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Editorial

Liebe Leserinnen,
liebe Leser,

in diesem Heft finden Sie fünf Beiträge sowie eine Einleitung der Gastherausgeber Hans-Peter Blossfeld und Andreas Schmitz zum Schwerpunktthema *Online dating: Social innovation and a tool for research on partnership formation.*

Die Beiträge widmen sich verschiedenen Aspekten von Partnerschaftsbörsen und basieren auf der Analyse quantitativer empirischer Daten, die vor allem im Rahmen des DFG-Projekts „Prozesse der Partnerwahl auf Online-Kontaktbörsen" (Universität Bamberg) sowie während der ersten Welle des Beziehungs- und Familienpanels *pairfam* erhoben wurden, aber auch auf qualitativ angelegten Studien, die in Deutschland und der Schweiz sowie in Frankreich durchgeführt wurden.

Das nächste Heft – Heft 1/2012 – wird ausschließlich *reguläre Beiträge* ohne Schwerpunktsetzung enthalten.

Zugleich möchten wir auf das von Dieter Schwab und Laszlo A. Vaskovics herausgegebene neue Sonderheft 8 der ZfF/JFR mit dem Titel *Pluralisierung von Elternschaft und Kindschaft. Familienrecht, -soziologie und -psychologie im Dialog* hinweisen, das in Kürze im Verlag Barbara Budrich erscheinen wird.

Ihnen möchten wir eine anregende Lektüre wünschen!

Hans-Peter Blossfeld   Kurt P. Bierschock
Geschäftsführender Herausgeber   Redakteur

Hans-Peter Blossfeld & Andreas Schmitz

Introduction to the special issue
Online dating: Social innovation and a tool for research on partnership formation

Online dating has evolved from a rare and stigmatised medium to a socially accepted way of partnership formation and to a lucrative business model at the same time. Current key capital market data on digital dating services amounts to a market volume of 138 million euros in Germany, 932 million dollars in the United States, and an amount of four billion US dollars worldwide[1]. This economic dimension is associated with massive advertising campaigns, increasing media discourse and the increasing relevance of online dating in contemporary couple formation. The success of online dating essentially stems from the simple and effective access to mating platforms. Online dating is increasingly displacing the traditional necessity of the actor's co-presence as online interactions take place in relative independence of time and space: men and women can easily integrate their dating activities into their daily lives with marginal time loss. The structure of dating sites allows for simultaneous contact with different potential partners as well as for an "administrative" management of possible partners.

Two different forms of digital dating, and accordingly two different business models, exist on the online dating market. The first involves searching for a potential partner on one's own initiative, the second one comprises a "matching system" offered by the provider. Between these two poles, there are numerous mixed forms depending on the particular business model. The booming development of online dating is coupled with an increasing differentiation of the digital dating market itself, ranging from services for a general audience to very special niches (e.g. services for people preferring specific religious affiliations, specific ethnic groups, or age brackets) and from services for finding a long-term partner to services to look for a sexual affair.

It comes as no surprise that the scientific interest in this field has also increased substantially. (1) Social scientists interested in mate search issues utilize dating platforms as a new observational methodology with distinct advantages when compared to questionnaires or marriage records. Usually, the aim is to gain insights that can be applied to human mating in other contexts. (2) Another stream of research considers online dating to

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1   Amounts are cited in the World Wide Web and are only rough estimations; scientific assessments of the economic dimension of online dating are still lacking.

be a partner market *sui generis,* as the dating process implies a specific computer-mediated communication. A third aspect (3) is the critical reception of the phenomenon of online dating and the analysis of its recursive effects on the meaning of romance as well as on society at large.

The first research stream highlights the methodological dimension of online dating. Blossfeld (2009) points to the fact that, with new research designs like the online dating design (Schmitz et al. 2009) and the speed dating design (Finkel/Eastwick 2007), early phases of the contact can be analysed in a unique way. The online dating design is characterized by the fact that data of individual choices as well as interactional processes are recorded without obtrusive observational effects. This web-generated process data is produced by the (inter-)actions of partner seekers and not by artificial choice or interaction situations. The special advantage for social research is that the data can be used to quantitatively analyse the interplay of opportunity structures and individual choice over the course of early relationship developments. Thus, the online dating design allows for an exact reconstruction of mating processes without the problem of post-hoc interpretations based on marriage records or subjective fallacies due to questionnaire data. It is a methodology that allows the assessment of classical problems of mate search and mating preference theory as, for example, the effects of an actor' market position on his strategies and revealed preferences.

In recent times, a growing body of research has focused on these new opportunities of recording and analysing digital interactions on online dating platforms. The first empirical analyses of web-based process data of a dating platform were performed by Fiore and Donath (2005), Hitsch et al. (2010a, 2010b), Fiore et al. (2008) and Lee (2008). These works provided insights into the association between profile characteristics and contact patterns, confirming findings of traditional mate search, such as male preferences for attractiveness or female preferences for social status. Skopek (2012, in press) analysed first contact patterns in online dating that showed the relevance of educational homophily in contact behaviour. However, the analytical potential of web-generated process data is by no means exhausted. The use of such data is not yet common within the social sciences. The primary problem is that access to such data sources depends on cooperation with private companies and requires advanced data management skills.

The second research stream takes into account that meeting and interacting online is accompanied by context-specific characteristics that differ from traditional forms and hence affect the character of the mating process itself (cp. Bergström 2011). Interactions and communications on an online dating platform take place in an anonymous context with low social control and low potential for sanctions as opposed to traditional contexts, such as working environments, educational institutions or personal leisure networks. Another relevant difference to traditional mating markets is that in this field, meeting and mating is the primary and dominant goal of agency, as opposed to the more traditional contexts where meeting and mating is often an unintended side-product of the actual practice in a task-specific context. As a consequence, users of dating platforms jointly create an intense competition for potential mates. Together with the user´s extended control and necessities of self-presentation in online profiles, an increasing risk of deception emerges, e.g., responding to a profile which does not fully correspond to reality. The problem of strategic self- and misrepresentation found particular attention in the work of Ellison et al. (2006) and Hancock et al. (2007). Overall, the findings of this research stream indicate that rather than fundamentally

misrepresenting important characteristics, users of dating platforms "optimize" their profile in accordance with their expectations of what potential partners might look for.

A third research stream presents itself in the critical reception of this new phenomenon and a discussion of its (negative) effects on the general mating process and on society. Its proponents contend that online-dating cannot solely be examined by means of its new research possibilities or as an endogenous phenomenon, but also in terms of its societal consequences. Most notably, Eva Ilouz (2007: 91) states that the internet brings "the process of rationalization of emotions and love to levels not dreamed of by critical theorists" and uses online dating to illustrate "emotional capitalism" at work. Wetzel (2009) refers to a "culture of competition" driven by online dating which emphasizes social differences between men and women in search of a partner.

The authors of this special issue present work that cover these different approaches. The contribution by *Skopek, Schmitz and Blossfeld* to this issue uses the potential of both online survey data and web-generated process data to explain mating preferences. While preferences themselves are usually a concept for the explanation of behaviour, this article shows that mating dispositions can be understood as a function of one's position in the field. The paper shows how age preferences can be explained by an individual's own age, market-relevant traits which are perceived by others as being favourable or unfavourable and preferences for other traits. The authors conclude with the statement that men and women suffer from a "gender-specific decline in mate value" with differential consequences for their chances and mating preferences.

The article by *Zillmann, Schmitz and Blossfeld* also refers to the notion and concept of human market value and its empirical implications for the practice of mate search. In their paper, they analyse deceptive behavior in the profile presentation of online dating sites. Using data from an online survey, they model misrepresentation in users' profiles as a function of one´s mate value. Zillmann et al. show that patterns of deceptive self-presentation depend on one´s field position in two ways. First, actual or perceived disadvantages in one characteristic can lead actors to misrepresent themselves with regard to this particular characteristic. Secondly, disadvantages in one characteristic can be compensated by advantages in other characteristics.

In her contribution, *Bergström* questions the association commonly drawn between heterosexual online dating and the search for long-term relationships. Based on interviews with French online daters and a qualitative analysis of site architectures, she presents an investigation of dating sites as a new "sexual territory" and shows how the field of French dating platforms is structured by normative preconditions and frames user conduct. Furthermore, she highlights how meeting online comes along with a new dating scenario that seems to favour sexual short-term relationships.

Dröge and Voirol refer to the research stream of critical reception of online dating, as promoted by Eva Illouz. They show how romantic love and economic rationality have emerged in modernity as two distinct spheres, which possess their particular "normative principles, expectations and practical orientations". In addition, they analyse how these two spheres occur in the field of online dating. On an empirical basis of qualitative interviews, they assess the resulting problem of how actors solve the tension of ambivalence between rational and romantic orientations in their practice of dating sites usage.

The last article of this special issue addresses a general audience. *Schmitz, Sachse-Thürer, Zillmann and Blossfeld* look into the subject of beliefs about online dating. Using different common stereotypes, they present empirical facts in order to test whether or not these beliefs are supported by data. Based on a broad range of analyses using different sources of data, they assess the adequacy of beliefs on finding a mate via the internet in Germany.

Overall, the articles of this special issue illustrate why online dating has become a research topic of particular interest in social sciences. Nevertheless, processes of virtual interactions need further theoretical and empirical assessment, as do the societal implications of the internet in general and online dating in particular, which are still in the infancy of scientific inquiry.

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Jan Skopek, Andreas Schmitz & Hans-Peter Blossfeld

The gendered dynamics of age preferences – Empirical evidence from online dating

Die geschlechtsspezifische Dynamik von Alterpräferenzen – Empirische Evidenzen aus dem Online-Dating

Abstract:

This study uses innovative data from online dating to analyze men's and women's preferences regarding the age of a partner. These data include observations on how individuals behaved on online dating platforms as well as information on which preferences individuals stated in a survey from an online panel. The paper analyzes how male and female age preferences can be explained by an individual's own age, preferences for other traits, and own market-relevant traits that are favorable or unfavorable for others. Our results show that age preferences essentially shift with age, but in different ways for men and women: Whereas men increasingly prefer younger women as they age, women's age preferences become increasingly diverse. They also show that age preferences are confounded with gender-specific preferences for attractiveness and education. Finally, preferences for age also vary with market-relevant traits such as education and parenthood, but not with prior marital experience. Altogether, our analyses point to a gender-specific decline in mate value with differential consequences for men's and women's mating preferences.

Zusammenfassung:

In der vorliegenden Studie werden innovative Daten, die aus dem Online-Dating stammen, verwendet, um die Präferenzen von Männern und Frauen hinsichtlich des Alters eines Partners zu untersuchen. Diese Daten umfassen sowohl Beobachtungen, wie sich Individuen auf den Plattformen einer Partnerschaftsbörse verhalten, als auch Informationen über die Präferenzen, die Individuen bei einer Online-Umfrage nannten. In diesem Beitrag wird analysiert, wie die Alterspräferenzen von Männern und Frauen durch das jeweilige Alter des Individuums, die Präferenzen hinsichtlich anderer Eigenschaften sowie die je eigenen marktrelevanten Eigenschaften, die anderen als wünschenswert oder nicht gewünscht erscheinen, erklären werden können, Wie unsere Ergebnisse zeigen, ändern sich Alterspräferenzen wesentlich mit dem eigenen Alter, dies jedoch für Männer und Frauen in unterschiedlicher Weise: Während Männer zunehmend jüngere Frauen bevorzugen, wenn sie selbst älter werden, entwickeln sich die Alterspräferenzen hinsichtlich der Partner in zunehmend unterschiedlicher Weise. Zudem zeigen die Ergebnisse, dass die Alterspräferenzen mit geschlechtsspezifischen Präferenzen hinsichtlich der Attraktivität und des Bildungsstandes konfundieren. Schließlich variieren die Alterspräferenzen auch mit marktrelevanten Eigenschaften wie Bildungsstand und Elternschaft, nicht jedoch mit vorherigen Eheerfahrungen. Alles in allem weisen unsere Analysen auf einen geschlechtsspezifischen Rückgang des Wertes auf dem Partnermarkt mit für Männer und Frauen un-

terschiedlichen Konsequenzen für die Partner-
präferenzen hin.

Key words: age preferences, mate selection, re-   *Schlagwörter*: Alterspräferenzen, Partnerwahl, of-
vealed preferences, stated preferences, partner   fenbarte Präferenzen, selbst berichtete Präferenzen,
market, online dating   Partnermarkt, Online Dating.

1. Introduction

Even though there can be no doubt that age is a central variable in assortative mating (Hollingshead 1950; Klein 1996a), sociological research on the role of age in mate selection is rare. The lack of studies is striking, because not only an actor's characteristics but also the relational position on the "partner market" change continuously with age. In addition, a higher rate of union dissolution as well as an increasing prevalence of repartnering and remarriage (Engstler/Menning 2003; Lankuttis/Blossfeld 2003) are leading to a significant growth in the number of people who want to form another partnership or marriage, thus eventually making mate selection more relevant over an increasingly broad age interval.

Most sociological work on the role of age in partner search can be found in the field of homogamy research (Atkinson/Glass 1985; van de Putte/Matthijs 2001; van de Putte et al. 2009; van Poppel/Liefbroer/Vermunt/Smeenk 2001; Vera/Berado/Vandiver 1990). Scholars studying age in assortative mating often rely on presumed similarity preferences for age, take patterns of age homogamy as evidence for such preferences, or even interpret age homogamy as an indicator of gender egalitarianism (cf. van de Putte et al. 2009) or romantic involvement (cf. Shorter 1977). However, if similarity in age is a preferable state for a couple, why do age differences between mates vary significantly at marriage (Bytheway 1981)? Why do men increasingly marry younger women as they get older – a largely neglected regularity in the literature, as pointed out recently by England and McClintock (2009)? To gain deeper insights into the role of age in mate choice, it is necessary to examine the partner preferences of both men and women, because the implicit assumption that age-related marital patterns are an expression of age preferences might be seriously flawed (South 1991). In our paper, we shall argue that age preferences of men and women (a) not only shift strongly as they age, but, moreover, are related to (b) an individual's overall image of an ideal partner as well as (c) an individual's relative position in the mate market.

Utilizing Web-generated process data from a major German dating site, we shall first disclose age preferences by reconstructing contact choices of men and women in an early encounter context. Furthermore, we shall examine how men and women reciprocally generate age-segmented opportunity structures for the opposite sex through their contact behavior. In a second step, we shall use additional information on the partner preferences of site users taken from an online panel to analyze what meaning is subjectively ascribed to age in the context of a partner market, drawing on individuals' perceptions of themselves and others. In particular, we shall analyze how far certain age preferences in men and women are "confounded" by preferences for other mate traits such as physical attractiveness and educational attainment level.

Finally, we shall assess whether the age preferences of men and women vary according to the individual traits favored or disfavored by others. Such variations could be expected if actors prove to adjust their preferences to their relational position in the market, that is, their own mate value.

Our paper is structured as follows: First, we shall discuss theoretical approaches to age preferences in men and women and derive hypotheses for our empirical analysis. Second, we shall describe the data and our methodological approach. In the subsequent empirical section, we shall present the results of our analysis of revealed age preferences and stated age preferences. Finally, we shall draw conclusions and sketch further research perspectives.

2. Definitions of preferences

The literature on mate choice often uses the concept of preferences in different ways, and most empirical studies lack any explicit definition. For our analysis, we distinguish between different concepts of preferences. With regard to some object of choice, a preference means that an actor favors an Alternative A over an Alternative B. Specific traits (such as age, education), specific values of traits (such as a certain age), or even a specific person might represent an actor's object of potential choice. The subject of this choice, the actor, can have *absolute* preferences and *relational* preferences toward these objects. The former refer to a preference for an alternative independent from individual characteristics of the actor, whereas the latter refer to a preference of objects in relation to the actor's characteristics.

Relational preferences can be seperated into preferences for a *similar* or a *dissimilar* partner. For instance, a woman may favor a man with a similar educational level but may disfavor a man of the same age (preferring an older man instead). If we observe patterns of interaction between men and women, we speak of "homophily" when partners have similar characteristics and "heterophily" when partners are dissimilar.

Preferences for different partner traits might be interrelated. For example, the preference for a certain age might coincide with preferences for educational level. We label this "confounded preferences."

The measurement of preferences comprises two methodological approaches: First, a preference can be measured via self-report data surveyed by questionnaire items assessing the characteristics of an ideal mate. This is called the stated preferences approach (cf., e.g., Ben-Akiva et al. 1994), and is often used in the social sciences. A stated preference is a subjectively expressed tendency to choose in a certain way in a hypothetical choice situation. Second, in contrast, one can also observe actual choices of individuals and thereby virtually "reveal" their preferences. This has been labeled the preference approach (cf. ibid.), and is usually applied by behavioral economists.

3. Theories and hypotheses on age preferences

In the following, we shall discuss age-related mate preferences against the background of (a) social norms and (b) social exchange. Subsequently, we shall extend the exchange theory perspective on mate selection to (c) a market perspective on partner preferences.

The impact of social norms

Age patterns of marriage partners have been explained in terms of societal norms regarding an acceptable age relation within a couple (e.g., Lewis/Spanier 1979; Spanier/Glick 1980). The core assumption is that men and women internalize socially shared conceptions about a "normal" partnership during the course of their socialization. Age norms for partnerships are stabilized by social sanctions penalizing those who violate the norm. As a consequence, individuals learn to desire the "normal" and reproduce this conception through their own mating decisions. From this perspective, preferences regarding a partner's age are essentially expressions of internalized conventions of what is perceived as acceptable in a society. Because the majority of marriages (at least in western societies) can be characterized by a husband being an average of 3 years older than his wife (Cox 1970; Klein 1996a, 1996b; Presser 1975), a de facto norm of the "older man" is inevitably present. Hence, age norms suggest that the man should be slightly older than the woman, but not too much older (Vera et al. 1990).

With regard to inter- and intragenerational variation, age differences are explained by shifts in the norm structure due to social change or to different levels of commitment to marital norms in different social classes. For example, lower age discrepancies in the upper social classes are sometimes supposed to be a result of their lower commitment to traditional norms (e.g., Cuber 1971; Vera/Berardo/Berardo 1985, 1987). Similarly, larger age differences for older individuals at the time of marriage is discussed as an effect of less binding normative commitments for older persons (e.g., Bytheway 1981).

The social norms perspective on the age of partners allows us to derive some basic hypotheses on the age preferences of men and women. If there is a "man-older" norm in society, we should find a clear tendency for "man-older" preferences being shared by men and women. However, because a man should be only slightly older (about 3 years), he should not prefer much younger women, and women should not prefer much older men. Instead, one could expect that norms prescribe preferences for "directed" similarity (similar age, but man slightly older). However, the question remains: How do age preferences change with age? A social norms perspective offers two contradictory ideas: One is to expect that age preferences will not change significantly over age for men and women. Alternatively, as Bytheway (1981) argues, age-related partnership norms might lose their relevance for choices by older persons. If this is the case, we expect to observe more idiosyncrasies in the age preferences of older individuals and, what is crucial here, an increasing alignment of age preferences in men and women among older age groups.

Social exchange

Arguments referring to norms paint a picture of individuals who fulfill the expectations of their normative context in a rather passive or even mechanical way. The subjective utility maximization approach, in contrast, also referred to as the rational choice approach (Elster 1986), allows us to conceive marital and nonmarital unions as a specific form of social exchange (Blau 1964; Edwards 1969). In this vein, men and women try to maximize their utility by balancing out the "giving and taking" of the rewards usually connected to an individual's resources such as age, education, or physical attractiveness. From this perspective, the decision to mate with somebody is conceptualized as a decision to enter a specific kind of exchange relationship. Usually, literature drawing on the exchange concept assumes that men try to exchange their socioeconomic resources (such as education or income) against the physical beauty of women and vice versa (Elder 1969; Taylor/Glenn 1976). Nonetheless, clear empirical evidence for this pattern is waning in more recent studies (Stevens/Owens/Schaefer 1990).

With regard to male and female preferences for a partner's age, social exchange theory gives different predictions depending on the exact meaning of age within anticipated exchange relations. First, the age of partners or rather the age discrepancy between them might be considered as a characteristic of couples in which general similarity is important for reasons of everyday cultural life. Similarity in age can facilitate a common lifestyle or might reduce conflicts in daily interaction routines, because partners of the same birth cohort also share comparable life experiences, tastes, and values. In the same vein, family economics considers age to be a complementary trait. As a result, similarity matching along age should be optimal in marriage markets (Becker 1973). Drawing on these arguments, scholars studying homogamy in marriages often presume similarity preferences with regard to age when explaining marriage choices (e.g., Kalmijn/Flap 2001). Sometimes they even interpret rates of age homogamy on the aggregate level as evidence for the prevalence of robust similarity preferences for age at the microlevel (McPherson/Smith-Loving/Cook, 2001). Thus, if similarity in partner's age serves as a cultural resource determining the quality of everyday life interaction, we can expect both men and women to prefer partners of equal age regardless of their own age. If it is similarity in age that contributes to a union's quality, we should also expect men's and women's similarity preferences for age to be constant over the life span.

However, social exchange theory can also be used to derive other hypotheses that do not necessarily predict preferences for age similarity. This is the case when age is defined as an interpersonal resource relating to an individual's overall mate value; for example, if a person's age is related to his or her beauty as perceived by individuals of the opposite sex. Unmistakably, modern western cultures prescribe standards of "beauty" that place a premium on youthful looks (Öberg/Tornstam 1999). It follows that age can be seen as a continuously declining resource of physical attractiveness during later phases of the life course. If a society has a physical attractiveness stereotype ("what is beautiful is good," cf. Dion/Berscheid/Walster 1972), individuals complying with the standard of beauty will occupy advantageous positions in partner markets. Put briefly, if society valorizes youth, being old can be a problem when searching for a mate.

This problem would seem to be more severe for women if the assumption of "a double standard of aging" holds true (Sontag 1979). This observation implies a strong gender-specific coupling of attractiveness and age. According to this perspective, the perception of physical attractiveness is attached more strongly to youth for women than it is for men. Empirical support for this can be found in rating studies reporting a negative effect on beauty ratings of female stimulus pictures when these lack youthfulness compared to no clear effect of age on men's physical attractiveness (e.g., Berman/O'Nan/Floyd 1981; Deutsch/Zelenski/Clark 1986; Henss 1991). This leads to the generalization that men are expected to seek women who comply with a female beauty ideal that might be "fixed" at an age of about 20–25 years (England/McClintock 2009). Accordingly, men in their 20s are expected to prefer women of about the same age. However, as these men get older, they will show an increasing preference for younger women, because they have to go "down" further in order to achieve the ideal age of women. More fundamentally, scholars in evolutionary psychology argue that the male preference for younger women is a biologically "hard-wired" relic of human evolution, because pairing with young women maximizes a man's reproductive success (e.g., Buss 1989). Nonetheless, England and McClintock (2009) have suggested that men's preferences for a fixed-age ideal might be offset by a preference for age similarity. Thus, men's preferred age discrepancy with regard to women might be a "weighted average" of two contradictory causal influences (ibid: 800). Consequently, men will increasingly prefer younger women as they grow older, but not as young as they would be if no similarity preference was at work.

Female preferences for older men are sometimes traced back to a genuine uncertainty in mating markets in conjunction with socially segregated gender roles (Oppenheimer 1988). If a family's socio-economic status depends essentially on male income, a woman's status and life chances depend strongly on her husband's career prospects. However, when a man is young and possibly still in education or just at the beginning of his occupational career, uncertainty regarding his "true" ability as a breadwinner will be high. From this point of view, younger men represent considerably less desirable partners for women. Consequently, in a situation of choice, women are supposed to show a tendency to prefer older over younger men. If this line of thought is accurate, women should not differentiate between men who just have reached the peak of their occupational career and those who have been financially secure for a longer period of time. That is, the argument of women seeking economic security cannot provide a differentiated hypothesis on the desired male age: A man can become economically secure in his 20s just as much as in the final years of his life. In contrast, given the traditional gender role scenario in which female income prospects are less relevant, only a low uncertainty is connected to younger women from the man's perspective because eminent female traits (such as physical attractiveness) tend to be immediately apparent and easy to assess (Oppenheimer 1988: 577). Thus, uncertainty regarding socio-economic prospects of women should not affect men's preferences for age of partner.

Different relationship goals might activate different preference sets for partner's age and hence significantly frame the decision-making process. Buunk, Dijkstra, Kenrick, and Warntjes (2001) have suggested that preferences for partner's age shift according to the level of involvement, namely, short-term versus long-term mating aspirations. Following exchange theory, the stronger the desire for a long-term relationship, the more actors will

aspire to an intensive and multidimensional social exchange with the future partner. On the basis of our previous discussion, we shall propose two working hypotheses: First, we expect men seeking a long-term relationship to have a stronger attachment on the similarity dimension of age, that is, to have a weaker preference for younger partners and a stronger preference for partners similar in age. Second, we expect women with long-term goals to have a stronger attachment to older men and women with short-term goals to have a weaker preference for older men.

The examples of men's preference for physical attractiveness and women's preference for social status illustrate an important issue of mate preference that has often been neglected in the academic discussion: Preferences in different dimensions might be empirically confounded. That is, a certain preference has interdependent relationships with other preferences within the overall set of preferences. This would cast doubt on the utility of assuming analytically distinct preferences. To give an example, if a man's preference for physical attractiveness is correlated with his preference for younger women, then this correlation will reveal something about the "meaning" of age in the context of mate search. Following the concept of confounded preferences, we expect as a working hypothesis that male preferences for women's age are (partially) a function of male preferences for female attractiveness, whereas female preferences for men's age are (partially) a function of female preferences for male socio-economic status.

A partner market approach

A partner market approach is the natural extension of the social exchange perspective. It draws attention to the fact that individuals, as well as their characteristics, are subject to competition. As a result, the value of certain resources on the partner market is determined by their availability (Stauder 2008). Hence, the chance of preference realization depends on the individual's position in the partner market, and this, in turn, is determined by the individual's resources. The terms "partner value" or "partnership market value" are sometimes used in this context (cf. Todd/Miller 1999). Against the background of this market position, actors reflect on the probabilities of realizing their preferences. A higher partner value corresponds to a better negotiating position, that is, more chances of asserting one's own interests compared to those of others. The less an actor's traits are desirable and the lower the perceived availability of desirable mates, the more he or she will be forced to give up preferences with a low probability of realization. It follows that in a partner market, preference sets of actors should be interrelated with their resource sets.

Consequently, certain age preferences might be the outcome of an adaptive cognitive process reflecting one's chances on the mating market. These chances depend highly on an actor's overall resource set, whose worth is evaluated in the partner market. Maintaining idealistic mating aspirations without any chance of their realization makes little sense, because such behavior can cause cognitive dissonance, psychic stress, or frustration, and it will probably lead to long-term singlehood. Therefore, it is reasonable for individuals to take into account their ability to live up to their actual desire for the opposite sex, and to adjust their personal preference to their personal constraints (Penke/Todd/Lenton/Fasolo 2008). Thus, we would expect men and women to change age preferences as a function of

their own market-relevant traits (their "benefits"), that is, the traits promising to be rewarding and therefore desired by the opposite sex. If traditional gender roles can still be found empirically in a society, we expect that men will try to trade status-relevant characteristics such as educational level for the youthfulness of women. Consequently, higher educational attainment levels should be associated with men's stronger preference for younger partners. However, if the relevance of traditional gender roles is diminishing through, for example, women's increasing educational opportunities, rising labor force participation, and better job chances in modern societies, this effect should be observed independently from gender.

Finally, unfavorable traits will restrict actors because they represent interactional "costs" that could force them to adjust their partner preference. In social exchange theory, "costs" represent any perceived costs or a lack of rewards from the perspective of others who will enter into a social exchange relation with the actor (Brehm/Miller 2002). Thus, the more unfavorable actors' resource sets, the more they will be forced to adjust their aspiration level. Accordingly, we expect that unfavorable traits drive actors to shift their preferences toward partners deviating from an ideal age. In particular, having children from previous relationships and being divorced might belong to those unfavorable traits. The presence of children could be perceived as a source of stress and costs for any new relationship, since caring for those children imposes time investments and effort for activities not directly related to this relationship. In addition, because mate choice implies inherent uncertainty regarding the true characteristics of prospects (Todd/Miller 1999), being divorced might serve as a signaling device to hidden partner traits promising to have detrimental effects on a potential relationship. Hence, the own experience of a previous marriage might alter the actor's preference structure for partner's age and there is some empirical evidence supporting that claim (e.g. South 1991). Thus, a cognitive psychological view on exchange processes underlines the relevance of relational preferences in general: It indicates that actors reflect their position in a market and adapt their aspirational level over the course of (un)successful exchange processes.

4. Data and methods

To address the issues discussed, we utilized two datasets collected on a major German online dating website.[1] The first dataset was derived from a database dump of e-mail interactions and user profiles on this site. This Web-generated process data permitted a detailed and nonreactive analysis of choices of contact partners embedded within a mate selection context. Hence, we could observe who was choosing whom for an initial contact and subsequent interaction. This enabled us to assess how men and women change their contact behavior with age, and consequently, how they reciprocally generate the opportunity structures for mating with the opposite sex. That is, how they *react to the situation*

structured by age and simultaneously *create the opportunity structure* for contacts to the opposite sex.[2]

The second dataset contains survey data from a sample of online dating users collected via an online questionnaire on the same site.[3] It includes questions about the users' absolute and relational preferences regarding several traits in a potential mate. In line with the conventional approach of stated preferences, this approach measured preferences on a subjective level that is latent in the behavioral data (Schmitz/Skopek/Schulz/Klein/Blossfeld 2009). Moreover, by using questionnaire data, we were able to assess the association of certain age preferences with preferences for other traits, as well as with the respondent's traits. Utilizing this subjective information in a second step enabled us to describe the actor's *perceptions and evaluations of their situation* within an age-segmented mating market.

In summary, we adopted a research design involving both an observation and a survey paradigm. This integrated approach delivered information on both revealed preferences and stated preferences allowing an integrated perspective on adapted mating behavior as well as on idealized mating conceptions (Schmitz et al. 2009). Of course, there were also limitations to our data. We did not analyze a statistically representative sample of the adult German population. Rather, our sample can be considered as a population of men and women searching for mates online in which we could analyze preferences in a real mate choice context.[4] In the following, we shall discuss our data, the methods applied, and the results obtained separately for each dataset.

Web-generated process data on choices (Dataset 1)

The process-generated data covered user activities over a randomly chosen time period of about half a year between January and June 2007.[5] Registered users created their own user profiles (an online equivalent of a personal ad), looked for other people by filtering the database using search forms, and interacted with these through an internal messaging system on the website.

Profiles contained both standardized sociodemographic data (such as gender and age) and nonstandardized data such as photographs and textual descriptions. Moreover, the co-operating company also provided time-related data on e-mail exchanges between users. From this data, we filtered out initial contact e-mails together with their sender and target. Subsequently, we merged sociodemographics (gender and age at time of mailing event) to sender and target nodes and removed self-directed and same-sex contacts. Out of 116,138

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2   In our study, we were limited to analyzing preferences and choices of individuals of different ages. Therefore, a variation of preferences over age might have been due not only to an age effect but also to a cohort effect. We believe the latter to be unlikely, because the average age difference of 3 years in couples seems to be a historical constant (cf. Klein 1996a). Nonetheless, we cannot test this claim directly, and this has to be borne in mind when interpreting our data.

3   Questionnaires were part of an online panel study launched on this site by researchers at the University of Bamberg.

4   At the time of data collection, the dating website targeted a broad audience of men and women looking for romantic partners. It was not targeted on any regional, social, religious, or preferential niche.

5   The platform provider gave us access to the data in anonymized form.

user dyads, we removed those with missing age information on either side, resulting in 115,909 dyads. We finally ended up with a sample of 10,427 senders of first contacts (65.42% male) who sent an average of 11.12 contacts (12.75 for men vs. 8.02 for women). Men contacted women who were an average of 4.76 years younger, whereas women contacted men who were an average of 2.74 years older.

By using behavioral choice data from online dating, we were, to some extent, able to "disclose" the age preferences underlying users' contact decisions (cf. Fiore/Taylor/Zhong/ Mendelsohn & Cheshire, 2010; Hitsch/Hortaçsu/Ariely 2010; Schmitz et al. 2009; Skopek/Schulz/Blossfeld 2009, 2011).[6] Nevertheless, it should be noted that individual preferences were not measured directly in this way. Observed behavior was used to draw inferences on the decision makers' preferences.

We used men's and women's choices to calculate the degree of age-related *homophily* and *heterophily* in the selection of potential mates. Note that we used the word homophily as a descriptive concept measuring the extent to which interpersonal relationships evolve between individuals sharing similar characteristics. Analogously, we adopted the term heterophily for those couples with dissimilar characteristics.[7] Referring to the literature, we defined age similarity (or age homophily) as a maximum age difference of 2 years in a sender-target dyad.[8] Accordingly, we treated a difference in age of at least 3 years in either direction as being dissimilar or heterophilic. We used the term *hyperphily* (or *hypophily*) to characterize sender-target dyads in which targets were a minimum of 3 years older (or younger).

Fractions of homo-, hypo-, or hyperphilic age relations were averaged over dyads by sender and subsequently averaged by sender's age. Moreover, to serve as an empirical reference, we calculated expected fractions of relations by age and gender.[9]

Data collected in an online panel survey (Dataset 2)

In order to analyze stated relational age preferences, we used a dataset collected via an online panel between June 2009 and April 2010. All registered and active users[10] of the

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6   Within the observation window, interacting via e-mail was free of charge on this site. Nonetheless, users had to make reasonable selections on whom to contact because interacting with several thousands of other users would be practically impossible. Users were expected to restrict their contact efforts most probably to a favored subsample from the whole population of users. Therefore, we interpreted an initial contact as a sign of the user's willingness to engage with the addressed user.

7   Here, we followed other authors such as Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954) or Verbrugge (1977) who used the homophily concept to study structures of friendship choices in spatial communities.

8   As in studies on age homogamy, we had to make a qualitative decision regarding the range of age discrepancy that could be considered as "similarity in age" (see, for a detailed discussion, Vera et al. 1985). We also experimented with other cutoffs for similarity.

9   Expected values took the gender-specific age distribution of site users into account and denoted the most likely fractions if the site users' choice of partners were to be completely random in terms of age. Further details can be found in Skopek et al. (2009).

10 Active users were defined as those who had logged on to the site at least once during the 6 months prior to the starting date of our survey. Inactive users did not receive an e-mail invitation. A total of

online dating site were invited to participate via e-mail. A total of 3,535 users took part in the survey, corresponding to a response rate of about 10%.

For our analyses, we restricted the sample in the following ways: We dropped individuals who did not specify their gender or date of birth and were not currently searching for a partner. Because we were interested in heterosexual preferences, we also dropped persons looking for same-sex partners or partners of both sexes. Moreover, we restricted the analysis to persons aged 18–80 years. Our final sample contained 2,672 persons (61.41% male).

The dependent variable in our analysis was the stated preference regarding the age of partners. Respondents could specify whether their ideal partner should be *younger*, *younger to almost equal*, *equal in age*, *almost equal to older*, or *older* on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*younger*) to 5 (*older*). Furthermore, respondents could specify that age *doesn't matter* (coded as 6). This enabled us to capture the subjective quality and relevance of age relations.

Independent variables were the respondent's educational level, age at interview, and whether he or she is looking for a long-term relationship, has been married previously, and whether he or she has children. Because there were about 23% missing values on the long-term relationship variable, we decided to set missing values to zero and control these cases with an additional binary indicator. Moreover, we included measures indicating respondent's absolute preferences for physical attractiveness, educational level, and age as partner features. Because we performed a case-wise deletion in order to have only complete cases, the final sample contained 1,370 men and 901 women. The appendix gives further information on the construction of our variables as well as their distribution.

We analyzed stated age preferences with multinomial logistic regression models because the outcome variable is a qualitative category.[11] We decided to use a multinomial rather than an ordinal model because in substantial terms the assumption and the modeling of the outcome as ordinal would be a severe misspecification.[12] Furthermore, the category *doesn't matter* prevents the outcome from being ordinally scaled. However, omitting this category would result in a potentially biased subsample of persons, namely, only those who specified a preference for an age relation. Moreover, we had a substantive interest in this particular outcome, because it expresses the respondent's indifference to specifying an age relation, which itself may vary by age and gender.

35,235 users were invited to participate in our survey. A detailed analysis of response can be found at Zillmann/Skopek/Schmitz/Blossfeld (2011).

11 The multinomial regression model (MRM) generalizes the binary logit model (outcomes are 0 or 1) by estimating the probability of one outcome over another in a set of qualitative outcomes (e.g., in our case, the probability of *younger* over *equal*). The multinomial model uses the data more efficiently than pairwise binary logit models, because it estimates parameters simultaneously. Thus, it can be understood as a linked set of binary logit estimations. However, because parameters can differ for each outcome, the MRM usually produces a lot of parameters. This makes it harder to interpret effects than in a binary logit model (see, for a detailed discussion, Long 1997).

12 Although the coding of relational age preference outcomes (1 to 6) might suggest that the categories have an ordinal structure, this does not have to be present within the actors' perception. For example, actors could have the subjective perception that they favored a partner of the same age compared to either younger *or* older partners.

To make the complex results easier to interpret, we plotted not only contrast effects for pairs of outcomes, but also discrete changes in outcome probabilities for a unit change in the independent variables while holding continuous variables constant at the sample mean and dummy-coded variables at the zero level. Logit coefficients for contrasts as well as discrete changes were estimated separately for men and women.


5. Results

We started by analyzing the patterns of age-related homophily and heterophily. These are depicted by the 2 x 3 collection of serially numbered graphs in Figure 1. Columns display the patterns for men contacting women (left) and women contacting men (right). The rows are organized into homophily (first row), hyperphily (second row), and hypophily (third row). Each plot shows observed (marked by a circle) and expected (dotted line) fractions over age. Expectations were computed under the assumption of a random match. In addition, a median spline provides a smoothed representation of the observed trend.

