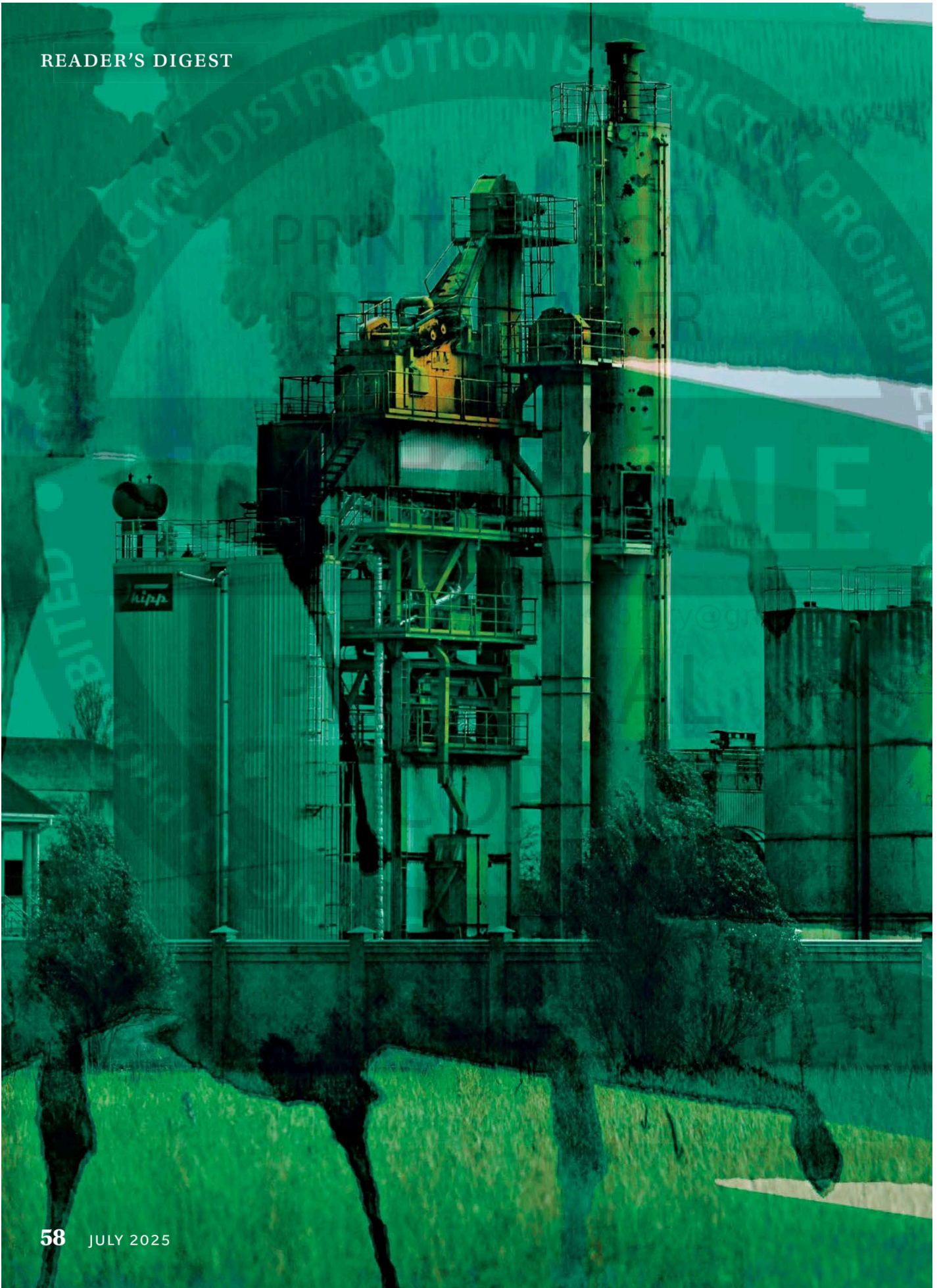


- Greenwashing

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ENVIRONMENT

HOW DO I GUARD AGAINST GREENWASHING?

*... and other important questions about
plastic pollution, answered*

BY Saabira Chaudhuri

FROM THE BOOK *CONSUMED: HOW BIG BRANDS
GOT US HOOKED ON PLASTIC*

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IS RECYCLING A SCAM?

The reason so many people think recycling is a scam is that it's been oversold to us: companies have worked hard to give the impression that plastics are widely recycled when in practice only a small slice—mainly rigid PET [Polyethylene Terephthalate] and HDPE [High-Density Polyethylene] containers—are. Recycling, despite all its problems, can be worthwhile. It can save resources that would otherwise go into the extraction of new raw materials, often the most energy-intensive part of making a new product. It can also keep materials out of landfills and incinerators, reducing emissions. Whether something should be recycled comes down to whether doing so results in a net-emissions saving—transporting recyclables a long way by truck or using energy-intensive recycling technologies may produce more emissions than using virgin material.

**ISN'T PAPER BETTER THAN PLASTIC?**

It can be but it isn't always. Rather than a wholesale shift from plastic to paper, it makes sense to look at each product on a case-by-case basis that attempts to balance waste, emissions and likely health hazards to arrive at the best choice. Paper is derived from a renewable resource and will break down when littered, but it still has a big environmental footprint. It can cause deforestation and harm an area's biodiversity. It's highly water-intensive, as well as chemical-intensive: a 2021 report found that 256 substances of concern—chemical substances that may pose risks to human health or the environment—can intentionally be used in paper and board packaging. When it comes to holding food and drinks, paper isn't naturally good at repelling grease or moisture. It needs coatings, which are often made from plastic. Paper food packaging has also been found to use PFAs, the notorious 'forever' chemicals. Companies say they're phasing out the problematic PFAs, but researchers have raised concerns that replacement chemicals that function similarly could be harmful to our health too.

