

# Analyzing Gender and Educational Differences in Mate Selection Preferences Among Indonesian Early Adults

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## ABSTRACT

Mate selection is a key developmental task during early adulthood, shaped by sociocultural and individual factors. This study investigates how gender and educational background influence mate selection preferences among Indonesian early adults, a topic that remains underexplored in local contexts. A quantitative comparative approach was used, involving 300 unmarried Indonesian individuals aged 20–40, all of whom had at least a diploma (D3) or higher education. Data were collected using an adapted version of the Mate Preferences Questionnaire developed by Buss and Barnes. Non-parametric analyses (Mann–Whitney U and Kruskal–Wallis tests) were employed due to non-normal data distribution. Significant differences were found in mate selection preferences based on gender and education level. Men prioritized physical attractiveness, household management ability, and intelligence, while women favored financial stability, religiosity, and higher education. Educational background also influenced preferences: respondents with master’s degrees (S2) placed greater emphasis on religiosity and family background, while those with diploma/bachelor’s degrees (D3/S1) favored sociability and physical attractiveness. Interaction effects between gender and education showed additional variation across multiple criteria including income, intelligence, and household roles. These findings highlight how mate preferences among Indonesian early adults are shaped by both gender norms and educational attainment, reflecting the intersection of traditional cultural values with emerging social trends. The study underscores the importance of considering local sociocultural context in understanding mate selection dynamics and recommends culturally sensitive premarital education programs.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Early adulthood represents a transitional phase from adolescence. Hurlock stated that individuals in the early adult developmental period are those aged 18 to 40 years (Wijaya et al., 2024). Santrock (2020) identified one of the developmental tasks of early adulthood is to find a life partner and initiate family

life. In terms of age regulation, the Indonesian Marriage Law (Law No. 16 of 2019), the minimum legal age for marriage for both men and women is 19 years (Government of Indonesia, 2019). National Population and Family Planning Board (BKKBN) further recommends that the ideal age for marriage is 23 years for women and 25 years for men. In line with this, Indra et al. (2023) suggest that the optimal age for women to marry is approximately 20–25 years, while for men it is around 23–30 years. At this age, individuals have generally reached physical and psychological maturity, and especially for men are considered to have sufficient income to support the family.

Moreover, women are required to marry before the age of 30. According to Arnett (2014), the demand to marry before the age of 30 comes from the family due to Asian's culture and values, to continue the lineage by considering the responses that will be obtained from the environment. Bukhari (2023) suggested that unmarried women are perceived as deviant by society, which assumes that marriage is an essential experience for every mature woman as part of her developmental tasks, so the expectation for marriage is often more directed at women than men.

Mate selection is the process of seeking and finding a partner to engage in a long-term committed relationship and lead to marriage (Wisnuwardhani & Mashoedi, 2012). Mate selection preference is defined as the selective process of mate evaluation (Townsend, 1989). These preferences reflect a conscious and selective effort to find a partner perceived as compatible and capable of fulfilling relational and emotional needs. According to DeGenova & Rice (2008), a partner serves as a life companion during both adversity and happiness, leading individuals to develop specific expectations of their partner to fulfill personal needs. This is observed according to the criteria individuals use to choose their desired partner.

Several factors influence personal considerations in choosing a life partner. The factors include physical attributes, personality traits, family background, educational background, occupation type, and income level (DeGenova & Rice, 2008). Therefore, the process of finding and choosing a partner is a challenging undertaking. Individuals encounter numerous challenges in the process of finding and choosing a partner. Schmitt (2014) argue that individuals may possess specific criteria for their ideal partner; however, the individuals they are attracted to do not consistently align with these predetermined standards.

Research by Buss (1985) indicates that men are generally inclined to select partners primarily based on physical attractiveness, whereas women often prioritize financial stability in their partner choices. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Wisnuwardhani & Mashoedi (2012) which indicates that men tend to be attracted to women with physical attractiveness, such as beautiful, long hair and clear skin. For men, such a physique signifies that the woman possesses health, and will potentially contribute to the genetics of offspring produced in the future.

