

# Caricatures become an obsession

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For Anokhy Desai, a new haircut or outfit requires more than a trip to the shopping center. These days, she also finds herself also diving into the Bitmoji app to chop hair and replace clothes.

It's there that Desai and millions of other people have created personalized caricatures of themselves. Bitmoji attaches the cartoonish likenesses to funny and cheesy phrases and then stamps them on images that can be shared across social media.

The hilarity and absurdity of those images has turned Bitmoji into one of the most-downloaded apps in the world, and its illustrations have taken over text-messaging threads and Snapchat conversations. They've become such an important form of self-expression that it's common to encounter people, like Desai, who regularly update their Bitmoji avatars to reflect new hairdos and fashion choices. The most devoted among them boast that they spend more time picking out clothes for their Bitmoji than their real-world self - a level of care unlike anything before, experts in the virtual reality industry say.

"We would look at Bitmoji as the high-water mark for what's been done to make the avatar experience mainstream," said Berkley Frei, general manager at avatar software firm Morph 3-D.

But what that adds up to is the big question for Snapchat, which bought Bitstrips, the company that developed Bitmoji, for more than \$64 million 18 months ago.

Snap Inc. as a whole has been under pressure from investors since its initial public offering this year to increase ad revenue and show that it's far from finished adding users. The unprofitable Los Angeles company hasn't released revenue figures or user numbers for Bitmoji.

But earlier this month, Snap announced 3-D Bitmoji World Lenses, which allow users to place a three-dimensional rendering of their Bitmoji in real-world scenes captured through their smartphone camera. The characters appear to interact with their environment, and the animations can be shared on Snapchat.

The feature marks a major technological step for a company that has already dabbled in mixed reality features that place virtual objects, such as a now-famous dancing hot dog, in photos and videos. If it takes off, it could further Snap's lead in the nascent mixed and augmented reality sector.

But it's unclear whether Bitmoji will turn into a major revenue generator for Snap.

Before the acquisition, Bitstrips had partnerships with HBO, Forever 21 and other companies making branded clothing available to users. Terms of the deals, which Snap has allowed to stand for now, haven't been disclosed.

Soliciting sponsored options from any advertiser would fit with prior strategy. Financial analyst James Cakmak mused that just analyzing users' bitmoji selections could reveal a lot about their current emotions and be valuable in deciding what ads to show them elsewhere in Snapchat. Further, the Bitmoji app enables users to search for images tied to a particular greeting or mood, and the search data would provide additional insight if used for advertising purposes someday.

But Snap hasn't added any new revenue-generating options to Bitmoji, except for introducing the NBA and Major League Baseball as partners for virtual jerseys.

Digital avatars aren't a new phenomenon - Yahoo popularized online avatars in the late 2000s but was later overtaken by Google and Facebook, both of which instead prioritize real-life profile photos.

Asian companies, which have been trendsetters in online chat tools, have seen only mild pickup with Bitmoji-like apps such as FaceQ and Myidol, according to app research firm Sensor Tower. And video game avatars, such as the Nintendo Mii for Wii gaming devices, lack the same broad appeal and constant editing associated with bitmoji, experts said.

Snapchat's rival Facebook and several startups, including Oben and Gabsee, are fighting to become the dominant provider of 3-D avatar-making tools for virtual and augmented reality experiences. Apple even showcased earlier this month Animoji - animated emoji whose facial expressions users can change with the iPhone's new face-scanning technology.

Many startups see moneymaking potential in selling wardrobes and special features to users. Oben, based outside LA, is one going further, enabling avatars to speak and move in 3-D.

But it's Snap and the Toronto-based Bitstrips unit it acquired that have succeeded more than any company at getting people to invest time in avatars. According to Bitstrips, that's because the company discovered a need people probably didn't know existed.

"Having a digital extension of yourself is a necessity," Bitstrips Chief Executive Jacob Blackstock told Fast Company last month. "In terms of everyone I know, I mostly see them (through smartphones). If you're

going to live in here, you've got to make this a better place to live."

Bitmoji are used like normal emoji, except with personalized flair. They can be accessed from smartphone keyboards and placed in just about any app that allows for image posting or sending. Users say they're most likely to share bitmoji with close friends and family.

The images have become the default profile photo on Snapchat, and Snap employee badges bear workers' bitmojis. They're increasingly found in new parts of Snapchat, including on a user-location map where avatars have sported sunglasses or been shown inside virtual cars or planes when traveling long distances.

They've evolved to include friendmoji, which includes the avatars of two users in a single image. Snap says friendmoji, launched a year ago, account for more than half of all bitmojis sent in the text-chat section of Snapchat.

The encroachment of Bitmoji into more of Snapchat has drawn scorn from users who say they don't want to be forced to use or see them. Some say they're turned off by a lack of customization options. Snap says it recognizes bitmojis are highly personal and the firm is weighing both user feedback and the technological development needed to provide more diverse options.

Nikhil Jain, Snap's chief executive, said there's no doubt - based on focus groups with teenagers - that diversity in selection is the top desire.

"They want to have a few different versions of themselves from ultra-realistic to a complete cartoon version that still resembles them," Jain said.

Avid users say one thing Snap has gotten right is keeping bitmoji

culturally relevant by adding catchphrases tied to trending issues, including fake news and the solar eclipse.

But users say they're mostly attracted to Bitmoji because the visuals deliver lightheartedness in a way [users](#) couldn't on their own.

Take, "Pasta la vista!" It's the kind of cute reply that Jasmine Roashan says would have never crossed her mind when she wanted to accept a friend's invitation to an Italian dinner.

But Bitmoji had it. She loved the choice, which put her in a "Terminator" pose and included the twist on Arnold Schwarzenegger's popular saying.

"It's definitely my favorite form of communication," Roashan said. "Like if we could do this interview in bitmoji, that would be great."

Roashan pointed to how a bitmoji with her mini-self standing next to an hourglass sends a different message than the standard hourglass emoji found on apps.

"With Bitmoji, it's easier for me to find the right tone," she said.

It's not just a teenage thing. Sheryl Pressberg, a mother in Santa Monica, said she picked up Bitmoji almost three years ago from her kids. She changes outfits and updates her hair to match real-life changes and sends at least one bitmoji a day.

"What's there to get bored of?" she asked, noting she was waiting on an option that would show an avatar holding a baby, now that she's a grandmother.

Desai, 23, a cybersecurity consultant in Los Angeles, says she tried

cartoonish images offered by Facebook's Messenger and other chat apps.

But those weren't personalized - they featured cats or cactuses with short phrases - and they didn't feel fun in the way her old Yahoo Games avatar did.

She's kept coming back to Bitmoji. When a friend was rejected for a salary raise, she sent him a friendmoji showing him as a scoop of ice cream that had slid off the cone while her avatar-turned-scoop sat strong.

"It's a way to be less serious than saying, 'sorry,' and leaving it there," she said.

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