

Knot Tying Dream: A WhatsApp Survey of Undergraduate Students' Future Marriage Partner Selection Criteria in Tanzania

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Abstract— This purpose of this study was to investigate factors that determine the selection of future marriage partners, by drawing an inference from university students. Using an online sample of 397 undergraduate students, more than four out of five respondents said they had initiated a search for a marriage partner. Males were more open than female students to declare their current search status. Furthermore, results revealed that religion and character were the dominant criteria while education qualifications, attractiveness, and family pressure were only considered for selection after having exhausted the most important ones. There is a need to explore the role of religious aspects such as interfaith marriages and how they impact marriage life.

Keywords— Marriage, selection, criteria, WhatsApp, students

I: INTRODUCTION

Choosing who to be the marriage partner has never been taken for granted by any people in any society. It is a serious process that is scrutinized not only by the prospective marriage partners but also by parents of both sides. In Africa, where planned or arranged marriages remain prevalent, the influence of parents on marriage partners' selection has remained active over the years. However, the on-going social and economic transformations mark a new era of attitudinal change necessitating a willful decision by women and men planning to marry. College students are among the proportion of people experiencing rapid changes in general social life experiences. This is based on the fact that they are in the transition from adolescents to adults determined to achieve the most important milestones in life including securing a good job or entering a serious relationship that may consequently lead to marriage (Casale, 2010; Lauten, *et al.*, 2005).

In the Tanzanian context, this is usually the period when students practice dating and courtship with wider freedom than they could have done at home where familial and social parameters do not usually permit. Traditionally, in Tanzania, the decision as who to marry or get married to was never a person's own, but instead that of parents and/or guardians (Coast, 2006; Jouhki, and Stark, 2017). Over the years, the wed to be especially in traditional societies had little control over who to be their marriage partner (Coast, 2006; Jouhki, and Stark, 2017). Therefore, there has been low motivation by

researchers to work on this area. However, the prevailing social, cultural and economic change triggered by the media and technology leaves no single society static. The feelings of western romantic love and the quest for freedom from traditions especially among young people are prevalent in third countries. There is therefore a need to examine the pattern of change in mate selection. It is on that basis that this study sought to investigate the current marriage search status as well as ascertaining the criteria with which students use to judge the best partner.

II: LITERATURE REVIEW

In many traditional societies, men prefer younger spouses, while women on the contrary, desire to marry older men (Biello, 2007). Reasons for this are associated with traditional roles that men play as household heads and women as helpers. However, according to Casterline, Williams, and MacDonald (1986), the rules for choosing or avoiding certain age differences vary among societies and generally unions in which the wife is older are avoided. It is further argued that in patriarchal societies and those characterized by a patrilineal kinship system, age difference between spouses is relatively large and marriages where the husband is ten years older than the wife are very frequent. Reasons for this are twofold: the first is about women's fertility and the second is about respect in marriage. In the case of fertility, the argument is that younger women are better spouses since they have a longer fertility range before they reach menopause. Marrying a mid-aged woman would mean that the productive period is shorter. Secondly, marrying a younger woman enables the husband to command respect in the family as the household head.

Gender is another important demographic and social factor that puts a divide between men and women when it comes to who to choose as the future marriage partner. Women are attracted more to men with high social status, power and money (Regan *et al.*, 2000). These factors are more valued partly because of the widely held belief that a man with power and money can provide and protect the family. Women also prefer to marry such men because society limits their own ability to be prosperous and gain influence. Other factors related to sexual desirability of women are more preferred by men (Regan, *et al.* 2000). These are mostly physical features

such as shape and color and they tend to vary according to the culture of a specific area.

The question of a spouse's character and its attributes such as loyalty, honesty, trustworthy and patience also feature heavily when making decisions on who to marry. In the African context, a man who possesses such attributes is said to be most preferred when it comes to mate selection. Good character is seen as an important factor by both men and women because it leads to building up of respect between spouses. Also, men with good character are likely to be good fathers and hence contribute positively to the upbringing of children (Maliki, 2009).