Graphs 1 and 2 in Figure 1 show that, on average, both men and women "preferred" homophilic age contacts to a greater extent than one could expect under random conditions. Nonetheless, the graphs display remarkable gender differences. For men, age homophily was very high at young age levels: More than 50% of first-time e-mails from men up to 25 years were addressed to women of similar age. However, the degree of men's homophilic contacts declined strongly although remaining higher than chance. In contrast, women's homophily increased over age, starting with relatively low values in women below 25 years (a maximum of 30%) and then oscillating considerably higher than expected at around 40% for higher ages.

Graphs 3 to 6 in Figure 1 show that heterophily diverged substantially between men and women. Only a small proportion of men contacted older women, and this was far below the proportion to be expected under the assumption of a random match (see Graph 3). Men's low level of hyperphily in age decreased even further with age. Men increasingly avoided contacts with older women. Instead, the older they were, the more they favored increasingly younger women (see Graph 5). Thus, male hypophily in age increased strongly with age. At the age of about 30 years, more than 70% (expectation was 30%) of male initial contacts addressed women who were at least 3 years younger. This fraction is even larger – albeit in accordance with the expectation – for men older than 45 years. Women, in contrast, made more contacts with older men, which is more or less consistent with the expectation for women younger than 30 years and exceeds the expectation for women older than 30 (see Graph 4). However, at higher ages, women contacted older males less and less in absolute terms. Contacting younger men was very rare for women in their 20s or younger. With increasing age, hypophily also rose for women, albeit this increase lagged behind the statistical expectation of a random match (Graph 6). Note that there was a remarkable asymmetry between the age hyperphily of men and the age hypophily of women: Whereas women increasingly desired younger mates, men generally had less desire for older women and did not relax this preference as they got older.

Figure 1:   Age homophily and heterophily in men and women initially
              contacting targets in online dating.
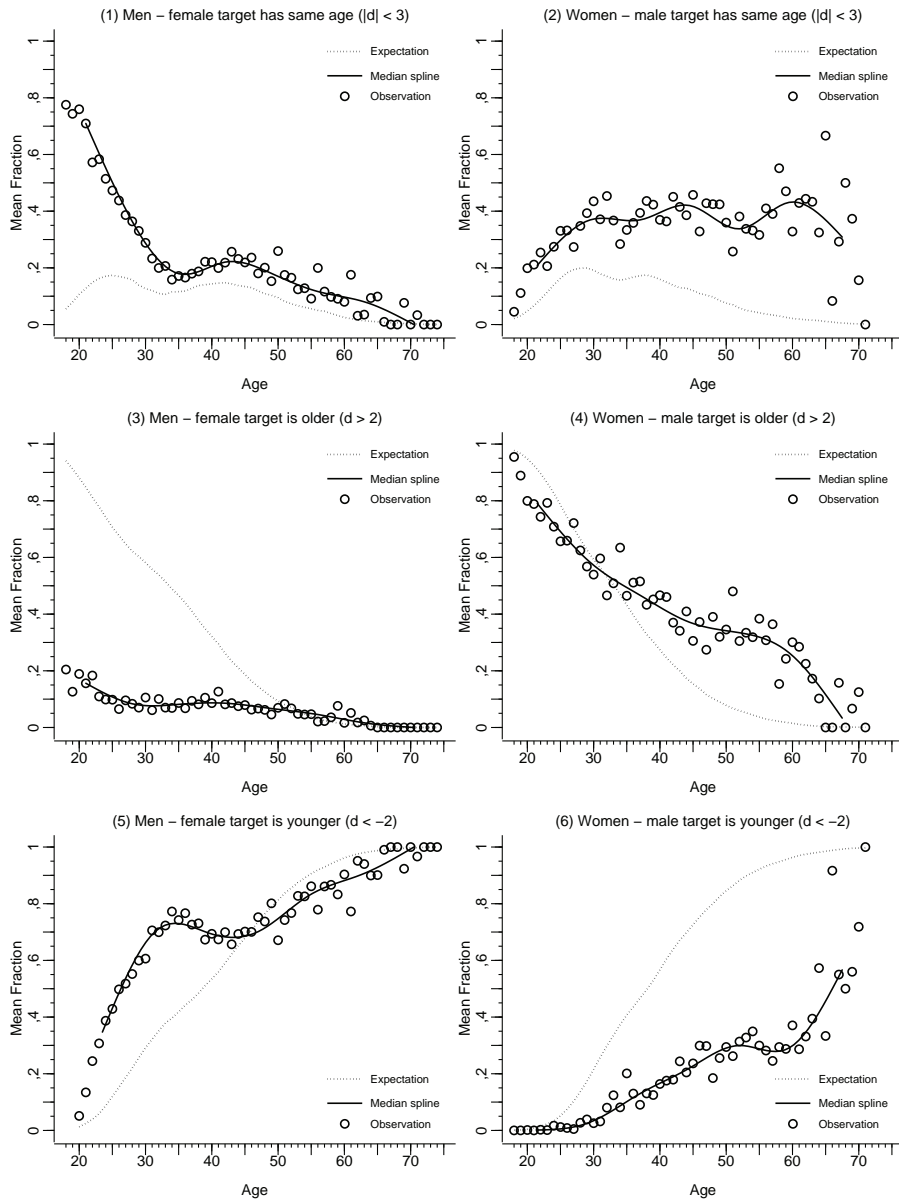
Note: The mean fraction of contacts targeting older, younger, and same-aged targets was calculated and plotted from users' initial contacting e-mails; calculation is based on 115,909 initial contact events and 10,427 initiating men and women; age difference *d* equals Age^{target} - $Age^{Initiator}$, the difference between the age of target and the age of initiator.

Source: Database dump of a German dating site, first half-year of 2007.

Overall, these results reveal a highly age-dynamic and gendered pattern of contacting along age. When men are young, they mostly prefer women of the same age. As they grow older, they increasingly prefer younger women, and they vigorously avoid contacts with older women. In contrast, women prefer older men at younger ages, and their choices become more and more mixed at higher ages.

The normative approach postulating a norm of the "older man" accounts for the average pattern of men contacting younger women and women contacting older men. However, our results do not support the hypothesis that age preferences remain stable over age. In a similar vein, our results seem to question the idea that similarity in age is a culturally relevant factor. Instead, they indicate that youthful age is a crucial female resource on the partner market: As men get older, they have to "go down" further in age to reach a fixed female age ideal. In the next step, we shall examine this by assessing whether male preference for younger women is confounded with a preference for attractiveness.

All in all, our choice data were somewhat puzzling when it came to the role of male age in female choice. The hypothesized male-older preference in women seems to be confirmed only in younger women, whereas the structure of female choice in terms of male age seems to become more and more blurred as women get older. Therefore, our interim conclusion is that age influences men's and women's choices differentially and hence, the situation of both sexes differs increasingly with age. Evidently, women face difficulties with age: Whereas they are increasingly looking for men in the same age group, they are increasingly less favored by exactly these men.

After illustrating both the age-dependent reaction to a potential partner's age in men and women and the created gender-specific opportunity structures, we shall now turn to the impact of this dynamic on the subjective level. The question arises whether the reported patterns of male and female choice regarding age are relevant for men's and women's subjective age preferences. Tables 1 and 2 report the results of the multinomial regression on male and female relational age preferences. Effects of independent variables are listed in columns. Comparisons of outcomes are organized in rows.[13] To facilitate interpretation, we report plotted contrast effects for pairs of outcomes as well as discrete changes in outcome probabilities for a unit change in the independent variables (with continuous variables held at the sample mean and dummy-coded variables held at zero).[14] In addition, Figure 2 plots the conditional effects of age on outcomes.

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13 Beta coefficients indicate the effect on the log-odds (logits) for a unit change in the respective covariate. For example, coefficient $\beta 1|2$ for age (men) indicates that the logits of Outcome 1 versus Outcome 2 increase by 0.041 for an additional year in age, and that this effect is significant at a level of .001. The factor change in the odds (relative risk ratio) of 1 over 2 given a unit change in age can be derived readily by taking the exponent of $\beta 1|2$ ($\exp\{0.041\}=1.042$). Multiplying this by minus one gives the reversed contrast (e.g., $\beta 2|1=-\beta 1|2$). We also calculated each outcome's predicted probability change for a discrete unit change in a covariate (denoted by $\Delta 1$) while holding all other variables constant. Note that the amount, significance, and direction of changes in the overall probability of an outcome depend strongly on the level of the covariate of interest as well as on the level of all other covariates in the model.

14 Therefore, we interpreted displayed discrete changes as changes in probability referring to a (hypothetical) person of average age, valuating importance of partner traits at an average level, and characterized by a medium educational level, low long-term commitment (and no missing value in that variable), no child, and not having been previously married.

Table 1: Estimates from multinomial logistic regression on stated age preferences of men (indep. variables in columns; discrete changes and logit effects reported)

Outcomes[b]	P(Y)[c]		ᵃAge	Education level low	Education level high	Long-term sought	Missing (long-term)	Previously married	Has children	Absolute preference for Looks	Absolute preference for Education	Age
1 younger	0.109	Δ1	0.006***	-0.004	0.077**	0.023	0.003	0.019	-0.035*	0.024*	-0.018*	0.042***
vs.												
2		β₁|₂	0.041***	0.129	0.687***	0.199	0.056	0.273	-0.394+	0.171+	-0.174*	0.270**
3		β₁|₃	0.075***	-0.047	0.537*	0.158	-0.061	0.243	-0.347	0.264*	-0.193+	0.228+
4		β₁|₄	0.088***	-0.404	0.714*	0.097	0.507	-0.231	-0.344	0.467***	-0.132	0.462***
5		β₁|₅	0.079**	-1.280+	0.226	0.103	0.127	0.435	0.016	-0.299	-0.390	0.721**
6		β₁|₆	0.088***	-0.175	0.519*	0.381	-0.081	0.089	-0.595*	0.358***	-0.233*	0.951***
2 younger or almost equal vs.	0.497	Δ1	0.006***	-0.076	-0.071*	-0.002	-0.013	-0.053	0.002	0.022	0.003	0.057**
3		β₂|₃	0.034***	-0.176	-0.150	-0.041	-0.117	-0.030	0.048	0.092	-0.019	-0.042
4		β₂|₄	0.047***	-0.533+	0.026	-0.102	0.451	-0.504	0.051	0.296**	0.042	0.192+
5		β₂|₅	0.039	-1.409*	-0.461	-0.096	0.071	0.162	0.410	-0.471	-0.216	0.451+
6		β₂|₆	0.048***	-0.304	-0.168	0.182	-0.137	-0.184	-0.200	0.186*	-0.059	0.681***
3 equal	0.125	Δ1	-0.003**	0.001	-0.001	0.005	0.012	-0.010	-0.005	-0.006	0.003	0.020+
vs.												
4		β₃|₄	0.013	-0.357	0.177	-0.061	0.568	-0.474	0.003	0.204	0.061	0.234+
5		β₃|₅	0.004	-1.233+	-0.311	-0.055	0.188	0.193	0.362	-0.563+	-0.197	0.493+
6		β₃|₆	0.013	-0.129	-0.018	0.223	-0.020	-0.154	-0.248	0.094	-0.041	0.723***
4 almost equal or older vs.	0.065	Δ1	-0.002**	0.029	-0.011	0.007	-0.025	0.031	-0.003	-0.016*	-0.002	-0.005
5		β₄|₅	-0.008	-0.876	-0.487	0.006	-0.380	0.666	0.360	-0.766*	-0.257	0.259
6		β₄|₆	0.001	0.229	-0.195	0.284	-0.588	0.320	-0.251	-0.109	-0.101	0.490***
5 older	0.008	Δ1	0.000	0.020	0.003	0.001	-0.001	-0.002	-0.003	0.004	0.002	-0.003
vs.												
6		β₅|₆	0.009	1.105+	0.292	0.278	-0.208	-0.346	-0.610	0.657*	0.156	0.230
6 doesn't matter	0.196	Δ1	-0.007***	0.029	0.003	-0.033	0.023	0.014	0.044	-0.028*	0.013	-0.111***

Table 2: Estimates from multinomial logistic regression on stated age preferences of women (indep. variables in columns; discrete changes and logit effects reported)

Outcome[b]	P(Y)[c]		[a]Age	Education level		Long-term sought	Missing (long-term)	Previously married	Has children	Absolute preference for		Age
				low	high					Looks	Education	
1 younger	0.101	$\Delta 1$	0.008	0.046	-0.077	-0.063	-0.014	0.021	-0.080+	-0.004	0.023	-0.022
vs.		$\beta_{1\|2}$	0.019	0.401	-1.333+	-0.722	-1.670+	0.158	-1.552*	-0.320	0.085	-0.088
		$\beta_{1\|3}$	0.065*	0.459	-1.410+	-0.840	-1.366	0.290	-1.466*	0.039	0.447	-0.420
		$\beta_{1\|4}$	0.120***	0.576	-1.411+	-1.128*	-1.665+	0.166	-1.711**	0.015	0.214	-0.398
		$\beta_{1\|5}$	0.197***	-0.029	-1.429+	-1.903**	-1.954*	-0.142	-1.904**	-0.012	-0.142	-0.166
		$\beta_{1\|6}$	0.070*	0.175	-1.878*	-1.049+	-1.758*	0.388	-1.582**	-0.088	0.313	0.296
2 younger or almost equal	0.133	$\Delta 1$	0.008**	-0.003	-0.010	-0.030	0.002	0.004	0.001	0.037*	0.019	-0.017
vs.		$\beta_{2\|3}$	0.046**	0.058	-0.077	-0.118	0.304	0.132	0.086	0.358*	0.362*	-0.333*
		$\beta_{2\|4}$	0.100***	0.175	-0.078	-0.406	0.005	0.008	-0.159	0.335*	0.129	-0.311*
		$\beta_{2\|5}$	0.178***	-0.430	-0.096	-1.181*	-0.284	-0.300	-0.352	0.308	-0.227	-0.078
		$\beta_{2\|6}$	0.050***	-0.226	-0.545+	-0.327	-0.088	0.230	-0.030	0.232	0.228	0.384***
3 equal	0.196	$\Delta 1$	0.003	-0.015	0.000	-0.025	-0.039	-0.019	-0.014	-0.016	-0.043*	0.040
vs.		$\beta_{3\|4}$	0.055***	0.117	0.000	-0.288	-0.299	-0.124	-0.245	-0.023	-0.233*	0.022
		$\beta_{3\|5}$	0.132***	-0.488	-0.019	-1.062*	-0.588	-0.432	-0.438	-0.050	-0.589***	0.254
		$\beta_{3\|6}$	0.005	-0.285	-0.467	-0.208	-0.392	0.098	-0.116	-0.127	-0.134	0.716***
4 almost equal or older	0.403	$\Delta 1$	-0.017***	-0.073	0.001	0.067	0.007	0.009	0.075	-0.023	0.005	0.073**
vs.		$\beta_{4\|5}$	0.078***	-0.605+	-0.019	-0.774+	-0.290	-0.308	-0.193	-0.027	-0.356*	0.232+
		$\beta_{4\|6}$	-0.050***	-0.401	-0.467+	0.080	-0.093	0.222	0.129	-0.103	0.099	0.694***
5 older	0.026	$\Delta 1$	-0.003*	0.013	0.001	0.040*	0.027	0.010	0.011	-0.001	0.010+	-0.001
vs.		$\beta_{5\|6}$	-0.128***	0.204	-0.448	0.854+	0.196	0.530	0.322	-0.076	0.456**	0.462***
6 doesn't matter	0.142	$\Delta 1$	0.001	0.032	0.085+	0.011	0.017	-0.026	0.006	0.007	-0.012	-0.073***

Significance: + $p \leq .10$, * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$; *Model Statistics:* Log-Likelihood = -1229.462***; $R^2_{\mathrm{Nagelkerke}}$ = .296; n = 901

[a] coefficients of independent variables are listed in columns; regression constants are not listed; logit coefficient $\beta_{k|n}$ is the estimated effect for a unit change in a covariate on the log-odds (logits) of outcome k over outcome n; the effect for $\beta_{n|k}$ equals $-\beta_{k|n}$; $\Delta 1$ equals the change in the predicted probability of an outcome if a covariate is increased by 1 unit holding metric variables at the sample mean and 0/1-coded variables at 0. [b] one-sided outcome comparisons in rows; [c] predicted probability of the outcome holding metric variables at the sample mean and 0/1-coded variables at 0.
Source: Survey data on users of a German online dating site collected in 2009/2010.

Table 1 shows that age significantly influenced men's preferences for female age. Holding other variables constant, a one unit increase in men's age made the preference for a *younger* woman (Outcome 1) more likely over remaining outcomes. Similarly, the probability of *younger or almost equal* (Outcome 2) increased with age, although the effect was stronger on Outcome 1, because the odds of Outcome 1 over Outcome 2 themselves increased significantly for each year of age. In contrast, other outcomes became less likely with age. Discrete changes suggested that the loss in probability was largest for the indifference preference (Outcome 6). Figure 2 plots the conditional effect of age on probabilities in order to visualize this finding. Very much in line with our prior results, there was a distinct age-graded shift in men's preference for younger women. Older men increasingly preferred younger women and were less interested in the indifference outcome (6 = *doesn't matter*).

Figure 2: Conditional effect of age on preference outcomes in men and women.
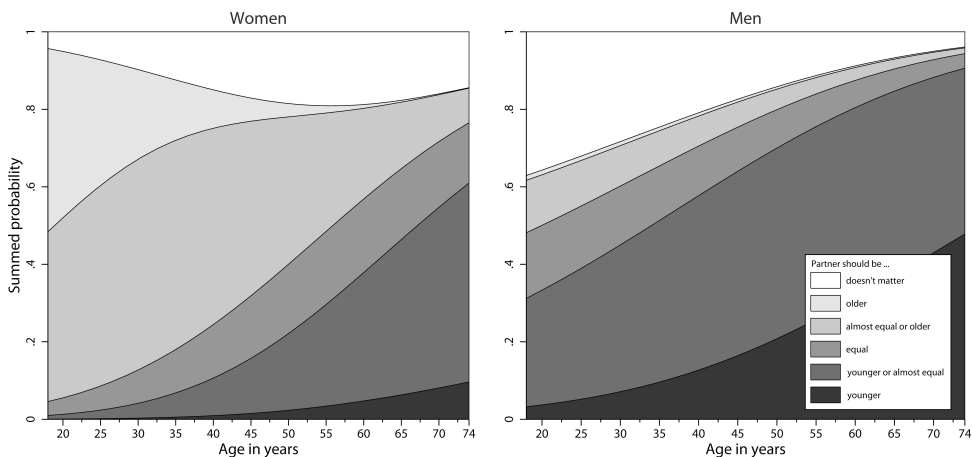
Note: Predicted probabilities of preferential outcomes summing to one were plotted by age; predictions were based on the multinomial regression model in Tables 1 and 2; effect of age was conditional on holding the other variables in the model at the mean of the respective estimation sample (men and women).

Source: Survey data on users of a German online dating site collected in 2009/2010.

Age had a significant effect on preferential outcomes for women as well (see Table 2). Contrasting logit coefficients indicated that compared to the remaining outcomes, the desire for a man to be *older* or *almost equal or older* declined significantly with age. Even more, the preference for *older* men vanished almost completely with age. This can be confirmed by an inspection of the area plot in Figure 2. Moreover, the older the woman, the more likely she was to state a preference for men who are *younger* or *younger or almost* equal compared to other outcomes. In contrast to men, the probability of the indifference outcome (*doesn't matter*) increased with women's age (odds of 6 over 4 and 6 over 5 increased significantly by age). One possible explanation for this pattern is that

older women abandon their original (age) preferences due to their deteriorating chances of finding a partner. Compared to the *older men* preference (Outcomes 4 and 5), the *same-age men* preference (Outcome 3) became more probable with age. However, the overall probability of Outcome 3 increased only marginally with age. When analyzing who is contacting whom regarding age (see Figure 1), we found that, with increasing age, female choice along age became less uniform and increasingly mixed. Analyses of stated preference painted a similar picture: Female age preferences became rather idiosyncratic and diversified among older women (see Figure 2).

We expected age preferences to be *confounded* with preferences for other traits. In particular, we hypothesized that men's age preferences would correspond with their absolute preference for physical attractiveness. As logit contrasts and discrete changes in Table 1 show, the more "looks" were preferred as an important partner trait, the higher the probability of desiring a *younger* or *younger or almost equal* female partner over other outcomes and the lower the probability of indifference (age of partner *doesn't matter*). Interestingly, there was a similar effect for women: the more "looks" were rated as a relevant partner feature, the more likely women were to state a preference for *younger or almost equal* partners. In other words, age preferences are partially a function of preferences for physical attractiveness—not only for men but also for women.[15]

Furthermore, the more women emphasized education as an important partner feature, the stronger their age preference shifted from *equal* and *doesn't matter* to *almost equal or older* or *older* men. Thus, women's age preferences seemed to be confounded with preferences for educational (and hence economic) status. But there was also an effect for men: the stronger the preference for female educational status, the less likely the preference for *younger* women compared to other preferences. Interestingly, men tended to shift to *doesn't matter* rather than to the older category. Thus, a high absolute preference for education seems to be associated with age preferences for women but not for men. Furthermore, men, but not women, showed a greater indifference toward a potential partner's age when they had a high absolute preference for education.

The importance of age as a partner feature decreased the indifference regarding the age relation for both women and men. The higher the importance of age, the stronger the preference for *younger*, *younger or almost equal*, or *equal* women in men and the stronger the preference for *equal* or *almost equal or older* men in women.

We hypothesized that men with a higher education would be more favored on the market and therefore might have evolved a stronger preference for younger women. This was confirmed by our data analysis (see Table 1). A high level of education significantly increased the probability of Outcome 1 over all other outcomes. There was a difference of about +7.7 percentage points in the probability of Outcome 1 for a hypothetical man (see above) with a high compared to a medium level of education. In contrast to men, female odds in favor of Outcome 1 compared to the remaining outcomes were reduced (albeit just on a 10% level of significance for most contrasts) and odds in favor of Outcome 6 were increased for more highly educated women (see Table 2). This means that, com-

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15 This result seems to contradict common biological assumptions in evolutionary psychology (Buss 1989).

pared to women with medium level of education, more highly educated women preferred younger men less often and were more frequently indifferent about the age of the partner.

Seeking a long-term relationship influenced age preferences in women but not in men. This did not support our hypothesis that men with a long-term goal frame would more often prefer women of a similar age. Evidently, by and large, male age preferences are independent from the desired level of involvement in a relationship. In line with our hypotheses, women interested in a long-term relation significantly preferred men to be *older* or *almost equal or older*. When there was no a priori long-term interest, women showed a stronger preference for younger as well as same-aged men.

Our theoretical discussion suggested that having children or the experience of a previous marriage might be conceived as unfavorable traits in the partner market, and that actors with such characteristics would therefore adjust their preference structure for partner's age. Our results indicated that men with children stated a weaker preference for younger women and were more often indifferent regarding female age. The male's deviation from the modal age preference together with a greater expression of indifference can be interpreted as a sign of men's adjustment to a restricted position in the mate market. For women, having a child was associated with both a weaker preference for younger men and a stronger preference for *older* or *almost equal or older* men. The "costs" of having children in the perspective of others seemed to lead women to refrain from female modal age preference. However, having been married previously had no significant impact on female or male preferences. Previous marriage experience might not be a "cost" per se in the perspective of others, but rather a characteristic defining different segments in the market. That is, individuals who have been married before might prefer partners with similar marriage experience, but this has little to do with their preference regarding a partner's age.

6. Discussion of results and conclusion

This study traced back age-related partner preferences to men's and women's age, their position in the partner market (their resource set), and their conception of an ideal partner (their preference set). Using process data from online dating, we were able to show that revealed age preferences vary strongly with age, but in a gender-specific manner: Whereas (a) men increasingly prefer younger women as they age, (b) women's age preferences become increasingly diverse. Using multinomial regression models, we corroborated these findings on the level of stated relational age preferences and additionally demonstrated that (c) age preferences are confounded with preferences for attractiveness and education in a gender-specific way, and that (d) preferences for age also vary with market-relevant traits such as education and parenthood, but not with prior marital experience.

Altogether, our analyses point to a gender-specific dynamic of age with differential consequences for men's and women's mating preferences: Age has a different meaning for men and women. Hence, they face different conditions on the partner market as they age, and this has a differential effect on their mate value. In particular, women face restrictions on the mate market with increasing age. Whereas they are increasingly looking for similar aged men, they are less favored by men of their own age group. Thus, men and women face a disproportionate decline in market value: Male chances of realizing mating

preferences stay constant or become better; female chances become worse with age. This has far-reaching consequences for actors who tend to adapt their preferences to the structural market conditions. The age preferences that are put into practice differentially shape the opportunity structures of men and women on the partner market, and hence can influence the preferences of others.

We conclude that both normative explanations for assortative mating along age and the axiomatic assumption of similarity preferences have been considered too narrowly and need to be handled with more care in future research. As western societies become older, and people increasingly tend to repartner and remarry, mate choice will increasingly become a phenomenon of age. This also increases the need to analyze it scientifically. Our finding that women's preferences become increasingly heterogeneous with age might well be a substantive issue for further research. Future studies should also assess how far the proposed approach can be applied to other preference dimensions (e.g., preference for status traits). One methodologically relevant field of research would be the integration of the different information on stated and revealed mating preferences and analyses of how far subjective preferences and choice behavior are congruent. Finally, our results might inspire further studies on age homogamy to account for gender-specific preference variability from a life-course perspective.

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Appendix: see page 290

Description of dependent and independent variables for stated preference analysis. Distributional information for complete cases.

Variable	Men (n = 1,370)					Women (n = 901)					Description
	mean	SD	P^{50}	min	max	mean	SD	P^{50}	min	max	
Age preference	3.05	1.79	2	1	6	3.95	1.28	4	1	6	Respondents were asked: "How old should your partner be?" Response categories were scaled gradually from *younger* to *older* around the middle category *equal*. Furthermore, respondents could specify indifference by an additional category *doesn't matter*. 1 = *younger*, 2 = *younger or almost equal*, 3 = *equal*, 4 = *almost equal or older*, 5 = *older*, 6 = *doesn't matter*
Age	40.84	12.23	41	18	79	42.01	12.23	43	18	74	Age at time of interview
Educational level											We applied a threefold classification for education very similar to that in Blossfeld and Timm (1997) combining information on general education and vocational qualification.
Low	0.11	0.31	0	0	1	0.13	0.34	0	0	1	(1) no general educational degree, (2) general elementary education without vocational training, (3) intermediate general education without vocational training.
Medium	0.65	0.48	1	0	1	0.62	0.49	1	0	1	(1) general elementary education as well as vocational training, (2) intermediate general education as well as vocational training, (3) higher education entrance qualification (e.g., *Abitur*) without and (4) with vocational training
High	0.24	0.43	0	0	1	0.24	0.43	0	0	1	(1) lower tertiary (e.g., university of applied sciences), (2) higher tertiary (e.g., academically oriented university education), or (3) PhD
Long-term	0.69	0.46	1	0	1	0.62	0.49	1	0	1	Desire for a long-term relationship scaled from 1 to 5. Long-term equals 1 for values 4 or 5 and equals 0 otherwise. Missing values were coded to 0 (missing coding).
Missing (long-term)	0.16	0.37	0	0	1	0.25	0.43	0	0	1	1 if Long-term was coded as missing, 0 otherwise.
Previously married	0.41	0.49	0	0	1	0.60	0.49	1	0	1	1 if person was ever married, 0 otherwise.
Having children	0.40	0.49	0	0	1	0.64	0.48	1	0	1	Having children, coded by 1 and 0.
Absolute preferences for											Question: "How important are these features of a partner to you?" Answers are scaled from 1 (*very unimportant*) to 5 (*very important*).
Looks	3.63	0.99	4	1	5	3.64	0.86	4	1	5	"Looks"
Education	3.31	1.11	3	1	5	3.96	0.98	4	1	5	"Educational level"
Age	3.32	1.04	3	1	5	3.68	1.00	4	1	5	"Age"

Note: Means, standard deviations, medians (P^{50}), and minimum and maximum values of variables were calculated for complete cases sample.

Source: Survey data on users of a German online dating site collected in 2009/2010.

Doreen Zillmann, Andreas Schmitz & Hans-Peter Blossfeld

Lügner haben kurze Beine.
Zum Zusammenhang unwahrer Selbstdarstellung und partnerschaftlicher Chancen im Online-Dating[1]

Liars have short legs.
The relationship between deceptive self-presentation and mating opportunities in online dating

Zusammenfassung:

Unwahrheiten sind alltägliche Bestandteile sozialer Interaktionen. Sie treten im Alltag jedoch meist nur in Form kleinerer Lügen und „Schummeleien", wie es umgangssprachlich heißt, auf. Ein Ziel von Unwahrheiten kann sein, sich eine bessere Position zu verschaffen, um daraus Vorteile beispielsweise in Form sozialer Wertschätzung durch Andere zu erhalten. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht Unwahrheiten bei der Selbstdarstellung im Kontext der Partnerwahl auf Online-Kontaktbörsen. Mithilfe von Daten aus einer Online-Befragung von Nutzern einer Online-Kontaktbörse wird untersucht, ob Muster unwahrer Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil beobachtbar sind und wie die Merkmale der Akteure die beobachtbaren Muster der Unwahrheit beeinflussen. Dazu führen wir eine analytische Unterscheidung von spezifischer und unspezifischer Kompensation nachteiliger partnerschaftlicher Chancen ein. Die empirischen Analysen konzentrieren sich auf unwahre Profildarstellungen des Bildungsniveaus und der physischen Attraktivität. Die Ergebnisse zeigen deutliche geschlechts- und merkmalsspezifische Muster unwahrer Selbstdarstellung. So zeigt sich beispielsweise hinsichtlich der Körpergröße

Abstract:

Untruthfulness and deception are common constituents of social interactions. In everyday life, however, they usually occur in form of small lies and cheating. Gaining a better position in order to receive social approval by others might be the intention underlying untrue statements. In this contribution, we investigate deception in self-presentation in the context of mate choice on online dating sites. Using data from an online survey conducted amongst users of an online dating site, we analyse whether patterns of misrepresentation in users' profiles can be detected and which of the actors' characteristics influence the observable patterns of untruthfulness. For this purpose, we introduce an analytical distinction between specific and unspecific compensation of disadvantageous chances in mating. The empirical analyses focus on deceptive presentation in the user profile concerning educational level and physical attractiveness. The results show clear gender specific and trait specific patterns of deceptive self-presentation. With regard to, for example, body height, there is a significant effect for men, but not for women: especially small men have a higher probability to misrepresent their height in

ein signifikanter Effekt bei Männern, nicht jedoch bei Frauen: Es sind vor allem kleine Männer, die eine höhere Wahrscheinlichkeit haben, ihre Körpergröße im Nutzerprofil unwahr darzustellen. Diese Strategie bezeichnen wir als spezifische Kompensation nachteiliger Chancen am Partnermarkt. Die Analysen bestätigen aber auch unsere Erwartung hinsichtlich Strategien der unspezifischen Kompensation: tatsächliche oder vermeintliche Nachteile in einem Merkmal können dazu führen, dass sich Akteure in einem anderen Merkmal unwahr darstellen, ebenso können Nachteile in einem Merkmal durch Stärken in anderen Merkmalen kompensiert werden. Mit Hilfe der unspezifischen Kompensation ist es möglich, Unwahrheiten in einem Merkmal gering und damit auch verzeihlich zu halten.

the user profile. This strategy will be called specific compensation of disadvantageous chances on the partner market. In addition, the analyses support our expectations concerning strategies of unspecific compensation: actual or perceived disadvantages in one characteristic can lead actors to misrepresent themselves in another characteristic; likewise, disadvantages in one characteristic can be compensated by advantages in other characteristics. Using unspecific compensation, actors are able to keep deception in one characteristic on a minimal and therefore excusable level.

Schlagwörter: Selbstdarstellung, Täuschung, Vertrauen, Informationen, Partnersuche im Internet, Partnerwahl, Online-Dating

Key words: self-presentation, deception, trust, information, mate search on the internet, mate choice, online dating

1. Einleitung

Das Internet bietet seit einigen Jahren neue Gelegenheiten zur Partnersuche und hat sich mittlerweile zu einem bedeutenden Partnermarkt entwickelt (vgl. z.B. Lea/Spears 1995; Merkle/Richardson 2000; Ben-Ze'ev 2004; Schulz/Zillmann 2009; Hogan et al. 2011). Es eröffnet verschiedene Möglichkeiten der (virtuellen) Begegnung, des Kennenlernens und der Kommunikation. Als spezielle Orte der Partnersuche haben sich Online-Kontakt-börsen herausgebildet, die sich von anderen so genannten Social Network-Seiten dadurch unterscheiden, dass sie explizit auf die Partnersuche oder Partnervermittlung ausgerichtet sind.

Um die Möglichkeiten zur Partnersuche, die Online-Kontaktbörsen bieten, nutzen zu können, müssen sich die Nutzer zunächst auf der Plattform registrieren. Im Zuge dessen gibt sich jeder Nutzer ein selbst gewähltes Pseudonym, das seine eindeutige Identifizierung auf der Plattform ermöglicht, jedoch nicht seine tatsächliche Identität preisgibt. Im Anschluss daran füllen die Nutzer ein Nutzerprofil aus, mittels dessen sie anderen Nutzern Informationen über sich, beispielsweise zum Alter, Familienstand, Bildungsniveau, zur beruflichen Situation und zum Aussehen bereitstellen. Neben diesen standardisierten Informationen haben die Nutzer die Möglichkeit, ihre Selbstdarstellung im Rahmen des Nutzerprofils über Freitextfelder zu ergänzen und damit ihr Online-Profil individueller und umfangreicher zu gestalten. Zudem können die Nutzer ihr Nutzerprofil mit einem oder mehreren Fotos von sich anreichern, um diesen Steckbrief persönlicher und authentischer zu gestalten.

Diese im Nutzerprofil bereitgestellten Informationen über die eigene Person sind zugleich für die anderen Nutzer der Plattform der wesentliche Ausgangspunkt für die Suche

und Selektion potenzieller Partner, die dann über plattforminterne Nachrichtensysteme, in der Regel sind das E-Mail-Nachrichten, mitunter auch Chats, kontaktiert werden können. Bei der Selbstdarstellung in einem Nutzerprofil, aber auch in der sich daran anschließenden Kommunikation über E-Mail-Nachrichten oder ein Chatsystem, lassen sich daher zwei idealtypische Ziele benennen. Zum einen möchten Nutzer durch ihre (Profil-)Darstellung ein Höchstmaß an Aufmerksamkeit bei potenziellen Partnern wecken, indem sie sich interessant und attraktiv darstellen (vgl. z.B. Ellison et al. 2006). Denn damit steigt die Chance, mit potenziellen Partnern überhaupt in Kontakt zu kommen und ein Untergehen in der Masse der Partnersuchenden zu verhindern. Zum anderen möchten die meisten Nutzer einer Online-Kontaktbörse eine (kurz- oder langfristige) Partnerschaft verwirklichen. Ein potenzieller Partner erwartet jedoch im Fall einer persönlichen Begegnung auf eine Person zu treffen, die den auf der Kontaktbörse offenbarten Merkmalen entspricht. Die Herausforderung bei der Selbstdarstellung besteht also darin, dass sich Nutzer einerseits optimal darstellen müssen, um ihre Aufmerksamkeits- und damit Kontaktchancen zu erhöhen (vgl. Schmitz 2010). Andererseits macht aber unter Umständen gerade diese Optimierung Anschlussinteraktionen und damit das letztliche Ziel der Etablierung einer Paarbeziehung im (nicht-virtuellen) Alltag unwahrscheinlicher. Das Ziel, eine hohe Aufmerksamkeit durch eine attraktive Profildarstellung zu erreichen, konfligiert also unter Umständen mit dem eigentlichen Ziel, einen Partner zu finden.

Aus der Perspektive der anderen Nutzer ist das Nutzerprofil die wesentliche und zugleich vorerst auch die einzige Informationsquelle, die zur Verfügung steht und anhand dessen sie ihre Bewertungen eines potenziellen Partners vornehmen und letztlich ihre Kontaktentscheidungen treffen müssen. Wie zuverlässig und vertrauenswürdig sind allerdings die im Online-Profil der Nutzer enthaltenen Informationen über die eigene Person? Wir fragen deshalb zunächst, wie verbreitet unwahre Selbstdarstellungen in Nutzerprofilen auf Online-Kontaktbörsen sind. Unsere Hauptfragestellung lautet dann: Welche Merkmale der Akteure können die beobachtbaren Muster der unwahren Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil erklären? Diese Fragestellung richtet sich auf die Untersuchung des Zusammenhangs der Handlungsvoraussetzungen, mit denen Akteure in den digitalen Partnermarkt einer Kontaktböse eintreten, und den damit verbundenen Handlungen und Strategien der Akteure. Unsere Analyse der unwahren Selbstdarstellung stützt sich auf die in der Partnerwahlforschung diskutierten und für die Paarbildung als zentral charakterisierten Merkmale der Bildung und der physischen Attraktivität (vgl. z.B. Blossfeld/Timm 1997, 2003; Murstein 1972; Stevens et al. 1990; Mulford et al. 1998; Franzen/Hartmann 2001). Gleichzeitig sind dies wahrnehmbare Merkmale, die die Chancen der Menschen auf soziale Wertschätzung beeinflussen und damit wesentlich zur Produktion und Reproduktion sozialer Ungleichheiten beitragen.

Nachfolgend werden wir unsere Fragestellung theoretisch strukturieren und aus diesen Überlegungen Hypothesen zur Erklärung unwahrer Selbstdarstellungen von Männern und Frauen bei der Online-Partnersuche ableiten. Es folgen eine Beschreibung der Datengrundlage, die wir zur Beantwortung unserer Fragestellungen und Prüfung der Hypothesen heranziehen, und die Darstellung der empirischen Befunde, die wir abschließend zusammenfassend diskutieren.

