Money Without Cash: How We Pay Today

Not long ago, people carried cash everywhere they went. They used coins and paper bills to pay for food, clothes, and bus rides. Today, life looks very different. Many people now complete a **transaction** without touching a single coin. Instead, they tap a card, a phone, or even a smartwatch, and the payment happens right away. This change did not happen overnight; it grew **gradually**, as new tools made paying simpler and faster. Some restaurants and shops have become fully **cashless**, which means they accept no bills or coins at all. Paying this way feels quick and **convenient** for busy customers. Across the globe, cashless habits are now **widespread**, from small markets to huge shopping malls.

Long before phones could pay for coffee, banks were already testing new ways to handle money. In the 1950s, a small paper card let customers buy things without cash at certain stores. Business people wanted a simple way to pay while traveling, so a team decided to **invent** a card that any **merchant** could accept. Banks and other **financial** companies quickly saw how useful this idea could be. Soon, a major **institution** created a system so stores everywhere could accept the same card. Each time someone used it, the bank would **verify** that enough money was available before approving the purchase. This simple idea changed how the world would pay forever.

Phones changed everything again. A modern smartphone is now a powerful **device** that can hold a person's entire wallet inside one small screen. Banks and tech companies built a shared **network** so a phone could send money to another phone in moments. This idea helped people far beyond big cities. In **rural** parts of Kenya, for example, many families once had no bank nearby. A mobile money service called M-Pesa gave them safe **access** to banking through a basic phone instead. Users could send money to relatives, pay bills, or buy goods almost **instantly**, even without a smartphone or a nearby bank branch. This kind of mobile banking now helps millions across Africa and beyond.

In many parts of Asia, a small black-and-white square has become the easiest way to pay. Customers simply **scan** the code with their phone camera, and the payment goes through in seconds. This method became especially **popular** in China, where apps like Alipay and WeChat Pay are used almost everywhere, from taxis to street food stalls. Shop owners like this system because it feels fast and **secure**, with fewer chances for mistakes than counting cash. Each code is **tiny**, yet it can hold a **unique** link to a specific store or seller. Today, similar QR payment systems are spreading quickly across Southeast Asia, Africa, and beyond.

This new way of paying brings real benefits, but it also raises new questions. Many people enjoy that spending is faster and easier to **monitor**, since every purchase appears clearly in an app. However, some experts share a growing **concern** about safety. Criminals sometimes try to commit **fraud** by stealing card details or tricking people online. Others worry about **privacy**, since companies can see exactly what a person buys and where. There is also a fairness problem: some systems can **exclude** people who do not own a smartphone, a bank account, or reliable internet. For this reason, many countries still allow cash payments alongside digital ones, so no one is left behind.

What comes next for money? Governments around the world are now working to **explore** a new kind of **currency** that exists only online, sometimes called **digital** cash. Unlike a bank app, this type of money would come directly from a country's central bank, not a regular company. Supporters believe it could make payments cheaper and safer for everyone, especially people without traditional bank accounts. Critics, however, **predict** it might create new worries about safety and personal data instead. No one knows exactly how payment will look in twenty years. Still, most experts agree that **eventually** paper cash will feel far less common than it does today.

Beyond the Headlines

Here's a fact that might surprise you: the world's first cash machine appeared in London in 1967, and its checks were secretly treated with a **radioactive** substance! The machine could not read ink, so engineers found a clever **solution**: a special marker on each paper voucher, invisible to the eye, let the machine confirm a customer's **identity** before it would **dispense** any cash. The creator also picked a four-digit code almost by accident — his wife said she could only remember four numbers, not six! That small, personal decision became the standard PIN length still used on nearly every card today. It's a truly **remarkable** piece of banking history.

Vocabulary

Paragraph 1

transaction (n.)	(n.) An act of buying or selling something. *"Paying for coffee with a card is a simple* ***transaction****."*
gradually (adv.)	(adv.) Slowly, over a period of time. *"The town* ***gradually*** *stopped using cash for small purchases."*
cashless (adj.)	(adj.) Not using coins or paper money. *"The café became fully* ***cashless*** *last year."*
convenient (adj.)	(adj.) Easy and useful for a person. *"Paying by phone is very* ***convenient*** *for busy shoppers."*
widespread (adj.)	(adj.) Happening in many places at the same time. *"Mobile payments are now* ***widespread*** *around the world."*

Paragraph 2

invent (v.)	(v.) To create something new for the first time. *"Engineers worked together to* ***invent*** *the first payment card."*
merchant (n.)	(n.) A person or business that sells goods. *"Every* ***merchant*** *in the mall accepted the new card."*
financial (adj.)	(adj.) Related to money or banking. *"The* ***financial*** *company offered new services to its customers."*
institution (n.)	(n.) A large, official organization, such as a bank. *"A major* ***institution*** *created the first card network."*
verify (v.)	(v.) To check that something is true or correct. *"The bank will* ***verify*** *your balance before approving a purchase."*

Paragraph 3

device (n.)	(n.) A small machine used for a specific job. *"A smartphone is a powerful* ***device*** *for making payments."*
network (n.)	(n.) A connected system that shares information. *"Banks built a shared* ***network*** *so phones could send money."*
rural (adj.)	(adj.) Related to the countryside, not the city. *"Many* ***rural*** *families once had no bank nearby."*
access (n.)	(n.) The chance or right to use something. *"M-Pesa gave many people safe* ***access*** *to banking."*
instantly (adv.)	(adv.) Immediately, without any delay. *"Users can send money to friends almost* ***instantly****."*

