

*An Investigation of the Mate Preferences of Young Adults Using Choice-Based  
Conjoint Analysis*

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**Abstract**

The current study is an exploratory investigation concerning mate preferences of young adult males and females. Previous research shows that men and women differ in their mate selection preferences (Buss & Barnes, 1986). By presenting participants with hypothetical scenarios that combined different packages of mate characteristics, the current study is designed as a choice-based conjoint analysis. The participants evaluated their preference for each mate incorporating these attributes. Conjoint analysis is an effective tool for determining hidden psychological preferences (Caruso, Rahnev, & Banaji, 2009). The current study's survey, adapted from Buss and Barnes (1986), was taken by 208 participants. The religiosity of the potential mate was considered significantly more important than other attributes.

Keywords: Mate preferences, choice-based conjoint analysis, relationship status

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## **Introduction**

The variance in mate selection preferences between men and women is widely known. Men have been shown to desire physical attractiveness and potential for fertility when looking for a mate, while women prefer promising financial status in a mate more than men in long-term relationships (Buss & Barnes, 1986). In long-term relationships, individuals consistently adhere to these evolutionary principles. Research also suggests that, above all else, individuals are more likely to marry someone who is similar to them in almost all variables (Buss, 1985). The principles of mate selection have been examined in a cross-culturally and yield consistent results with the original research, supporting the universal role of mate selection patterns (Buss, et. al, 1990; Shackelford, Schmitt, & Buss, 2005).

The current study applies a choice-based conjoint analysis design to understand and measure the grouping of attributes that are important to participants in mate selection. Conjoint analysis is a powerful method not only for quantifying participants' preferences, but also for revealing latent tendency of their hidden psychological preferences (Caruso, Rahnev, & Banaji, 2009). According to Lewis, Ding, and Geschke (1991) and Orme (2010), conjoint analysis has been widely applied in measuring the degree of importance of each attribute individually and its influence combined with others on the consumer's choice of the overall product. Its unique ability to measure participants' preferences for a diverse range of different topics with tremendous accuracy has made the choice-based conjoint analysis one of the top choices in preference predicting (Orme, 2010). The nature of Sawtooth Software's choice-based conjoint analysis makes it so that participants are unable to choose extreme sides of a Likert Scale.

Through the use of choice-based-conjoint analysis, individuals were presented hypothetical scenarios that combined different attributes they could find in a potential mate. We hypothesize, consistent with evolutionary theory, that mate preferences are based around wealth, fertility, and indicators of committed child rearing. We investigated this hypothesis in young adults by using choice-based conjoint analysis.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

This study focuses on individuals who were either single or unmarried, but currently in a committed relationship. Of the 208 participants that completed the survey, 56 were males and 152 were female. Participants ranged between the ages of 18 and 30 ( $M = 21$ ). Of these, 36% were in a relationship and 64% were not in a relationship. A majority of the participants were students at a multicultural religious university gathered through convenience and snowballing sampling.

### **Materials & Procedure**

Individuals were invited to participate in the study through social media or by being approached by the researchers. A link to the survey created through Sawtooth Software was then sent to those who consented to be a part of the study. Participants were presented with 18 hypothetical scenarios that combined different packages of

mate characteristics adapted from Buss & Barnes (1986). Participants selected the grouping of characteristics that best matched their idea of their ideal spouse and least ideal spouse. Sawtooth Software was further utilized to determine the preferred attributes individuals desired in a potential spouse. By adopting the Hierarchical Bayes estimation method, Sawtooth Software calculated the “utility scores” and “importance scores” based on the collected data. utility scores reveal individual participant's relative preference of attributes within the same items of marital preference. importance scores express individual participant’s preference between trait groups.

## Results

To determine the mate preferences of young adults, choice-based-conjoint (CBC) analysis was utilized to determine the importance scores and utility scores for each attribute. The result, as demonstrated by important scores, show that participants have a higher preference for attributes that fell in the following categories: Religious, Politically Conservative, and Artistic-Intelligent (refer to figure 1). The attribute Religious was preferred two times the second largest attribute, Politically Conservative, with a large importance score of 30.1%. The result from the utility scores indicates that, overwhelmingly, a politically liberal (utility = -32.4), idealistic (utility = -27.1), and agnostic (utility = -150.7) spouse was not preferred by young adults (refer to figure 2, 3, 4). The top categories for what participants desired in a spouse were: church-goer, good moral character, healthy, wealthy, interesting to talk to, and intellectually stimulating (refer to figure 2, 3, 4).