Religion remains an important social variable in influencing mate selection in many societies in the world. Rosenfeld (2008) contends that religious endogamy in western societies is still substantially high. This is because of the assumption that religion is a binding force in hold marriages together for those with the same religious beliefs. On the contrary, differences in religious beliefs among couples may be disruptive in marriage (Maliki, 2009). Mixed religion unions have been witnessed but they are not practiced to a high extent. In recent times however, interfaith marriages, especially among young people, have been slowly embraced compared to the recent past. Schwartz (2006) claims that a steady increase in interfaith marriages is indicative of the declining role of faith in mate selection in the modern world. Other factors such as the growing diversity of population due to migration and integration facilitate interfaith marriages.

Financial stability based on either income or other investments is also considered important when selecting spouses. Studies by Khallad (2005); Badahlah and Tiemann (2009) and Maliki (2009) all revealed that men's financial prosperity is highly valued in mate selection. This is probably because in many societies across the world, a man is seen as the breadwinner for his family (World Bank, 2012). A providing man earns respect among the community members and in other forums as well. Women, therefore, view good financial capacity of a man as security that can guarantee a better life including the provision of basic needs. On the contrary, men's overall mate preference focuses on other variables other than financial status. They include, among others, attractiveness and commitment of a partner.

Several studies report preference of a marriage partner on the basis of education achievement (Maliki, 2009; Buunk *et al.*, 2002). Potential spouses with a college degree, diploma or certificate are preferred especially by women because of the assumption that they are in a better position to secure jobs and contribute financially to the family. For men, however, educated women are viewed as difficult to handle especially those who have attained a university degree. Educated women are generally described as arrogant, egoistic and do not make good wives since they have more desires and chances of engaging in alternatives to the roles related to marriage (Torabi and Abbasi-Shavazi, 2016). However, both men and

women generally agree that basic education for a spouse is a necessary thing especially in this era of technological advancement. Although men are scared by highly educated women, still those women without basic literacy skills are in a disadvantaged position.

In some traditional societies, families have more influence with regard to marriage than the man and woman getting married. In Indian traditions for example, marriages have traditionally been regarded as unions between families with matches being made by elders who meet to discuss the character of potential mates and decide whether or not they should get married (Mathur, 2007). These arrangements are still common and young people who go against parents' wishes are considered immoral. In some scattered cultures around the world such as among the Hindus and in Morocco and in Yoruba society in Nigeria, arranged marriages still exist (Baloji, 1984 cited by Maliki, 2009). The reasons for arranged marriage vary significantly. Some arrangements are motivated by economic gains where one family benefits by uniting with a wealthier one. Sometimes it is because of pressure from the family members or in dealing with the consequences of pregnancy out of wedlock (Bendriss, 2008).

Marriage within the limit of a clan or custom still matters in many places in the world. This tendency leads to arranged marriages in favor of spouses of the same cultural orientation (Buunk, 2015). Traditions that support endogamy argue that marriage should be within the same ethnic group so that family and group cohesion is maintained. Furthermore, the need to socialize offspring in a culturally suitable manner and the need to maintain ethnic identity are also cited as some of the main motivating factors (Qian *et al.*, 2017). In multi-ethnic societies, marriage within the same ethnic group is most prevalent among minorities who are mostly historically migrants. In modern societies and particularly among the educated young urbanites, endogamy practice is rarely observed (Uromo and McDonald, 2016).

III: METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Participants in the study were 397 currently unmarried undergraduate students from various Universities in Tanzania. Respondents were required to answer questions via an electronic link through WhatsApp chat groups, and submit the responses right from their gadgets. The authors relied on the goodwill of the first WhatsApp receiver to share the link to the next individual or to student chat groups. Each student was expected to submit only one response, and a field was triggered to restrict multiple submissions. Follow-up messages were sent in order to remind those who had not submitted the questionnaire to do so. Thereafter, the responses were automatically generated into the spreadsheet database, after a student had completed the questionnaire and pressed the submit button. The data were then mined, processed and transferred into SPSS for further analysis. Current marriage partner search status (0-not searching, 1-searching) was associated with various demographic and socio-economic

variables. These kinds of analyses were performed using the Chi-square test of independence (Field, 2009).

