The latest edition of the Mobile World Congress (MWC) Barcelona kicked off a new and exciting phase for the global tech device industry. From 5G-enabled handsets to foldable phones, the industry got a glimpse into the future of handsets and devices. While the jury is still out on when these devices will go mainstream, the event marked the beginning of an innovation era that promises exciting and unconventional form factors for users in the coming years.

A look at some of the key device launches and announcements during MWC Barcelona 2019…

Entry of 5G phones

5G-enabled phones took centre stage during MWC 2019. Various players launched 5G-enabled devices – Xiaomi's 5G Mi Mix 3, LG's V50 ThinQ, Samsung's Galaxy S10 5G, Huawei's Mate X and ZTE's Axon 10 Pro 5G. Several others, including Sony, Oppo, OnePlus and Alcatel, showcased prototypes of their 5G phones, which are expected to commercially hit the market in the coming months.

Of the devices that were launched at the event, the Mi Mix 3 is believed to be the cheapest. The phone features a 6.4 inch OLED display with a 19.5:9 aspect ratio and is powered by the octa-core Snapdragon 855SoC along with a Snapdragon X50 5G modem that can deliver 20 times better performance. It offers 2 Gbps+ peak download speeds on a 5G network. Meanwhile, Samsung's Galaxy S10 5G features a 6.7 inch display with an aspect ratio of 19:9. It is powered by the 1.9 GHz octa-core Samsung Exynos 9820 processor. ZTE's Axon 10 Pro 5G smartphone features a 6.47 inch AMOLED FHD+ display with 1440x2560 pixel resolution and is powered by the Qualcomm Snapdragon 855 processor with a Snapdragon X50 5G modem and an AI performance engine.

Most of the 5G-enabled devices are running on Qualcomm's latest Snapdragon 855 processor with a X50 modem. The chipmaker major announced its new X55 5G modem, which will enable devices to connect to 5G networks, at MWC 2019. It showcased the essential features of its new hardware and components that will help users track their devices in real time while reducing battery consumption. The X55 can support download speeds of up to 7 Gbps and upload speeds of up to 3 Gbps. Qualcomm announced its plans to bring 5G compatibility to laptops in the coming years.

While MWC 2019 saw handset manufacturers upping their game through a foray into the 5G space, a key concern for them is the almost insignificant presence of 5G networks at present. Even in developed countries like the US and Canada, operators are expected to roll out 5G services by 2020 only. For many other countries, it will take another two to three years to do so. In the absence of a 5G network, any adoption of these phones seems highly unlikely. However, once 5G kicks in, growth in the 5G handset segment is expected to be unprecedented.

Foldable phones are real

Foldable phones were the talk of the MWC this year. These phones literally do what their name suggests. They have a bendable screen that can be folded in and out as per user convenience. Currently, Samsung and Huawei are the two players that have forayed into this space and their handsets– Samsung's Galaxy Fold and Huawei's Mate X - were showcased at the event. Samsung's phone has a foldable screen on the inside while Huawei's is wrapped on the outside of the phone's body.

In terms of technical specifications, the Mate X features two FullView display panels, one in the front and the other at the back. The front screen is 6.6 inches wide, and has a resolution of 1148x2480 pixels and an aspect ratio of 19.5:9, while the back screen is 6.38 inches wide, and has a resolution of 892x2480 pixels and an aspect ratio of 25:9. When unfolded, the dual screen system offers a seamless, 8 inch OLED FullView display with a resolution of 2480x2200 pixels and an aspect ratio of 8.7:1.

Meanwhile, the Galaxy Fold has a 7.3 inch display with a resolution of 1536x2152 pixels in the front and a 4.6 inch display with a resolution of 840x1960 pixels at the back. The screen on the inside can be opened out like a book for watching videos, browsing the web or multitasking, with three apps on the go simultaneously. Both the phones are equipped with huge storage (512 GB internal storage) and powerful batteries (4,380 mAh for Samsung and 4,500 mAh for Huawei).

While the unconventional features of these phones created quite a stir at MWC 2019, their adoption and usability remain to be determined. High prices would, of course, be a major consideration in foldable technology going mainstream in the near future. There are also concerns regarding the durability of such phones since folding can potentially reduce their life expectancy. Further, there could be potential issues around seamless switching of the app layout/interface from the big screen to the small screen, thereby impacting user experience. As per CCS Insight, foldable phones will remain a niche category until 2022. Going by the

predictions of research firm Strategy Analytics, foldable phones will see global sales of just 1.2 million in 2019, with the potential to go up to 64.9 million by 2023. That said, the launch of these phones has heralded a new era for smartphones. For app developers, foldable phones could represent a new opportunity to leverage exciting app ideas.

Moving beyond two cameras

MWC 2019 was packed with camera phones. Leading from the front was Nokia, setting a new benchmark through its Nokia 9 PureView smartphone, which comes with five 12 megapixel cameras at the back. On clicking the shutter, the five cameras shoot different exposures at the same time, which then get merged into a single, ultra-detailed shot. According to Nokia, the system captures up to 10 times the amount of light normally captured by one camera. The phone also comes with a unique camera app, which is fine-tuned to accommodate and get the most out of the five camera sensors. That said, only two of the five cameras shoot in colour, the other three are monochrome. The phone also has a 20 megapixel front camera.

Meanwhile, Sony unveiled its Xperia 1 smartphone, which features a triple camera with optical image stabilisation. All three of these sensors are of 12 megapixels each.

MR the new buzzword

Microsoft introduced its second-generation HoloLens augmented reality (AR) headset at MWC 2019. The HoloLens2 is a mixed reality (MR) headset that features improved optics that track the user’s eyes to provide a more immersive and reactive AR experience. The HoloLens 2 comes with a five-channel microphone array and built-in spatial audio hardware for audio input and output respectively. In addition, it offers an 8 megapixel sensor for videoconferencing. The holographic device, which attracted a lot of attention at MWC 2019, will primarily target businesses. Manufacturing these devices for retail consumers for gaming and other purposes is still a long way down the road. High costs have always been a dampener for AR and virtual reality devices, despite their potential.

Smart wearables

Taking the concept of smartwatches to a new level, Nubia introduced Nubia Alpha at MWC 2019. This smartwatch has several smartphone-like features including a 4 inch flexible OLED display and a 5 megapixel camera. Further, like the Galaxy Fold and Huawei Mate X, Nubia Alpha also comes with a bendable screen. According to Nubia, the display can withstand being bent 100,000 times. Also, the smartwatch offers gesture control aside from the usual smartwatch features such as fitness tracking and mobile payments.

Ultra-long screens

At MWC 2019, Sony revealed a new range of phones with tall aspect ratios to the extent of 21:9. Along with its flagship Xperia 1, Sony showcased the Xperia 10 and the Xperia 10 Plus at the event, all of which boast 21:9 aspect ratio displays. These ultra-long handsets are well suited for watching films and videos. These tall phones come with a skinnier form factor, claiming better grip and accessibility. Sony devices feature an IP68 rating for dust and water protection. It will be interesting to see how users respond to these phones once they break into the market.

Dual screens

While the industry was focusing on the new foldable phones, LG took a different route, unveiling a separate screen accessory for its V50 ThinQ 5G handset. This device has a clip-on clamshell case that doubles as an additional, full-sized screen. In a way, it is a second display, but in the form of a detachable accessory. The company believes that the dual-screen accessory will revolutionise the streaming experience on hand-held devices, whether it is a video, a game or a live event, particularly once 5G connectivity kicks in.

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