

LetterFromBeijing

Nifty gadgets for 'lazy' folk – a triumph of convenience or bane of the planet?

From a hands-free hair-drying tool to a tablet stand, such devices are a hit with young Chinese, but the waste generated when the novelty wears off is a concern.



Goh Yan Han
Correspondent

BEIJING – With a phone in one hand and a cup of bubble tea in the other, I still somehow enjoy the cool shade of the umbrella over my head.

How? You might ask. With the help of a nifty clip, I can attach the umbrella to my backpack.

The clip is just one of the hundreds of different "lazy people devices" available on Chinese shopping platform Taobao for just a few Singapore dollars.

Such gadgets have been growing in popularity in China over the past year, with an increasing number of posts about them on social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu, marketing experts told The Straits Times.

Over 570,000 posts of purchases have been made on Xiaohongshu so far with the hashtag "lan ren shen qi" – which translates literally as magical devices for lazy people.

Marketing experts could not pinpoint the start of the trend, but said such devices have been receiving more attention in recent years.

This fad comes on the back of a growing "lazy economy" – estimated in past local reports as being worth at least US\$2 billion (S\$2.7 billion) – that includes greater interest in services such as home-based manicures, pre-cooked meals, smart home appliances and housekeeping.

The lazy economy is primarily driven by young Chinese willing to dole out money for a convenience-driven lifestyle.

Experts tell me lazy people devices feed into Chinese society's drive for efficiency and productivity, especially for those living in crowded cities, while also relieving the stress of daily living.

Not to mention, many of these devices come with an affordable price tag, due to China's cost-effective production methods, which enable rapid prototyping and product iteration, said Ms Lai Ming Yii, project leader and research manager at Shanghai-based Daxue Consulting.

Associate Professor Elison Lim, from the marketing division at Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) business school, said these devices inject an element of fun into activities that could otherwise be perceived as boring.

These "life hacks" could also give people a greater sense of control amid a feeling of being time-starved, stressed or in a depleted state, especially for urbanites, she added.

The idea of writing about lazy devices came to me one night as I was scrolling through a social media app mindlessly and a post about a phone remote made me pause mid-scroll.

About a quarter the size of an iPhone, the device allows you to use your phone without having to touch it.

What would be the point of doing so, I wondered, since clicking on the remote takes as much effort as swiping on the phone screen.

But I decided to try out this phone remote, and a few other lazy items, in any case.

After a quick search on Taobao, I ended up purchasing an umbrella clip, a phone remote, lazy glasses and a hair-drying tool – these ranged between \$2 and



A book stand, a phone and tablet holder and a snack tray belonging to a 39-year-old office administrator known as Ms Liang. "These stands help my neck feel more rested after a long day at work," she said. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MS LIANG



A tablet stand and a small remote allow Ms Candy, 22, to watch a show while keeping her hands warm under the blanket in the cold of winter. PHOTO: COURTESY OF MS CANDY



A hands-free hair-drying tool that involves the user wearing a sack over the head. The sack is connected to a hairdryer by a tube. PHOTO: SCREENSHOT FROM TAOBAO



The reporter with an umbrella clip attached to her backpack strap, allowing her to go hands-free while enjoying the umbrella shade. ST PHOTO: AW CHENG WEI



Based on a periscope mechanism, these lazy glasses can allow one to lie flat while watching television, supposedly preventing neck strain. PHOTO: SCREENSHOT FROM TAOBAO

dries your hair, while your hands are freed up as the hairdryer can be left on the table.

I was most optimistic about this item – it had thousands of sales and good reviews despite making the user look like an alien.

But I found that it mostly dried only the top layer of my hair, and I also had concerns about the concentrated hot air overheating my head.

I tried asking users about the appeal of these lazy devices.

Three people I approached declined to give their full names despite repeated prodding as they did not want others to know "just how lazy I am", they said.

One of them was Ms Liang, a 39-year-old office administrator who bought a book stand about two years ago as it was "tiring to hold the book up for long, and the stand prevents me from having to look down all the time".

In January, she added a small tray holder to it – after posts about it online – to hold drinks and snacks.

In May, she added a phone and tablet holder to it so that she could lie down and have her hands free while watching television dramas.

"These stands help my neck feel more rested after a long day at work," she said.

Ms Candy, 22, who works in new media and lives in Hubei in central China, purchased a tablet stand and an accompanying phone remote last December, amid one of China's coldest winters on record.

"The tablet was too heavy and too cold to the touch. This set-up lets me keep my hands warm in my blanket when I lie in bed reading novels or watching TV," she said.

Ms Lai, the research manager, told me that many youngsters were born during a period of rapid economic growth in the country and enjoyed significant improvements in quality of life compared with the generations before.

As they eventually start living independently, they seek ways to maintain or even enhance their comfort levels – contributing to the lazy economy and the demand for lazy devices, she added.

Of course, the Chinese are not the only people who use such items – the Japanese have long been known for coming up with nifty gadgets that provide convenience, such as heated eye masks, portable washing machines or even underarm air-conditioners.

Perhaps it is not really about laziness, but a universal desire for ease and convenience.

On online forum Reddit, there are over 12.8 million users on r/lifehacks, a section of the platform dedicated to discussions on tips to make life smoother – from using baby powder to get rid of sand after a day at the beach, to drinking a cup of water before bed to wake yourself up if you always miss your alarm.

Actually, aren't common household appliances like washing machines lazy people devices too?

In the case of China, the rise of the lazy gadgets is partly driven by the intense competition in the country's live-streaming industry, Ms Lai said.

To be profitable, live-streamers try to uncover hidden consumer needs.

"This drives the innovation and differentiation in the creation of even more 'lazy people devices', as companies seek to cater to consumers' desire for convenience and efficiency in all aspects of their lives," she said.

A couple of weeks after testing the products, I realised I did not use any of them regularly, if at all. I also noticed comments by people who had bought the items with enthusiasm, only to leave them aside after some time.

The generation of waste from such items is worrying, said NTU's Prof Lim.

People may buy these items on a whim without thinking about the impact of their decisions.

"Given that the lazy devices tend to be fun items that people may lose interest in quickly and throw out, they eventually become waste," she said.

These devices, while aimed at helping us, might not be helping the planet after all.

While I will likely continue to keep an eye out for innovative gadgets, I will think twice before purchasing them and consider how much use I will get out of them.

As for the ones I already own, I am looking forward to using the umbrella clip daily when I head home to Singapore and need the shade on my daily walk to the office.

gyanhan@sph.com.sg

Such gadgets have been growing in popularity in China over the past year, with an increasing number of posts about them on social media platforms... Over 570,000 posts of purchases have been made on Xiaohongshu so far with the hashtag "lan ren shen qi" – which translates literally as magical devices for lazy people.

SCAN TO WATCH
How well do these devices work?
<https://str.sg/vid-yhletter>