

## **A Lesson in Love: Reviewing Japanese and Indonesian Dating Culture in Academic Literature**

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### **Abstract**

Dating practices can be observed across cultures. Many studies have highlighted the differences between Asian and Euro-North American dating cultures. Comparisons between different Asian countries, however, are more limited. This paper aims to address the gap by comparing Japanese and Indonesian dating cultures by reviewing the existing academic literature around the subject. This comparison will highlight the similarities and differences of Japanese and Indonesian dating practices to identify possible challenges they may posit in intercultural dating practiced by people from the two countries.

**Keywords:** Dating; Culture; Indonesian; Japanese

### **Introduction**

Dating can be defined as a premarital intimate relationship between individual. Jamieson (2011) argued that, although the terms may be different, such practices of intimacy exist across cultures and may be characterised by self-disclosure, physical contact, practical care, and sexual contact. Some literature (e.g.: Bennett, 2005; Smith-Hefner, 2005) refer to the practices as “courtship”.

Extensive research has been done on European and North American dating culture. Comparative studies (e.g.: Vaquera & Kao, 2005; Keels & Harris, 2014; Martinez, Ting-Toomey, & Dorjee, 2016) have also been done to identify potential challenges that may rise when Euro-North American individuals engaged in interracial, intercultural, or interfaith dating and marriage. The comparisons, however, tend to focus on different racial groups among Europeans and North-Americans (e.g.: Caucasian, African-American, Asian-American, Latino-American). Comparisons with non-Europeans and non-Americans tend to only include individuals from East Asian countries (see Kito, 2005; Ritter, 2015). Although the academic findings have provided valuable insights of intercultural differences in the practices of intimacy, this paper argues that some findings may



not be applicable for people from many other parts of the world. While different Asian countries may share some similar dating practices, more research is needed to identify the possible intercultural dating challenges resulted from the under researched differences.

This paper aims to address this gap by comparing the dating cultures of two Asian countries from different regions of the continent. Japan is chosen to provide examples of East Asian dating culture and Indonesia is chosen to provide examples for Southeast Asian dating culture. The two countries are selected as they seem to possess some distinct cultural practices, while their historical, socio-political, and economic ties provide opportunities for intercultural interactions between their individual citizens.

The comparison is made based on the available and accessible scholarly articles of the dating practices in each country. The comparison will be presented in four areas: 1) the attitude towards marriage; 2) the initiation of dating relationship; 3) gender differences in the relationship; and 4) the attitudes towards premarital sex. Brief description of the current situation of Japan and Indonesia will precede the findings to aid contextual understanding upon the findings.

### **Japan, Indonesia, and the Research on Dating**

According to the Japanese Government's official page (2018), Japan possesses 145,936 square kilometres of land consists of 47 prefectures, which is the home for 126,700,000 people. Japanese is acknowledged as the national language, while the main religions comprise of Shintoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. In relation to its population, Japan is challenged with a steady population decline. With higher mortality rate than birth rate, the National Institute of Population and Social Security Researched projected that the Japanese population in 2060 may reach 86,737,000 (JapanTimes, 2013).

Contrary to Japan, the population in all 34 provinces of Indonesia continues to rise. The population has exceeded 250 million people in 2015 and has been projected to reach more than 300 million people by 2035 (Jones, 2014). With around 90% of the people identify as Muslim, Indonesia has been acknowledged as the country with the largest Muslim population in the world (Smith-Hefner, 2005; Hald & Mulya, 2013). Regardless of the high population growth, Indonesia is still challenged with high infant mortality rate. Jones' (2014) projection showed that, among other Southeast Asian countries, Indonesia's infant mortality rate in 2010 was higher than the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia, and will continue to surpass the four countries until at least 2035.

Japanese and Indonesian history intertwined towards the end of World War II when the Japanese imperial army pushed the Dutch out of the archipelago. The Japanese then occupied Indonesia between 1942 and 1945, until Indonesian founding fathers declared the independence as Germany and Japan lost the war

(Sato, 2006). Despite the historical struggle, modern Japan and Indonesia have strong socioeconomic ties. Japan provided the biggest official development assistance (ODA) for Indonesia in 1996 and has continued to be the country's biggest investor, as Indonesia continues to be Japan's major supplier for oil, natural gas, and timber (McIntyre, 2000; Wibawarta & Yovani, 2012). Japan has also influenced Indonesian contemporary society through the widespread of Japanese comic books (manga), television series, and other forms of Japanese pop culture (Wibawarta & Yovani, 2012).

