

Exploring Mate Selection Preferences in Indonesia: A Preliminary Study for Instrument Development in Non-Formal Education Contexts

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Abstract

Background: Mate selection preferences is an evaluation process that aims to find a partner who is considered potential for someone. This study was inspired by Buss and Barnes' study regarding mate selection preferences, as well as Hinkin, Tracey, and Enz's study regarding the seven stages of scale development and analysis; to investigate Indonesians' mate selection preferences.

Research Objectives: This study was considered as a replication research for Indonesia context to verify the prior results' consistency and accuracy of research on mate selection preferences inspired by Buss and Barnes as well as to develop an instrument of mate selection preferences for Indonesians.

Research Method: This study applied three of Hinkin, Tracey, and Enz's seven-stage scale development process. Stage one involved qualitative item generation through focus group discussions with 47 participants and thematic analysis. Stage two assessed content validity with input from 11 experts in measurement, psychometrics, and psychology. Stage three involved administering a rank-order questionnaire to 423 respondents to refine the scale and ensure adequate sample size.

Research Findings: The finding of the first stage was 33 themes of mate selection preferences, including same religion, ethnicity consideration, family blessing, attractive physical appearance, mentally and physically healthy, as item generation. The result from the second stage was the validation from experts, resulted in 22 characteristics with a validation range of 0.345 – 0.831 and a good category of reliability of 0.898. The result from the third stage was the order of preference for choosing a partner, was obtained by placing the characteristic of same religion as the first order.

Conclusion: The results of the first three stages in this research can be used as a starting point to understand how Indonesians select partners who are influenced by characteristics of same religion, cultural or ethnicity considerations, and family blessing. The same religion was ranked first in the order of mate selection preferences. This study then should be continued to the next four stages of instrument development in order to create a final scale of Indonesians' mate selection preferences.

Novelty/Originality/Value: This early investigation into Indonesian mate selection reveals the cultural richness and values—religion, ethnicity, and family—that shape marriage choices. It also highlights the complexity of finding an ideal partner and offers practical insights for non-formal education, helping both Indonesians and foreigners understand local partner selection norms.

Keywords: Mate Selection Preferences, Scale Development and Analysis, Focus Group, Thematic Analysis

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INTRODUCTION

Psychosocial development is a crucial aspect of life, particularly in the age range of 17-45 years. This period is marked by developmental tasks aimed at pursuing dreams, career development, finding a partner, getting married, and starting a family. Erikson's theory suggests that this period is a time of "intimacy versus isolation" crises (Papalia & Martorell, 2023; Santrock, 2020). In this stage, a person is asked to develop intimacy or the ability to present feelings of warmth, closeness, and sharing in a relationship. If an individual fails in developing intimacy, he will feel isolated or unable to build intimacy (Haggerty et al., 2021; Orenstein & Lewis, 2022). Excessive isolation can give rise to feelings of loneliness that hinder the fulfillment of further developmental tasks. Before entering a relationship, individuals need to be involved in the process of selecting a partner.

Mate selection is a process of determining a mate to enter a long-term relationship or marriage bond (Brackett, 2016; Williams & Sulikowski, 2020). Winch (in Furham & Cuppello, 2024; Hou et al., 2020) in complementary needs theory suggested that mate selection is considered as an individual's psychological drive to choose a partner of the opposite sex with characteristics that can complement individual deficiencies. Eckland in social homogamy theory emphasizes the process of choosing a partner based on similarities in sociocultural background with the aim of maintaining the individual's values and beliefs (Islam, 2021). Eastwick et al. noted that the matching between trait patterns of couples and preference of an ideal partner can create a possibility for couples to be able to survive in their relationships (Driebe et al., 2024; Eastwick et al., 2019, 2023). It suggested criteria that is set by the individual can also determine the genetics of offspring produced and their chances of adapting to the environment later in life (Scheller et al., 2023).

