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# Gender Variation in Potential Mate Preferences by the Undergraduate Level Students

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**ABSTRACT**

Mate selection varies across time, place, culture and several other factors related to the society, family and individual. The main objective of the study was to identify the potential mate selection criteria of the undergraduate level students and analyse the gender gap in finding their potential life partners. This study bases the triple theoretical lenses of evolutionary theory, social exchange theory and social homogamy theory in order to figure out the respondents' mate preferences and analyse the gender variation in their choices. A total of 224 students studying in the final year of bachelor-level programmes of Pokhara University in the colleges located in Kathmandu city were surveyed during February to March 2024 using a self-administered questionnaire. Data were analysed using descriptive as well as bivariate level inferential statistics, e.g. chi-square test. The findings indicated that males prefer younger, shorter and lighter in body structure their potential mate, while females prefer the opposite. Females are more concerned with the particular traits of their potential life partner in terms of physical structure, education, occupation, income, and wealth, while males are more open to such attributes. This study provides evidence that there is gender variation in several mate selection criteria of youth shaped by the socio-psychological mindset of Nepali society.

**Keywords:** Criteria, Gender, Mate, Potential, Preference

## INTRODUCTION

Potential mate selection or potential mate preference is an important life process of a young individual, for both males and females. This crucial life event of the young individuals has been shaped by several factors that are associated with culture, place, society and the individual. It also depends on health, age, body shape, education, religion, caste, community, financial status and occupation, among others (Islam, 2021; Maliki, 2009). Hence, mate selection of the unmarried girl or boy depends on, but is not limited to, physical attraction, love, care, understanding, devotion, lifestyles, support, and family background of the prospective candidate. In the world context, there are immense studies carried out to have an impression on the mentality of romantic partnerships (Lu, 2023; Amuasi & Alhassan, 2022; Alavi et al., 2013; Islam, 2021; Maliki, 2009; Conley, 2007; Sandhya, 2018; Sandhya & Somashekarappa, 2019; Abdullah et al., 2011; Buss, 1989; Furnham, 2009; Eastwick et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2020). There are both confirmations and contradictions in the findings done in the past on college students. The findings of the attributes of potential mates like religion, height, weight, health, wealth, income, honesty, intelligence, and morality are more in conformity with the findings of previous studies. The findings related to culture, ages, family background, political affiliation, and chastity are more controversial in various cultural contexts. For example, South Asian societies like India and Nepal value highly to chastity (sanctity/ purity/ virginity) essential for the new partners, but countries like the USA and China find these qualities non-essential (Zhan, 2016) towards the more recent period.

There are numerous criteria that the prospective marriageable age individuals would prefer to possess in the potential spouse. Some of the preferred attributes are religion, mental health, profession, physical attractiveness, financial status, intelligence, sociability, health condition, refinement, neatness, character, physical appearance, chastity, education, culture, marital status, in-laws' family status, and age. Crucial to consider is that these qualities depend on the local socio-psychological mentality, which includes place, culture, context, and the specific mindset of individuals influenced by their cultural legacy. Several studies are conducted in different economies like Bangladesh, China, India, Singapore, Malaysia, Pakistan, the USA and Africa (Amuasi & Alhassan, 2022; Alavi et al., 2013; Islam, 2021; Maliki, 2009; Conley, 2007; Sandhya, 2018; Sandhya & Somashekarappa, 2019). The outcomes normally vary in gender lines in a way that males and females have different expectations from their potential mate in terms of physical features, age, wealth, education and profession (Lu, 2023; Abdullah et al., 2011; Maliki, 2009; Buss, 1989; Furnham, 2009; Eastwick et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2020).

