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The Good, Bad and Ugly of Plastics.
Review of *Consumed: How Big Brands Got Us Hooked on Plastic* by Saabira Chaudhuri

Dobry, zły i brzydki użycia plastiku.
Recenzja książki autorstwa Saabira Chaudhuri
pt. „Consumed: How Big Brands Got Us Hooked on Plastic”

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Abstract: The title of this review of *Consumed: How Big Brands Got Us Hooked On Plastic*, written by Saabira Chaudhuri (her first book) and published by Blink Publishing (an imprint of Bonnier Books UK) in May 2025**,** is borrowed from writer Mike Berners-Lee's description of the same. It is a four-part, 13-chapter (all cleverly-titled), 400-page 'polemic, investigative, change-agent' which seamlessly blends science, history and story-telling, while availing of well-timed humour which is sure to make readers chuckle quite instinctively. The resort to humour is not to make light of things expedient, but rather to mock at the throwaway consumerism (plastics being one of the enablers for the same) and avaricious profit-seeking which has engulfed not just the western world, but more conspicuously of late, the developing countries as well. Plastics, in a way, have been intricately intertwined with the aforesaid undesirables, which have wrecked havoc on the environment. An 'alarming', 'unputdownable', 'gripping', 'eye-popping', 'honest', 'truthful', 'deeply-researched', 'comprehensive' must-read (qualifiers adopted by a host of critics and authors to describe Chaudhuri's book), *Consumed***,** which focuses primarily on the USA, with brief detours to Europe and India, is a valuable addition to the long list of books which have followed Rachel Carson's Silent Spring. Readers are introduced to many 'colourful' interesting characters in the pro-plastics and anti-plastics camps, in this saga. This review takes the reader on a breezy journey through the book, hopefully motivating him/her/them to purchase a copy and be an agent of desirable change, willing to challenge undesirable *status quos* one after the other. Human behaviour is plastic, and can and should be moulded to answer the call of the century (or rather, the decade, as we do not have the luxury of time on our hands).

Keywords: plastics, throwaway culture, consumerism, greenwashing, PET recycling, microplastics, nanoplastics, corporate accountability, waste, SDG 11, SDG 12

Abstrakt: Tytuł recenzowanej książki to *Consumed: How Big Brands Got Us Hooked On Plastic*, autorstwa Saabiry Chaudhuri. Jest to jej pierwsza książka, opublikowana przez Blink Publishing (imprint Bonnier Books UK) w maju 2025 r. Tytuł został zaczerpnięty z określenia użytego przez pisarza Mike'a Berners-Lee. Publikacja ta jest czteroczęściową, trzynastorozdziałową (wszystkie rozdziały pomysłowo zatytułowane), czterystustronicową książką o charakterze „polemicznym, śledczym i sprawczym", która płynnie łączy naukę, historię i opowiadanie, korzystając z trafnie dozowanego humoru, niemal na pewno wywołującego spontaniczny uśmiech czytelnika. Humor nie służy tu bagatelizowaniu spraw, lecz ośmieszeniu kultury jednorazowego konsumpcjonizmu (plastik jest jednym z jej motorów) i chciwego dążenia do zysku, które ogarnęły nie tylko świat zachodni, lecz ostatnio jeszcze wyraźniej kraje rozwijające się. Plastik jest w pewnym sensie ściśle spleciony z tymi zjawiskami, które sieją spustoszenie w środowisku. *Consumed* – „alarmująca", „nie do odłożenia", „porywająca", „zaskakująca", „szczera", „prawdziwa", „dogłębnie przebadana", „kompleksowa" lektura obowiązkowa (to określenia wielu krytyków i autorów) – skupia się przede wszystkim na USA, z krótkimi odniesieniami do Europy i Indii, i stanowi cenny wkład do długiej listy książek idących śladem *Silent Spring* Rachel Carson. W tej opowieści czytelnicy poznają wielu „barwnych", interesujących bohaterów po obu stronach sporu – zarówno zwolenników, jak i przeciwników plastiku. Niniejsza recenzja zabiera czytelników w lekką podróż po książce, miejmy nadzieję zachęcając ich do kupna egzemplarza i do stania się zaangażowanym w niezbędne zmiany, gotowym kwestionować kolejne niekorzystne *status quo*. Ludzkie zachowania są „plastyczne" – mogą więc i powinny być kształtowane tak, by odpowiedzieć na wyzwania tego stulecia (a raczej tej dekady, bo nie mamy luksusu czasu).

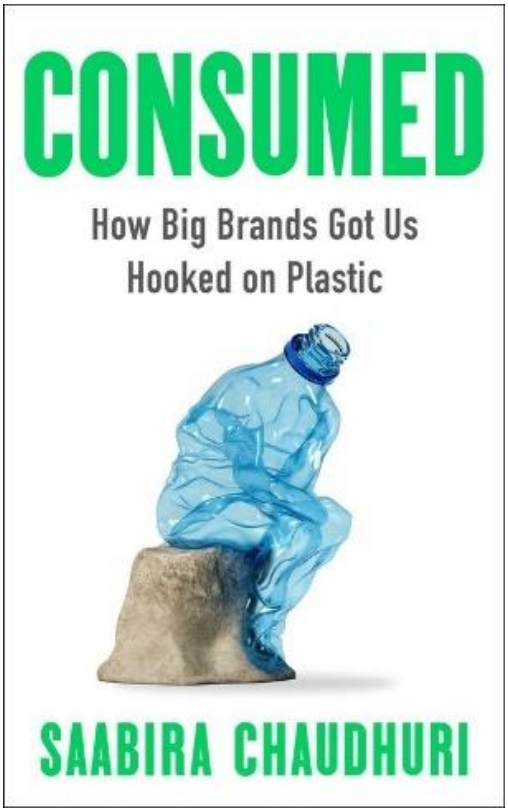
Słowa kluczowe: tworzywa sztuczne, plastik, kultura jednorazowości, konsumpcjonizm, greenwashing, recykling PET, mikro plastik, nano plastik, odpowiedzialność korporacyjna, odpady, SDG 11, SDG 12

Introduction

It was an interview with Saabira Chaudhuri published in the Times of India (Fernandes, 2025) which impelled yours sincerely to order a copy of this book pronto.

The author informs readers in the Preface that it was the supply by the corporate sector, of the 'illusion' of convenience and comfort provided by plastics, which created demand (and not vice versa), slowly 'festering' into an undesirable lock-in, which now needs an urgent looking-into. Plastics (generally single-use in the anthroposphere, but long-lived in landfills in the lithosphere), *inter alia*, have been the carriers of the aforesaid comfort and convenience to consumers. The author leaves readers wondering - Can consumers alone bring about the much-needed change to stop the damage and destruction being wrecked by waste plastics on the environment? Or must it necessarily be a team-effort involving governments and the corporates? Reading the book provides the answers.

The prologue is a joy-ride at the expense of one Mr. Lowell Harrelson who believed (from hearsay) that garbage (irrespective of what it was composed of) from New York could be moved to fallow farmland in North Carolina and harvested for methane profitably! Do not skip the



'Comedy of Errors' prologue – a factual narrative which is stranger than fiction and which has plastics as one of its sidekicks. It is cleverly used by the author as a reference in almost all the chapters in the book, to locate other events and happenings in time. It is striking that way back in 1987 there was awareness about the fact that 'the very durability of plastics has conferred a curse,' but it could not effectively become an impetus to real change on-the-ground to stop the incipient damage in its tracks. Spurning (littering, landfilling or even 'sea-filling'!) and burning plastics (preferably with energy recovery) are last resorts, to be turned to only if none of the virtuous Rs of waste management – reusing, recycling, repurposing, or even reducing (or redesigning to dematerialise), and refusing (to use, by consumers) – is feasible or possible (Venkatesh, 2024). Why then, one may wonder, has the recycling rate of the eminently-recyclable polyethylene terephthalate (PET; seen on the cover of the book morphed into a 'wondering human being') been dismally low? As we learn later in the book, the recycled PET resin has been more expensive than virgin resin all along.

1. Right from where it all began

The author, in Chapter#1, goes back in time to the 19th century and identifies celluloid and bakelite (both invented to transmaterialise products of everyday-use) as the forerunners of the long list of plastics that swamped the market in the 20th century. The wars (specifically, WW2), contributed to the rise in demand for the same, as replacers of metal, rubber and wood initially. Thereafter, driven by clever (now deemed to have been unethical) marketing by the likes of DuPont, Monsanto Chemical, Dow Chemical (and several others who followed), to stoke the flames of want and the desire for drudgery-free living, they were posited as well-deserved rewards for the austerity imposed on American people (especially women), during wartime. The sizes of trash cans (and thereby the volumes of waste and discards generated) in the USA,

the author notes, increased, as most things American would…including the appetite for junk-food and drinks, spurred directly by the diffusion of plastic-packaging ('bottles, cups, bags, sachets, boxes and pouches') into the food and beverage sector!

The author dwells expertly on every link in the logical chain of causes and effects, setting the stage to reveal that the obsession with ease and glamour concealed a bunch of then-unknown dangers which would later come to light, one after the other. To combat deforestation, paper was replaced by Styrofoam (expanded polystyrene foam supplied by Dow Chemical), for instance, by McDonalds – what would much later be acknowledged as an instance of problem-shifting. At the time of writing, these dangers (and many others unrelated to plastics) are very much known, but only denied by some.

The innate self-serving and egocentric streak in avaricious businessmen at the helm of corporate entities, who are answerable to dividend-hungry shareholders, makes them commit blunders, hire highly-paid lobbyists to spread contrived, manipulative disinformation, and go on to err even more in an attempt to cover their tracks. [They are neither anthropocentric (focusing on the welfare of all humankind often at the expense of the environment) nor eco-centric (placing the environment on a higher pedestal than humankind)]. The ill-effects of this series of missteps are borne not just by humankind but the entire biosphere. Instead of wisely blending in with the circularity of Mother Nature, misguided humankind has foolishly ventured linearly out along a tangent. Getting back on the circular track to run the race ethically and pass on the baton responsibly to the generations to come, will prove to be extremely difficult. Perhaps not. Time will tell. Thankfully, there are enough eco-centric individuals with 'oodles of determination and passion for the planet', capable of countering the egocentric brigade! This book is a sincere effort in this direction.

2. Thinking beyond Spurning and Burning

Saabira Chaudhuri recounts the initial challenges encountered in the efforts undertaken to recycle plastics in the mid-1980s (open-loop downcycling by and large) in the USA – collection (needing to elicit cooperation from consumers), sorting, separating and selecting (handling composites, tackling contamination risks, and factoring in the different properties of the different types of plastics in the fray) and finding acceptable and profitable alternatives for reintroduction into the anthroposphere.

Nothing ventured, nothing won. The need for change spawned several partnerships and joint ventures and a host of research projects in American universities. Environmental activists

combated disinformation with science-based communication, to educate the public. At the time of writing, what was undertaken as a public relations exercise and a marketing campaign by corporates, to be 'liked and respected' by clients, perhaps remains just that in some parts of the world, while in others, it is evolving into a conscious socio-environmental responsibility, egged on by the pursuit of the sustainable development goals postulated by the United Nations (Venkatesh, 2023a).

The author explains how social activists – young and old – tried to arm-twist McDonald's to focus on assuming responsibility for reprocessing the resin from their Styrofoam packaging wastes to new products, instead of letting them clog landfills or be incinerated to release toxic gases and produce cadmium-laden ash. Eventually, after spending some time greenwashing, McDonald's decided to abandon polystyrene foam altogether. However, the non-reusable alternatives they chose, as the author points out, were not amenable to recycling either.

From Styrofoam packaging (McDonald's) to polyethylene-cellulose-polypropylene disposable diapers (Procter and Gamble; P&G), the author moves over to write about another 'anti-plastics' crusade against a 'corporate war on Nature', in Chapter #4 titled 'Talking Shit' (pun obviously intended). She introduces readers to the attention to detail and meticulousness of an environmental activist by the name of Charles Lehrburger (one of the several characters interviewed for this long story on plastics). Chaudhuri reminisces about the cloth diaper rental and laundering industry from way back in the 1930s which was upended by the transition to P&G's Pampers, which did have some selling points – related to the use phase - over the former. Pampers had done the groundwork on which Huggies (Kimberley-Clark) would capitalise, to compete with and surpass the former. Soggy and smelly, disposed single-use diapers – dubbed as the 'environmental bad boys of the 1990s' - would proliferate in the landfills of the US of A. [A country can be both blessed and cursed by the availability of vast uninhabited open spaces (the latter, if these facilitate unhindered landfilling of wastes)] Readers will be enlightened about how competition and fear of a loss of market share spurs technical innovation, even in the case of a mundane daily-use item like a diaper.

While announcing that experiments to recycle diapers and introduce compostable variants were underway (which unfortunately were not successful), P&G tried to distract critics, mislead and greenwash consumers, by commissioning funded environmental life-cycle assessments to highlight the higher resource usage (energy and water) during the use-phase of cloth diapers, and posit that as a greater concern, environmentally, than filling up landfills with non-biodegradable disposable diapers – most of them also laden with faeces and urine. Sadly, for

this single-use part-plastic product, alternatives to incineration and landfilling could not firmly entrench themselves. On date, every minute about 300,000 disposable diapers are littered, landfilled or burned, globally, writes Chaudhuri – a fact that can also be gleaned from World Economic Forum (2023).

The author throws light on the genesis of the 'three chasing arrows' (courtesy Gary Anderson) symbol in the Resin Identification Code – RIC - in Chapter #7. This was introduced to supposedly aid recyclers, with the caveat that the code implied 'recyclability' but not necessarily the guarantee that the wastes collected and transported to recycling facilities, will end up getting downcycled back into the economy. The author very lucidly explains the practical technoeconomic hurdles which impede large-scale recycling (generally open-loop downcycling). Recycling plants thereby merely serve as 'stopovers' en route to incinerators and landfills, for a greater part of the wastes supplied to them. However, Chaudhuri notes that if taxes on landfills and incinerator emissions keep rising, there will be a point at which increasing the degree of recycling will become economically feasible, and confer the sought-after environmental benefits as well. On a sidenote, readers learn from Chapter # 12 that over 92% of Americans are ignorant of what the RIC means!

3. Degradability – When, How and Why?

In a bioeconomy (circular, preferably), biodegradability is a sought-after property for wastes, which could thereby be 'united' with the pedosphere, serving the purpose of soil stabilisation, carbon storage and nutrient addition (Venkatesh, 2021). Chaudhuri identifies two different types of degradability – photo (where the agent is sunlight), and bio [where the agents are either aerobic (presence of oxygen) or anaerobic (absence of oxygen) microorganisms]. She reminds readers that 'all compostable products are biodegradable in a certain environment, but all biodegradable products are not compostable.' In other words, it is more complex than just 'putting it out for the bugs to chew and forgetting about it.'

Using Hefty garbage bags marketed by Mobil in 1990 in the USA as 'degradable', to illustrate the case (Chapter #5), the author observes that in the absence of standards and globally-enforceable regulations, corporates hop onto the bandwagon of using the term 'degradability' (without specifying what the agent/s is/are) or 'biodegradability', as a convenient selling point. Deceptive and misleading, contends the author, and lambasts it as a blatant ongoing 'misuse'. (In 2024, Hefty was marketed as a 'recyclable' garbage bag. Pointing out that it would anyway

end up in landfills, the attorney general of Minnesota pulled up Mobil for attempting to mislead consumers.)

While biodegradability may be a property of a product which ends up as waste, the question to be asked is 'How soon?' The author notes in another chapter that 44% of 'bioplastics' are actually quite difficult to degrade biologically (Lors et al. 2024). Further, just as electric vehicles must be analysed as parts of a system which includes the thermal power plants far away, bioplastics need to be understood in their entirety from a systems perspective. Researchers investigating landfills have found so-called biodegradables having a very long sojourn down there; in Chapter #8, we meet a pro-plastics university professor Bill Rathje (who coined the word 'garbology' for the Oxford English dictionary) who used this finding – based on 'hard science and cold facts' to assuage plastics' bad reputation. He omitted mentioning that those enduring 'biodegradables' were often bagged in plastic!

For photodegradation to come into play, the wastes have to be exposed to sunlight; Chaudhuri then wonders if they would be left above the ground. In that case, post-disintegration, what would be the fate of the resultant microplastics? Wind and water will drive them far and wide (Yadav et al., 2020 cited in Venkatesh, 2023b)., and the consequences thereof, are now well-known to readers (discussed in detail in Chapter #12). She mentions, en passant, the competition between suppliers of LDPE (low-density polyethylene) bags and paper bags to supermarkets (also the subject of Lidbrand et al., 2023) , and lays bare the stalemate in which debates about which of the two is preferable environmentally, end in.