Buss & Barnes suggested that mate selection preferences are a search for characteristics that individuals want in a potential partner (Choy & Li, 2021). Conroy-Beam and Buss (2021) research on mate selection preferences highlights the psychological mechanisms that drive individuals to seek a potential partner with desired characteristics, such as morphology, social status, or behavior, thereby influencing their selection process. Buss and Barnes (1986) identified 13 criteria for a partner, as follow: 1) kind and understanding, 2) exciting personality, 3) intelligent, 4) physically attractive, 5) healthy, 6) easygoing, 7) creative, 8) wants children, 9) college graduate, 10) good earning capacity, 11) good heredity, 12) good housekeeper, and 13) religious.

Buss and Barnes first conducted a research on mate selection preferences by using 12 instruments including Marital preference questionnaire, California psychological inventory, Spouse rating, and Interviewer rating. Then based on its factor loading, they found nine criteria out of 76 items, which were: 1) kind and understanding, 2) exciting personality, 3) intelligent, 4) healthy, 5) easygoing, 6) creative, 7) wants children, 8) good housekeeper, and 9) religious. Moreover, Buss and Barnes added four criteria to consider male and female choices. The four criteria were: 1) physically attractive, 2) college graduate, 3) good earning capacity, and 4) good heredity. Good heredity was considered as an important mate selection characteristic according to Henshaw et al. (2022).

Furthermore, Buss (in Buss et al., 2001; Buss & Shackelford, 2008) identified 18 criteria for selecting a partner, including good [cooking](#) and housekeeping skills, pleasant character, good educational background, financial prospects, chastity, reliable character, emotional stability, desire for home and children, favorable social status, good looks, religious background, ambition, political background, mutual interest-love, good health, and education and intelligence. Ariyani, Wahyuni, and Putri (2022) highlight the importance of family origins, religion, and culture in forming a family in Indonesia. According to Indonesia Marriage Law No.1 Year 1974, it is stated that marriage is valid if it meets the religious laws and beliefs of the respective religion. The importance of religion in marriage law is understandable since Indonesia is a religious country, ranked 7th with 98.7% of Indonesian people claiming to be religious, based on CEOWORLD magazine survey on world's most religious countries in year 2024 (Wilson, 2024).

Consequently, most Indonesian authorities do not recommend interfaith marriages, such as in Islam, as stated in Fatwa number 4/MUNAS VII/MUI/8/2005 by Indonesian Ulama Council. Catholic Church and Christianity are also in line with this view. In Catholic Church, interfaith marriage is considered as problematic

and fundamental problems as it can rise obstacles such as education for children and family's welfare as well as dangers to Catholic faith (Pamungkas & Viktorahadi, 2021). While in Christianity, marriage is considered as God's initiative or as a marriage of faith. Interfaith marriage is not permitted as stated in the Old and New Testaments (Silfanus, 2022). According to Parker et al. (2014), 52% of 3000 respondents opposed marriage to partners of different religions, citing potential violations of religious rules and future difficulties for their children.

Further, Indonesia's partner preferences are influenced by ethnic and cultural diversity. This is understandable since Indonesia is the most ethnically diverse societies. Indonesia consists of 1,300 ethnic groups with Javanese being the largest one (Yuniarni, 2016). The Javanese philosophy in marriage partner search, "Bibit, Bebet, Bobot" is widely used by Javanese ethnic group, which includes lineage, socio-economic status, and beliefs, work, skills, education, personality, and behavior (Masfiah, 2022; Sabri, 2024). In Javanese culture, parents not only act as advisors, but often have significant authority in determining their children's choice of life partner. This is based on the belief that parents have more experience and wisdom to choose a suitable partner, to maintain family harmony and well-being. This tradition reflects respect for family hierarchy and the values of collectivity that are characteristic of Javanese culture (Gusti, 2024). This highlights the importance of parents' blessing or family blessing.

