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## Future paper based printed circuit boards for green electronics: fabrication and life cycle assessment†

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Paper-based electronics have been considered as one of the most exciting technologies in the near future due to sustainability, low cost, mechanical flexibility, etc. Even though there have been numerous studies regarding this technology, there is not any available quantitative study on how paper electronics would minimize the impact on the environment. This work aims to give the first detailed analysis regarding this important question. To this end, we for the first time designed and prototyped paper-based multilayer printed circuit boards (P-PCBs), which show comparable functions to the currently available organic printed circuit boards (O-PCBs); yet the P-PCBs adopt a "green" preparation process. A life cycle assessment study was performed to quantify the P-PCBs' environmental impacts, e.g. acidification potential, global warming potential, human toxic potential, ozone layer depletion potential, etc. Our current research reveals that the P-PCBs have about two magnitude lower impact on the environment than O-PCBs based on the results of the life cycle assessment, which suggests that the P-PCB technique is beneficial for the environment at the regional or global production level. The current study gives useful information and sheds light on the future technological directions for various paper based electronics studies.

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### Broader context

The concept of paper based electronics has existed for decades and there have been many developments of the materials, techniques and applications in recent years. Many reports present the excellent properties of paper based electronics in various applications and discuss the possibilities towards large scale manufacturing, commercialization and product integration. As such, a comprehensive assessment of the paper based electronics is necessary, such as the cost, environmental impact, market size, etc. Among them, the environmental impact is one of the most concerning issues, yet there are few research studies on it and no report is available on how much of a burden on the environment paper electronics are. In this work we developed a multilayer paper based printed circuit board (P-PCB) technique which provides adequate functionalities for common uses; we further conducted the life cycle assessment (LCA) to analyze the environmental impacts of the prototypes based on this technique. With the comparison of the quantitative life cycle impact assessment (LCIA) results of P-PCB and the ordinary organic printed circuit board (O-PCB), we show the great advantages of P-PCB in green electronics, which will cater to the trend of eco-products and sustainability of future electronics.

## Introduction

Paper-based electronics have attracted considerable interest because of their unique characteristics including flexibility, foldability, lightweight, degradability and low cost. A wide range of devices have been investigated in a paper-based scenario,<sup>1</sup>

including transistors,<sup>2,3</sup> solar cells,<sup>4,5</sup> supercapacitors,<sup>6,7</sup> batteries,<sup>8–11</sup> radio frequency identification (RFID) tags,<sup>12–14</sup> antennas,<sup>15,16</sup> micro-fluidic paper-based analytical devices ( $\mu$ PADs),<sup>17</sup> micro electro-mechanical systems (MEMS),<sup>18,19</sup> touch pads,<sup>20,21</sup> flexible displays,<sup>22</sup> OLEDs,<sup>23</sup> microfluidic analytical devices, etc.<sup>24</sup> Although these new types of products are considered to be advantageous over the conventional ones in terms of both economic and environmental concerns, there still lacks a systematic evaluation about how and how much the paper-based electronic products could be better than the current counterparts. Therefore it is of considerable interest to carry out a systematic survey of paper-based electronics, i.e. paper-based printed circuit board (P-PCB) technology in this report.

Printed circuit boards (PCBs) are an indispensable part in the electronics industry, which provide support for the

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integrated circuits and electrical connections for the electronic components. The global PCB market was about 54 billion in 2012, of which the China market accounted for almost 40% and is predicted to continuously increase in the next five years.<sup>25</sup> However, the conventional PCB is an environmentally hazardous product due to the significantly negative impact along its life cycle. For example, the PCB manufacturing is well known as an energy-intensive and chemical-intensive industry, which involves many chemical processes and materials that are potentially harmful to the environment.<sup>26,27</sup> It has once been reported that the electronics industry caused severe pollution of some rivers around the Pearl River Delta that contain excessive levels of heavy metals such as copper and lead.<sup>28</sup> What is more, the PCB industry brings about potential environmental issues in the waste disposal and recycling stages. It is estimated that globally, 20–50 million tons of waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE) are discarded annually, and a large sum of them are informally collected and recycled especially in those developing countries in Africa and Asia.<sup>29,30</sup> This problem is more severe in the case of mid-range and low-end electrical devices such as domestic appliances. It is forecasted that the amount of domestic e-waste in China will rise to 5.4 million tons in 2015.<sup>31</sup> The waste PCBs are from all kinds of WEEE, which contain a large amount of toxic substances, such as organic compounds, heavy metals and brominated flame retardants (BFRs); these substances can cause serious environmental and health problems if improperly disposed. For instance, Guiyu in Guangdong province, China (Fig. S11†) may be the largest electronic waste (e-waste) site on earth.<sup>32,33</sup> Due to the many primitive recycling operations, 80% of the children in Guiyu suffer from lead poisoning and the soil there has been found to be so saturated with heavy metals such as lead, chromium and tin that the groundwater becomes undrinkable.<sup>34</sup>

In order to solve these problems, besides imposing more strict regulations by the governments, technical advances such as replacing the current hazardous materials with more environmentally benign ones can be very effective. As such, the paper-based PCB (P-PCB) technique has been regarded as one of the most promising alternatives to the current organic PCB (O-PCB) technique in the near future for green electronics and sustainable development due to the features of sustainability, flexibility, degradability and low cost.

