

A Study of Mate Preference Among Young Adults

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ABSTRACT

Mate preference is a foundational topic in relationship research because it helps explain how young adults identify, compare, and prioritize the qualities they seek in a romantic or marital partner. The present paper offers an original, literature-based analysis of mate preference among young adults with special attention to developmental stage, gendered patterns, and sociocultural influences. The review integrates classic cross-cultural work, contemporary replications, the Ideal Standards framework, and studies focused on emerging adulthood and the Indian context. The literature shows that mate preference is multidimensional rather than reducible to a single trait. Warmth, trustworthiness, loyalty, mutual attraction, and emotional stability repeatedly emerge as high-value characteristics, while attractiveness, vitality, education, financial prospects, and family compatibility remain important in context-specific ways. The reviewed studies also suggest that some broad sex differences persist across cultures, yet these differences exist alongside strong similarities in the value attached to affection, dependability, and relationship stability. In addition, current scholarship indicates that young adults now negotiate mate choice within a rapidly changing social world shaped by individual aspiration, family expectations, and shifting norms around education, work, and marriage. The paper concludes that mate preference among young adults is best understood as a dynamic interaction between psychological needs, perceived partner qualities, and cultural meaning systems. A brief empirical framework is also proposed for future field-based study.

Keywords: mate preference, young adults, partner selection, romantic relationships, emerging adulthood, relationship ideals

INTRODUCTION

Human beings do not enter intimate relationships randomly. Even when attraction appears spontaneous, people usually carry relatively stable ideas about what makes a partner desirable, trustworthy, suitable, or compatible. These ideas influence whom they notice, whom they approach, whom they reject, and the kind of long-term future they imagine with another person. In psychological and sociological research, these evaluative tendencies are studied under the broad concept of mate preference. Mate preference refers to the qualities individuals desire or prioritize in a prospective romantic or marital partner, including emotional, physical, social, intellectual, moral, and economic characteristics.

The topic becomes especially important during young adulthood. This life stage is commonly associated with identity exploration, growing independence from parental control, greater interaction with potential partners, and increasing seriousness about long-term commitment. For many young adults, partner

choice is no longer only a matter of attraction; it is also connected to anticipated family life, emotional security, social mobility, and personal fulfillment. Because of this, the study of mate preference among young adults offers a valuable window into how intimate choices are shaped at the intersection of personal desire and social structure.

The academic study of mate preference has moved through several important phases. Early work focused on broad cross-cultural regularities and examined whether men and women tend to value different traits in long-term partners. Later work refined this picture by showing that partner ideals are structured, multidimensional, and sensitive to relationship context. More recent scholarship has emphasized developmental change, cultural diversity, measurement problems, and the need to understand how stated preferences map onto actual partner choice. Taken together, this body of research shows that mate preference is neither a purely biological instinct nor a purely social construction. Rather, it is a complex field in which evolved concerns, developmental tasks, cultural values, and contemporary opportunities all play meaningful roles. (Buss, 1989; Buss & Schmitt, 2019).

The present paper examines this topic through a literature-based research approach. It synthesizes classic and recent studies in order to identify the major dimensions of mate preference among young adults, to review evidence regarding gender and cultural variation, and to discuss why this topic remains important in contemporary society. Special attention is given to studies relevant to India and to the developmental stage often described as emerging adulthood. The paper also proposes an empirical framework that can guide future survey-based work on the same topic. (Bleske-Rechek & Ryan, 2015; Sprecher et al., 2019; Simons et al., 2025).

Conceptual Understanding of Mate Preference

Mate preference can be understood from several complementary perspectives. From a psychological viewpoint, it reflects the standards people use to evaluate whether another person would be an appropriate partner. From a developmental viewpoint, it reflects what people believe they need at a particular life stage. From a sociocultural viewpoint, it reflects the values, expectations, and role prescriptions transmitted through family, media, community, religion, and institutions. None of these perspectives alone is sufficient; together they help explain why some mate preferences remain relatively stable across settings while others vary across time, class, gender, and culture.

A useful conceptual distinction is between highly personal traits and socially instrumental traits. Personal traits include affection, honesty, emotional stability, understanding, humor, and compatibility. Socially instrumental traits include education, occupation, earning potential, family background, and social status. Physical attractiveness and health-related cues often sit somewhere in between because they may carry both subjective and social meanings. Young adults rarely choose among these domains in isolation. Instead, they weigh several desirable qualities together and make trade-offs depending on whether they imagine a casual relationship, a long-term partnership, or marriage.