The criteria with which participants used to judge others as best partners were adopted and modified from previous studies especially Maliki (2009);Olusola and Maduawuchi (2015). Respondents were asked to prioritize a criterion up to three levels; the first through the third. The first priority represented the most important and the third represented the least important factor that determine the choice. Each criterion was measured on two levels, “1-Yes, 0-No”, and a respondent was expected to write “yes” if the criterion was applicable to his or her choice of a mate as first, second, or third. Initially, there were seven criteria; family background, parent influence, education qualification, profession, physical attractiveness, religion, character, and economic status. However, the family background and parents influence were merged to form one category, “family influence”. Likewise, education and profession were merged and treated as education. Furthermore, economic status was dropped because of inadequacy sample, thus bringing the total criteria used in the final analysis to five. Separate Cochran’s Q tests were performed on the five remaining criteria with which respondents used to assess the suitability of a future marriage partner. All five tests revealed statistically significant differences, and as a result the null hypotheses that responses were the same across the groups were rejected. Therefore, follow-up pair wise comparisons were then performed using Dunn’s (1964) approach together with the Bonferroni correction method. Tables 2 and 3 provide detailed results for post hoc tests as well as the adjusted p-values.

IV: STUDY FINDINGS

1. Demographic and Socio-economic Characteristics

In this study, 397 undergraduate students from various high learning institutions in Tanzania took part in completing a WhatsApp online questionnaire. Table 1 shows that, the majority of participants were from three universities; Mzumbe (16.4%), University of Dar es Salaam (15.9%) and Moshi Cooperative University (10.1%). However, some did not identify the place of study because this was not a required field. For details see Table 1. Nearly 60% of all participants were male in ages between 23 and 27. A large proportion was in their second (39%) and third (32%) year of study. Nearly three quarters were born and brought up in urban areas; a skewed change from past trends.

2. Future Marriage Partner Search Status

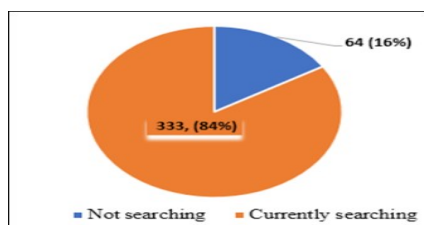


Figure 1: Search Status

Figure 1 indicates that four in five students had already initiated the search for a future marriage partner by the time of this study. Further analyses seeking an association between current search status and demographic and social variables was also performed. However, with the exception of gender, the rest were not significantly associated with the current search status, age ($\chi^2(2) = 4.251, p = .119$), year of study ($\chi^2(3) = 4.877, p = .181$), and where lived just before joining college ($\chi^2(1) = 0.365, p = .046$). Gender (male/female) was significantly associated with the decision to initiate search for future marriage partner, $\chi^2(1) = 6.196, p = .013$. The male were more likely to initiate a search (47.6%) than did their counterpart female students (36.3%). This search status among male and female undergraduate students can be easily spotted in Figure 2.

