

Partner Selection Process among Young Adults from Interfaith Family Backgrounds

Azalia Nur Khofifah¹, Nia Anggri Noveni²

{azalianurkhofifah2003@gmail.com¹, niaanggrinoveni@ump.ac.id²}

Fakultas Psikologi, Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto^{1,2}

Abstract. This study explores the partner selection process among emerging adults from interfaith family backgrounds in Indonesia's pluralistic society. Six participants were involved, including three individuals in interfaith relationships and three significant figures such as parents or close friends. A qualitative case study using thematic analysis was conducted through in-depth interviews to examine personal, relational, and social factors influencing partner choice. Findings show that emotional attraction, shared values, career support, and communication dynamics play central roles. Religious differences often trigger conflict, particularly within families and broader social contexts. Nevertheless, support from significant figures, open communication, and value negotiation help sustain these relationships. The study concludes that interfaith partner selection in emerging adulthood is shaped not only by personal preference but also by complex familial and societal influences, highlighting the importance of psychosocial support and inclusive perspectives in understanding interfaith couple dynamics.

Keywords: partner selection, interfaith families, emerging adulthood, muslim youth

1 Introduction

The diversity of interfaith families in Indonesia reflects tolerance and harmony within a pluralistic society. Family members who practice different religions such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, or Buddhism live side by side with mutual respect, embodying the national motto *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* (Unity in Diversity). This phenomenon has become increasingly visible in modern society as interactions across diverse backgrounds grow more common [1]. Many interfaith couples choose to marry despite facing complex challenges related to differences in beliefs, traditions, and religious practices. Such marriages involve not only two individuals but also two families with potentially conflicting values, creating unique dynamics in family formation [2]. At the same time, interfaith families often encounter broader social challenges, including stigma from conservative communities and negative perceptions of interreligious unions. These stigmas can manifest as social discrimination, exclusion, or the belief that interfaith families violate cultural and religious norms, thus placing significant pressure on couples and their extended families [3]. In the context of individual development, early adulthood (ages 20–40) is a critical phase marked by identity formation, independence, and the pursuit of intimate, committed relationships. According to Erikson, the central developmental task at this stage is achieving intimacy rather than isolation. For individuals from interfaith families, this developmental task becomes more complex, as they must also consider values, beliefs, and family experiences when choosing a

partner. Problem statement is how do emerging adult Muslims from interfaith family backgrounds experience the process of partner selection within Indonesia's pluralistic sociocultural context?. The research objective is a To understand the experiences of emerging adult Muslims from interfaith family backgrounds in choosing a life partner.

2 Literature Review

a. Definition of Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is a developmental stage that begins in late adolescence, around the early twenties, and extends into the thirties. During this period, individuals undergo various processes of establishing independence, both personally and economically, which serve as an important foundation in their lives [4].

b. Definition of Partner Selection

Partner selection can be defined as the process of seeking and evaluating potential partners who meet certain criteria to build a committed relationship [5]. It is an individual's effort to find someone with whom they can establish a meaningful committed relationship, eventually leading to marriage [6].

c. Partner Selection Model

The process of partner selection is described through three main stages: [1] forming preferences, in which individuals determine their ideal partner criteria based on values, experiences, and social influences; [2] integrating preferences, namely the process of prioritizing competing desires, such as choosing between personality traits or economic stability. This mechanism is illustrated in the diagram as a gray box, as it is not yet fully understood scientifically; and [3] navigating the dynamic partner market, where individuals make actual decisions amid changing social environments. This process is represented by a black box as a symbol of the current limitations in scientific understanding [7].

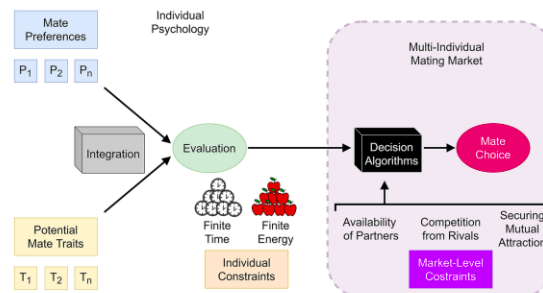


Figure 1. Partner Selection Model

Source: Conroy-Beam (2021)