In terms of the research on dating, there are limited number of English publications for both Japanese and Indonesian dating practices. Some scholars (e.g.: Kito, 2005; Ritter, 2015) have studied the Japanese dating practices by comparing them with North American practices. However, further exploration on Japanese dating culture is still limited. By far, Farrer, Tsuchiya, and Bagrowicz's (2008) study seemed to be the only English scholarly publication which provides comprehensive and deeper insights into the history, values, and process of *tsukiau* dating—the Japanese practice of steady courtship. Similar scholarly discussions for Indonesian dating culture exists, but the studies tend to focus on specific subcultural group based on ethnicity (e.g.: Forth, 2004; Smith-Hefner, 2005) or religion (e.g.: Asyari & Abid, 2016). Therefore, more scholarly articles of Indonesian dating practices are involved in the review to aid understanding of Indonesian dating culture.

### **The Changing Attitude towards Marriage**

Japanese and Indonesian attitudes towards marriage seems to be quite similar. Dating, as in its contemporary practices, did not seem to exist. Up to the 1960s, marriage in both Japanese and Indonesian was usually arranged, either through parents or intermediary (Applbaum, 1995; Smith-Hefner, 2005; Farrer et al., 2008; Rottger-Rossler, 2008 in Jamieson 2011). Engagement took place between the official meeting of two families and the marriage ceremony. According to Smith-Hefner (2005), for Indonesian Javanese at the time, this engagement might just last for one day to several weeks.

The attitude towards marriage started to change after the 1960s. In both Japan and Indonesia, the increasing education and employment opportunities, especially for women, were seen to be key factors in the increase of people's marriage age (Applbaum, 1995; Smith-Hefner, 2005). Applbaum (1995) noted that, in the 1990s, the average marriage age was 25.9 for Japanese women and 28.6 for Japanese men. Citing the data from Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Farrer et al. (2008) pointed out that the age had increased to 28.2 for women and 30.0 for men in 2006. Indonesian marriage age was far lower. Smith-Hefner (2005) noted that, until the 1960s, most Javanese women were married by the age of 16. The marriage age then increased, not only because of the Indonesian

New Order regulation for compulsory education, but also because the Indonesian Marriage Law of 1974 set the minimum marriage age to 16 for women and 19 for men.

As education and employment brought more opportunity to meet and interact with the opposite sex, dating relationship seems to become an acceptable form of premarital intimate relationship (Smith-Hefner, 2005; Farrer et al., 2008). Japanese and Indonesian attitude towards marriage, however, remains quite conservative. According to Applbaum (1995), marriage seems to be a rite of passage to enter adulthood. The age of 22 to 25 is considered as “proper marriageable age” for women and those who stay single past the age considered to be on par with a Christmas cake which becomes less and less desirable after the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. Applbaum (1995) noted that the proper marriageable age for men is later, between 26 to 30. Those who stay single past the age are considered less trustworthy, less cooperative, and less responsible than their married peers. Smith-Hefner (2005) mentioned similar stigma against singlehood as, in the 1950s, single women past the age of 20 were considered “unmarketable”. Interestingly, no derogative label was mentioned for single Indonesian men past a certain age. Regardless, most young people in Indonesian society today still want to get married at some point (Parker & Nilan, 2013 in Hardon & Idrus, 2015).

In relation to this, both Japan and Indonesia saw the come-back of arranged married popularity. The trend was reborn earlier in Japan. Known as *omiai*, the marriage arrangement through professional *nakodo* (intermediary) become a form of business between the 1980s and 1990s (Applbaum, 1995). However, the trend did not last long as Farrer et al. (2008) claimed that the practice had almost been extinct in the late 2000s. On the contrary, the arranged married seem to be back in Indonesian trend around this time. Known as *ta'aruf* the exchange of proposal and potential partners' resume through *murabbi* or *murabbiya* (religious mentor who act as the intermediary) becomes an increasingly popular pathway to marriage for some Indonesian Muslims (Smith-Hefner, 2005; Asyari & Abid, 2016). While the repeated trend of *omiai* seemed to be sparked by commercial business (Applbaum, 1995), Asyari and Abid (2016) argued that the increasing popularity of *ta'aruf* was born from the active campaign of Indonesian Tarbiyah movement. The movement, which aims to establish an Islamic State in Indonesia through nonviolence struggle, actively promote early marriage without courtship, as endorsed in Islam, through popular book publication, movies and television, marriage preparation course, marriage consultation, and social media (Asyari & Abid, 2016).

