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Apple bruised as shoppers choose cheaper tablet computers as gifts

iPads won 38% of the market against 56% for tablets powered by Google's Android software, such as Tesco's runaway hit, Hudl

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Tesco's Hudl tablet computer significantly undercut the competition, including the iPad, Nexus 7 and Amazon's Kindle Fire, and sold 300,000 in its first two months. Photograph: Tesco/PA

It may come to be remembered as the year that tablet computers found the mainstream, but 2013 has seen a new wave of affordable, high street touchscreen devices that have sold in their droves this Christmas. With some tablets on sale for as little as £30 and retailers including Tesco and Argos selling their own branded devices, 2013 may also be remembered as the year that Apple no longer dominated the country's tablet sales.

"2013 was definitely the year of the tablet," said Francisco Jeronimo, research director for the analysts IDC. In the first three quarters of the year, 7.6m tablets were shipped to the UK, a year-on-year growth of 192% for the same period in 2012, according to IDC's

data. Of those 7.6m tablets shipped, the average sale price was \$407 making around \$3bn (£2.2bn) in sales.

Some 38% of those sale were Apple's iPad, which set the standard for tablet computers when it launched in 2010. This year saw two new models from the California-based company, including the thinner, lighter iPad Air for £400, and a revamped iPad Mini, with high-resolution screen and faster processor, for £320.

But for the first time since it launched, Apple's iPad wasn't top dog in UK sales. Tablets powered by Google's Android software won 56% of the market in the first three quarters of 2013, fuelled by popular, cheaper tablets with lower specifications. Google's Nexus 7 kickstarted the trend towards more affordable tablets, revised this year costing less than £200 and offering an experience comparable to the smaller of the two iPads.

"The very low end tablet market saw very strong sales this year, which is something we're expecting to continue into next year and beyond – especially for Christmas," said Jeronimo. In September, the high street grocer Tesco made a surprise announcement by launching its Hudl tablet for £119, acknowledging the exploding tablet market and the popularity of Android devices. Tesco's 7 inch Android tablet significantly undercut the competition including the iPad, Nexus 7 and even Amazon's Kindle Fire tablet range. It was an instant hit and went on to sell 300,000 in its first two months, as Tesco struggled to keep stock on store shelves.

Noting that its customers bought 1m tablets in 2012 alone, Argos followed suit in October with the poorly received Bush MyTablet for £100, and Aldi started selling its Lifetab for £80 which sold out in its first 24 hours. Neither performed as well as the Hudl, which did everything that most people would want to do on a tablet most of the time without much fuss.

Last week, the Indian government launched an even more aggressive assault on the tablet market with the Datawind UbiSlate, at just £30 in the UK as part of an educational initiative.

"Tablets under £100 have excellent gifting potential this Christmas," said Jeronimo. "Parents looking to give gifts to children and teenagers are unlikely to spend £400-500 on a tablet, so tablets sub-£100 are less of an investment and more of an attractive disposable gift that doesn't matter so much if it gets broken."

Of course, the number of sales of tablets do not tell the whole story. With around 2.9m iPads shipped in the first three quarters of 2013 Apple claimed the premium end of the market, with each unit sold commanding a much higher average sale price than that of the higher volume low-end market.

The software and media ecosystem is arguably one of the most important contributors

to Apple's bottom end too, which iPad users fuel. "Users who buy an iPad also spend much more money on apps and media within the Apple App Store and iTunes," explained Jeronimo.

For Google and its Play Store, however, the expansion of budget tablets is not such an important driver of revenue, because as Jeronimo explains, "users buying low-cost tablets generally aren't relevant to the app and content ecosystem, instead being used to browse the internet or play free games."

That brings us to Christmas when consumer electronics retailers make the of their profit for the year. Last year saw half the total tablet sales made in the last quarter, and this Christmas will have followed suit.

Research firm CCS Insight predicts Christmas will be "absolutely huge," seeing tablet sales in the four quarter equalling the previous three quarters combined, along with a massive potential for buyer remorse according to CCS Insight's Ben Wood: "As is the reality with most consumer electronics purchases, you get what you pay for and we worry that there will be lots of people unwrapping cheap tablets at Christmas which could well end up as unwanted gifts on eBay come January."

Next Christmas, another wave of cheaper and even faster tablet computers is likely to be in the shops, said Jeronimo, and the devices will become even more commonplace. "In the short term the downward trend on price will definitely continue, and increasing tablet penetration will be fuelled by adoption in education and business as well as by consumers."

Tablets have begun to replace traditional PCs, domestically and for some businesses. Tablet offerings will become more compelling as advances in technology makes them faster, lighter and improves battery life. Current portable technology is held back by batteries that are heavy and bulky, but store relatively little power.

Several technologies promise to extend battery life for days rather than hours. Lithium-air batteries, for example, "use oxygen in the air as a reagent, rather than carry the necessary chemicals inside the battery," explained Professor Peter Bruce of the University of St Andrews. That technique dramatically increases the amount of electricity the battery can store. Another technique combining sulphur with lithium stores even more power, but currently can't be made safe enough to put in your pocket.

Other research points to how we might interact differently with our glass slabs. Researchers at the University of Bristol recently showed that the feeling of real objects could be simulated in mid-air using nothing but sound. These 'ultrahaptics' use ultrasound to manipulate air molecules in a layer above the screen, providing the sensation of touching a real object through the skin of a user.

This tactile feedback means that users could feel like they are turning a volume knob, grabbing a steering wheel in a racing game or perhaps bashing the keys of an imaginary typewriter.

Eventually, the fixed glass touchscreens of today may cease to exist. Flexible displays are on the horizon, with LG and Samsung producing OLED screens that can be bent and flexed. While the electronics powering the displays may not be bendable in the near future, foldable screens could become a reality in the next 10 years. That could mean that your compact smartphone folds out to be a bigger screen for watching a video on the train home.

Google's Glass headset points to some wearable technologies that would be screenless and voice-controlled, giving the results of searches, transcribing emails and travel directions through audio. Glass itself has a minimal screen, overlaying information according to where we are and what we need to do, whether directions or search results, but this augmented view of the world, projecting contextual information, offers a more immersive way of interacting with the digital world, your movements perhaps tracked by a Microsoft Kinect-like camera tracking your gestures and instructions.

In 10 years, this augmentation could combine with ultrahaptics to simulate almost any digital interface in mid-air — and make screens, keyboards, phones and tablets a thing of the past.

How to avoid parental in-app purchases bill shock

If you're a parent sharing a tablet with your children, it's vital that you understand how to restrict in-app purchases on the device to avoid "bill shock" at the end of the month if they've bought without your permission.

On Apple's iPad, you can find the restrictions within the Settings app: tap on General, then Restrictions. You'll find switches here to turn off the ability to make in-app purchases entirely, or to require an iTunes password to be entered every time. Needless to say, don't share your iTunes password with your children.

On recent Android tablets, you can create a Restricted Profile for your children within the Users menu in its Settings app. Creating a restricted profile lets you turn individual apps on or off for that user.

Also, use the Google Play store app and access its Settings by pressing your device's Menu button. Here, you can set up a pin number that will be required whenever buying in-app purchases. Again, make sure you don't share the number with your children.

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