

Meet the Twags*

Forget rock stars and Hollywood hunks — glamorous 'founder-hounders' are out to catch the geeky bosses of Silicon Valley start-ups



KATIE GLASS

The 9.6m followers who tune in to watch Miranda Kerr having her hair done on Instagram — for this is how models spend most of their time — were treated to a rather more interesting sight last Thursday: a black and white photograph of a whacking great diamond ring. Across it was the caption "Marry me!" and a twee animation of the tech mogul Evan Spiegel on bended knee. Underneath Kerr had typed "I said yes!!!" and an explosion of heart emojis.

A spokesman for Spiegel, founder of the Snapchat mobile app, who is 26 to Kerr's 33 and worth \$2.1bn (£1.6bn) to her \$42.5m, revealed "they are very happy". He declined to add whether Spiegel was disappointed Kerr had not announced their engagement, which already has 447,000 "likes", as a Snapchat "story".

At first, the marriage seems an unlikely combination: a man so bright he founded Snapchat while still at Stanford University, becoming one of the world's youngest self-made billionaires by 22, and a Victoria's Secret model who was previously married to the Pirates of the Caribbean star Orlando Bloom (she allegedly had a fling with pop brat Justin Bieber, leading Bloom to punch Bebe in a posh Ibiza restaurant).

Perhaps the union indicates that there is more to Kerr than we thought. More likely, it reveals something about Spiegel — and the way the social status of "geeks" has changed.

Since Steve Jobs made computers cool and Millennials started living online, nerds are king. Even coding is sexy enough for the model Karlie Kloss, singer will.i.am and actor Ashton Kutcher to learn it. Silicon Valley has become the new Hollywood, as moguls and social media barons take over from film stars and



Miranda Kerr, right, and above with her fiancé, the Snapchat founder Evan Spiegel. She was previously married to Orlando Bloom, below



sportsmen not just on rich lists, but as alpha men.

Being a co-founder of a company is this decade's equivalent to being a rock star or a chef. And, if their attractiveness to models and actresses proves anything, then being a Twag — tech wife or girlfriend — is a "thing". Sources tell me Twags are also known as "founder-hounders" because they like to date the creators of start-up companies.

Actress Talulah Riley was an early adopter. She started dating the PayPal founder Elon Musk in 2008. Riley, then fresh from starring in the St Trinian's film, met Musk in London's Whisky Mist nightclub after he had delivered a lecture at the Royal Aeronautical Society. I interviewed her shortly afterwards and she told me they had spent the evening talking about "quantum physics". A month later they were engaged. Their on-again-off-again marriage lasted six years before she filed for divorce again in March. Currently Musk, worth an estimated \$12.7 billion and focused on Tesla cars, is said to be "spending a lot of time" with Johnny Depp's estranged wife, Amber Heard.

Model Lily Cole dated the Twitter founder Jack Dorsey in 2013. Later she had a son with Kwame Ferreira, founder of the digital innovation agency Kwamecorp. Actress Emma Watson is going out with William Knight, an "adventurer" who has an incredibly boring sounding job as a senior manager at Medallia, a software company. Allison Williams, Marnie in the HBO television show Girls, is married to Ricky Van Veen, co-founder of College Humor website.

Could it be that these women are onto something? Dating a bro certainly has its appeal. They are innovative: how else would they invent apps that deliver cheese toasts or match singles based on their haircuts? They are risk-takers who must be charismatic enough to inspire investors and attract crowd-funding. They may not be gym-fit, but they are athletes who can do your tax bill. They are animal lovers: every start-up is dog friendly. And they are fun: who would not want to date somebody with a ball pool in their office?

There is a saying about dating in Silicon Valley: the odds are good but the goods are odd. Nerds are notorious for peculiar chat-up lines and normcore clothes. Still, if geeks can be awkward, that is part of their charm. Keira Knightley, complaining that Silicon Valley was all men in hoodies and Crocs, described how one gave her his card, saying she should get in touch if she wanted to see a spaceship.

One Vogue writer recalled a Silicon Valley man messaging her via a dating app, in which he noted: "In 50% of your photos you're holding an iPhone. It may interest you to find out that I invented the iPhone. More accurately I was an engineer on the original iPhone..."