2. Theoretische Überlegungen und Hypothesen

Während die Partnersuche außerhalb des Internets, also in nicht-virtuellen Alltagskontexten, durch die Situation der unmittelbaren Anwesenheit der Akteure gekennzeichnet ist, entfällt bei Online-Kontaktbörsen dieses Moment der unmittelbaren Erfahrung des Gegenübers, was bis zur Unsicherheit hinsichtlich der gesamten Identität des potenziellen Partners führen kann. Auch in Offline-Kontexten stellt die Unsicherheit hinsichtlich einzelner Eigenschaften des Gegenübers ein Problem dar (Goffman 2008), sie erweist sich im virtuellen Kontext jedoch als ungleich virulenter. Denn aufgrund der spezifischen Kontextbedingungen der Partnersuche auf Online-Kontaktbörsen – der Anonymität der Interagierenden, der informationellen Sparsamkeit der Interaktion, der dyadischen Natur der Interaktionsbeziehungen und damit dem Fehlen von Reputations- und Kontrollmechanismen durch Dritte – ist diese Form des Kennenlernens durch ein hohes Maß an *Informationsasymmetrie* zugunsten des Senders von Informationen gekennzeichnet (vgl. Schmitz 2010; Schulz/Zillmann 2009; Donath 1999). Der Empfänger von Informationen ist wesentlich schlechter über den wahren Zustand wichtiger Eigenschaften in den Nutzerprofilen anderer, wie beispielsweise deren Alter, Bildungsniveau oder Familienstand, informiert als der Sender. Für den Empfänger dieser Informationen ergibt sich daraus ein hohes Maß an Unsicherheit über die tatsächlichen Eigenschaften potenzieller Interaktionspartner. Dadurch werden auf diesem Partnermarkt einerseits unwahre Selbstdarstellungen auf Seiten des Senders von Informationen sehr viel wahrscheinlicher und sind andererseits auf Seiten des Empfängers der Informationen wesentlich schwieriger zu entlarven.

In ihrer eher subtilen und indirekten Form, dem Verschweigen von Informationen, sind unwahre Darstellungen zumindest in den standardisierten Textfeldern durch das Anzeigen von Informationslücken, etwa durch das Einblenden von „keine Angabe"-Antworten, offensichtlich. Treten sie jedoch in Form falscher Informationen auf, wie die Angabe eines falschen Bildungsniveaus oder Alters im Nutzerprofil, sind unwahre Selbstdarstellungen nicht unmittelbar beobachtbar. Oftmals stellen sich derartige Falschinformationen erst mit einem persönlichen Treffen heraus und damit zu einem Zeitpunkt, an dem womöglich bereits viel Zeit und emotionale Bindung in die Interaktionsbeziehung investiert wurde und unter Umständen andere Interaktionsbeziehungen zugunsten dieser nicht fortgeführt wurden. Sie erhöhen damit seitens des Partnersuchenden das Risiko einer verfehlten Investition. Die Etablierung einer Paarbeziehung hängt damit ganz wesentlich davon ab, ob die Akteure das Vertrauensproblem auf dem Online-Partnermarkt lösen und damit Vertrauen in einander aufbauen können, das zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt, z.B. bei einem ersten persönlichen Treffen durch die Offenbarung von (gravierenden) Falschinformationen, nicht wieder zerstört wird.

Diese Ausführungen haben bereits angedeutet, dass Akteure auf diesem Partnermarkt gleichzeitig Sender und Empfänger von Informationen sind und damit die Vertrauensprobleme schaffen, mit denen sie im Perspektivwechsel wieder konfrontiert werden. Diese Untersuchung konzentriert sich auf die Perspektive des Senders von Informationen, also auf die Perspektive des Selbstdarstellers. Dennoch werden wir nachfolgend beide Perspektiven theoretisch berücksichtigen, da sie ineinander greifen und interdependent sind.

Theoretische Überlegungen zur Selbstdarstellung: Die Perspektive des Senders von Informationen

Mithilfe der Selbstdarstellung werden Informationen über die eigene Person anderen Akteuren übermittelt. Diese Informationen werden vom Gegenüber genutzt, um in Erfahrung zu bringen, wer der andere überhaupt ist. Auf dieser Grundlage werden Bewertungen vorgenommen und Erwartungen hervorgerufen, ob der Kontakt mit dem potenziellen Interaktionspartner als lohnend erscheint. Diese Informationen tragen also – in Goffmans (2008, 1980) Worten – dazu bei, die Situation zu definieren, in der sich Akteure befinden, um darauf aufbauend Handlungsentwürfe zu planen und letztlich Handlungen zu vollziehen. Jedoch ist die Selbstdarstellung nicht nur eine „Serviceleistung" (Lenz 2006: 153), die Akteure füreinander erbringen, sondern sie erwächst ganz wesentlich aus dem Ziel der Einflussnahme auf das Handeln anderer, vor allem auf deren Handeln gegenüber der eigenen Person (Goffman 2008: 7). Diese Einflussnahme wird dadurch bewirkt, dass Akteure mithilfe einer gezielten Informationsbereitstellung die Definition der Situation ihres Gegenübers – des Empfängers von Informationen – in der Art beeinflussen, dass dieser veranlasst wird, bestimmte Handlungen auszuführen oder zu unterlassen. Im Online-Dating haben Akteure damit die Möglichkeit, mithilfe ihrer Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil ihr Netzwerk an Kontakten – sowohl in quantitativer als auch in qualitativer Hinsicht – zu beeinflussen.

Bei Online-Kontaktbörsen kann man Profilinszenierungen analytisch als Zwischenziel bzw. als „Zwischengut" (Esser 1999; Ormel et al. 1999) für die Realisierung des individuellen Nutzens in Form langfristiger sozialer Wertschätzung durch potenzielle Partner betrachten. Eine attraktive Darstellung der eigenen Person anhand des Profils ist nur der „erste Schritt" auf dem Weg zum letztendlichen Ziel der Etablierung einer Paarbeziehung. Das Profil eines Nutzers bestimmt jedoch in besonderem Maß seine Aufmerksamkeits- und Kontaktchancen, also die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass dieser in der Masse der konkurrierenden Nutzer wahrgenommen, positiv beurteilt und kontaktiert wird oder sein Kontaktversuch mit einer Antwort bedacht wird. Bei der Selbstinszenierung insbesondere im Nutzerprofil fließen folglich die angenommenen Erwartungen des Gegengeschlechts – die *Erwartungserwartungen* – ein. Die Erwartungserwartungen werden dadurch zur wesentlichen Grundlage für das inszenatorische Handeln der Akteure. Dies schlägt sich allgemein in der Auswahl der bereitgestellten Informationen über die eigene Person nieder, darüber hinaus aber auch dergestalt, dass die das Gegengeschlecht interessierenden Merkmale betont und gegebenenfalls übertrieben werden. Damit besitzen Selbstdarstellungen häufig eine Tendenz zur Idealisierung, die nicht selten schon als Täuschungen *(fabrications)* bezeichnet werden können (Goffman 2008, 1980; vgl. auch Lenz 2009). Täuschungen sind intendierte Transformationen der Situationsrahmung des Gegenübers und damit ein Mittel über bewusstes Verbergen oder gar Fälschen von Informationen auf die Situationsdefinition des Gegenübers in gewünschter Weise Einfluss zu nehmen (Goffman 1980: 98).

Theoretische Überlegungen zum Prozess der Partnerwahl: Die Perspektive des Empfängers von Informationen

Die Partnerwahl basiert nicht auf einer singulären Entscheidung, sondern sie kann als Prozess charakterisiert werden (vgl. z.B. Skopek et al. 2009; Hill/Kopp 2006; Murstein

1970, 1986; Kerckhoff/Davis 1962). Am Anfang des Partnerwahlprozesses steht zunächst die Entscheidung darüber, mit welchen Frauen oder Männern jemand überhaupt näher in Kontakt kommen möchte. Im Online-Dating entsteht dieser allererste Kontakt über das Schreiben einer E-Mail-Nachricht. Wie erfolgt jedoch diese Entscheidung, das heißt wie wählen Akteure aus den zur Verfügung stehenden Personen potenzielle Kontaktpartner aus, aus denen in späteren Phasen des Partnerwahlprozesses möglicherweise feste Paarbeziehungen oder sogar Ehen entstehen?

Ein allgemeines und damit vielseitig anwendbares theoretisches Modell dafür liefert die soziale Austauschtheorie (vgl. z.B. Blau 1964, 1968; Edwards 1969; Huston/Burgess 1979). Soziale Beziehungen werden in diesem Ansatz als Tauschbeziehungen beschrieben. Getauscht werden – symbolisch betrachtet – Ressourcen zwischen Frauen und Männern. Akteure bewerten ihre sozialen Beziehungen dabei hinsichtlich antizipierter Nutzen- und Kostenaspekte, also unter Vorwegnahme zukünftiger Erwartungen, die sie an den potenziellen Interaktionspartner richten. Demnach initiieren Akteure dann soziale Beziehungen, wenn sie die Interaktion mit dem potenziellen Partner als belohnend und profitabel einschätzen. Diese Perspektive impliziert die Annahme eines rationalen Akteurs, der sein Verhalten an der Maximierung seines individuellen Nutzens, hier in Form eines möglichst „optimalen" Partners ausrichtet.

Die Annahme einer optimalen nutzenmaximierenden Partnerwahl scheint jedoch sehr unwahrscheinlich, wenn nicht gar unmöglich (vgl. Blossfeld/Timm 1997, 2003; Skopek et al. 2009; Todd/Miller 1999; Oppenheimer 1988). Deshalb gehen neuere, realistischere Annahmen davon aus, dass Akteure nicht nach einem Optimum, sondern vielmehr – orientiert an Simons Prinzip des „satisficing" (vgl. Simon 1956, 1990) – nach einer zufriedenstellenden Lösung streben. Demnach suchen Akteure nicht nach dem perfekten Partner, sondern beenden die Suche, sobald ein akzeptabler Partner gefunden wird. Als akzeptabel wird ein potenzieller Partner dann bewertet, wenn er ein bestimmtes Mindestmaß bzw. minimales Anspruchsniveau erfüllt (vgl. Todd/Miller 1999; Blossfeld/Timm 1997, 2003; Oppenheimer 1988). Das Anspruchsniveau dient dabei als subjektive Referenz, an der potenzielle Partner gemessen werden. Damit werden Personen, die eine zu geringe Ressourcenausstattung – und damit einen zu geringen Partnerwert (vgl. Todd/Miller 1999) – signalisieren, als potenzielle Partner abgelehnt. Die Ressourcenausstattung eines Akteurs korrespondiert also mit seinem Partnerwert und bestimmt zugleich seine Gelegenheiten zum sozialen Tausch. Der Partnerwert deutet damit auf die Verhandlungsposition des Akteurs am digitalen Partnermarkt hin, in dem um Aufmerksamkeits- und Kontaktchancen konkurriert wird (vgl. Schmitz/Skopek 2011).

Erweiterung der theoretischen Überlegungen zur Selbstdarstellung
Mit den vorangestellten Überlegungen zur Partnerwahl und damit einer idealtypischen Perspektive des Empfängers von Informationen können wir die komplementäre Perspektive des Senders bzw. Selbstdarstellers ergänzen und fortführen. An diese Überlegungen anknüpfend ergeben sich für Akteure, die eine vergleichsweise geringe Ressourcenausstattung und damit einen geringen Partnerwert aufweisen, verschiedene idealtypische Handlungsstrategien, um die damit verbundenen Benachteiligungen in Form verringerter Kontakt- und Tauschchancen zu kompensieren. Eine dieser möglichen Handlungsstrategien ist die Kompensation von Nachteilen durch den strategischen Rückgriff auf das Mittel der unwahren Selbstdarstellung.

Damit ist zu erwarten, dass nur einigen Akteuren der Rückgriff auf Unwahrheiten im Profil oder im Kommunikationsverlauf als hilfreiche Strategie erscheint. Der wahrgenommene Nutzen und damit die Neigung zum strategischen Rückgriff auf Unwahrheiten sollte also mit dem Partnerwert eines Akteurs variieren; Akteure mit geringem Partnerwert sollten eher versucht sein, auf Unwahrheiten bei der Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil zurückzugreifen. Denn Akteure, die sich selbst gute Chancen am Partnermarkt ausrechnen, müssen sich nicht abweichend von ihren Merkmalen darstellen. Diejenigen Akteure, die sich jedoch geringe Chancen auf eine Realisierung ihres Anspruchsniveaus bzw. ihrer Präferenzen hinsichtlich potenzieller Partner ausrechnen, sind womöglich dazu veranlasst, in ihrer Selbstdarstellung auch auf Mittel der Täuschung zurückzugreifen.[2] Zudem sind Täuschungen alltägliche Handlungen und nicht auf den Kontext des Internets begrenzt.[3] Täuschungen werden jedoch insbesondere dann auftreten, wenn eine starke Konkurrenz sowie eine hohe Zielkongruenz am Markt herrschen, also viele Akteure um das gleiche Gut wetteifern. Eine Online-Kontaktbörse lässt sich als ein solcher Partnermarkt beschreiben, Hinzu kommt die im Vergleich zu nicht-virtuellen Kontexten des Kennenlernens erhöhte Unsicherheit bezüglich der tatsächlichen Eigenschaften des Interaktionspartners. Diese Rahmenbedingungen von Online-Kontaktbörsen lassen attraktivitätssteigernde Korrekturen der Selbstdarstellung im Vergleich zu den nicht-virtuellen Kontexten des Alltags wahrscheinlicher werden.

Mit dem theoretischen Konzept des Partnerwertes wird die Gesamtattraktivität eines Akteurs beschrieben, die von seiner Ressourcenausstattung abhängt. Implizit darin enthalten ist, dass Akteure ein Bündel verschiedener Ressourcen bzw. Merkmale haben und damit zahlreiche als attraktiv, aber auch als unattraktiv wahrgenommene Merkmale (vgl. Schoen/Wooldredge 1989; Schmitz 2010). Mit diesen Überlegungen können wir nun den allgemein formulierten Mechanismus der Variation unwahrer Selbstdarstellung in Abhängigkeit vom Partnerwert des Akteurs weiter differenzieren.

Aus der Perspektive des sich am Partnermarkt darstellenden Akteurs ist damit naheliegend, dass er versucht, Nachteile in einem bestimmten Merkmal, z.B. im Bildungsniveau, durch Unwahrheit in eben diesem Merkmal auszugleichen. Diesen Ausgleich bezeichnen wir im Folgenden als *spezifische Kompensation*. Bei der Profildarstellung auf Online-Kontaktbörsen ist diese Strategie aus technischer Sicht leicht umzusetzen und relativ folgenlos, da keine Sanktionen durch Dritte erfolgen können. Allerdings stößt diese Strategie recht bald an Grenzen, denn Akteure können nur im geringen Umfang ein als unattraktiv wahrgenommenes Merkmal in ihrer Profildarstellung beschönigen, wenn sie den potenziellen Partner tatsächlich für eine (wie auch immer geartete) Beziehung gewinnen möchten. Behauptet ein kleinwüchsiger Mann beispielsweise, dass er eine durchschnittliche Körpergröße besitzt, mag das zunächst seine Aufmerksamkeitschancen und

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2 Schmitz, Hofmann und Zillmann (2010) konnten in ihrer qualitativen Untersuchung Hinweise darauf finden, dass insbesondere Akteure mit einem niedrigen Partnerwert auf Strategien der Täuschung zurückgreifen, um ihre Chancen, mit potenziellen Partnern überhaupt in Kontakt zu kommen, zu erhöhen. Damit verbunden ist die Hoffnung der Akteure durch das Ausspielen anderer Stärken, z.B. durch besonderen Humor, derartige „Notlügen" verziehen zu bekommen und den potenziellen Partner letztlich überzeugen zu können.

3 Im Alltag treten Täuschungen überwiegend in Form kleinerer Unwahrheiten und Lügen sowie oft auch in Form so genannter „white lies" (Goffman 1984: 69), beispielsweise aus Höflichkeit oder gar zum Schutz anderer, auf (vgl. auch Nyberg 1993; Ekman 1989; Barnes 1994).

damit seine Kontaktchancen in Form vermehrter Zuschriften und Antworten steigern, seine Tauschchancen im Sinne einer sich verstetigenden Beziehung erhöht er dadurch aber nicht. Im Gegenteil: diejenigen Frauen, die er für ein persönliches Treffen gewinnen kann, werden nach einer ersten Begegnung höchstwahrscheinlich enttäuscht sein und auf weitere Treffen verzichten. Und so zeigt sich auch tatsächlich, dass sich Akteure auf Kontaktbörsen zwar der Strategie der spezifischen Kompensation bedienen, sie tun dies jedoch meist nur in Form einer graduellen Optimierung. Männer machen sich beispielsweise nur etwas größer und Frauen nur etwas schlanker (vgl. Hancock et al. 2007; Toma et al. 2008). Sie handeln dabei entlang gesellschaftlich geteilter *Konventionen*, und zwar einerseits hinsichtlich einer optimalen Merkmalsausprägung. Diese Konventionen geben Akteuren in Form von Leitbildern und Geschlechterrollen Orientierung im Hinblick darauf, was überhaupt am Partnermarkt als attraktive Eigenschaft bei einem Mann und einer Frau gilt. Andererseits gelten diese Konventionen auch hinsichtlich der erwarteten und als normal geltenden Qualität und Quantität der Unwahrheiten. Nicht jede Täuschung oder das was umgangssprachlich auch als Lüge bezeichnet wird, wird gleichermaßen stark moralisch verurteilt. Es ist anzunehmen, dass Akteure diese Konventionen, die als ungeschriebene Regeln am Partnermarkt gelten, bei der Anwendung ihrer Strategien berücksichtigen. Einige Akteure werden also versuchen, ihre restringierte Position am Partnermarkt zu kompensieren, indem sie ihre wesentlichen Restriktionen auf eine konventional zulässige Weise in ihrer Selbstdarstellung beschönigen.

Die Strategie der spezifischen Kompensation ist aber nicht die einzig denkbare Logik des Umgangs mit vermeintlichen oder tatsächlichen Nachteilen. Die konventionalen Grenzen der Anwendung der spezifischen Kompensation lassen weitere Kompensationsstrategien erwarten. So ist aus Sicht eines Akteurs denkbar, dass Nachteile in einem Merkmal auch durch Stärken in anderen Merkmalen ausgeglichen werden können. Beispielsweise könnte ein Akteur seine geringe Ausstattung mit Bildungsressourcen auch durch besondere physische Attraktivität kompensieren. Ein anderes Beispiel, das ebenfalls dieser Logik folgt, stellt einen Akteur dar, der seine tatsächliche oder vermeintliche physische Unattraktivität zusätzlich zur konventional zulässigen Beschönigung dieses Merkmals dadurch zu kompensieren versucht, indem er – den Tatsachen nicht entsprechend – einen hohen Bildungsstatus vorgibt. Diese Strategie werden wir im Folgenden als *unspezifische Kompensation* bezeichnen. Akteure greifen also auf die den Konventionen entsprechenden Möglichkeiten des Zwischenziels einer optimierten Profildarstellung zurück, die nicht zwingend eine direkte Kompensation ihrer Merkmalsschwächen zum Gegenstand haben müssen. Vielmehr kann ein restringierter Partnerwert auch unwahre Selbstdarstellungen bei Merkmalen begünstigen, die nicht oder nur im geringen Maß für ihre schlechten Chancen ursächlich verantwortlich sind. Diese Überlegung leitet sich aus der Vorstellung ab, dass Akteure aus einem Bündel von attraktiven aber auch weniger begehrten Merkmalen bestehen. Ein strategisch reflektierender Akteur nimmt seine Tauschchancen vor dem Hintergrund seiner Position am Partnermarkt vorweg und versucht, seinen *Gesamteindruck* zu verbessern, um zunächst in der Masse möglicher Kontakte überhaupt erst wahrgenommen zu werden und schließlich eine Interaktion mit einem potenziellen Partner wahrscheinlicher zu machen. Dabei müssen Akteure nicht unbedingt anstreben, sich als *optimal* im Sinne der bestmöglichen Merkmalsausprägung darzustellen, sondern vielmehr als *normal* im Sinne einer nicht unterdurchschnittlichen Merkmalsaus-

prägung.[4] Bei der Gestaltung des eigenen Profils kommt es also auch darauf an, seine Kontaktchancen durch ein Vermeiden der Zurschaustellung von als negativ angenommenen Merkmalen zu erhöhen, um von potenziellen Partnern aufgrund ihrer erwarteten Kriterien bei der Partnersuche und -selektion nicht einfach ausgeschlossen zu werden. Insbesondere auf einem Partnermarkt, der wie das Online-Dating durch eine Überfülle möglicher Partner charakterisiert ist, suchen Menschen vermehrt nach bestimmten Eigenschaften und vermeiden andere.[5]

Mit der spezifischen und unspezifischen Kompensation haben wir zwei idealtypische Strategien aufgezeigt, mit denen Akteure eine geringe Ressourcenausstattung zu kompensieren versuchen. Wir werden diese Überlegungen im Folgenden unter Berücksichtigung einer Geschlechterperspektive in Bezug auf die für unsere Analyse relevanten Merkmale Bildung und physische Attraktivität konkretisieren. Gleichzeitig liefert diese Diskussion die Grundlage zur Spezifikation der geschlechts- und ressourcenspezifischen Hypothesen.

Die Erwartung gegengeschlechtlicher Partnerpräferenzen

In den bisherigen Ausführungen haben wir zwei Akteure unterschieden, die die Täuschung konstituieren: der Akteur, der täuscht, also der Sender falscher und selektiver Informationen, und der Akteur, der getäuscht wird, also der Empfänger dieser falschen und selektiven Informationen. In diesem dyadischen Verhältnis müssen jedoch noch weitere Akteure unterschieden werden, die mittelbar im Täuschungsakt involviert sind. Analytisch muss nämlich das Modell, an dem sich der Täuschende orientiert (vgl. Gambetta 2005: 234) ebenso berücksichtigt werden wie Dritte, die die Täuschung sanktionieren könnten. Da das Sanktionierungspotenzial Dritter auf Online-Kontaktbörsen äußerst gering ist, stellt sich insbesondere die Frage, an welchem Modell sich Akteure bei der Darstellung ihrer Person orientieren. Zur Beantwortung dieser Frage ist Meads Konzept des *signifikanten* und *generalisierten Anderen* aufschlussreich (Mead 1934). Mit diesem Konzept ist die Fähigkeit des Akteurs zur Perspektivübernahme angesprochen, um damit die Reaktion des Gegenübers zu antizipieren und letztlich auch den Verlauf einer (potenziellen) Interaktion einzuschätzen. Im Online-Dating lässt sich eine Unterscheidung danach treffen, ob im Rahmen des Nutzerprofils ein generalisierter Anderer getäuscht wird oder im Rahmen einer dyadischen Interaktion ein signifikanter bzw. konkreter Anderer. Mithilfe der Selbstdarstellung über das Nutzerprofil präsentiert sich ein Nutzer auf dem digitalen Partnermarkt jedoch in jedem Fall gegenüber einem generalisierten Anderen in *Vorwegnahme der Erwartungen* potenzieller (Kontakt-)Partner. Diese generalisierte Kommunikation ist für Akteure die erste Möglichkeit, sich für die Partnersuche ins rechte Licht zu rücken.

Die Vorwegnahme der Erwartungen eines generalisierten Anderen verweist auf die in einer Gesellschaft etablierten Geschlechterrollen und -leitbilder im Kontext privater Bezie-

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4   Und so schreibt z. B. Goffman: „Wegen der großen Belohnungen, die die Tatsache, als normal betrachtet zu werden, mit sich bringt, werden fast alle Personen, die die Möglichkeit haben, zu täuschen, dies auch bei irgendeiner Gelegenheit absichtlich tun." (Goffman 1975: 96).

5   Lenton und Stewart (2008) konnten zeigen, dass mit zunehmendem Umfang des Angebots potenzieller Partner die Auswahlstrategien der Akteure zunehmend *Eigenschaften* im Unterschied zu *Alternativen* in Form „ganzheitlicher" Akteure zum Gegenstand hatten und dabei zunehmend weniger Kompromisse bei der Auswahl potenzieller Partner eingegangen wurden.

hungen, an denen sich Akteure bei ihrer Selbstdarstellung orientieren. Es sind dies insbesondere die jeweiligen Erwartungen im Hinblick auf die Partnerpräferenzen des Gegengeschlechts. Vor diesem Hintergrund stellt sich die Frage, welche partnerschaftlichen Präferenzen Männer und Frauen heute im Allgemeinen (in unserer Gesellschaft) haben und welche Merkmale somit Frauen und Männer als attraktiv und begehrenswert erscheinen lassen.[6]

Ausgehend von unterschiedlichen Sozialisationsbedingungen, die Frauen und Männer erfahren haben sowie den sich daraus bildenden unterschiedlichen Rollenerwartungen, denen Frauen und Männer ausgesetzt sind, lässt sich eine geschlechtsspezifische Strukturierung von Partnerpräferenzen erwarten (vgl. Blossfeld/Drobnič 2001; Skopek 2011).[7] Beispielsweise zeigte sich auf der Grundlage von Kontaktanzeigenstudien, dass Frauen im Vergleich zu Männern in ihren Angaben häufiger nach Partnern suchen, die finanzielle Sicherheit (Butler-Smith et al. 1998; Hirschman 1987; Harrison/Saeed 1977) und „gute" statusrelevante Merkmale wie höhere Bildung oder berufliche Position (Hassebrauck 1990; Kaupp 1968) bieten und darüber hinaus älter sind als sie selbst (Harrison/Saeed 1977). Demgegenüber zeigten Männer eine deutliche Präferenz für jüngere Frauen (Campos et al. 2002; Cameron et al. 1977) und physisch attraktive Partnerinnen (z.B. Hirschman 1987). Männer legen nach diesen Studien bei der Auswahl von potenziellen Partnerinnen vor allem Wert auf Jugendlichkeit und Schönheit. Weitere Studien zu Partnerpräferenzen und Geschlechterstereotypen zeigen, dass bei Männern auch die Körpergröße ein relevantes Merkmal zu sein scheint (vgl. z.B. Skopek 2011; Pawloswki/Koziel 2002; Biernat et al. 1991; Shepperd/Strathman 1989; Lynn/Shurgot 1984; Gillis/Avis 1980).

Damit stellen der männliche Status und die männliche Körpergröße zwei erhärtete Kriterien dar, die über Erfolg und Misserfolg am Partnermarkt entscheiden können. Es ist deshalb anzunehmen, dass sich Frauen dementsprechend – angesichts der Fülle potenzieller Partner auf Kontaktbörsen – im ersten Schritt auf Profile beschränken, die ihren Präferenzen hinsichtlich dieser beiden wichtigen Merkmale entsprechen. Indem Männer bei der Partnersuche diese partnerschaftlichen Präferenzen von Frauen vorwegnehmen, sollten sie, wenn sie sich des strategischen Mittels der Täuschung bedienen, also vor allem in den Merkmalen Bildung und Körpergröße einen Ansatzpunkt zur Optimierung ihrer Präsentation sehen. Frauen hingegen sollten bei ihrer Profildarstellung vor allem auf Merkmale der physischen Erscheinung Wert legen, wie sie in den Angaben zum Körpergewicht (insbesondere relativ zur Körpergröße als Body Mass Index) sowie in den zur Verfügung gestellten Fotographien über die eigene Person zum Ausdruck kommt.[8]

Diese präferenzbasierte Argumentation, die der Perspektive des individuellen Akteurs entspricht, ist allerdings nur eine Seite der Medaille. Abstrahiert man von der individuel-

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6 Es geht hier also um die Frage nach *absoluten* Attraktivitätsbewertungen bzw. Partnerpräferenzen. Davon abzugrenzen sind *relationale* Attraktivitätsbewertungen, bei der die Attraktivität eines Merkmals des Gegenübers relativ zur eigenen Merkmalsausprägung bewertet wird.

7 Eine grundlegend andere Erklärung geschlechtsspezifisch strukturierter Partnerpräferenzen liefern evolutionsbiologische Ansätze (vgl. dazu bspw. die Studien von Buss und Barnes 1986; Buss und Schmitt 1993; siehe auch die Diskussion soziologischer und evolutionsbiologischer Erklärungsansätze von Geschlechterunterschieden in partnerschaftlichen Präferenzen in dem Artikel von Eagly und Wood 1999).

8 Auch das Alter der Frauen ist ein Signal für ihre physische Attraktivität (vgl. z.B. England/McClintock 2009). Zur Bedeutung des Alters für die Attraktivität von Frauen und Männern siehe auch den Beitrag von Skopek et al. in diesem Band.

len Perspektive und wechselt zu einer übergeordneten Perspektive – der Perspektive des Partnermarktes – gerät zusätzlich in den Blick, dass die Attraktivität eines Merkmals zwar durch allgemein geteilte Vorstellungen darüber, was als attraktiv gilt, bestimmt wird. Sie wird darüber hinaus aber auch wesentlich durch die Verfügbarkeit dieses Merkmals am Partnermarkt bestimmt. Damit hängt der Wert einer bestimmten Eigenschaft, wie z.B. eine schlanke Figur, auch davon ab, wie groß das Angebot dieser Eigenschaft am Partnermarkt ist und inwieweit sie damit Gegenstand von Konkurrenz ist (vgl. z.B. Stauder 2008; Klein/Stauder 2008). Die Attraktivität eines Merkmals wird damit also vom Zusammenspiel individueller Vorlieben für eben dieses Merkmal *und* von Marktprozessen und damit den Gelegenheiten am Partnermarkt bestimmt.

3. Methodisches Vorgehen

Datengrundlage und Analysestichprobe
Für die Beantwortung der Fragestellungen und die Prüfung der Hypothesen greifen wir auf Daten zurück, die im Rahmen einer Online-Befragung auf einer großen deutschen Online-Kontaktbörse erhoben wurden.[9] Die Datenerhebung auf der Plattform erfolgte vom 22. Juni 2009 bis 15. April 2010. Alle angemeldeten und aktiven[10] Nutzer der Plattform wurden per E-Mail-Nachricht zur Teilnahme an der Befragung eingeladen. Insgesamt nahmen 3.535 Online-Dater an der Befragung teil. Das entspricht einer Ausschöpfungsquote von 10 Prozent.[11]

Für die Prüfung der Hypothesen haben wir eine Analysestichprobe konstruiert. Da das Interesse darin besteht, Unwahrheiten in der Selbstdarstellung von Frauen und Männern im Prozess der Partnersuche zu analysieren, umfasst die Analysestichprobe nur Befragte, die explizit angeben, auf Partnersuche zu sein; das sind 63 Prozent der Befragten. Damit wurden Personen ausgeschlossen, die auf die Frage, ob sie derzeit auf der Suche nach einem Partner sind, mit „nein" oder „weiß nicht" antworteten. Weiterhin enthält die Analysestichprobe nur heterosexuelle Partnersuchende, also Frauen, die ausschließlich nach Männern suchen und umgekehrt. Schließlich haben wir das Alter auf 18 bis 80 Jahre beschränkt. Befragte, die einen fehlenden Wert bei der Altersangabe enthielten, wurden beibehalten. Insgesamt reduziert sich damit die Fallzahl von ursprünglich 3.535 auf 2.113 Fälle. In unserer Analysestichprobe sind 1.350 Männer (64 Prozent) und 763 Frauen (36 Prozent) enthalten. Das Durchschnittsalter der Nutzer beträgt 41 Jahre. Eine detaillierte Beschreibung der Analysestichprobe enthält Tabelle A.1 im Anhang.

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10   Ein Nutzer galt dann als aktiver Nutzer der Plattform, wenn er sich in den letzten sechs Monaten (Referenzzeitpunkt ist der Beginn unserer Befragung) mindestens einmal auf der Plattform eingeloggt hat. Inaktive Nutzer erhielten keine Einladung; insgesamt wurden 35.235 Nutzer zur Befragung eingeladen.

11   Eine Auflistung der Ausschöpfungsquoten nach unterschiedlich definierten Subgruppen ist bei Skopek (2010) zu finden.

Operationalisierung der abhängigen und unabhängigen Variablen

In der Online-Befragung wurden Nutzer zu ihren subjektiven Wahrnehmungen und Interpretationen, nach individuellen Lebenslaufereignissen, zu Bedingungen außerhalb der Online-Kontaktbörse sowie zur unwahren Selbstdarstellung befragt. Die Frage nach der eigenen unwahren Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil war wie folgt formuliert: „Manche Nutzer möchten ihre Chancen verbessern, indem sie in ihren Profilangaben etwas mogeln. Stellst du dich in deinem Profil auch manchmal anders dar, als du eigentlich bist bezüglich …".[12] Danach wurden verschiedene Angaben, die Nutzer in ihrem Profil über sich preisgeben können, aufgelistet wie beispielsweise Alter, Größe, Gewicht, Kinderzahl und Bildung. Die Befragten konnten jede dieser Angaben mit „ja" oder „nein" beantworten. Unsere abhängigen Variablen für die nachfolgenden Analysen sind die (selbstberichteten) unwahren Auskünfte über die eigene Person im Nutzerprofil im Bildungsniveau sowie in den Größen- und Gewichtsangaben. Die Größen- und Gewichtsangaben verwenden wir als Indikator für die physische Attraktivität der Nutzer. Zum einen folgen wir damit anderen Untersuchungen (vgl. z.B. Franzen/Hartmann 2001; Lynn/Shurgot 1984; Skopek 2011; Tovée et al. 1998, 1999, 2002). Zum anderen sind die Nutzerprofile im Vergleich zu den zur Verfügung stehenden Informationen im nicht-virtuellen Alltag wesentlich weniger reichhaltig. Es ist anzunehmen, dass dann aber gerade diese wenigen Angaben, die zur Verfügung stehen, beispielsweise zur physischen Attraktivität des Gegenübers – wie sie in Größen- und Gewichtsangaben neben eventuell zur Verfügung gestellten Fotografien zum Ausdruck kommen – zur Beurteilung des Gegenübers sehr wichtig werden.

Für die Analysen der unwahren Selbstdarstellung verwenden wir Selbstauskünfte der Befragten. Es ist generell schwierig, Täuschungen in sozialen Interaktionen empirisch zu erfassen (vgl. z.B. Hettlage 2003; Lenz 2003; Schmid 2003). Besonders schwierig zu erfassen sind dabei Täuschungen, auf die Akteure selbst zurückgreifen wie beispielsweise eine unwahre Darstellung der eigenen Person gegenüber Anderen. In Bezug auf die hier verwendeten Befragungsdaten ist mit dem Problem sozialer Erwünschtheit zu rechnen (vgl. z.B. Diekmann 2008: 447ff.). Insofern ist anzunehmen, dass der Umfang unwahrer Selbstdarstellung der Akteure auf dem Online-Partnermarkt unterschätzt wird. Neben dieser Einschränkung haben die für unsere Analyse verwendeten Befragungsdaten aber einen entscheidenden Vorteil: Befragungsdaten vermögen es, die *Intention* der Akteure abzubilden. Denn erst das intentionale und damit bewusste Senden falscher und selektiver Informationen trennt die Täuschung vom Irrtum (Goffman 1980: 98; Simmel 1992, orig. 1908: 388).[13]

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12   Wir haben die Nutzer in der Befragung mit „du" anstelle von „Sie" angesprochen und uns damit dem Sprachgebrauch auf der Plattform angepasst.

13   „Nicht, dass der Belogene über die *Sache* eine falsche Vorstellung hat, erschöpft das spezifische Wesen der Lüge – das teilt sie mit dem einfachen Irrtum; sondern daß er über die innere Meinung der *lügenden Person* in Täuschung erhalten wird." (Simmel 1992, orig. 1908: 388). Damit geht es bei der Täuschung nicht einfach um die Diskrepanz zwischen Darstellung und Wirklichkeit. Die objektive Wahrheit ist damit nicht entscheidend; zum Maßstab wird vielmehr die subjektive Unwahrheit (Hettlage 2003: 12; Schmid 2003: 53; Lenz 2003: 66). Wenn ein Akteur beispielsweise eine falsche Angabe zu seiner Körpergröße macht, dann wird diese Falschangabe erst dann zur Täuschung, wenn er sich dessen bewusst ist und damit absichtlich bei Anderen einen falschen Eindruck erwecken möchte. Ist sich der Akteur über die Abweichung nicht bewusst, kann nur von einem Irrtum gesprochen werden.

Als unabhängige Variablen für unsere Analysen verwenden wir das erfragte Bildungsniveau, die Körpergröße, das Körpergewicht, das Alter und den Beziehungswunsch des Nutzers. Diese Variablen wurden wie folgt gebildet:

Bildungsniveau. Zur Operationalisierung der Bildungsressourcen des Nutzers verwenden wir in Anlehnung an Blossfeld und Timm (1997, 2003) drei Abstufungen, die aus den Angaben der Befragten zu ihrem Bildungsabschluss und Ausbildungsabschluss zusammenfasst wurden. Wir erhalten damit die folgende hierarchische Abstufung: In der Kategorie „niedriges Bildungsniveau" sind (1) Personen ohne Schulabschluss, (2) Personen mit Hauptschulabschluss ohne berufliche Ausbildung und (3) Personen mit mittlerer Reife ohne berufliche Ausbildung enthalten. In der Kategorie „mittleres Bildungsniveau" sind (1) Personen mit einem Hauptschulabschluss in Kombination mit einem beruflichem Ausbildungsabschluss, (2) Personen mit mittlerer Reife und einem beruflichem Ausbildungsabschluss, (3) Personen mit Abitur ohne beruflichen Ausbildungsabschluss und (4) Personen mit Abitur und beruflichem Ausbildungsabschluss enthalten. Schließlich sind in der Kategorie „hohes Bildungsniveau" Personen enthalten, die (1) einen Fachhochschulabschluss, (2) einen Hochschulabschluss oder (3) eine Promotion als formalen Bildungstitel besitzen. Mithilfe dieser Bildungsklassifikation können die damit verbundenen individuellen Arbeitsmarkt-, Einkommens- und Karrierechancen adäquat abgebildet werden (vgl. Blossfeld/Timm 1997: 443).