In order to enable a new integration scheme of P-PCB into the current electronic packaging technology so as to achieve the necessary working functions for the future green electronics, a novel prototype of P-PCB needs to be established. The design of this prototype shall follow some basic principles so that the future P-PCB can possess the general functions much resembling those of the commonly available O-PCB. For example, (1) a P-PCB shall possess excellent electrical conductivity in the printed circuit areas to avoid severe resistance loss; (2) the resolution of lines and pitches shall meet the basic requirements for modern electronic packages; (3) it could have a multilayer structure with functional vias; and (4) it shall have adequate reliability which ensures the general applications. Moreover, considering the intrinsic characteristics of paper, a pure additive process seems to be the best choice for the

fabrication of P-PCB, such as 3-D printing,<sup>35</sup> inkjet printing<sup>12,36–38</sup> and screen printing,<sup>39,40</sup> instead of the current subtractive or a hybrid one which involves the wet process for both the rigid PCB and flexible PCB. Besides, the wiring material is one of the most important issues for P-PCB, which requires excellent electrical properties, reliability, processability, etc.

To all these ends, we for the first time established a processing technique for the preparation of the P-PCB and systematically evaluated the environmental impacts. Even though there have been significant advances in the paper based printed conductive circuit technology,<sup>12,15,16,41–45</sup> we selected electrically conductive adhesives (ECAs) as the conductive material for P-PCB in this study; this is mainly because ECAs have been well applied in the electronics packaging industry for decades and the recent technical advances of ECAs guarantee the necessary functionalities even when they are printed on paper, such as excellent conductivity, mechanical robustness, outstanding reliability as compared to the conductive inks, and there is a broad spectrum of choices of the high performance polymer resin binder to meet various application scenarios.<sup>46–53</sup> The present work adopts the thermoset polyurethane (PU)-based ECA with micro silver flakes as conductive fillers, which exhibits excellent electrical conductivity and many other superior performance characteristics.<sup>43,53,54</sup> Correspondingly, we adopt the screen printing method in this work which is widely used in the printed circuit industry.

Based on our current technique, a series of prototypes of P-PCB with the necessary functionalities were prepared. In order to evaluate the environmental costs of P-PCB scientifically, we adopted the life cycle assessment (LCA) method. The LCA is an effective approach to analyze both the energy consumption and environmental impacts associated with a product over its full life cycle all through the raw material acquisition, production phase, use phase and waste management;<sup>55,56</sup> and it has been widely applied in the development stage of a new product or technology. The LCA results can provide us a guidance of materials selection, product design, recovery mode and even policy making so that we can focus research efforts on minimizing the burdens of a product while maximizing its benefits. Life cycle thinking is helpful for the eco-design or sustainable design of a new product or technology. So we conducted the LCA method to quantify the environmental impacts and identify the key drivers of the environmental impacts in the whole life cycle of the P-PCB prototypes.

## Methodology

### Fabrication and characterization of the P-PCB prototypes

We designed a pure additive process for fabricating a multilayer P-PCB, which mainly utilizes the techniques of screen printing, drilling and filling. In a typical process, we firstly screen print the polyurethane (PU)-based ECA with the designed patterns on each layer of the paper substrate and cure them at 150 °C, and then adhere them layer by layer using the pressure sensitive adhesive with a position-alignment setup, so that the circuits on different layers are aligned with each other. After that, we

connect each layer by punching vertical interconnect access (via) and filling the ECA; finally the surface mount devices (SMDs) are mounted onto the surface of the P-PCB with polyacrylate based ECA which can be cured at room temperature. Sometimes, we need blind vias or buried vias and thus we may adjust the sequence of the adhering and punching steps and the electrical connection would be ensured. Using the above methods, the as-obtained P-PCB show analogous functions to the conventional flexible or rigid O-PCB. Fig. 1a and b show the flow chart and a scheme of a typical process for a three-layered P-PCB.

