

Smiley faces at small company making popular emoji apps

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Mobile apps that allow users to create their own emojis or share the stylized images of NBA star Stephen Curry and other celebrities are paying off for a small upstate New York company.

Moji Maker— with its mix-and-match menu of happy, angry or goofy faces—was the No. 2 paid app on the iTunes chart as of Friday morning. The company that made it, Moji, recently scored big with its Curry app and is following up with similarly styled apps for two Olympic athletes who won gold this week: swimmer Michael Phelps and gymnast Simone Biles.

The company of about a dozen people is based far from Silicon Valley and celeb-heavy Los Angeles in Binghamton, New York, where the three principals—all between 30 and 32 years old—grew up. None of them had a background in programming. Their success provides a window into a quickly evolving emoji market that didn't even exist until recently.

"We look at everything that we make and we ship objectively, and say, 'Is this something that we would actually use in our everyday texts? Does this have relevance in a person's everyday conversation?'" said Oliver Camilo, the company's founder and CEO. "Because we don't want to create stuff that's just a boring bottle of water."

The emoji market is flourishing as mobile users demand more ways to express themselves. Kim Kardashian and Justin Bieber are among the growing number of celebrities who have their own emoji apps.

"Right now, there's just not a lot of players doing it and that's why a very small player who aligns himself with a Steph Curry or anyone else is able to achieve so much adoption," said Travis Montaque, founder and CEO of the research and brand integration company Emogi.

The emojis from Moji and its competitors have not been adopted by the California-based Unicode Consortium, which controls official emoji standards used on standard keyboards. Camilo said that's not their goal. The roughly 20,000 emojis from Moji can be texted, tweeted and posted on Facebook, but they cannot be used in Instagram comments and only in Snapchat messages since they are not approved by the consortium, Camilo said.

The privately held company—which Camilo runs with his partners, brothers Johnny and Liam Burns—does not provide download or sales numbers, though Camilo said the fast-selling Moji Maker app netted them sales in the six figures within a week.

Camilo is now based in Denver and the company is setting up an office in Los Angeles. They will continue to partner with celebrities as they look at working with corporate brands.

Their StephMoji app debuted just before Curry and the Warriors faced the LeBron James-led Cavaliers in the NBA Finals in June. The app features Curry smiling, shooting, dribbling and chewing on his mouth guard. With an assist from Curry on social media, it quickly became a best seller.

"It was literally perfect timing," Camilo said.

The Olympic athlete apps, PhelpsMoji and Simoji, debuted in late July. The Phelps app was already updated with a new scowling emoji after a photo of Phelps glowering inside his hood—dubbed

"PhelpsFace"—went viral this week.

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