

On a sunny Wednesday afternoon I find myself in the bar of a restaurant in Covent Garden, Central London, waiting to meet Adam Bond. He is, I know, a 32-year-old actor, a 6ft, muscular non-smoker, a Gemini who loves dogs and the book *In the Heart of the Sea*, but who is tired of playing mind games in relationships.

I know this because, as I sit nervously drinking a bottle of lager, I scan his profile on the popular dating site Lovestruck. His main photo is a head shot that shows him smiling warmly, his beard, tan and dark, shoulder-length hair all combining to make him look like a particularly handsome Jesus. In another photo, he wears a sailor's hat, and you get the impression he's in the middle of having a really good time. He lists the songs *Uptown Girl* by Billy Joel and *Someone Like You* by Adele as favourites, he lives in Swiss Cottage and he specifies that he has a postgraduate degree. Although I've not yet met him, it doesn't take me long to decide he has a lot going for him. He seems fun and photogenic, easygoing and interesting. Bond, in other words, looks a catch.

I am not the only person to conclude this. Since he joined the site 18 months ago, thousands of women have seen his profile and thought exactly the same thing. Bond, it turns out, is the most desired man on Lovestruck. When we asked the Lovestruck webmasters to crunch their numbers, they found that, of their 500,000 members, he attracted the most interest. He has been sent more messages from more single women than any other guy. He's also received more "winks" – the coy mechanism by which one user can signal their presence to another on some dating sites – than anyone else. Bond, like everybody I meet in the next few days, is therefore an outlier, a high-performing individual in the increasingly competitive field of online dating.

When he first found out, he was surprised. "I was like, 'Really?'" he says brightly, after arriving and ordering a glass of soda water. But on some level, he recognises that, yeah, he's doing OK. In 2013, he estimates he went on "about three dozen" dates as a result of his profile, most of them with different women. He says he often likes to take them "crashing Mayfair galleries" – flouncing into upmarket art sales, grabbing champagne and pretending to be interested in buying a painting. "It's fun," he says. "It's make-believe. It's fantasy."

Bond decided to sign up to Lovestruck because, over the past few years, his life has been split between working in the US and the UK, which has made him feel rootless at a time when most of his friends seem to be settling down. Like the vast majority of people who now date online, his phone provides constant updates of the interest he is attracting.

MOST POPULAR WOMAN ON CHRISTIANCONNECTION.CO.UK

CAT LANE

AGE: 29

STATUS: Single

LOOKING FOR: A relationship or friendship

FAITH: Christian

HEIGHT: Shorter than average

BUILD: Slim

I'm a friend and family girl who is really in love with every aspect of my faith! Love people, adventures, learning, music, travelling, exercise, art. I would love to meet a fun-loving, laid-back, adventurous guy who is really looking to put Jesus at the centre of their life and looking to grow, learn and serve.



MOST POPULAR MAN ON BEAUTIFULPEOPLE.COM

NICHOLAS CHRISTOPOULOS

AGE: 36

STATUS: Single

LOOKING FOR: Fun and flirts

OCCUPATION: Engineering

HEIGHT: 6ft

BUILD: Muscular

ZODIAC SIGN: Gemini

DRINKING: Socially

SMOKING: No



MOST POPULAR WOMAN ON MYSINGLEFRIEND.COM

LIZZY LINLEY

26, looking for a male between 28 and 34



Age 26
Sex female

Lizzy was added by Jen, who said her tastes are more...

- Sweet than Savoury
- Watch sport than Play sport
- Cocktail than Gin & tonic
- Coffee than Tea
- Federer than Nadal

Jen also had this to say about Lizzy...

"I am lucky enough to have Lizzy as my best friend and it is my pleasure to introduce her to you."

Lizzy is great fun, generous, thoughtful and an ambitious young woman. She is very intelligent and independent, has lots of great friends, me included obviously!