With plans to set up large-scale composting and recycling plants not materialising, Big Plastics, in order to stand its own against the anti-plastics sentiment raging across the USA, had to consistently spend on advertising and paid-editorials/features in magazines and newspapers, in order to uphold the 'virtues' of plastics while actively 'working to inoculate against the negatives thereof'. Incineration of plastics was projected as a safe way to recover energy from waste plastics! The author delves deeper into the modus operandi and the characters involved (Richard Wirthlin, with the epithet 'Prince of Pollsters', for instance), in the partly-successful campaign to dampen the animosity towards plastics. (Ronald Reagen, incidentally, happens to make a cameo appearance in this story.) Misleading 'cleverly-and frequently-delivered' rhetoric often makes people question basic scientific understandings, as is happening in the USA at the time of writing this review.

4. Detour to India - Globalising the Throwaway Culture

Saabira Chaudhuri grew up in Bengaluru in south India and witnessed the 'reuse-recycling-repurposing-repair' culture that thrived in India (and still does, though perhaps not to the same extent in the cities). Indian readers can easily relate to the instances she provides in Chapter#9, of the reuse and repurposing referred to. She laments the damage that has been caused to this culture by the conflation of throwaway consumerism with progress and 'lazy' convenience with a higher standard of living, by the burgeoning urban middle-class on the one hand, and the enticement of the rural poor to adopt the 'aluminium-coated polyethylene sachet culture' on the other. Liberalisation in the early 1990s opened the Indian market to many multinationals (American P&G forayed in to compete with already-entrenched British Unilever). Needless to add, this meant that the per-capita plastic waste generated in India would rise conspicuously into the 21st century. Economic growth has always come at a price (a negative externality - a socio-environmental cost which increases over time). What is good for the goose (business) is often not good for the gander (environment)!

The fate of plastic wastes generated in rural India and the imports of plastic wastes from abroad, are different stories altogether. It was as early as 2001 that reports of cows dying after consuming plastic bags were first published. This happens to the day! Among the other repercussions of the generation of plastic wastes have been fires, and clogging of drains leading to floods and landslides in the monsoon. And yes, the undeniable concerns which microplastics in the hydrosphere are posing, at the time of writing this review! Just as it was with disposable diapers (P&G) and Styrofoam (Dow Chemical & McDonald's), efforts made by Unilever to collect and recycle shampoo sachets did not take off owing to economic infeasibility. Saabira Chaudhuri informs that in 2021, about 40 billion shampoo sachets were sold in India (Kumar et al. 2024). Were they incinerated? Landfilled? Combusted in cement kilns as sources of heat? Unilever, she writes, chose not to answer these questions of hers.

5. PET Projects – Spotlight on Coke and Pepsi

Closed-loop recycling, whenever possible, is preferable to open-loop downcycling. PET, as mentioned earlier, is eminently recyclable, but is generally downcycled (if it does not end up in landfills or incinerators, that is). The author takes readers on a journey from thick returnable-refillable glass bottles to the thinner disposable variants to disposable steel and aluminium cans (incidentally both lined on the inside with the anti-corrosive plastic bisphenol A) to different types of plastics, including PET which has now entrenched itself as the polymer of choice for soft-drink bottles. The author's conversational-yet-studied style of presentation makes this

journey thoroughly absorbing. Along the way, we meet Kate Krebs of the National Recycling Coalition and read about the controversial role she played, collaborating with Coke (and other beverage recyclers) to promote kerbside recycling of used PET bottles over charging refundable deposits, and Coke's unfounded promise of reusing or recycling 100% of its plastic bottles in the USA, and using 30% sugarcane-based bioplastic for all its bottles globally by 2020.

The Coke and Pepsi PET bottles' saga ends on a slightly disappointing note, in Chapter#11. Recycling powered by collection of used PET bottles based on refundable deposits could not pick up in the USA exactly as envisaged. Contaminated PET bottles from kerbsides had to be diverted to landfills; what could be recycled turned out to be of lower-quality, and virgin PET suddenly became cheaper owing to a drop in petroleum prices. Interestingly, there was a huge chunk of used PET bottles wending their way to China, along with huge quantities of other types of plastic wastes! The recycling rate of PET bottles in the US, at the time of reviewing, hovers somewhere below 30% (vis-à-vis 14% for plastics packaging as a whole). The author, in a footnote, informs that Germany and Denmark, on the strength of well-functioning deposit programmes have over 95% PET bottle recycling rates!