Most promisingly, some guys are astoundingly rich. It is suggested Kerr's engagement ring is a 2.5-carat diamond worth around \$55,000. She has already moved into Spiegel's \$12m LA pad. Between his money and her Victoria's Secrets bridesmaids, no wonder sources claim they are planning an "extravagant wedding".

It might rival even the Napster founder Sean Parker's \$10m performance-art bash. He married songwriter Alexandra Lenas in a canopy among Big Sur's redwoods decorated to look like an enchanted forest. Some 350 guests wore Tolkienesque costumes created by The Lord of the Rings costume designer Ngila Dickson. They sat on white fur rugs and were given bunnies to pet. Presumably rabbit babysitters were on hand when the disco started.



Elon Musk with Talulah Riley and, far right, Sean and Alexandra Parker at their fairytale wedding



*Tech billionaires' wives and girlfriends

"He was funnier than I expected him to be," she said.

Kerr began dating Spiegel in 2014 after meeting him at a Louis Vuitton dinner in New York. You can bet he was networking. Shortly after Louis Vuitton showcased their cruise collection in a Snapchat story. Last season Snapchat went on to become the biggest new name at NY fashion week.

If you want to meet tech guys, you might catch them at Silicon Valley parties, which is how the Uber chief executive Travis Kalanick met his partner, Gabi Holzwarth, a violinist hired to play. Or they might be schmoozing clients downtown in a swanky Noe Valley club in San Francisco or a boring Union Square hotel in New York. In London you find them around Old Street, aka Silicon Roundabout, in bars, at hackathons, or start-up meet-ups. In the day they are coding at Google Campus or practising their pitching in a co-working space.

Some tech boys date the old-fashioned way: on Tinder. Airbnb founder Brian Chesky met his girlfriend of three years, Elissa Patel, through the app. When I interviewed Instagram co-founder Systrom he admitted that when he had been single he had signed up.

Dating agency Linx — presumably a play on operating system Linux — is dedicated to making Silicon Valley matches.

Amy Andersen set it up in 2003 after moving to Palo Alto and being "flabbergasted" by the number of eligible men. She claims her clients are "extremely dynamic and successful individuals": tech founders, tech chief executives, financier founding partners of large institutions and "tons of entrepreneurs".

Andersen says tech guys make "fabulous partners". Romantic and chivalrous, they write love letters, plan dates, "even proposing on Snapchat!" If you want to marry a tech billionaire, she says, "you need to bring your A game." Her clients look "for women who are equally, if not more, dynamic and interesting than he is!"

There are drawbacks to dating tech guys. Before Google buys your amore's business, he will be living on Pot Noodles waiting for the next round of funding — and workaholics are dull. Kerr says Spiegel is "25, but he acts like he's 50. He's not out partying. He goes to work in Venice [Beach], he comes home. We don't go out. We'd rather be at home and have dinner, go to bed early." Which might suit Kerr, but is not my idea of a fun.

You had also better be prepared to share your life. When Priscilla Chan miscarried three times, Mark Zuckerberg wrote about it on Facebook, while Chesky used a romantic trip with his girlfriend to promote Airbnb — uploading a picture of her in bed, with a note saying "f*** hotels". Besides all of which is the notorious issue of Silicon Valley sexism.

It has a chief exec-bro culture that puts pick-up artist/comedian Dapper Laughs to shame. Ninety per cent of women working in the Valley say they have witnessed sexist behaviour, 60% have experienced unwanted sexual advances at work, two thirds of them from their boss. Whitney Wolfe, a co-founder of Tinder, took Justin Mateen to court for sexual harassment. Her lawsuit against the company alleged that Mateen, her former partner, sent text messages calling her a "whore".

Spiegel has tech bro form. He apologised after emails from his days at Stanford emerged: missives about stripper poles, getting black-out drunk, shooting lasers at "fat chicks", and promising to "roll a blunt for whoever sees the most tits tonight". After one fraternity Hawaiian luau party, he signed off emails "f*** bitchesgetit".

No wonder some women are not inspired to become Twags. Especially when you could be a tech billionaire yourself. Would you not rather be Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer of Facebook, than married to the boss?

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