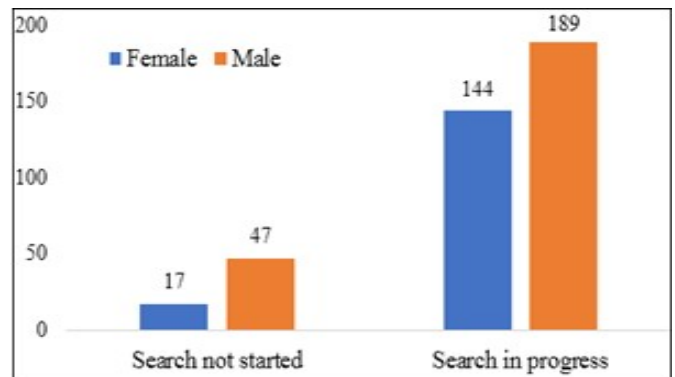


Figure 2: Search Status by gender

3. Factors Influencing the Choice for Future Marriage Partner Among Undergraduate Students

Table 2 provides details of Cochran's Q test results for six different analyses. On one hand, the study revealed similar sets of criteria forming the basis for choosing a marriage partner. The first set is made up of religion and character. For instance, participants’ responses were statistically significantly different in prioritizing religion and character as choice criteria, $\chi^2(2) = 113.290, p = .000$. Results revealed that a significantly greater proportion of participants favored religion as the top criterion (40%) compared to the second (19%) and third (11%) preferences. Pair wise comparison results (see table 3) show that as the level of importance attached to religion as a selection criterion increased so did the number of responses increase. For instance, comparing third most important to first most important, $p = .000$ as well as second most important, $p = .004$ an increase in participants' responses was observed. Likewise, statistically significant difference in the percentage was also observed between first most important and second most important, $p = .000$. Character was also a prominent determinant of future marriage partner selection, $\chi^2(2) = 84.955, p = .000$. Responses were significantly higher for character when perceived as being the most important (36%), important (20%) and least important (11%). Statistically significant differences were observed between priority one and two, $p = .000$, priority one and three, $p = .000$

as well as priority three and two, $p=.004$.

On the other hand, the remaining factors, namely, family influences, education qualification, and attractiveness revealed statistically significant differences in the number of response distribution across the three levels of priorities i.e. first, second and third had similarities as well. For instance, the judgment of a partner on the basis of body attractiveness along the three levels of priority was significantly different, $\chi^2(2) = 54.131, p=.000$. The proportional difference was higher (19%) for the first priority and the third priority than for the first priority and the second priority (15%). However, the difference between priority two and priority three was not statistically significant. Family influences were statistically significant across all levels of preferences used to assess the worthiness of a future partner, $\chi^2(2) = 35.762, p=.000$. The proportion of responses, "yes", fell from 19.4% (second priority) to 8.8% (first priority). The response decreased more, from 24% (third priority) to 8.8% (first priority). Like family and physical attractiveness, education was further a line of division between those who did and those who did not consider it as one of the criteria for choosing a partner in marriage, $\chi^2(2) = 37.516, p=.000$. The difference between the first (4%) and the third priority (19%) was substantive and statistically significant while the difference in response "yes" on education for first (4%) and second (18%), though significant, was relatively smaller than the first. Figure 3 shows further the graphical representation of the proportion of response, "yes", along with the priority list.

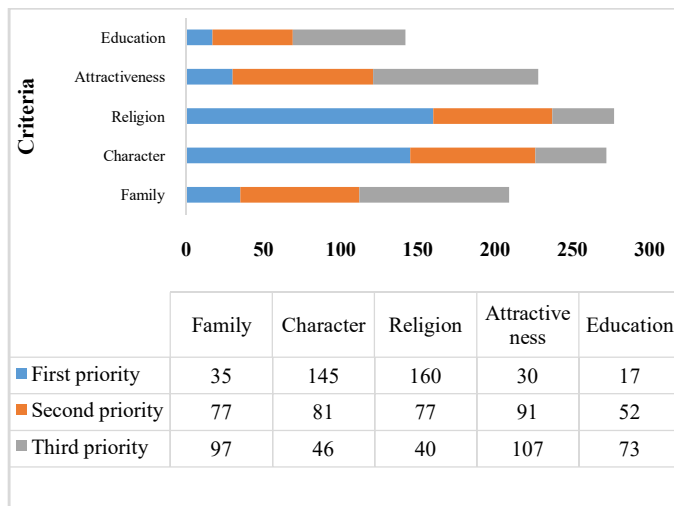


Figure 3: Students' response on mate selection criteria on the priority list

V: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Campus life is a very important stage among the students in planning for their future marriage life. The fact that more than 80% of participants were already soliciting someone for a marital relationship is an indicator of preparedness for a transition toward marriage life. On one side, males, being decision makers regarding whom to marry (given the inherent social setting in which the study was conducted), are more open to declare their interest in getting a marriage partner. Females, on the other hand, remained submissive to the social

and cultural environment that give males a dominant role in deciding when to initiate marriage relationship. Nevertheless, there is a great change toward the personal expression of the intrinsic motives including the manifestation of the determination to get married by female students in particular.

It is probably evident that religion still plays a dominant role in young people's minds when it comes to deciding whom to marry. This may be attributed to the fact that nearly 98% of all Tanzanians practice various religious beliefs (Lugo and Cooperman, 2010). Although students having gone out of their families tend to develop and practice new social behavior, yet it is expected that they would conform to the social beliefs and values. As expected, the role of character assessment remains at the center of each respondent planning to engage someone for marriage. Probably this is based on the fact that a partner who is morally acceptable and fits within the social and cultural settings is most likely to be an instrument for establishing and building family life. Another interesting observation in this study is the perceived diminishing role of families and close people in the course of finding a marriage partner; suggesting enhanced freedom by male and female students over mate selection. This is probably contrary to the traditional arranged marriages where the family and close relatives retain a bigger say over the future marriage life of a family member.

VI: STUDY LIMITATIONS

Despite the fact that this study is one of the fewest ever to have used WhatsApp as an electronic survey platform to generate data, it cannot rule out limitations. Firstly, the authors were not able to establish the number of students who use WhatsApp accounts and who are therefore connected to different chat groups in colleges and universities. This limited their ability to randomize the study instead, they relied on the goodwill of the first receiver to share the questionnaire link to their classmates. While expecting that the first receiver would share the link to the right people, authors cannot guarantee that all participants were students.

VII: CONCLUSION

This study focused on understanding the status of future marriage partners by both male and female undergraduate students. It is evident the majority are already in some sort of relationship leading to marriage. Religion and character remain fundamental to deciding whom to marry. Education qualification, family influences, and attractiveness of the prospective partner are other factors but these are to be considered once the dominant preferences have been taken into account.

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APPENDICES

Table 1: Place of study

SN	College/University	Frequency	Percent
1	Institute of Financial Management	16	4.0
2	Moshi Cooperative University	40	10.1
3	The Muhimbili University of Health and Allied Sciences	29	7.3
4	Mzumbe University	65	16.4
5	National Institute of Transport	11	2.8
6	Sokoine University of Agriculture	36	9.1
7	Tanzania Institute of Accountancy	19	4.8
8	University of Dodoma	31	7.8
9	University of Dar es Salaam	63	15.9
10	Other higher learning institutions	87	21.9
Total		397	100.0

Table 2: Cochran's Q tests results for six mate choice criteria

SN	Criteria	Priority	"Yes" Responses N=397	Q test statistic	Sig.	Comments
1	Family influence	First(1)	35 (8.8%)	35.762	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second(2)	77(19.4%)			
		Third(3)	97(24%)			
2	Education	First(1)	17 (4%)	37.516	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second(2)	52 (19%)			
		Third(3)	73 (18%)			
3	Religion	First(1)	160 (40%)	113.290	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second(2)	77 (19%)			
		Third(3)	40 (10%)			
4	Character	First(1)	145 (36%)	84.955	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second(2)	81 (20%)			
		Third(3)	46(11%)			
5	Attractiveness	First(1)	30 (7%)	54.131	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second(2)	91 (22%)			
		Third(3)	107 (26%)			

Alpha Level= .05

Table 3: Post hoc test results for combined paired comparisons

SN	Criteria	Paired comparisons	Chi sqr	Adjusted Sig.	Comments on the null hypothesis
1	Family influence	First-Second	3.969	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		First-third	5.858	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second-third	1.890	.176	Don't reject the null hypothesis
2	Religion	First-Second	7.188	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		First-third	10.392	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second-third	3.204	.004	Reject Null hypothesis
3	Education qualification	First-Second	3.789	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		First-third	6.062	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second-third	2.273	.069	Don't reject the null hypothesis
4	Attractiveness	First-Second	5.523	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		First-third	6.971	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second-third	1.449	.442	Don't reject the null hypothesis
5	Character	First-Second	5.875	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		First-third	9.088	.000	Reject Null hypothesis
		Second-third	3.213	.004	Reject Null hypothesis

Adjusted alpha = .016 for each paired comparison