

PHL tablet shipments hit 11-year-record low — IDC

THE PHILIPPINE tablet market saw a decline of 39.8% to 750,300 units in 2023, marking the lowest shipments since 2012, according to International Data Corp. (IDC).

"Tablet shipments dropped to pre-pandemic levels after averaging over a million units per year between 2020 to 2023," IDC Philippines Senior Market Analyst Angela V. Medez said in IDC's report on Feb. 29.

"This was the lowest annual shipment recorded since 2012," she added.

In 2023, Samsung led the Philippine market with a 29.5% share, IDC said, citing data from its Worldwide Quarterly Personal Computing Device Tracker.

However, Samsung's shipments decreased by 42.1% to 221,500 units in 2023 from 382,800 units a year earlier.

Cherry Mobile followed with a 14.1% share, selling

105,600 units, while Huawei and Xiaomi held 11.8% and 10% shares, respectively, shipping 88,700 and 74,700 units.

IDC reported a 35.1% increase in fourth-quarter shipments in 2023 due to multiple product launches by various brands.

Samsung's new Galaxy Tab A9 & S9 FE series alone accounted for nearly 40% of the quarter's 218,000 shipments.

IDC also anticipates a contraction in commercial tablet shipments this year as government agencies shift priorities away from procurement for distance learning programs during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Until tablets can differentiate themselves from smartphones and PCs through innovation and unique positioning, they may not be consumers' top choice for electronic purchases," said Ms. Medez. — **Aubrey Rose A. Inosante**

Meta's Facebook, Instagram back up after global outage

META-OWNED Facebook and Instagram were back up on Tuesday after a more than two-hour outage that was caused by a technical issue and impacted hundreds of thousands of users globally.

The disruptions started at around 10 a.m. Eastern Time, with many users saying on rival social media platform X they had been booted out of Facebook and Instagram and were unable to log in.

The White House National Security Council was monitoring the incident and not aware of any specific malicious cyber activity at this time, a spokesperson said.

At the peak of the outage, there were more than 550,000 reports of disruptions for Facebook and about 92,000 for Instagram, according to outage tracking website *Downdetector.com*.

"Earlier today, a technical issue caused people to have difficulty accessing some of our services. We resolved the issue... for everyone who was impacted," Meta Spokesperson Andy Stone said in a post on X, without elaborating on the issue.

Meta, whose shares were down 1.2% in afternoon trading, did not immediately respond to a request seeking more details on the technical problem.

The company has about 3.19 billion daily active users across its family of apps, which also includes WhatsApp and Threads.

Its status dashboard earlier showed the application programming interface for WhatsApp Business was also facing issues.

However, the outage for WhatsApp and Threads was much smaller, according to *Downdetector*, which tracks outages by col-



UNSPLASH

lating status reports from several sources including users.

Several employees of Meta said on an anonymous messaging app Blind that they were unable to log in to their internal work systems, which left them wondering if they were laid off, according to posts seen by Reuters.

The outage was among the top trending topics on X, formerly Twitter, with the platform's

owner Elon Musk taking a shot at Meta with a post that said: "If you're reading this post, it's because our servers are working."

X itself has faced several disruptions to its service after Mr. Musk's \$44-billion purchase of the social media platform in October 2022, with an outage in December causing issues for more than 77,000 users in countries from the US to France. — **Reuters**

Insurtech Igloo, Lazada team up for online shopping protection

INSURANCE TECHNOLOGY firm Igloo has partnered with Lazada to introduce online shopping protection plans in response to the increasing number of e-commerce transactions in the Philippines.

"As the number of Filipinos engaging in online purchases continues to rise, it becomes increasingly imperative to provide them with protection throughout their entire shopping journey, extending support even after they've received their products," Igloo Philippines Commercial Lead Roberto S. Vea said in a statement on Monday.

Customers shopping on Lazada's platform may now assess eligibility for protection plans, review premium costs, and delve into policy specifics during the checkout process.

The insurance offerings on Lazada encompass electronic and gadget pro-

tection, merchandise protection, and product liability protection.

Electronic protection and gadget protection plans cover accidental damage, liquid damage, theft, and loss for electronic devices, accompanied by professional repair services at authorized centers.

Merchandise protection, in collaboration with Etiqa Philippines, safeguards non-electronic purchases against accidental damage and theft, enhancing consumer confidence in online transactions.

Igloo plans to introduce a fourth insurance plan in December, focusing on non-electronic products' accidental and liquid damage protection, diversifying coverage options for shoppers.

Product liability protection, underwritten by Liberty Insurance, addresses adverse reactions from

beauty products, ensuring customers have access to medical consultations, reimbursements, and emergency hospitalization if necessary.

According to Mr. Vea, the premiums for these protection plans typically amount to around 5-6% of the product cost, maintaining affordability while delivering comprehensive coverage.

