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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 worldwide¹. 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

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's 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 Illouz (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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