3 Method

This study employs a qualitative method as its primary approach to explore and understand the meaning of social phenomena from the perspective of individuals and their social contexts [8]. Specifically, the researcher adopts Yin's typology of a *holistic single-case study design*, as the focus is on examining in depth one bounded case: the partner selection process among emerging adults from interfaith family backgrounds [9]. The study involves six participants selected through purposive sampling with assistance from key persons. The inclusion criteria were: [1] being in the early adulthood age range (20–28 years), a critical stage for relationship building and life decision-making; [2] being Muslim with an interfaith family background; and [3] having a dating experience of at least two years. Participants consist of three primary participants (N, H, and S), who are emerging adults currently in relationships, and three secondary participants (A, R, and NN), who are their significant others. To ensure consistency, the term *participant* is used throughout the study, with distinctions clarified in a demographic summary table (not shown here).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide developed from theories of partner selection and early adulthood development [6]. The interviews were held from March 8 to March 30, 2025, allowing for open-ended questions and probing follow-ups. Data sources include interview recordings and field notes, which were then transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using a theory-driven *thematic analysis*. The coding process followed three stages: [1] *open coding*, where meaningful units of data were identified; [2] *axial coding*, where codes were grouped into broader categories; and [3] *selective coding*, where core themes were refined in relation to the research objectives. This systematic approach ensured that emerging themes were both grounded in data and aligned with the theoretical framework.

To ensure rigor, the study applied criteria of credibility, transferability, and dependability. Credibility was enhanced through source triangulation (cross-checking between primary and secondary participants), member checking (participants reviewed their transcripts and interpretations), and peer debriefing with academic supervisors. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of the context and participants, enabling applicability to similar settings. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting all research procedures and decisions, allowing external reviewers to trace the consistency of the process [10].

4 Result

a. Choosing a Physically Attractive Partner

This reflects strong emotional drive and personal attraction, often linked to love and initial romantic interest. Such choices are typically based on liking, visual appeal, and a desire for physical intimacy. Choosing a physically attractive partner is a subtheme under *Love vs. Status Resource*, which emerged among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

b. Choosing Based on Logical Stability

Individuals who emphasize this aspect usually prioritize partners who are financially stable, have steady jobs, higher education, or advantageous social backgrounds for building a secure future together. This reflects logical considerations in creating a stable life. Choosing Based on Logical Stability is a subtheme under *Love vs. Status Resource*, which emerged among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

c. Uniting Through Emotional Connection

Strong love often grows from deep emotional bonds, such as trust, comfort in communication, and feeling understood. People with this preference build relationships based on inner compatibility rather than external factors. Uniting Through Emotional Connection is a subtheme under *Love vs. Status Resource*, which emerged among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

d. Rationally Choosing a Dependable and Stable Partner

Some individuals are rational in partner selection, prioritizing traits such as responsibility, consistency, and emotional or financial stability. They believe a dependable partner is better equipped to face life's challenges and make important decisions. In the long term, such stability forms a strong foundation for a healthy, lasting relationship. This is a subtheme under *Dependable/Stability vs. Good Looks/Health*, found among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

e. Prioritizing the Need for Security

Security is a basic need in relationships. A stable, reliable partner provides emotional comfort and protection from uncertainty in both personal relationships and social life. This need often outweighs physical attraction, as security is considered more important for creating harmony and peace. This is a subtheme under *Dependable/Stability vs. Good Looks/Health*, which emerged among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

f. Career and Economic Support

A stable partner is also valued for their ability to provide economic support and encouragement in career development. Their presence becomes a source of motivation and psychological stability, strengthening independence, growth, and the pursuit of shared life goals. This is a subtheme under *Dependable/Stability vs. Good Looks/Health*, which appeared among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

g. Considering Education

For those who prioritize education, partners with good academic backgrounds or high intelligence are seen as intellectually stimulating and equal discussion partners. Education is often associated with values, ethics, and broad perspectives, which are considered crucial in shaping mature, thoughtful relationships. This is a subtheme under *Education/Intelligence vs. Desire for Home/Children*, which emerged among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

h. The Need to Build a Family

Conversely, some individuals prioritize the desire to establish a household and raise children. They seek partners ready to commit, willing to embrace parenthood, and who value family life. Warmth at home and emotional stability are their main priorities, even if the partner does not have a high educational background, as long as they are prepared to create a harmonious life together. This is a subtheme under *Education/Intelligence vs. Desire for Home/Children*, which emerged among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