In addition to the Lazada partnership, Igloo previously collaborated with GCash to extend insurance coverage to users for transactions across various online marketplaces, including Lazada, Shopee, Viber, and Facebook.

The surge in e-commerce activity is reflected in the 38.9 million current e-commerce shoppers in the Philippines, projected to reach 55.8 million by 2025, according to Locad.

— **Aubrey Rose A. Inosante**

Viber introduces customizable chat folder feature in Philippines

MESSAGING PLATFORM Viber unveiled on Wednesday its customizable chat folder feature in the Philippines to streamline chat organization.

"In today's fast-paced digital world where messaging apps play a paramount role in people's everyday lives, Rakuten Viber steps in with folders," Rakuten Viber Chief Executive Officer Ofir Eyal said in an e-mailed statement.

"Our latest feature is here to elevate conversations and preserve meaningful connections by unlocking time-saving potential and embracing the advantage of simplicity."

This feature allows users to create up to five custom folders apart from

the "All" tab section, which includes all other chats.

The company also said that chats can be assigned to multiple folders and folders can contain or add an unlimited number of chats.

Folders can be renamed or marked as "read" for easier browsing of all chats within the folders.

"The unread badge with a number on top of each folder indicates the number of unread chats within that folder," it said.

However, certain exclusions apply, as hidden chats, messages from businesses, and customer interactions cannot be included in these folders, it added. — **Aubrey Rose A. Inosante**

As China's Xi summons 'new productive forces,' old questions linger for economy

HONG KONG/BEIJING — Facing its deepest economic challenges in years, China's leadership has tasked ministries and local governments with implementing a new mantra from President Xi Jinping: unleash "new productive forces."

In his annual report to China's legislature on Tuesday, Premier Li Qiang, Mr. Xi's top deputy, vowed a "new leap forward" by supporting developing sectors and industries including electric vehicles, new materials, commercial spaceflight, quantum technology and life sciences.

The term "new productive forces" was coined by Mr. Xi last September during a trip to a rustbelt city in northeast China, where he highlighted the need for a new model for economic development based on innovation in advanced sectors.

State media seized on it and trumpeted the rubric to the point where it has been enshrined into Xi Jinping Thought, a core element of doctrine for the ruling Communist Party.

By focusing on the prospect for future growth, the slogan shifts the focus from China's present difficulties, including weak consumer confidence, the overhang of a property crisis and local government indebtedness.

But how China will implement the vision — the challenge taken up on Tuesday by China's parliament, a body controlled by the Party — remains unclear and its success uncertain.

"The direction of promoting tech innovation is right, but my worry is how to achieve it — what path and what institutional mechanisms should we rely on to drive technological innova-

tion and boost productivity?" said one Chinese policy adviser who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity.

"The reality is that market forces are retreating, and the government is dominating the drive."

Beijing hopes the "new productive forces" campaign will strengthen China at a time when geopolitical pressures including steps by the United States to "decouple" or "de-risk" have curtailed access to foreign technology.

"Prioritizing the 'new productive forces' in the agenda reflects leaders' anxiety over China potentially lagging behind the US in cutting-edge technologies such as advanced chips and artificial intelligence," said Tianchen Xu, an economist at the Economist Intelligence Unit in Beijing.

Mr. Li promised more investment in science and technology, steps he said would drive eventual gains in fields such as artificial intelligence and the applications of big data.

Expanding domestic demand, a step many economists consider the most pressing priority for China, featured lower in Mr. Li's summary of priorities.

'DOUBLING DOWN'

As of this week, every provincial government is on China notice to drive Mr. Xi's agenda, but there are still unanswered questions of how to promote top-down innovation.

"They're just doubling down on Xi Jinping thinking on the economy ... the whole report is very top-down," said Steve Tsang, director of the SOAS China Institute in London.

One risk is that the push could usher in a big increase in state subsidies for

research and development in areas that never pay off, a misallocation of funding.

Mr. Li, in his work report, said Beijing would issue one trillion yuan's worth of special purpose bonds — equivalent to \$139 billion — in 2024 to provide funding for strategic sectors.

China's focus on national security and tight government control could also hamper innovation, foreign investment and the luring and retention of top talent, analysts said.

"To support innovation, we should give people more freedom to think and talk, because many innovations result from the collision of ideas. This is a big contradiction," the policy adviser said.

The new mantra was also taken up by China's state planning agency, the National Development and Reform Commission. Its annual report on Tuesday pledged support for industries including satellite internet applications, China's BeiDou Navigation Satellite System, and research into nuclear fusion.

China has long sought to upgrade its ageing industrial hinterlands, including the coastal Pearl River and Yangtze River deltas, with mixed results as wages and production costs rise, eroding China's competitiveness vis-a-vis other countries.

How it manages this transition, previously dubbed "emptying the cage and changing the bird," will be critical.