Körpergröße und -gewicht. Da uns keine Informationen über die im Nutzerprofil zur Verfügung gestellten Fotografien vorliegen, verwenden wir zur Operationalisierung der physischen Attraktivität die Angaben der Befragten zu ihrer Körpergröße (in Zentimetern) und ihrem Körpergewicht (in Kilogramm). Im Modell zur Erklärung der unwahren Selbstdarstellung des Bildungsniveaus verwenden wir die Größen- und Gewichtsangaben in Relation zueinander in Form des Body Mass Index (BMI). Die Körpergröße nehmen wir in diesem Modell als zusätzliche Variable auf, da die bisherige Forschung gezeigt hat, dass sie ein vom BMI unabhängiges und relevantes Merkmal für die Partnerwahlentscheidung von Frauen zu sein scheint (vgl. z.B. Skopek 2011; Shepperd/Strathman 1989; Gillis/Avis 1980). In den Modellen zur Erklärung der unwahren Selbstdarstellung der Größe und des Gewichts werden Größen- und Gewichtsangaben einzeln in die Modelle aufgenommen.

Alter. Das Alter der Nutzer (in Jahren) wird aus den Angaben zu Geburtsmonat und -jahr sowie dem Befragungszeitpunkt berechnet.

Beziehungswunsch. Als zusätzliche, ressourcenunabhängige Variable verwenden wir in unseren Analysen die Angabe des Befragten, inwiefern er auf der Suche nach einer festen Beziehung ist. Diese Angabe konnte auf einer fünfstufigen Skala von 1 „trifft überhaupt nicht zu" bis 5 „trifft voll und ganz zu" beantwortet werden.[14] Diese Variable fügen wir

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14 In unseren Analysen verwenden wir diese Angabe als 0/1-kodierte Variable. Der Wert 1 (gebildet aus den Werten 4 und 5 der ursprünglichen Skala) zeigt an, dass der Befragte auf der Suche nach einer festen Beziehung ist; der Wert 0 (gebildet aus den Werten 1 bis 3 der ursprünglichen Skala) entsprechend, dass der Befragte tendenziell nicht auf der Suche nach einer festen Beziehung ist.

aufgrund unserer theoretischen Überlegungen ein. Darin haben wir argumentiert, dass die Absicht, einen potenziellen Partner auch persönlich zu treffen mit dem letztlichen Ziel der Etablierung einer längerfristigen Beziehung, wesentliche Auswirkungen darauf haben kann, inwiefern auf Unwahrheiten im Nutzerprofil zurückgegriffen wird.

4. Ergebnisse

Deskriptive Ergebnisse zur Verbreitung unwahrer Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil
Unsere erste Fragestellung betrifft die Verbreitung unwahrer Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil auf Online-Kontaktbörsen. Tabelle 1 zeigt die Angaben der Befragten zur unwahren Selbstdarstellung im eigenen Nutzerprofil entlang zentraler Merkmale.

Tabelle 1:   Unwahre Selbstdarstellung im eigenen Nutzerprofil (in Prozent)

Unwahre Selbstdarstellung	Gesamt	Männer	Frauen	N_1	N_2	Phi
Irgendeines Merkmals	26,9	27,3	26,1	538	2.002	–
Größe	6,5	7,8	4,3	130	1.997**	0,068
Alter	10,3	11,8	7,6	205	1.997**	0,065
Gewicht	15,0	14,2	16,3	299	2.000	–
Gesuchte Beziehung	8,3	9,9	5,5	165	1.994***	0,076
Familienstand	6,7	7,7	4,8	133	1.997*	0,055
Kinderzahl	5,0	5,7	3,7	100	1.993*	0,044
Bildung	6,2	7,1	4,7	124	1.992*	0,047
Foto	7,3	8,1	6,0	146	1.991+	0,039
Geschlecht	5,2	6,0	3,9	104	1.991*	0,045
Anderes Merkmal	5,5	6,7	3,5	110	1.989**	0,068

Signifikanz: [+] 0,1; * $p \leq 0,05$; ** $p \leq 0,01$; *** $p \leq 0,001$. *Quelle:* Online-Befragung von Nutzern einer großen deutschen Online-Kontaktbörse; N=2.113; eigene Berechnungen. *Anmerkung:* N_1 gibt die Anzahl der Nutzer wieder, die auf die Frage nach der eigenen unwahren Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil in der ausgewählten Merkmalsdimension mit „ja" antworteten. N_2 gibt die Anzahl der Nutzer wieder, die die Frage überhaupt (mit „ja" oder „nein") beantwortet haben.

Insgesamt gibt die Mehrheit der Befragten an, in ihrem Nutzerprofil ehrliche Angaben über die eigene Person zu machen. Lediglich ein Viertel (27 Prozent) der Nutzer gibt an, sich in einem oder mehreren Merkmalen schon unwahr dargestellt zu haben. Zwar ist davon auszugehen, dass einige Nutzer aufgrund der wahrgenommenen sozialen Erwünschtheit nicht zugaben, auf Unwahrheiten zurückgegriffen zu haben. Dennoch kann unsere deskriptive Analyse das *Mindestmaß* an strategischer Täuschung quantifizieren. Auf Grundlage der selbstberichteten Auskünfte zu Unwahrheiten im Nutzerprofil scheint das eingangs angesprochene Vertrauensproblem zwischen Sender und Empfänger von Informationen kein beträchtliches Ausmaß zu haben. Insofern die Teilnahme an der Befragung und deren Beantwortung nicht selektiv sind, können wir zudem Aussagen über die *Struktur* der eingeräumten Unwahrheiten treffen.

Hinsichtlich des Bildungsniveaus werden vergleichsweise selten unwahre Angaben gemacht. Es sind jedoch mehr Männer (7 Prozent) als Frauen (5 Prozent), die angeben, in ihrem Bildungsniveau schon falsche Angaben im Nutzerprofil bereitgestellt zu haben. Dieser Unterschied ist statistisch signifikant, was die in unseren theoretischen Überlegun-

gen diskutierte Relevanz des Bildungsniveaus als Statusressource insbesondere für Män-
ner bestätigt. In den Größenangaben sind es ebenfalls mehr Männer als Frauen, die im
Nutzerprofil auf Unwahrheiten zurückgreifen. Auch diesen Zusammenhang haben wir in
unseren theoretischen Überlegungen vermutet. Bei den Angaben zum Gewicht wird – re-
lativ zu den anderen Merkmalen – recht häufig die Unwahrheit angegeben. Hier sind es
mit 16 Prozent mehr Frauen als Männer (14 Prozent), die diesbezüglich in ihrem Nutzer-
profil schon einmal nicht ehrlich waren. Dieser Zusammenhang unterstützt unsere An-
nahmen, allerdings ist er in unserer Analysestichprobe statistisch nicht signifikant. Die
vergleichsweise hohe Anzahl an „positiven" Antworten in den Gewichts- und Altersanga-
ben (mit 15 bzw. 10 Prozent) könnte darauf hindeuten, dass Unwahrheiten in diesen An-
gaben, als vergleichsweise legitim wahrgenommen werden (vgl. Toma et al. 2008: 1031).
Zum anderen könnte das auch darauf hindeuten, das Unwahrheiten in „metrischen Variab-
len" wie den Alters-, Gewichts- und Größenangaben durch die Möglichkeit einer sehr fei-
nen Abstufung leichter umzusetzen sind als Falschangaben in kategorialen Merkmalen
und dadurch von einigen Akteuren als sehr erfolgsversprechend wahrgenommen werden.
Schließlich sind sie in einem späteren persönlichen Treffen recht schwierig zu entlarven.
Ob jemand beispielsweise fünf Kilogramm weniger angegeben hat als er tatsächlich
wiegt, dürfte auch in einer persönlichen Begegnung nur schwer feststellbar sein. Wenn
aber die Wahrscheinlichkeit der Entdeckung der Unwahrheit sinkt, sollte ein rationaler
Akteur den Nutzen der Unwahrheit höher einstufen; damit steigt gleichzeitig der Erwar-
tungswert der entsprechenden Lüge.

Generell fällt auf, dass sich Männer in allen Merkmalsdimensionen mit Ausnahme
des Gewichts häufiger unwahr darstellen als Frauen. Gerade Männer sind aber auf On-
line-Kontaktbörsen in einer wesentlich verschärfteren Konkurrenzsituation als Frauen,
ganz einfach deshalb, weil üblicherweise immer noch mehr Männer als Frauen Online-
Kontaktbörsen nutzen (vgl. z.B. Brym/Lenton 2001; Schulz et al. 2008; Sautter et al.
2010). In unserer Analysestichprobe kommen auf jede Frau 1,8 Männer. Deshalb müssen
insbesondere Männer auf die Gestaltung ihres Profils Wert legen und unter Umständen
auch auf Unwahrheiten zurückgreifen, um ihre Aufmerksamkeits- und damit Kontakt-
chancen zu steigern und nicht in der Masse potenzieller Partner unterzugehen. Bei den
Frauen hingegen entschärft sich die Konkurrenzsituation. Damit ist es für Frauen eher
möglich auf den Rückgriff auf Unwahrheiten im Nutzerprofil, aber auch in der späteren
Kommunikation, zu verzichten. Wenn es nur wenige Frauen auf diesem Partnermarkt
gibt, dann werden auch vermeintlich weniger attraktive Frauen zu begehrenswerten Al-
ternativen, und zwar nur deshalb, weil sie rar sind. Es bestätigt sich aber die erwartete
Struktur der eingeräumten Unwahrheiten in der Profildarstellung bei den befragten Frau-
en. Frauen greifen bei Unwahrheiten eher auf solche Merkmale zurück, die mit Jugend
und körperlicher Attraktivität verbunden sind.

Multivariate Analyse der unwahren Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil
Die deskriptiven Analysen haben gezeigt, dass nur ein relativ geringer Anteil der Befragten
berichtet, sich im Nutzerprofil schon unwahr dargestellt zu haben. Zwar liegt uns damit nur
eine geringe Anzahl an „positiven" Antworten vor. Für unsere statistischen Analysen ist
diese Anzahl allerdings ausreichend. In den nachfolgenden multivariaten Analysen tragen
wir dieser geringen Anzahl an „positiven" Antworten dadurch Rechnung, dass wir die kom-

plementäre Log-log-Regression verwenden. Dieses Verfahren eignet sich insbesondere bei sehr schiefen Verteilungen einer dichotomen abhängigen Variablen. Eine Formalisierung des Modells ist zum Beispiel bei Agresti (2002: 248ff.), Powers und Xie (2000: 83f.) und Long (1997: 50ff.) zu finden. Mit diesem Verfahren schätzen wir die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass ein Nutzer bei einer gegebenen Merkmalsausprägung auf Unwahrheiten in der Darstellung seines Bildungsniveaus, seiner Körpergröße oder seines Körpergewichts zurückgreift. In den nachfolgenden Tabellen weisen wir die unstandardisierten Regressionskoeffizienten aus.[15] Zur Testung der Hypothesen legen wir aufgrund der kleineren Fallzahlen und zur Verringerung des β-Fehlers ein Signifikanzniveau von 10 Prozent an.

Geschlechts- und ressourcenspezifische Erklärung von Profiltäuschungen in der Bildung
Unsere Hauptfragestellung lautete, wie die beobachtbaren Muster der unwahren Selbstdarstellung im Nutzerprofil erklärt werden können. Dazu haben wir ausgehend von den theoretischen Überlegungen zur geschlechtsspezifischen Ressourcenausstattung der Akteure prüfbare Hypothesen zur unwahren Selbstdarstellung abgeleitet. Aufgrund der geschlechtsspezifisch formulierten Hypothesen sind die nachfolgenden Modelle zur Erklärung der unwahren Selbstdarstellung in den Merkmalsdimensionen Bildung, Gewicht und Körpergröße getrennt nach Geschlecht dargestellt. Tabelle 2 zeigt die Ergebnisse zur unwahren Selbstdarstellung des Bildungsniveaus im Nutzerprofil von Männern und Frauen.

Die Kompensation von vermeintlichen oder tatsächlichen Nachteilen in einem Merkmal durch den Rückgriff auf Unwahrheiten in eben diesem Merkmal, die wir als spezifische Kompensation bezeichnet haben, testen wir im ersten Schritt. Modell 1 in Tabelle 1 zeigt die Regressionskoeffizienten des kategorisierten Bildungsniveaus. Für Männer zeigt sich ein monotoner Effekt: mit steigendem Bildungsniveau sinkt die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass diese ihr Bildungsniveau im Nutzerprofil unwahr darstellen. Männer mit niedrigem Bildungsniveau haben im Vergleich zu Männern mit mittlerem und hohem Bildungsniveau die höchste Wahrscheinlichkeit, hinsichtlich ihres Bildungsniveaus unehrliche Angaben zu machen. Bei Frauen hingegen zeigt sich ein u-förmiger Bildungseffekt. Sowohl Frauen mit niedrigem als auch mit hohem Bildungsniveau haben im Vergleich zu Frauen mit mittlerem Bildungsniveau eine höhere Wahrscheinlichkeit, ihr Bildungsniveau im Nutzerprofil abweichend von den Tatsachen darzustellen. Dabei ist der Effekt der Frauen mit hoher Bildung besonders augenfällig, widerspricht er doch der intuitiven Annahme, dass hohe Bildung per se die Chancen am Markt erhöht und damit von keinem Akteur unwahr dargestellt werden muss (vgl. auch Schmitz 2010). Geht man allerdings davon aus, dass Männer vor allem Partnerinnen suchen, die ein gleiches oder niedrigeres Bildungsniveau haben als sie selbst (Blossfeld/Timm 2003), dann bedeutet ein hohes Bildungsniveau eine massive Einengung des Partnermarktes. Frauen scheinen deswegen ihre hohe Bildung als Restriktion auf dem Partnermarkt wahrzunehmen. In dieser Kategorie waren, um dies in Erinnerung zu rufen, Personen mit einem (Fach-)Hochschulabschluss oder einer Promotion enthalten. Es ist zu vermuten, dass diese Frauen ihre zusätzlichen Bildungszertifikate eher verschweigen und z.B. auf die Angabe eines Doktortitels verzichten oder anstelle des Hochschulabschlusses lediglich das Abitur als formalen

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15 Die Regressionskoeffizienten werden ebenso wie in der logistischen Regression mithilfe der Maximum-Likelihood-Methode geschätzt und können in ähnlicher Weise interpretiert werden (vgl. Powers/Xie 2000: 84).

Bildungstitel angeben oder aber ganz auf die Angabe ihres Bildungsniveaus im Nutzerprofil verzichten.

Tabelle 2: Ergebnisse der komplementären Log-log-Regression zur unwahren Selbstdarstellung des Bildungsniveaus im Nutzerprofil

	Männer			Frauen		
	M1	M2	M3	M1	M2	M3
	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)
spezifische Kompensation						
niedriges Bildungsniveau	1.08***	0.75*	0.73*	1.17*	0.90	1.19*
	(0.32)	(0.34)	(0.34)	(0.56)	(0.58)	(0.58)
mittleres Bildungsniveau	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.	Ref.
hohes Bildungsniveau	-0.90+	-0.78	-0.80+	0.99*	1.19*	1.27**
	(0.48)	(0.48)	(0.48)	(0.47)	(0.48)	(0.49)
unspezifische Kompensation						
Alter		-0.03*	-0.03*		-0.01	-0.01
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.02)	(0.02)
BMI		-0.05	-0.05		0.07**	0.07**
		(0.03)	(0.04)		(0.02)	(0.02)
Größe		-0.03+	-0.03+		-0.04	-0.05
		(0.02)	(0.02)		(0.03)	(0.03)
ressourcenunabhäng. Variable						
Beziehungswunsch: feste Bez.			-0.55+			-1.77***
			(0.31)			(0.43)
Konstante	-2.96***	-2.92***	-2.48***	-3.75***	-4.25***	-3.23***
	(0.17)	(0.18)	(0.30)	(0.33)	(0.47)	(0.51)
Pseudo-R^2 (NK)	0.05	0.08	0.09	0.04	0.09	0.18
Pseudo-R^2 (MF)	0.04	0.07	0.07	0.03	0.08	0.16
AIC	0.40	0.39	0.39	0.32	0.32	0.30
unwahre Darstellung ja/nein	54/996	54/996	54/996	23/582	23/582	23/582
N	1.050	1.050	1.050	605	605	605

Signifikanz: $^+$ 0,1; * p ≤ 0,05; ** p ≤ 0,01; *** p ≤ 0,001. *Quelle:* Online-Befragung von Nutzern einer deutschsprachigen Online-Kontaktbörse, eigene Berechnungen. *Anmerkung:* Alter, BMI (Body Mass Index) und Größe sind zentriert.

Modell 2 nimmt zusätzlich zum Bildungsniveau weitere Merkmale des Befragten auf, und zwar das Alter, den Body Mass Index und die Körpergröße. Damit möchten wir prüfen, ob die Akteure, unter Kontrolle ihrer Bildung, in Abhängigkeit von weiteren partnermarktrelevanten Merkmalen auf Strategien der Unwahrheit zurückgreifen. Wir prüfen also, ob sich Strategien der unspezifischen Kompensation beobachten lassen. In Modell 3 wird zusätzlich kontrolliert, ob der Befragte auf der Suche nach einer festen Beziehung ist. Im Folgenden wenden wir uns der Interpretation des Modells 3 zu, da sich die Ergebnisse durch Aufnahme der zusätzlichen Variable „fester Beziehungswunsch" nicht wesentlich verändern (Unterschied der Modelle 2 und 3). Der Regressionskoeffizient der hohen Bildung bei Männern und der Koeffizient der niedrigen Bildung bei Frauen verfehlt in Modell 2 nur sehr knapp die Signifikanzgrenze von 10 Prozent und wird deshalb nicht inhaltlich interpretiert. Mit steigendem Alter der Männer verringert sich, bei Konstanthaltung des Bildungsniveaus, die Wahrscheinlichkeit in den Bildungsangaben im Nutzer-

profil unehrlich zu sein. Von zwei Männern, die beide ein mittleres Bildungsniveau haben, hat also der ältere der beiden Männer eine geringere Wahrscheinlichkeit auf Unwahrheiten in seinem Bildungsniveau zurückzugreifen. Das Alter der Männer kann dabei als statusrelevante Ressource interpretiert werden, denn neben Bildungszertifikaten bestimmt auch das Alter des Mannes dessen Einkommenspotenzial (Oppenheimer 1988). Unter Bedingungen des traditionellen Modells des männlichen Ernährers werden Frauen daher stärker ältere Männer (bis zu einer gewissen Grenze) als jüngere Männer bevorzugen. Indem Männer diese Erwartung der Frauen an potenzielle Partner vorweg nehmen, kann das Auswirkungen auf ihre Neigung haben, auf Unwahrheiten in ihrer Selbstdarstellung zurückzugreifen.

Der Body Mass Index zeigt bei Männern, wie theoretisch erwartet, keinen signifikanten Einfluss, wohl aber die Körpergröße. Je größer ein Mann ist, desto geringer ist die Wahrscheinlichkeit, dass er sein Bildungsniveau den Tatsachen nicht entsprechend darstellt. Dieser Befund erhärtet unsere Annahme, dass die Akteure am Partnermarkt Stärken in einem Merkmal dazu nutzen, um vermeintliche oder tatsächliche Schwächen in einem anderen Merkmal auszugleichen. Gleichzeitig heißt das aber auch, dass eine geringe Körpergröße bei Männern, unter Kontrolle des Bildungsniveaus, die Wahrscheinlichkeit erhöht, in den Bildungsangaben zu lügen. Kleine Männer neigen im Vergleich zu großen Männern eher dazu, in ihrem Bildungsabschluss zu täuschen. Sie sind eher dazu gezwungen, ihre Aufmerksamkeits- und Kontaktchancen auch durch Unwahrheit hinsichtlich ihrer Bildung zu erhöhen, jedoch letztlich mit dem Risiko geringerer Tauschchancen in Form einer sich verfestigenden Beziehung. Damit greifen Akteure auch auf Unwahrheiten zurück, die nicht zwingend eine direkte Kompensation ihrer Merkmalsschwächen zum Gegenstand haben müssen. Es ist aber davon auszugehen, dass – um bei diesem Beispiel zu bleiben – ein sehr kleiner Mann auch auf Unwahrheiten in den Größenangaben und damit zusätzlich auf eine spezifische Kompensation dieser Merkmalsschwäche zurückgreift. Mit dem Alter und der Größe des Mannes haben wir damit für die Strategie der unspezifischen Kompensation zwei Beispiele aufgezeigt.

In Modell 3 der Frauen hat der Body Mass Index einen signifikant positiven Effekt auf die Wahrscheinlichkeit hinsichtlich des Bildungsabschlusses die Unwahrheit anzugeben. Körperlich attraktivere Frauen weisen also eine geringere Wahrscheinlichkeit auf, die Unwahrheit in ihrem Bildungsniveau anzugeben. Während Männer Nachteile in ihrem Bildungsniveau durch ihre Körpergröße und das Alter auszugleichen versuchen, ist bei Frauen die körperliche Attraktivität ein strategischer Ansatzpunkt, um vermeintliche oder tatsächliche Schwächen im Bildungsniveau zu kompensieren.

Schließlich bleibt noch die Interpretation des Effekts des Beziehungswunsches. Es zeigt sich, dass sowohl Männer als auch Frauen, die auf der Suche nach einer festen Beziehung sind, weniger dazu neigen, auf Unwahrheiten in ihrem Bildungsniveau zurückzugreifen.

Geschlechts- und ressourcenspezifische Erklärung von Profiltäuschungen der körperlichen Attraktivität

Tabelle 3:   Ergebnisse der komplementären Log-log-Regression zur unwahren
Selbstdarstellung des Gewichts im Nutzerprofil

	Männer			**Frauen**		
	M1	M2	M3	M1	M2	M3
	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)
spezifische Kompensation						
Gewicht	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***	0.03***
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.01)
unspezifische Kompensation						
Größe		-0.01	-0.01		-0.02	-0.02
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.02)	(0.02)
Alter		-0.02*	-0.02*		-0.00	-0.00
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.01)	(0.01)
niedriges Bildungsniveau		0.79**	0.78**		0.34	0.36
		(0.27)	(0.27)		(0.32)	(0.32)
mittleres Bildungsniveau		Ref.	Ref.		Ref.	Ref.
hohes Bildungsniveau		0.12	0.12		0.85***	0.85***
		(0.22)	(0.22)		(0.24)	(0.24)
ressourcenunabhäng. Variable						
Beziehungswunsch: feste Bez.			-0.18			-0.38
			(0.22)			(0.26)
Konstante	-2.29***	-2.39***	-2.24***	-1.77***	-2.17***	-1.87***
	(0.10)	(0.14)	(0.23)	(0.11)	(0.20)	(0.28)
Pseudo-R² (NK)	0.06	0.09	0.09	0.08	0.11	0.12
Pseudo-R² (MF)	0.04	0.07	0.07	0.05	0.08	0.08
AIC	0.69	0.68	0.68	0.81	0.81	0.81
unwahre Darstellung ja/nein	122/931	122/931	122/931	92/515	92/515	92/515
N	1.053	1.053	1.053	607	607	607

Signifikanz: $^{+}$ 0,1; * p ≤ 0,05; ** p ≤ 0,01; *** p ≤ 0,001. *Quelle:* Online-Befragung von Nutzern einer deutschsprachigen Online-Kontaktbörse, eigene Berechnungen. *Anmerkung:* Gewicht, Größe und Alter sind zentriert.

Tabelle 3 enthält analog zu Tabelle 2 die Regressionsergebnisse zur unwahren Darstellung des Körpergewichts im Nutzerprofil. Sowohl Männer als auch Frauen weisen mit steigendem Gewicht eine höhere Wahrscheinlichkeit auf, in ihren Gewichtsangaben unehrlich zu sein. Vergleicht man die hier nicht dargestellten Konstanten des Nullmodells, zeigt sich, dass Frauen mit 15 Prozent im Vergleich zu Männern (12 Prozent) eine höhere Ausgangswahrscheinlichkeit haben, in ihrem Gewicht die Unwahrheit anzugeben. Dieses Ergebnis war bereits aus der deskriptiven Analyse in Tabelle 1 bekannt. Das Alter der Männer hat einen signifikant negativen Effekt. Unter Kontrolle des Körpergewichts haben wiederum jeweils ältere Männer eine geringere Wahrscheinlichkeit, in den Angaben zu ihrem Körpergewicht unehrlich zu sein. Bezüglich des Bildungsniveaus zeigt sich, dass niedrig gebildete Männer im Vergleich zu Männern mit mittlerem und hohem Bildungsniveau eine erhöhte Neigung haben, auf Unwahrheiten im Gewicht zurückzugreifen. Bei Frauen zeigt sich ein umgekehrter Bildungseffekt. Hier sind es die hoch gebildete Frauen, die im Vergleich zu Frauen mit mittlerem und niedrigem Bildungsniveau, unter Konstant-

haltung des Gewichts, eine erhöhte Wahrscheinlichkeit haben, auf Unwahrheiten hinsicht-lich des Gewichts zurückzugreifen. Für beide Geschlechter zeigt sich wieder ein negativer Effekt des Beziehungswunsches, der allerdings nicht signifikant ist.

Tabelle 4: Ergebnisse der komplementären Log-log-Regression zur unwahren Selbstdarstellung der Größe im Nutzerprofil

	Männer			**Frauen**		
	M1	M2	M3	M1	M2	M3
	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)	b/(se)
spezifische Kompensation						
Größe	-0.08***	-0.08***	-0.08***	-0.02	-0.04	-0.05
	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.02)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
unspezifische Kompensation						
Gewicht		0.00	-0.00		0.02+	0.02*
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.01)	(0.01)
Alter		-0.02+	-0.02+		-0.02	-0.02
		(0.01)	(0.01)		(0.02)	(0.02)
niedriges Bildungsniveau		1.12***	1.09**		-0.35	-0.09
		(0.34)	(0.34)		(1.10)	(1.10)
mittleres Bildungsniveau		Ref.	Ref.		Ref.	Ref.
hohes Bildungsniveau		-0.36	-0.40		1.78***	1.84***
		(0.45)	(0.45)		(0.52)	(0.53)
ressourcenunabhäng. Variable						
Beziehungswunsch: feste Bez.			-1.09***			-1.92***
			(0.30)			(0.48)
Konstante	-2.85***	-3.01***	-2.20***	-3.62***	-4.45***	-3.32***
	(0.14)	(0.19)	(0.27)	(0.38)	(0.53)	(0.58)
Pseudo-R^2 (NK)	0.05	0.11	0.14	0.00	0.10	0.21
Pseudo-R^2 (MF)	0.04	0.09	0.12	0.00	0.09	0.19
AIC	0.36	0.35	0.35	0.27	0.26	0.25
unwahre Darstellung ja/nein	49/1.033	49/1.033	49/1.033	18/587	18/587	18/587
N	1.052	1.052	1.052	605	605	605

Signifikanz: $^+$ 0,1; * p ≤ 0,05; ** p ≤ 0,01; *** p ≤ 0,001. *Quelle:* Online-Befragung von Nutzern einer deutschsprachigen Online-Kontaktbörse, eigene Berechnungen. *Anmerkung:* Größe, Gewicht und Alter sind zentriert.

Abschließend zeigt Tabelle 4 die Regressionsergebnisse für die unwahre Selbstdarstel-lung der Körpergröße. Je größer ein Mann ist, umso geringer ist die Wahrscheinlichkeit, seine Körpergröße im Nutzerprofil unwahr darzustellen. Dieser Befund ist anschlussfähig an die Überlegungen zum Stellenwert männlicher Körpergröße auf dem Partnermarkt. Das Alter der Männer und der Beziehungswunsch zeigen wieder einen signifikant negati-ven Effekt. Weiterhin haben Männer mit niedrigem Bildungsniveau im Vergleich zu Männern mit mittlerem und hohem Bildungsniveau eine erhöhte Neigung, in ihrer Köper-größe unehrlich zu sein.

Bei Frauen zeigt sich, wie erwartet, kein signifikanter Effekt ihrer Körpergröße auf die Wahrscheinlichkeit, in diesem Merkmal unwahre Informationen bereitzustellen. Be-merkenswert ist der signifikant positive Effekt des Gewichts bei Frauen. Frauen scheinen nur dann unehrliche Angaben hinsichtlich ihrer Körpergröße zu machen, wenn sie etwas mehr Gewicht haben. Wenn Frauen also unehrliche Größenangaben machen, dann geht es

in erster Linie nicht um ihre Körpergröße, sondern sie scheinen diese Angaben zu nutzen, um ein erhöhtes Gewicht in Relation zur Körpergröße besser kaschieren zu können. Dabei greifen Frauen, wenn ihnen das notwendig erscheint, auf eine Beschönigung ihres Gewichts zurück (vgl. Tabelle 3). Da aber diese spezifische Kompensation recht bald an die Grenzen der legitimen Optimierung stößt, zumindest wenn dem potenziellen Partner ein einigermaßen realistisches Bild vermittelt werden soll, greifen Frauen, um dies zusätzlich zu kompensieren, vermutlich auch auf Unwahrheiten in der Körpergröße und damit auf eine unspezifische Kompensation zurück. Und so ist es möglich, mit kleineren Unwahrheiten an verschiedenen Stellen die Gesamtattraktivität – also den Partnerwert – zu verbessern, ohne zu sehr von den Tatsachen abweichen zu müssen. Weiterhin zeigen sich wieder ein signifikant positiver Effekt des hohen Bildungsniveaus und ein signifikant negativer Effekt des Beziehungswunsches.

Zum Effekt des Beziehungswunsches ließen unsere theoretischen Überlegungen erwarten, dass die Nutzer der Kontaktbörse umso weniger auf Mittel der Täuschung zurückgreifen sollten, je fester ihr Beziehungswunsch ist. Dieser Befund zeigt sich auch: Über alle Modelle und beide Geschlechter hinweg ist die Wahrscheinlichkeit zu täuschen für diejenigen Akteure geringer, die einen Partner für eine festen Beziehung suchen. Allerdings ist dieser Befund hinsichtlich des Körpergewichts für beide Geschlechter nicht signifikant. Wir interpretieren diesen Effekt wie folgt: Das Bildungsniveau und die Körpergröße können als relativ stabile Merkmale wahrgenommen werden, weshalb die Partnersuchenden womöglich davon ausgehen, dass sie hinsichtlich dieser Merkmale nicht täuschen sollten. Bei einem festen Beziehungswunsch investieren Männer und Frauen deshalb weniger in ihre Aufmerksamkeitschancen durch die Optimierung dieser Merkmale in ihrem Profil. Demgegenüber ist das Körpergewicht ein Merkmal, das stärker beeinflussbar ist. Die Partnersuchenden könnten darauf spekulieren, dieses Merkmal bis zu einem realen Treffen mit dem potenziellen Partner tatsächlich noch etwas zu optimieren. Außerdem scheinen Beschönigungen im Gewicht vergleichsweise legitim zu sein (vgl. Toma et al. 2008); sie sind zudem – durch die recht feinen Optimierungsmöglichkeiten – bei einem späteren persönlichen Treffen relativ schwierig zu entdecken. Wenn aber die Entdeckungswahrscheinlichkeit der Unwahrheit recht gering scheint, wird die Optimierung im Profil und damit die Investition in die Aufmerksamkeits- und Kontaktchancen umso lohnender.

5. Zusammenfassung und Diskussion

Das Ziel dieses Beitrags war die Untersuchung von Mustern unwahrer Selbstdarstellung auf Online-Kontaktbörsen. Dieser Beitrag grenzt sich dabei insofern von bisherigen Untersuchungen ab, die den Rückgriff auf Unwahrheiten und Täuschungen vorwiegend durch Persönlichkeitseigenschaften der Individuen erklärt haben (vgl. z.B. Hall et al. 2010; Phillips et al. 2011), als diese Untersuchung die relationale Position der Akteure am Partnermarkt berücksichtigt. Die Berücksichtigung der Position am Partnermarkt weist auf die Bedeutung der geschlechtsspezifischen Ressourcenausstattung der Akteure *und* der spezifischen Spielregeln am Partnermarkt hin. Die allgemeine Situation am digitalen Partnermarkt zeichnet sich durch eine hohe Konkurrenz um Aufmerksamkeits- und Kon-

taktchancen aus: Alle Akteure sind dazu veranlasst, sich möglichst attraktiv und interessant zu präsentieren, um von potenziellen Partnern angeschrieben zu werden oder eine Antwort auf eine Kontaktofferte zu erhalten. Diejenigen Akteure, die jedoch relativ schlecht mit partnermarktrelevanten Ressourcen ausgestattet sind und damit eine relativ schlechte Position am Partnermarkt innehaben, müssen am ehesten auf Strategien der Unwahrheit zurückgreifen, um ihre Aufmerksamkeits- und Kontaktchancen zu erhöhen. Die theoretische Diskussion um die am Partnermarkt geltenden Konventionen im Hinblick auf die Quantität und Qualität der Unwahrheit hat uns dabei zur Annahme zweier Kompensationsstrategien geführt. Da anzunehmen ist, dass Akteure um die am Partnermarkt geltenden Konventionen wissen, scheint eine naheliegende Strategie zu sein – wenn schon auf Unwahrheiten zurückgegriffen werden muss – in verschiedenen Merkmalen im *konventionell akzeptablen* Maß, also überall nur im geringen Umfang zu täuschen und damit nie allzu sehr von den Tatsachen in einzelnen Merkmalen abzuweichen. Da jedoch einige Nutzer durch eine spezifische Unwahrheit im konventionell üblichen Maß ihren niedrigen Partnerwert und damit ihre geringen Aufmerksamkeitschancen nicht hinreichend kompensieren können, greifen diese auch auf unspezifische Kompensationen zurück. Diese Strategie, sich lediglich in kleinen Ausmaßen der Unwahrheit zu bedienen, scheint damit ein Ausweg aus dem Dilemma zu sein, sowohl die eigenen Aufmerksamkeits- und Kontaktchancen in der Masse potenzieller Partner zu erhöhen, ohne dabei auf der anderen Seite zu sehr die Chancen auf das letztliche Ziel der Etablierung einer Paarbeziehung zu verringern. Während der Mechanismus der spezifischen Kompensation, also der Unwahrheit dort wo der Nachteil vorliegt, bereits in anderen Untersuchungen zur strategischen Selbstdarstellung am Beispiel des Online-Datings nachgewiesen werden konnte (vgl. Hancock et al. 2007; Toma et al. 2008; Toma/Hancock 2010), ist die Berücksichtigung der relationalen Position der Akteure am Partnermarkt und der daraus abgeleiteten Idee der unspezifischen Kompensation als zusätzliche Ausgleichsstrategie unseres Wissens bislang nicht theoretisch konzipiert und empirisch untersucht worden.

Insgesamt zeigen unsere empirischen Analysen, dass der Rückgriff auf Unwahrheiten sowohl mit dem Geschlecht als auch mit der Ressourcenausstattung der Akteure variiert. Es sind gemäß unseren Erwartungen nicht alle Akteure, die die besonderen Kontextbedingungen auf Online-Kontaktbörsen nutzen, um sich unwahr darzustellen, sondern Akteure, die vermeintliche oder tatsächliche Nachteile in Merkmalen aufweisen von denen sie annehmen, dass das Gegengeschlecht diese an potenziellen Partnern wertschätzt. Unsere Analysen sind deshalb zugleich ein Hinweis darauf, welche Vorstellungen in den Köpfen von Frauen und Männern darüber bestehen, welche Erwartungen das andere Geschlecht an einen potenziellen Partner hat. Die Analysen haben gezeigt, dass aus Sicht der Männer Frauen vor allem statusrelevante Eigenschaften, wie sie im Bildungsniveau und Alter hervortreten, an potenziellen Partnern wertschätzen. Auch die Körpergröße des Mannes ist – zumindest in der Annahme der Männer – ein relevantes Auswahlkriterium der Frauen. Umgangssprachlich formuliert sind „Lügner" hinsichtlich dieser Merkmalsdimension eher Männer, die kurze Beine haben. Aus Sicht der Frauen legen Männer vor allem auf Merkmale der physischen Erscheinung bei potenziellen Partnerinnen Wert. Auffällig ist dabei vor allem der über alle Modelle hinweg signifikante Effekt hoher Bildungsressourcen bei Frauen, der darauf hindeutet, dass Frauen die Erwartung haben, dass eine hohe Bildung – zumindest im Kontext der Partnerwahl – für sie nachteilig sein kann.

Unsere Analysen zeigen, dass traditionelle Geschlechterrollen immer noch in den Köpfen von Männern und Frauen verankert zu sein und als Orientierung zu dienen scheinen.

Unsere empirischen Analysen zu Unwahrheiten im Bildungsniveau und in Merkmalen der physischen Attraktivität haben exemplarischen Charakter und können ebenso auf andere Bereiche, wie Unwahrheit im Beziehungswunsch und Unwahrheit bezüglich des Lebensalters erweitert werden. Täuschungen im Prozess der Paarbildung stellen zudem alltägliche Handlungen dar. So ist es schwer vorstellbar, dass Menschen eine Paarbeziehung mit einer Strategie der schonungslosen Offenheit zu realisieren vermögen (vgl. z.B. die Studie von Kaufmann 2004). Unwahrheiten können also – solange sie ein akzeptables Maß nicht überschreiten – sehr funktional sein. Weitere Untersuchungen müssten zeigen, ob und wie die beschriebenen Mechanismen und Strategien auch außerhalb des Internets in herkömmlichen Begegnungskontexten handlungswirksam werden.

