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TUE JAN 15, 2013

PLACES

Is self-checkout really better?

Touch-screen payment kiosks are clearly the way of the future—but do they actually expedite your retail experience? We put them to the test.

BY: KIM HUGHES

By now, the advent of store self-checkouts is pretty much complete. From Canadian Tire to Loblaws, Ikea to the Toronto Public Library, there the kiosks stand, quietly waiting for you to scan, swipe, and bag all by yourself. It's a brave new world, one that feels fiercely independent... yet somehow isolating. Are we really in such a hurry to grab some bagged salad and return to our pods in the sky without so much as engaging in idle banter about the cost of bananas with our local Sobeys cashier?

Setting aside the sociological ramifications of self-checkout—or the fact that some people just seem to hate the whole idea on principal—the question remains: Are these machines really faster and better than good ol'-fashioned clerks? They may be more cost-effective for the stores using them in place of humanoids (ostensibly the reason they were installed in the first place), but do they enhance the shopping experience in a meaningful way for consumers?

In other words, is this really progress? We sought to find out. And while our methods aren't even remotely scientific, neither is buying batteries or tea lights on a harried Saturday afternoon. But it turns out those mundane activities might actually be less painful than before.

Location: Canadian Tire, Bay and Dundas (#DTN)

Number of self-checkouts vs. on-duty cashiers: Six kiosks and two cashiers at street level.

Wait time to use: None.

Is a clerk presiding over the kiosks? Yes, and he totally plays along with my undercover front about wanting to illustrate this crazy thing called self-checkout for a friend back in Croatia and, so, would he mind if I snapped a few pictures, yada yada yada. After establishing that Zagreb is, in fact, the Croatian capital, the clerk offers to snap my picture standing beside a machine. Now *that's* service!

Ease of use: Pretty easy. Prompts are delivered by an upbeat robotic female voice that thanks me for my business and offers me cash back, which is about five kinds of swell. (No fees!)

2001: A Space Odyssey moment: Canadian Tire money is accepted, and dispensed, by this HAL-like terminal. That's fine for adults, but it denies an entire generation of kids the thrill of being handed a crisp CT bill by their grandpa that's all theirs to keep.

Verdict: Definitely the way to go.



Location: Metro, Front and Church (#SLM)

Number of self-checkouts vs. on-duty cashiers: Four kiosks, four cashiers, plus customer-service personnel.

Wait time to use: About 90 seconds.

Is a clerk presiding over the kiosks? Hell yes, and there is no way she is prepared to tolerate any picture-taking for self-checkout-curious Croatians. A call to the manager backs her up. Sigh.

Ease of use: Fairly easy, even when buying bulk items (just so long as you remember to write down the bin code number on the little tab). Otherwise, you'll have to engage the clerk and believe me when I say: You do not want to engage this clerk.

2001: A Space Odyssey moment: The kiosk asks for my Air Miles card. The circle of sophisticated data collection tracking consumer habits for future exploitation is complete.

Verdict: Fine, although it so happens that when I visit this store, a visually impaired man in a wheelchair accompanied by a service dog is being cashed out by a clerk at a nearby register. This clerk couldn't be any more accommodating—a clear reminder that nothing trumps the human touch.





Location: Toronto Public Library, Pape and Danforth branch (#DAN)

Number of self-checkouts vs. on-duty cashiers: Three kiosks and three staffers behind the main counter.