Another important distinction is between ideal standards and real-world constraints. A person may ideally want a partner who is kind, attractive, ambitious, emotionally mature, family-oriented, and economically secure. In actual partner selection, however, decisions are made within limits imposed by opportunity, social approval, timing, geography, and the availability of partners who possess multiple desired traits at once. Contemporary mate preference research therefore tries to understand not only what people say they want, but also how they rank or negotiate those preferences when they cannot maximize all of them simultaneously. This distinction has become more central in contemporary work that uses constrained-choice methods to study trade-offs (Simons et al., 2025).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Foundational Cross-Cultural Work

One of the most influential studies in this field was conducted by Buss (1989), who examined mate preferences across 37 cultures. That study helped establish the claim that partner preferences display both universality and patterned sex differences. Men, on average, were more likely to value cues associated with youth and physical attractiveness, while women, on average, placed greater importance on indicators linked to status, ambition, and financial prospects. The importance of this work lies not only in the individual findings but in its cross-cultural design, which shifted the discussion from anecdotal observation to systematic comparison. (Buss, 1989).

Later work has not simply repeated Buss's conclusions; it has tested them under more contemporary conditions. Walter et al. (2020), in a large-scale replication across 45 countries, reported that broad sex differences in preferences for attractiveness, age, and financial prospects remain robust. However, the replication also demonstrated that these patterns coexist with substantial overlap between men and women, and that cultural context influences how strongly certain preferences are expressed. This is an important reminder that average differences do not imply rigid opposites. Young men and young women often value many of the same traits, especially in long-term relationships. (Walter et al., 2020).

A further refinement came from the work of Shackelford, Schmitt, and Buss (2005), who identified broader dimensions of human mate preference across cultures. Their analysis suggested that attributes often cluster into larger evaluative patterns such as love versus status/resources, dependable/stable versus good looks/health, and education/intelligence versus home/children orientation. This dimensional perspective is useful because it recognizes that partner choice involves bundles of traits rather than disconnected checklists. It also helps explain why certain qualities tend to appear together in both survey responses and real-world judgments. (Shackelford et al., 2005).

Ideal Partner Standards and Relationship Ideals

The social-cognitive tradition has made an equally important contribution through research on relationship ideals. Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, and Giles (1999) demonstrated that qualities of an ideal partner are typically organized around three major dimensions: warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, and status-resources. Their work showed that people do not only seek attractive or successful partners; they also seek partners who appear dependable, loyal, emotionally safe, and capable of sustaining intimacy. In fact, their study found warmth-trustworthiness to be rated most highly for both sexes, followed by vitality-attractiveness, with status-resources receiving comparatively lower average emphasis. This finding has been especially influential because it reveals the centrality of emotional security in mate selection. (Fletcher et al., 1999).

The Ideal Standards framework matters for the study of young adults because it captures how partner choice is guided by internal standards that are both relational and evaluative. Young adults do not simply ask whether a person is attractive; they also compare that person to an internal picture of what a good relationship should feel like. Such standards can shape interpretation, attraction, commitment, and satisfaction. They can also be flexible, changing when relationship experience or life goals shift. Thus, the study of mate preference is closely linked to broader questions of self-concept, commitment, and anticipated relational quality. (Fletcher et al., 1999).

Table 1. Selected studies informing the present paper

Study	Context / Sample	Key contribution
Buss (1989)	37 cultures	Established broad cross-cultural patterns in mate preference, especially attractiveness and resources.
Fletcher et al. (1999)	Partner-ideal research	Identified warmth-trustworthiness, vitality-attractiveness, and status-resources as major dimensions.
Bleske-Rechek & Ryan (2015)	College students followed over time	Showed weak-to-moderate rank-order stability and little mean-level change.
Sprecher et al. (2019)	Adults aged 18-40	Reported lower mate selectivity with age across emerging adulthood and beyond.
Bejanyan et al. (2014)	India and America	Linked collectivism and traditional gender-role attitudes to mate preferences.
Simons et al. (2025)	Contemporary partner-preference study	Argued for updated instruments and constraint-based assessment of priorities.