Townsend (1989) suggested that women tend to be more cautious and selective in choosing their life partners compared to men. This tendency contributes to the diverse set of criteria individuals develop for potential partners, shaped by their own idealized (DeGenova & Rice, 2008). Women tend to be more attracted to well-established men who are perceived as capable of ensuring the future of marriage (Wisnuwardhani & Mashoedi, 2012). This is further supported by a study conducted by Todosijević et al. (2003), which found that women also tend to select life partners based on economic and social status. According to sociocultural perspectives, men are often seen as the primary earners who influence the financial and social status of the family, while women considered as housewives who take care of children and the house, so it is common for women to look for men who can provide a substantial income (Setyonaluri et al., 2020).

Larasati (2012) stated that women typically prefer men who are higher or at least equal to their educational level, economic and social status. Townsend (1989) found that highly educated women tend to seek male partners who possess either a higher or equivalent level of education. According to DeGenova & Rice (2008), marriages in which both partners share a similar educational background tend to be more compatible than those between partners with differing educational backgrounds. Higher levels of education are associated with a greater capacity for individuals and communities to absorb information

and translate it into everyday behaviors and lifestyle choices. In addition, educational level may influence women's preferences in choosing a life partner, because individuals are generally more likely to experience stability and compatibility when they marry someone with a similar level of education.

However, the empirical research on how educational level influences mate preferences in Indonesia is still limited, particularly within early adulthood. Therefore, the primary aim of this study is to examine whether there are differences in mate selection preferences during early adulthood based on gender and educational level. The research questions in this study are 1) Does gender significantly influence mate preferences? 2) Does education play a role significantly in choosing a partner? 3) How does the interaction of gender and educational background shape partner selection criteria?

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a quantitative approach using a comparative research method. The comparative method is a form of descriptive research that examines one or more variables across two or more distinct samples or at different points in time, by analyzing the factors underlying the emergence of a particular phenomenon (Sugiyono, 2016). Specifically, this study compares mate selection preference variables based on gender and educational level.

The statistical analysis in this study used the Mann-Whitney and the Kruskal-Wallis analyses. These two analyses are considered appropriate for clearly or separately describing gender differences (male and female) and educational background differences (D3/S1 and S2) in partner selection. The interaction between the two is depicted using the Kruskal-Wallis analysis.

The population in this study consists of young adult men and women, aged 20-40 years, who are single and have at least completed a diploma 3 (D3) program and are either currently pursuing or have completed a bachelor's (S1) or master's (S2) degree. Participants were selected using non-probability sampling techniques, which means not all members of the population have the same opportunity to be included in the research sample (Rangkuti & Fajrin, 2015). Specifically, quota sampling was employed; this method selected participants by establishing a predetermined target number to be achieved within the sample drawn from the population (Sugiyono, 2016). The number of representative samples was determined using the Slovin formula (Sugiyono, 2016), resulting in a total of 300 participants that required to meet five main criteria; male or female between 20 and 40 years of age, single or never been married, have completed education at the diploma 3 (D3) level, currently pursuing or have completed bachelor's degree (S1); currently pursuing or have completed master's degree (S2).

Participants were divided into two groups based on their educational background: D3/S1 and S2. D3/S1 participants were intentionally combined because they were deemed to have minimal differences in educational level. S2 participants were separated because S2 (or master's program) is considered a supplementary higher education program. The total number of participants in each group was intentionally balanced (150 participants) to ensure a more accurate and proportional comparison.

Data were collected using an adapted version of the Mate Preferences Questionnaire, a research instrument developed by Buss & Barnes (1986) to assess individual preferences in selecting a life partner. The instrument comprises nine dimensions and includes 13 criteria that may be present in potential partners. Respondents were asked to rank these 13 items in order of desirability. The development of this instrument is based on the theory of assortative mating, which explains that individuals tend to be more attracted to partners who possess characteristics similar to their own (Buss, 1985). Data collection was conducted by distributing the research instruments, compiled in booklet form, to respondents who met the criteria. In filling out the questionnaire, participants were asked to rank 13 criteria for their desired partner based on their level of importance.

The collected data were analyzed using non-parametric statistical techniques to examine whether there were significant differences in mate selection preferences during early adulthood based on gender and educational level. The statistical tests conducted in this study were the Kruskal-Wallis Test and the Mann-Whitney U Test through SPSS 23.0 software. The instrument testing in this study used the

RASCH model. The reliability of the measuring instrument was 0.94. According to Guilford, a score above 0.90 is considered highly reliable.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1. Findings

The study was conducted with 300 Indonesian men and women, aged 20–40 years, who had never married and at least completed a diploma 3 (D3) program or were currently pursuing or had completed a bachelor's degree (S1) or master's degree (S2). Data collection was carried out by distributing the research instruments compiled in booklet form to respondents who met these criteria. Table 1 presents the analysis results.

**Table 1.** Respondents' description

Category	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Sex</b>		
Male	150	50%
Female	150	50%
<b>Educational Level</b>		
Currently pursuing/completed bachelor's degree (S1)	150	50%
Currently pursuing/completed master's degree (S2)	150	50%

Before testing the hypothesis, an assumption test was conducted to assess data normality using the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test. The results indicated an abnormal data distribution, and the two samples were not related. Therefore, non-parametric statistical methods were employed, specifically the Kruskal–Wallis test and the Mann–Whitney U test, using SPSS version 23.0. The first hypothesis was tested to compare gender differences in mate selection preferences between men and women, the data were obtained as follows:

**Table 2.** Mann–Whitney U test result for mate preferences among gender

Item	Male Mean Rank	Female Mean Rank	U	p
Kind and understanding	145.84	155.16	10.550.5	.341
Religious	171.98	129.02	8.027.5	< .001
Exciting personality	145.15	155.85	10.447	.283
Creative and artistic	153.77	147.23	10.759.5	.511
Good housekeeper	129.52	171.48	8.102.5	< .001
Intelligent	139.44	161.56	9.591.5	.026
Good earning capacity	179.82	121.18	6.852.5	< .001
Wants children	148.73	153.27	10.984.5	.722
Easygoing	157.41	143.59	10.213	.165
Good family background	145.76	155.24	10.539	.342
College graduate	169.09	131.91	8.461.5	< .001
Physically attractive	96.54	204.46	3.156	< .001
Healthy	159.77	141.23	9.859	.063

The result shows that firstly, the order of male's mate preferences is 1) physically attractive, 2) good housekeeper, 3) intelligent, 4) exciting personality, 5) good family background, 6) kind and understanding, 7) wants children, 8) creative and artistic, 9) easygoing, 10) healthy, 11) college

graduate, 12) religious, and 13) good earning capacity. Secondly, the order of female's mate preferences is 1) good earning capacity, 2) religious, 3) college graduate, 4) healthy, 5) easygoing, 6) creative and artistic, 7) wants children, 8) kind and understanding, 9) good family background, 10) exciting personality, 11) intelligent, 12) good housekeeper, and 13) physically attractive.

The second hypothesis was tested to compare whether mate selection preferences differ based on respondents' educational level, as Table 3 shows.

**Table 3.** Mann–Whitney *U* test results for mate preferences based on educational level

Item	D3-S1	S2	U	p
	Mean Rank	Mean Rank		
Kind and understanding	146.44	154.56	10.640.5	.406
Religious	164.21	136.79	9.193.5	.006
Exciting personality	150.87	150.13	11.194	.940
Creative and artistic	153.74	147.26	10.764	.515
Good housekeeper	153.79	147.21	10.757	.510
Intelligent	145.59	155.41	9.879.5	.066
Good earning capacity	140.27	160.73	10.978	.716
Wants children	155.48	145.52	10.513	.323
Easygoing	141.69	159.31	9.716	.040
Good family background	145.66	155.34	10.503.5	.319
College graduate	151.43	149.57	9.928	.076
Physically attractive	145.66	155.34	10.523.5	.332
Healthy	151.43	149.57	11.110.5	.852

The results indicate that firstly, the mate preferences criteria of the D3–S1 group are ranked in the following order: 1) good earning capacity, 2) easygoing, 3) intelligent, 4) good family background, 5) physically attractive, 6) kind and understanding, 7) exciting personality, 8) college graduate & healthy, 9) wants children, 10) creative and artistic, 11) good housekeeper, and 12) religious. Secondly, the S2 group's mate preferences are ordered as follows: 1) religious, 2) wants children, 3) good housekeeper, 4) creative and artistic, 5) college graduate & healthy, 6) exciting personality, 7) kind and understanding, 8) good family background, 9) physically attractive, 10) intelligent, 11) easygoing, and 12) good earning capacity.