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Anhang

Tabelle A.1: Beschreibung der Analysestichprobe (Spaltenprozente bzw. Mittelwerte)

	Männer	Frauen	Gesamt	N
Geschlecht				
männlich	–	–	63,89	1.350
weiblich	–	–	36,11	763
keine Angabe	–	–	–	–
Durchschnittsalter (SD)	40,29 (12,31)	42,34 (12,43)	41,03 (12,39)	2.107
Alter				
unter 20 Jahre	2,15	2,36	2,22	47
20 – 29 Jahre	20,96	17,96	19,88	420
30 – 39 Jahre	24,81	19,00	22,72	480
40 – 49 Jahre	27,63	29,75	28,40	600
50 – 59 Jahre	17,56	22,94	19,50	412
60 – 69 Jahre	5,63	7,08	6,15	130
70 – 79 Jahre	0,96	0,66	0,85	18
80 Jahre und älter	–	–	–	–
keine Angabe	0,30	0,26	0,28	6
Bildungsniveau				
noch Schüler	1,11	0,39	0,85	18
keinen Schulabschluss	3,48	2,88	3,27	69
Haupt-/(Volks-)schulabschluss	23,48	14,68	20,30	429
Mittlere Reife	24,67	34,47	28,21	596
Fachhochschulreife	12,81	11,93	12,49	264
Abitur	17,63	20,45	18,65	394
anderer Schulabschluss	1,11	0,26	0,80	17
keine Angabe	15,70	14,94	15,43	326

	Männer	Frauen	Gesamt	N
Ausbildungsniveau				
noch in Ausbildung	3,48	4,06	3,69	78
keinen Ausbildungsabschluss	7,26	8,78	7,81	165
beruflicher Ausbildungsabschluss	52,37	49,02	51,16	1.081
Fachhochschulabschluss	9,56	11,14	10,13	214
Hochschulabschluss	9,33	10,09	9,61	203
Promotion	1,33	1,18	1,28	27
anderer beruflicher Abschluss	0,30	0,66	0,43	9
keine Angabe	16,37	15,07	15,90	336
Kombination Bildung & Ausbildung				
niedrig (ohne Schulab., HSO, MRO)	7,70	9,17	8,23	174
mittel (HSM, MRM, ABIO, ABIM)	55,04	51,77	53,86	1.138
hoch (FH, UNI, Promotion)	18,37	20,31	19,07	403
keine Angabe	18,89	18,74	18,84	398
Familienstand				
ledig	60,15	40,10	52,91	1.118
verheiratet	3,70	0,66	2,60	55
verheiratet, aber getrennt lebend	10,37	11,40	10,74	227
geschieden	23,04	40,63	29,39	621
verwitwet	2,74	7,21	4,35	92
keine Angabe	–	–	–	–
Paarbeziehung				
ohne Paarbeziehung	89,78	92,53	90,77	1.918
mit Paarbeziehung (ohne Ehe)	6,52	6,82	6,63	140
Ehe	3,70	0,66	2,60	55
keine Angabe	–	–	–	–
Kinder				
Kinder vorhanden	37,48	63,56	46,90	991
kinderlos	62,52	36,44	53,10	1.122
keine Angabe	–	–	–	–
Beziehungswunsch: feste Beziehung				
trifft nicht zu	7,56	4,85	6,58	139
teils/teils	10,74	13,24	11,64	246
trifft zu	75,85	78,24	76,72	1.621
keine Angabe	5,85	3,67	5,06	107
Durchschnittsgröße in cm (SD)	179,21 (7,56)	167,30 (6,57)	174,89 (9,21)	1.917
Durchschnittsgewicht in kg (SD)	82,61 (16,00)	74,31 (17,65)	79,62 (17,08)	1.909
Durchschnittlicher Body Mass Index (SD)	25,66 (4,46)	26,53 (6,13)	25,98 (5,14)	1.908

Anmerkungen: ohne Schulab. = ohne Schulabschluss; HSO = Hauptschule ohne beruflichen Ausbil-dungsabschluss; MRO = Mittlere Reife ohne beruflichen Ausbildungsabschluss; HSM = Hauptschule mit beruflichem Ausbildungsabschluss; MRM = Mittlere Reife mit beruflichem Ausbildungsabschluss; ABIO = Abitur ohne beruflichen Ausbildungsabschluss; ABIM = Abitur mit beruflichem Ausbildungs-abschluss; FM = Fachhochschulabschluss; UNI = Hochschulabschluss.

Quelle: Online-Befragung von Nutzern einer großen deutschen Online-Kontaktbörse; N=2.113; eigene Berechnungen.

Marie Bergström

Casual dating online. Sexual norms and practices on French heterosexual dating sites

Online-Dating für gelegentliche Treffen. Sexuelle Normen und Praktiken in französischen heterosexuellen Partnerschaftsbörsen

Abstract:

Although Internet-mediated casual encounters between gay men have become an established object of study in social science, research on heterosexual online dating is largely focused on the search for romantic long-term relationships. This article presents an investigation of the new "sexual territory" that appears with heterosexual dating sites. Based primarily on qualitative fieldwork, this study first reveals the normative framework that structures the field of French dating platforms, and secondly shows how meeting online comes with a new dating scenario that tends to facilitate the engagement in short-term sexual relationships.

Key words: sexual territories, online dating, heterosexuality, casual dating.

Zusammenfassung:

Während über das Internet vermittelte gelegentliche Treffen zwischen homosexuellen Männern bereits ein etablierter Forschungsgegenstand in den Sozialwissenschaften sind, ist die Forschung zu heterosexuellem Online-Dating größtenteils auf die Suche nach romantischen Langzeitbeziehungen fokussiert. Der vorliegende Artikel will damit beginnen, diese Forschungslücke zu füllen, indem er den möglichen neuen sexuellen Bereich untersucht, der durch heterosexuelle Online-Dating-Plattformen entsteht. Diese Studie basiert hauptsächlich auf qualitativen Feldstudien und zeigt den normativen Rahmen auf, der das Feld der französischen Dating-Seiten strukturiert. Außerdem zeigt die Untersuchung, wie das Kennenlernen im Internet ein neues Dating-Szenario mit sich bringt, das dazu tendiert, die Aufnahme sexueller Kurzzeitbeziehungen zu vereinfachen.

Schlagwörter: sexuelle Bereiche, Online-Dating, Heterosexualität, sexuelle Beziehungen

Introduction

The use of online dating sites is today a widely spread social practice in the Western world and beyond (Bajos/Bozon 2008; Brym/Lenton 2001; Daneback 2006; Hogan et al. 2011; Madden/Lenhart 2006; Schulz et al. 2008). In France, which is the focus of this article, 13 percent of men and 10 percent of women have at some point logged on to such an Internet site, according to a survey conducted in 2006 (Bajos/Bozon 2008). As sug-

gested by the authors, it is highly probable that the frequency of usage has considerably increased in the population since the survey's publication and that theses figures therefore give an underestimated picture of today's reality of French online dating.

Henceforth an important social arena for initiating intimate relationships[1], online dating has become the object of a new field of research in social science. However, a glance at the scientific literature in this area reveals two separate bodies of work with few links to each other. On the one hand, one observes a relatively comprehensive literature in sociology and social psychology on dating sites as a meeting place for heterosexual individuals in search of romantic long-term relationships (Dutton et al. 2008; Ellison et al. 2006; Fiore/Donath 2004; Illouz 2006; Whitty 2007). On the other hand, Internet use by men who seek sexual encounters with other men is a major topic in research on public health and more specifically on sexual risk behaviour (Benotsch et al. 2002; Davis et al. 2006; Engler et al. 2007; Tikkanen/Ross 2003; Weatherburn et al. 2003). As an effect of the separation of academic disciplines (and their different sources of funding) as well as of diverging research interests, one observes a scientific reproduction of the common opposition between conjugal heterosexuality on one side and gay sexual relations on the other. As the study of online dating is becoming an established field of research, it appears important to go beyond this stereotypical limitation of the objects of study and to investigate the diversity of actors and practices associated with this increasingly important social phenomenon. In particular, the sexual dimension of heterosexual online dating is poorly explored and merits further attention[2]. Drawing on findings from the literature on gay men's sexual use of the Internet, the goal of this article is to begin to fill this academic void. More specifically, we seek to understand to what extent heterosexual dating sites constitute a new "sexual territory" – a privileged social space for engaging in, or negotiating, sexual relations (cf. Deschamps/Gaissad, 2008; Léobon/Frigault 2004) – and how "casual dating" is thus organised in this new online environment.

Online dating and stigmatised sexual practices

The studies on online dating focusing on men having sex with men (MSM) present similar results. Firstly, the Internet stands out as an important place for meeting sexual partners (Bajos/Bozon 2008; Bolding et al. 2005; Liau et al. 2006; Velter 2004). In France, 41.6 percent of the bi- and homosexual men have had sexual relations with a partner whom they had met online (Bajos/Bozon 2008). Secondly, compared to offline-dating contexts, the characteristics of the online environment facilitate the engagement in this type of relationship. Drawing

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1   *Relation*, *relationship* and *couple* do not only refer to romantic long-term relationships but are in this article used as general terms with no regard to the temporality of the relation. Thus, they also include occasional encounters and mere sexual partners.

2   Far from being a question limited to research on online dating, Catherine Deschamps and Laurent Gaissad point out that "social science admits and comments on men's experiences of occasional encounter in all its different forms and especially same-sex relations. But within this field of research, heterosexuality is still a blind spot (*non-lieu*), especially that of women" (Deschamps/Gaissad, 2008: 20) (translation by the author of the article). It should also be noted that studies on romantic and sexual relationships between women are almost nonexistent in the field of online dating research and largely underdeveloped in sociology in general.

on Al Cooper's "triple A engine" (Cooper 1998), several studies support that the *accessibility, affordability* and *anonymity* of the Internet makes it a particularly favourable context for initiating sexual contact (Léobon/Frigault 2004; Ross 2005; Tikkanen/Ross 2003). Going along the same lines, Alain Léobon and Louis-Robert Frigault (2008: 88) put forth that "as a free and unrestrained [*non contraint*] environment, the Internet, accessed most often from home, is perceived as more secure by its users to the extent that their social network has no possibility of judging their intentions (in particular sexual). In escaping the normative pressure that aims at socially regulating sexuality, the Internet favours the expression of diverse sexualities between men".[3]

Although the literature on Internet use among men who have sex with men strongly supports that the online environment tends to facilitate sexual contacts, few studies have explored this aspect with regard to the heterosexual population. The first aim of this article is thus to investigate to what extent French heterosexual dating sites also appear as a favoured environment for engaging in sexual short-term relationships.

We make the hypothesis that the possibility of initiating casual relationships outside the frame of one's social environment does not only facilitate encounters for sexual minority groups such as gay men, but also among heterosexual men and women. Given the significant social control exerted on female sexuality and the potentially transgressive nature of sexual relations for women outside the context of a stable relationship (Ambjörnsson 2007; Bäckman 2003; Bozon 2009), we believe that the anonymous environment of online dating sites also tends to facilitate women's engaging in heterosexual casual relationships. In this article, we thus seek to analyse more specifically to what extent online dating changes practices and norms regarding heterosexual female sexuality.

The framing of site architecture

As shown notably by Michel Bozon and François Héran (2006), not all social environments are meeting places and relationship initiation tends to be confined to certain spaces (bars, parties, university, etc.). In other words, dating has its own geography. Moreover, each context has a specific spatial and social organisation that frames practices and interactions as well as the resulting relationships (Bozon/Héran 2006; Deschamps/Gaissad 2008; Léobon/Frigault 2007). This leads Bruno Perreau (2008) to highlight the importance of taking into account the spatial context when analysing how sexual relationships are initiated.

Furthermore, recent studies on Internet use show that the architecture of Internet sites influences and largely frames user behaviour (Bergström 2011; Chaulet 2009; Ellison et al. 2006). More specifically, Dominique Cardon claims that, far from being a neutral mediating tool, the interface design of online platforms has a "performative effect" on usage (Cardon 2008: 104).

Drawing on these studies, the second and more global aim of this article is to investigate the constitution of heterosexual dating platforms. Rather than a mere medium*,* we suggest that these sites should be viewed as a social space and that it is an important goal to understand how their specific organisation frames practices in the domain of sexuality. This more general aim leads us to contextualise online dating and to proceed in a qualita-

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3   Translation by the author of the article.

tive in-depth analysis of the architecture of heterosexual online dating platforms. Thus, rather than limiting the study to an analysis of outcome – does heterosexual online dating lead to casual relationships? – the objective is also to give a more general picture of the conditions of this practice in the context of dating sites.

Fieldwork

The results presented in this article are primarily based on different forms of in-depth qualitative analysis.

During the autumn of 2008, we conducted a vast inventory of French-speaking online dating sites which lead to the identification of 1045 different platforms (Bergström 2011). The sites were accessed through the search engine *Google.fr* and the use of more than 300 different key words. The three month long inventory was not interrupted until a strong re-dundancy was observed in the search results, and although the sample is not random, we believe it to give a good indication of the general tendencies that characterise the French dating site field. Five hundred and fifty one of the listed sites had published contact in-formation that permitted us to invite the web creators to participate in an online survey based on questions regarding targeting practices and member characteristics. Question-naires were collected from 145 sites that were then object to case studies: the analysis of the survey results was articulated with a systematic study of the sites' functionalities (means of communication and profile information), design (colour scheme, imagery and graphics) and textual content. Eleven semi-structured face-to-face interviews were also conducted with creators of different types of platforms.

Moreover, 42 biographical face-to-face interviews were made with heterosexual on-line dating site users, ranging from 20 to 68 years of age, of which 24 were women and 18 men. The majority of the interviewees were recruited in contexts that were unrelated to online dating (i.e. such as universities) and the only criteria of selection was that they have used an online dating site. However, the interviewee group was composed in such a way to ensure diversity in terms of gender, social class and, to a lesser extent, age. We mainly recruited individuals who were up to 35 years old who, in turn, constitute the larg-est group of dating site users in France (Bajos/Bozon 2008). All interviews were system-atically transcribed and coded with the software Nvivo by the author of this article.

The field of French heterosexual dating sites

Two normative universes

As showed in a former study, the notion of *online dating sites* refers to a vast and diverse web of different platforms. There are today more than eight hundred heterosexual dating platforms of various natures and sizes targeting the French population (Bergström 2011)[4].

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4   Out of the 1045 registered sites, 883 (84.5%) target primarily the heterosexual population (Berg-
      ström 2011).

Furthermore, our study showed that far from addressing the same social groups, an important number of French dating sites are "specialised" and target individuals through diverse criteria such as religion, ethnicity, occupation, cultural taste, political opinion, sexual practice, etc. Hence, only a third of the heterosexual sites correspond to what is commonly known of as "mainstream" sites (Bergström 2011).

However, despite this apparent variety, two distinct subcategories of platforms can easily be identified. Indeed, the field of French heterosexual online dating sites is largely structured by a normative and explicit opposition between sites supposedly conceived for relationships that are "serious" and sites intended for relationships that are not. The underlying normative frame corresponds to the social representation of two types of heterosexual intimate relations based on radically different premises, content and signification. Presence or absence of romantic feelings for the partner constitute an important criterion of categorisation; but just as important is the temporal aspect of the relationship. As showed notably by Sharman Levinson (2001), intimate relations are indeed primarily defined and categorised not in terms of affectivity but contingent on the amount of time between the first encounter and sexual intercourse as well as the overall length of the relationship. Thus, a relationship will be considered "serious" when it lasts and when it is not immediately sexual.

Dating site creators, by considering the search for these respective types of relationships to be two fundamentally different things, both in terms of process and general meaning but also with regard to the set of information needed to evaluate the potential partner, produce specific platforms for each type of partner search, and more generally create two radically opposed normative universes.

Symbolic separation

The two heterosexual site subcategories are qualified both by users and webmasters as "serious sites" versus "libertine sites". Due to the textual nature of digital environments, where social spaces are to a large extent constructed by words, the distinction between the two is first a difference in denomination. On the main page, the sites are explicitly designated as one or the other:

> *"A meeting place for singles in search for serious relationships"*
>
> *"Positioned on serious dating"*
>
> *"Meet singles who, just like you, are seriously looking for a partner"*
>
> *"Sexy dating"*
>
> *"The new naughty dating site"*
>
> *"Want a one night stand? This is the place!"*[5]

In addition to the verbal differentiation, the distinction between *serious sites* and *libertine sites* is realised through the main page setting and more specifically through a largely

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5   Illustrative quotes from texts published on the main page of six different French heterosexual online dating sites.

stereotypical interface design. These caricatured main pages, though seemingly lacking investment or attempt at originality, in fact constitute a fundamental instrument for the web creators to immediately communicate to what category the site belongs. The aim is indeed to minimise the ambiguity regarding the nature of the site through the creation of a coherent symbolic universe. Thus, the set of colours used is highly limited and recurrent within each subgroup. Whereas *serious sites* tend to use neutral colours like white and blue, *libertine sites* take recourse to colours associated with a feminine or affective universe, such as red, pink and purple. In the same way, the choice of images is characterised by clear tendencies. On their main page, *serious sites* publish photographs to a large extent composed by brown haired couples in light coloured clothes whereas lightly dressed blond or redhead women constitute a common subject of photographs used on *libertine sites*. Just as pictures used in publicity, both actors and relations are "hyper-ritualised" (Goffman 1987) with the aim of producing the right associations regarding the type of contacts that one can presumably expect from usage of the site.

> *Regarding the appearance, you need to have the cleanest frontage possible.*
>
> Question: *How do you do that?*
>
> *Well, for example, you can't have a picture… The picture on the main page, you can't have a super sexy girl in a string. It's for sure that that's going to attract guys, it's going to attract a certain type of guys. And somehow the girls are going to find themselves with those guys who are inclined to look for a one night stand. So, it's no good (…)*
>
> Question: *How did you choose the photo?* [i. e., the photo on the main page]
>
> *In fact, it's a very well-known photo… It's a brown head girl, we didn't pick a blond girl because that's too ostentatious. The guys, they'll* [simulates excitement]. *We wanted a pretty serious picture, so: a brown-haired girl, blue eyes.*
>
> [Webmaster of a *serious site*]

The extensive use of stereotypes also characterises the texts published on the main page. *Serious sites* largely take on a romantic discourse when presenting the site and its *raison d'être*: "*Find your soul mate*", "*Find the love of your life*", "*Take on your best Romeo outfit and make your declaration of love under Juliette's balcony*". A text analysis of the discourse used by the *libertine sites* clearly shows that these are conceived on an oppositional mode with the *serious sites*. The users and the relationships promoted are indeed described in terms of "*free love*", "*liberated individuals*", "*nonconformist*", "*no moral limits*", etc. Like the transgressive "exterior limits" defined in opposition to the "virtuous circle" conceptualised by Gayle Rubin (Rubin/Butler 2001), these sites are presented to the users as a social space for relationships that do not conform to hetero-normative ideals regarding decency.

Functional differences

In addition to the differentiation in design and discourse, the two heterosexual online dating subgroups also present different contents and services. When promoting a meeting place for potential long-term partners, the usage of the site is also conceived as a longer

and more elaborate process. The specificity of the *serious sites* consists notably in privileging mail interaction rather than instant chat and, in the case of large established sites, in proposing detailed tests with the aim to evaluate the compatibility of potential partners. The apparent focus on questions regarding socio-professional status, life-style and cultural taste indicates that partner compatibility is to a large extent conceived as social homophily.

The primary difference between the two heterosexual site subgroups however concerns sexuality. Whereas sexual practice, together with physical appearance, constitutes an important part of the profile information given on *libertine sites,* this element is entirely absent on sites presented as destined for long-term relationships. In spite of the numerous and detailed questions aiming at "matching" future partners, one observes indeed an absence of information regarding sexual compatibility or preferences that reveals the inexpressible nature of this type of criteria in a heterosexual dating context aiming at being *serious*.

Chart 1:   Tendencies in heterosexual site differentiation

	"SERIOUS" SITES	"LIBERTINE" SITES
Symbolic differentiation		
Discourse	Romantic	Transgressive
	(*true love, soul mate, serious…*)	(*liberated, anti-conformist, without*
	No sexual content	*limits…*)
		Sexually explicit
Colours	Blue, white, grey	Pink, purple, red, black
Imagery	Couples, white, young, smiling,	Women, white, young, no smiling,
	brown haired, white clothing.	blond or red haired, lightly dressed,
		dark clothing.
Material differentiation		
Functionalities	Mail	Chat
	Compatibility tests	Webcam
Profile questions		
Number	Numerous	Sparse
Content	Socio-professional information and	Physical appearance and sexual in-
	cultural taste. No sexual information.	formation

A comparison with the French gay platforms gives an instructive perspective on the opposition between *serious* and *unserious* that characterises the heterosexual online dating field. Although one observes different kinds of gay sites that correspond to a distinction, and thus a categorisation, of different types of relationships, these are not conceived on a dichotomous mode. Rather than a dual distinction between sites for long-term and short-term relations, gay sites commonly propose different "zones" for more or less sexually explicit communication. Named notably *soft, hot* and *hard,* the zones are proposed as a part of one and the same site which permits a back and forth movement depending on the users' momentary intent. Life-style and socio-professional information equivalent to that presented on heterosexual *serious sites* is mainly indicated in the *soft* zone, but appears next to explicit sexual information regarding the user. Also, as opposed to the heterosexual user, the member of a gay site has the possibility to indicate being simultaneously searching for a romantic relationship and sexual encounters. Thus, the sharp distinction

and spatial separation of different dating universes has no equivalency in the field of French gay dating sites (Bergström 2011).

Meeting potential partners online and through sites specifically designed for this purpose is commonly seen as a radical change in the history of relationship formation (Cooper et al. 2000; Kaufmann 2006; Ross 2005). Pascal Lardellier, one of the first sociologists in France to have studied the usage of these sites, describes the phenomenon as a true Copernican revolution of dating norms and practices (Lardellier 2004). However, the qualitative analysis of the architecture of heterosexual dating platforms reveals a social space that is primarily structured by a stereotypical distinction between love and romanticism on one hand, and sexuality and transgression on the other hand. Independent of the usage ultimately made of these sites, one observes a setting that, far from being revolutionary, conveys largely traditional sexual norms. Moral respectability and normality as implicit sexuality confined to stable relationships is materialised through the radical opposition between *serious* and *libertine sites*. In other words, instead of challenging the traditional normative categorisation of intimate relationships, the field of heterosexual online dating sites "institutionalises" it through the creation of separate environments for either purpose.

A reflection of female preference?

In interviews with creators of *serious* online dating sites, the absence of sexual references and, more generally, the creation of a space presented as exclusively devoted to the formation of stable relationships, are largely described as an adaptation to the female users:

> *The women are very important for us. It's this serious, general public [brand] positioning. It's for serious dating. Meaning, you're not going to receive the… the information regarding the length of the penis of the person who's talking to you [information presented on certain gay sites]. No, you're going to be able to do something with your life. I mean, we primarily try to see to the need of the women, you see. That's why we put a lot of importance to this… non pornographic positioning.*

[Webmaster of a *serious site*]

At first sight, the female preference for long-term relationships and a non-sexual dating environment seems to be confirmed by the sex ratio on the *serious* and *libertine* sites. Indeed, questionnaires collected from 145 webmasters reveal that whereas the gender distribution tends to be balanced on the former, women represent only 10 percent of the total number of registered members on the *libertine sites*[6]. Also, a textual analysis of the online ads posted on a major *serious site* shows that, compared to women, men tend to declare more often to be searching for casual relationships (Bergström 2008). Similar observations have lead to the conclusion of a structural asymmetry and inadequacy between the

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6   Due to the varying ways of counting users and also the sensitive nature of this information for the webmasters, these figures are to be interpreted with precaution. However, unlike the membership published by the sites themselves, the results of the questionnaire were anonymised and were thus seemingly less object to commercial strategies aiming at increasing the number of users. Also, when the effective number of members could be verified by accessing the member data base (6 sites), the observed figures were coherent with those indicated in the questionnaire.

expectations of female and male users: whereas the majority of women would use online dating sites with the aim to find a "serious relationship", numerous male users would be looking for a "quick adventure" (Kaufmann 2006; Lardellier 2004).

However, to consider a declaration of intent as a direct reflection of preference is to suppose that the conditions and the consequences of such statements are the same for women and men. Yet, this is to neglect the gendered nature of sexual norms that renders women and men's access to sexuality largely unequal. To register onto a *libertine site* or to merely declare to be searching for a sexual encounter takes on a different meaning when the user is a woman.

Image management

It should be noted that the type of partner or relationship that one can declare be looking for on an online dating site depends on the censorship policies applied on the given platform. The control is particularly extensive on *serious* sites where a user risks having his or her profile deleted in case it contains sexually explicit contents. As illustrated by the following quotations, the webmasters preoccupation with keeping the sites free from sexual allusions is however not founded on an attempt to assure the "serious" nature of the contacts initiated on the platforms. Rather, the aim of the censorship policies is to create an *atmosphere* characterised by decency. In other words, these policies, but also the site architecture, design and discourse taken as a whole, do not primarily result from the webmasters' anticipation of actual usage. It is above all a question of creating and assuring a certain image of the site.

> *I wanted to have a very clean image. But then, people do whatever they want on their side. But a very clean image (...) Everything inside the site has to be very very clean!*

> Question: *What do you mean, clean?*

> *I mean that, whatever two consenting adults do outside of the site, it's not our business. But what they do inside the site, it's implicit [à demi-mots].*

> [Webmaster of a *serious site*]

> Question: *So you didn't want to use colours like that?* [i..e., red and pink]

> *We're not at all… it's not a libertine site, you know! It's an online dating site for normal people, the general public, for people who want to build a life together, to start over, or to meet somebody. But then, it's like a car, people will use it their way… If you give them a car, a BMW, they might drive fast or they might not. In the end the driving depends on the driver (...) It's a serious site and at the same time it's still a dating site, so you can play around, it's fun. Maybe you come here for… for sex, well, in the end people do what they want. Or maybe you come here to find somebody, to get married, or to meet friends, well you're welcome. We just give them a framework.*

> [Webmaster of a *serious site*]

Indeed, the aim of the webmasters of *serious sites* is above all to "*have a very clean image*" that provides a "*framework*", independently of what the users do "*on their side*". The dichotomous opposition that structures the heterosexual online dating field is hence primarily a result of careful image management. The way a site is perceived is of great im-

portance to the webmaster only to the extent that it is first and foremost an important issue for the users.

As all social spaces, the online environment potentially works as a "signifier" for the individuals that occupy it in the sense that it supposedly says something about them. As Erving Goffman pointed out, individuals draw conclusions regarding new acquaintances that depend notably on the context in which they meet them, assuming that "only individuals of a particular kind are likely to be found in a given social setting", (Goffman 1959: 1). Thus, the site image appears as an important element of the users' self-presentation and the choice of site is important for what one comes across as being. However, what a certain social space "says" about an individual is partially determined by gender. This holds particularly true when the context is sexually explicit, and the relative disinterest for *libertine sites* shown by heterosexual women is also to be understood in this perspective. To register for such a site is perceived as a display of sexual availability, which for women implies a risk of sexual categorisation and stigmatisation. More than just a question of image, this has a concrete effect on their relative position in the future sexual relation:

> *In fact, I have the impression that, on that type of dating site* [i.e.,libertine sites], *since the presupposition is that… if you're there, it's because you're a slut, because it's for fucking. So, somehow it's like the thing with the prostitutes who get raped. You see? You're not going to be able to say "no", because you're there for that purpose. So, I think that's what worried me. It's the idea that, if you meet up with somebody and if ever you don't like him or if things turn wrong, you're going to be a bit trapped (...) You're going to have to go all the way because, because you're… You agreed and… and you did everything to show that you agreed, so you no longer have the right to say that you don't agree to it anymore.*

[Sarah, user, 20 years old]

Sarah defines herself as a libertine and has had numerous experiences of casual encounters. Nevertheless, she qualifies the *libertine site* she registered for as "*really dangerous*" as she perceives that her mere presence on the site categorises her as a slut; a labelling that, in turn, induces a difficulty to refuse sexual intercourse. Her apprehension is based on former offline experiences where indeed, due to this stigma, she found herself forced to have sex. As the act of simply registering for a *libertine site* possibly *per se* defines her negatively, she never dared to meet up with somebody "in real life" and eventually signed out.

More generally, interviews with female dating site users clearly show that to declare to be looking for a "serious" relationship or to prefer *serious sites* to *libertine sites* can hardly be interpreted as mere expressions of preference and intent. Given the sexual norms that condition women's access to sexuality, it must also be understood as a strategic behaviour that aims to stave off potential negative categorisation. The romantic discourse and environment indeed function as a shield against such a stigma and thus create a situation where they can more freely negotiate long *or* short-term relationships. In other words, it enables women to more easily stay in control of the dating scenario and gives them a more favourable basis for negotiating the conditions for sexual intercourse.

This is the case of Alice (29 years old) who registered for a major French *serious site* with the intention to meet sexual partners. During a period of less than five months she had sexual encounters with over twenty different men. However, neither in her written self description nor during the conversation with potential partners did she make explicit the nature of the relationship that she was looking for. Knowing that such a behaviour

could be considered "*slutty*" [sic], Alice takes on a romantic discourse and thus displays a respectable image that permits her to engage in a potentially transgressive behaviour while minimising the risks of negative categorisation and creating more leeway when negotiating the future relation. The implicit nature of sexual intent on *serious sites* is confirmed by Thomas, who also has met sex partners on such a platform. Moreover, he explains that if ever uttered, the information is coded:

> It's never spelt out but a lot of girls put "carpe diem"[7] in their ads and you kind of know that it's just another way of saying that they're open to an unserious thing.

[Thomas, user, 26 years old]

As highlighted by Alain Léobon and Louis-Robert Frigault, the anonymity facilitates the engagement in potentially stigmatised same-sex relations to the extent that it allows a relative disconnection between public identity and sexual practice (Léobon/Frigault 2004). For heterosexual women however, negative sexual categorisation does not only have an effect on their relations with the "outside world" but also on that with a sexual partner. Concerns regarding possible risks – presented as "security" issues – associated with meeting unknown men for possible relationships are present in almost all interviews with female users. These factors, as well as the strategies that derive from them, must be taken into account when one seeks to understand what women do, "want" and say on online dating platforms.

Aware of the impact that the image of the dating site has on the perception of the user, the webmasters institute two profoundly different types of spaces that correspond to the normative opposition between "serious" romantic relationships and "unserious" sexual relations. More specifically, and with the aim of attracting and pleasing female users, the webmasters of *serious sites* create an entirely asexual dating environment in line with a traditional representation of female sexuality. However, by confronting female users with a dual choice between spaces presented as moral and "clean" on one hand and spaces described in sexually transgressive terms on the other hand, they ultimately produce the very behaviour and "preference" that they anticipate. Indeed, due to the risk of stigmatisation (and ultimately physical harm) that, for women, comes with displaying explicit sexual intent, *libertine sites* are largely not used by heterosexual women, independently of the type of relationship they are searching for. Hence, the result of the sharp distinction found between *serious* and *libertine* sites is primarily the confinement of heterosexual women to a "romantic" dating environment where all types of sexually explicit content are either absent or censored. More generally, it thus appears important to consider the dating site field not as a mere indicator or reflection of the sexual norms that generally prevail in society, but as an important contemporary site of production (among others) of these very norms.

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7   The Latin expression *Carpe diem* is commonly translated as "seize the day".

New dating scenarios

The Internet today is an important "cruising"[8] venue for men who seek sexual encounters with other men and most gay sites are especially conceived to facilitate this activity. Online dating among the French heterosexual population on the other hand is principally located to websites largely framed by a romantic discourse and where the sexual dimension of dating is entirely absent. Nevertheless, far from resulting only in long-term relationships, *serious* dating sites constitute also an arena for short-term sexual relations. An online survey conducted in 2011 and advertised on 25 French online dating platforms showed that among the heterosexual users of the so called *serious sites*, a third had had the experience of a short-term sexual relationship with a partner met online (Bergström in press). Our interview material permits us to contexualise this hence frequent practice and shows that, compared to offline contexts and just as for the gay population, these sites constitute an environment that tends to facilitate such relationships.

Temporality and "stories of reference"

Although earlier qualitative studies on the use of online dating sites focus on the digital interface – and more specifically on the absence of face-to-face interaction and on the written communication –, we argue that this is not primarily the defining element that renders these sites specific in regard to other dating environments. What is profoundly new with online dating sites is the emergence of a space specialised in intimate relationship formation and frequented by a significant part of the population. This is worth highlighting not only because it differentiates dating platforms from other interactive Internet sites (online communities, forums, games, etc.) and other forms of mediated dating (e.g. matrimonial agencies and personal ads that represent a marginal social practice) but because it changes the very process of relationship formation.

Although ambiguity generally plays an important role in seduction and in dating (Bozon/Héran 2006), registering for a site specifically devoted to couple formation means *a priori* to declare oneself single and in search of a partner. To render explicit this status notably results in an acceleration of the dating process. Whereas offline couple formation is often characterised by uncertainty and a vacillating progressively evolving approach, online dating is interacting with the initial "knowledge of the facts" and leads the actors to rather rapidly decide whether the relationship is to be or not.

> Question: *But what is it that's different on these sites?* [i.e., a question regarding the process of couple formation]
>
> *I don't know, I think that… on the Internet… or rather in real life, it's a kind of game, you don't really know how it's going to end. Whereas maybe, on the Internet, when you meet [in real life], the dices are already thrown. When I met my boyfriend, given the conversations we'd had before, given everything we had talked about, I could guess that if he would be attracted to me and if I would be attracted to him, well we'd go out together. Whereas, when you meet somebody at a party, you don't*

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8   "Cruising" is an informal term, most often used by gay men, to refer to the act of searching for occasional, usually anonymous, sexual encounters in public spaces.

really know. You try to know if he likes you, if you like him, etc. You might see each other, you might not, you might call each other etc. So, it's more of a bit-by-bit process. Whereas on the Internet you loose this whole kind of progressive dimension.

[Sandra, user, 23 years old]

The amount of time used for online interaction preceding a first meeting "in real life" varies. However, if there is affinity between the two potential partners, the first date is usually rapidly followed by the formation of the couple. Regarding her first offline meeting with her boyfriend, Sandra says that "*nothing happened then, but he sent me an email afterwards saying 'So?' meaning 'so what do you think?'*". The first date indeed constitutes a decisive moment where the interlocutors decide whether to pursue the contact or not. If the appreciation is mutual, the absence of ambiguity regarding the underlying reasons of contact leads the relation to more rapidly take a physical and sexual form, compared to offline dating. Without considering the overall length of the relationship, one hence observes a new dating scenario that, due to the specificity of the dating environment, leads users to more rapidly engage in sexual relations.

Moreover, the interviews reveal how this accelerated scenario has an impact on the perception of both the resulting relationships and the dating sites as a meeting place. As already highlighted, temporality is an important variable for "making sense" of one's experience and for categorising and referring to other people's relationships. In particular, and as noticed by Michel Bozon, "to prolong the initial period of seduction implicitly states that one is ready to engage in a relatively long relationship" (Bozon 2009: 107).[9] Inversely, to hasten sexual intercourse is generally perceived as a sign of the "unserious" nature of the relation. The accelerated dating process that comes with online dating leads the interviewees to consider the platforms as an environment above all propitious to "unserious" relationships.

You're gonna have to make a fundamental distinction between the person you pick up on Meetic [i. e., a major French dating site]; with whom you exchange three words, whom you meet up with in a café, whom you sleep with quickly and with whom it ends quickly. That's one type of story. And the other story, it's the person whom you meet on Facebook; whom you talk to, whom you invite to parties, whom you re-invite again to other parties, who invites you to parties, and you end up going out with her. And this can take one year. And you'll then have seen her a lot and during a long period of time before sleeping with her. Just because it's not an online dating site!

[Matthieu, user, 22 years old]

It didn't work out because I... because of this religion problem. We get along really well and all and we still call each other, but no. In the end, it's [i.e., the reason for ending the contact] also because we met, as I said before, through this site. It doesn't make me want to continue. It's strange to say so because you go on this site to meet somebody but in the end you say to yourself: "Well no, for me it can't be serious".

[Corinne, user, 21 years old]

Given the general image of dating sites, Corinne considers that a resulting relationship can per definition not be considered a "serious" one and that is one of the reasons why she

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9   Translation by the author of the article.

does not intend to pursue the initiated contact with her partner. The connection, seen also in Matthieu's comment, between specific meeting places, certain temporalities and anticipated outcomes is defined by Sharman Levinson as "stories of reference" (*histoires de reference*, cf. Levinson 2001). As ideal-typical dating scenarios, these function as a socially shared interpretative scheme that permits individuals to make sense of their experiences and to calibrate their expectations. Thus, "everyone knows" that one can *generally* expect an "unserious" relationship from an encounter in a discotheque, in a holiday resort or on an online dating site. In consequence, when Pauline (23 years old) registers on Meetic and engages in a short-term sexual relationship, she "*really* [has] *the impression to have had the "Meetic experience""*. Indeed, meeting online today has its own ideal-typical "story of reference". In other words, a socially shared script of what one can expect that tends to guide user conduct and, more importantly, produce self-fulfilling prophecies.

The absence of peer audience

Online dating sites appear as a context that favours sexual relationships for yet another and more important reason. Contrary to common meeting places both offline (bars, parties, university, work, etc.) and online (communities and social networks), the initial contact is taken outside one's social environment. Not only is the interlocutor exterior to the individual's social network, but the interaction takes place "behind closed doors". To the extent that the circle of friends exerts an important social control on the different phases of a relationship – from formation to dissolution –, the absence of peer audience has various effects as well.

