

AI is booming on the App Store, and developers are taking advantage of it

There's endless hype around generative AI this year, and app developers have clearly been paying attention. AI-focused tools are blowing up Apple's App Store charts in almost every category, occupying top 10 rankings across education, productivity, and photo editing. Opportunities are particularly rife for free graphics and design apps, a category that's positively saturated with AI content creation tools.

But quantity doesn't mean quality – and a great many of these apps are bewilderingly bad. I've been using some of the most popular offerings to understand the state of AI tools as we head into 2025. And for every serious attempt to make AI useful, there seem to be several more designed to cash in on the hype: quietly paywalling features they advertise behind pricey subscriptions and greatly misrepresenting the results that users can achieve, if the app even works at all.

Around half of the App Store's top 10 graphics and design apps have "AI" in the name, and three of them are all made by the same company – HUBX, an app developer founded in 2022 that's based in Turkey. One of its apps, DaVinci AI, is advertised as an AI image generator with some photo editing features. Almost every tool is locked behind a \$30 annual (or \$5 weekly) subscription fee, and the free trial only unlocks a subpar text-to-image feature that gives you a choice between using unspecified versions of Stable Diffusion and DALL-E AI models.

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The Verge

The images it produces are low-quality and resized or cropped incorrectly. In-app ads appear when you click pretty much any link. The UI is unpleasant to navigate. If you *do* pay for the full version, you can't download any edited images without slapping an ugly watermark on it. And yet, it sits far above the rankings for more recognizable creative platforms like Microsoft Designer, which has its own built-in text-to-image AI generator. Adobe Express is the only design-focused app in the same category that currently ranks above DaVinci AI.

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The other two high-ranking HUBX products I tested were just as lackluster: the Home AI "interior design" app spits out hallucination-riddled images of rooms that are barely usable even as concept plans, and the Tattoo AI app refused to work entirely. Both apps have the same feature paywalls and review pop-up reminders as DaVinci AI. The copy and pasted App Store version history notes across all HUBX products are also devoid of any details.

While all three apps feature a surprisingly large number of five-star reviews, the user feedback across social media and the App Store comments is overwhelmingly negative. A recurring complaint is that customer service is impossible to get ahold of. HUBX never responded to my requests for comment.

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Apps that clearly advertise having AI features are highly attractive. According to Sensor Tower, four out of the top 10 most downloaded iOS graphics and design apps in the US so far this year have had “AI” somewhere in their title. That’s actually two fewer than last year, but the most popular apps are booming. Potoroom saw downloads increase by more than 160 percent since last year. Comparatively, Photoshop Express downloads on iOS – which also includes generative AI features – fell by 21 percent during the same period.

AI-focused creative apps aren’t *all* bad, but the app market saturation makes it harder to find the good ones that use the technology in more focused ways. Apps like Google’s Magic Editor and Adobe Photoshop have specific tools for removing unwanted objects from photos or inserting new ones in specific places. Smaller developers that provide similar features and perform those tasks well are also climbing the App Store rankings.

For example, Potoroom and Picsart AI – all-in-one graphic design apps akin to platforms like Canva and Adobe Express – are actually pretty good! They rank highly in the free “Photo and Video” App Store category and provide a similar variety of features to quickly create online content using premade digital assets and templates, alongside some AI-powered editing tools like automatic background and object removal.

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Neither app blew me away, but they did exactly what they advertised: the background removal features aren't as good as Canva's, but they did the job, and object removal erased undesirable aspects of photos even if it wasn't as convincing as Google's Magic Editor. Both apps lock some of their more premium editing features and digital assets behind a \$13 monthly subscription, which is pretty standard if you're being upfront about it – individual Canva and Adobe Express subscriptions start at \$15 and \$10 per month, respectively, by comparison.

There's also a noticeable divide between the iPhone and iPad charts – very few AI-focused names appear in the top 100 free *or* paid list for the iPad, which instead feature a more diverse range of graphic design apps like Adobe Fresco, Clip Studio Paint, and Canva. And interestingly, the list of top *paid* iPhone apps looks very similar. There's an abundance of sketching and 3D modeling platforms, premium reference materials for artists, and tools that streamline specific creative tasks like removing backgrounds and resizing images.

The divide suggests the spammy AI app phenomenon is a mass-market one that hasn't quite caught on with traditional photographers and illustrators who still want to use their tried-and-true apps. It also suggests that AI itself holds less appeal if users are expected to pay for it, which tracks with the kind of creative AI apps that appear most frequently – custom tattoos, logo makers, and interior design – which are skilled services that usually require payment. People don't necessarily want to remove the skill barrier; they want to remove the financial one.

Using in-app charges to appear on the App Store's free category, and thereby attract a wider audience, is hardly new. Mobile games have been taking advantage of this loophole for years – and what's now happening with the creative AI market looks eerily familiar.

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