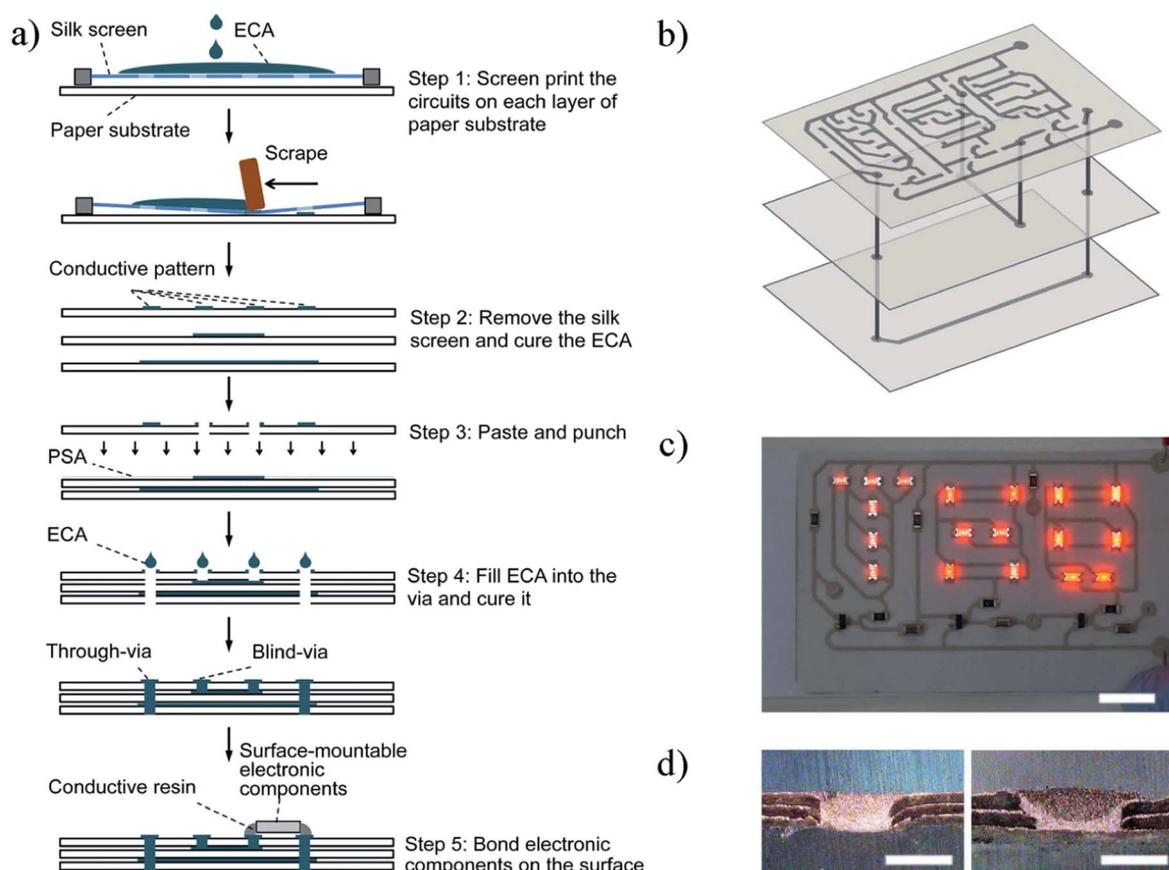
Usually, a two to four-layered circuit board can meet the general mid-range needs for PCB uses, thus we designed several three-layered circuit prototypes (twinkling LED array, doorbell) for P-PCB and replaced the control panel of a temperature controller with our P-PCB, which worked very well and showed adequate functionality characteristics comparable to O-PCBs (see ESI† for details). Here, an epoxy based substrate (FR-4) is used for comparison. Then we compared a series of performance characteristics that were essential for PCB applications, including line spacing, moisture resistance, flame retardation, biodegradability, reliability, dielectrical properties of the

substrate materials, *etc.* These tests were performed according to the standards prevalently used in the PCB industry, *i.e.* the ICP 6013 series.

The materials that we chose were mainly commercially available printing paper with an adhesive sticker (pressure sensitive adhesive) on the back (Avery Dennison Co. America, FASSON series, AW5416), PU resin (Bayer MaterialScience AG, Germany, DESMOPHEN 1150 and BL 3175 SN), polyacrylate resin (Koninklijke DSM N.V., Holland, NeoCryl B-725), micro-silver powders (Sichuang Banknote Co., China, Product No. SF01A) and Scotch tape (3 M). We tailored a position-alignment setup to fabricate this three-layered P-PCB.