Young Adulthood as a Developmental Context

Young adulthood is a particularly rich stage for examining mate preference because it combines stability with change. Bleske-Rechek and Ryan (2015) followed young adults from the first year to the fourth year of college and found weak-to-moderate rank-order stability but very little mean-level change in mate preferences and mating orientations. Their findings suggest that mate preferences are not completely fluid, yet they also remain open to influence from developmental experience. In other words, young adults carry enduring preferences, but those preferences are still being organized and tested against real relationship experiences. (Bleske-Rechek & Ryan, 2015).

Related work by Sprecher, Econie, and Treger (2019) showed that age within emerging adulthood and beyond is associated with lower mate selectivity. Their survey indicated that as participants grew older, they tended to become somewhat less selective, and this negative association between age and selectivity was stronger for men than for women. This finding is important because it suggests that partner preferences are affected not only by personality or culture but also by life-course position. As young adults accumulate experience, confront social realities, and reassess future goals, their standards may become more realistic or more negotiated. (Sprecher et al., 2019).

Together, these studies show that young adulthood is not merely a background category; it is itself a meaningful explanatory context. The transition into adulthood involves growing autonomy, educational and occupational investment, emotional learning, and changing relationship expectations. For that reason, mate preference among young adults should be studied as a developmental process as much as a set of isolated attitudes.

Cultural and Indian Context

Culture strongly shapes how partner qualities are interpreted and prioritized. Bejanyan, Marshall, and Ferenczi (2014), in a comparative study of young adults in India and America, found that Indians

reported greater collectivism and more traditional gender-role orientations, and that these factors partly predicted stronger preferences for traditional mate characteristics. Their work is especially valuable because it shows that mate preference is not only about what people individually like; it is also about what they have learned to regard as appropriate, secure, or marriageable within their social environment. (Bejanyan et al., 2014).

Research focusing directly on India provides additional nuance. Kamble, Shackelford, Pham, and Buss (2014) compared modern Indian participants with an Indian sample from roughly a quarter century earlier. They reported continuity in the high valuation of mutual attraction and love, as well as continuity in sex differences related to attractiveness and resource-linked traits. At the same time, they identified changes in the valuation of characteristics such as creativity, industriousness, and domestic qualities. The significance of these findings lies in the coexistence of persistence and change: even where modernization alters education, work, media exposure, and marriage practices, some core partner preferences remain remarkably durable. (Kamble et al., 2014).

These cultural studies are especially relevant in societies where family approval, community norms, caste, religion, class, and gender expectations continue to influence romantic relationships. For many young adults, especially in South Asian settings, partner choice is both personal and social. Emotional attraction matters, but so do family background, perceived respectability, and anticipated compatibility with existing norms of marriage and kinship.

Contemporary Updates and Measurement Concerns

Recent scholarship has also drawn attention to the limitations of older measurement traditions. Simons, Sutton, Hanus-Knapp, and Clark (2025) argued that mate selection research has long relied on college-student samples and trait lists rooted in older instruments that may not fully reflect contemporary relationship criteria. Their study expanded the list of partner characteristics and used constrained choices to identify not only preferred traits but also deal breakers, necessities, luxuries, and relatively unimportant qualities. This line of work is important because it pushes the field beyond static ranking exercises toward more realistic models of how partner evaluation occurs under actual constraints. (Simons et al., 2025).

Taken together, the literature suggests three major conclusions. First, mate preference is multidimensional. Second, both similarities and differences across gender and culture matter. Third, the content and expression of mate preferences change as the social world changes. This makes the topic especially relevant for contemporary young adults, whose relationship decisions now unfold in a landscape influenced by higher education, urbanization, social media, delayed marriage, and expanding expectations of emotional compatibility.

Need and Significance of the Study

The need for studying mate preference among young adults is both academic and social. Academically, the topic helps connect personality, development, gender, culture, and family studies within a single relational framework. Socially, it helps explain how expectations about love, marriage, and compatibility are changing among younger generations. In societies where romantic choice and arranged considerations often intersect, understanding mate preference can illuminate tensions between aspiration and obligation, autonomy and approval, and intimacy and social reputation. (Bejanyan et al., 2014; Kamble et al., 2014).

The significance of the topic is also practical. Counselors, educators, and family researchers often encounter young adults who struggle to balance emotional attraction with perceived long-term

suitability. Research on mate preference can help explain why relationship expectations sometimes become unrealistic, why value conflicts emerge between partners or families, and why certain traits are treated as non-negotiable. In this way, the topic contributes not only to academic theory but also to relational well-being and social understanding.