Paragraph 4

scan (v.)	(v.) To use a machine to read information. *"Customers* ***scan*** *the code with their phone camera."*
popular (adj.)	(adj.) Liked or used by many people. *"QR code payments became* ***popular*** *across China."*

secure (adj.)	(adj.) Safe from danger or risk. *“Shop owners feel this payment system is fast and **secure**.”*
tiny (adj.)	(adj.) Very small in size. *“Each QR code is **tiny** but powerful.”*
unique (adj.)	(adj.) Being the only one of its kind. *“Every store has a **unique** code for payments.”*

Paragraph 5

monitor (v.)	(v.) To watch or check something closely. *“An app can help you **monitor** your spending.”*
concern (n.)	(n.) A feeling of worry about something. *“Experts share a growing **concern** about online safety.”*
fraud (n.)	(n.) Dishonest action done to get money illegally. *“Criminals sometimes commit **fraud** by stealing card details.”*
privacy (n.)	(n.) The state of being free from public attention. *“Some people worry about their **privacy** when shopping online.”*
exclude (v.)	(v.) To leave someone or something out. *“Cashless systems can **exclude** people without a smartphone.”*

Paragraph 6

explore (v.)	(v.) To study or think about something carefully. *“Governments are working to **explore** new kinds of payment.”*
currency (n.)	(n.) The money used in a particular country. *“Some countries are testing a new digital **currency**.”*
digital (adj.)	(adj.) Existing only in electronic form, not on paper. *“**Digital** cash exists only online, not as paper bills.”*
predict (v.)	(v.) To say what will happen in the future. *“Critics **predict** new challenges for digital money.”*
eventually (adv.)	(adv.) At last, after some time. *“Most people will **eventually** stop carrying paper cash.”*

Beyond the Headlines

radioactive (adj.)	(adj.) Giving off a special kind of energy that machines can detect. *“The paper voucher was treated with a **radioactive** substance.”*
solution (n.)	(n.) An answer to a difficult problem. *“Engineers found a clever **solution** to read the voucher.”*
identity (n.)	(n.) Who a person is. *“The marker helped the machine confirm a customer’s **identity**.”*
dispense (v.)	(v.) To give out something, such as cash. *“The machine would only **dispense** cash after checking the code.”*
remarkable (adj.)	(adj.) Very impressive or unusual. *“It was a **remarkable** moment in banking history.”*

Language Review

Exercise A — True or False

Read each statement. Write True or False on the line.

1. Long ago, most people paid for things using cash. ________________	
2. The first payment card appeared in the 1950s. ________________	
3. M-Pesa is a mobile money service used in Kenya. ________________	
4. QR code payments are not popular in China. ________________	
5. Cashless payment systems always include everyone equally. ________________	
6. Some experts worry about fraud and privacy with digital payments. ________________	
7. A digital currency from a central bank would come from a private company. ________________	
8. The world's first cash machine appeared in London. ________________	

Exercise B — Matching

Match each word in Column A with its meaning in Column B. Write the correct letter.

Column A	Column B
1. transaction	a. who a person is
2. merchant	b. to give out something, like cash from a machine
3. device	c. an act of buying or selling something
4. scan	d. the money used in a country
5. fraud	e. a person or business that sells goods
6. currency	f. dishonest action done to get money illegally
7. dispense	g. a machine or tool with a special purpose
8. identity	h. to use a machine to read something, like a code

Exercise C — Multiple Choice

Choose the best answer (a, b, c, or d) for each question.

1. What did people use before cashless payments became common?

a. Coins and paper bills
b. Credit scores
c. Mobile networks
d. QR codes

2. In what decade did the first payment card appear?
a. 1930s
b. 1950s
c. 1970s
d. 1990s

3. What does M-Pesa allow people to do?
a. Print money at home
b. Only pay in large cities
c. Send money using a basic phone
d. Avoid all banks forever

4. Where did QR code payments become especially popular?
a. Kenya
b. Sweden
c. Canada
d. China

5. What is one concern experts have about cashless payment?
a. It can exclude people without smartphones
b. It is too slow
c. It requires too much cash
d. It cannot be used in stores

6. What is a digital currency from a central bank NOT the same as?
a. Paper money
b. A bank app made by a private company
c. Online shopping
d. A payment method

7. What happened in London in 1967?
a. The first QR code was invented
b. WeChat Pay launched
c. The first cash machine appeared
d. Credit cards were banned

8. Why did the first cash machine use a four-digit code?
a. Because six digits were too expensive
b. Because computers could only read four numbers
c. Because banks required it by law
d. Because the creator's wife could only remember four numbers

Exercise D — Discussion Questions

Talk about these questions with a partner or in a small group.

1. Do you use cash often, or do you prefer paying with a card or phone? Why?
2. How do you think mobile money services like M-Pesa help people in rural areas?
3. What are some benefits and some risks of paying without cash?
4. Do you think your country will become fully cashless one day? Why or why not?
5. If you designed a new way to pay, what would it look like?