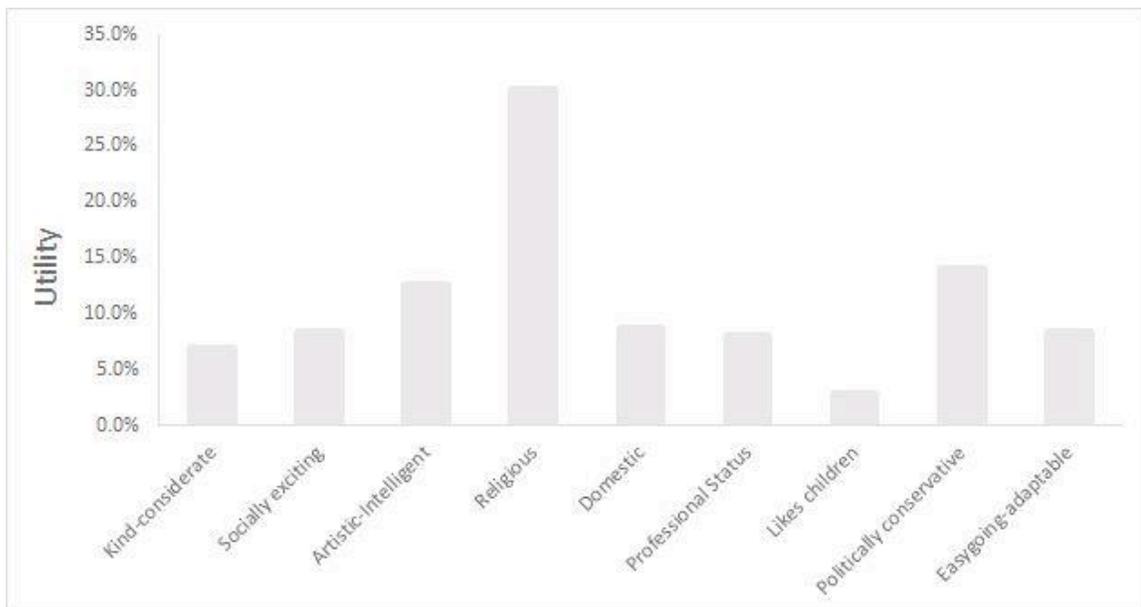


Figure 1: Importance score Summary

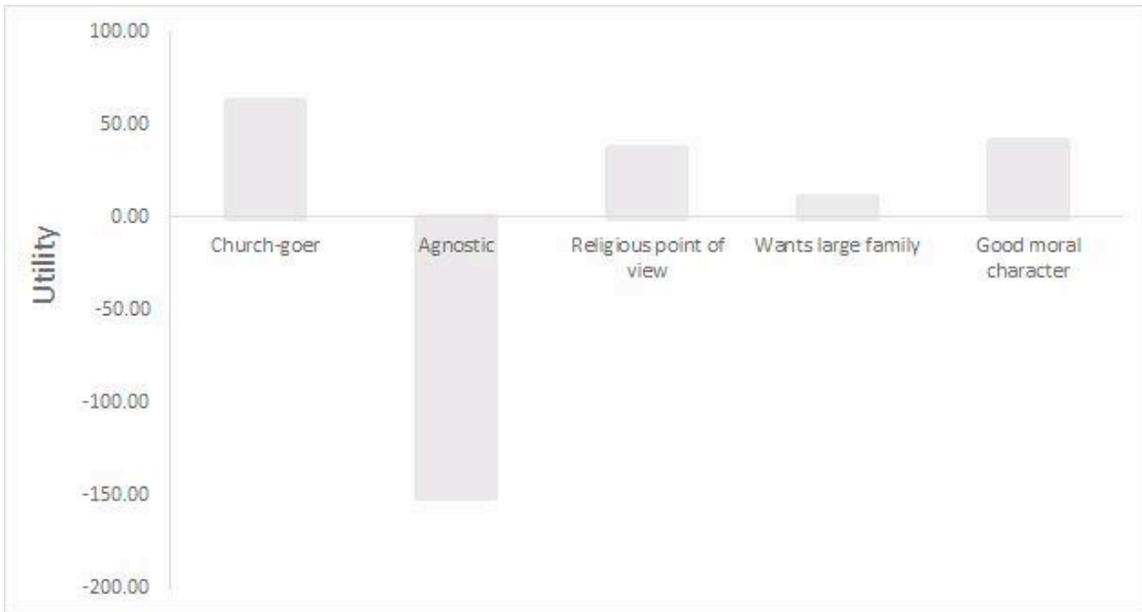


Figure 2: Religious Utility Score



Figure 3: Artistic-Intelligent Utility Score



Figure 4: Politically Conservative Utility Summary

## Discussion

Results provide evidence that supported the hypotheses. Young adults were found to prefer a mate who demonstrated optimal attributes consistent with evolutionary theory. While the results show a bias in favor of religiosity, this is most likely due to the participants attending a religious university. However, the preference for a religious spouse is beneficial from an evolutionary standpoint in that it increases paternal certainty for the males and provides the females with a “faithful” spouse who will not deplete their resources through having an affair (Strassmann, Kurapati, Hug, Burke, ... & Hammer, 2012). Within the Religious category, a church-goer may be preferred over other religious demonstrations because of the commitment shown through the action of going to church. These hypothetical men or women not only say they are religious but demonstrate that they are (Weeden, Cohen, & Kenrick, 2008). Intelligence is evolutionarily beneficial for females seeking a spouse due to the connection between intelligence and a job that provides financial resources (Buss & Shackelford, 2008). This same concept applies to individuals who consistently chose an ideal spouse who was labelled as wealthy. Health is a crucial attribute for the evolutionary focus of gene diversity and the survival of offspring (Buss & Shackelford, 2008). Choice-based conjoint analysis demonstrated that these preferences remain consistent during an extensive survey. The sample size could have created limitations to the current study. Many participants were from a particularly religious population, which could explain why they did not want a mate who was politically liberal or agnostic. Future research should broaden the population size with equal numbers of male and female participants, as well as controlling for religion and other demographic characteristics that could affect the generalizability of this research.

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