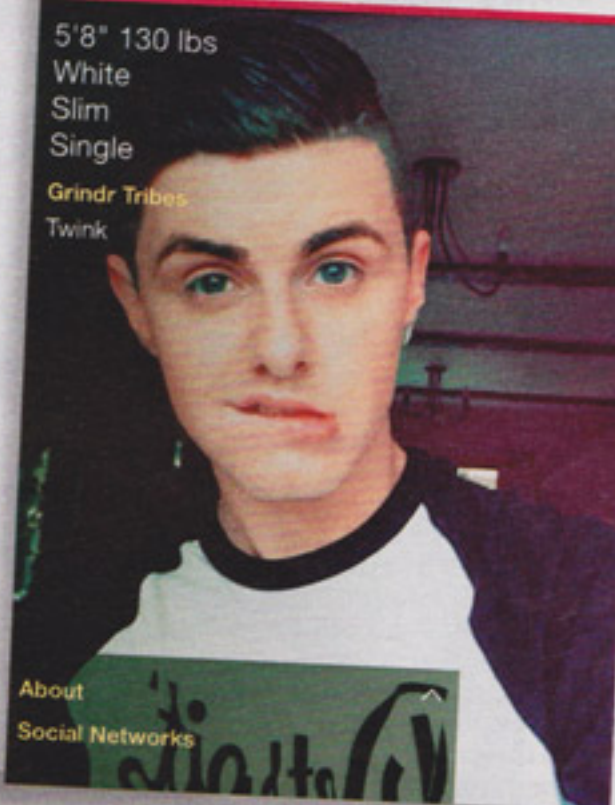
As the picture shows, she's gorgeous and has modelled for numerous companies but is not your stereotypical model. She loves a night out at the pub playing pool, drinking Strongbow, eating pizza then watching scary films! I'm not saying she's manly in every sense but she would wipe the floor with you at the pool table but possibly by distracting you with her stories.

MOST POPULAR ON GRINDR.COM

SEAN SCHOFIELD

5'8" 130 lbs
White
Slim
Single

Grindr Tribes
Twink



About
Social Networks

He says you can opt to have an e-mail sent to you every time someone views your profile, but that he has disabled that option: "I mean, that would be ridiculous." Instead, he gets e-mails whenever someone sends him a message or a wink. "I get those every day. Usually I delete them and forget about it. But then I go onto the site later, see them all and think, 'Holy crap!'" Then, he'll begin to skim through the people who have contacted him, looking first at their photographs. He mimics a tired swiping action on his phone. "It becomes, 'No, no, yes, maybe, no, no.' It may sound shallow, but I'm not hurting anyone," he says. "You don't hear of people falling in love at first personality."

This world of winks and hopeful messages, of "likes", "dislikes" and snap judgments based on smartphone selfies, will be familiar to many. Online dating in the UK is a £170-million-a-year industry, with almost 1,500 different sites offering their services. And we are, increasingly, finding romance with people we first encounter online. Research carried out by Future Foundation on behalf of dating site eHarmony concluded that, in 2013, 40 per cent of new adult relationships in the UK began online in one form or another, with 17 per cent of the couples who got together last year meeting through internet dating.

These numbers are only going to grow. The same report forecasts a steady upward trend so that, a decade from now, perhaps 60 per cent of all new relationships will have been in some way facilitated by the internet, with

'IT SOUNDS SHALLOW, BUT YOU DON'T HEAR OF PEOPLE FALLING IN LOVE AT FIRST PERSONALITY'

more than half those being as a direct result of dating sites. Soon the distinction between "dating" and "online dating" will be rendered meaningless. But how do you succeed in this increasingly virtual environment? What sort of person do you need to be?

For a start, it helps to live in London. The capital has the highest percentage of single people in the UK, with perhaps half the population aged 20-59 without a partner. Second - predictably - good looks don't hurt. The day after meeting Adam Bond, I have coffee with Grace Mahony. She is 23 and works as a member of the support staff of a financial advice firm in Central London. We sit together on the grass in Green Park during her lunch break. Last year, she signed up to a dating site called Beautiful People. You submit a photo of yourself and existing members rate your appearance. If you rate high enough, you're allowed to join.

"Obviously, the concept sounds really, really vain," says Mahony, a little embarrassed. "But it was mainly curiosity that made me do it. Would I get in or not?"