Food waste and non-fibre components—such as coatings—that make up more than five per cent of a package can mess with the economics of the paper recycling process. Many countries mandate that paper packaging used for food be made from virgin

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paper, which means recycled food containers can't be used to make new food containers, but must be downcycled into lower-grade material.

That being said, I do think paper that doesn't use dangerous chemicals could be a good choice in a few areas. One is for disposable packaging that's widely littered—including snack packets, bottle labels, chocolate and energy bar wrappers—and too small to charge a deposit on. Using virgin paper isn't inherently bad as wood can be grown and harvested as a crop.

Two caveats here: the coated paper will likely keep its contents fresh for a shorter amount of time than plastic, so an unintended consequence could be

increased food waste if supply chains and consumer communication aren't well managed. And if the coating isn't biodegradable, the package could leave behind long-lasting microplastics if littered. Paper could also play more of a role in packaging dry products. More companies are stripping water out of laundry detergents, instead shipping concentrated dry pods and sheets in paper boxes.

If you stop and think about it, it's mad to ship a product that's mostly water around the world if you can just ship the concentrate. There's potential to sell dry versions of more products, but companies would need to invest the same millions convincing consumers to switch to these as they did hooking them on liquid versions in the first place.

HOW CONCERNED SHOULD I BE ABOUT MICROPLASTICS AND NANOPLASTICS?

While there's ample evidence that microplastics and nanoplastics harm animal health, their impact on human health is still unclear. There isn't an internationally accepted definition of these plastic particles, while testing methods differ widely, opening researchers up to criticism.

Scientists worry that plastic particles could have far-reaching effects on human health because they act as sponges for chemicals, including those that disrupt the endocrine system. Researchers have also raised concerns that persistent exposure to low levels of

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microplastics in the air could lead to respiratory and cardiovascular diseases, inflame the gastrointestinal tract and change the intestinal microbiome to create an imbalance between beneficial and harmful bacteria. Beyond the 2024 study that linked microplastics with an increased risk of humans having a stroke or heart attack, there's ongoing research aimed at uncovering how microplastics impact human health in real life.

Using less plastic food packaging—particularly small packages like sachets, since the ratio of plastic to contents is high—and moving away from plastic kitchenware, like chopping boards, could help. But studies show that microplastics and nanoplas-

tics enter our bodies through a variety of sources, including the soil, air and our skin, so there's not a huge amount any of us can do individually.

Ultimately, the solution lies in regulatory measures that mandate companies to make design changes to products known to leach microplastics—like tyres, paints, synthetic clothes and plastic containers—and put in place filters in washing machines and water treatment plants to stop tiny plastic particles escaping into the environment. As researchers learn more about plastics, they're getting a better sense of the mechanisms that make them degrade. For instance, a 2024 study found that brightly coloured plastics degrade more quickly than

white or black ones, indicating that some additives may unintentionally promote degradation.

HOW CAN I MINIMIZE MY EXPOSURE TO CHEMICALS IN PLASTICS?

Since learning more about chemicals in plastics, I buy less canned food and drinks since I know they use plastic liners that can contain bisphenols. I no longer heat food in plastic containers or put plastic in the dishwasher since heat encourages chemicals to leach. I


than plastic ones. I've swapped my kids' plastic cutlery, plates, bottles and cups for stainless-steel ones too. I haven't been able to convince them to stop putting plastic toys in their mouths though, and wooden ones don't last long.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF AGAINST GREENWASHING?

Be sceptical about green claims, pause to think about the whole picture—including both waste and emissions—and try to connect the dots to the end.

A 2024 STUDY FOUND THAT COLOURED PLASTICS DEGRADE MORE QUICKLY THAN WHITE OR BLACK ONES, MEANING ADDITIVES MAY PROMOTE DEGRADATION.

avoid putting hot, greasy and acidic food in plastic for the same reason. I have replaced my everyday plastic cooking utensils (black ones particularly since they are more likely to be made from e-waste and contain hazardous chemicals) with wooden ones, bought wooden chopping boards and slowly swapped many of my plastic food storage containers for glass ones—though these still use a bit of plastic to seal at the top. I've contacted the suppliers of the non-stick cookware I use to check it doesn't contain PFAs and I use my cast-iron pans more often. I use a stainless-steel reusable water bottle and a ceramic coffee cup rather

Paper isn't always better than plastic, biodegradable plastic often goes to landfills or incinerators where it doesn't biodegrade, and while a pricey bottle or shoe made from 'ocean plastic' sounds impressive, it does little to address the root causes of our plastics problems. Ask yourself: Why is a company making this claim? Is it specific or does the company portray itself as 'eco-friendly' without explaining how? Does a product or package do what it claims? If so, is that good for the environment? And what are the trade-offs? 

EDITED EXCERPT FROM THE BOOK *CONSUMED: HOW BIG BRANDS GOT US HOOKED ON PLASTIC* BY SAABIRA CHAUDHURI, PUBLISHED BY BONNIER BOOKS UK. REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSIONS.