

# ELITEPARTNER.DE: AN ONLINE DATING SELF-EXPERIMENT

Sebastian Reck

Last week I did it. Following the example of millions of fellow citizens, I finally registered with an online dating network. Well, not just any network. Rather, I chose to join *Elitepartner.de*, the self-proclaimed community of ‘cultured and sophisticated singles’. Why did I do so? Given the fact that I am more than happy to have met my girlfriend almost two years ago, my registration might seem rather unnecessary, perhaps even unfaithful. No, finding my new online love was not what I was after.

Rather, I was curious to learn about the origins of *Elitepartner.de*’s huge appeal. Two issues were of particular interest to me. Firstly, I wanted to gain insight into the working of such an online dating platform. What mechanisms for making people ‘find each other’ does it promise? Secondly, I was interested in the way people make use of this platform to construct their ‘online identities’ in order to make an impression on fellow users.

The analysis of this particular online dating community proved to be very fruitful. Thinking of it in theoretical terms, it appears that the phenomenon of ‘online dating’, enjoying ever increasing popularity, tells much about the structure of our society.

---

*Sebastian Reck is a Master student of ‘International Development Studies’ at the University of Amsterdam. He has a Bachelor degree in ‘European Studies’ which proves his interests to be diversified. Currently he is doing research on a Fair Trade certified farmers’ organisation in the North of Costa Rica.*

In the following, I would like to provide an overview of the outcomes of this small self-experiment. Interpreting my personal experiences through the lens of various sociological theories (especially those of Max Weber and Pierre Bourdieu), I will conclude that *Elitepartner.de* may be interpreted as a prime example both of the ongoing process of disenchantment and of the competitive and consumerist structure of our society.

## DISENCHANTMENT

As initially mentioned, dating networks are of immense appeal to a huge number of people. As of 2009 4% of European and 20% of Americans participated in online dating networks (Klopp 2009). The idea of using the internet to find a partner is rapidly gaining popularity. A few years ago, searching a partner online would have been perceived as something very uncommon, perhaps even a bit 'sleazy'. Today, having become common practice, it has lost these connotations. But what is it, that people find so alluring about online dating? *Elitepartner.de* explicitly provides five answers to this question:

*Money back guarantee: if a couple of two people who have found each other online breaks up, both receive a prolonged membership for free.*

*Profiles are personally supervised by "Elitepartner Staff" (whether these profiles live up to the expectations).*

*Elitepartner.de promises quality and data privacy protection (certified by TÜV, the central German institution for consumer protection, safeguarding the maintenance of technical safety standards).*

*Elitepartner.de promises a 'scientific' personality test.*

*Elitepartner.de's 'Elite-principle' is based on the scientific matching of personality tests (the so called 'Glücksformel' (fortune formula)). This is supposed to be able to determine in quantitative terms (by using the unit of 'matching point') how well people match each other.*

*(www.elitepartner.de, translation by author).*

Many people are indeed convinced by these arguments. In fact, *Elitepartner.de* alone boasts more than one million members. Consequently, this 'technique' of searching for a partner has become an important supplement

to more traditional ways (such as going out or joining clubs). Apparently, habits are changing, which poses the question whether online dating constitutes a particular feature of our modern, some might say ‘post-modern’ (Harvey 1989), society.

Referring back to Max Weber’s *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and his theory of Protestantism furthering capitalism and capitalism in turn breeding secularism, seems useful in this context. Weber reasoned that the Protestant wish to lead a ‘good life’ (indicators being a devotion to hard work, modesty but also worldly success) in order to soothe the anxiety of whether or not belonging to God’s ‘chosen’, decisively contributed to the dispersion of capitalism (Weber 1991 [1930]). This is because the attainment of such a successful ‘good life’ presupposed not only increasingly rational organization and bureaucratization, but also investment rather than imminent spending of profits (Collins 1986: 50).

It seems however, that the increased rationalisation of life, while simultaneously fostering capitalism and modernisation, has led to an increasing ‘disenchantment’ of the world. All of a sudden, everything has to be grasped rationally and be quantified in order to make it comparable. Consequently, formerly mysterious and incalculable forces were slowly being transformed into merely empirical issues that could be entirely understood, provided one subjects them to rational reasoning and calculation. Arguably, religiosity (taken to be the number of Europeans that perceive themselves to be religious), has suffered badly from this rationalised way of thinking and living (Weber 1991 [1930]). However, it is important to realize that this process of disenchantment is ongoing in its nature. For instance, it seems very relevant to ask whether and to what extent the process of disenchantment has influenced the way people interact with each other. In this case, *Elitepartner.de* seems to be a prime example.

The main goal for people to join this community is to ‘fall in love’. However, what I would like to argue in the following paragraphs is that *Elitepartner.de* is less about falling in love than about systematically ‘creating love’. In fact, it seems that in the context of online dating, the concept

---

*Elitepartner.de*  
is less about  
falling in love  
than about  
systematically  
‘creating love’

of 'love' has suffered from disenchantment at least as much as religiosity did from Enlightenment.

Entering the site for the first time I was instantly deprived of my overly romanticised and outdated conception of love. Somehow I had always thought that love is something that just 'happens'. Either you run into the love of your life or you do not. I was unaware that there was a way to enforce it and I am unsure whether relief actually exceeds anxiety now that I have learnt that "Love is no coincidence!" ([www.elitepartner.de](http://www.elitepartner.de), 2009). Then, I

---

Is there any more efficient way of getting to know as many people in such a small amount of time than by browsing through their profiles?

clicked the link that redirected me to the 5 reasons for choosing Elitepartner (as listed above). These 5 points alone are enough to depict how deeply rationalised 'project online love' has become.

The most striking feature is the 'scientific matching' based on psychological research. The main claim here is that finding your partner on *Elitepartner.de* is not about coincidence or even intuition. No way! Rather, by filling out a rather extensive questionnaire, I provided the computer with a comprehensive set of personal data which is then processed (via the so called 'Elite Principle') into a profile that is directly comparable to others.

This enabled me to systematically browse the community for the partner who is the best match for me. In fact, after clicking on a profile, I was instantly provided with the corresponding 'matching percentage'. Judging from an abstract point of view, *Elitepartner.de* constitutes a 'tool' that promises two things. Firstly, it provides the user with a huge pool of members. This is arguably much more efficient and, in a sense, 'rational' than going to a party. Would one ever be able to become acquainted with this number of 'potential partners' on a single night out? Is there any more efficient way of getting to know as many people in such a small amount of time than by browsing through their profiles? Secondly, the search engine functions as a (pseudo-) 'scientific tool' that will allow the user to find 'love'

by suggesting the persons whose profiles match best. It is as easy as that. A totally 'rational' method bereft of any mysticism. 'Love', a formerly mysterious and incalculable force, so Elitepartner claims, has become an easily accessible good.

Everyone needs to judge for himself whether this perception constitutes a disenchantment of the romantic idea. It may well be argued that 'love' loses much of its gravity by perceiving it as something that can actually be 'made' or even indirectly purchased.

The people at *Elitepartner.de* however seem to be so convinced of their 'technique' that they offer a money back guarantee. At least in my opinion, this does not make things any more romantic...

#### ELITISM AND THE SENSE OF DISTINCTION

Considering the fact that the competition on the German 'online dating market' is rather intense, raises the question of why it is that Elitepartner, having been established only in 2005, has already grown to be the second biggest dating network in terms of membership. As of March 2010, more than 2 million people were participating in the network (Singleboersen Vergleich 2010).

Two closely interlinked reasons for this phenomenon seem to exist. Firstly, as outlined above, the 'scientific matching method' (the so called 'elite-principle') has a certain appeal. People invest trust in *Elitepartner.de* to create a functional sketch of their identity, enabling them to find the 'perfect match'. Secondly, and perhaps even more importantly, it seems that people are intrigued by the term 'elite' itself, as it promises a certain sense of exclusiveness and distinction. Strangely enough, while the concept of 'elite' lies at the core of their marketing strategy, the creators of *Elitepartner.de* do not explicitly specify what this denotes. What would it take to belong to Germany's 'exclusive circle of 1.000.000 'elite' singles'? I was hoping to find some implicit answers to this question while filling in my 'personality test'.

As will be shown, once again, *Elitepartner.de*'s functioning principles are closely related to the structure of our modern society. Our social order seems to be distinguished not only by capitalism and the corresponding sense of competitiveness, but also by consumerism, based on the belief that consumption habits allow us to form our identities. Also, it seems that the term consumption has been broadened as to also encompass 'culture'. Here, the theoretical groundwork developed by Bourdieu will serve as a valuable tool of analysis.

Adopting a Marxist notion of 'class', Bourdieu (1990) perceives the struggle over status, the quest for 'distinction' as central to the workings of society (Bourdieu 1990:22). Interestingly, this struggle for recognition is fought not only by means of objective criteria of status (such as financial assets) but also by other, less tangible means such as 'taste' or 'culture', which Bourdieu summarizes under the term 'cultural capital'. He argues along two main lines. First, he rejects Kantian aesthetic philosophy that acknowledges both the existence of 'pure aesthetic contemplation' and 'innate taste' (Jenkins 1992:128). To him it seems that different coherent sets of preferences derive from distinct and distinctive systems of dispositions (Bourdieu 1986: 261). Taste does not arise out of each individual, it is rather something that can be learned, and therefore it is dependent on the individual's access to different systems of education: "People learn to consume culture and this education is differentiated by social class" (Jenkins 1992:138).

Second, taste, respectively 'cultural awareness', should not be understood as a by-product of the individual's love for art. Rather, due to the fact that it might significantly contribute to the attainment of a certain form of 'social distinction', it has to be perceived as yet another type of social capital. Indeed, as Jenkins aptly summarizes, Bourdieu's conception of our social space is one of "a multidimensional arena in which economic and cultural capital are both the objects and the weapons of a competitive struggle between classes" (Bourdieu 1990:142).

Whether or not Bourdieu's social constructivist approach of denying the existence of an 'innate taste' is justified, is a question that would exceed the scope of this essay. What is certain however, is that when shifting the focus back to our main object of analysis, it seems astonishing how well his

theory serves to explain the workings of Elitepartner.de.

I was just about to check my email account when all of a sudden, a new window popped up and a good looking female, perhaps just under 30 years old, told me that she had bought two tickets for the theatre tonight, and asked me whether I would like to join her. The advertisement was designed to look like a live chat. Clicking the dialogue box in order to respond, I was redirected to *Elitepartner.de* where I was greeted with a welcoming video. I was introduced to four members of Elitepartner.de and their respective success stories (a designer, an architect, a cardiologist, and a 'dreamer' (only recently being a dreamer has come to be a profession; however it seems this privilege is restricted to good looking females under 30).

The first thing I saw is a well dressed, middle aged man (I supposed he was the cardiologist) playing golf. Next, I observed a young woman, wearing a chic dress and a pearl necklace, sitting on a huge bed as she was typing on her laptop. She seemed to be engaged in a live chat and overly happy about the text messages she receives. Then there was a jump cut to her chat partner, the architect, who was sitting on a huge leather couch in his nice apartment. In the background, I could see a cosy fire flickering in a stately fireplace.

After the video ended, it took me two more clicks to arrive at my personality test. This test, which was going to form the core of my 'elite-identity' after successful completion, consisted of a multitude of questions ranging from basic personal data (name, age, etc.) via my hobbies to how I perceive myself to be acting when I am in a relationship. The scope of this essay is too limited to recount the full extent of the questionnaire. However, in the following I will provide some rather telling excerpts.

One of the first questions concerned my occupation. *Elitepartner.de* asked me to indicate the sector in which I am working, the institution or company I work for, and my specific position. Also, I was asked to indi-

---

Only recently  
being a dreamer  
has come to be a  
profession; how-  
ever it seems this  
privilege is re-  
stricted to good  
looking females  
under 30

cate my income group. Then, I arrived at the hobbies section, where I was provided with a chart of activities from which I was supposed to choose the four that appealed to me most. While both sailing and golf were on this list, football was not part of it. I wondered why not replace the chart with a simple input field? Something similar happened when I was asked to indicate my taste in music. The chart provided me with ‘classical music in general’, but also ‘opera’ or ‘chanson’. However, if I were into Ska or Metal music, I would have needed to indicate so under the very general category of ‘popular music’. Next, I had to indicate which type of apartment I would like to live in. My choice was limited to the following stereotypes:

- the family home (*“I need lots of space for myself, my family and perhaps even some pets. A little front garden would be greatly appreciated”*)
  - the artist’s apartment (*“I am in search of a certain ‘je ne sais quoi’. I have a passion for architecture and I am on a constant search for ‘self realization’. It does not necessarily need to be chic, but it has to match my personality”*)
  - the bourgeois townhouse (*“Urban but nevertheless far from any hectic rush. A villa with charm and high ceilings and a big estate. A manorial residence; that is what I am searching for”*)
  - the avant-garde suite (*“The most up to date technology of construction. A central location and ‘state of the art’ equipment. Yes, I am an urbanite!”*)
  - the redecorated old building (*“High ceilings, stucco, wooden floors and my own balcony. Perhaps a view of the park just outside. There is nothing like a thoroughly redeveloped, old building with charm and rich in history”*)
  - the country house in the green (*“Cosy and calm, perhaps a bit nostalgic and dreamy. Here I would like to relax and recharge my batteries”*).
- (www.elitepartner.de, translation by author).

Finally, after about half an hour, I had completed the process of ‘elite-identity formation’ and I gained access to the database. I had defined myself by means of a prefabricated questionnaire and now I was hoping that someone would find me (or my profile?) attractive. Thinking of how this identity formation occurred, five things came to my mind.

Firstly, modesty does not seem to be a virtue anymore. Rather, I had to ‘show what I have got’ in order to make an impression. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the disclosure of my consumption preferences and pos-

sibilities (basically my economic capital) formed a major part of my ‘elite identity’. As indicated above, the descriptions of the different types of habitations for instance (see footnotes) sound like descriptions of their owners. In a perfectly consumerist manner, *Elitepartner.de* members try to shape their identities by materialist means.

Secondly, ‘economic capital’ is not a sufficient means to achieve ‘social distinction’. Rather, it needs to be supported by a certain cultural awareness. By stating a preference for the ‘artist’s apartment’, for instance, I implicitly claim that I know why I do so. The acquisition of such an estate is merely an indicator of ‘economic class’. A maximization of social distinction, however, requires not only economic- but also cultural capital. As Bourdieu would say, I would need to show that I am able to ‘appropriate’ this apartment by proving that I am a ‘man of taste’ (Bourdieu 1986:207). The concept of ‘taste’ is essential both to my self-perception and societies’ perception of me as an individual: “It (taste) distinguishes in an essential way, since taste is the basis of all that one has –people and things- and all that one is for others, whereby one classifies oneself and is classified by others” (Bourdieu 1990:65). As will be shown later on, taste (e.g. in culture) is, at least in the context of *Elitepartner.de*, much more about the struggle for social distinction than about the individual’s love for art.

---

The fact that I can  
refine my partner  
search to show  
only members  
who are in possession of an academic degree speaks volumes

The third impression that I got from registering with *Elitepartner.de* is that, even though never explicitly stated, the notion of what it takes to belong to the ‘elite’ is very strongly implied. Why for instance, is it, that the cardiologist from the welcoming video plays golf rather than soccer? What am I supposed to infer from the fact I am not allowed to indicate my actual taste in music? Somehow, *Elitepartner.de* is suggesting that it is better to play tennis rather than go hiking, better to go sailing than to visit the public swimming pool. Also, the fact that I can refine my partner search to show only members who are in possession of an academic degree speaks volumes. The stereotype of an ‘elite member’ is a person in possession of both considerable economic resources and the ability to spend them in a

‘cultured’ manner, preferably on golf, yachting and a stylish apartment. But how does this stereotype relate to reality? This leads me to my fourth observation.

What we are dealing with is not a community of the privileged, but rather a community of those that would love to be privileged

Bearing in mind that over 2.000.000 Germans are already members of *Elitepartner.de*, the whole picture that is drawn here looks more like wishful thinking. Avoiding the contentious issue of whether such a thing as an ‘elite’ actually exists, and if it did, what would be its main characteristics, it is rather obvious that the majority of *Elitepartner.de* members would not be able to live up to the stereotype depicted above. What we are dealing with is not a community of the privileged, but rather a community of those that would love to be privileged.

