

These dating apps are all about location

May 25 2011, By Shan Li

Sitting in the stands at Dodger Stadium, Steve Bergmann began checking out nearby women he might hit on. But his eyes weren't scanning the seats - they were fixed on his smartphone.

Bergmann tapped into an app that uses GPS to locate prospective dates in the vicinity. He scrolled through photos and profiles till one young woman caught his eye, then shot her an instant message. Half an hour later, Bergmann and Meg Riely, both 25, were sipping beers together at a concession stand.

"She was one of the closest girls in my vicinity, and her picture was pretty cute," said Bergmann, a personal wealth manager. "So I sent her a message about the game and basically tried to be as charming as I could."

Forget online dating services and their scientific personality tests. This is [courtship](#) in the [smartphone](#) era, driven mainly by photos and proximity.

About a dozen smartphone apps allow people to connect at sports events, shopping malls and other public places, using the same location-based technology that tells you about a traffic jam ahead or whether there's a sale on jeans at a store you are walking past.

Proponents say it's simply a modern answer to that age-old question: Where can I meet someone?

"The whole point is to facilitate real-life meetings," said Christian Wiklund, founder and chief executive of Skout Inc., the San Francisco

company that makes the dating app used by Bergmann and Riely. "It takes a lot of courage to just walk up to someone. These are good ice-breakers."

Skout, which is the largest of the location-based dating apps, claims 5 million subscribers and says the average age of users is about 26. Grindr, aimed at the gay market, said it has 1.8 million subscribers.

Most of these dating apps are free and work about the same way. People download an application and set up a profile that includes their photo, their interests and the type of person they are looking to meet.

The apps are advertising-supported and offer added services for a fee. Subscribers to Are You Interested? can pay \$1.99 a month to find out who has browsed their profiles. They can also send pictures of puppies or cupid's arrows (each cost 99 cents) to flirt with possible suitors.

For digital wallflowers, Skout offers "wink bombs" that send all selected nearby subscribers a pick-up line. Sample: "Are you a parking ticket, because you have fine written all over you."

Old-school online dating services such as Match.com and EHarmony are also offering apps now, but without location-based components.

"People don't like the idea of being approached in the grocery store without their makeup on," said Mandy Ginsberg, president of Match, whose subscribers tend to be in their 30s and older.

Users say there can be a sleaze factor. Crude instant messages from a stranger are always annoying, but they can be downright unnerving when that stranger is lurking nearby.

Then there are the socially awkward.

Thea Miller, 25, of Los Angeles, said 90 percent of the guys who contact her via Skout are "drippy and creepy," and "probably live in a basement somewhere."

Miller takes precautions by opening the app only at large events, such as concerts or Lakers games, with plenty of people around.

"You just have to be smart and not meet anybody in a dark parking lot at night," she said.

To some, it's one more example of our diminishing privacy. There are already digital records of where we shop, what we buy and where we go - and now there's a database of where we hunt for dates.

"These apps are another way that information could be collected about people without their consent or even knowledge," said Lillie Coney, associate director of the Electronic Privacy Information Center. "If these apps know that I'm a single woman looking for a nice, single guy in my age range, that info could be sold to a third party and used to target advertising at me."

But for Ozzie Perez, 22, and Ernie Garcia, 30, the benefits of using a dating app overshadowed any downsides. Perez was working at a Wal-Mart in Anaheim, Calif., when he received a message, via Grindr, from Garcia. The app told Perez that Garcia was 2,000 feet away.

After a flirty chat about their mutual interests, the two went on a date that night to Disneyland.

"I'm not into hookups and partying," said Perez, from what is now their shared home in Long Beach, Calif. "To find someone on my level was one in a million."

The Los Angeles-based company offers a premium service, Grindr Xtra, that for \$2.99 a month allows users to detect up to 200 users in an area. The free service limits it to 100.

Mark Brooks, a consultant to online dating services, said premium levels could eventually be a significant source of income for the apps. For now, he said, "they can't charge much for memberships because they have to reach a critical mass of users."

Smartphone dating apps are often associated with brief flings, a trait that might discourage some of the lovelorn from using them.

"There's a stigma about it," acknowledged Brian Gettleman, 33, a surgical devices salesman in Manhattan. "You think there's probably a low caliber of people using them."

Three years ago, Gettleman was drinking coffee at the Time Warner Center in midtown when he turned on his Skout app and noticed Aisha Ballie, a salesclerk working at a Hugo Boss store two floors below.

"Hey, how are you," he wrote.

She replied, "Hey, you're cute. How are you?"

Last May, Gettleman flew Ballie, 25, to Paris and proposed with his grandmother's ring. The two plan to wed this October in Westchester, N.Y.

"When we talk about how we met, we get mushy," Ballie said.

But many app users are like Dustin Robertson, a 35-year-old music video editor and personal trainer. On a recent night at the Abbey Food & Bar in West Hollywood, he turned on his Grindr [app](#) in hopes of meeting a

new friend. Now.

"Everyone wants everything now," Robertson said, "because technology is all about the now, being of the moment."

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