6. Mega Problem with the Micro and Nano

Smaller the size, bigger the problem. The reference is to the micro-, and nanoplastics becoming more and more ubiquitous now in the hydrosphere and pedosphere (and also in the air we breathe). Chapter # 12 aptly titled 'The Last Straw' opens with a plastic straw stuck in the nostril of an Olive Ridley turtle rescued by a German marine biologist off the Costa Rican coast in 2015. That was just one straw. Imagine all the waste plastics (centi-, milli-, micro-, nano-) out there in the hydrosphere, encountered by sea birds, mammals, fish and other creatures everyday. Thanks to social media, Saabira Chaudhuri says, public awareness about the impending threats to biodiversity that cannot be swept under the carpet, have goaded many countries (mainly in Europe, with France being a trendsetter) to ban or restrict the use of several single-use plastic products like cups, plates, spoons and forks in restaurants, and also plastic foil wrappings used for some vegetables and fruits in supermarkets. The author presents cucumbers, carrots, bananas and berries sold in Paris, as examples in Chapter #13.

There is a mention by Saabira Chaudhuri, of a 2024-study which linked microplastics in human bloodstreams to blood clots, thrombosis, strokes and cardiac arrests. Direct and indirect harm posed by plastics to humans have apparently made corporates realise that they should not be turning a blind eye to what they see, and a deaf ear to complaints and protests. But switching

to reusable, recyclable and compostable plastics which they have been promising at regular intervals to save face and stay in business (and reneging on the same), has not been easy owing to a host of infeasibilities. Besides, global plastics consumption is forecast to triple by 2060 – Unilever's sachets, P&Gs disposable nappies, McDonald's plastic-lined paper cups, Coke and Pepsi's PET bottles will keep flooding into the anthroposphere. The composition of the pie (with respect to how the wastes generated will actually be handled) in 2060 is unpredictable at the time of reviewing, but there may well be some positive changes, as we move forth, favouring the environment and human health.

The author refers to another report which urges the use of fewer and safer chemicals (to control and abate the environmental and health repercussions associated with the leaching thereof into the soil, water and food). Not all chemicals, Chaudhuri observes, are intentional additions to plastics; there are numerous (from among the possible 16,000) which creep in as contaminants and are yet to be studied thoroughly by toxicologists.

Conclusion: Frequently-asked Questions

While reminding us not to forget that as consumers, we have the power to alter the shape of the future, by exerting pressure on manufacturers who give a short shrift to sustainability and indulge in greenwashing blatantly, Saabira Chaudhuri provides detailed responses to what she considers are 'frequently-asked questions' by anyone and everyone out there looking for answers. Table 1 lists these FAQs, but for the elaborate answers provided by the author, you would need to buy the book Consumed – How Big Plastics Got Us Hooked on Plastic, and hopefully be able to bring about much-desired changes in your consumption patterns, for the sake of Gaia and everything in Nature she cradles and nurtures, including the members of our species who are yet to be born.

The book is very well-timed, considering that all countries in the world (consumers of plastics obviously) are doing their bit to reach the sustainable development goals – SDGs - they have set for themselves, for the end of year-2030. [Plastics – their production, use and end-of-life management – impact almost all the SDGs in some way or the other.] Saabira Chaudhuri does leave us with the hope that *'We can continue to be consumers without being consumed'.*

Table 1: Frequently-asked questions, answers to which you find in the book (Chaudhuri 2025, 326-350)

1. Is single-use plastic bad?
2. Should I try to use less single-use plastic?
3. Is recycling a scam?
4. Why are plastics recycling rates so low?
5. What can I do to support recycling?
6. What is greener – cloth diapers or disposables?
7. How can I protect myself against greenwashing?
8. Isn't paper better than plastic?
9. Are reusables the answer to our plastic-wastes problem?
10. What is chemical recycling and is it promising as companies say?
11. Are biodegradable plastics environmentally-friendly?
12. Are there any applications for which compostable products make sense?
13. Are bio-based plastics a good alternative to fossil-fuel-based ones?
14. Given that we use fossil fuels, is not using them to make plastics and then burning then actually a good idea?
15. Is landfilling conventional plastics bad for the environment?
16. Should I worry about chemicals in plastics?
17. How can I minimise my exposure to chemicals in plastics?
18. How concerned should I be about microplastics and nanoplastics?
19. Are some plastics safer than others?
20. Most of your answers have caveats. Is there anything you can say to leave me feeling hopeful?

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