

If cotton totes aren't as environmentally friendly as we thought, should we stick to single-use plastics?

No, the best bag to use is the one you already own.

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On Aug. 24, [The New York Times](#) discussed the emergence of a "cotton tote crisis", which was sparked by a successful marketing campaign for the I'm Not a Plastic Bag tote in 2007.

Leaning into the generation's environmental consciousness and its anti-plastic sentiment, the cotton bags were marketed as a solution to plastic use.



Image [via](#) Anya Hindmarch.

Since then, cotton totes have become both a branding tool for businesses, as well as a status symbol for consumers.

Like graphic tees, the tote bag is now a fashion statement, and an aesthetic in itself.

But why is this an issue?

The trendiness of cotton totes has driven it to become just another fast fashion accessory.

Sold as merchandise or given away as freebies, these totes have quickly accumulated in shoppers' wardrobes.

But owning a ton of cotton totes isn't the most environmentally friendly thing to do, especially if they're not being reused — or worse, discarded just months later.

While consumers might have bought these cotton tote bags in the name of sustainability, what has resulted are "unintended consequences of people trying to make positive choices, and not understanding the full landscape," *NYT* reported.

For starters, the product itself may not be as environmentally friendly as originally thought.

Single-use plastic vs cotton

Cotton is an extremely water intensive material, and cotton bags are hardly compostable, especially when dyed, according to the NYT article.

Its weight also makes it more energy intensive to transport, and recycling cotton bags is almost as energy intensive as making it in the first place.

A 2018 [study](#) by the Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark determined that an organic cotton tote bag would need to be reused 20,000 times to compensate for its environmental impact.

A regular cotton tote would have to be reused 7,100 times.

So if cotton has such a bad reputation, is it time to revert back to using single-use plastics?

Disposable plastic bags are notorious for their environmental impact — they are made from greenhouse gas-emitting fossil fuels, take countless years to break down, and are commonly associated with ocean pollution, which endangers marine life.

So, which bag to use?

A local [study](#) done by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in 2020 tried to evaluate the most sustainable option across bags of five different materials.

The study found that if every bag were used only once, the single-use plastic bag was actually the most eco-friendly option.

This is because of Singapore's waste management system, where our incineration treatment prevents a significant leakage of waste into the environment.

The worst options were cotton bags followed by paper bags, which have much larger environmental footprints in the production process, due to high consumption of water and natural resources.

However, if used more than 50 times, the reusable polypropylene non-woven plastic bag is still the best and most sustainable option.

The global warming potential for reusable plastic bags used, for instance, is 17 times lower than that of cotton bags.



Polypropylene non-woven bags. Photo from IndiaMART

Disappointment all around

In response to the *NYT* article (which was wired on [Straits Times](#)), some commenters were rather upset about the news, thinking that they had made the more eco-friendly choice by switching to cotton tote bags.

One, for instance, said: "I have been fed a lie that I've been blindly following, thinking I'm doing good to earth."

Their disappointment is valid - after all, the bags were marketed an eco-friendly alternative.

Remember when bamboo and metal straws were all the rage in Singapore a few years back?

The momentum of the zero-waste movement was encouraging. However, without the habit of reusing them, these straws will just become another environmental 'solution' that adds to the problem.

It's not about the material, but how you (re)use it

For consumers, it can be difficult to navigate the culture of consumerism and greenwashing that runs counter to a sustainable lifestyle.

Instead, we should acknowledge that any material used for products, be it clothes, packaging, or electronic devices, will have some form of environmental impact.

Therefore, we should be mindful about our purchases, buy only what we need to reduce waste, and use them as much as possible.

If possible, we should use what we already own — if you have reusable bags, cotton or plastic, stick to them.

What's worse than using a cotton or plastic bag is buying a reusable product that doesn't get reused enough.

If can't see yourself bringing around that reusable cup, don't rush to buy it.

The best eco-friendly habit is a minimalistic one: to first reduce, reuse, and finally, recycle.