

The bottleneck in dating isn't matching. It's time

By Al Lim

The Straits Times, Singapore, Page 2, Section: | OPINION
Friday 9 October 2026
944 words, 891cm² in size
386,100 circulation

Al Lim

Who would want the Government to help them date? That question came up at a session of the Institute of Policy Studies' Young Singaporeans Conference, titled Future Makers. A few hands went up from among the 30 participants who brainstormed ways to address Singapore's declining total fertility rate.

The counterpoint to that question was that at least you won't get catfished. That counterpoint is now an app.

FirstDate, launched by the Government Technology Agency on Sept 29, is a pilot dating service for public officers aged 21 to 35. Users log in with Singpass and answer questions about their interests, values and deal-breakers. There is no swiping. Every cycle, the system sends one match, chosen by the Gale-Shapley stable marriage algorithm.

The algorithm is a classic of market design, built to produce stable outcomes. Developed in 1962 by mathematicians David Gale and Lloyd Shapley, it helped earn Shapley and economist Alvin Roth the 2012 Nobel Prize in economics. It is used to match medical graduates to residencies and students to schools.

I recall encountering it in college, when it allocated our first-year study trips. We ranked 10 choices. I got my seventh. That is not a flaw. The algorithm is designed for stability, not to maximise everyone's satisfaction. No two people who are not paired would prefer each other to their assigned partners.

For residency matching, stability is a useful design goal. But in romance, preferences are far from static. What we want from another person can change upon meeting them, spending time together or as we ourselves change.

FirstDate treats dating as a matching problem: too much swiping, too many choices and not enough attention to compatibility. But I think it misreads the bottleneck. What is scarce is not information. It is time.

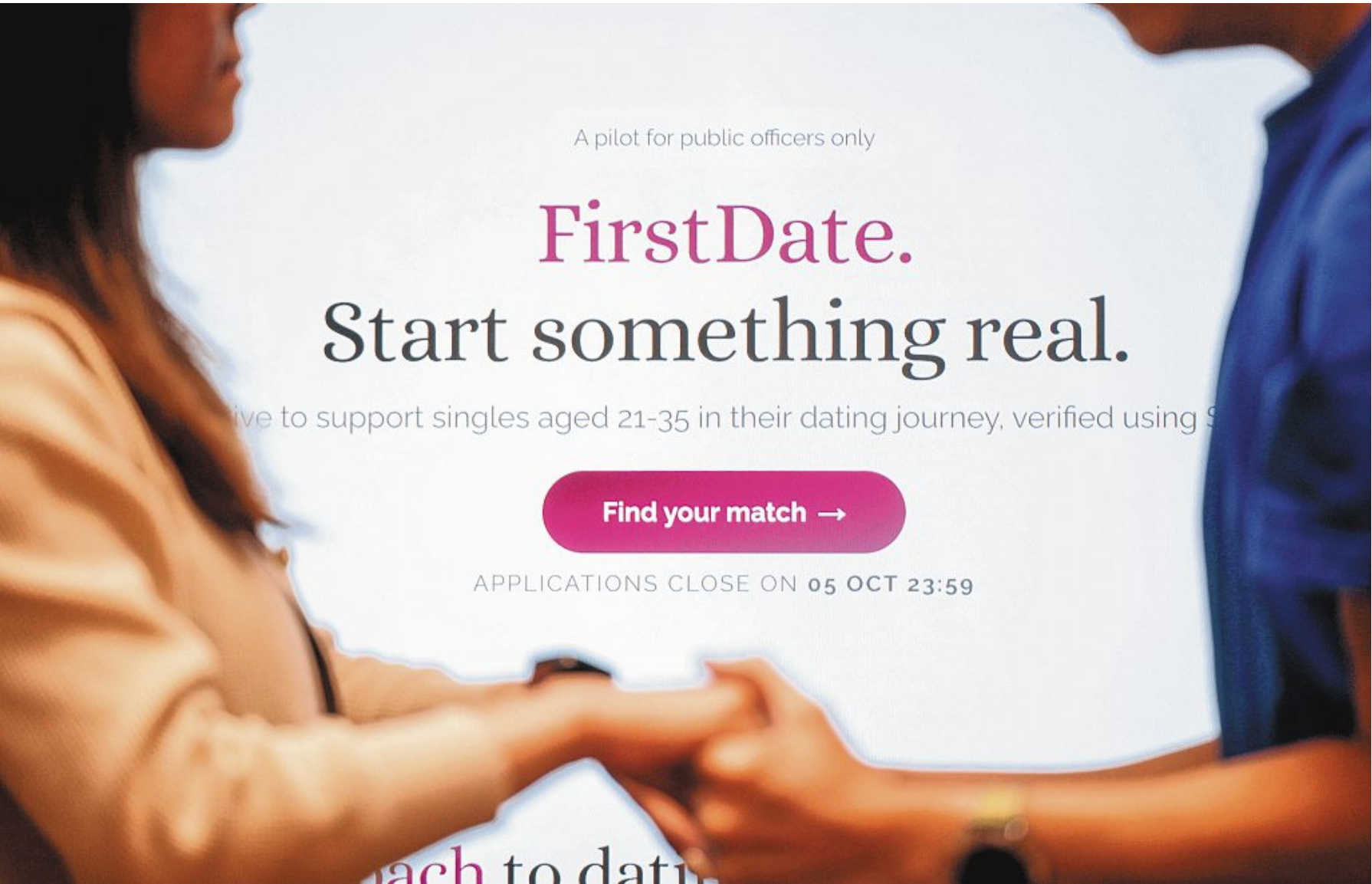
Making dating more efficient does not solve the deeper problem of whether people have the time and opportunities to meet.

