

The things they are a-changin'

This year, we say goodbye to some everyday items that have accompanied us throughout the years as they make way for increased digitalisation in the new normal.

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AS the eventful and difficult year that is 2020 draws to a close, we begin to say goodbye to many things that we have depended on and accompanied us in our daily lives. Some of these changes are due to technological advances while others have been sparked by new digital adoptions due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The coronavirus has not only changed the way we work, shop, travel and communicate – among others – but also accelerated the digitalisation of our lives.

Without realising it, we may have already used some items – like parking meters – for the very last time, as these devices are switched for more efficient replacements. Malaysian courts, for one, will stop using fax machines by Jan 1 and switch to emails.

The fax machine will not be the only casualty of time. Throughout the years, there are many items that have been phased out of everyday use and have now become paraphernalia of a bygone time. Typewriters, purchasable mobile phone ringtones, DVDs and even iPod Nanos and Shuffles have now gained a nostalgic quality and are difficult to come by as more technological discoveries enter the market. To welcome the new year in our new normal, *Sunday Star* explores the everyday items that are likely to disappear in the coming year and what is expected to replace them moving forward.

Bidding adieu

Parking meters still dot the roadsides of Kuala Lumpur and most major cities but you hardly see people standing by them, rummaging their pockets for coins anymore. These meters, often a source of frustration for motorists when they break down, are being replaced by smart parking apps or e-wallet payment options.

Dr Azree Shahrel Ahmad Nazri, from Universiti Putra Malaysia's

Computer Science and Information Technology faculty, is expecting to see more contactless devices in use next year – and a big shift will be at highway tolls. Currently, Touch 'N' Go cards are being replaced by PLUS Malaysia Bhd's RFID (radio-frequency identification) toll payment system. Azree Shahrel predicts that soon, we will see artificial intelligence (AI) being used for number plate recognition at tolls.

Parking at shopping malls may also adopt the same plate recognition technology, as is currently being tested in some malls in Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya.

In some government buildings, conventional attendance records like the punch in and out systems have been replaced with face recognition technology, says Azree Shahrel.

"Kiosks at government buildings for when you need to access government services and e-portals will also begin using facial and biometric recognition systems. This technology is already being rolled out at the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit (Mampu)," he tells *Sunday Star*.

"Cheque deposit machines too will soon be replaced as a way to cut costs. We will be able to use our smartphones to take a photo of the cheque and have it authenticated directly with the banks," he adds.

Mainstream adoption of QR codes will see the popularity of many everyday items dwindle. Physical menus, for example, have been replaced in some restaurants in favour of digital menus that appear on your mobile phone after a QR code unique to the table is scanned. This change has many benefits; reducing overhead costs and also limiting the transmission of diseases as there is less physical contact, says Azree

Shahrel.

The way in which Zakat payments are made in some states has also been revolutionised.

"Now you can pay Zakat through e-commerce website Shopee or via QR codes. You can pay from anywhere and don't need to go to the surau for it," he says, adding that the convenience is a welcome move.

Digitalisation has also impacted some unexpected areas – Azree Shahrel shares how he encountered some beggars in Bangi recently who prepared QR codes to receive money from people without loose change.

Azree Shahrel hopes that Malaysia will continue to adopt new technology, especially related to AI, in the near future.

"If Malaysians continue to use new technology, it will increase the aggregate demand and directly improve the supply of such technology.

"This encourages more initiatives to create even newer technological discoveries," he explains.

While it is exciting to see what new things will be in store for us, it

is also worth noting that not all that fades out of popular use will remain gone.

Some items will make a resurgence, fuelled by an interest in retro or vintage memorabilia. Instant Polaroid cameras, vinyl records and cassettes have established comfortable niche markets along with tiffin carriers, now sold in bright colours and designs. Bell bottoms also made a brief reappearance by way of Kpop mega-group BTS in the video and performances of their chart-topping song *Dynamite*.

Carrying on to the future

There are also certain things that have proven to withstand the test of time – these are often related to acts which are tradition or custom-based and have been practiced for decades or centuries.

Although Malaysian society is making a quick transition to cashlessness, some physical money-based traditions like giving ang paws or duit raya are unlikely to change.

"The act of giving ang paws and duit raya is symbolic. The symbolic meaning is still very important,"

says Universiti Sains Malaysia sociologist Dr Azrina Husin, adding that there is a deeper value in traditions which allows it to continue throughout the years.

Another example is the act of providing "hantaran" – the symbolic honouring of two families by an exchange of gifts during a wedding is still well-preserved despite the smaller and less extravagant wedding celebrations during the pandemic.

Similarly, while some couples make do without bridal showers, important cultural practices like the tea ceremony for the Chinese are still being carried out as they hold important traditional significance.

Monash Malaysia social anthropologist Dr Yeoh Seng-Guan supports the notion that the last things to change are often those which have been practised for centuries.

"There may be some minimal change, but it wouldn't be a radical one. Things that involve the cycles of life – birth rituals, the coming of age, marriage and death rituals – the core symbols are there and they won't change.

"If at all, it may just be more sanitised or simplified," he says, pointing to smaller and shorter gatherings for celebrations or funerals during the pandemic as examples.

The changes that we need

The one change that Yeoh hopes to see in Malaysia next year is more positive attitude towards migrant workers, for us to be more united in upholding humanity, and to understand that disease does not discriminate.

Azrina hopes for improved accessibility to technology, to ensure there are no gaps among Malaysians as we move towards digitalisation.

"Along with this, she also hopes that there will be a focus on educating the public on safe and ethical ways to use technology.