The third hypothesis was analyzed to compare the differences in partner selection preferences based on gender and education level. Table 4 presents the analysis results.

**Table 4.** Kruskal–Wallis test results for gender and educational level

Item	Male	Female	Male	Female	H	p
	D3-S1 Mean Rank	D3-S1 Mean Rank	S2 Mean Rank	S2 Mean Rank		
Kind and understanding	138.85	154.02	152.82	156.31	1.954	.582
Religious	181.42	147.00	162.55	111.03	27.304	< .001
Exciting personality	143.81	157.94	146.49	153.77	1.277	.735
Creative and artistic	151.54	155.94	156.00	138.52	2.060	.560
Good housekeeper	126.37	181.20	132.66	161.77	19.791	< .001
Intelligent	134.31	148.41	144.57	174.70	8.962	.030
Good earning capacity	185.66	111.71	173.97	130.65	37.015	< .001
Wants children	142.13	149.04	155.33	155.50	1.220	.748
Easygoing	142.89	137.65	171.93	149.52	6.905	.075
Good family background	160.29	150.66	131.23	159.82	5.564	.135
College graduate	158.91	124.47	179.27	139.35	17.262	.001
Physically attractive	93.64	197.67	99.44	211.25	117.950	< .001
Healthy	160.54	142.32	159.01	140.13	3.494	.321

Based on the result above, the D3–S1 male group ranked mate preferences criteria in the following order: 1) physically attractive, 2) good housekeeper, 3) intelligent, 4) kind and understanding, 5) wants children, 6) easygoing, 7) exciting personality, 8) creative and artistic, 9) college graduate, 10) good family background, 11) healthy, 12) religious, and 13) good earning capacity. D3-S1 female group ranked the criteria as follows: 1) good earning capacity, 2) college graduate, 3) easygoing, 4) healthy, 5) religious, 6) intelligent, 7) wants children, 8) good family background, 9) kind and understanding, 10) creative and artistic, 11) exciting personality, 12) good housekeeper, and 13) physically attractive. S2 male group's mate preferences in order: 1) physically attractive, 2) good family background, 3) good housekeeper, 4) intelligent, 5) exciting personality, 6) kind and understanding, 7) wants children, 8) creative and artistic, 9) healthy, 10) religious, 11) easygoing, 12) good earning capacity, and 13) college graduate. Lastly, S2 female group's mate preferences in order: 1) religious, 2) good earning capacity, 3) creative and artistic, 4) healthy, 5) easygoing, 6) college graduate, 7) exciting personality, 8) wants children, 9) kind and understanding, 10) good family background, 11) good housekeeper, 12) intelligent, and 13) physically attractive.

### 3.2. Discussion

#### 3.2.1 Gender-based Preferences

The findings above show that, based on gender, there are significant differences in partner selection preferences between men and women across several criteria. Men tend to prioritize partners with physical attractiveness, good housekeeping skills, and a good family background. However, they are less likely to prioritize partners with high income, strong religious beliefs, or a higher education. In contrast, women prioritize partners with good earning capacity, religious commitment, and higher education, while placing less emphasis on physical appearance, intelligence, and an attractive personality. These results are consistent with the theory and findings of Buss & Barnes (1986), which indicate that men tend to choose partners based on physical attractiveness, whereas women tend to choose partners based on earning potential.

At the same time, there are differences between current findings and other studies. A study by Sprecher et al. (2019) shows that men increasingly value women's education and financial prospects, while women place slightly less emphasis on men's economic resources, reflecting broader global trends toward gender equality in partner preferences. On the other hand, the current study suggests that traditional gender patterns remain more dominant in Indonesia, where men still prioritize physical attractiveness and domestic skills, and women continue to value economic and religious stability. This difference highlights the importance of cultural context in shaping mate preferences.