Generally, unmarried boys and girls are attracted to physical features, love, care, understanding, devotion, intelligence, lifestyles, support, financial status, chastity, education, culture, age, health and family background of the respective family line of descent. Choices normally vary by the gender line, meaning that males and females have different expectations from their future mate in terms of physical features, age, wealth, education and profession (Lu, 2023; Maliki, 2009; Abdullah, 2011; Buss, 1989; Furnham, 2009; Eastwick et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2020). It is, in a way, inexplicable what feature might attract one individual to another. However, there are certain theoretical lenses which shed light on the preferences of the range of attributes young people would value, which this study investigates. There are various theoretical lenses, e. g. evolutionary theory (Coley, 2007; Zhan, 2016), social exchange theory (Conley, 2007; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008) and social homogamy theory (Islam, 2021; Sandhya & Somashekarappa, 2019) offer theoretical explanations on these criteria for who marries whom. Further, mate

preferences expressed by college students may also reflect society's traditional beliefs and changing nature of cultural values (Zhan, 2016) due to modernisation. On these theoretical and empirical premises, this study intends to test the mate selection criteria of the Nepali college-level students in the context of the present socio-psychological mindset. It further intends to identify the gender gap in potential mate selection criteria by the youth.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Evolutionary theory (Conley, 2007; Zhan, 2016) states that mate preferences are shaped by evolutionary pressures that enhance survival and reproduction. Men tend to prefer partners with cues of fertility and reproductive value (e.g., youth, physical attractiveness). Women tend to prioritise partners with resources, stability, and the ability to invest in offspring (e.g., status, ambition, protection). Universal patterns (e.g., preference for kindness, symmetry) reflect reproductive advantages. Young people's choices often follow these patterns, even if unconsciously. The social exchange theory (Conley, 2007; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008) posits that mate selection is viewed as a cost-benefit analysis. Individuals seek relationships where rewards outweigh costs. Young people evaluate partners based on perceived rewards (e.g., attractiveness, support, companionship) and costs (e.g., conflict, financial burden). People look for the best possible partner they can get relative to their own value in the social market. Social homogamy theory (Islam, 2021; Sandhya & Somashekarappa, 2019), on the other hand, explains that people tend to select partners who are similar to themselves in key social characteristics such as age, social class, religion, ethnicity, educational level, geographic location, and cultural background. Young people are more likely to interact with and therefore fall in love with individuals from similar social environments, schools, neighbourhoods, peer groups, and workplaces. Homogamy increases relationship stability due to shared values and expectations.

Buss (1989) conducted a study to test gender differences, which is the central idea in this study, in mate selection preference among more than ten thousand participants of thirty-seven cultures. In selecting mates in each culture, the males preferred females who were younger than they, and the females preferred those males who were slightly older than they. Furthermore, the males preferred the females who were physically attractive, and the females preferred the males who were industrious and financially rich (Lu, 2023; Buss, 1989; Todosijevic, 2003; Walter, 2020). In Furnham's (2009) study, females chose intelligence, height, education, conscientiousness, social skills, and political and religious values for selecting their mates; whereas the males chose good looks for their mates. In Chen's (2002) study, the Chinese men preferred a beautiful, healthy, gentle, chaste, and youthful lady for selecting their mates; whereas the Chinese women liked wealth, advanced academic degree and height for selecting their mates. In the study of Farooq and Arshad (2017), the Pakistani students of both genders chose their mates who had the same caste, social status, and education. Sorensen and Pollet (2016) suggested that social change and societal norms could make a mate choice process flexible over time, place and context. Eastwick et al. (2014) showed that both male and female participants chose physical attractiveness and financial prospects for their mates. In Sarir et al.'s (2018) study, the Pakistani females chose Pakistani males who were physically attractive, were similar in age to them, and were financially stable. Walter et al. (2020) studied gender differences in mate selection preferences in forty-five countries. Their findings portrayed that men preferred attractive young mates, while women preferred older mates with financial prospects. Across many cultures, people of both genders chose mates who were

closer to their own ages. On this background, the present study investigates the preferences for the potential stable life partner by young unmarried girls and boys studying at the undergraduate level. It examines the range of preferences for the likely mate in terms of several criteria like age, body structure, education, profession, location, wealth, income and organisation for employment in the present socio-psychological mindset of young people in Nepal. It further probes the gender variation on prospective mate selection criteria and possible causes in the changed socio-political context of Nepal. Moreover, this study intends to gauge the differences in male and female students' views on mate preferences, their choices, priorities, values, desires and wishes regarding their potential stable life partner.

## DATA AND METHODS

This study uses descriptive as well as inferential research designs. It is based on the study of university-level students who were unmarried by the time of data collection and studying in the third year or above of their undergraduate level programmes. Data were collected from those students who were studying in the colleges of Pokhara University located in the Kathmandu valley. The logic for conducting this study in Kathmandu is that most colleges affiliated to Pokhara University are located in Kathmandu city, and students influx there from all over Nepal for getting quality higher education.

The students studying in the affiliated colleges of Pokhara University located in the Kathmandu Valley at their undergraduate level were the population of the study. They were contacted through the college administration and programme coordinators of the respective colleges, who were requested to bridge between the students and researchers. This study followed multistage sampling techniques as per the steps mentioned below.

**Table 1**
*Stages of the Sample Selection Process*

| Stages | Selection | Methods of Sampling |
|--------|-----------|---------------------|
| Stage 1 | Selection of colleges | Simple random sampling |
| Stage 2 | Selection of Programmes | Purposive sampling |
| Stage 3 | Selection of classrooms | Convenience sampling |

*Sources: Authors' construction, 2024*

In the first stage, the colleges which mainly offered programmes related to science or management were segregated, and two colleges from each cluster were selected by using a simple random sampling method. In the second stage, relevant programmes were selected purposively based on general and science streams. Then, at the third level, the semester or classes were conveniently selected based on the active classrooms available at the time of data collection. Hence, by following this procedure, a total of 224 students came out as the final sample size.

Data were collected during February to March 2024 from the students studying in the sampled colleges and programmes. Each respondent student was given a questionnaire set which consisted of an initial declaration of research objectives and soliciting their participation. The initial part of the self-administered questionnaire secured the socio-demographic profile of the respondents. The main part of the questionnaire consisted of the questions related to their potential ideal life partner in terms of age, caste, culture, religion, height, weight, education, location of residence, occupation, wealth, income and such other criteria. They were asked to put their tick marks on the preferred options they

value the most from among multiple choices. Qualitative open responses were also asked to put forward their idea freely in the space provided for written options. The collected data were first cleaned to ensure the clarity and consistency of the responses. Then descriptive statistics like mean, standard deviation, frequency percentages and chi-square test as inferential statistics were employed to test the research hypothesis. Qualitative information was analysed in the spirit of thematic analysis to sort out meaning from the dominant themes covered in various responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which were used to complement and triangulate the findings from the quantitative survey.

## RESULTS
The finding of the present study is presented in two distinct parts. The first part of the study consisted of the socio-demographic profile of the respondent students. The second part consisted of the cross-tabulations and chi-square statistics of the study, leading to hypothesis testing. Finally, the discussion and conclusion of the study are presented.

**Socio-demographic profile of the respondents**
In this section, we present the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, which provide a picture of their socio-demographic characteristics. The information includes their stream of study, age, gender, caste, religion and current living arrangements.

**Table 2**
*Socio-demographic Profile of the Respondents*

| Description | | Frequency | Percent |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kind of Programme | General | 114 | 50.9 |
| | Science | 110 | 49.1 |
| Sex of respondents | Female | 119 | 53.1 |
| | Male | 105 | 46.9 |
| Age groups | 19 years | 7 | 3.1 |
| | 20 years | 28 | 12.5 |
| | 21 years | 44 | 19.6 |
| | 22 years | 56 | 25 |
| | 23 years | 59 | 26.3 |
| | 24 years | 23 | 10.3 |
| | 25 years | 7 | 3.1 |
| Caste/ethnicity | Brahmin Chhetri Newar and other advantaged castes | 168 | 75 |
| | Disadvantaged Janajatis | 34 | 15.2 |
| | Dalit and Others | 22 | 9.8 |
| Religion | Hindu | 200 | 89.3 |
| | Buddhist | 14 | 6.3 |
| | Christian Islam and other | 10 | 4.4 |
| Currently living in | Own house | 78 | 34.8 |
| | Rented house | 123 | 54.9 |
| | Hostel and other | 23 | 10.2 |
| Currently living with | Own parent | 112 | 50 |
| | Relatives | 34 | 15.2 |
| | Single | 36 | 16.1 |
| | Other | 42 | 18.8 |
| | Total | 224 | 100 |

*Source: Field Survey, 2024*

Table 2 presents the basic socio-demographic profile of the respondent students.

There is almost equal representation of the science-based programmes and general programmes. The science-based programmes are engineering and health sciences under the Faculty of Science and Technology, while the general programs consist of Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) and Bachelor of Hotel Management (BHM) from the Faculty of Management Studies of Pokhara University. The gender disaggregation reveals that there are 53 percent and 47 percent of female and male proportions of the respondents, respectively, in the study sample. It is because there is are majority of female students in some programmes like BBA and some health science programmes like B. Sc. Nursing are exclusively female represented, which makes the female proportion a little higher than the male in aggregate.

The age range of the students is 19-25 years, with 23 years students representing 26 percent in all, while 22 years students represent 25 percent. Hence 22 years and 23 years students altogether represent more than half of all the respondents. Caste and ethnic composition of the respondent students reveal that 75 percent represent Brahmin, Chhetri, Newar and other advantaged castes like Thakuri, Shahi, Dasnami and others; while the disadvantaged Janajatis like Tamang and Gurung are second with 15 percent in the sample. Dalits and other unidentified castes come third with 10 percent included in the sample. Students who make up the sample represent roughly 90 percent of the Hindu while Buddhists come second with 6 percent inclusion in the sample, and the rest are a mix of Christian, Islamic, Bon and other unidentified religions. Regarding the living arrangements in terms of residence and accompanying persons of the respondent student, the majority (55 %) live in rented houses as they come from different parts of the country. Thirty five percent students commute from their own homes, while others live in private hostels and various other arrangements. Fifty percent of all the students are accompanied by their own parents; while 15, 16 and 19 percent respectively live with their relatives, single and various other arrangements. Hence, the respondents are a mix of different programmes, gender, caste and living arrangements in the context of Nepal.

**Gender variation in mate selection criteria**

Gender differences in the potential mate selection criteria are well established empirical findings in the context of several other countries (Lu, 2023; Conley, 2007; Islam, 2021; Maliki, 2009, Buss & Shackleford, 2008; Furnham, 2009; Abdullah, 2011; Buss, 1989; Furnham, 2009; Eastwick et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2020). This study offers a unique opportunity to verify this finding in the renewed sociopolitical context of Nepal. In the case of mate selection criteria, the expressions of frequency distribution do not carry full meaning until they are related to the gender. Hence, relating each criterion, like age, education, height, weight, caste, etc., is to be expressed in terms of their gender variables.

**Table 3**
*Gender Differences in the Selection Criteria of Potential Mates*

| Description of the preferred criteria of a potential mate | | Sex | | | Chi-square | P-value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Female | Male | Total | | |
| Preferred age of the potential mate | Same as my own age | 38 (17.0) | 40(17.9) | 78(35.0) | | |
| | Younger in age than me | 5(2.2) | 44 (19.7) | 49(22.0) | 73.7 | 0.000 |
| | Older in age than me | 68(30.5) | 10(4.5) | 78(35.0) | | |
| | Indifferent to the age | 8(3.6) | 10(4.5) | 18(8.1) | | |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preferred caste of the potential mate | Same caste as mine | 78(35.1) | 29(13.1) | 107(48.2) | | |
| | Different caste than me | 20(9.0) | 35(15.8) | 55(24.8) | 30.9 | 0.000 |
| | Indifferent to the caste | 21(9.5) | 39(17.6) | 60(27.0) | | |
| Preferred religion of the potential mate | Same religion as me | 100(45.0) | 57(25.7) | 157(70.7) | | |
| | Different religion as me | 4(1.8) | 13(5.9) | 17(7.7) | 22.2 | 0.000 |
| | Indifferent to religion | 15(6.8) | 33(14.9) | 48(21.6) | | |
| Preferred culture of the potential mate | Same culture as me | 92(41.4) | 48(21.6) | 140(63.1) | | |
| | Different culture than me | 11(5.0) | 19(8.6) | 30(13.5) | 22.6 | 0.000 |
| | Indifferent to the culture | 16(7.2) | 36(16.2) | 52(23.4) | | |
| Preferred education of the potential mate | Same level of education as me | 32(14.5) | 40(18.1) | 72(32.6) | | |
| | Lower level of education than me | 1(0.5) | 3(1.4) | 4(1.8) | 27.0 | 0.000 |
| | A higher level of education than I | 69(31.2) | 25(11.3) | 94(42.5) | | |
| | Indifferent to the level of education | 17(7.7) | 34(15.4) | 51(23.1) | | |
| Preferred subject of the potential mate | Same subject as me | 22(9.9) | 23(10.4) | 45(20.3) | | |
| | Different subject for me | 59(26.6) | 34(15.3) | 93(41.9) | 6.3 | 0.041 |
| | Indifferent to the subject | 38(17.1) | 46(20.7) | 84(37.8) | | |
| Preferred height of the potential mate | Same height to me | 2(0.9) | 21(9.5) | 23(10.4) | | |
| | Taller than me | 114(51.4) | 6(2.7) | 120(54.1) | | |
| | Shorter than me | 1(0.5) | 53(23.9) | 54(24.3) | 180.3 | 0.000 |
| | Indifferent to the height | 2(0.9) | 23(10.4) | 25(11.3) | | |
| Preferred weight of potential mate | Heavier in weight than me | 71(32.0) | 6(2.7) | 77(34.7) | | |
| | Lighter in weight than me | 5(2.3) | 53(23.9) | 58(26.1) | 93.9 | 0.000 |
| | Indifferent to the body weight | 43(19.4) | 44(19.8) | 87(39.2) | | |
| Preferred residential location of potential mate | Closer to my parental home | 49(22.1) | 25(11.3) | 74(33.3) | | |
| | Farther from my parental home | 27(12.2) | 23(10.4) | 50(22.5) | 8.4 | 0.015 |
| | Indifferent to the location | 43(19.4) | 55(24.8) | 98(44.1) | | |
| Preferred occupation of potential mate | Same occupation to me | 17(7.7) | 15(6.8) | 32(14.4) | | |
| | Different occupation than me | 63(28.4) | 43(19.4) | 106(47.7) | 3.1 | 0.203 |
| | Indifferent to the occupation | 39(17.6) | 45(20.3) | 84(37.8) | | |
| Preferred wealth of the potential mate | Similar to the wealth as my own parent | 49(22.2) | 21(9.5) | 70(31.7) | | |
| | Wealthier than my parent | 43(19.5) | 21(9.5) | 64(29.0) | 33.5 | 0.000 |
| | Poorer than my parent | 0(0.0) | 8(3.6) | 8(3.6) | | |
| | Indifferent to the wealth | 27(12.2) | 52(23.5) | 79(35.7) | | |
| Preferred work | USA, Canada, | 64(28.8) | 32(14.4) | 96(43.2) | 17.9 | 0.001 |

| station of potential mate | Australia | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Europe | 4(1.8) | 3(1.4) | 7(3.2) | | |
| | Nepal | 27(12.2) | 43(19.4) | 70(31.5) | | |
| | Other Asian Countries | 4(1.8) | 0(0.0) | 4(1.8) | | |
| | Indifferent to the countries | 20(9.0) | 25(11.3) | 45(20.3) | | |
| Preferred organization of the potential mate | Same organization as of mine | 15(6.8) | 20(9.0) | 35(15.8) | | |
| | Different organization than of me | 70(31.7) | 29(13.1) | 99(44.8) | 20.6 | 0.000 |
| | Indifferent to the organization | 34(15.4) | 53(24.0) | 87(39.4) | | |
| Preferred level of income of the potential mate | Very high income | 55(24.9) | 27(12.2) | 82(37.1) | | |
| | Moderate income | 50(22.6) | 41(18.6) | 91(41.2) | | |
| | Little or No income | 0(0.0) | 6(2.7) | 6(2.7) | 19.9 | 0.000 |
| | Indifferent to the income | 14(6.3) | 28(12.7) | 42(19.0) | | |
| **Total** | | **119(53.8)** | **102(46.2)** | **221(100)** | | |

*Source: Field Survey, 2024*
*Note*. The total percentages below 100 are due to non-response.

It is evident from Table 3 that there are gender differences in the preferred age of the potential mate. Most men prefer their mate to be younger in age than themselves, while the opposite is preferred by the female. It means that females like to have a mate slightly older in age than themselves. There is an equal proportion of male and female respondents for prefer the same age as well as age indifferent to the potential life partner. This variation in age preference is statistically significant at a 5 percent level of significance of the chi-square value. As for the caste of the potential mate, an overwhelming majority of females would like to have a spouse from the same caste, but males believe that either from a different caste or are indifferent to the caste. In either case, males are more open to having a life partner from any caste compared to their female counterparts. As is the case with caste, religion and culture follow the same trend of the mate preference criteria, which are statistically significant for the chi-square value, clearly signifying gender variation. In corollary, more males are in favour of other castes, religions and cultures than their female counterparts. In case of the height of the potential mate, the majority of females desire their mate to be taller in body height, whereas the majority of males prefer their mate to be shorter in height than themselves. The issue of body weight is also well connected to the mentality of height, in the sense that female in general prefer their potential mate to have a heavier body weight while male prefer their wife to have a smaller body weight than their own. Those with an opinion of indifference to body weight are of a smaller number and in equal proportion to both male and female. This finding is also statistically significant in the chi-square value, indicating a gender line in mate selection. As for the preferred location of the potential mate to get married, most females are in favour of being closer to their parental home, while most men are indifferent to the location of the parental home of their potential mate. This result is statistically significant at a 5 percent level of significance of the chi-square value. It means that there is gender variation in the choice of location of the potential mate. Level of education is one of the criteria people would value for selecting their potential life partner. Almost an equal proportion of males and females prefer to have a mate with equal educational qualifications to themselves. However, in the Nepalese context, females normally desire a mate with having higher educational level than their male counterparts, which this study

corroborates. However, very few of both sexes prefer to have a partner with a lower educational qualification. In addition to the level of education, the subject of education is an equally crucial variable for mate selection. Table 3 indicates that around 10 percent of males and females prefer their mate to have the same subject of study as themselves. More males than females believe of preferring a mate who has a different subject of education, or they are indifferent to it. This relationship is statistically significant with a chi-square value at the 5 percent level of significance. Regarding the occupation of the potential mate, both male and female are indifferent to the kind of occupation. In case of wealth of the potential mate, most females are in view of either similar or wealthier than their own parents, but most males are indifferent to it. There has been a clear gender variation in the response, which is statistically significant for the chi-square value. This finding is in line with the empirical findings of many other studies (Conley, 2007; Islam, 2021; Maliki, 2009) that women put more value on wealth and resources while men are more concerned with the physical features of their mate. A question was asked to fill in the most preferred work station or country of residence of their potential mate in order to understand their preferred country of residence. It sounds interesting that most females prefer to work and live in the USA, Australia or Canada, while most men prefer to live and work in Nepal. The underlying reasons might be many, but this is an interesting finding of gender variation in work station or country of living, with females preferring a foreign country more than their male counterparts. What kind of organisation they would prefer for the potential mate was asked, which resulted that only a small proportion of both males and females hold the opinion that the mate should be from the same organisation. While a large proportion of females prefer to have a mate from a different organisation than themselves and males are mostly indifferent to the type of organisation of their mate. This result is statistically significant, too. As in the case of income, the same principle applies in the case of gender variation. It means that women are more concerned than men about the level of income of their potential mate. In this study, more females are in favour of a very high or high income level, while most men are indifferent to the level of income of their female counterparts. This finding might have been because females place more value on the economic resources which offer security, comfort and a better standard of living for the household members, while males place more value on other qualities of females like physical features, well manners, resilience to stress and more. This mentality has prevailed due mainly to the reason that men are the principal breadwinners in Nepal.

## DISCUSSION

The societies have undergone incredible socio-economic, cultural and psychological transformation. Selection of the right kind of partner for individuals the marriageable age was considered a family responsibility in the past. The issue has undergone considerable changes during recent periods in such a way that selection of the mating partner has been the sole matter of the person concerned (Niaki et al., 2014). However, the youth are influenced by society, with the direction of their own family and effects from the peer groups.

According to the evolutionary theory (Conley, 2007; Zhan, 2016), males look for partners who can help them cope with the limitations imposed by nature. Since men in our society have been socialised to be the breadwinners and providers, it would stand to reason that those men should desire a partner who possesses skills that are useful in the home, such as cooking, housekeeping and childrearing. Women, for instance, look for financial

stability in a partner because having children and raising them takes resources like food, shelter, and money. Hence, both partners try to complement each other with the skills and abilities which they possess. Female are in favour of men who possess more wealth and income with heavier and robust body weight having more earning potential rightly corroborates the hypothesis in this study. Social exchange theory (Conley, 2007; Nakonezny & Denton, 2008) suggest that men with high status and earning ability will tend to marry women of great physical beauty as well as especially strong domestic skills. In general, people use their own assets (such as attractiveness, wealth, position, etc.) to negotiate a better bargain with a partner; depending on the qualities they value; this could be someone who is a virgin, successful, or attractive, for example. Female in this study more concerned with the particularity of the traits like age, height, weight, wealth, education of male indicate that they are ready to exchange their puberty with the man who is more resourceful. As per the spirit of social homogamy theory (Islam, 2021; Sandhya & Somashekarappa, 2019), people normally wish to create harmony in the family, society and personal life so that they prefer other individuals having homogenous attributes. Such attributes might be in various forms like education, age, profession, wealth, culture, caste and religion etc. They try to get relationship with the mate who is having same or similar economic, social and cultural milieu stands more conformity of the finding of this study.

Despite the growing importance of living costs and value of wealth in the recent times, the prospective mates are searching for more human qualities such as loyalty, honesty, morality, ethics as the foremost qualities (Todosijevic, 2003; Niaki, et al., 2014). This is due to the longstanding nature of conjugal relationships in countries like Nepal. Another serious issue received attention by most boys and girls is the physical features, sound health and physical fitness (Niaki et al., 2014) for the good prospects of earning capacity and reproductive viability. People used to value chastity, purity and fidelity as the foremost concern for the potential mate in the past. However, these qualities have been overlooked by the today's youth to engage in the long term marital partnerships (Conley, 2007; Walter, 2020). Today's youth normally do not expect to get marriage with the mate who is actually chaste.

Among the various traits, physical features, physical appearance and targeting to attractiveness are the dominant quality of expectation by the prospective mate (Furnham, 2009; Sandhya & Somasekarappa, 2019). Most studies focus clear gender variation in the mate preference choices as marked in the previous literature (Lu, 2023; Conley, 2007; Islam, 2021; Maliki, 2009, Buss & Shackleford, 2008; Furnham, 2009; Abdullah, 2011; Buss, 1989; Eastwick et al., 2014; Walter et al., 2020). In most societies, female prefer older age males than them while male prefer younger age females than them (Maliki, 2009; Sandhya & Somasekarappa, 2019; Walter, 2020). Older, taller and heavier male are more preferred by female indicate a male's ability to protect his spouse. On the contrary, male prefer the female who is younger, shorter and lighter in body weight than him (Sandhya, 2018; Sandhya & Somasekarappa, 2019). Most male than female prefer their potential partner to be younger in age. Contrary to it, more female than male prefer their mate to be slightly older in age than them. The differences regarding the preference of height shows that female prefer the potential spouse to be taller than her while male prefer the female with shorter in stature. Regarding body weight, most female prefer their mate to be heavier in weight while most male prefer their mate with lighter in body weight. The youth mentality behind such result would be that in such a patriarchal society like Nepal, male tries to control his spouse while female expects physical protection from her male counterpart. Hence, the body structures they expect would provide a sense of control of

male over female and sense of protection for the female by her male counterpart. It may go up to the expectations of the sexual pleasure and offspring quality.

People do not marry with other religious groups (Maliki, 2009; Sandhya & Somashekarrappa, 2019; Conley, 2007). Most female prefer their mate to be from the same caste, culture and religion, while most male prefer them to be from different caste, or indifferent to culture and religion to these attributes. People used to stick firmly to their religion and culture in the orthodox society of earlier times. However in the present context, this criterion is taken less seriously by both male and female. But female more than male are more complying with such criteria as a carryover of socio-cultural mind set. This finding shows the gradual loosening the bond of these ascribed attributes in Nepali society; taken place by the achieved qualities.

Graduates prefer to marry with someone with good education (Maliki, 2009; O' Neel, 2006). However, women express a preference for marriage partner who are of high educational background of their male counterparts (Maliki, 2009) as in the finding of this study. This motive of educational qualification indicates that women are more concerned to higher earning potential and better quality of life by means of education of their male counterparts. Since, women move to and settle in the male partner's parental house to get a living, in Nepal; she is more concerned for how much economic resources the male possesses to enjoy the conjugal life (Sandhya, 2018). Females value more to the potential mate who can support her financially.

## CONCLUSION

Modern social trends such as gender role flexibility, rising female educational and economic participation, and shifts in cultural norms have brought considerable changes to mate preference patterns. Young adults, particularly undergraduate level students, whose traditional mating preferences are influenced by contemporary values such as personal autonomy, educational aspirations, career goals, social equality and changed socio-psychological mentality.

This study provided a probe into romantic orientation on several customary mate selection criteria as a testimony of Nepali society in the college setting of the country. Females prefer their potential mate to be a little older in age, more educated, having high wealth and income level, same caste, culture and religion, and closer to their parental home. While males prefer a little younger, shorter, lighter in body structure and in many other aspects are indifferent to a particular criterion. Most of such criteria have strong gender variation, indicating the difference in the socio-psychological mindset of males and females, which is shaped by the present socio-cultural context. Both male and female value more the interpersonal quality and competency-based criteria while renouncing the inborn type of characteristics like caste, culture and religion for their preferred life partner. There is both continuity as well as change in customary attributes of potential mate selection in the contemporary Nepali society.

## DECLARATIONS
**Author contribution:**
BA contributed to crafting the overall idea of the presentation and layout of the manuscript in the present form.
GS contributed to searching the relevant literature and putting it in the appropriate locations in the manuscript.

**Data availability statement:** Data is stored in the SPSS 26 version on the PC of the first author and can be obtained upon request from the corresponding email address.

**Ethical approval:** Ethical principles applicable to the social science research were strictly followed at every stage. Though the study investigated the romantic issues of the youths, no socially sensitive kind of private information was asked of the respondents. No official ethical approval was sought.

**Competing interests:** The authors declare to have no competing interests.

**Declaration on AI use:** No use of AI

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