Find Your Summer Soulmate with Blur!

I’ve worked at Physics Today for 20 years now. Throughout that time, I’ve kept the same email address—which, understandably, has ended up on the distribution lists of an increasing number of public information officers and media relations people. Most of the press releases that land in my inbox concern scientific research. This week, however, I received one from ChicExecs PR of San Marcos, California, touting a new dating app called Blur.

“Move over, superficial dating,” the release declared. “There’s a new digital cupid that’s hitting the heart-mark with personality!” How novel is Blur? As is the case for most dating apps, Blur’s users upload profiles and photos. And like Grindr and other apps, Blur exploits a phone’s ability to determine and transmit its location to alert a user when other users are nearby.

Blur’s special sauce, and the reason for its odd name, is how users “qualify” each other, to use a term from sales and marketing. Let’s say you walk into the Misfit, a bar in Santa Monica. You unpocket your mobile phone and fire up Blur. The screen displays a circle of blurry pictures of nearby Blur users. Maybe some of them are in the bar, enjoying a Pimm’s Punch or a Sipsmith Negroni. Beneath the photos is the first in a series of “fun” questions, such as “Do you take lots of selfies?” As you answer the questions, one or more of the blurry photos become gradually clearer because your answers match those of other Blur users. “Once potential matches are revealed,” explained the press release, “you can join a private chat room where you two can break the ice.” And the more you use the app, the better Blur’s “advanced machine learning algorithms” can match you with a mate.

One of the recurring themes of this column is to question the extent to which our behavior in cyberspace is truly different from our behavior in meatspace. Users of Bumble and Tinder swipe through photos of potential matches based on outward appearance. Is that action so different from walking into the Bath Assembly Rooms during Jane Austen’s time and sizing up eligible-looking members of the crowd?

In 2012, Jeffrey Cooper of Trinity College Dublin and his colleagues demonstrated that one quick glance suffices to evaluate the attractiveness of potential mates. The researchers showed photos of people to 151 adults and asked them whether they would like to date them. Meanwhile, a functional MRI scanner monitored which parts of the subjects’ brains became active when they looked at a particular photo. A few days later, the subjects met the people in the photos at a speed-dating event. Even though the subjects had time to chat and ask questions, they reliably chose to pursue the people whose photos they had liked. What’s more, the fMRI scans revealed that the photo evaluation, which occurred in two locations of the prefrontal cortex, took just half a second.

But as Jane Austen told us in her novels, evaluating someone’s suitability as a lifelong partner takes much longer. “She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me,” was how Fitzwilliam Darcy summarized his first impression of Elizabeth Bennet. Perhaps future apps will figure out how to bring Darcy and Lizzy together more expeditiously.

Reference