### Life cycle assessment

The present LCA was conducted according to ISO 14040 guidelines which included four steps: (1) goal and scope definition, (2) inventory analysis which quantifies the materials inputs, the energy inputs, and the environmental discharges through the specified life cycle phases, (3) impact assessment which accumulates flows into different impact categories, and (4) interpretation of the results.<sup>57</sup>



**Fig. 1** (a) A brief flow chart of the pure additive fabrication process of a three-layered P-PCB. (b) A schematic diagram of the through-via and blind-via connecting the circuits on different layers of a three-layered P-PCB: the first layer and the second layer are connected by two blind-vias, and the first layer and the third layer are connected by two through-vias. (c) A prototype of a twinkling LED array showing the letters "THU" (the scale bar is 10 mm). (d) Optical microscopic cross-sectional images of a through-via (left) and a blind-via, the ECA filled in the via connected well with each layer (the scale bar is 0.5 mm).

In order to demonstrate the environmental advantage of the P-PCB, we conducted a comparative LCA for both P-PCB and the epoxy based O-PCB in terms of materials and processes. As the four-layered epoxy based PCB is commonly used, we defined the functional unit as “fabricating 10 000 m<sup>2</sup> of four-layered PCB with the paper/epoxy substrate”, and we consider the two kinds of PCB to have similar functionalities (we consider them to have the same circuit area, which is 20 000 m<sup>2</sup> in this study). The system boundaries are shown in Fig. 2. We took the raw material acquisition, fabrication of PCB and waste disposal into consideration, and excluded the transportation and the phase in the system boundaries.

After defining the scope of the study, we established the material inventory by collecting data from local firms in Shenzhen City (Shennan circuits Co., Ltd. and Shenzhen Hangsheng Electronics Co., Ltd.) and the published literature. Additionally, for P-PCB, we designed and carried out a procedure for multilayer P-PCB fabrications and developed the material inventory based on reasonable assumptions, experimental data and computer models. The main materials inventory data and the collection methods are presented in Tables S1 and S3;† all the materials were tracked back to the point of resource extraction, using cradle-to-gate data from the database (Ecoinvent).

The life cycle impact assessment (LCIA) was conducted with the characterization model CML 2001-Apr. 2013 incorporated in GaBi 6.0. In this assessment we considered several most concerned environmental impact categories: Abiotic Depletion (ADP) (fossil), Acidification Potential (AP), Eutrophication Potential (EP), Freshwater Aquatic Ecotoxicity Potential (FAETP), Global Warming Potential (GWP), Human Toxic Potential (HTP), Ozone Layer Depletion Potential (ODP), Photochem. Ozone Creation Potential (POCP), and Terrestrial Ecotoxicity Potential (TETP). These categories can give full description of the environmental impacts of the P-PCB.

## Results and discussion

### The comprehensive properties of the P-PCB

We have successfully demonstrated the feasibility of forming 3–10 layered P-PCBs with the procedure we proposed: Fig. 1c is a prototype with three layers and Fig. 1d shows the cross-section of a through-via and a blind-via of this prototype. The connections of five and ten layers of P-PCB are shown in Fig. S3.† We can see that the filled ECA connects well with each layer of the printed ECA pattern, and this may guarantee the electrical connection of each layer, which is one of the most important issues of a multilayer P-PCB.