The absence of a peer audience during the process of couple formation notably results in a generally weaker social regulation of the relationship. To be considered "being together" or "in a relationship" is not only up to the two partners but constitutes a status that is partly dependent on the confirmation of the social entourage that takes note of and acknowledges the relationship. Firstly, the specific nature of the relationship is only visible when manifested in a context where it demarks itself from other social relations. The interviewees define "going out together" primarily as the moment when the couple starts presenting itself as such in the public sphere: just as "coming out", "going out" is an act of public display. Hence the peer group plays an important role in instituting the couple. Secondly, as an observer of the relationship, the peer group also exerts control over its dissolution. Putting an end to a relationship is a delicate event not only due to emotional reasons but also because it is a statutory change that commonly has to be announced and answered for.

More commonly initiated without the peer group's knowledge, online relationships start off to a larger extent "in privacy". Before voluntarily rendering the relationship public and thus receiving the couple status, the frontiers between *in* and *out* of the relationship are largely permeable. Thus, if the use of online dating sites, more often than offline dating, results in sexual short-term relationships – meaning relations that both start and end rapidly –, this is also due to the weaker "institutionalisation" of the couple that results notably from the absence of the institutive-regulative role of the peer group. The casual character of these relations is therefore not necessarily intended *a priori*.

Nevertheless, the short-term sexual relationships that result from online dating site usage are not a mere "effect of context". In the conducted interviews, especially with female users, sexuality appears subject to strategic management. The omnipresent risk of stigmatisation strongly conditions where, how and with whom women decide to engage in sexual relationships and makes dating sites indeed a favoured context for initiating such relations.

> Question: *What about the propositions a bit sexual that you received on Meetic or Facebook, did you reply, did you have any experiences…?*
>
> *First, I always say no. But then, yeah, I've had experiences. Well, for example the second guy that I met on the site [i.e, Meetic]. But it wasn't, you know, a one night stand. We met several times, you see. But yeah… actually yes, I do have met people just for… Globally, I don't at all have one night stands in mind! I'm not at all like that! But then… then it's already happened that I don't get back to the person because I didn't like him. But originally, I'm not in that state of mind. But there's a lot of people who, yeah, have one night stands. And I don't do that because… often men… well, it's not even often, it's everyone; basically, there are two types of girls. There are the girls with whom they just want to have a bit of fun for a night. There's that category of girls there, and the others. And I really don't want to be a part of that category of girls (…) When I talk to people who I meet on the dating sites or elsewhere, I see that in the end the guys don't like those girls. But for one night, why not. So, they don't respect them. And I really watch out for that because when you say that a girl does that, you say she's a slut (…) The number of people I know that tell me they do that! They meet a girl one night, just like that, they do it that night and the next morning they wake up and they can't even touch the girl. She's a slut. "Good bye!"*
>
> [Corinne, user, 20 years old]

Later on in the interview, Corinne confirms that "*in the end,* [she has] *had plenty of one night stands"* but she firmly dislikes to define them as such since this puts her in the "wrong category" of unrespectable girls. Also, she really "watches out" for the circumstances under which she engages in sexual relations in order to prevent negative categorisation. For Corinne as well as for other interviewees online dating sites appear, as hypothesised, as an environment that facilitates casual relations to the extent that these relationships can take place without the social entourage being aware of it. More specifically, the anonymous environment permits women to engage in potentially transgressive practices while keeping up respectable appearances in the context of other social relations. Hence, online dating appears to come with social change in the domain of sexual practice but much less so in the domain of sexual norms. In consequence, the use of online dating sites is for women largely characterised by a distinction between what one *says* and what one *does*, in order to control what one comes out to *be*.

Conclusion

Although composed by a large number of various Internet platforms, the French heterosexual dating site field is largely structured by a normative opposition between "serious" and "unserious" relationships. As a consequence, one observes a new online sexual territory stereotypically subdivided between hypersexualised and hyperromanticised spaces. Moreover, due to the risk of negative sexual categorisation that comes with the display of

sexual availability, the "libertine" sites are largely not used by women. As a consequence, the interviewees take recourse and recruit their sexual partners on sites applying a strict censorship on sexual contents and that more generally are marked by a normative framework where casual sex and moral respectability are opposed. To empirically determine the specific effect of the sites' social organisation on user conduct is difficult. However, it appears plausible that women's self-presentation strategies, which largely take on a romantic discourse even when searching for sexual encounters, are also influenced by the normative universe created by the *serious sites.* As articulated by one of the webmasters, they create a "framework" that, although far from determining user conduct, is imposed on the users and affects how these are perceived and, hence, how they present themselves.

Yet, as hypothesised, heterosexual online dating sites appear as a favourable context for casual relationships to the extent that the anonymity permits women to engage in such practices while minimising the associated risk of stigmatisation by the peer group. Moreover, the interviews reveal the importance of other factors favouring short-term sexual relationships. Searching for partners on dating sites is more generally linked with a new dating scenario. Due to the explicit stating of one's status as a single and in search of a relationship, and in the absence of the institutive-regulative institution of the peer group, the entrance to as well as the exit from sexual relations tend be more rapid than in offline dating. Thus, it should also be noted that what *a posteriori* can be defined as "casual dating" does not necessarily correspond to the initial intention of the users.

Far from being the "free and unstrained" sexual environment described by Alain Léobon in his study on gay internet sites, heterosexual online dating is characterised by largely traditional sexual norms both in regard to practice and the social organisation of the sites. The qualitative in-depth analysis does not reveal a straight "cruising area" or a major change of heterosexual dating norms, but rather the complex conditions of women's access to sexual relations. Although online dating sites appear indeed as a new sexual territory that favours casual relationships, it comes also with new normative boundaries. Future research will tell us whether the change observed in relation to practices will, in turn, transform what is considered acceptable sexual conduct for heterosexual women.

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Online dating: The tensions between romantic love and economic rationalization

Online-Dating zwischen romantischer Liebe und ökonomischer Rationalität

Abstract:

This paper will at first show how romantic love and economic rationality have emerged in modernity as two distinct spheres, which are characterized by their own normative principles, expectations and practical orientations – two spheres that have systematically been opposed in sociological tradition. In a second part, it will be analyzed how these two distinct sets of normative principles and practical orientations are both introduced into the field of online dating. This leads to the third part which investigates on an empirical basis how people deal with the ambivalences and tensions between these different orientations in the practice of online dating. Finally, a short conclusion questions if the boundaries between love and the market are being blurred or, in a fragile way, re-established on the Internet today.

Key words: online dating, rationalization, romantic love, market, Internet, qualitative research, interviews, Germany, Switzerland

Zusammenfassung:

In diesem Beitrag wird zunächst aufgezeigt, wie romantische Liebe und ökonomische Rationalität in der Moderne als zwei eigenständige Sphären entstanden, die durch je eigene normative Prinzipien, Erwartungen und praktischer Orientierungen gekennzeichnet sind und die zudem in der klassischen soziologischen Theorie zueinander systematisch als Gegensätze angesehen wurden. Im zweiten Teil wird analysiert, wie diese beiden eigenständigen Bereiche normativer Prinzipien und praktischer Orientierungen in das Feld des Online-Dating eingeführt werden. Dies führt dann zum dritten Teil, in dem empirisch untersucht wird, wie die Nutzer mit den Ambivalenzen und Spannungen zwischen diesen unterschiedlichen Orientierungen in der Praxis der Partnerschaftsbörsen umgehen. Die Schlussforderungen schließlich gehen der Frage nach, ob die Grenzen zwischen Liebe und Markt im Begriff sind, verwischt werden oder ob diese – auf jedoch brüchige Weise – im Internet heute wieder hergestellt werden.

Schlagwörter: Online-Dating, Rationalisierung, romantische Liebe, Internet, qualitative Forschung, Interviews, Deutschland, Schweiz

Introduction

Within a few years, online dating has emerged in both public debates and in the social sciences as a new topic of questioning and scientific inquiry. In most cases, this form of relationship mediated by digital interfaces is presented as something radically new, dramatically transforming the romantic encounter as well as the ways subjects develop bonds of love or friendship. One of the assumptions made by researchers and observers of present transformations of digital activities is that these changes should signify an increase of a market relation between people: the current popularity of online dating is often seen as an effect of a general trend towards the rationalization of intimate relationships (Illouz 2007; Illouz/Finkelman 2009), the rise of the "entrepreneurial self" (Rose 1992; Arvidsson 2005) and the increasing dominance of consumerist culture in all areas of society (Baumann 2007).

The aim of this article is to discuss these assumptions on a theoretical as well as an empirical level. (I) In a first part, it will be argued that the questions raised today by online dating are not completely new because they reveal – in a specific way – fundamental normative tensions constitutive for modern societies in general. Here, romantic love and economic rationality have emerged as two distinct spheres characterized by their own normative expectations as well as practical orientations. A short sketch of how these two spheres were systematically opposed, not only in the practices of the people, but also in the perspective of almost all social theorists of the twentieth century will be outlined. (II) In a second part, it will be shown how these two distinct sets of normative principles and practical orientations are both introduced into the field of online dating. As a result, the Internet is not merely a new form of 'partner market' based on rationalistic and consumerist orientations. At the same time, it can be assumed that it represents a 'neoromantic media' that opens a whole new social space for romantic feelings and interactions. (III) The third part should underline these assumptions a little bit further on the basis of our empirical research.[1] Hence, it will be analyzed how users are socialized into the world of online dating and what they learn about the ambivalences and tensions between different normative principles and practical orientations in this field. This will finally lead to a short conclusion questioning how the boundaries between the spheres of love and the market are being shifted, blurred or, in a fragile way, re-established in the practice of online dating.

I.　Love and the market as opposite spheres in modernity

It is striking to see how most writers of classic sociological literature have systematically opposed two kinds of relationships, that is love and intimacy on the one hand, the market and instrumental relations on the other. The social sphere of intimate relationships of care and love as well as the family has been conceptualized in opposition to – sometimes even as a refuge from – the formal relationships that dominate the economic realm of the market. Max Weber, for instance, stated that love is "as radical as possible in its opposition to all functionality, rationality, and generality" (Weber 1946, p. 346). Pierre Bourdieu considers love as the "purest" practical realization of mutual recognition because it excludes self-interest, egoism and all kinds of symbolic power. Love means a suspension of strategic action between partners who make a "gift" of themselves in a relation of mutual trust (Bourdieu 1998, p.116). Niklas Luhmann (like Georg Simmel [1985] and others before) pointed out that love might offer "protection and support against the dominant characteristics of modern society – against the economic compulsion to work and exploitation, against the administration of the state, against a science that is shifting towards technology. The endangered self takes refuge in love" (Luhmann, 1997: 987[2], Luhmann 1986). This argument, still in vigor today, constructs the sphere of love and intimate relationships as a kind of 'counterworld' to the modern market society. Following this line, Anthony Giddens, for instance, describes the "pure relationship" as a dominant cultural ideal where the connection between partners is solely based on sexual and emotional attraction and liberated from any social or economic constraints (Giddens 1992). In the perspective of Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Ulrich Beck, love has become a "secular religion" (Beck-Gernsheim/Beck 1995: 12) that promises salvation from the anomy that comes along with the process of individualization.

This conceptual opposition is not only based on theoretical considerations, but also on specific social transformations in the process of modernization. Many studies in history and sociology have analyzed how the *emergence of a private sphere of intimacy*, in contrast to the public sphere of the professional and economic life, has been the social condition for the development of relations based on the *romantic ideal of love* (Ariès/Duby 1999; Schurmanns 1998; Coontz 2005; Shorter 1975). While the public sphere has been increasingly dominated by formal relationships, instrumental rationality, bureaucracy and technology, contrastingly, romantic love and the values of personal intimacy, self-disclosure, mutual care and interpersonal recognition have gained importance in the private sphere (Honneth 1996). In modern society, the *"romantic utopia"* (Illouz 1997) allows people to preserve the vision of an emotional transcendence of day-to-day instrumentalism by calling attention to mutual needs of care and intimacy within close relationships.

It is not our point here to expose in details those socio-historical changes that have led to this opposition between love and market but instead, we would like to sketch the main

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2　Original in German: Liebe bietet „Schutz und Halt gegenüber den dominanten Merkmalen der modernen Gesellschaft – gegenüber wirtschaftlichem Zwang zur Arbeit und Ausbeutung, gegenüber staatlichen Regulierungen, gegenüber der ins Technologische drängenden Forschung. Das bedrohte Ich rettet sich in die Liebe."

features of the two distinct normative principles, which relate to the spheres of love and market. In order to do so, it is helpful to point out three basic characteristics in which both principles are most radically opposed to each other. The principles of love and the market each constitute a relationship that substantially differs, first, in the way the subjects involved are constructed; second, in the motives and aims, which are generally assumed by the participants, and third in the level of abstraction that is characteristic for this type of interaction.

Love's normative principle

Love relationship's first feature deals with the fact that it undoubtedly implies *connected* beings contrarily to isolated beings conceived independently from the relation. An inter-subjective dimension appears in the love relationship, between interdependent beings, which creates an open-mindedness of the subject towards the other as well as an expectation of reciprocity from the other (Benjamin 1988; Honneth 1996). As we will see later, self-disclosure plays a crucial role in the establishment of this particular form of intersubjectivity. In such a relationship, a subject's affective needs can only be satisfied in the common action between partners sharing the same affective values as frame. According to Hegel, this relationship can see the birth of such sensation as "unity of myself with another and of another with me" (Hegel 2001: 139). Affixed to this relation are norms controlling reciprocal stances according to which the "successful" love relationship excludes egocentrism, egotism, judgment and aloofness. From these norms, expectations and aspirations grow: if one of the relation's participant breaks this implicit "contract" of "disinterest" – for instance by defending one's interests to the detriment of the relation – it appears as an attack to this normative principle of love relationship (Honneth 1996). This is excluding the calculating subject only concerned with the maximization of one's own personal benefit.

The second feature deals with the *autonomous nature* of the relation and the exclusion of external factors. This relation is considered for itself, from the encounter and the long-lasting bond made of closeness and intimacy between *two beings* – in one "unity of myself with another" (Hegel). Such insideness of the "successful" love relationship answers to a norm since the intervention of a third party (another person, law institution, etc.) in the love relationship is problematic and most likely to be criticized.

At third, it is important to express the *singular and irreplaceable nature* of the other in the love relationship. Indeed, the partners perceive themselves as unique, singular and "uninterchangeable" beings: the love relation excludes any form of abstraction (such as in trade, law or administration), thus requiring to take into account the singularity and uniqueness of the participants. Following this direction, it can stand as a "refuge" preserved from abstract and instrumental characteristics of social relations in modern societies.

Market's normative principle

Contrarily to love, the market implies at first an *isolated and calculating subject* acting according to one's own interests in a competitive space. The market subject is an isolated, egotist and auto-referential subject. He or she needs another subject only as a support for the exchange and as a means of maximization of one's interests rather than in what the other is the intersubjective condition of himself or herself. The subject does not need others because he/she already exist with his/her own wishes and interests before the involvement in the exchange. Thus, this calculating and auto-sufficient actor takes for granted that the others show the same calculating attitude.

To this can be added that if the market, as highlighted by Weber (1978: 635), "represents a coexistence and sequence of rational consociations, each of which is specifically ephemeral insofar as it ceases to exist with the act of exchanging the goods", it means that it is ephemeral and a-social. The market exchange presumes a relation existing for the exchange and in the moment of the exchange only. Submitted to the market, the relation is determined by a purpose external to its social dimension, according to the *heteronymous nature* of the relation. A participant introducing social considerations in the exchange relation questions this exogenous trait of the exchange, namely, the normative principle of the market supposes a norm outside the social field.

At third, the relation specific to market is *impersonal and abstract* – it does not imply singular beings with affective strings. According to Weber, the market exchange is "the most impersonal of all relations of practical life in which men can be involved" and the market "only has considerations for things, not at all for persons neither for right of fraternity or pity, none either for primary human relations specific to personal communities" (Weber 1978: 641). The market is "radically estrange from any fraternity relation", it comes from "outside of neighborhood's community and any personal links" and it is in opposition with "all other forms of common life" in particular those revealing blood ties. Finally, only private ends determine market processes, erasing social bonds.

The tension between love and the market

The results of this general 'normative reconstruction' suggested here, radically oppose to one another the social spheres of love and the market. One has to keep in mind, though, that these normative principles have never been fully realized in the history of modern society. "The idea that arose on the threshold of the nineteenth century, opposing romantic love to the instrumental world of exchange relations, was probably always a typical product of bourgeois illusion" (Hartmann/Honneth 2006: 55).

As feminist studies have shown, the sphere of couple relationships and the family, which is generally seen as guided by the norms of romantic love, still includes specific forms of economic exploitation and domination (Delphy/Leonard 1992). At the same time, market relationships in modern society are not only governed by strictly rational forms of exchange, but also include a symbolic dimension and emotions as well as elements of a gift economy. Generally speaking, the normative principles of love and the market do not always fully correspond with the actual social practices in the respective fields. But still, these norms have a strong guiding force. As we have seen with feminism,

they can serve as a base for criticism, which points to the discrepancy between the general ideal and the actual practice in a certain social sphere. If this criticism is successful, it also reaffirms the norm in question.

In recent times, there have been developments that seem to strengthen the boundaries between the social spheres of love and the market as well as processes, which tend to blur these distinctions. Since the late 1960s, the structure of the family and of couple relationships has fundamentally changed. By calling attention to the needs or wishes derived from the romantic ideal that the institutionalized practice of intimate relationships has hitherto failed to fulfill, social movements have criticized the traditional model of the bourgeois family, contributing to a deinstitutionalization of the nuclear family (Bernier 1996; Chaumier 2004). In addition to this, social and economic transformations have enabled a greater social mobility of individuals. This and the general rise of incomes have significantly diminished the social and economic constraints of couple formation, giving people more freedom to follow their own feelings in the choice of a partner. As a result, emotional quality and sexual attraction have significantly gained importance in contemporary love relationships (Giddens 1992: chap. 4; Beck-Gernsheim/Beck 1995). In general, these trends can be interpreted as a reinforcement of the romantic ideal of love and a strengthening of the boundaries between intimate relationships and other social spheres.

But there are also developments pointing in the opposite direction. In contemporary society, forms of economic rationality and market interaction tend to spread into many social areas. In sociology, this phenomenon is being discussed as the "tyranny of the market" (Bourdieu 1999) or – less polemic – as the "marketization of society" (Neckel 2001; Neckel/Dröge 2002) and the rise of a new "enterprise culture" (Heelas/Morris 1992; Keat/Abercrombie 1991). These developments also affect the private sphere. As Eva Illouz (1997) has shown, values and practices of consumer culture have increasingly entered the field of love – e.g. when people use consumer items and luxury goods to give their affective relationships a symbolic expression. Beside this, current developments in the sphere of work – e.g. the growing demand for 'flexibility' – are setting the private life under new constraints (Sennett 1998; Wimbauer 2010; Dröge/Somm 2005). But this blurring of boundaries also affects the realm of the market. Specific resources from the private sphere – e.g. "social skills", empathy, and creativity – have been carried over into the public sphere of work. "Emotional intelligence" (Goleman 1998) and emotional self-management skills are often regarded as the key qualifications in today's business. As a result, the "commercialization of human feeling" (Hochschild 1983) has gained importance in work. Many authors, following Michel Foucault and the so-called 'governementality studies', have pointed out that these tendencies are also going along with a new concept of subjectivity: the idea of an "enterprising self" that shapes its existence through choices, that follows the ethics of individual responsibility, and that tries to optimize all areas of its personal life in regard to efficiency and economic rationality (Foucault 2004; Gordon 1991; Rose 1992; Bröckling 2007).

All this shows how difficult it is to analyze the actual relationship between romantic love and the market, especially if one looks at the way in which the boundaries between the different "value spheres" (Weber) and their corresponding normative principles are constantly shifted, blurred and reestablished. As a result, the relation between romantic love and the market is best described as a fundamental tension, which is both constitutive

for modern society and yet unresolved – maybe even irresolvable in a more general sense. The necessity to deal with this tension seems to be a constant struggle and a driving force for social change. As we would suggest, the Internet is one place in today's society where this very struggle takes place.

II. Love and the market on the Internet

As mentioned above, the social change since the late 1960s has taken down many institutional restrictions in the sphere of intimate relationships, allowing more freedom in the choice of a partner as well as in the concrete form of the relationship (married or not, homo-, hetero- or bisexual, "polyamory" or monogamy, etc.). We have interpreted this as a reinforcement of the romantic ideal because it strengthened the autonomy of love against external regulations and restrictions.

Historically, this development was supported by a much more general social movement which was searching for new forms of self-realization and social experiences not only in love and sexuality, but also in culture, community and economic life. Interesting enough, the Internet and other electronic communication devices have also been interpreted in this direction – that is, as tools that widen the room for collective experiences and self-realization. With his concept of "virtual communities", Howard Rheingold (1993) has been, for instance, one of the first to defend the idea that Internet technologies allow the apparition of new forms of collectivity dealing with distant others estranged from co-presence. Referring – among others – to Marshall McLuhan (1962), Rheingold was convinced of the possibility of such practices to reinforce the social, collective, and communitarian life. He even hoped to improve sexuality by connecting people over the Internet (Rheingold 1991). In these early days, the ideas of counterculture movements in the USA were especially important for the interpretation of the social and cultural potential of this new media, creating what has later been called "the ideology" of the Internet (Turner 2006).

In a certain way, online dating practices also rely on this cultural and ideological framework. Within the last ten or fifteen years, this type of dating has become widely accepted in our society, making this business one of the few profitable sections of the Internet economy with a growth rate of 30-40% p.a. (Jupiter Research 2008; NZZ 2007; Schmid 2006). It is obvious that the idea of freedom in the choice of a partner, which was very important for the sociocultural transformations described above, plays a crucial role in the cultural framing of online dating, too. One might even say that the Internet promises to continue – on a technological level – the liberation in the process of couple formation that started as a social movement in the late 1960s. In fact, this new media suggests that almost all remaining constraints, which are characteristic for classic places of couple formation, could be overcome (Geser/Bühler 2006; Hitsch/Horta/Ariely 2005; Fiore 2004). It offers an enormous amount of choices and makes it easy to contact people from all over the world. At the same time, it creates a very private situation: Sitting alone in front of his or her computer, a person seems to be more or less out of reach from the usual mechanisms of social control (family, colleagues, circle of friends) that can be restrictive in other forms of dating. Finally, online dating sites provide detailed information about

each person involved (laid down in their digital "profiles"), which is supposed to help finding a person that exactly fits one's own personality. This idea of personal 'compatibility' of prospective partners, which is very prominent in the way dating sites describe and advertize their service, refers directly to the close connection between love and self-realization that has been established as part of the sociocultural transformation of the 1960s and 1970s.

As we will see in the third part of this article, the promise of liberating and enlarging the possibilities for couple formation through the Internet can be very exciting and attractive for people, although it is often hard to get this promise fulfilled.

The Internet as a neoromantic media

Albeit there are many connections between sociocultural transformations in the field of love and the way online dating is interpreted and framed in our society, one thing is still irritating. Given the fact how important intimacy, emotions and sexuality has become in today's ideals of love (Giddens 1992), the question arises why people might choose a form of interaction which is mediated through technical interfaces to establish such an intimate relationship. It has often been highlighted that this mediated interaction is characterized by the fact that it brings people to relate to each other beyond their immediate co-presence. Hence, those people do not share the same social and temporal frame. The disappearance of co-presence leads to some important consequences such as the less important role of the body in communication processes or the potentially anonymous nature of communication – aspects which, at first glance, seem to be completely contradictory to what we have outlined above as the main characteristics of the romantic ideal of love. Additionally, all interactions in this space inevitably are mediated by technological interfaces, thus any form of relation between two subjects must undergo the intermediary of digital platforms. Again, this seems totally contradictory to the specific immediacy of the relationship that the romantic ideal suggests.

As a result, computer mediated communication has often been regarded as a widely depersonalized and de-emotionalized form of human interaction (Döring 2003: 127 et seqq.); Walther 1996). Many classic views are based on the assumption that the reduction of communication channels in the text-based online conversation would lead to a certain kind of impersonality. Given the fact that direct body language is completely absent and hard to be recreated in computer networks,it seems to be particularly difficult to convey emotions.. As a result, this interaction is often described as task oriented and less influenced by power relationships or differences in social status (Sproull/Kiesler 1986; Rice/Love 1987). But it did not seem intended at all to build up intimate, close and long-term interpersonal relationships.

Nevertheless this position has been criticized early on, among others by the proponents of "virtual communities" (Rheingold 1993) on the net. The critics pointed to the fact that this emerging media has always been used not only for business or scientific purposes but also as a place to build up personal, intimate relationships (Jones 1995; Walther 1996). We would go even further and argue that the Internet is a kind of "neoromantic media" that fosters specific characteristics of interpersonal relationships, which are very close to what has been outlined above as core elements of the romantic ideal of love.

What is of particular interest here, is the way in which the mediation through digital interfaces can support the specific form of intersubjectivity that the ideal of romantic love implies – despite the fact that this interaction seems so distant and impersonal in the first place. For this form of intersubjectivity, mutual self-disclosure plays a crucial role, and the Internet fosters this in a particular way (McKenna 2007; Joinson 2001; Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 34 et seqq.). Following the research of social psychology, there are two diametrically opposed constellations especially prone to extensive forms of self-disclosure: Ephemeral acquaintances which are not very deep nor long lasting – the so-called "stranger in the train phenomenon" – or relationships that are characterized by a special intimacy and mutual trust (Cozby 1973). What makes the Internet so particular is the fact that it combines elements from both constellations. On the one hand, users often see this media as a kind of secure space because they do not appear with their real names and have an easy-exit option anytime they want (Thurlow et al. 2004). This helps to overcome one's inhibitions and encourages self-disclosure – similar to the stranger in the train to whom we disclose ourselves just because we will most likely never meet him again (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: 34 et seqq.; Döring 2003: 255 et seqq.; Ellison et al. 2006). On the other hand, the mediation through digital interfaces can – quite different from what one might expect – also lead to feelings of closeness, intimacy, familiarity and trust. The reason for this is that the reduced channels of online communication forces people to use their imagination to fill the informational gaps about the alter ego (Walther 1996). In the case of online dating, idealized images about the 'perfect partner' that people carry with them seem to be an important source for these imaginations – the virtual other becomes a projection screen for one's own wishes (Ben-Ze'ev 2004: pp. 78 et seqq.; Whitty/Carr 2003). As will be shown later on in greater details, this can lead to impressions of a particular closeness and familiarity in the relationship, which again augments the disposition for self-disclosure.

Over all, these characteristics of interactions mediated through digital interfaces can foster a certain form of intersubjectivity that shares some common characteristics with what the romantic ideal according to the normative principle of love suggests: relating to the other as a 'whole person' and not only as somebody playing a role, as an individual with whom one shares exclusive, intimate knowledge, etc. (Voirol 2010a). Obviously, some important elements are missing – especially that kind of visible and tactile experience of the body which is strictly bound at face-to-face (or body-to-body) interaction (Illouz 2007: 95 et seqq.). In part III of this article, we will have a closer look on the consequences of this absence – consequences that become especially problematic when the body comes into play as the relationship develops beyond the space of digital interfaces.

Online dating as a partner market

The present analysis considering the 'neoromantic' interactional forms of love on the Internet is only one perspective on the phenomenon of online dating. Major trends in sociological analyses describe it primarily in terms of the rational choice theory and the economics of the marriage market (Schulz/Skopek/Blossfeld 2010; Skopek/Schulz/Blossfeld 2009; Geser/Bühler 2006; Hitsch/Horta/Ariely 2005; Fiore 2004). Following this tradition, the process of mate selection in general and online dating in particular is character-

ized as a form of market transaction where people exchange personal resources like education, social status, beauty, and so on, in order to maximize their individual utility. Of course, this perspective is heavily influenced by its theoretical background: the classic economics of the marriage market (Gale/Shapley 1962; Becker 1973, 1974, 1981). Nevertheless, there are other positions arguing against a quite different background which also stress the fact that forms of economic rationalization, consumerism and market relationships play a crucial role in online dating processes (see, for instance, Illouz 2007, Illouz/Finkelman 2009; Bauman 2007; Wetzel 2008)

As Eva Illouz has shown, the Internet makes the partner market as visible and 'tangible' a market like no other social setting before. Common places for getting in contact with potential partners outside the net – bars, parties or university campuses, but also traditional newspaper ads or dating agencies – have always been representing a very small portion of the partner market which, as a whole, stays invisible and abstract. In contrast, online dating sites are confronting their users instantaneously with the whole universe of options that are at stake in mate selection. Thousands of potential partners are directly 'at hand', for a contact requires only a few mouse clicks. "Whereas in the real world, the market of partners remains virtual – never seen, only presupposed and latent – on the net, the market is real and literal, not virtual, because Internet users can actually visualize the market of potential partners" (Illouz 2007: 87).

In fact, online dating sites address their users not only as romantic subjects, but also as economic actors who are looking for efficiency and a good bargain in mate selection (Dröge 2011). By the way they present the profiles of potential partners in exactly the same manner as items on eBay, Amazon or other shopping sites, with their complex search forms that allow to define the own preferences in mate selection with a precision unknown before, with the tools they offer to evaluate one's own market value and to enhance this value if possible – with all these elements borrowed from modern forms of consumerism and the economic sphere, they suggest a subject position which is very close to what we have outlined above as the main characteristics of a calculating subject in the realm of the market. It is the position of an economic agent who compares offers on a level of equivalence and tries to maximize his own interests. At the same time, it is the position of a self-marketing 'supplier' in a very competitive "economy of attention" (Franck 1999) with hundreds and thousands of direct rivals active on the site.

As will seen below, people may be able to distance themselves from this suggested subject position for a certain amount of time and follow the 'neoromantic' promises that the Internet also offers. But still, both the norms of the market and of the romantic ideal of love coincide in this field and people have to deal with the ambiguities and contradictions that arise from this. They must decide which orientation they are going to follow, and in turn, insure that their interactional partners share the same "definition of the situation" (Goffman 1974) – whether this may be a certain form of market-like exchange or a romantic encounter with their respective corresponding rules and normative expectations. As we have mentioned above, these problems are not new to modern society. But online dating 'reenacts' the tension between love and the market in a specific manner.

III. The practice of online dating – romantic expectations and processes of rationalization

When people enter the field of online dating, they are being socialized into the specific rules, routines and norms of this particular social space. In this process, they also have to deal with the normative and practical tensions between love and the market present here. They are addressed as romantic subjects, searching for intimacy and an exclusive love relationship. But at the same time, they are confronted with innumerable competitors in an anonymous market environment in which they must assert themselves. So how do people find their way into this complex space?

According to most contemporary scientific literature, the answer seems clear. As we have already mentioned, the current popularity of dating on the net is often seen as the result of a consumerist or rationalistic approach to intimate relationships. In fact, these rational and consumerist orientations play an important role in online dating, so there is some truth in these diagnoses. Nevertheless, we would reject the assumption that these orientations are the main driving force or motivation for people to enter the field of online dating. On the contrary, our empirical data strongly suggests that in the first place, most people are attracted by what we have called the "neoromantic" aspects of the media, whereas more rationalist orientations come into play later on. This could be described as a typical "career" in the usage of online dating, as a temporal pattern that – despite all individual differences – is fundamental with regard to the way people deal with the chances and pitfalls of this new means of seeking a partner. Further on, it is assumed that this temporal pattern results from a certain learning process in which specific frustrations about the non-deliverance on the promises of the "neoromantic" media lead to a more rationalist approach to online dating. This assumption will be explained in greater detail below.

To begin with, it is relevant to show how people experience the "neoromantic" aspects of the media and what makes them so attractive in the first place. Thinking about this, one has to keep in mind that people often start their journey into online dating out of a situation of loneliness and sometimes even frustration about the lack of opportunities to meet interesting people in their everyday life. They might have a lot of social contacts – our respondents often stress the fact that they are no geeky computer nerds nor loners but on the contrary, very well-embedded in social networks. Nevertheless, they often feel being stuck in their restricted world of friends and colleagues. When they sign up on an online dating site, this small world is suddenly widened and hundreds and thousands of new people enter their field of vision. A whole new social sphere opens up where it is very easy to get in touch with as many people as one likes and from all around the world. Here, a general characteristic of the Internet comes into play: its capacity to enlarge social circles in a way that is not very different from early times of modern society, when urbanization and industrialization entailed similar social ruptures (Voirol 2010b).

Some users of online dating are overwhelmed by these new possibilities. But in general, many of our respondents experience it as a long-awaited escape from a rather frustrating situation they have fallen into. This can be very exciting and users often describe that they were rapidly sucked into this new sphere – sometimes even to an extent that they consider it as a form of addiction. They may spend hours browsing the site, observing

who is visiting their own profile and writing messages to people that they would have never met otherwise. Already at this early stage in the usage of online dating, the Internet offers a certain "counterworld", that is, a way of stepping out of everyday life and experience a form of "extraordinariness" that is also a substantial part of our modern ideal of romantic love in general (Weber 1946: 346).

This experience of "extraordinariness" is often reinforced when people start to communicate with others on the site. To say it with the words of Carol[3], a nurse in the mid-forties who first explored about ten years ago the world of online dating: "I was fascinated by the attraction that may develop out of something that's just text, you know? Without ever hearing the voice, without knowing how the person looks like."

Like Carol, many of our interviewees describe it as an intriguing and sometimes surprising experience: how rapidly feelings of intimacy and close togetherness can arise in online relationships – feelings, that are sometimes even considered as being deeper and more intense than they are outside the Internet. Here, the exact same mechanisms that we have described above as the "neoromantic" potential of the new media come into play. "Something that's just text" develops into a projection screen for one's own wishes concerning a prospective partner. Fantasy and imagination get activated and idealization processes begin to arise. What has been a frustrating situation of loneliness now tends to be transformed into the exact opposite: an overabundance of likeminded people that can be imagined as possible companions in a loving relationship. Again, this is exciting and draws people even deeper into the world of online dating.

But there is also something else at stake here. As we have outlined above, online communication in general is often prone to rapid and extensive self-disclosure. Such is also the case in dating environments. Carol is again a good example here when talking about a very close friend of hers that she got to know over the Internet a few years ago: "We have never met face to face, but he's a guy, there is almost nobody out there knowing me as good as he does. He knows so much about me."

In fact, this guy is rather a 'best friend' for her, somebody to call or email in the middle of the night when she is in trouble. As he is homosexual, having an intimate relationship was at no time really an option and they never met other than over the Internet or the telephone. Yet, she made similar experiences with other people – albeit not so deep and not for so long, because after a while a face-to-face encounter seemed unavoidable. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see (not only in this case) which amount of self-disclosure and intimacy might develop in pure online communication where people have not yet met outside the Internet.

Mutual self-disclosure is crucial for the process of falling in love and building up a love relationship. There is plenty of literature about this topic from psychology as well as sociology. A classic study comes from Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner, who analyzed the process of couple formation in their work on "Marriage and the construction of reality" (Berger/Kellner 1964). From the perspective of a microsociology of knowledge, Berger and Kellner argue that intense "conversations" in which people disclose themselves and share their everyday worldview play a crucial role in developing a common identity as a couple and stabilizing their relationship. We all know these extensive conversations

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3   All names have been changed.

about one's own personal experiences, about everyday opinions, personal tastes and idiosyncrasies from early stages of couple relationships. Berger and Kellner interpret this as a "nomic process" (ibid.: 11) in which the emerging couple adjusts their respective "constructions of reality" to each other in order to develop a common worldview. This, in turn, transforms also the identity of the two people involved and helps to establish the specific form of intersubjectivity that the romantic ideal suggests. Each person now becomes part of an exclusive unit, which is distinctive from any other social relationship they are engaged in.

Of course, Berger and Kellner could not foresee the development of the Internet in the sphere of intimate relationships when they wrote their study in 1964. Nevertheless, their concepts can be very helpful in analyzing today's online relationships. In fact, one might say that with online dating, the "nomic process" of developing a common worldview and an identity as a couple already starts to emerge within the mediated environment. Especially if people are rather new to this type of dating, they tend to dive deeply into online conversations, chatting and emailing extensively with mostly one, sometimes a few significant others. This can increase to the point where they virtually participate in the everyday life of the other, exchanging messages at least every few hours about what they are currently doing, thinking or experiencing.

Jenny for instance, a media consultant from Germany currently living in Switzerland, made her first experiences with online dating by emailing several months with a guy from Dubai before they actually met. Being an expatriate from Germany, he shared his everyday experiences of strangeness with her. She was at that time working on her diploma thesis, and shared the woes of this task with him. In the end, they wrote about twenty emails each day. Although they never met outside the Internet up to that day, their lives were still closely interconnected and the respective other was an integral part of it. One can really say that in a certain sense, they became a couple before they actually met outside the Internet. "I was fascinated by that man", Jenny said in the interview, "I totally fell in love".

What is going on here and in many other cases is that, as a result of an intense and long lasting "conversation" over the Internet, the specific self-transformation that Berger and Kellner are describing already begins. One's own "construction of reality" is confronted with, widened and to some degree even transformed by the one of a significant other, to whom one is closely connected over the Internet. Again, this can be very intriguing and brings "extraordinariness" into everyday life – even up to a point where one's own identity gets affected (Dröge 2010). In Jenny's case, this went so far that she eventually decided to live in Dubai for three months to finish her diploma thesis there. Before that, the two had met for a few days in Germany. But still, the established online relationship was the decisive factor for her. From today's standpoint, she describes it as a "huge bubble" – "strange how one can be obsessed with an image of somebody". But at that time, the relationship was very important for her and had a huge impact on her personal life.

Overall, one can conclude that the Internet really constitutes a new and exciting "seductive space", as Aaron Ben-Ze'ev (2004: 1) puts it. It opens up a whole new social sphere for romantic feelings and experiences – beginning with the widening of social circles and a certain type of "extraordinariness" it brings into everyday life, continuing with

the large room it gives for imagination, projection and idealization of the respective other, and additionally reinforced by the processes of mutual self disclosure and the identitarian transformations that may arise from them.