Objective of the Study

1. To synthesize major theoretical and empirical perspectives on mate preference among young adults.
2. To identify the partner qualities most frequently emphasized in the literature, including emotional, physical, social, and economic traits.
3. To examine the influence of developmental stage, gender, and culture on mate preference patterns.
4. To highlight the relevance of Indian and cross-cultural findings for contemporary understanding of partner selection.
5. To propose an empirical framework that can be used in future field-based studies on young adults.

Method and Materials

The present study on Mate Preference among Young Adults follows a descriptive research design. The study aims to examine the major qualities preferred by young adults while selecting a prospective romantic or marital partner, and to understand how emotional, social, educational, economic, and cultural factors influence mate preference.

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh. Aligarh was selected as the area of study because it includes young adults from varied educational, social, and cultural backgrounds, making it suitable for examining contemporary mate preference patterns.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total sample of 100 young adults was selected for the study. The respondents belonged to the age group of 18 to 30 years. The sample included young adults from educational institutions, workplaces, and community settings in Aligarh. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to select respondents who were suitable for the objectives of the study.

Sources of Data

The study is based on both primary and secondary data.

Primary data were collected directly from the respondents through a structured questionnaire designed to gather information about preferred partner qualities, emotional expectations, educational and occupational preferences, family compatibility, cultural values, and attitudes toward marriage and long-term relationships.

Secondary data were collected from books, research papers, journals, and relevant academic sources related to mate preference, young adulthood, partner selection, gender, and cultural influences.

Tools for Data Collection

The main tool used for primary data collection was a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire focused on the following dimensions:

1. Demographic profile of respondents
2. Warmth and interpersonal qualities such as kindness, trustworthiness, loyalty, and emotional stability
3. Physical attractiveness, health, and personality-related traits
4. Educational, occupational, and economic preferences
5. Family background, cultural compatibility, and social values
6. Expectations regarding marriage, commitment, and long-term relationship stability

Methods of Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and comparative methods. Percentages and simple statistical techniques were used to interpret the responses. The findings were examined to understand the relative importance of different partner qualities among young adults and to identify the influence of social and cultural factors on mate preference.

Ethical Considerations

All respondents were informed about the purpose of the study. Their participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. No personal identifiers were recorded, and the responses were used only for academic purposes.

Results and Discussion

The literature reviewed in this paper supports the view that mate preference among young adults is neither random nor one-dimensional. Across theoretical traditions and research designs, one consistent theme is the high value attached to warmth-related partner qualities. Trustworthiness, dependability, emotional stability, loyalty, and mutual affection repeatedly appear near the top of preferred characteristics. This pattern helps correct a common oversimplification that mate selection is mainly driven by looks or money. Those factors matter, but they rarely replace the perceived need for emotional security and relational trust. (Fletcher et al., 1999; Buss & Schmitt, 2019).

At the same time, the literature also shows that physical attractiveness and status-linked traits cannot be dismissed. Attraction, vitality, health cues, ambition, education, and financial prospects remain meaningful elements in partner evaluation. The most accurate interpretation is therefore not that young adults choose between 'love' and 'practicality', but that they often seek a workable combination of emotional, physical, and socioeconomic qualities. The relative ranking of these qualities changes depending on culture, age, relationship context, and perceived market conditions. (Shackelford et al., 2005; Simons et al., 2025).

Gender differences remain visible in the literature, but they should be interpreted carefully. Broad cross-cultural findings continue to show that men, on average, place somewhat greater importance on attractiveness and youth-related cues, whereas women, on average, give greater weight to status and resource potential. Yet the overlap is substantial, and both sexes consistently value kindness, love, and reliability. A strong research paper on mate preference should therefore avoid exaggerated binaries. The question is not whether men and women want entirely different things, but how they prioritize partially overlapping sets of desirable qualities. (Buss, 1989; Walter et al., 2020).

The developmental perspective adds a further layer of insight. Young adulthood is a period in which ideals are tested against experience. Individuals move from imagined partner standards to more realistic assessments shaped by education, peer relationships, heartbreak, family pressure, and future planning.

The evidence reviewed here suggests that mate preferences are stable enough to matter but flexible enough to adapt. This balance between continuity and adjustment helps explain why young adulthood is such a critical stage for studying partner choice. (Bleske-Rechek & Ryan, 2015; Sprecher et al., 2019).