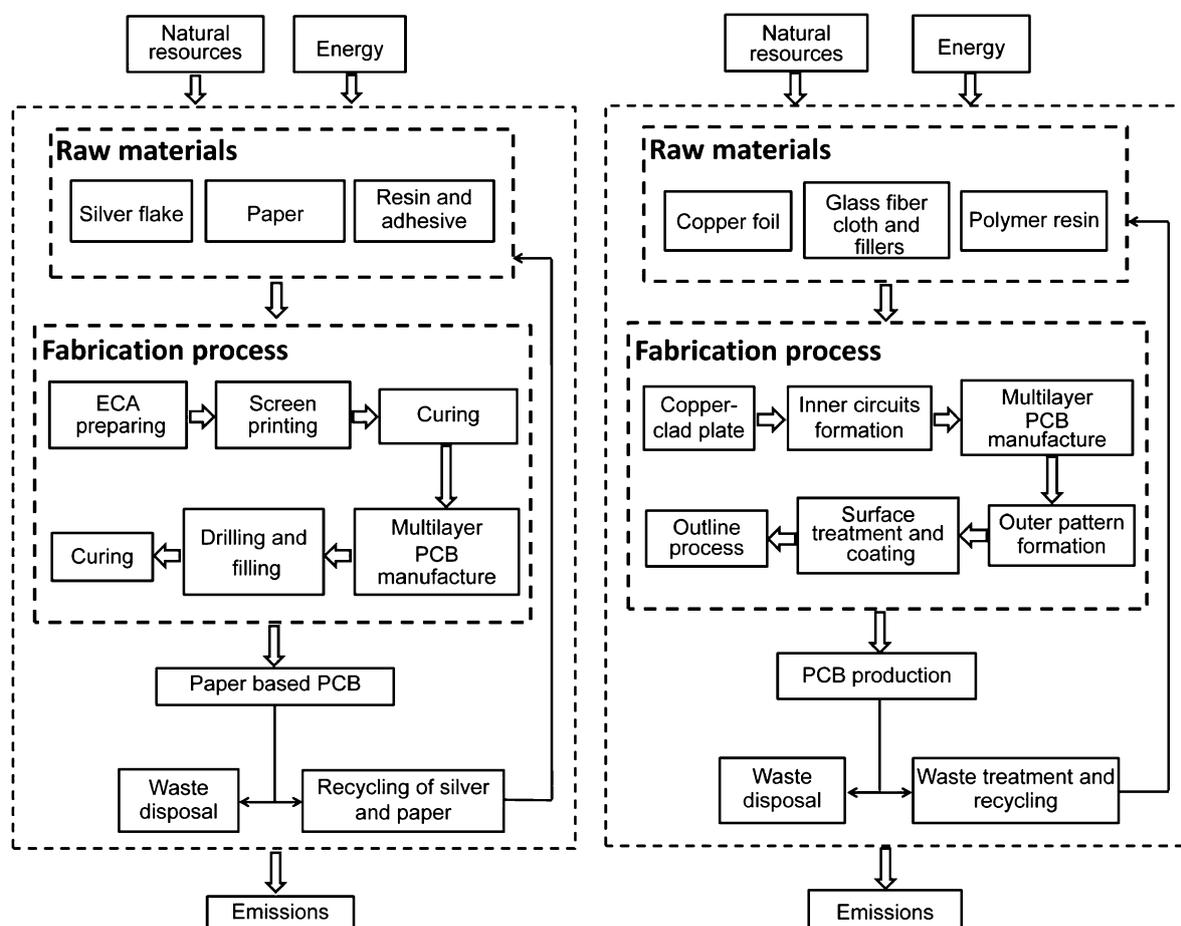


Fig. 2 System boundaries of paper based multilayer PCB (left) and epoxy based multilayer PCB (right).

Table 1 Comprehensive comparison of paper based PCB (P-PCB) and organic based PCB (O-PCB)

	Paper based PCB	Organic based PCB <sup>a</sup>
Substrate	Commercially available paper	Epoxy resin/glassfiber/inorganic fillers
Biodegradability	Degradable	Nondegradable
Flame retardation	Poor to fair	Good
Moisture resistance	Poor to fair	Good
Line spacing	~100 μm (ref. 1)	~50 μm
Line width	50–100 μm for screen printing <sup>1</sup>	~50 μm
Tensile strength	~6 MPa for printing paper <sup>b</sup>	—
Flexural strength	—	>400 MPa
Resistivity of conductive materials	~10 <sup>-5</sup> Ω cm for 50% Ag loading of PU based ECA <sup>b</sup>	~2 × 10 <sup>-6</sup> Ω cm for copper foil
Reliability	>85 °C/85RH 1500 h <sup>b</sup> >–40–125 °C per 500 cycles <sup>b</sup>	>85 °C/85RH 1500 h >–40–125 °C per 500 cycles
SMT temperature	Room temperature	~240 °C
Dielectric constant	~3 (1 GHz) <sup>c</sup>	~4.5 (1 GHz)
Dielectric loss factor	~0.132 (1 GHz) <sup>c</sup>	~0.023 (1 GHz)
Cost <sup>d</sup>	15–30 USD per m <sup>2</sup>	90–120 USD per m <sup>2</sup>

<sup>a</sup> We took the FR-4 based PCB for comparison; the performance characteristic parameters are from the product manual of Shennan circuits Co., Ltd.

<sup>b</sup> The parameters were obtained by experiments and the details can be found in the ESI. <sup>c</sup> Tested after drying at 80 °C for 2 h and conditioned in a closet with stable temperature and humidity (20 °C, 60%RH). <sup>d</sup> Cost of the P-PCB is calculated based on the prototypes that we prepared (details are shown in Table S11) and the cost of the O-PCB (FR-4) from Shennan circuits Co., Ltd, both contain four layers.