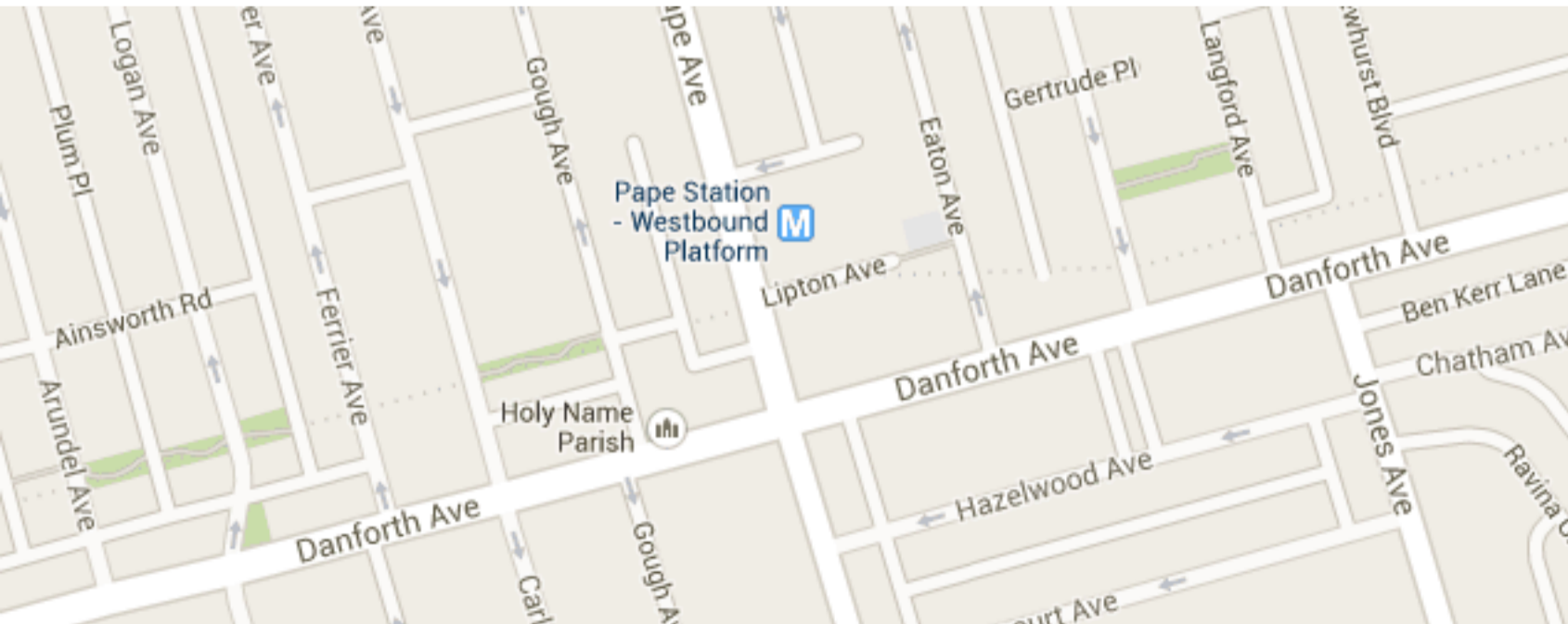
Wait time to use: None.

Is a clerk presiding over the kiosks? Not in any kind of high-alert way like in grocery stores. They're just working away as usual.

Ease of use: Dead-easy. You launch the thing, scan your library card, lay your materials on a shiny black electronic bed, and elect to receive or not receive a paper slip listing the due date. Bob's your uncle.

2001: A Space Odyssey moment: The kiddo at the next terminal, who is maybe five, is whizzing through self-checkout like she was born to do it—which, come to think of it, she was.

Verdict: Easy-peasy, though library staff tend to be quite chipper, so the conversation is missed. And you will have to engage them to pay fines. (You do pay your fines, right?)





Location: Loblaws, Queens Quay and Jarvis (#HAR)

Number of self-checkouts vs. on-duty cashiers: Six kiosks to three cashiers.

Wait time to use: About a minute.