In other ethnic groups such as Batak, Bugis, Minangkabau, and Balinese, they have their own principles in mate selection preferences. In Batak, for instance, the concept of marriage is exogamy or different-clan marriage. For Batak, the same-clan people are descendants from the father's line or blood relatives or called patrilineal bloodlines, so that cannot be married to. They should find a match from outside clan (Oksavina, 2023; Siregar et al., 2023; Solin et al., 2024; Yunus, 2021). In Bugis or Makassar, there is a term called Dui 'Menre' (Bugis) or 'Panai' money (Makassar). 'Panai' money refers to a significant amount of money that should be given by a groom's family to a bride's family determined based on her education level, descent/caste, economic level, physical condition, women status (single, widow, or divorce), and title of hajj (the title given for a person who has performed the hajj pilgrimage, according to Islam) in the context of a ritual of a marriage proposal (Djabbar & Winaudri, 2020; Fitriyani, 2022; Komariah, 2023; Nurhalisa & Pratiwi, 2023). In Minangkabau, the concept of marriage is similar with Batak's, that the marriage is exogamy. However, in Minangkabau, the exogamy is from a perspective of matrilineal bloodlines or marriage should with different line from the mother's line (Aprilia et al., 2024).

Utomo and McDonald (2016) research shows that 90% of the 47,822,404 couples in Indonesia are couples from the same ethnicity. Parker et al. (2014) revealed the same suggestion in their study that the ethnicity of a prospective partner is important to pay attention to because it influences their customs and relationship with the ethnic community. This highlights the importance of considering a prospective partner's ethnicity in determining their customs and relationships within the ethnic community. On that account, this information is practically beneficial to educate people (Indonesians or foreigners) non-formally in understanding how Indonesians select partners who are influenced by characteristics of same religion and cultural or ethnic considerations as well as family blessing.

This study explores Indonesian mate selection preferences, inspired by Buss and Barnes, using Hinkin's scale development and analysis which covers seven stages of scale development. It presents results from the first three stages of the seven stages of scale development in construction of Indonesia's mate selection preferences.

METHODS

This study was mostly conducted quantitatively using the model of seven stages of scale development of Hinkin et al. (1997). The first stage of the model can be conducted qualitatively. The following is an explanation of the first three stages which are intended as initial steps in research to create a measurement scale:

Item generation

Items were generated using qualitative approach as research design, with thematic analysis as its analysis method or data analysis technique. In this method, data was gathered by using focus groups technique. There were 47 participants involved in this stage which divided into four focus groups. This stage is the first stage of development and analysis, with the aim to create items. The process of creating items can be done inductively or deductively as suggested in thematic analysis. Inductive approach usually used when the phenomenon is unfamiliar. The participants in this approach will be asked their opinions or feelings in order to describe the studied phenomenon. The responses are then analysed using a suitable analysis to derive items. Conversely, the deductive approach is used when the theories and relevant literatures exist to understand the phenomenon. In this study, inductive approach was used to generate items from Indonesian perspectives on mate selection preferences. The total of 47 participants was grouped into four focus group discussions and then their data was analysed by using thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis itself is a method of analysis which is independent of theory and epistemology. Thematic analysis can be applied to a variety of theoretical and epistemological approaches. This method is considered theoretically flexible, versatile and useful for research tool to get a rich and detailed data (Christou, 2023). In thematic analysis, data is identified, analysed, and reported as themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022, 2023; Lochmiller, 2021; Terry & Hayfield, 2021). Therefore, thematic analysis is suitable for an early investigation of Indonesians' mate selection preferences. By using essentialist/realist epistemology in this study, it can explore participants' experiences, meanings, and realities.

Thematic analysis informs themes or patterns as findings. Frith and Gleeson (in Braun & Clarke, 2023) suggested that themes or patterns within data can be identified in an inductive or bottom up. Then, Boyatzis (in Braun & Clarke, 2023) suggested that the patterns within data can be identified in a theoretical or deductive or top down way. In this study, the themes were identified inductively. Patton (in Braun & Clarke, 2023) showed the themes which were identified inductively are considered strongly related to the data. The themes generated by inductive approach would not be motivated by the researcher's theoretical knowledge. In other words, coding in inductive way does not attempt to fit data into a pre-existing coding frame based on the analytic preconceptions of the researchers. These processes can also be called as data-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2023; Wæraas, 2022).

