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Smartphones will become our electronic assistants

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Phablet: modern devices combine the features of both phones and tablets

The debate about the size and shape of the mobile phone could well be coming to end, as more manufacturers focus on the benefits that connectivity brings to users who are likely to own a range of smart devices rather than just one handset.

The mobile phone has been through a rapid evolution over the past two decades — from bricklike slabs via clamshell flip phones to where the market appears to have settled today in providing homogeneous slimmed down sleek rectangles of glass, plastic and metal.

The features inside the phone have developed as just quickly, from being capable only of making calls to boasting advanced cameras and music players.

Analysts report the smartphone has become the primary means of accessing the internet, and the video, games and apps data

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connectivity brings.

However, the development of the smartphone has largely stalled. Most devices feature largely the same specifications, with only incremental improvements on memory, camera and screen quality. Instead, cost has become the differentiator in a market that is increasingly

dominated by cut-price Asian manufacturers.

Ben Wood, analyst at CCS Insight, says that when Steve Jobs pulled the iPhone out of his pocket on stage in 2007, he set the dominant design for mobile phones, in the same way that the physical design of TVs and cars has changed little over the past decade.

Various concepts have been put forward for devices that are transparent, or else foldable and rollable, or sporting plastic and sapphire screens.

Mr Wood, for example, believes that 3D imaging will become a widespread feature.

But many industry watchers believe that these shifts are a marketing side-show to an increasing focus on what smartphones will be doing in future rather than how they will look.

The question of a mobile phone's appearance is likely to become increasingly redundant as the shiny piece of metal and glass simply becomes a window to the internet and a way to link a myriad other services and accompanying devices.

Ronan Dunne, chief executive of Telefónica UK, says there will always be personal preferences about the right size of phones, but that this issue is not going to drive innovation.

He predicts that the smartphone will become just one part of a wider collection of devices that people are likely to need in future.

For example, Mr Dunne expects people to take smaller phones, or even just a smartwatch or other smart wearable gadget, out for an evening to make calls, texts and maybe access an app or two. For longer trips, he says, people will take tablets and "phablets" (which combine smartphone and tablet functions), which are more suitable for web browsing and video watching.

Mr Wood also predicts a "network of devices that we'll be using and will be able seamlessly to switch between the series of connected screens we own to access a continuum of experiences that will be all be optimised for the device that is most relevant at that particular moment".

These devices will be connected to our homes, where the smartphone becomes a remote control for opening doors authenticated by biometric sensors or turning on the heating. It may even become a second screen to watch a different angle of a football game from the one being shown on TV, for example.

And in smart cars, the phone could be neatly slotted into the dashboard to act as the in-car entertainment centre and navigation system. In shops, smartphones could become the wallet to make purchases using contactless payment.

James Barford, at Enders Analysis, expects the smartphone to become more of a personal assistant

– adding to voice activated services such as those provided by Apple’s Siri or Microsoft’s Cortana – with greater anticipation of users needs. So the device can tell you to wear a jumper if its cold, for example, or warn that your route is congested.

Francisco Jeronimo, research director at IDC, an analysis company, agrees that the biggest revolution in the next 10 years “will be in the way we interact with the phone, or to be more precise, the way the phone interacts with us”.

He predicts “intelligent” sensors, aware of our surroundings and personal preferences, and devices that can bring data together to help us manage our lives.

“Flexible screens, more sensors, augmented reality, you name it, will only have one purpose – to contribute to our phone becoming our personal assistant,” he says.

Such developments will be led by operating system providers, he says, rather than device makers.

Indeed, given the range of uses that the phone, tablet, watch and other wearables will have, the question over whether it is slimmer or lighter, plastic or metal, 3D or augmented reality, will largely come down to choice.

There will undoubtedly be new designs to come from the leading manufacturers, as they seek differentiation, but the main focus will be what can be shown on the screen rather than what is around it.

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