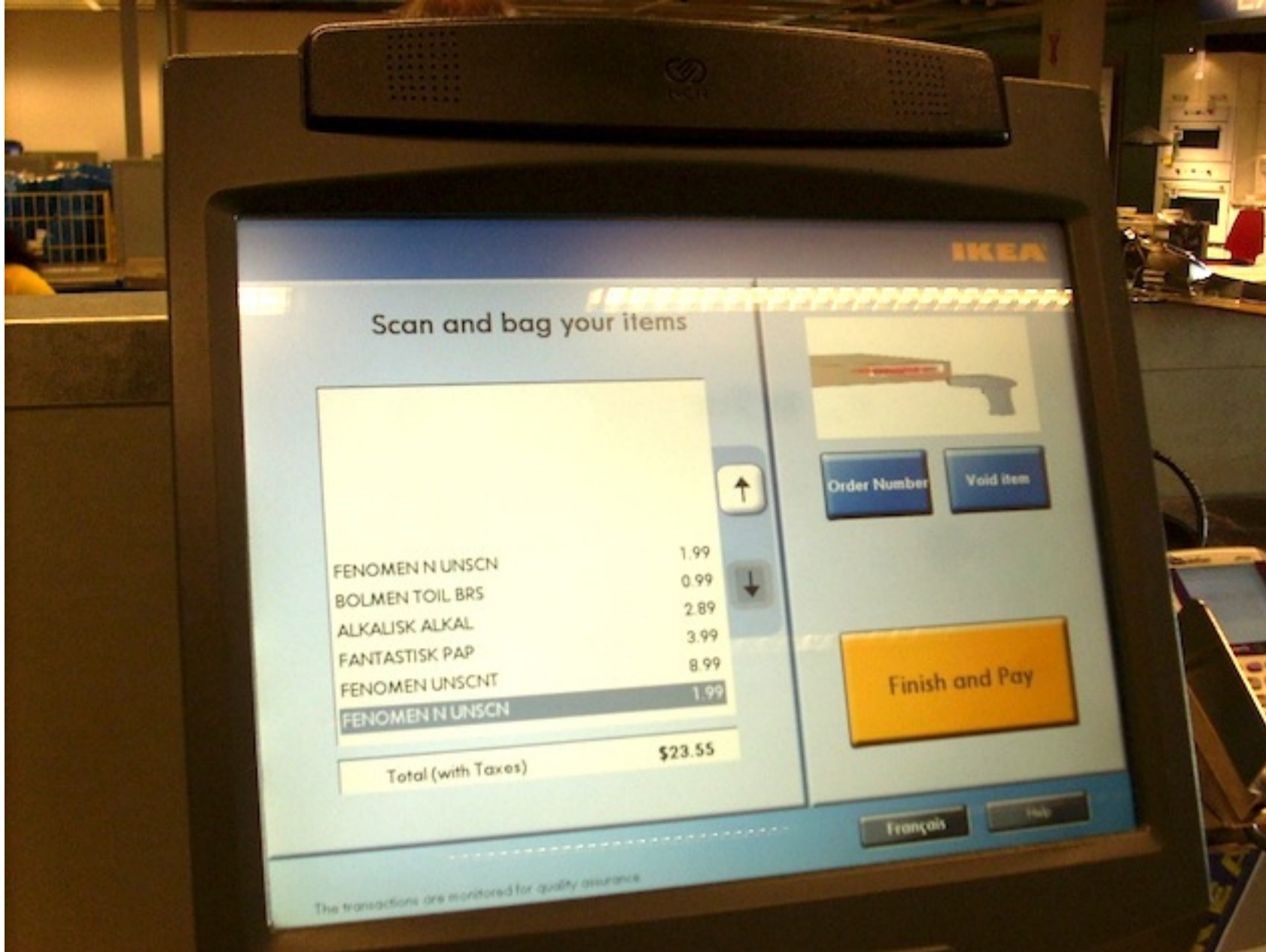
Is a clerk presiding over the kiosks? You betcha.

Ease of use: Easy, but by now these electronic commands are starting to sound hostile. Is it just me or is that prompt to “please place the item in the bag” a smidge impatient? I am also thanked for using self-checkout, which seems ridiculous—would a live cashier thank me for not stealing? Speaking of which, during really busy times, it would be pretty easy to surreptitiously slip something into a bag since the layout here has the customer facing away from the supervising clerk. Just saying.

2001: A Space Odyssey moment: Maybe it’s the high ceiling, the abundance of glass, or the fact that the store is above street-level but it kind of feels like you’re floating in space here. Cool, but a bit disorienting.

Verdict: Meh. On a not-so-busy day, I’d probably go the cashier route.





Location: Ikea at The Queensway and Kipling, #ETO

Number of self-checkouts vs. on-duty cashiers: Eight self-checkout terminals to four cashiers; four more self-checkouts are opened in the time it takes my car-driving pal to go through a regular line with a cashier.

Wait time to use: About three minutes.

Is a clerk presiding over the kiosks? Yes, one clerk for every four machines.

Ease of use: Not only easy, but oddly fun as the process involves the use of a handheld, gun-like scanner that seems to unleash my inner five-year-old. Weeee! Also, the absence of a robo-voice methodically cooing commands is welcome.

2001: A Space Odyssey moment: The machines produce a cacophony of plinky “bloop” sounds when they scan stuff, making you feel like you’re trapped inside a game of Pac-Man.

Verdict: Wickedly fast compared to the lines being handled by humans, simply because there are so many self-checkouts open. Clearly, from Ikea’s point of view, this is the wave of the future—even though it still sucks that they don’t accept American Express.



Summary: As my pro-union, car-driving friend points out at Ikea, self-checkouts are often faster than regular cashiers. But the reduced number of employees they require—usually one person


overseeing multiple terminals—could be bad for business long-term.

After all, if folks are replaced by machines and don't have jobs, they're not going to be shelling out for Billy bookcases or Fenomen candles. (And it sure would be interesting to know if retailers noticed a spike in theft around the time these machines arrived at their stores.) Plus, I actually like chatting with people. For misanthropes in a hurry, however, self-checkout is tough to beat.

Which do you prefer: self-checkout, or real, live, human cashiers? Let us know in the comments section below.