Disappointments, learning processes and economic rationalization

Although the Internet can be considered as a 'neoromantic' social space, there are also a lot of difficulties and the disappointment of the romantic expectations is often waiting just around the corner. Of course, it is by no means special to this new media that emerging love struggles with doubts and potential disappointments. But still, online dating has a few specific pitfalls that are closely connected to romantic expectations it fosters in the first place.

Among these pitfalls, one situation stands out in being probably the most difficult and often disappointing moment in the process of becoming a couple over the Internet: the first face-to-face encounter. Virtually all our respondents have made curious experiences with this situation. Oftentimes, the irritations seem minor at first sight. The other person might have a strange sounding voice or an odd bodily behavior, be much taller or smaller than anticipated, look older, more "dressed up", less cute than expected, or might not be as eloquent or communicative as before. "You build up an image of somebody. … But oftentimes it simply doesn't fit", Jenny says, describing an experience that is shared by many of our respondents.

Despite the fact that these irritations may seem marginal, they can have severe consequences. No matter what the actual problem is – the first face-to-face encounter mostly disturbs the image of the respective other in a very fundamental way. It is rarely the case that the feelings of intimacy and togetherness developed online seamlessly cross the border to the offline encounter. On the contrary, these feelings often collapse very fast when people meet outside the net, and it can be very hard or even impossible to reestablish them again (for similar observations see also: Illouz 2007; Herlyn 2001).

Given how strong these feelings can be in the first place, this sudden collapse is a very irritating and disappointing experience. People express their disappointment in different ways: they may accuse the other person of not having been authentic, honest or truthful before, they may question the reality status of online interaction in general or blame themselves for being too naïve. Carol concludes: "That's kind of a parallel universe, you know? Hard to describe. It's a dream world, nothing real, no. … You can read into it something about the man or woman of your dreams, you mold it into place. You are sculpting the other into Mr. Right, yeah. And then you meet him and he is anything but this."

As this quotation shows, the discrepancy between the romantic expectations and the actual experiences can lead to a fundamental change in the attitude towards the Internet. What has been a sphere of exiting romantic experiences now tends to become an illusionary, unreal world, a "parallel universe" as Carol puts it, which contains a huge potential for disappointment and frustration. The intense online "conversations" which were believed to foster self disclosure and mutual understanding now appear more like monadic soliloquies where one communicates with one's own projections rather than with a real counterpart. Finally, the feelings of intimacy and togetherness that are developing online

now become not only questionable but also potentially dangerous, because they tend to draw people into a world of false emotions and illusions. It seems as if the classic idea of "amour fou" is reactivated here – love as a dangerous passion that makes people lose touch with reality and go insane. But classic forms of "amour fou" are usually regarded as mainly driven by the body and the sexual desire – this makes them so dangerous and exiting at the same time (Breton 1949). On the Internet though, it is not the dominance but the absence of the body that causes the problems. People experience their passion as dangerous and illusionary simply because the emotions are initially detached from bodily co-presence, and the bodily experience and sexual desire cannot catch up with them in the face-to-face encounter.

As a result of the fundamental change in her point of view on the romantic potential of the Internet, Carol has now abandoned all her activity in the field of online dating. But this has not been her first reaction. She struggled nearly ten years with this decision, trying to learn the lessons and be more cautious or even stay away from the Internet for a while – but the exciting aspects of online dating always recaptured her.

It is very common that people try to develop some sort of protective measures against the disappointing experiences they made with online dating. First and foremost, this implies a certain form of self-discipline that should help to distance oneself from the dangerous feelings emerging in the virtual sphere. People talk about cooling down their emotions, being more realistic and aware of one's own projections, preparing oneself for the "shock" of the first face-to-face encounter, and so on. "You learn very fast that you shouldn't expect too much", our respondent Robert explains in the interview – this also implies that a free-floating romantic imagination on the Internet is not only a problem experienced by women, such as common preconception might suggest. "That's because you are projecting, you already develop an image of that person. … You have to retain yourself a bit, not always easy." During the interview, he started the computer and opened up his profile on an online dating site to show how it works. As he was browsing through the new messages and the list of recent visitors of his profile, it was impossible to overlook how hard it was for him to keep his imagination and emotions under control. "Hey no, that's not true! This one is really cute!" he shouted out, spotting a new face in the list of recent visitors. But instantly, he reminded himself: "Well, yes, it's always, you have to rein in a bit".

As we can see here and in many other cases, controlling imagination and emotions is a constant struggle while exploring the sphere of online dating. As outlined above, this has to do with the very nature of this "seductive space" (Ben-Ze'ev 2004) that fosters imagination, projection and romantic feelings in a specific way. But at the same time, online dating also suggests a 'solution' for this common problem. We are talking here about the different rationalistic techniques and tools that promise to overcome the irrationality of emotions, intuition, imagination and idealization in the process of partner selection. For this purpose, online dating sites offer a vast array of information about each and every member of their community. Advanced filtering techniques also allow for adjusting the selection of prospective partners very precisely in order to assure a common social, financial and educational background, similar hobbies and lifestyle, shared interests and opinions (Dröge 2011). All these techniques should help to reduce the uncertainty of love in general and online dating in particular. They promise to avoid disappointments, illusions and false expectations and make the partner selection a well-considered, sane and rational

choice. In fact, people are using these rationalistic tools and techniques as a central part of their strategy of self-discipline. This is what we have called above a 'learning process' in which rationalization processes emerge as an attempt to overcome the disappointments that result from the romantic expectations, which tend to attract people first.

Jenny for instance, the woman who once emailed with her virtual mate in Dubai for several months before meeting him face-to-face, is now trying to drastically cut down the time she invests in an online relationship. In order to do so, she developed a very systematic and methodic approach to online dating. In a first step, she adjusts the filtering criteria properly so that only a few hundred profiles remain on a certain dating site. With a quick run-through, she reduces these few hundred profiles to a short list of about thirty. Then, she writes brief messages to all of them, waiting for the answer to decide whom she will meet in person. With this method, she explains, one is able to "graze" a whole site in only one evening.

In a very similar manner, the interviewee Miriam reports that her "strategy improved much" over time: "Today, I'm able to scan a profile in two minutes. … I am ticking off my checklist." Also, she has now learned that it is a "waste of time" to write long emails back and forth because it constructs an image of somebody that is not reliable anyway. Instead, she meets people as soon as possible. This again leads to the problem that attending all these dates is very time-consuming. So she has become much more "choosy" with regard to the people she considers appropriate for a date. Furthermore, she optimized the very process of dating by meeting people only during her lunch break. This limits the time she has to invest to the one hour break at maximum, whereas dates in the evening can take much longer because they do not have a predefined end.

What becomes obvious in the considerations of Jenny and Miriam quoted here, is a certain idea of efficiency and economy of time that we find in many interviews. This idea is a good example of how concepts and routines from the realm of the market, from the sphere of work and mass consumption enter the field of personal relationships on the Internet. In order to understand what is happening here, it is important to see that the strategy of efficiency has a dual meaning in this particular situation. On the one hand, it reacts to the overabundance of potential partners available on the Internet. In fact, online dating exposes people to a "tyranny of choice" (Fiore 2004: 24 et seqq.; Schwartz 2004): If there are more options than a person can actually explore, choosing becomes inherently difficult. Advanced selection strategies have to be applied – techniques that are usually more common in the field of mass-consumption than they are in romantic encounters (Illouz 2007: 86 et seqq.; Arvidsson 2005).

On the other hand, the strategy of efficiency also answers to the disappointment of the romantic ambitions that we outlined above. First, it replaces quality by quantity. Instead of diving deeply into an intense emotional relationship with a single alter ego as the romantic ideal would suggest, the strategy multiplies the options by contacting more people with less intensity. This should then reduce the potential disappointment if one of these options fails. This however introduces a form of abstraction into the interactions which is, as outlined above, rather characteristic for social relationships in the realm of the market than for love.

Secondly, the attempt to cut down the time of the online conversation should also allow dangerous emotions and illusions as little room as possible to develop. As Robert

concludes, "the less projection the better it is. Establish a contact and meet the person right away, that's the best". Finally, this strategy tries to control one's own feelings by confronting them with the 'hard facts' laid down in the profiles and by relying on precon-figured selection criteria, rather than on what emerges in the conversation. Here, ration-alization techniques are used as a kind of disciplinary tool to prevent one's own feelings from losing touch with reality.

In a more general sense one can say that people adopt routines and strategies from other social spheres – notably that of market relationships, work and consumerism – in order to cope with the problems they face in their romantic ambitions on the Internet. In her research, Eva Illouz also found a lot of evidence for this. Her respondents used eco-nomic metaphors and analogies to describe their experiences with online dating, e.g. when they compared a rendezvous with a job interview where they apply the same tech-niques to market themselves to a potential employer (Illouz 2007: 87 et seq.). In our own study, several people compared online dating with shopping on the Internet: "It occurs to me as if you are choosing a digital camera, you know?", Carol explains, "you get offers and comparisons. This suits me and that, this and that. I don't know, it doesn't seem right for me somehow."

Conclusion

In the above quotation, the last sentence from Carol is particularly interesting. It shows that even if rationalization techniques seem to solve some of the problems that come to-gether with the romantic expectations fostered by the Internet, they also introduce new ir-ritations and difficulties. This can be seen in many of our interviews. The norm of roman-tic love does not simply disappear during the 'learning process' described above but it remains, making people feel that something "doesn't seem right" if they rely too much on strategies and routines from the sphere of market relationships and consumerism. The ten-sion between love and the market is apparently unsolvable but produces a difficult dou-ble-bind situation. Each side seems to offer 'solutions' for the problems of the respective other side but introduces new difficulties at the same time. Being more rationalistic and self-disciplined promises to avoid that the romantic feelings are becoming insane, but also distances oneself from what was the initial ambition of the whole project – that is, enter-ing into an exclusive and intimate relationship with a beloved other. Moving more to-wards the 'romantic' side of the spectrum may help to come closer to this goal and to ex-perience forms of intimacy and closeness that can be very exciting. But it also nurses doubts whether these feelings eventually are 'real' and can be translated into a stable off-line relationship.

Given how close romantic interactions and rational strategies are intertwined in this particular situation, one might ask if it is still useful to distinguish the two in such a strict manner as we suggested in the first part of this article. Following this doubt, online dating would be interpreted as a current example of how the boundaries between the social spheres of love and the market are blurred or even completely disappear.

From our point of view, such an interpretation would be wrong for two major reasons. At first, it would not allow for understanding the particular excitement that most people

experience when they first enter the field of online dating. This excitement mostly relies on the 'neoromantic' promises that the new media implies. If people would no longer be able to distinguish between a situation ruled by the romantic ideal and a more rational approach to love and intimate relationships, then these promises would not be as appealing as they are. Secondly, such an interpretation would not allow for explaining why people are so strongly disappointed if their romantic ambitions are not fulfilled on the Internet and why they express a feeling of unease if they move too much towards the rational and strategic side of the spectrum of possible orientations. This again points to the fact that the romantic ideal of love is still in vigor today and that people derive expectations from this ideal, which then leads to being disappointed. It is for these very reasons that we do not see the differences between romantic love and the market as completely blurred. Instead, the Internet seems to be a contemporary arena where the fundamental tension between both normative principles is being 'reenacted' under particular new circumstances.

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Myths and facts about online mate choice
Contemporary beliefs and empirical findings

Online-Dating – Mythen und Fakten. Eine Konfrontation gängiger Vorstellungen mit empirischen Ergebnissen

Abstract:
With the increasing dissemination and usage of online mate choice, finding a partner via the Internet has attracted remarkable public attention in the last decade. Several, mostly negative prejudices toward online mate choice – especially regarding its risks and disadvantages – circulate constantly throughout the mass media and form public perceptions. This article presents common stereotypes on this (still) new phenomenon, derived from an investigation of newspapers online and offline, online guides, blogs, and discussion forums and confronts them with the empirical facts. Based on several descriptive analyses, we discuss whether and to what extent ten prevalent beliefs correspond to the empirical reality of finding a mate via the Internet in Germany.

Key words: online dating, Internet, media discourse

Zusammenfassung:
Mit ihrer wachsenden Verbreitung ist die Partnerwahl im Internet zu einem bemerkenswerten Gegenstand des öffentlichen Diskurses geworden. Viele, meist negativ konnotierte Annahmen über die Eigenschaften und den Ablauf der Partnerwahl im Internet, insbesondere hinsichtlich ihrer Risiken und Nachteile, zirkulieren heute in den Medien und beeinflussen deren öffentliche Wahrnehmung. In diesem Beitrag präsentieren wir weit verbreitete Stereotype zum (immer noch) neuen Phänomen der Partnerwahl im Internet. Diese Klischees und Vorurteile, die in (Online-) Zeitungen und Zeitschriften, Online-Ratgebern, Blogs und Diskussionsforen recherchiert wurden, werden mit empirischen Fakten konfrontiert. Basierend auf verschiedenen deskriptiven Analysen diskutieren wir, ob bzw. inwieweit zehn populäre Vorstellungen mit der empirischen Realität der digitalen Partnersuche in Deutschland übereinstimmen.

Schlagworte: Online-Dating, Internet, medialer Diskurs

"Online dating doesn't seem very real to me.
Sure, people do meet and fall in love over the internet but I still don't believe in it."

Online User Krist1neeween1e

1. Introduction

Relationship formation within the social web in general and through dating sites in particular has "reached a critical mass in many countries" (Hogan/Li/Dutton 2011: 33). It seems difficult to escape this phenomenon of online mate choice, as it appears in multimedia advertising campaigns, journalistic discourses, and one's own circle of acquaintances. Finding a partner online can involve different social media such as chat or discussion forums or social networks (e.g., Facebook) and, most notably, online dating platforms. Despite the growing importance of the Internet as a means of mate search and partnership formation, many prejudices still seem to dominate the public discussion. These beliefs are often connected with making a distinction between searching for a partner offline (representing the traditional, "normal way" of finding a partner) and searching via the Internet (which is still associated with fundamental skepticism). These beliefs often convey the image of a minority of users who are forced to use the Internet for mate search purposes because of personal deficiencies such as a disadvantageous appearance. Consequently, if a relationship develops between people who have found each other online, it is often assumed not to be a "real" relationship. The opposite picture is drawn by the operators of mate search platforms. Dating companies stress the superior opportunities for finding a suitable partner from an online pool of partners, leading to a real, satisfying relationship. The mass media oscillate between those two positions, often not being able to justify either viewpoint with solid empirical data.

In fact, there has been a remarkable increase in research on online mate choice, but it has been published mostly for specialized scientific audiences (see e.g. Blossfeld/Schmitz/Schulz 2010; Fiore/Shaw/Taylor/Zhiong/Mendelsohn/Cheshire 2010; Gibbs/Ellison/Lai 2011; Hancock/Curry/Goorha/Woodworth 2008; Heino/Ellison/Gibbs 2010; Hitsch/Hortaçsu/Ariely 2010; Hogan/Li/Dutton 2011; Skopek 2011). It is often difficult to bridge the "communication gap" between this scientific discourse and that in the public sphere. This gap is the underlying motivation for our paper. We aim to pick up common beliefs on online mate choice, examine them empirically, and make the findings accessible to the general public. We have searched through different media sources and extracted predominant opinions and prejudices towards finding a mate online. The most prevalent beliefs are investigated and then analyzed with reference to the different studies available on online users as well as on the usage and character of online mate choice. To address a broad audience we present the empirical results in a way intelligible to the public at large and do not apply advanced statistical models. We show that some preconceptions about finding a mate online hold true, whereas others have to be rejected, thereby turning out to be myths. Empirical data is used to put all examined beliefs into perspective and we act as "hunters of myths" as Elias (1978) labeled it, aiming to shed light on the phenomenon of mate choice in the digital sphere.

2. Ten popular beliefs and facts on online dating

The word myth derives from the Greek *mythos*, which has a broad spectrum of meanings (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1990: 710) ranging from the unquestioned validity of *mythos* to the concept of *logos* whose validity or truth can be argued and demonstrated. We use the term in the modern sense of the word as a false statement, belief, theory, idea, and so forth. Myths represent a shared set of beliefs that have a significant meaning for a particular society. They might be functional in the sense of disburdening people's everyday practices or dysfunctional in the sense of providing false foundations for agency. Representing more or less functional rules of thumb for everyday practice, myths hardly constitute a "coherent system of beliefs" (Bourdieu 1999), and contradictions in a particular field are not unexpected. However, empirical answers are all the more necessary if one intends to "hunt them down" in line with Elias' conception of the sociologist's task. Abbott (2010: 174) notes that "in this electronic age we can be ignorant faster than ever before, about more things and in more settings." Hence, digital phenomena are particular a subject of unexamined beliefs. But, at the same time, the Internet also offers promising new opportunities for empirical assessment. The following work outlines ten widespread beliefs on online mate choice and contrasts them with empirical facts in order to assess whether they turn out to be either myths or beliefs that actually apply to social reality.

2.1 Data and method

The Internet does not just offer easy access to data on public discourses as they precipitate in newspapers or web lexica such as *Wikipedia*, but also to more spontaneous sources such as blogs in which Internet users discuss their perceptions of the social world. To gain an overview on the current discourse on online mate choice, we browsed a range of (online) newspapers, online lexica, and blogs for references to and discussions on online mate choice using different search terms such as online dating, online mate choice, or Internet dating. We collected a comprehensive compilation of ideas, perceptions, and evaluations on the discourse of finding a mate via online platforms. In a second step, we singled out the most frequent statements (in sources written in either English or German) in these narratives in order to identify the ten most prevalent ideas on online mate choice. These beliefs can be arranged and presented in three thematic groups: (a) beliefs about online dating users, (b) beliefs about the usage and character of online dating, and (c) beliefs about the offline impact of online dating.

   We used different empirical sources to analyze and evaluate these statements: (a) observational online data revealing the processes on a dating site, (b) online survey data expressing subjective perceptions of dating site users, and (c) offline data on couples. The first data source consists of Web-generated process data collected on a major German dating platform (referred to as the "PMOD[1] logfile" in the following, see Schmitz/Sko-

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1   PMOD is the abbreviation of the project "Processes of Mate Choice in Online-Dating" coordinated by Hans-Peter Blossfeld at the University of Bamberg and funded by the German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG).

pek/Schulz/Klein/Blossfeld 2009). It contains records (logfiles) of contact behavior and profile information on 32,365 active users[2] and 683,312 contact events collected between January 2009 and April 2010. This kind of data allows us to observe the users' behavior over time and to reveal mating preferences based on actual behavior (see Schmitz/Sko-pek/Schulz/Klein/Blossfeld 2009). The second data source was an online panel conducted between June 2009 and April 2010 on the same German dating platform. This could be used to analyze subjective perceptions on the use of the Internet as a means of mate choice. All registered and active users of the dating platform were invited to take part in the survey via e-mail. A total of 3,535 online daters of the platform filled in the question-naire – representing a response rate of 10%. These data are referred to as the "PMOD sur-vey". The third data source was the first wave of the German "Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationship and Family Dynamics" (pairfam)[3]. Pairfam is a representative offline survey of 12,402 persons and 3,729 partners. The first pairfam wave allows us to assess how many of these relationships have been constituted offline and online. So far, only online surveys and business reports, that tend to overestimate the actual incidence of relation-ships started on the Internet, have been available. In contrast, the pairfam survey data en-ables us to estimate the number and characteristics of individuals who successfully used the Internet to find a partner and eventually formed a couple. We analyze all data with simple descriptive methods such as graphs and tables in order to make the results easily accessible to a broader public audience.

2.2. Beliefs and facts on online dating users

Belief: People using online dating are largely young and male. A still widespread and te-nacious belief in the context of online dating is that users are mostly male (Consumers Guides 2010) and young (see Paul 2010). This assumption arises from two ideas: (a) Internet usage is associated with young men because of their particular affinity for tech-nology, and (b) young men have a disproportionately high interest in the opposite sex.

Fact: In the first step, we analyzed the belief that only young people use the Internet as a way to find a partner. Figure 1 describes the age distribution of male and female users of a major German dating site.[4] The average age of both sexes was about 40 years. Hence, the idea that only young people are using this medium to find a partner cannot be corrobo-rated.

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2   An active user is defined as a person who at least sent one message within the observational win-dow.

3   The survey is being coordinated by Bernhard Nauck, Johannes Huinink, Josef Brüderl, and Sabine Walper (see Huinink/ Brüderl/Nauck/Walper/Castiglioni/Feldhaus 2010). The panel is receiving long-term funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG).

4   Frequencies are presented as a kernel density distribution, a smooth representation that allows us to interpret the variable without single biasing parameter values and to compare different distributions within the same dimensionality.

Figure 1:   Age distribution (kernel density) of online dating users by sex
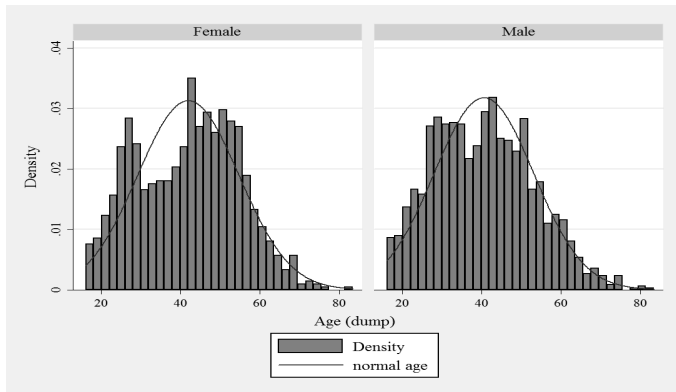
Source: PMOD logfile of users of a German dating platform; *N* = 32,365; own calculation.

Furthermore, it can be seen that the users' age on the platform did not follow a simple normal distribution. Instead, age distributions for both sexes showed a clear bimodal pattern. Examining the family status of users revealed that this bimodal pattern was composed of two different normal distributions. Figure 2 shows that there were different normal distributions for men and women who have not been married before versus those who have married before.

Figure 2:   Age distribution (kernel density) by sex and marital status.
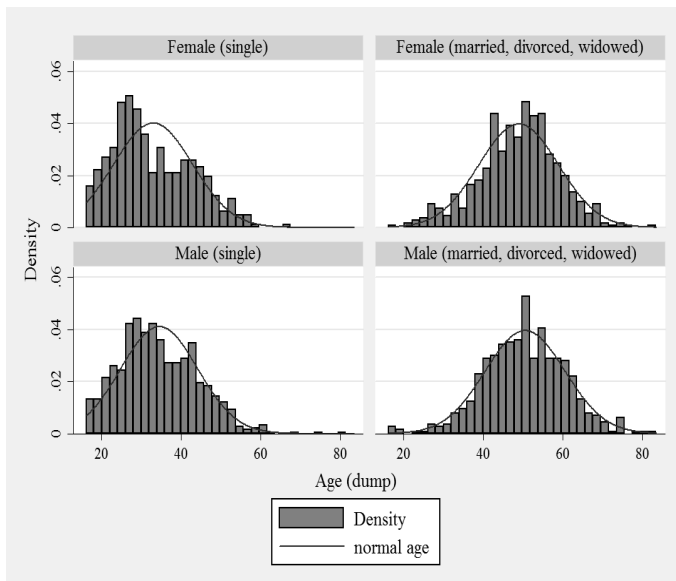
Source: PMOD logfile of users of a German dating site; *N* = 32,365; own calculation.

In the next step, we analyzed the frequently held belief that users of dating sites tend to be mostly male. This common belief is probably the reason why operators of online dating sites repeatedly contend that the relation between the sexes on their online platforms is more or less balanced or even female dominated. While some research was able to show that more men than women register to dating sites (see e.g., Brym/Lenton 2001; Sautter/Tippett/Morgan 2010), we wanted to analyze whether the sexes do differ by means of the active usage (as defined above), given a registration. Table 1 shows the percentages of both sexes on the analyzed dating platform based on the PMOD logfile data. Analyzing the profile information of 32,365 users of the German dating site yielded about 54% registered women and 46% registered men. Nonetheless, dating platforms are often abused by dubious profiteers who program artificial users (also called "bots"),[5] trying to bait users into commercial services. Those programs, which simulate humans, exhibit attractive features, especially being female, young, and good-looking. Nonetheless, such artificial actors can be identified by their behavioral and interactional patterns (see Schmitz/Yanenko/Hebing 2011). Controlling for such bots resulted in a slight change in the sex distribution (48% women and 52% men). These results still clearly contradict the view that online dating sites are generally predominated by males, at least by means of active usage.

Table 1:   Gender distribution with and without bot correction
            (column-wise percentages)

Gender	With bots	Without bots
Women	53.97	48.38
Men	46.03	51.62
N	32.365	31.161

Source: PMOD logfile data of 32,365 active users of a German dating site; see Schmitz/Yanenko/Hebing (2011).

In summary, we exposed two common beliefs as myths: It is not just young people who use online dating today. On the contrary, there is a considerable proportion of people older than 60 years (extreme outliers are excluded). Two different populations (the "never married" and the "married before") looking for a new partner on online dating sites create a bimodal age distribution for both sexes. The *active* participation in online dating is quite balanced with regard to sex with a slight over-representation of males – at least on the dating platform analyzed here. Of course, the market for dating platforms might be segmented by age and gender in Germany, and further research will have to inspect the gender distribution across all dating platforms.

Belief: People using online dating cannot find a partner offline. In an online newspaper, Kayawe (2011) has asked: "Online dating: a sign of desperation?" This illustrates the general belief that the only men and women who will need to use the Internet are those who are unable to find a partner offline. Part of this conviction is that people looking for a mate online can be characterized by unfavorable traits and thus by having lower chances in general. As the Telegraph.co.uk (2010) points out: "For years, online dating has en-

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5   The term "bot" is derived from the English "robot", referring to the fact the actor is not human.

dured a stigma that suggests it's only reserved for those who are unattractive, old or unlucky in love." In other words, this kind of characterization of online daters is used mostly for people who have not only low chances on mating markets, but also in other dimensions of their lives such as the labor market.

Fact: To test this belief, we compared the answers of the respondents in the PMOD online survey with those of the respondents in the pairfam survey. In both surveys, respondents were asked to assess their own attractiveness with the following question: "There are many people who would find me attractive as their partner".[6] Table 2 compares self-assessed attractiveness in the two surveys. Men and women in the PMOD online survey more often reported self-assessed attractiveness and less often unattractiveness than respondents in the pairfam offline survey did.

Table 2:   Self-assessed attractiveness in respondents from the pairfam versus PMOD surveys (column-wise percentages)

There are many people who would find me attractive as their partner	Pairfam			PMOD		
	Male	Female	Overall	Male	Female	Overall
1 Not at all	3.62	5.00	4.20	5.22	5.39	4.96
2	17.58	19.54	18.41	7.30	5.95	6.33
3 Partly	47.22	41.45	44.78	38.89	33.09	34.26
4	23.56	23.09	23.36	21.27	24.63	21.21
5 Absolutely	8.02	10.92	9.25	12.78	19.89	14.67
N	2,071	1,520	3,591	1,589	1,076	2,843

Source: Pairfam (*N* = 12,402) and PMOD surveys (N = 3,535); own calculation.

People using the net for purposes of mate choice cannot be characterized generally as having a low "mate value." A large group of online daters characterized itself as very attractive and probably uses the Internet merely as an additional and maybe exciting mate market. Thus, the belief that people using the Internet for mate search purposes suffer from a low mate value does not hold.

Belief: The majority of users fake their online profile. Users' self-presentation in online dating profiles is crucial for generating contacts and reactions to their own contact offers. Due to the great number of competitors, users of online dating services often feel the pressure to present themselves in the best possible light (see Ellison/Heino/Gibbs 2006). This leads to the widespread belief that "online dating profiles are only about lying and betraying" (Riestenpatt 2010) and raises questions like: "Is it really possible that people who are searching for a partner on online dating sites are always taller, wealthier, and sportier than the average German citizen?" (Klopp 2010[7]). One widespread belief is that online users exaggerate because they cannot find a partner offline.

Another widespread belief is that deceptive self-presentation has a gender-specific dimension: "When it comes to Internet dating men are much more likely than women to lie about . . . well, everything except their weight" (Vass 2011). Thus, it is often assumed

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6   The item of the PMOD survey has been recoded from a 7-scale to a 5-scale variable.
7   Translated from German by the authors.

that (a) men lie more often than women, and (b) men lie about other characteristics than women: "Women tend to lie about their weight or their age. Men tend to lie about their income, level of baldness and their athletic condition" (Hedrick 2011).

Fact: When users of the analyzed German dating platform were asked whether they had ever experienced a lie on online dating sites (see Figure 3), about 20% of men and women stated that they had experienced a lie only once. About 37% of the users (32% of men, 43% of women) had experienced lies several times. However, it is also true that more than 40% of the users never detected any lies told by their counterparts.

Figure 3:   Pie charts of experienced deception (Percentages). Question: "Have you ever been in contact with somebody on an online dating site who lied in his/her online profile?
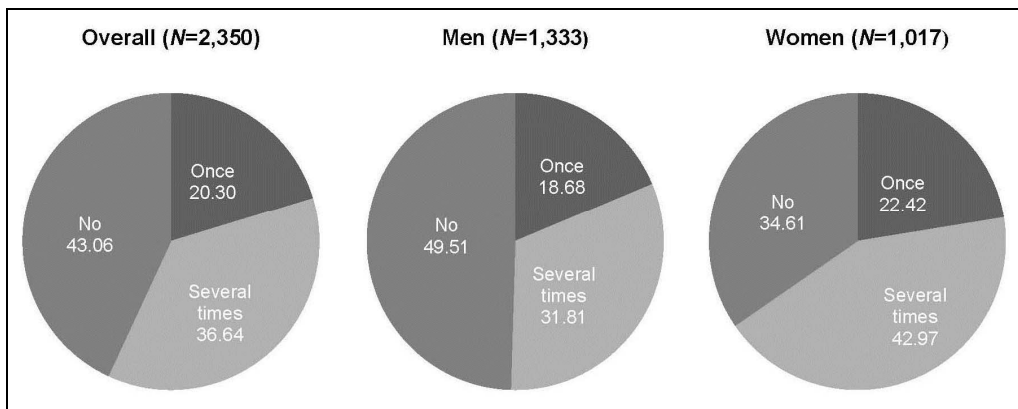
Source: PMOD survey of users of a major German dating platform. Sample restricted to respondents who had already been in contact with other users.

Table 3 presents experiences of men and women with deceptive profile characteristics reported by other users. Indeed, results showed that women 'cheated' most frequently regarding their weight (35%), profile picture (30%), and age (26%), which are characteristics referring to women's physical attractiveness. Men, in contrast, lied most often about the kind of relationship they desired (i.e., whether they were looking for somebody for a chat or e-mail friendship, a sexual affair, or a long-term relationship, 45%), their marital status (36%), and their weight (38%). Interestingly, men lied more often than women with regard to all listed profile characteristics except for the number of own children. Two explanations are possible: either women are better at detecting men's lies than vice versa or men really do lie more often than women.

The analysis of the frequency of deceptive behavior in Figure 3 and Table 3 is only one dimension of the trust problem between daters in an online mate market. Another – possibly more relevant – dimension is the magnitude of deception. A potential partner will more likely tolerate his/her interlocutor presenting himself/herself as being one year younger instead of ten years younger than he really is. One way to measure the magnitude of lies on online dating sites is to compare the characteristics of online dating users with

those of the Internet population in Germany (see Table 4). On the aggregate level, online dating users are indeed a little taller, less overweight, and have a lower BMI than the average Internet user. This allows for two different conclusions: Either online daters are a selective population who are a little taller, less overweight, and have a lower BMI or – the more likely interpretation – online dating users are lying at least a little with regard to these characteristics. Similar results have been documented in Toma, Hancock, and Ellison's (2008; see also: Hancock/Toma/Ellison 2007) refined study that compared the weight, height, and age in online daters' profiles with their actual data.

Table 3:   Which profile characteristic have you been lied to about? (Percentages)

Experienced misrepresentation of other users regarding:	Male	Female	Overall	N		Phi
Height	12.32	25.18	17.86	2,312	***	0.166
Age	25.70	32.34	28.57	2,321	***	0.073
Weight	35.39	37.46	36.29	2,315		–
Desired relationship	26.39	44.97	34.43	2,318	***	0.194
Marital status	17.45	35.56	25.30	2,316	***	0.206
Children	14.17	13.53	13.89	2,311		–
Education	17.28	23.35	19.90	2,312	***	0.075
Profile picture	30.02	35.23	32.27	2,321	**	0.055
Sex	6.25	3.81	5.19	2,311	**	0.054

Source: Online survey of users of a German online dating site; own calculations. Sample restricted to respondents who already had been in contact with other users. *n* refers to the number of respondents who answered the question with "yes" or "no." *$p \le .05$. **$p \le .01$. ***$p \le .001$.

Table 4:   Comparison of online daters' height, weight, and BMI with the height, weight, and BMI of the German Internet population

	%-default	M	SD_x	x^{p50}		%-default	M	SD_x	x^{p50}
PMOD [a]					**Internet Population** [b]				
(N = 12,608)					(N = 1,587)				
Men (n = 7,430)					*Men (n = 889)*				
Height [c]	0.78	180.95	7.08	180	Height	0.34	179.11	6.91	179
Weight [d]	6.92	80.12	11.38	80	Weight	1.61	83.47	14.47	82
Body Mass Index [e]	7.42	24.47	3.14	24.15	Body Mass Index	1.61	26.01	4.25	25.31
Women (n = 5,178)					*Women (n = 698)*				
Height	1.00	167.94	6.41	168	Height	0.29	167.00	6.22	168
Weight	18.68	64.45	12.48	62	Weight	2.76	67.26	13.20	64
Body Mass Index	19.22	22.88	3.91	22.10	Body Mass Index	2.76	25.13	4.54	23.12

Source: This analysis was conducted by Skopek (2010) within his PhD Thesis.
Notes: [a] Sample of active users derived from process-generated data; [b] calculated with health data from *ALLBUS* survey from 2004; [c] measured in *cm*; [d] measured in *kg*; [e] calculation: *BMI* = kg/m^2. *Column legend*: %-default = percentage of respondents not answering to the particular item; *M* = arithmetic mean; SD_x = standard deviation; x^{p50} = median.

In sum, there are often gender-specific deceptions about daters' characteristics in online profiles, and presumably also within e-mail communications. Thus, this belief seems to hold true. But – and this is the important point here – the magnitude of misrepresentation seems

to be reasonably small. Online dates are reasonably a little taller, a little less overweight, and as Hancock et al. (2007) have shown, tend to present themselves in their online profile as being a little younger than they really are (see also Zillmann/Schmitz/Blossfeld in this issue).

2.3   Beliefs and facts on the usage and character of online dating

Belief: Physical appearance is essential in online dating. One belief about the character of online dating is that users are searching for physical appearance more than for inner values. This is also one of the most common opinions found in different sources: "It just seems like people will only date you on your looks" (User icedout 2008). This belief also has a gender-specific dimension: The everyday assumption is that "men only want beauties, women take all"[8] (Bild.de 2009). Another belief derived from our media analysis pointed in exactly the opposite direction: "Looks don't count" on the Internet (see Spurlock, 2006). The idea here is that, in contrast to offline interaction, individuals in the virtual world always want to get to know a potential mate's inner characteristics before finding out about their physical attractiveness.

Fact: Figure 4 reports the answers of participants in the PMOD online survey when asked to state the subjective importance of different characteristics of a potential partner. Both men and women attributed the same importance to physical attractiveness. However, "humor," "intelligence," and "education" seemed to be even more important. Thus, outward appearance seems to be of some importance for both sexes, but it is not the most important personal characteristic.

Figure 4:   Profile plot of subjective importance of several potential mate characteristics
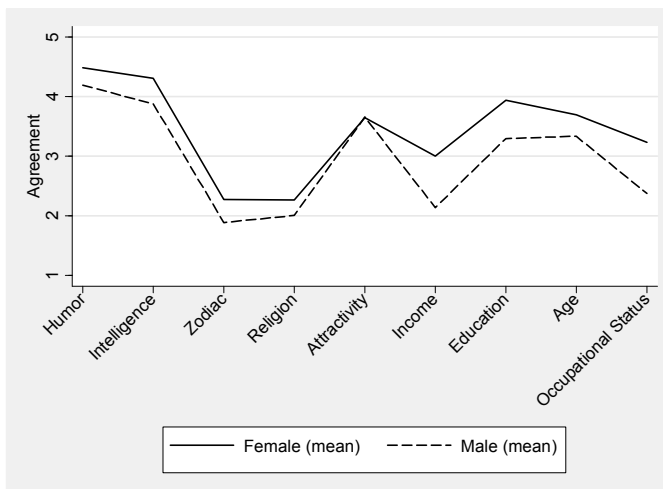
Source: PMOD survey of users of a major German dating-platform; *N* = 3,535; own calculation.

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8   Translated from German by the authors.

Because respondents might not admit to the subjective relevance of physical appearance in a survey, we also analyzed an additional indicator: profile pictures and their effect on the interest of potential mates. Table 5 reports the average number of first contacts received by female and male users depending on whether or not their profile contained a picture. The rate of ingoing first contacts for men and for women was much higher when their profile contained a picture (women: 16.04 vs. 6.29 first contacts; men: 3.86 vs. 1.49 first contacts).

Table 5:   Ingoing first contacts of online users depending on whether or not their profile contained a picture (means with standard deviations in parentheses)

Profile picture	Female	Male	Overall
No	6.29	1.49	3.55
	(7.98)	(2.77)	(6.10)
Yes	16.04	3.86	8.71
	(19.28)	(5.67)	(14.25)
Total	11.80	2.90	6.55
	(16.16)	(4.86)	(11.84)

Source: PMOD logfile of users of a major German dating platform; $N = 32,365$; own calculation.

