

Her 'Smile' app makes dating a laughing matter

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FULL TEXT

When users log onto the Smile dating app, they won't be greeted by swaths of profiles to swipe through, nor by responses to prompts meant to spur conversations.

Instead, they'll find a long stream of videos gleaned from TikTok —“The Office” clips, dog videos, snippets from celebrity interviews. If they find the clip funny, they tap on a heart button. Not funny —the heart with a slash through it.

The app's algorithm uses this data to identify the user's “humor profile” —a unique combination of eight different humor styles, like sarcastic humor, self-deprecating humor, and dark humor —and offers up matches who have similar makeups.

The use of a humor-based model, said founder Melissa Mullen, is an attempt to “combat the superficiality that's pervading the online dating industry,” she said. With her app, all but one profile picture is blurred until a few messages are exchanged, and there can only be three matches at a time to avoid “the paradox of choice,” said Mullen. If a user doesn't like a match, they will be able to delete it and get another.

Though you can download Smile on Apple's App Store now (and on the Google Play store by May 1), users won't be able to fully engage with the app until June 1. Mullen started working on the app a little over a year ago, as she was navigating the post-college dating scene after graduating from Boston College. Her worst date turned out to be one she had high hopes for: a Tinder match who was a professional comedian.

“I was really excited because I really value humor in a relationship, but I just didn't find him funny or his jokes funny,” said Mullen, 25. “That's really a key thing in our algorithm —you're not going to be funny to everyone, but everyone is funny to somebody.”

The emphasis on humor over looks runs counter to the dating apps that left Mullen unsatisfied when she was a user. She recalls swiping on “thousands of guys” and going on “hundreds of dates,” but none panned out. She started to think about what all of her successful past relationships shared. “These people that I was going on second and third and fourth dates with were people that I wouldn't necessarily have swiped right on had I met them on a dating app, just based on how they looked,” said Mullen, a Needham native who now lives in West Roxbury. “They all could make me laugh.”

When Mullen began looking into the connection between love and humor, she found the research of Jeffrey A. Hall, a professor at the University of Kansas. Hall, who is the director of the college's Relationships and Technology Lab, became an adviser for the app.

When looking for a long-term partner, Hall said, matching based on another person's photos isn't an effective model. Instead, a shared sense of humor is a much stronger prediction of long-term compatibility. Even if there isn't an initial physical attraction, Hall said, “we can fall for them because of who they are as a person and shift our sense of attraction to them.”

To this end, Smile took into account what they believe to be users' main stressors about online dating —“They're feeling judged, evaluated, or filling out laundry lists of personality inventories,” Hall said —and replaced them with the social media scrolling that younger generations are wont to do anyway.

Smile events are being held all over the city leading up to the June 1 launch to drive more people to the app's waitlist (more than 3,000 people have signed up already, Mullen said, and these people will get access to the app

on May 1). There have been several pop-ups at local colleges, and on April 22 and 23 from 7:30 p.m.-9 p.m., there will be Smile events at the Hideout Comedy night at the White Bull Tavern downtown.

The majority of the larger dating apps, including Tinder, Hinge, and OkCupid, are owned by one company, Match Group, which has a market cap of over \$25 billion. Fringe services, like Smile –which, Mullen said, has raised almost half a million dollars in angel investments –are often bought up by bigger apps.

“I’ll probably entertain offers if they come in, but I would love to see Smile become the next big thing and to run Smile myself for a long time,” said Mullen.

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