TAGS *Canadian Tire, IKEA, Loblaws, Metro, Toronto Public Library*

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Latest 

beta

in my experience self check outs are only as fast as the people who use them, and most people are not adept at using them. As someone who worked as a cashier for many years I sometimes pick this option because I can cash myself out just as fast as any cashier, depending on what items i have in my basket. If i have produce I don't even bother. I wouldn't use this option if I had more than 10 items. most people are slow and clumsy at it, and most cashiers are quick, they have memorized product codes and can get through transactions much faster.

I would recommend that people opt for real cashiers! It actually makes me crazy that canadian tire at bay and dundas hardly ever has anything but self check out available.

 1  0

3:37 pm on January 21, 2013

 [Reply](#)  [Report](#)

Jizanthapuss

Philosophically, I'm opposed to self-checkouts. People with jobs are the cornerstone of a stable, healthy economy. Look at what bank machines have done for the number of bank tellers. Tons of secure, good paying jobs vanished and bank profits skyrocketed.

Practically speaking, do I use them? It depends how busy it is and if there's a lineup at the self-checkout. I don't mind checking myself out. And I don't mind waiting in line for a cashier. But there's no way I'm waiting in line for the self-checkout!

 1  0

3:54 pm on January 19, 2013

 Reply  Report

Kristian Ward

I have to say that I have no love for the self checkout – they are constantly stalling and making me wait and send over a unimpressed glare to the person supposed to be monitoring and normally distracted with their cell phone or better helping a person figure out just how to use the damn thing.

why is it that the new Loblaws downtown opted NOT to have them? but they kept them all in their lower end retail locations...

Personally they are a waste of time and do nothing for the shopping experience anywhere...

But a side note – IKEA never one issue!

K

 0  0

12:42 pm on January 18, 2013

 Reply  Report

Mark

I use self-checkout so that the store doesn't need as much staff. The money they save on staff will lower the prices in their store since they'll pass those savings on to the customer – it won't just go to the managers and executives.

Then, when I leave the store, to anyone who's asking for spare change, I tell them to get a job.

 1  0

2:20 pm on January 17, 2013

 Reply  Report

Liz

Self-checkouts are the bomb when you're buying shame eating food.

 4  0

10:46 pm on January 15, 2013

 Reply  Report

Daniela

I wish the scanners they had at self-checkouts were the same as the scanners used by cashiers. As a former cashier, I can attest that all self scanners I've used are no where near as sensitive as the full service option. The self-checkouts could totally be better.

 1  0

9:13 pm on January 15, 2013

 Reply  Report

Jmons

Going to human cashiers gives young people jobs! Do you think the money saved from losing the employee goes towards lower prices? I highly doubt it.

 2  0

8:18 pm on January 15, 2013

 Reply  Report

↪

Mijay

Great point. I think those using self-checkout should receive a percentage discount since we're doing the labour!

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9:14 pm on January 15, 2013

 Report

↪

M

I put myself through university working as a cashier, so I refuse to use self-checkouts on principle.

 2  0

10:47 pm on January 15, 2013

 Report

Moi

I prefer a real person. I am a COUPON gal. you need a real person to enter them in for you (self check nope:(

 4  1

7:11 pm on January 15, 2013

 Reply  Report

James

Self checkouts are the cornerstone of the Shit-future. Worst.

 8  0

5:13 pm on January 15, 2013

 Reply  Report

Martha

I usually prefer self-checkouts, but only when I (and the people ahead of me in line) have a limited number of items. I often seem to find myself behind someone with a cart-load of groceries, slowly scanning each item and fumbling for the bar code. A lot of the time, the human cashiers can ring a customer through much faster.

 4  0

4:08 pm on January 15, 2013

 Reply  Report

colin

When self-checkout is properly used, it's great. When it's abused, it's awful. People think they're saving time by getting into the self checkout with a cart full of groceries. They're not. In fact, they end up taking more time as they fumble through the touch screen display to figure out how to enter jicama, or if this napa cabbage has a code somewhere on it.

The other issue is the bagging. If you've just scanned through a few dozen items, there's no room there to bag them, yet people still try to do it. It's this bizarre 'i can't wait for the line, but i'm fine taking three times as long and not having the ease of the conveyor belt' mentality that just makes no sense.

The self-checkout is a wonderful tool and it's clearly helpful when all you have is a small number of items. That's why it exists. It's the technological equivalent of someone in front of you with a full shopping cart turning around and saying "you only have a box of crackers? Then please, go in front of me." Let's keep it that way.

 9  0

3:58 pm on January 15, 2013

 Reply  Report