She not only got in, but now has the most viewed female profile on the whole site, as well as the highest-rated set of pictures. Members are encouraged to judge each other's photographs out of five, and she currently boasts an average of more than 4.9. "It's a bit sad that I know that," she says.

Mahony was bullied at school. But then she hit 15 and suddenly the boys who had been giving her a hard time began asking her out. "Even if I was out with my mum, they'd come up and start trying to chat me up." Now, she receives virtual overtures from men every day, most of which typically open with some observation about her thick curly hair. Like Adam Bond, she quickly turned her message notifications off, as the beeping sound her phone made kept waking her up at night. Still, every time someone shows an interest, she can't help feel a trill of pleasure. "It's always exciting. It's always flattering. I know people will think I'm up myself because I'm on this site, but I am quite humble. I always think, 'Why me?'"

Well, why her? "I would hope there was more to it than the photos, that I'm not just this online persona that people find attractive," she says, pointing out that her profile also lists information such as her favourite books (*The Great Gatsby*, *A Game of Thrones*). "But it would probably come down to the pictures" ■

and the way that I look, same way I would message someone based on whether I found them attractive or not." Plus, it's not like she hasn't tried to look good for the camera. "I've definitely got photos that show me in the best possible way," she says, laughing. "From the best possible angles."

Over the past six months she's been on "about 40" dates with "between 6 and 8" guys, and while none has yet worked out long-term, "There's always something in the pipeline. I'm very appreciative of that." She also wonders if there might not be something almost edifying about the process of regular online dating, of getting out there, meeting people, trying your luck, not taking things too much to heart. "It's made me more level-headed," says Mahony. "It's shown me that you can't go into these things expecting everything to be perfect."

Still, the pursuit of perfection is a big reason why so many people search for love online. And Nicholas Christopoulos is perfect. This is not my opinion; it is a demonstrable fact. Every photo on the 36-year-old's Beautiful People profile has been rated the full five out of five. In terms of looks, he has been judged unimprovable, and his profile has attracted more than five times as many views as the average guy on the site. When we meet for lunch at a restaurant near St Paul's Cathedral, the waitresses literally giggle as they bring us food. He is bloody handsome, actually: tall, slim, a wave of black hair, stubble, cheekbones, the lot. He even looks good eating a burger.

Anyway, Christopoulos is originally from Melbourne and works as a freelance software engineer in London. He's building a motorbike, recently climbed Mont Blanc and says he hasn't owned a TV in seven years. He joined Beautiful People in September for the fairly straightforward reason that he wants to meet beautiful women. "I don't know if everyone would admit it, but I think I am superficial about certain things. Most of the time, people want to be with someone they find physically attractive as well as interesting."

He admits he is pretty picky. "I like blonde women. Traditional figures. Slim, but curves are fine. A real person. Somebody who hasn't gone crazy down the gym. And somebody who likes to dress well, I suppose. Who respects themselves. Who isn't afraid to go out without make-up on."

GRACE TURNED OFF HER MESSAGE NOTIFICATIONS. THE BEEPING SOUND KEPT HER AWAKE AT NIGHT

MOST POPULAR WOMAN ON BEAUTIFULPEOPLE.COM

GRACE MAHONY

AGE: 23

STATUS: Single

LOOKING FOR: Love, fun and flirts, social networking

OCCUPATION: Administration

HEIGHT: 5ft 4in

BUILD: Slim

HOME OWNER: No

ZODIAC SIGN: Capricorn

SMOKING: No

DRINKING: Prefer not to say

So far, he's only been on "three or four" dates as a result of his membership. "But I've had a ton of messages, just talking to people." He will occasionally receive what sound like veiled propositions from women saying, "You're attractive. Let's go out to dinner. Are you free tonight?", but says he always declines. He suspects some of these people are married. "And I didn't join the site for one-night stands. I'm going to sound like an idiot here, but if I wanted a one-night stand I could go out, meet someone in a bar, and it will happen. It's not difficult."

I notice he is wearing the same leather jacket he wears in his main profile picture. He grins. "It's Burberry. I'd just bought it and I was really happy about it, so obviously I put a photo up on the site. I had puffy eyes, but I didn't give a s***. I just put it up."