"The biggest challenge is that the market still needs to support it. At present, China has invested a lot in industrial upgrading, and the results are still relatively unremarkable," said a second policy adviser who asked not to be named given the sensitivity of the matter. — **Reuters**

Bitcoin soars to record high, then tumbles

WASHINGTON/LONDON/SINGAPORE — Bitcoin touched a record high on Tuesday, fueled by investors pouring money into US spot exchange-traded crypto products and the prospect that global interest rates may fall.

The world's largest cryptocurrency hit a high of \$69,202, topping November 2021's all-time peak of

\$68,999.99. Investor interest has increased since the Securities and Exchange Commission approved 11 spot bitcoin ETFs in late January. It then reversed course and was recently down around 7% at \$63,400.

The cryptocurrency's latest meteoric rally may have more legs than in 2021 as more institutional

investors commit long-term money that could help the token sustain its high levels.

Net flows into the 10 largest US spot bitcoin funds reached \$2.2 billion in the week ended March 1, with more than \$2 billion of that going into BlackRock's iShares Bitcoin Trust. — **Reuters**

Enhancement in PhilHealth benefits on track, more to expect this year — Ledesma

Chief Emmanuel R. Ledesma Jr. assures President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. that members and their beneficiaries can expect better and more responsive health benefits packages that they can avail of at any accredited health facility nationwide.

"Nasimulan na po natin ang pagpapabuti ng ating mga benepisyo sa nakaraang taon, at magpapatuloy po ito ngayong 2024. Marami kaming nakalatag na enhancements na siguradong mararamdaman ng mga miyembro dahil sa mas mababang bayarin sa ospital, kung hindi man wala nang babayaran pa," he declared.

The PhilHealth Chief's pronouncement came on the heels of President Marcos, Jr.'s recent call that "any increase in premium will substantially be much more in value in terms of benefits and coverage to PhilHealth members".

Ledesma recently announced that the 30-percent increase in most of its case rate packages already took effect for all admissions starting February 14, 2024, the first time that an across-the-board increase was implemented since the all case rate scheme was launched in 2013. "The 30% increase in case rates will restore substantial coverage affected by health inflation," said Ledesma.

Coverage for breast cancer under its Z Benefits Package also jumped from P100,000 to P1.4 million or an increase of 1300%.

In 2023, the PhilHealth Board approved the expansion of its coverage of hemodialysis from 90 to 156 sessions per year. This has increased the annual benefit coverage of patients with Chronic Kidney Disease Stage 5 to P405,600 from P234,000. In 2023, PhilHealth paid a total amount of P17.43 billion for hemodialysis claims alone.

PhilHealth also significantly increased its coverage for certain conditions that are included among the high burden disease in terms of finances and effect on the quality of life of patients. It increased the benefits packages for acute ischemic stroke from P28,000 to P76,000; and acute hemorrhagic stroke from P38,000 to P80,000. Ledesma said these two packages alone have increased by 200% percent.

"Para naman sa mga may high-risk pneumonia, halos na-triple po ang benepisyo mula P32,000 to P90,100", adding that PhilHealth even improved its Z Benefits Packages for colorectal cancer and on selected orthopedic implants.

In October last year, it launched the Outpatient Mental Health Package which provides outpatient coverage for general and specialty mental health services for P9,000 and P16,000 per patient annually, respectively. The Agency is partnering with the National Center for Mental Health for the initial implementation of the package and is currently contracting more providers at the grassroots level to make this even more accessible to more than three million Filipinos with mental health conditions.



PhilHealth was able to implement the benefits enhancements despite the suspension of the scheduled adjustment in contribution rate in 2023 from 4 percent to 4.5 percent.

"Our commitment to continuously provide Filipinos with responsive benefit packages remains, as guided by our thrust of 'Pinalawak at mga Bagong Benepisyo para sa Mamamayang Filipino,'" he added.

For 2024, members have more to expect from PhilHealth. "We will rationalize case rates for bronchial asthma and bacterial sepsis in newborns and COVID-19 inpatient benefits," said Ledesma.

He further said that guidelines for outpatient therapeutic care benefits package for severe acute malnutrition in children aged 5 years old and below and services for physical medicine and rehabilitation will also be expected this year.

Another benefit to look forward to is the enhancement of peritoneal dialysis under the Z Benefits Package.

"This is where the importance of adjusting our contribution rates comes into play. It will generate funds necessary for us to complete our benefit plans, and more importantly to sustain the reforms in the benefit packages," he stressed.

For 2024, the Agency has allotted some P243 billion to pay for these benefits, P30 billion of which is earmarked for its PhilHealth Konsultasyong Sulit at Tama or Konsulta package. The Konsulta will be further expanded to include treatment for TB, animal bite, malaria and HIV/AIDS. This is in addition to expanding coverage for medicines from the current 21 to 53 through PhilHealth's Guaranteed and Accessible Medications for Outpatient Treatment or GAMOT.

"We are set to expand access points for these medicines by engaging pharmaceutical service entities to make these essential medicines within reach by our Kababayanans needing them," Ledesma vowed.