The sociocultural perspective is especially important in the Indian and comparable South Asian context. Here, mate preference often reflects a dual orientation. On one side, young adults increasingly seek personal compatibility, emotional intimacy, and mutual respect. On the other side, family approval, social background, and normative expectations continue to structure what counts as an acceptable or desirable match. This does not mean that young adults are passive recipients of tradition. Rather, they actively negotiate between personal aspirations and collective expectations. That tension is one of the most significant features of contemporary mate preference research. (Bejanyan et al., 2014; Kamble et al., 2014).

Finally, recent studies suggest that the field itself must continue to evolve methodologically. If researchers rely only on outdated trait lists or unconstrained rating scales, they may miss how contemporary young adults actually make choices. Present-day partner evaluation may include concerns such as emotional maturity, respect for autonomy, mental-health compatibility, lifestyle fit, shared values, and the ability to sustain equality within a relationship. Expanding measures does not reject older findings; rather, it makes the field more responsive to the lived realities of the present. (Simons et al., 2025).

Another important point emerging from the literature is the difference between preference expression and preference enactment. What young adults say they want in a partner may not always match whom they actually choose. Opportunity structure, reciprocity, self-perceived mate value, parental involvement, social class, and time pressure can all shape final decisions. A person may sincerely rate honesty and emotional maturity above all else, yet still enter a relationship because of immediate attraction, convenience, shared environment, or social encouragement. For this reason, the strongest future studies will combine self-report preference measures with methods that capture real trade-offs and actual relationship behavior.

The topic is also important because mate preference functions as an index of wider social change. When researchers observe increased emphasis on education, career ambition, emotional intelligence, or egalitarian partnership, they are not merely learning about romance; they are also learning about how younger generations understand adulthood itself. Preferences for a supportive and respectful partner, for example, may reflect changing expectations about gender roles, labor division, and emotional communication in modern relationships. Thus, the study of mate preference among young adults provides insight into both personal relationships and contemporary social transformation.

Conclusion

The present paper has examined mate preference among young adults through a literature-based research approach. The evidence reviewed here shows that mate preference is best understood as a dynamic structure of priorities rather than a single desire. Emotional trust, mutual attraction, relational stability, attractiveness, education, financial prospects, and cultural compatibility all play roles, but they do not play equal roles in every setting. Young adults evaluate potential partners by combining inner standards, developmental needs, and social realities.

The reviewed literature also indicates that broad sex differences remain visible, though they operate alongside powerful similarities. Moreover, culture matters deeply. In societies where family and

community continue to shape relationship decisions, mate preference cannot be understood purely as a matter of individual taste. The Indian context, in particular, shows that modern romantic aspiration and traditional social expectations often coexist rather than simply replace one another. (Bejanyan et al., 2014; Kamble et al., 2014).

In academic terms, the study of mate preference among young adults remains important because it helps explain how intimate relationships begin, how partner standards are formed, and how social change enters private life. Future field-based studies can strengthen this literature by using updated instruments, more diverse samples, and methods that capture both ideal preferences and real trade-offs. Even in a rapidly changing world, the question of what young adults want in a life partner remains central to the understanding of human relationships.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research on mate preference among young adults should move beyond simple rating scales and use methods that force prioritization. Budgeting tasks, vignette-based choices, and mixed-method interviews can reveal which traits are treated as necessities, which are desirable but negotiable, and which become important only in specific relationship contexts. Such approaches would also make it easier to compare stated ideals with actual decision strategies.

Researchers should also diversify samples. Much of the existing literature relies on college students, urban populations, or convenience samples. Studies that include working young adults, rural respondents, first-generation learners, and individuals from different linguistic, caste, class, and religious backgrounds would provide a more socially grounded understanding of mate preference. In the Indian context especially, future studies should examine how digital matchmaking, family consultation, and changing gender expectations interact in shaping partner ideals.

A final priority is greater integration between quantitative and qualitative work. Survey scores can show what traits rank highly, but in-depth interviews can explain why those traits carry meaning for participants. For example, when respondents say they value a 'good family background' or 'emotional maturity,' the lived meaning of those phrases may differ sharply across regions and social groups. Stronger future research will therefore combine statistical rigor with interpretive depth so that mate preference is understood not only as a set of numbers, but also as a culturally situated human judgment.

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