Content adequacy assessment

This second stage is aimed to test the conceptual consistency of items. Basically, its function is to guarantee adequacy before the development of the final questionnaire and constitute construct content validity, as it allows the elimination of items that may be conceptually inconsistent. In other words, this stage is to provide the items which are properly constructed. In this quantitative stage, eleven experts assessed the generated items from the first stage or from thematic analysis which was based on data from four focus group discussions. The eleven experts consisted of measurement experts, psychometricians, psychologists, developmental and family psychology lecturers or scientists.

Questionnaire administration

This stage is for determining the scale for items and an adequate sample size. In item scaling, likert scales are mostly used in survey research using questionnaires (Darnton, 2023; Opuni & Alhassan, 2023; Shepard, 2024). However, there are other scales that can be used depends on the objective of the study. As for sample size, it is determined in order to appropriately conduct tests of statistical significance. In other words, the items that have been prepared in the second stage are then presented to the appropriate sample with the aim of checking how well the items meet psychometric requirements. The use of questionnaire administration means that this stage is also a quantitative stage.

This stage was done by distributing online questionnaires for 423 respondents by using rank order scale. The criteria for respondents used were those who were still unmarried, at the age that was suitable for marriage. Rank order scale allows participants to rearrange and rank the items in a specific order. In this case is to order which characteristic of a mate is more important to them. The use of rank order scale was also inspired by

Buss studies. The next four stages of Hinkin's scale development are factor analysis, internal consistency assessment, construct validity, and replication; which are not explained in this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section is to present the results and discussions from the first three stages: 1) item generation stage, 2) content adequacy assessment stage, and 3) questionnaire administration stage. Each stage has its own results and discussions. Below is explanation:

First stage

The first stage of item generation used four focus group discussion with 47 participants in total. In the focus group discussions, open-ended questions were addressed. The participants characteristics were Indonesian nationality with age 18 years old and over. The data was then analysed by thematic analysis. The six phases of thematic analysis were carried out in order to get final results or themes.

Phase 1 of thematic analysis, data were transcribed, read, re-read to get familiar with it and to have initial ideas. The following are two examples of data transcription: *"There was no such involvement from my parents, they gave freedom who to choose. But, as soon as they knew [potential partner]'s ethnicity and religion, they disagreed,"* and *"From my perspective, I would like my husband to like watching anime because I am a fan of anime. That is my hobby and I would like my husband to share the same hobby and interest with me so that we can get along with each other better,"*

Phase 2, initial codes were generated by coding the ideas and compiling relevant data to each code. From the transcription here as an example, the initial codes obtained were physical appearance and femininity. *"The first characteristic I see from [potential partner]'s is **physical appearance**. Moreover, I prefer her to be **feminine**, calm, sweet, cute, beautiful, fair-skinned, and has pretty eyes,"*

Phase 3, potential themes were coded, and relevant data were collected to each potential theme. After the initial codes were sought, all of the participants' answers were categorized into each potential theme. As for phase 4, the themes were reviewed by checking and mapping the themes; then phase 5, the themes were named; and finally phase 6, writing the report. The example of coding is as listed below.

Table 1. Coding

Excerpts	Initial coding	Coding 2 (potential themes)	Coding 3 (themes reviews)	Coding 4 (name of themes)
"Yes, in my opinion related to mate criteria, the most important is same faith, because it will be hard for the future related to worship and others."	The most important is same faith	same faith is the most important	same faith	same religion
	because it will be hard for the future related to worship	same faith is equal to same in worshipping, and this similarity makes future easier	same worship	
"Same as what others mentioned earlier that same faith and same religion are very important because it's like if we have a partner who understands religion,	The same faith and same religion are very important	same faith same religion	same faith same religion	same religion
	If the partner understands religion, it's like he	understanding religion makes	same understanding in the same religion	

understand eu... so if the partner understands religion, it's like he can distinguish between good and bad things.”	can distinguish between good and bad things.	people can distinguish between good and bad		
“There is no interference, but I am a very obedient child. I was once close to two people; I mean at different times. The first one, I felt my mother found it suitable, after I was no longer with the first one, I got close to the second one, as a child I felt that my mother found a mismatch, but she didn't say it, just felt it as her child.”	the first one (the first partner), I felt my mother found it suitable	My mother found it suitable	mother's approval / family approval	family blessing
	the second one (the second partner), I felt that my mother found a mismatch.	My mother found a mismatch	mother's blessing / family blessing	
	She didn't say it, just felt it as her child.	I felt it (her disapproval)		
“There is no interference, parents give freedom. But same as mentioned earlier, when they know about ethnic group and religion, they seem to disagree.”	when they (parents) know about ethnic groups and religion (of a partner), they (parents) seem to disagree	parents ask for the same ethnicity	ethnicity consideration	ethnicity consideration
		parents ask for the same religion	same religion	same religion