The comprehensive properties of P-PCB are shown in Table 1, and are compared with those of the typical O-PCB. In addition to the advantages of low cost and degradability, the P-PCBs also show excellent reliability performance characteristics during a temperature-humidity (85 °C/85RH) aging test (Fig. S6†) and a thermal cycling (–40–125 °C) test. To be specific, the bulk resistivity of the test samples was maintained at  $1.6 \times 10^{-5}$  Ω cm after being aged at 85 °C/85RH for 1500 hours, while it just increased to  $5.9 \times 10^{-5}$  Ω cm after 600 cycles of the thermal cycling test (–40 °C–125 °C, one cycle in 30 min). Although the line spacing, line width and dielectrical properties (dielectric loss) are inferior to those of O-PCB, they are still sufficient to meet the requirements for many low density and low-frequency PCB applications. As for the poor performance of flame retardation, moisture resistance and mechanical strength, we can adopt the paper-making technique to improve them for future applications (such as adopting a suitable sizing agent or controlling the surface chemistry<sup>58</sup>). On these grounds, the P-PCB shows comparable functionalities with the conventional O-PCB. Note that, even though silver is much expensive than copper (about 80 times), it is still quite economical since a pure additive process only involves a limited amount of materials and processing steps (Tables S2 and S4†).

### Inventory results of the P-PCB

The main components of the P-PCB are shown in Table 2, and the inventory data are mainly calculated from the model and the prototypes that we constructed before (see ESI† for details). The energy consumed in the manufacturing process is estimated with the parameters of the available equipment and the actual consumption in the experiments. From the preliminary assessment results, we may find that although the conductive filler (silver flakes) only makes up 2.83 wt% of the P-PCB, its environmental impacts account for a considerable proportion of that of the whole P-PCB. For instance, silver is responsible for more than 75% of the HTP. So we collected the inventory data of the production of silver flakes (Table 3) for a more detailed LCA, and in this way we can focus more on the main causes of the environmental impacts. The detailed input inventory is shown in Table S2,† which is tracked back to resource consumption.

### Inventory comparisons

Fig. 3 presents the life cycle inventory results on the mass of emissions for fabricating 10 000 m<sup>2</sup> P-PCB and O-PCB. The O-PCB life cycle shows significantly greater emissions to both

Table 2 Material and energy inventory of P-PCB

Component	Material	Weight content
Substrate	Paper	87.77%
Adhesive	Methyl acrylate	6.58%
Conductive filler	Silver flakes	2.83%
ECA binder	Polyurethane	2.83%
Energy consumption per m <sup>2</sup>		0.173 kW h

Table 3 Material and energy inventory for silver flakes

Ag flakes per kg		
Raw materials	Amount	Unit
AgNO <sub>3</sub>	1.573	kg
Ethanol	1	kg
Water	10	kg
NaOH	0.370	kg
Formaldehyde	0.139	kg
Electricity	8	kW h

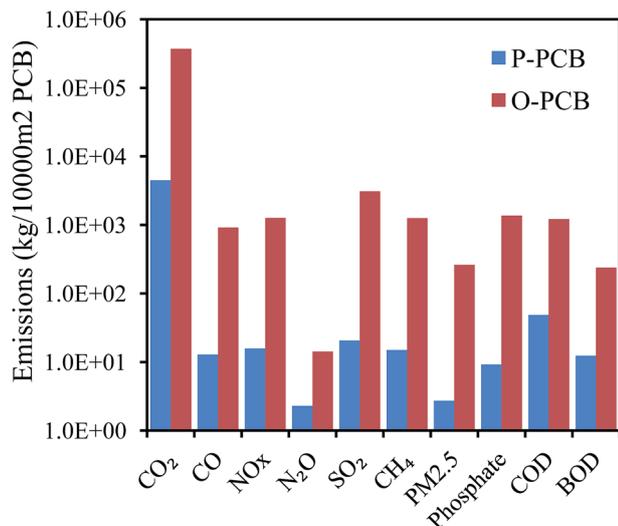


Fig. 3 Comparative LCI for P-PCB and O-PCB. PM<sub>2.5</sub> refers to particle matter  $\leq 2.5 \mu\text{m}$ ; COD refers to Chemical Oxygen Demand; BOD refers to Biological Oxygen Demand.

air and water, which means that the life cycle of O-PCB is more environmentally harmful: more materials and resource consumptions contribute to more gaseous emissions like CO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>x</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>, etc.; more chemical processes involved in the life cycle are responsible for more emissions of Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD), Biological Oxygen Demand (BOD) and phosphate.