While we're on the subject of how online daters present themselves, one thing that Christopoulos – and several of the other people I interview – finds frustrating is when someone's photos don't reflect what they look like in real life. "It's not good," he says, sternly. But he can still understand the rationale: "If you're single, you're going to try to do everything you can to make yourself a good prospect. At the end of the day, it's advertising," he says. "That's what it is. You're an advertising billboard for who you are."

The more people I speak to, the more it becomes apparent that, in an environment where everybody is striving to present the very best

picture of themselves, honesty quickly becomes a very valuable commodity. To be perceived as "genuine" is critical if you are to succeed. Looks aside, everyone I interview seems to have a few basic things in common. They share a certain openness in their dealings, both in person and in e-mails. They strike me as good communicators. They seem genuine, basically, and manage to convey this in their profiles and, I imagine, in the dozens of messages they might send every day.

Messages are important. Your dating profile is public, but messages are private, personal, and in many ways more revealing. "Sometimes you get ones that are just too soppy, or trying to be too funny, or that are just too complimentary to be genuine," says Lizzy Linley, a 26-year-old from North Yorkshire who is studying to become a vet in London. "If they call you 'babe' in their first message, it gets deleted."

In February, Linley and a female friend woke up hungover and decided to create a profile for her on My Single Friend. Her mate wrote a nice testimonial talking up her pool skills and modelling experience (the whole idea of the site is that you write your friend's profile) and they posted a picture of her looking at the camera with a woolly hat pushed back to reveal her long blonde hair. Linley's profile has since become the site's most popular of 2014 so far, and she has been on four first

dates as a result. Actually, technically she has been on three first dates as a result of her profile, but on her way back from one of them she met a guy on the train, started chatting and they swapped details. "It was a, 'Here's my number, call me maybe?' sort of thing," she says. She seems proud of herself for having taken that leap. "It just made me realise that there's nothing wrong with putting yourself out there, trying to make things happen."

Linley makes a common observation: it's hard enough to find the time to socialise with your friends, so when you do, you're less inclined to spend the whole night scanning the club for single strangers. "It kind of defeats the point of going out with your mates," she says. "What's the old saying? You either meet someone at work, at the gym or at the pub? Well, if you've exhausted those possibilities, going online becomes the next logical step. In a way," she admits, "it's actually a bit less effort."

For a long time, this was not a mindset Cat Lane ever imagined she would adopt. "I'm a romantic," says the 29-year-old. "And I always wanted that



whirlwind romance, in which I met The One." But two years ago, something happened. Lane, a musical theatre performer, converted to Christianity having been an atheist all her life. Suddenly, the romantic fantasy of finding The One was overshadowed by the statistical reality of just locating someone she fancied who shared her faith. So she decided to look online.

We meet for coffee in Borough Market, by London Bridge. Lane is petite, blonde, has long eyelashes and an ever so slightly playful manner. Like Lizzy Linley, she was hanging out with a friend when, spur of the moment, they decided to sign her up to Christian Connection (its slogan: "Another Dating Website? Thank God!").

Within a day of creating her profile, Lane was inundated with messages. First it was fun, then, quickly, it became "exhausting", as she realised there was no way she could reply to them all. "You want to say, 'Thank you so much, you seem a lovely person,' but it would just take so much time." So has she sent any messages? "None. It's not that I'm scared but honestly, not in an arrogant way, I found that I got enough responses as it was."

"Winks" have been replaced with "waves" on Christian Connection: "They're a bit less sleazy," Lane says. I ask if she's comfortable being judged on her looks. She laughs and says that, as a performer, she's used to being approved or rejected on sight.

She says that, while church can be a place where Christians meet their partners, there's actually a slightly strange dynamic going on if you're an attractive single blonde. "It's funny. Because, at church, people really want to get to know what you're like as a person, you almost don't want to come across as too pretty or whatever." Why? "Because people might feel that you're not a genuine person." Does she worry that some men might feel self-conscious around her? "A lot of Christian guys struggle with that. But if somebody is scared to talk to you, maybe they're not confident enough for you anyway."