Men's preferences for partners who possess strong household management skills reflects the enduring influence of patriarchal cultural norms in Indonesia, which positioning domestic labor as a duty and obligation imposed on women (Harahap, 2022). This is in line with qualitative research that stated gender norms continue to define women primarily as household caregivers and position men as the main providers (FEB UI, 2021).

Furthermore, women's preferences for well-earning and religious partners are often influenced by the perception of men as strong and masculine figures who fulfill traditional roles as breadwinners, protectors, and spiritual leaders within the family (Syafe'i, 2015). Women also consider the criteria of socio-economic stability and partner responsibility as reflection of Indonesia's traditional gender ideology that places men as the primary supporters of the family (Ariyani et al., 2022).

### 3.2.2 Educational Differences

Mate selection preferences also vary by educational level. In this study, participants were grouped into two categories: individuals who completed a diploma or D3 program, were currently pursuing or completed bachelor's degree (referred to as the D3-S1 group), and individuals who were either currently pursuing or completed master's degree (referred to as the S2 group). The D3-S1 group tends to prefer partners who are sociable, want to have children, and are physically attractive, but places less importance on religiosity, a good family background, and the ability to manage a household. In contrast, the S2 group prioritizes religiosity, family background, and the ability to manage a household, but places less emphasis on partners who are sociable, college graduates, and who express a desire to have children.

Individuals in the D3-S1 group, representing early young adulthood, typically hold idealized mate preferences and are actively exploring partner criteria that emphasize similarity in physical attractiveness, sociability, and shared interests. This is in line with a study by Ariyani et al. (2022) which revealed that individuals tend to seek partners who share many similarities with themselves (homogamy). Although categorized by education, the differences in mate preferences between the D3-S1 and S2 groups may also reflect age-related patterns. Younger adults, who are more likely to be in the D3-S1 group, tend to emphasize physical attractiveness and social compatibility, while individuals in their late twenties or early thirties, who are more common in the S2 group, prioritize stability, shared values, and long-term compatibility, but less emphasis on appearance but (Eastwick et al., 2014; Sprecher et al., 2019).

Consistent with previous statement, the present study also found that individuals in the S2 group begin to prioritize aspects such as religiosity and family background in their partner selection. This is in line with a study by Ariyani et al. (2022) which highlighted the importance of family background, religion, and culture in family formation in Indonesia. The emphasis on religious similarity reflects broader social expectations, where choosing a partner with the same beliefs is often considered essential for maintaining harmony within the family and society. A study by Aini et al. (2019) also highlighted that enduring social norms continue to prioritize religiosity and cultural similarity in marital decisions. Furthermore, a study by Setyonaluri et al. (2020) found that individuals with higher education in Indonesia are more likely to delay marriage and prioritize partner choices that align with shared values and family expectations, extending beyond purely economic considerations.

In relation to the criteria of college graduates that were not prioritized by the S2 group, the discussion should be related to gender as the results of four groups comparison below.

### 3.2.3 Gender and Educational Differences

Based on gender and education level, participants were grouped into four categories: men who have completed D3, are currently pursuing or completed bachelor's degree (D3-S1 male group); women who have completed D3, are currently pursuing or completed bachelor's degree (D3-S1 female group); men who are currently pursuing or completed master's degree (S2 male group); and women who are currently pursuing or completed master's degree (S2 female group). There are significant differences in partner selection preferences across several criteria, including religiosity, ability to manage household responsibilities, intelligence, income, sociability, educational attainment, and physical attractiveness.

D3-S1 male group prioritizes partners who are physically attractive, capable of managing the household, and intelligent, but places less emphasis on income, religiosity, and family background. D3-S1 female group prioritizes income, education, and sociability, but places less importance on physical appearance, household management skills, and an attractive personality. Group S2 male places greater emphasis on physical attractiveness, family background, and household management ability, but places less importance on education, income, and sociability. S2 female group prioritizes religiosity,

income, and creative or artistic traits, while placing less emphasis on appearance, intelligence, and household management skills. These results support Buss & Barnes (1986) theory that men, regardless of their educational level, tend to prioritize choosing a partner with physical attractiveness. Women, on the other hand, tend to prefer partners with good income. However, women who are pursuing or have completed an S2 degree place greater importance on religiosity when selecting a partner. This finding is consistent with DeGenova & Rice (2008) perspective, which suggests that factors such as race and religion are important considerations in the partner selection process.

