iOS 14 leak reveals feature that lets you use apps even if you haven’t installed them

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Samuel Axon

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According 9to5Mac’s analysis of an alleged leaked build of iOS 14, the next major release of Apple’s mobile operating system for iPhones, iPads, and iPods will introduce a new API that will let developers offer some functionality of their apps to users who have not actually downloaded or installed those apps.

The publication says that Apple refers to the feature as “Clips” and that it is built off of the existing tools that allow users to navigate to app-specific content via QR codes. The idea seems to be that tapping an app-targeted link or scanning a QR code could bring up content in a temporary “floating card” of the app on the device that allows you to consume the content or perform some other app-related action.

Presently, using a link or code like that when you don’t have the associated app installed opens it in Safari and sometimes directs you to the App Store to download the app before you can do anything with it. Now, a portion of the app could be downloaded “as an Over-The-Air package.” Apple would provide the API to developers to determine which parts of the app

should be accessible this way and to let developers implement this themselves using Apple's own tools.

In the early build 9to5Mac claims to have access to, it seems that only QR codes work at present, but it is plausible that Apple could extend that to links as well. In any case, the publication says it has identified integrations with YouTube, OpenTable, Yelp, DoorDash, and Sony's second-screen app for PlayStation players. Apple often partners with a select set of app developers when building a new feature so there are running examples when the feature is demonstrated and introduced—usually at the company's summer developer conference, which will be held virtually this year.

Google already offers a couple of somewhat similar options in Android; one is called Slices, and another is a limited preview of a feature called Instant Apps. The specific use cases of Apple's version are still unclear, so we can't be sure yet which of those two solutions Clips is similar to, if either. It's also not clear whether Clips will be limited to QR codes, which would relegate it to use as a marketing tool attached to advertisements and the like, or if it will be used to allow users to access deeper functionality without downloading apps.

Depending on how this API is used, it could have ramifications for concerns, ranging from parental controls to the metrics apps developers use to measure and build upon their success.

It's important to acknowledge that while later-confirmed past leaks have made it seem likely that 9to5Mac's leaked iOS 14 build is legitimate, it wouldn't be unusual for Apple to include features in early pre-release builds that don't make it to market right away or at all. We'll likely have to wait until at least the virtual WWDC in June to get the final word.

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