The findings of the first stage were established after all of the relevant answers from the participants got categorized into themes, each of all the themes were named into a suitable characteristic. The 33 themes found were attractive physical appearance, sufficient income, same interests, same vision/life goals, one “frequency”, same religion, educational level consideration, family blessing, ethnicity consideration, socio-economic status consideration, marital status consideration, good behavior, loyal, wise, hardworking, accepting as the person is, not possessive, proximity to place of residence/activity, birth order consideration, similar characters with parents, religious, physically healthy, mentally healthy, age consideration, friendly, wanting children, creative and artistic, good household management, family background consideration, caring, feminine character (for female) or masculine character (for male), fertile, and responsible (Ariyani, Wahyuni, Putri, et al., 2022).

These 33 themes or characteristics of mate selection preferences are greater than the number of partner search criteria that Buss offered in his studies. Buss and his colleagues (Buss et al., 2001; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Buss & Shackelford, 2008; Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2021) suggested 13 and 18 criteria in their previous research of mate selection preferences. Although the Buss' criteria also mention that there are general similarities between people in selecting partners across different cultures, however for Indonesia, similarity in religion could be the most important criterion or considered as the first criterion. The other important criteria that can be discussed are ethnicity consideration and family blessing. Not only Javanese people with their “Bibit, Bebet, Bobot” (Masfiah, 2022; Sabri, 2024), but also people of Batak with their patrilineal exogamy or different-clan marriage (Oksavina, 2023; Siregar et al., 2023; Solin et al., 2024; Yunus, 2021) as well as Minangkabau people with their matrilineal exogamy (Aprilia et al., 2024) are examples of the importance of ethnicity consideration in seeking a marriage spouse. There are also Bugis and Makassar people with their Dui ‘Menre’ (Bugis) or ‘Panai’ money (Makassar) in their marriage traditions (Djabbar & Winaudri, 2020; Fitriyani, 2022; Komariah, 2023; Nurhalisa & Pratiwi, 2023). In addition, family blessing is also practiced by Indonesians as for Javanese as their respect for parents, family hierarchy, and value of collectivity (Gusti, 2024).

Those 33 themes which were found in the first stage of analysis were resulted from qualitative approach with focus group data and thematic analysis. Using qualitative approach with such data collection and analysis method basically means that the data collected were grounded. It means, the data directly comes from the

participants. Therefore, these themes generally reflect Indonesian perspectives of mate selection preferences which highlight the importance of same religion, ethnicity consideration, and family blessing. In other words, the considerations of religion, ethnicity, and family are parts of normal mate selection in Indonesia. This is in line with the study of MacDonald et al. (2012) which informs the importance of family and culture in finding a partner and the study of Henshaw et al. (2022) about good heredity.

Second stage

In this stage, the 33 characteristics of mate selection preferences were examined by eleven experts and analysed using Item-Total Correlation and Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC). Among 33 characteristics, the results showed only 22 characteristics with high item discrimination ($r > 0,3$), which were attractive physical appearance, same vision/life goals, same religion, family blessing, ethnicity consideration, good behavior, loyal, wise, hardworking, accepting as the person is, birth order, similar characters with parents, religious, physically healthy, mentally healthy, wanting children, creative and artistic person, family background consideration, caring, feminine character (for female) or masculine character (for male), fertile, and responsible. The table below consists some examples of validated characteristics.