What it means to be ‘privileged’ in our consumerist society is however almost completely determined by the small minority of citizens who indeed are in the possession of both above average economic- and cultural capital. They are the people that represent the epitome of ‘elitism’, and it is them who, perhaps not even fully intentionally, decide about the rules by which the battle for social recognition is fought. Here, once again, Bourdieu’s theory bears great explanatory value. Especially his notion of ‘competitive struggle’ sheds light on the workings of *Elitepartner.de*. ‘Competitive struggle’ is

*“(...) the form of class struggle which the dominated classes allow to be imposed on them when they accept the stakes offered by the dominant classes. It is an integrative struggle and, by virtue of the initial handicaps, a reproductive struggle, since those who enter this chase, in which they are beaten before they start... implicitly recognize the legitimacy of the goals pursued by those whom they pursue, by the mere fact of taking part.” (Bourdieu 1986:165)*

Indeed it seems that more than one million *Elitepartner.de* members have ‘entered the chase’ by accepting the four characters from the welcoming video as role models. Also, it is very unlikely that many of them will actually

succeed in this struggle for status.

Finally, now that we have established both the nature and the origins of the 'rules of the game', I would like to shift the focus of analysis back to the role of 'Culture' (my fifth observation). Having displayed Elitepartner.de as a competitive 'community of want', in which the parameters for success (both economic and cultural) are imposed from outside, makes it very likely that the function of the concept of 'Culture' (or 'culture?') is more closely related to social struggle and identity creation than to personal enjoyment or a genuine love for art. Anxious to comply with the array of 'legitimate cultural tastes', the user's relationship towards 'Culture' can best be described by the term 'undifferentiated reverence' (Bourdieu 1986:319). It is indeed experienced to be valuable. However in a rather instrumentalist manner: 'Culture' (at least the idea of 'culture' that Elitepartner.de presupposes) is perceived as a means to achieve distinction in order to gain status; rather than as an end in itself.

Thinking of the girl that invited me to join her for an evening at the theatre, it now strikes me that I did not even ask which show we would be visiting. I started to question the sincerity of my cultural interest. Perhaps, I do admit, it was her good looks that were pivotal to my interest. A perfectly justified reason for every single on the search... not for an 'elite-single' however.

## CONCLUSION

By analyzing *Elitepartner.de* I have tried to point towards two underlying, but nevertheless very influential, features of Western society. Firstly, I depicted the ongoing process of disenchantment / demystification which seemingly has come to influence even the most intimate domains of our social lives. Indeed, not even the concept of love appears to be immune to rationalization. Rather, it seems that a huge number of people willingly accept this demystification in exchange for an easy access to the commodity called 'love'.

The fact that every member pays a considerable monthly fee in order to

access *Elitepartner.de*'s computer based method for the matching of single profiles (the so called 'Elite Principle'), epitomizes this trend.

Secondly, *Elitepartner.de* serves as a prime example of the ongoing struggle for social status, the origin of the rules that govern this struggle and the means by which it is fought. The dominant image of 'being elite' presupposes two main requirements. On the one hand, there is 'economic capital'. Financial resources increase consumption possibilities and, due to the strong consumerist nature of society, enable the individual to significantly influence his 'identity'. On the other hand however, in order to maximize social status, 'economic capital' needs to be complemented by 'cultural capital'. Here, two phenomena merit attention. Firstly, it seems to be the actual elite, those who have both economic and cultural capital (respectively what the broad public regards to be 'cultural capital') who decide on what constitutes 'legitimate taste'. Secondly, and this seems to be already implied in the notion of 'cultural capital' itself, 'culture' is becoming more and more instrumentalized to function as a mere means for the improvement of the individual's social standing.

Everyone needs to judge for himself how to evaluate the two abovementioned trends, which is why I will refrain from giving an overly normative estimation of the advantages and disadvantages of *Elitepartner.de*. However, in order to arrive at a reasoned judgement, it is important to be aware of their existence. It is this awareness this essay aimed to convey.

## REFERENCES

- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1990. *In Other Words*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* [transl. Richard Nice]. London: Routledge.
- Collins, Randall. 1986. *Max Weber. A Skeleton Key*. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Elitepartner. 2009. "Elitepartner.de: Akademiker & Singles mit Niveau".
- Harvey, David. 1989. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jenkins, Richard. 1992. *Pierre Bourdieu*. London: Routledge.
- Klopp, Tina. 2009. „Scheuklappen bei der digitalen Partnersuche.“ Die Zeit.
- Marx, Karl. 1981. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Vol.1*. London: Vintage.
- Singleboersenvergleich. 2010. „Vergleich von Partnervermittlungen“.
- Weber, Max 1991 [1930]. *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (Talcott Parsons, transl.). London: Harper Collins Academic.