FINDING TIME AND A PARTNER

An Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

The bottleneck in dating isn't matching. It's time

Nobel Prize-winning algorithms can find you a match, but nothing beats a free Friday night.



Making romance more efficient through dating services, such as the Government Technology Agency's FirstDate for public officers, does not solve the deeper problem of whether people have the time and opportunities to meet, says the writer. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

review of fertility trends and family-policy evidence suggests that cash benefits have, at best, transitory effects on fertility, while paid leave and childcare show stronger positive associations with fertility. That supports Singapore's shift towards giving parents more time.

This aligns with the 2021 Marriage and Parenthood Survey by the National Population and

Talent Division (NPTD), where 90% of married respondents said flexible work arrangements made or would make it easier to start a family, suggesting that formal leave alone cannot address the time constraint. Much of the Government's time-specific support announced in 2026 begins only once people are already parents.

But singles face that problem

earlier: finding the time and opportunities to meet and form relationships in the first place. A 2019 NPTD survey found that two in three singles said they needed more time and energy to have more dating opportunities.

Many office workers will recognise the feeling. After a long day, the instinct is to collapse at home, not head back out. And dating often requires doing that

again and again, for evenings that may go nowhere.

Dating platforms recognise this constraint, too.

"Say, you knock off at 6pm or 7pm every day. How many offline events can you attend?" Shn Juay, chief executive (ex-US and Canada) of dating app Coffee Meets Bagel, told CNA in April 2026.

The 2021 NPTD survey also

found that among singles who were not dating, 58% cited a limited social circle and 57% a lack of opportunities to meet potential partners.

Singles were also most comfortable meeting potential partners through social or recreational activities, friends and colleagues.

Perhaps that helps explain the appeal of meeting people in more "organic" settings. Run clubs, dubbed the "new Tinder" on social media, increasingly double as dating spaces. People turn up to run, see the same faces each week, and something else may develop.

Pickleball has been going the same way. At a night social in Serangoon in February, players wore colour-coded wristbands, green for single and blue for strictly platonic, and were reshuffled into new groups every 15 minutes.

Such interactions, quite simply, require dedicated time.

To be sure, FirstDate is a reasonable experiment. It is easy to scoff at it. Some criticise the cut-off age of 35. Some call it dystopian. Others joke that people will sign up just for the free food vouchers.

But in a public service of some 158,000 officers, with an opt-in design and privacy safeguards, who are we to stop singles who want to mingle?

If the public service is a testing ground, perhaps test time, not just matches.

Protect public officers' evenings. Cut after-hours messages. Let lunch run long. Private employers could try the same. With Singapore's labour market still relatively tight, predictable hours and protected personal time are employee benefits in their own right.

In the 2021 NPTD survey, 92% of married respondents said they were more likely to join an organisation offering flexible work arrangements, and 94% said they were more likely to stay.

Employers therefore have reasons to protect their workers' time even before considering any effects on relationships or fertility.

Romance needs time to unfold. Whether that begins with a FirstDate or a second, only time will tell.

• Al Lim is presidential assistant professor of anthropology at the College of Integrative Studies at Singapore Management University.