Figure 5 shows the same pattern in the form of a density distribution ranging from no ingoing first contacts to 10 first contacts. Presenting a picture on the profile led to a much higher number of first contacts for both sexes, especially for men: More than 60% of men without a picture were not contacted at all within the observation window, whereas less than 10% of women with a profile picture received no contacts. These differences show that presenting one's picture impacts decisively on a user's chances in the virtual dating market.

Figure 5:   Density plot of ingoing first contacts by sex and presence of profile picture
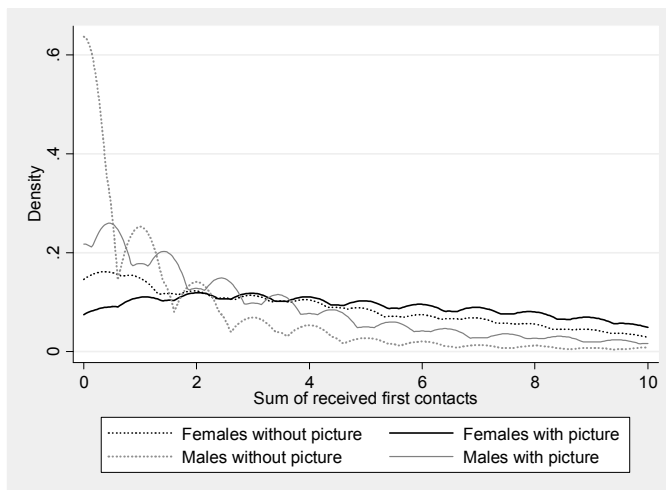
Source: PMOD logfile of users of a major German dating-platform; $N = 32,365$; own calculation.

In the next step, we analyzed contact behavior in relation to the body mass index (BMI) based on profile information on height and weight.[9] Figure 6 compares the density distribution of female BMI (bright distribution) with the averaged BMI of women contacted by male users (dark distribution). Hence, this illustration compares the given attractiveness of women on the dating site with the attractiveness preferred by men. Men tended to contact women with a BMI lower than 25 more frequently than their actual availability on the platform would suggest. In other words, there was a high competition for females with this body mass index and little demand for women with a disadvantageous BMI of 25 and higher. Furthermore, women with a BMI of 25 and higher were contacted less than their presence would let expect.

Figure 6:   Actual (dark) versus contacted (bright) female body-mass distribution
              (density plot)
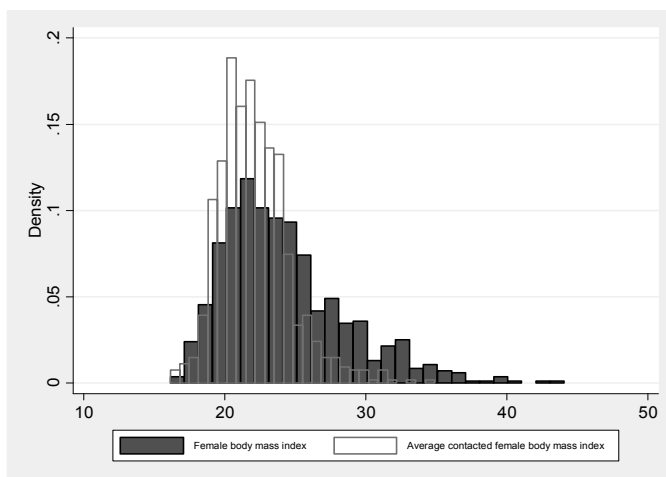
Source: PMOD logfile of users of a major German dating platform; *N* = 32,365; own calculation.

A similar, yet less obvious pattern could be observed for contact rates of male BMI (see Figure 7). Males with a BMI between 25 and 28 were contacted more often by women than we would expect based on the actual male BMI distribution.

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9   The body mass is an approximate indicator of outward appearance and is calculated as: BMI = Mass
     (kg)/(height (m))². A BMI of 18.5–25.0 is usually conceived of as "normal" and favorable.

Figure 7:   Actual (dark) vs. contacted (bright) male body-mass distribution
              (density plot)
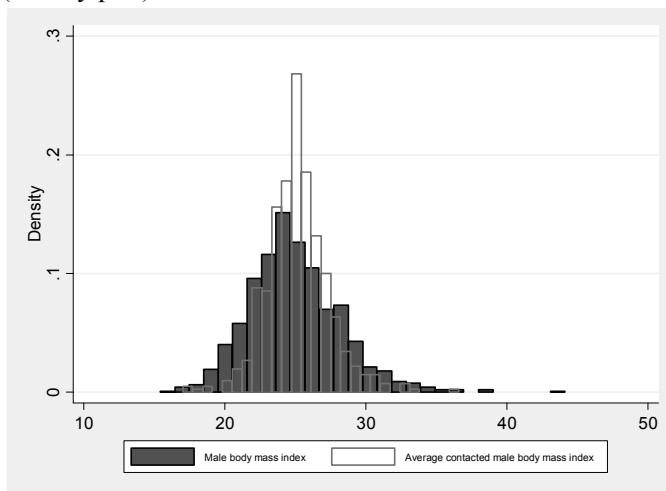
Source: PMOD logfile of users of a major German dating-platform; *N* = 32,365; own calculation.

These indicators reveal that physical appearance plays an important role in the first con-
tacts on the Internet. Stated preferences also show the importance of outer appearance
for the users of online dating. One advantage of Web-generated process data becomes
apparent here: Users might lie with regard to their height and weight or, if asked, with
regard to survey questions, but observing the contacted users with their BMIs reveals
their actual behavior, making this a good proxy for the relevance of physical appearance.
Using this data, it was possible to illustrate that the belief that online dating is about
physical appearance *cannot* be rejected. However, its relative importance in comparison
with other users' characteristics in the online profile and offline contexts needs further
empirical investigation.

Belief: Online dating is mostly about sex. Another frequently encountered belief is that
online dating and sex are closely linked: "Mostly, they will screw you up, or you are only
an affair anyway, perhaps even for a man who is in a relationship or married who also
goes hunting on the Internet"[10] (User sarah022 2010) Thus, there is the belief that for
some people – especially men – online dating is a fast, easy, and effective tool with which
to find somebody for a short-term relationship without incurring liabilities and conse-
quences, so that online dating platforms "are a wonderful place for married men to pick
up women" (User KittenHasAWhip 2010).

Fact: Within the PMOD online survey, we asked participants to rate how far seven poten-
tial reasons for the usage of the online dating platform applied to them. Figure 8 reports
the relevance of a sexual relationship along with other potential personal goals. This in-
cludes questions about finding a partner for nonbinding to binding relationships like chat-
ting, spending spare time with somebody, looking for a date, or finding someone for mar-

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10   Translated from German by the authors.

riage. Figure 8 demonstrates that there were no notable differences between men and women with regard to the stated possible goals. Obviously, men and women use online dating in order to establish very different relationship forms. But for both sexes, the most frequently stated reason for online dating was to find a serious partner and to establish a lasting relationship. Thus, the goal of realizing a sexual relationship is not the most important objective of online dating platform users, but as topics of sexuality are particularly sensitive, the data might underreport the true relevance of sexual interest. However, as the data reveal, men do seem to place more emphasis on sexuality than women.

Figure 8:   Profile plot of reasons for using online dating services
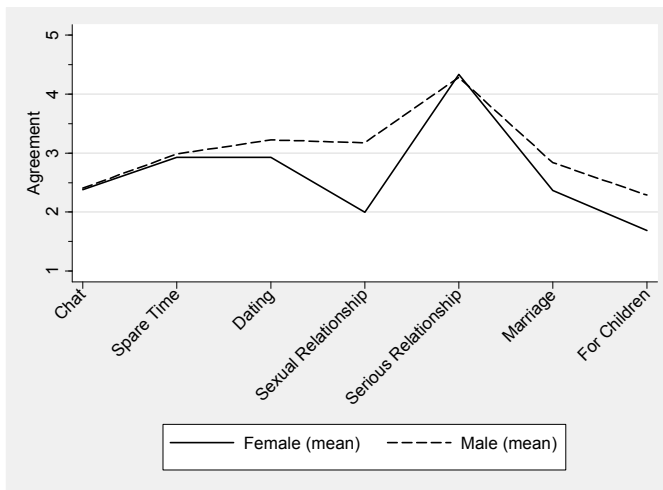
Source: PMOD survey of users of a major German dating platform; *N* = 3,535; own calculation.

To summarize, the belief that online dating is mostly about sex has to be rejected. This turns out to be a myth, because there are other relevant reasons why men and women use online dating. Establishing a sexual relationship is only one of several reasons, although it is especially important for men.

Belief: Women adopt a passive role in contact initiation. Another belief in the media discourse is that women are the passive gender when it comes to contact initiation. The English Wikipedia, for example, states that "men are more likely to initiate online exchanges and are less choosy" compared to women (see Wikipedia entry for "Dating" 2011). This belief is accompanied by the everyday belief that women who are rare in the (online) mating market do not need to take the first step to initiate a relationship. Instead, women get many contact initiations from men. Thus, it is assumed that women "normally" wait until men try to get in contact and do not try to initiate contacts with men they are interested in.

Fact: Again, we used the PMOD log file data on users' contact behavior.[11] We defined whether a user of the dating site was active (more than 80% of all interactions were initiated), passive (less than 40% were initiated), or mixed (40-80% were initiated). A look at the message activity rate by sex (see Table 6) gives some empirical support for this belief: About 51% of men revealed an active contact behavior, but only 12% of women. Vice versa, only about 11% of men showed a passive behavior, but about 52% of women. The belief in gender-specific activity propensity holds true, even if it cannot be generalized to all men and women.

In a further step, we assessed the relation between a user's activity and the so-called ingoing contact rate indicator (ICR). The degree of activity is defined as percentage of sent contact initiations by user out of all involved contact events. See table 6 for the calculation of percentage of active, passive, and mixed strategy users. The $\overline{ICR}$ (ingoing contact rate) is the average number of ingoing first contact offers in the observation window; the $\overline{ICR}$ /month is the average number of ingoing first contact offers within 30 days of registration (monthly rate).

Passive women had more first contact offers than active women. The same relation was found for men, but to a smaller extent. Women had an average ingoing contact rate of about four contacts per month, whereas men had at least one ingoing first contact per month. But active men had fewer first contact initiations than passive men. Women who had almost no ingoing first contacts seemed to drop their passive role and become more active. For men, it was the other way round: Men who received enough first contact initiations from women did not have to be active themselves and could move into a more passive role.

Table 6:   Contact initiation activity by sex and frequency of incoming contact offers

Contact initiation	a_i	Men %	Men $\overline{ICR}$	Men $\dfrac{ICR}{month}$	Women %	Women $\overline{ICR}$	Women $\dfrac{ICR}{month}$	Overall %	Overall $\overline{ICR}$	Overall $\dfrac{ICR}{month}$
Passive	$0.0 \le a_i \le 0.2$	11.31	6.21	1.27	52.32	17.19	5.45	28.15	14.59	4.46
	$0.2 \le a_i \le 0.4$	9.78	5.90	1.73	1.38	9.34	3.32	12.90	7.80	2.61
Mixed	$0.4 \le a_i \le 0.6$	13.17	3.95	1.01	10.96	6.11	2.57	12.26	4.74	1.58
	$0.6 \le a_i \le 0.8$	14.30	4.06	0.96	6.47	5.75	1.90	11.09	4.47	1.18
Active	$0.8 \le a_i \le 1.0$	51.43	1.03	0.27	12.87	1.16	0.66	35.60	1.05	0.33
Overall		100.00	2.91	0.72	100.00	11.81	3.91	100.00	6.56	2.03

Source: PMOD logfile of users of a major German dating platform. Sample of active users (men = 7,430 and women = 5,178).

In summary, the belief that women are more passive in terms of contact initiation indeed holds true. However, both men and women will move to a more active contact strategy when they do not get enough ingoing first contacts.

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11   This analysis was originally conducted by Jan Skopek (2011) as part of his doctoral thesis. It is based on observations of interactions in the same German database during the first 6 months of 2007. Calculation: $\overline{ICR}$ /month = 30 x ICR/t, when t is the number of days during which the profile is registered within the observation window.

2.4   Beliefs and facts on the offline impact of online dating

Belief: Online dating does not work. "Online dating is just not real"[12] (Baum 2009). Such expressions are widespread in the public discourse on online dating. But what does "real" mean in this context? It refers to how far online dating works when it comes to finding a partner in real life. As discussed above, many people do not believe that the person you get to know on a dating platform is the same person you will associate with later in "reality." In other words, online dating is often assumed to have no offline impact. An offline relationship based on online dating, however, does not necessarily have to be a romantic long-term relationship. It might be a sexual relationship or a friendship based on shared leisure-time activities.

Fact: In order to assess whether this belief is a myth or not, we analyzed the appropriate items in the PMOD online survey. About one-third of male respondents and 44% of female respondents reported having previously found a partner via the Internet (see Table 7).

Table 7:   I have found a partner online before (column-wise percentages)

I have found a partner online before	Male	Female	Overall
No	67.88	55.71	62.98
Yes	32.12	44.29	37.02
N	1,569	1,059	2,628

Source: PMOD survey of users of a major German online dating platform; *N* = 3,535; own calculations.

Thus, mate search on the Internet can indeed deliver real partners. In a next step, we asked respondents to tell us what kind of relationship they had had with the partner they had found (Figure 9).

Figure 9:   Found someone for…
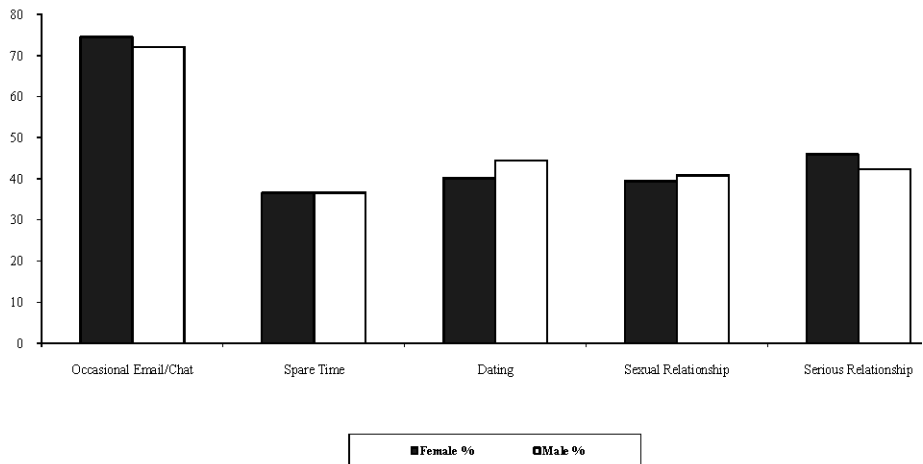
Source: PMOD survey of users of a major German dating platform; *N* = 3,535; own calculation.

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12   Translated from German by the authors.

Both sexes had found romantic partnerships and sexual relationships. Finally, we asked respondents whether the partner they met on the Internet had fulfilled their expectations. Table 8 indicates that at least 56% of respondents reported that their expectations were fulfilled at least sometimes, often, or even every time.

Table 8:   Were your expectations fulfilled when you met the partner offline?

	n	%
Never	139	11.17
Seldom	404	32.48
Sometimes	530	42.60
Often	150	12.06
Every time	21	1.69
N	1,244	100.00

Source: PMOD survey of users of a major German dating platform; $N = 3,535$; own calculation.

Hence, the belief that "online dating does not work" can clearly be rejected. It turns out to be a myth: Men and women often find partners online for different offline purposes, and a fulfillment of their expectations is by no means uncommon.

Belief: Only a negligible subpopulation uses the Internet for mate search purposes. Despite a growth in advertising and media reception, some people still regard the Internet as negligible and abnormal when it comes to romantic or sexual matters. A widespread belief regarding online dating and finding a partner via the Internet in general is that only a few, specific or even "suspect" people use this type of mate search (see Rieke 2011). The "normal" way of finding a partner is still assumed to be via offline friendship networks, one's workplace, or educational institutions. This assumed normality still leads to the idea that only a few people will deviate from the common way of finding a mate. Nonetheless, it is not unusual to discover that acquaintances use the net for mating purposes, but they will often confess this only under the seal of secrecy. In sharp contrast to these opinions, the media and advertising draw a picture of the Internet as an enormously successful way of searching for a mate that results in a significant number of partnerships. Whereas some research has addressed how many individuals in a country use the Internet to find a partner (see Bajos/Bozon 2008; Brym/Lenton 2001; Fiore/Donath 2005; Hardie/Buzwell 2006; Sautter/Tippett/Morgan 2010), there is no clear answer to the question of how many couples this actually produces.

Fact: Because the assumption that few couples actually emerge from online mate search refers to the total population, representative data on actual couples is needed to assess its validity. Hence, we drew on representative information derived from the pairfam survey. Along with other questions, participants in this study (born 1970 or later) were asked to name the context in which they had found their actual partner. As Table 9 shows, 5.45% of all couples within the representative offline sample first met online and about 9% of the members of the 1990-1994 birth cohort found their partners online. This is a fairly conservative estimate, because actors tend to hide this fact intentionally so that the Internet will play an underrepresentative role in the retrospective couple history. Furthermore, the data analyzed were collected in 2008. It can be assumed that more current data will

reveal an even more intensive diffusion. At any rate, we can see that the belief that only a negligible number of couples emerge from online mate search does *not* hold true, at least for the younger birth cohorts surveyed by the pairfam panel. Future analyses will show whether the Internet will grow in importance for mating processes, and whether the assumption that only a marginal subpopulation use the Internet for mate search is a myth.

Table 9:   Ways of finding a partner by birth cohort in different contexts (column-wise percentages)

Context	1970–1974	1980–1984	1990–1994	Overall
School, training, work	26.60	22.07	27.64	24.96
Hobby, club, sport	10.97	8.03	11.18	9.86
Bar, disco	21.17	16.67	6.83	18.12
Friends/Acquaintances	30.33	39.41	40.68	34.77
Relatives	4.61	5.48	2.80	4.77
Via the Internet	3.89	6.46	9.01	5.35
Vacation	2.41	1.88	1.86	2.16
N	1,823	1,332	322	3,477

Source: Pairfam data (*N* = 3,729). Own calculations.

Belief: Romantic relationships constituted online are no "real" relationships. As discussed before, many people believe that seeking a partner online cannot provide a stable and lasting partnership. It is assumed that partnerships initiated online are mostly short and not as deep as relationships that began offline. Online dating is often regarded as being "just for temporary enjoyment, not a lifetime of happiness" (User loenex 2009). As a result, many believe that the Internet cannot lead to a long-lasting partnership. "Real" relationships are considered to emerge in the "real world" and not on the Internet.

Fact: Tables 10 and 11 report different subjective indicators based on pairfam items. Table 10 compares couples who met online with couples who met offline. A subjectively relevant indicator is whether the partners have declared their love to each other.

Table 10:   Reciprocally stated love in the relationship (column-wise percentages)

Declared their love to each other	Offline	Online	Overall
Yes	94.62	93.18	94.48
No	5.38	6.28	5,52
N	1,971	220	2,191

Source: Pairfam data (*N* = 3,729). Own calculations.

Another indicator is whether the couple plans to set up a common household (see Table 11). Neither indicator revealed any important differences between couples who met online or offline.

Table 11:   Future plan for common household (column-wise percentages)

Common household planned	Offline	Online	Overall
1 Not at all	23.03	29.51	23.67
2	25.11	27.87	25.39
3 Partly	21.94	18.85	21.63
4	24.48	17.21	23.76
5 Absolutely	5.44	6.56	5.55
N	1,103	122	1,225

Source: Pairfam data (*N* = 3,729). Own calculations.

Evidently, the belief that relationships initiated online are less real than those constituted offline is a myth, at least in terms of subjective appreciation or future plans.

Belief: Socio-structural dissimilarities are promoted by the absence of social barriers. Meeting and mating in real life often takes place in socially structured contexts such as school, university, or the workplace. It is often assumed that the Internet is characterized by an absence of social barriers that would influence the demographic characteristics of couples: "These social networks and free online dating and matchmaking websites have eliminated the barrier caused by distant geographic location, thereby allowing people to find and meet other people from all walks of life and be social, even to those on the other side of the planet" (Goodwizz 2010). The consequence, of course, is that social inequality is expected to diminish in the process of assortative mating: "As the use of online dating services grows, people whose paths never would have crossed offline now regularly meet and have meaningful exchanges in the virtual world" (Anwar 2011). Hence, it is often assumed that partners in couples who met via the Internet will differ more in socio-structural terms then partners in couples who met offline. Thus, it is supposed that members of these online couples will differ more in characteristics like age, education, social background, and living standards.

Fact: We again used the pairfam database of 12,402 persons and 3,729 partners and computed several indicators for these actors and partners. Table 12 reports the association measures for several socio-structural indicators in the couples. The composition of couples who first met online or offline did not differ as much as one might expect. Even though the Internet is free of institutional barriers and theoretically anybody can interact with anybody else, there was a clear pattern of couple similarity. Particularly striking was the similarity in partners' age. The correlation between men and women who found each other online was even higher than that between couples who met outside the Internet ($r = 0.78$ vs. $r = 0.66$). There are some possible explanations for this finding: First, the Internet itself is segmented by age. Some platforms are used more frequently by older people; others, more often by younger people. Second, due to the 'digital divide', users of the World Wide Web and couples who meet through it are generally younger than couples meeting offline. Nonetheless, sociologists have shown that the older people are, the *less* age homogeneity can be expected (see Skopek/Schmitz/Blossfeld in this issue). Third, some couples might have met in a matching platform that makes suggestions based on similar age. Fourth, the users might have similarity preferences that are easier

to realize within virtual environments. Table 12 reports differences of education in couples who met online or offline. Surprisingly, the differences were not very strong. Despite the absence of social barriers, people still try to find a partner with a similar level of education.

Table 12:   Measures of association on couple level

Characteristics	Online	Offline	Statistic
Age	0.78	0.66	Pearson's *r*
Education (CASMIN)	0.29	0.39	Kendall's Tau
Education (years)	0.55	0.65	Pearson's *r*
Labor status	0.12	0.14	Cramer's *V*
Marital status	0.15	0.31	Cramer's *V*
BMI	0.19	0.05	Pearson's *r*

Source: Pairfam data ($N = 3,729$). Own calculations.

Employment or marital status also revealed only very small differences between couples meeting online or offline. Hence, we have to clearly reject the belief that the absence of social barriers online promotes dissimilarity for couples. This belief was exposed as a myth.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, we summarized prevalent opinions on online mate choice in order to confront them with empirical facts and find out which beliefs are actually myths and which seem to be adequate perceptions of social reality. We analyzed a broad range of (online) newspapers, blogs, online reference works, and discussion forums. The most striking beliefs were extracted and assessed empirically on the basis of different data. Although we found a lot of stereotypes on finding partners online that have mostly negative connotations, most of them do not correspond to empirical reality – at least not in the way they are discussed by the general public. Some of those beliefs might have been appropriate once, but are now outdated and have become myths. Hence, time is a relevant dimension when evaluating common ideas about online mate choice, because the practice of online mate search seems to be evolving faster than its public image.

Overall, the ten beliefs discussed imply at least three normative preconceptions of mate choice that are put into question by the new meeting and mating possibilities provided by the technical and social innovation of the Internet. The first is that encountering a partner should be a matter of fortune; the second, that face-to-face interaction is a necessary precondition for the development of a serious or "real" relationship; the third, that partnership formation should take place in a "normal" environment, meaning physical space. The differentiation between online and offline daters, online and offline dating, and online and offline couples is losing its analytical utility. Couples might meet offline but transfer the first steps in consolidating their relationship online (for example via Facebook), or they might meet online due to offline friendship networks (friends of friends). People search for attractive partners on the Internet, they cheat on each other, and they continue to (re-)establish social barriers. In contrast to the statement heading this article, online mate choice is "real". Whether and how far this reality influences the reality of

mate choice remains to be seen. Further research will have to analyze to what extend beliefs and facts vary according to cultural backgrounds, and cross-national comparisons would be useful in this regard. But future work on this topic has to take into account that a "theory effect" emerges whenever the media eclectically receive scientific findings on online mate choice: Scientists themselves can become the source of the very myths they are trying to question.

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ifb – Mitteilungen

Das Staatsinstitut für Familienforschung an der Universität Bamberg (*ifb*) berichtet an dieser Stelle in loser Folge über aktuelle Forschungsprojekte, neue Forschungsvorhaben, Tagungen und Veröffentlichungen.

Großeltern und Enkelkinderbetreuung

Die Organisation der Kinderbetreuung ist für die Vereinbarkeit von Familie und Beruf ein Schlüsselfaktor. Um Defizite der institutionellen Kinderbetreuung hinsichtlich Verfügbarkeit und Öffnungszeiten abzufangen, ist oft das Engagement der Großeltern erforderlich. Im Mikrozensus 2005 gaben beispielsweise 27,7% der berufstätigen Mütter an, dass ihre Kinder unter drei Jahren während der Arbeitszeit i.d.R. unentgeltlich von Verwandten, Nachbarn oder Freunden betreut werden. Omas und Opas dürften hier eine zentrale Rolle spielen. Vorteile der Kinderbetreuung durch die Großeltern ergeben sich insbesondere daraus, dass sich diese ohne finanzielle Gegenleistung um ihre Enkel kümmern, dass sie in zeitlicher Hinsicht flexibler sind als Kindertagesstätten, dass sie die Kinderbetreuung mit großer emotionaler Hingabe leisten und für die berufstätigen Eltern in vielen Fällen keine zusätzlichen Wege anfallen, etwa wenn die Großeltern im Haushalt ihrer Kinder die Enkelbetreuung übernehmen oder die Enkel selbst zu sich nach Hause holen. Auch unabhängig von einer Erwerbstätigkeit erleben Eltern es als Entlastung, wenn sich Großeltern an der Kinderbetreuung beteiligen und so der Elterngeneration Freiräume für Erledigungen oder Zeit mit dem Partner verschaffen.

Aus Sicht der Großeltern ist die Betreuung der Enkelkinder nicht nur uneigennützig. Viele Großeltern wollen ihre Enkelkinder nicht nur aus der Ferne aufwachsen sehen, sondern sie aktiv in ihrer Entwicklung begleiten und verbringen daher gerne und freiwillig Zeit mit ihnen. Enkelbetreuung kann für ältere Menschen durchaus als sinnstiftend und als „Jungbrunnen" erlebt werden und die Lebensqualität und -zufriedenheit erhöhen.

Angesichts der skizzierten Aspekte ist Enkelbetreuung eine wichtige Dimension der innerfamilialen Austauschbeziehungen. Enkelbetreuung ist eine Form instrumenteller Unterstützung, die von Älteren für ihre Kinder geleistet wird, und stellt somit einen bedeutsamen Bestandteil der Generationenbeziehungen dar.

Allerdings sind dem großelterlichen Engagement heute auch Grenzen gesetzt: So sind Großmütter heute in den ersten Lebensjahren ihrer Enkel oft selbst noch erwerbstätig und können die Elterngeneration während der üblichen Arbeitszeiten aufgrund eigener Verpflichtungen nicht bei der Kinderbetreuung unterstützen.

Parallel zur Zunahme der weiblichen Erwerbsbeteiligung hat sich das Selbstverständnis der Frauen in den letzten Jahrzehnten gewandelt. So ist vorstellbar, dass jüngere Großmütter ihre Freizeit selbstbestimmt gestalten wollen und die Bereitschaft zur regelmäßigen Enkelbetreuung für sie keine Selbstverständlichkeit mehr darstellt.

Darüber hinaus kann die Betreuung von Kindern durch ihre Großeltern konfliktbeladen sein, etwa wenn zwischen den Generationen Differenzen über Erziehungsthemen bestehen. Im ungünstigen Fall entsteht so durch die Enkelbetreuung zusätzliches Konfliktpotenzial zwischen den Generationen.

Die Zielsetzung des Forschungsprojektes zum Thema Enkelbetreuung umfasst vor diesem Hintergrund im Wesentlichen die folgenden Aspekte:

Zum einen geht es darum, den Forschungsstand zum Thema Enkelbetreuung im internationalen Vergleich zu erfassen und in den eigenen Analysen einen Bezug zu den jeweiligen familienpolitischen Rahmenbedingungen und dem kulturellen Kontext herzustellen. So ist beispielsweise davon auszugehen, dass Enkelbetreuung in Ländern mit einem gut ausgebauten und qualitativ hochwertigen Kinderbetreuungssystem weniger umfangreich ist als in Wohlfahrtsstaaten, in denen Familie und Kindheit als Privatsache betrachtet wird. Auch das Ausmaß der Erwerbsbeteiligung von Müttern und von Frauen der Großelterngeneration dürfte in einem Zusammenhang stehen mit der Häufigkeit, in der Großeltern sich um ihre Enkel kümmern. Zum anderen zielt das Forschungsprojekt darauf ab zu ermitteln, welche personen- und familienbezogenen Merkmale Einfluss auf die Enkelbetreuung nehmen. Inwieweit variiert das Ausmaß der Enkelbetreuung z. B. mit der räumlichen Entfernung zwischen Großeltern und Enkeln, dem Bildungsniveau, dem Alter und Geschlecht der Großeltern und Enkel, der finanziellen Lage und dem Gesundheitszustand der Großeltern? Investieren Großeltern eher Zeit in die Enkelbetreuung, wenn sie (noch) in einer Partnerschaft leben oder nach der Verwitwung?

Nicht zuletzt soll auch der Frage nachgegangen werden, welche Auswirkungen die Enkelbetreuung auf die beteiligten Personen und Generationen hat: Steigt die Lebenszufriedenheit der Älteren durch die Beteiligung an der Kinderbetreuung? Kommt es aufgrund von Meinungsunterschieden über Erziehungsthemen zu Konflikten zwischen Großeltern und Eltern?

Das Forschungsprojekt basiert auf einer gründlichen Literaturrecherche zum bisherigen Forschungsstand. Auf dieser Grundlage werden die theoriegestützten Hypothesen und Analyseebenen für den empirischen Teil spezifiziert. Für deskriptive Auswertungen und Mehrebenenanalysen zu den oben genannten Fragestellungen werden dann drei international vergleichende Datenquellen herangezogen:

– Die ersten beiden Wellen des „Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe" (SHARE) aus den Jahren 2004 und 2006

– das Eurobarometer 60.3 (Erhebungszeitraum: November 2003 – Januar 2004)
– die erste Welle des „Gender and Generations Survey" (GGS) von 2005/ 2006.

Neben diesen drei quantitativen Datenquellen steht eine qualitative Erhebung zur Verfügung, die im zweiten Halbjahr 2011 im Rahmen einer Diplomarbeit durchgeführt wurde. Diese Studie konzentriert sich auf diejenigen Dimensionen der Enkelkinderbetreuung, die im Bereich der intergenerationalen Beziehungsqualität angesiedelt sind. Auf dieser Datenbasis lassen sich die Motive, Funktionen und Vorteile der großelterlichen Betreuung näher untersuchen, aber auch mögliche Konfliktfelder beschreiben.

Die ersten Ergebnisse der Studie werden Mitte 2012 veröffentlicht

SARA – Beratung bei Kinderwunschbehandlung

Der Kinderlosenanteil ist bei den heute 30- bis 34-jährigen Frauen mit 42% im Westen und 31% im Osten Deutschlands sehr hoch (vgl. Pötzsch 2007, S.28).[1] In unserer Gesellschaft gibt es eine Pluralität von Lebensformen und die Entscheidung, eine Familie zu gründen, ist nur eine von vielen Möglichkeiten der Lebensplanung. Dennoch – und obwohl Lebenswege ohne Kinder in unserer Gesellschaft zunehmend akzeptiert werden – wünscht sich die Mehrheit der jungen Frauen, Männer und Paare Kinder. Die Elternschaft bildet für viele einen zentralen Bestandteil ihrer Identität und Paarbeziehung. Sie ist eng verwoben mit verschiedenen biographischen und psychologischen Aspekten und wird als intime und private Angelegenheit betrachtet. Dabei wird die Kinderlosigkeit, gewollt oder ungewollt, auf individueller Ebene meist als ein gesellschaftliches Tabuthema erlebt.

Aus verschiedenen Gründen bleiben heutzutage immer mehr Frauen und Paare kinderlos. Das biologische Zeitfenster, in dem Frauen Kinder gebären können, ist begrenzt und mit steigendem Alter der Frau sinkt ihre Fertilität. Warum Frauen und Paare sich heute erst spät oder gar nicht für das Kinderkriegen entscheiden, kann unterschiedliche Gründe haben. Wichtige Aspekte sind dabei:

– die Vereinbarkeit von Elternschaft und Beruf,
– die Erfahrung fehlender oder instabiler Partnerschaften,
– die Vereinbarkeit von Familienleben und individualisierten Lebensentwürfen,
– materielle Gründe (wie z. B. finanzielle Unsicherheit)

Bei ungewollter Kinderlosigkeit spielen nicht selten auch biologisch-medizinische Faktoren eine Rolle. Ihre Ursache kann in körperlichen Störungen und Fehlfunktionen des weiblichen oder männlichen Organismus oder auch in der altersbedingten Abnahme der Fertilität liegen. Davon können nicht nur Kinderlose, sondern auch Eltern mit weiterem Kinderwunsch betroffen sein.

Wenn ein Kinderwunsch nicht in Erfüllung geht, stellen sich für die betroffenen Paare viele Fragen, welche häufig mit Gefühlen der Enttäuschung, des Selbstzweifel und der Verunsicherungen einhergehen. Ungewollte Kinderlosigkeit kann eine starke Belastung

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[1] Pötzsch, O. (2007). *Geburten in Deutschland.* Wiesbaden: Statistisches Bundesamt.

für die Betroffenen darstellen. Dadurch ausgelöste Krisen können sich auf andere Lebensbereiche negativ auswirken.

Viele Paare nutzen Angebote der modernen Reproduktionsmedizin und hoffen, dass eine medizinische Behandlung zu einer stabilen Schwangerschaft und zur Geburt eines Kindes führt. Häufig bedarf es dabei mehrerer aufeinanderfolgender medizinischer Eingriffe, die nicht immer erfolgreich sind.

Ein psychosoziales Beratungsangebot, welches Aufklärung, Information, Unterstützung und Entlastung zum Thema Kinderwunsch anbietet, kann für Paare sowohl vor, während, als auch nach medizinischen Kinderwunschbehandlungen eine wichtige Hilfestellung sein. Dort können allgemeine Fragen zur Fruchtbarkeit, zu möglichen Therapieformen sowie Erfolgsraten und Risiken der Kinderwunschbehandlung auch außerhalb eines medizinischen Kontextes mit unabhängigen Fachkräften geklärt werden. Die psychosoziale Beratung bei Kinderwunsch bietet eine umfassende Unterstützung bei der individuellen Bewältigung der verschiedenen Ereignisse vor, während und nach Kinderwunschbehandlung(en) an.

Da die individuellen Belastungen im Kontext einer medizinischen Kinderwunschbehandlung wie auch die psychosozialen Folgen eines unerfüllten Kinderwunsches auf das gesamte Leben ausstrahlen (können), ist ein psychosoziales Beratungsangebot immer eine wichtige Ergänzung zur ärztlichen Beratung und medizinischen Behandlung.

Die zentrale Aufgabe des Praxisprojektes ist die Etablierung einer interdisziplinären Begleitung und Unterstützung für Frauen, Männer und Paare vor, während und nach Kinderwunschbehandlungen.

Ein regelmäßig stattfindender Informationsaustausch zwischen den Fachkräften der Beratungsstelle für Schwangerschaftsfragen und der reproduktionsmedizinischen Einrichtung sowie die gemeinsame Gestaltung von Veranstaltungen und Beratungsangeboten bilden das Fundament der interdisziplinären Projektarbeit.

Langfristig soll aus dieser Kooperation ein regelmäßig stattfindender Gesprächskreis etabliert werden, in dem sich betroffene Frauen und Paare sowohl gegenseitig Unterstützung geben und ihre Erfahrungen austauschen als auch professionelle Beratung erhalten können. Durch eine breite Öffentlichkeitsarbeit soll der Bekanntheitsgrad des Projektes sowie des psychosozialen Beratungsangebotes erhöht werden.

Die wissenschaftliche Begleitung des Projektes wird vom *ifb* übernommen und besteht aus folgenden methodischen Bausteinen:

– Aktive Teilnahme an Arbeitskreisen und Projektbesprechungen sowie die Dokumentation der Projektentwicklung.
– Ermittlung und Beschreibung der spezifischen Aufgaben der Beratungsstellen für Schwangerschaftsfragen im Zusammenhang mit assistierter Reproduktion.
– Projektberatung und Begleitung bei der Konzeptentwicklung sowie dem Auf- und Ausbau von Kooperationsstrukturen.
– Exploration der aktuellen Situation in der reproduktionsmedizinischen Praxis durch eine Expertenbefragung. Die Befragung soll mindestens fünf spezialisierte Mediziner(innen) einbeziehen.
– Untersuchung des subjektiven Erlebens von Paaren mit Kinderwunsch: Durchführung einer längsschnittorientierten qualitativen Betroffenenbefragung. Es sollen 10 Paare zu ihren Erfahrungen mit den Angeboten und Behandlungen der Reproduktions-

medizin befragt werden. Die narrativ orientierten Erhebungsgespräche finden mit bei-
den Partnern getrennt voneinander statt, so dass auch mögliche geschlechtsspezifische
Unterschiede im Erleben erfassen werden können. Für die Befragung sind zunächst
zwei Messzeitpunkte eingeplant, die bei Bedarf um einen dritten Messzeitpunkt er-
gänzt werden können.

Ergänzt wird das Untersuchungsdesign durch eine Befragung von Eltern nach einer
Fremdkindadoption (als Quasi-Kontrollgruppe) und einer ausführlichen Falldokumentati-
on der Beratungspraxis, in der neben soziodemographischen Daten wesentliche Bestand-
teile der Beratungspraxis erhoben werden. Zudem unterstützt das Projekt die Träger in der
Organisation von Fachtagen und interprofessionellen Arbeitskreisen.

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