### Environmental impact results of the P-PCB

Fig. 4 shows the environmental profile of the P-PCB. The listed are the main raw materials in the production of silver flakes and

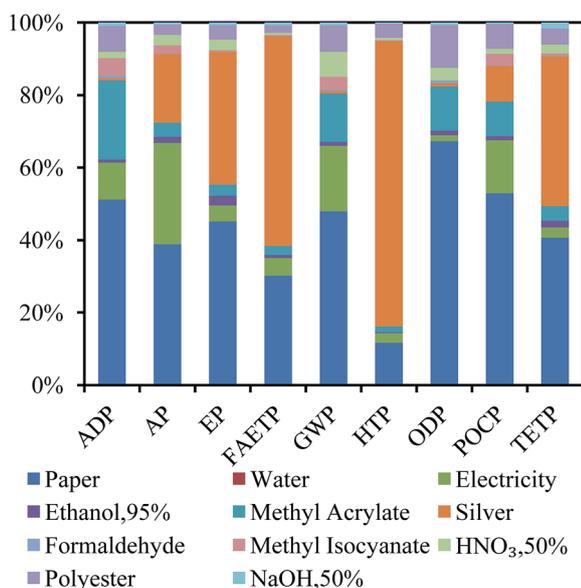


Fig. 4 Environmental profile of P-PCB; the main raw materials and consumptions in the manufacturing of P-PCB are listed.

fabrication of P-PCB. The scores of the environmental impact of each material are normalized in terms of percentage, so that we can define which material is the most contributing factor in the life cycle. For example, the raw material of paper is the main contributor to ADP (51.1%), AP (38.9%), EP (45.1%), FAETP (30.2%), GWP (47.9%), ODP (67.3%), HTP (11.7%), POCP (52.88%) and TETP (40.68%). Because paper is the main component of the P-PCB (~88 wt%), the pulp production and paper production processes are main contributors to the environmental impacts. The Suspended Solids (SS), Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD) and Absorbable Organic Halide (AOX) in the pulp production contribute to the EP, FAETP, HTP and TETP; while burdens on ADP are due to energy consumption which is mostly based on fossil fuels. Meanwhile, the alkyl halide emission is the primary cause of ODP and the emissions of SO<sub>2</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub>, and NO<sub>x</sub> in the pulp production and paper production are the main contributors to AP, GWP, and POCP.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to paper, silver is another significant contributor, despite that it only accounts for less than 3 wt% of the P-PCB (Table 2). This is because the production of silver is a high consumption process: burdens on AP (18%) are due to SO<sub>2</sub> emission from fossil fuel combustion; burdens on EP (36.6%) originate from phosphide and nitride emissions; and the cyanide, biphenyl, mercury, lead, and tin discharged in the refining process are responsible for 78.8% of HTP, 57.9% of FAETP and 41.3% of TETP.

On the other hand, the polymer resins, which act as the binder (polyester) and adhesive sticker (polyacrylate), also account for some aspects of air pollution, e.g. AP, GWP, POCP, and ODP because of their potential to discharge SO<sub>2</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub>, NO<sub>x</sub> and halohydrocarbons in the production and disposal phases. Besides, the electricity used in the O-PCB fabrication contributes to ADP, AP, GWP, and POCP for its consumption of fossil fuels and emissions of SO<sub>2</sub>, CO<sub>2</sub>, CH<sub>4</sub>, and NO<sub>x</sub>.

### Environmental impact comparisons

Table 4 shows the life cycle impact assessment (LCIA) results of both P-PCB and O-PCB. The flows in the life cycle of O-PCB are much more than those of P-PCB. For example, the emission equivalent weight of HTP, FAETP, EP, TETP and AP in the life cycle of O-PCB is more than one hundred times that of the P-PCB. This is mainly due to the consumption of copper in the O-PCB production as the life cycle of copper contributes the most to AP (45.15%), EP (63.56%), FAETP (89.52%), HTP (84.02%), TETP (85.09%), and POCP (38.06%) as a result of the energy consumption and emissions (gas emissions such as CO<sub>2</sub>, SO<sub>2</sub>, and NO<sub>2</sub> and waste water emission) in the mining and refining processes of copper.<sup>60</sup> In addition, the emission equivalent weight of the other environmental impact categories of O-PCB is also dozens of times that of P-PCB. That is because of the electricity consumption mainly in the electroplating process and the large sum of raw materials such as epoxy substrates, glassfiber, Al<sub>2</sub>O<sub>3</sub>, etc., which put much burden on the environment in their life cycle. The contributions of each input of O-PCB to the environmental impacts are shown in Fig. S10.†