When analyzed in greater detail, the D3-S1 male group consistently placed the highest importance on having a kind and understanding partner, whereas the S2 female group rated this criterion lowest. Preference for a religious partner was highest in S2 female group and lowest in D3-S1 male group. The criterion of having a creative and artistic partner was most prioritized by S2 female group and least by S2 male group. D3-S1 male group placed the highest importance on choosing a partner who can manage household responsibilities well, while D3-S1 female group placed the least emphasis on this trait. Intelligent partners were most preferred by D3-S1 male group and least preferred by S2 female group. D3-S1 male group also prioritized partners who expressed a desire to have children the most, while S2 female group prioritized this criterion the least. D3-S1 female group placed greater importance on partners who are sociable, while S2 male group valued this trait the least. D3-S1 female group also tended to prefer partners who are college graduates, whereas S2 male group valued this criterion the least. For partners with an attractive appearance, the D3-S1 male group placed the highest importance, while the S2 female group placed the lowest. In contrast, for partners who are healthy, S2 female group placed the highest importance, while D3-S1 male group placed the lowest. According to Byrne (1971), these kinds of patterns in mate selection reflect the complementarity theory, where individuals seek partners who complement their own traits or fulfill unmet needs.

In addition, men, regardless of their level of education, still tend to prioritize physical attractiveness and good housekeeping skill in a partner, while placing less importance on the criterion of good earning capacity, which can be attributed to the influence of patriarchal culture as previously discussed. As for women, regardless of their educational level tend to place the importance on good earning capacity and rank physical attractiveness as the least important criterion. However, for women in the S2 group, religiosity was considered the primary criterion, followed by good earning capacity as the second. Additionally, these research findings are in line with a study by Daraz et al. (2023), which suggested women with higher education or greater economic independence tend to broaden their mate preferences, increasingly valuing shared values, companionship, and mutual support.

When it comes to the criterion of a college graduate, there is a difference between women in the D3-S1 group and those in the S2 group. Women in the D3-S1 group view the criterion of college graduation as more important than women in the S2 group, who might be expected to prioritize selecting a partner with a college degree. The tendency of women in the D3-S1 group to prioritize a college graduate partner may reflect their developmental stage, as they are still entering early adulthood and in the process of establishing their life structure. At this stage, they tend to explore and prefer partners who share similar backgrounds and characteristics (Levinson, 1978).

Furthermore, society often portrays highly educated women as less desirable partners due to the stigmatization that frames them as difficult to lead or manage in a relationship, which contributes to their remaining single. As a result, they are also frequently labeled as “perawan tua” or old virgin, in contrast to highly educated single men, who are typically viewed as accomplished and still capable of having children (Setyonaluri et al., 2020).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study highlights how mate selection in Indonesia is influenced not only by gender but also by educational background. Although men and women continue to differ in their emphasis on physical attractiveness versus earning capacity, education appears to shift priorities, particularly by increasing

religiosity among those with higher educational attainment. This pattern underscores the importance of viewing partner preferences within the broader socio-cultural and religious context of Indonesia, where traditional gender expectations intersect with the evolving influence of education.

This study is important because it challenges the assumption that partner preferences are universal and instead shows that cultural and educational factors significantly shape the values that individuals prioritize in choosing a partner. The practical implications of this research are that for Indonesians, finding a partner is inextricably linked to the influence of culture, religion, and family values. Therefore, people from outside Indonesia, as well as Indonesians from diverse backgrounds, need to understand and respect these factors. Many programs can be recommended to achieve this need, such as educational and sociocultural programs, including early adult religious-based premarital counselling, and exploration of the uniqueness of finding a partner in Indonesia.

It also suggests the need for future research to explore these dimensions more deeply within diverse sociocultural contexts. Moreover, it is essential to evaluate the use of Buss's instrument, as it reflects a Western perspective that may not fully capture the Indonesian unique blend of patriarchy, religiosity, and cultural norms.

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