Lane has a brunch date with a guy who recently messaged her and who seems relaxed and confident. Young Christians, I get the impression, make good online daters. For a start, honesty is even more important because the stakes are so much higher (the endgame for everyone, after all, is marriage). Plus, they are instinctively attuned to socialising with other Christians anyway. "It helps you in your faith to be part of a community," says Lane, before she goes. "To meet like-minded people."

This is just one of several things that, oddly enough, Cat and Sean Schofield

MOST POPULAR MAN ON LOVESTRUCK.COM

ADAM BOND

AGE: 32

STATUS: Single

HEIGHT: 6ft

BUILD: Muscular

OCCUPATION: Art, design and fashion

I'm tired of playing mind games in relationships and have learnt that life is too short to pretend to be someone who I am not. If I like you, I'll let you know. That said, I'm always up for a bit of fun. I'm a free spirit, an adventurer and an adrenaline junkie. So there you have it. Oh – and whoever you are out there... She must love dogs. 'Ruff said!

have in common. Sean is 22, a medical secretary in Cambridge, and was recently voted as having the best profile on Grindr, a location-based app created principally to put gay men in contact with one another.

We speak on the phone. He stresses that Grindr isn't just a dating app – although he has been on "about ten dates over the past year" using it – but that it also serves a "networking" function. "So there have been people I've met up with and known that we wouldn't work romantically, but that we'd get along as friends. And that's really important in the gay community, to meet people you can be friends with, especially if you've only just come out."

Another thing Schofield and Cat Lane have in common is that they'd both rather meet partners offline. "If I had my way, I'd rather meet someone in a pub or club. I think I'm better in real life than I am talking to people online."

Sean says that he gets some "pretty extreme sexual messages, some very blunt stuff", and estimates 60 per cent of the correspondence he receives is from people "after no-strings-attached sex". In fact, he's recently put a note on his profile asking people not to contact him if that's what they are after. Because Grindr uses your location to put you in contact with users in the same area, Sean says that while he gets a steady flow of messages in

Cambridge, when he visits London, interest rockets: "I can get 50 messages in an hour." That sounds like quite a lot, I say. "Yeah, it surprises me. I don't know what it is about my profile that makes people send messages."

It doesn't hurt that he is boy-band pretty and exhibits a sense of fun (he recently posted lyrics from the TLC song No Scrubs, which apparently got a good response). But far from relishing the virtual attention and messaged compliments, he says it can make him feel anxious. "When somebody says 'You're stunning' or 'You're beautiful' or whatever, it can create this pressure. It puts you on a pedestal. It's flattering, but they may not think that when they see you in real life."

Like Grace Mahony, he doesn't like the idea that people might be attracted not to him as a person, but to a digital version of himself. "I'd prefer it if, when we were having a conversation, someone said, 'You know what? You're really funny.' I'd prefer compliments like that."

He also wonders if there is something compulsive about looking for love online, whether it encourages a restlessness that isn't always healthy. "With my last relationship, one of the big reasons we split up was that he was still using apps and stuff. It can be a dangerous thing, the idea that you can still shop around, like you're in some supermarket: 'I can get this person, but I'll keep my eye open for more.'" Still, it toughens you up, if nothing else. "If you go on these sites thinking everyone is going to message you back, you might be in for a shock," he says, chuckling grimly. "It's definitely given me a thick skin. It would give anyone a thick skin."

And this, in an odd way, is the most striking thing about all the people I meet. They may be some of the web's most popular singletons, but they are, for all that, still single. Everybody – even Nicholas Christopoulos, with his perfect photo rating – had experienced failure or disappointment in some form or another. Online conversations that petered out. Date requests that went ignored. Drinks that couldn't end soon enough. Girls that got away. But, like the rest of the country, they keep clicking and they keep hoping for the best.

Back in Covent Garden, Adam Bond tells me he chose to meet at this particular restaurant because he once brought a girl here on an amazing date. "We were literally sitting right on these seats," he says, wistfully. "And I was so into her." But in the end, she decided she'd rather keep dating other guys than settle down. It still rankles, but Adam's not giving up yet. "We're still in touch, which is great, so who knows what might happen down the road?" he says brightly. "We'll see. We'll see." ■

The Times dating website has 82,000 members – join at encountersdating.co.uk

