furniture in high-traffic areas such as hospitality, aviation (both private and commercial) and leather goods.

UK tanner Pittards, meanwhile, has featured antibacterial technology, Microspike, since the 1990s, which has been used extensively in both footwear linings and in gloves. Its latest innovation, Pittards Tri Protex, which was launched in collaboration with bio-technology company Micro-Fresh, is an evolution of that technology, according to Jon Loxton, Chief Technical Officer, in that it combines existing Microspike and another Pittards performance innovation, Microdefence, with Micro-Fresh to deliver antibacterial protection. It can be used with a variety of leathers without affecting the final handle or aesthetics. Pittards Tri Protex conforms to AATCC 100, achieving 99,9% elimination of bacteria. "The Tri Protex technology is versatile in that it can be used on different types of leather and also combined with our other technologies in order to create bespoke solutions", he says. "Pittards Tri Protex exhibits antimicrobial properties, it acts as a fungicide and bactericide, killing bacteria and other microbials. Each technology complements the other, creating a synergy when these three technologies are combined, offering a wide range of protection. Bacteria or other microbes are killed on the surface of the leather, they do not get the chance to penetrate. The technology is substantive and tanned through the leather structure, giving protection throughout the life of the article", he adds.



**Leit & Held's range of phone accessories features natural antibacterial properties.**

According to Debbie Burton, Marketing Director at Pittards, demand for leather with hygiene features is not new, but Covid-19 has heightened demand, and antibacterial and antiviral leathers and leather treatments are tapping into this zeitgeist. "There has always been demand for anti-bacterial properties, as brands see that as a further benefit to performance products. But, as with many things, Covid-19 has accelerated interest".

It is not just chemical leather treatments that are driving innovation in the sanitisation and hygiene segment of leather. The antibacterial properties of natural vegetable tannins, on the other hand, are well documented and are also serving the consumer's need for clean and healthy products and surface materials. German leather goods brand Leit & Held, which specialises in vegetable tanned accessories, has recently started to market and actively promote the antibacterial features of its leather goods range. While this is not directly related to the Coronavirus

**Tenerias Omega's range of antibacterial and antiviral leathers, which was launched in the wake of the pandemic.**



pandemic, and the brand's leather does not claim to prevent viruses, the appeal of leather with enhanced hygiene features is timely and pertinent, according to the brand's Sustainability Manager, Nina Conrad. "With the launch of our latest collection, we decided to actively highlight the naturally antibacterial properties of our vegetable tanned leathers. While all of our leather goods are made from the same vegetable tanned leather, and in principle offer the same properties, this is particularly relevant and appealing with regard to our mobile phone cases, as we handle them all day every day, so eliminating bacteria in high contact areas is an added benefit for our customers", she says.

It makes sense that antibacterial, antiviral leathers and those that can be easily cleaned and treated with antiviral solutions lend themselves to products which are in direct contact with the skin, such as automotive seating, trims and steering wheels (here, the shared mobility trend is particularly of relevance), transport, hospitality, as well as leather goods and accessories which are tactile. "While it is true that the pandemic has accelerated growth in this area, we believe that the interest in health and well-being is a long-term trend that will remain with us. Consumers have had a long time to embed new behaviours, turning them into habits. Products that can help them reinforce those, and that pay attention to their concerns by providing solutions, will continue to be important", says Pittards' Debbie Burton.

Tenerias Omega's Patricia Ponce echoes this: "Covid-19 will definitely change our habits and the pandemic has certainly highlighted the importance of hygiene, safe, clean surfaces through the use of products that ensure higher safety standards and protection against viruses and bacteria", she says. The pandemic may have boosted interest in antibacterial and antiviral leather, but it certainly looks here to stay and remain an area of focus and further development. |