Table 2. Item total correlation (6 examples of items)

Characteristics	Item-Total Correlation
Attractive Physical Appearance	0,699
Same Religion	0,686
Family Blessing	0,569
Ethnicity Consideration	0,506
Physically Healthy	0,603
Mentally Healthy	0,831

Table 3. Intra Class Correlation

Point Estimate	Lower 95% ci	Upper 95% ci
0.898	0.821	0.951

The table above showed the reliability value of 0.898 and was classified as good according to Koo & Li (2016). These second stage's result (22 criteria) did not change the essence of the earlier results which are 33 criteria. The same religion criteria, ethnicity consideration, family blessing, are still remain.

The 22 identified themes resulted from the second stage reflect a more concise mate selection preferences for Indonesians. However, it still suggests more considerations in selecting partners, compared to Buss and Barnes' study which informs 13 and 18 criteria (Buss & Barnes, 1986).

Third stage

The next stage was distributing an online questionnaire form using rank order scale. The criteria of respondents were early adult Indonesian aged 18-45 years old and has yet to marry. The data collection obtained a total of 423 respondents.

Table 3. Item rank

Items	Mean	SD	Rank
Same Religion	2.861	4.790	1
Same Vision/Life Goals	6.993	5.400	2
Loyal	8.504	4.765	3
Good Behavior	9.303	5.002	4
Attractive Physical Appearance	9.416	7.012	5

Family Blessing	9.426	6.517	6
Hardworking	12.624	5.581	7
Wise	13.463	4.669	8
Accepting as the person is	13.475	5.671	9
Responsible	14.326	9.976	10
Religious	15.002	8.120	11
Mentally healthy	15.934	7.486	12
Physically healthy	16.657	6.744	13
Caring	18.747	8.779	14
Ethnicity Consideration	21.757	8.659	15
Family Background Consideration	24.513	7.207	16
Similar Characters with Parents	25.352	5.749	17
Wanting Children	25.681	5.399	18
Birth Order	25.877	5.297	19
Creative and Artistic	25.889	5.534	20
Feminine Character (For Female) or Masculine Character (For Male)	27.617	6.433	21
Fertile	27.927	5.984	22

The items above are listed in order of rank with mean scores ranging from 2.861 to 27.927. The rank was determined by mean scores, where the smallest mean indicated the highest rank or the most important and the biggest mean indicated the lowest rank or the least important. The most important is “same religion” and the least important is “fertile”. Meanwhile, the deviation standard scores range from 4.669 to 9.976. The lowest indicated less variation in respondent’s answer which is “wise” and the highest indicated more variation in respondent’s answer which is “responsible”. The third stage’s result confirmed that the same religion criterion ranked first. This confirms that Indonesia is a religious country as stated in CEOWORLD magazine survey on world’s most religious countries in year 2024 (Wilson, 2024) and Indonesian people as people who follow the rules of marriage in their religions.

On one side, the unveiling of Indonesians mate selection preferences although is still as an early investigation introduces the “richness” and the wisdom of Indonesian cultures in marriage as well as appreciation and understanding of how marriages in Indonesia are bound by religions, cultures or ethnicity, and family values. On the other side, it also informs the complexity of how to find an ideal partner.

CONCLUSION

This study explores Indonesian mate selection preferences, inspired by Buss and Barnes. The study identifies 22 characteristics of Indonesian mate selection preferences, including the same religion, vision/life goals, loyalty, good behavior, attractive physical appearance, family blessing, hardworking, wise, accepting, responsible, religious, mentally and physically healthy, caring, ethnicity consideration, family background consideration, similar characters with parents, wanting children, birth order, creative and artistic, feminine character (for female) or masculine character (for male), and fertile. The most important characteristic is "same religion," while the least important is "fertile." This result introduces the “richness” and the wisdom of Indonesian cultures in marriage as well as appreciation and understanding of how marriages in Indonesia are bound by religions, family values, and cultures or ethnicity. On the other side, it also informs the complexity of how to find an ideal partner. Although the study is still in its early stages, with four more stages needed to reach a final instrument, these findings can inform and educate Indonesian people, particularly youths, about the richness and wisdom of Indonesian cultures in marriage, as well as foreigners in helping them appreciate and understand the bounds of marriages in Indonesia.

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