i. Tolerance from the Family

One crucial aspect of interfaith relationships is family support or at least tolerance. When a partner is socially approachable, it often paves the way for smoother family acceptance despite religious differences. Sociability and openness can reduce tensions in

socio-religious contexts. This is a subtheme under *Sociability vs. Similar Religion*, which emerged among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

j. The Need for a Socially Engaged Partner

Some individuals prefer partners who are socially active, easy to interact with, open in communication, and well-connected. They believe that a socially dynamic life brings positive energy into the relationship, even when religious backgrounds differ. Social partners are also seen as better at building networks and supporting joint social activities. This is a subtheme under *Sociability vs. Similar Religion*, found among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

k. Identity Formation Through Economic and Cultural Differences

Partner identity is shaped not only by religion but also by social, economic, and cultural dynamics. Having a partner from a different religion but who can form shared values through life experiences and social interactions reflects new types of relationships that are flexible and adaptive to diversity. This is a subtheme under *Sociability vs. Similar Religion*, which emerged among participants N, H, S, A, R, and NN.

l. Family Expectations of Partner's Background

Family expectations regarding a partner's family background are often significant in interfaith relationship dynamics. Many families expect their child's partner to share the same religion as a way of preserving long-standing spiritual and cultural values.

m. Individual Perceptions of Religious Beliefs

An individual's perception of religion strongly shapes how they interpret diversity in relationships, especially when facing a partner of a different faith. For some, religion is an absolute principle, making differences a major obstacle to long-term commitment. For others, religion is viewed more personally and spiritually, with love and humanity as the foundation of partner choice. These perceptions are shaped by childhood experiences, parenting styles, social environment, education, and personal spirituality. Individuals with inclusive, open perspectives are more flexible in navigating interfaith relationships, as long as communication and mutual respect exist. Meanwhile, those with rigid, exclusive religious views are more likely to face inner conflicts, especially regarding values, identity, and future relationship orientation.

n. Choosing a Life Partner

Selecting a life partner is one of the key factors influencing individuals' decisions in determining their future spouse. This process reflects personal considerations involving values, expectations, challenges, and long-term goals.

o. Learning to Live Together with a Partner

Learning to live with a partner is an important process in early adulthood developmental tasks. This transition marks the shift from individual life toward family life, involving preparation for marriage, shared responsibilities, and learning to understand one another in building a relationship.

5 Discussion

Participants highlighted that sharing the same religion was perceived as essential for long-term stability. This resonates with Erikson's notion of identity formation in early adulthood, where clarity of values is central to intimacy. Recent studies on religious identity development emphasize that interfaith youth often experience a "double negotiation" between personal spirituality and family expectations. In the Indonesian context, where marriage law privileges same-religion unions, this negotiation becomes even more complex. As one participant noted, *"changing religion is not a trivial matter-it means changing beliefs."* The data show that family approval was a recurring concern, often outweighing personal preferences. This aligns with intersectionality theory, where decisions are shaped not only by religion but also by family hierarchy, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. In Indonesia, where kinship ties and collective values remain strong, interfaith couples face amplified pressures. Participants' accounts of *"hidden prayers"* or difficulties during holidays illustrate how families both constrain and support relational choices. Beyond religious differences, participants also emphasized the importance of emotional connection, stability, and shared life goals. This reflects cultural negotiation, where partners develop strategies such as open communication and value compromise to sustain intimacy. While literature often portrays interfaith relationships as fragile, our findings show resilience when couples receive psychosocial support and maintain adaptive communication. The findings underscore the need for more inclusive psychosocial support for interfaith youth, both in counseling practices and in family education. Given Indonesia's pluralistic society yet restrictive legal framework, young adults from interfaith families often struggle with navigating between personal agency and collective norms. Rather than viewing interfaith unions solely as a risk, policy and family interventions should recognize the agency and adaptive strategies of emerging adults [6].

From a developmental perspective, partner selection in early adulthood cannot be separated from the developmental tasks that individuals must undergo. Santrock (2018), referring to Erikson, states that early adulthood is characterized by the psychosocial crisis of intimacy vs. isolation. This means that individuals are in a phase where they seek closeness and meaningful emotional intimacy with others, including building romantic relationships that may lead to marriage. At this stage, individuals have also reached cognitive maturity, namely the ability to engage in complex postformal reasoning, consider multiple perspectives, and make decisions based on a balance of rational and emotional considerations. This ability is particularly important when individuals are faced with difficult choices, such as marrying a partner from a different background while confronting family opposition [4].

The challenges of choosing a partner in early adulthood with different religious and cultural family backgrounds appear to be complex and diverse. Based on findings from six participants, conflicts emerged involving family pressure, spiritual confusion, and deep internal dilemmas. For instance, participant H expressed concern about the future of children in the context of inconsistent religious education, while participants R and A faced social pressure due to differences in ethnicity and cultural background. This illustrates that in the Indonesian context, which upholds the importance of shared religious and cultural values, individuals often experience a tension between personal affection and social norms. Erikson, as cited in Santrock (2018), emphasizes that individuals in early adulthood are in the stage of intimacy vs. isolation, marked by the drive to form meaningful relationships amid the threat of alienation due to social differences. These findings are supported by Amalia, who shows that

interfaith couples tend to face strong resistance from families, especially when there is no clear religious commitment [11]. Moreover, research by Gustiawati and Lestari, also highlights that parental approval is a dominant factor in the success or failure of interethnic and interfaith relationships, even more influential than the couple's emotional readiness itself [12].

The factors considered in choosing a partner are not only emotional but also include rational and practical aspects. Findings from participants revealed that love was the main reason, but it was followed by considerations such as comfort, responsibility, shared goals, and financial stability. Participants R and NN emphasized the importance of economic readiness as a marker of maturity in building a relationship. This aligns with Santrock's (2018) theory of early adulthood development, which states that individuals in this phase begin to apply postformal thinking, meaning they can think flexibly, consider multiple perspectives, and accept ambiguity when making important decisions such as partner selection. In addition, DeGenova (2008) explains that couples in early adulthood tend to balance between Love vs. Status Resources, namely emotional needs and social support with economic realities and family expectations. Research by Fatimah, Maulana, and Pratiwi, shows that realistic considerations such as shared life goals and responsibility are prioritized more by young couples than physical attractiveness or popularity [13]. Similarly, the study by Handayani and Sugiarti, concludes that prospective partners with financial readiness are more highly valued, as they are considered capable of being stable and supportive life companions in the long term [14].

6 Conclusion

This study highlights that partner selection in early adulthood is a critical developmental task influenced by emotional, social, cultural, and religious factors. The findings show that love often serves as the foundation, but it is not the sole determinant. Economic stability, emotional reliability, and alignment of values particularly religious beliefs emerged as equally important considerations. Participants N, H, and S experienced challenges in balancing personal aspirations with family expectations, particularly when faced with religious differences and cultural traditions. Religious incompatibility was the most significant barrier, often leading to family rejection, emotional stress, and social pressure.

At the same time, participants emphasized the importance of emotional maturity, communication, and adaptability in sustaining relationships across differences. For example, H prioritized economic security due to past financial instability, while N and S valued emotional stability and character more than physical appearance. These findings indicate that in Indonesia's socio-cultural context where family approval and religious alignment are highly valued partner choice often becomes a negotiation between personal desires and social expectations.

Implications for practice can be drawn from these findings. Educators and counselors may help young adults develop reflective decision-making skills and coping strategies when facing family resistance. Pre-marital counseling programs could emphasize communication, negotiation of values, and strategies to balance personal and cultural expectations. Policymakers can also support awareness campaigns promoting tolerance and inclusivity in intercultural and interfaith relationships, reducing stigma and creating a more supportive environment for young couples.

Recommendations for future research include broadening the sample to include individuals from different religious communities, not only Muslims, and employing larger or more diverse

samples to capture varied perspectives. A longitudinal approach could also provide deeper insights into how early decisions about partner selection evolve over time and impact marital satisfaction and family functioning.

In sum, partner selection during early adulthood in the context of religiously diverse families is shaped by complex interactions between love, pragmatic considerations, and sociocultural influences. While emotional readiness and personal choice play crucial roles, family acceptance and cultural norms remain powerful determinants of relationship success.

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