Table 4 LCIA for 10 000 m<sup>2</sup> P-PCB and O-PCB

Impact categories	Impact units	P-PCB	O-PCB	O-PCB : P-PCB
ADP	J	$8.51 \times 10^{10}$	$5.50 \times 10^{12}$	65 : 1
AP	g SO <sub>2</sub> -equiv.	$3.63 \times 10^4$	$4.53 \times 10^6$	125 : 1
EP	g Phosphate-equiv.	$1.88 \times 10^4$	$2.95 \times 10^6$	157 : 1
FAETP	g DCB-equiv.	$3.11 \times 10^6$	$5.81 \times 10^8$	187 : 1
GWP	g CO <sub>2</sub> -equiv.	$5.55 \times 10^6$	$3.92 \times 10^8$	71 : 1
HTP	g DCB-equiv.	$1.03 \times 10^7$	$2.31 \times 10^9$	224 : 1
ODP	g R11-equiv.	$3.56 \times 10^{-1}$	$1.85 \times 10^1$	52 : 1
POCP	g Ethene-equiv.	$3.31 \times 10^3$	$3.29 \times 10^5$	99 : 1
TETP	g DCB-equiv.	$6.49 \times 10^4$	$9.04 \times 10^6$	139 : 1

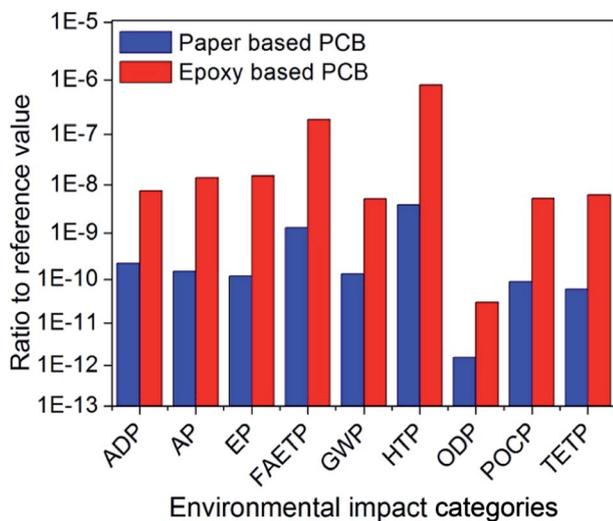


Fig. 5 Comparison of the standardized LCIA results of P-PCB and epoxy based PCB.

To sum up, the environmental burdens of P-PCB are about two orders of magnitude less than O-PCB, as shown in Fig. 5 and Table 4, which render an essential difference between P-PCB and O-PCB and that could be explained by the following. Firstly, the raw materials of P-PCB are simple and environmentally friendly ones, of which more than 80% is cellulose paper and the environmentally harmful materials only account for less than 5%. In contrast, the O-PCB has more unfriendly raw materials, such as epoxy resin, glassfiber, fillers and copper foils. Secondly, the pure additive method adopted in the P-PCB manufacture is more economical and simpler than the conventional processes of O-PCB production, which is energy consuming and sacrifices a large amount of copper. Thirdly, the waste treatment of P-PCB is more environmentally friendly due to its cellulose nature; whereas epoxy requires a high temperature of 800 °C to decompose, and toxic emissions such as dioxin could be discharged,<sup>33</sup> which is restricted by the European Union (EU) because of its potential hazards to human health.<sup>61</sup>

## Concluding remarks and outlook

This article for the first time evaluates the feasibility of a pure additive process for fabricating an ECA based multilayer P-PCB.

Through a detailed comparison with the typical O-PCB, we show that the basic characteristics of our P-PCB prototypes have reached a promising performance level for the mid-range and low-end electronic applications. Additionally, from the LCA results we found that the environmental impact index of P-PCB is about two orders of magnitude lower than that of O-PCB, indicating a promising prospect of P-PCB in the future green electronics market. This study may have answered the question which has been discussed for a long time of how “green” the paper electronics technology can be.

Although the present technology is still a proof of concept, and the current performance characteristics can only meet the needs for low density and low frequency electronics, we believe that with the rapid development of materials science and technologies, there will be more appropriate candidate materials and techniques for P-PCB to meet further needs; for example, with the development of advanced paper materials (considering dielectric properties, thermal conductivity, fire-resistance, moisture resistance, transparency surface roughness, *etc.*),<sup>21,58,62–64</sup> conductive materials (stability, electrical conductivity, processability, *etc.*),<sup>65</sup> and fabrication techniques,<sup>66,67</sup> the use of P-PCB in high density and high performance integrated circuit applications is not impossible. What is more, if combined with some substrate materials with particular characteristics like stretchability<sup>68</sup> or weavability,<sup>69</sup> the P-PCB would have even more impacts on future electronics.

We have shown the advantages and disadvantages of paper electronics with the case study of P-PCB in this paper. With the key problems being solved for better performance and standardized production, paper electronics will soon find broad applications in future green electronics, such as wearable electronics, household appliances, small electronic gadgets, consumable electronics, toys, *etc.*

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