### **The Initiation of Dating Relationship**

Regardless the re-emergence of arrange marriage trend in both countries, dating relationship seems to become more and more common in both Japan and Indonesia. According to the participants in Farrer et al.'s (2008) study, some

Japanese started dating in high school, but more started dating in university or after they started working. *Tsukiau* is the common term used for the relationship. According to Farrer et al. (2008), the concept may be similar to Euro-North American concept of “going steady”. *Kokuhaku* or formal confession signifies the beginning of the relationship which can be characterised by spending more time together, exchanging gifts, frequent communication even when being far away from each other, *amae* or entrusting oneself to the partner, revealing true self, sexual relationship, and shared intention to marry (Farrer et al., 2008). Among these characteristics, the importance of *kokuhaku* is also frequently emphasised in non-scholarly articles (e.g.: Suzuki, 2013; Kincaid, 2014). Even after several outings, two Japanese individuals may still not consider each other as romantic partner before the formal confession take place.

Comparing to the Japanese, dating among Indonesian may be initiated earlier. *Pacaran* is the common term used and it may start in mid-secondary school, before the age of 15 (Smith-Hefner, 2005; Rusmiati & Hastono, 2015). However, Jaafar, Wibowo, & Afiatin (2006) found that 15 is the average age when Indonesian young people start to date. In this relationship, similar to Japanese *tsukiau*, frequent communication, even when couples are far away from each other, may also be maintained through instant messenger (Ayun, 2016). Confession may also precede the relationship (Fadilah, Kuniyasi, & Quraisyin, 2011), but the importance does not seem to be as high as in Japanese dating practices. Shared marriage thoughts may not be common as Smith-Hefner (2005) found that, due to the early age, the relationship may not be considered as serious by both the couples and their parents. However, this view upon dating may change as the individuals grow older. For those considered to be of proper age to marry, the community may view the relationship as a pathway to find marriage partner, while the individual themselves may take it more seriously to satisfy the desire for emotional intimacy, physical affection, companionship, and sexual pleasure (Bennett, 2005).

### Gender Differences in Dating Relationship

Japanese and Indonesian gender differences in dating relationship seems to be similar. Men tend to be expected to be more direct, more pro-active, and less dependent. As the opposite, women tend to be expected to be more passive and more dependent. As an example, for an *omiai* meeting, *nakodo* may urge their shy male clients to initiate a kiss or hand-holding with the prospective wife (Applbaum, 1995). For *tsukiau*, as Farrer et al. (2008) found, Japanese men are more expected to carry out the *kokuhaku* and delay showing *amae* towards their girlfriend until the relationship is considered stable. Meanwhile, it is more acceptable for Japanese women to show *amae* earlier or more frequently (Farrer et al., 2008; Marshall, 2012).

In Indonesia, gender differences in dating relationship may be influenced by the gender script endorsed in the local traditional culture, religious beliefs, and legal regulation. As an example, although their decision-making positions are considered equal, Indonesian Buginese women are still expected to focus more on managing the household while the men are expected to be brave and manage the issues outside the household (Hardon & Idrus, 2015). Other examples include the establishment of men's position as the household leaders and breadwinners, and women's position as the homemakers, in both the Islamic teaching and Indonesian Marriage Law (Nilan, Demartoto, Broom, & Germov, 2014; Hartono, Davies, & Macrae, 2017). The gender script may initially be intended for married couple, but the community tend to view dating relationship as a pathway to socialise the gender roles in future marriage (Bennett, 2005). Therefore, the institutionalised gender division may also be internalised by individuals and influence the gender expectations between dating couples.

### **Attitudes towards Premarital Sex**

Japanese and Indonesian attitudes towards premarital sex seems to be different. Farrer et al. (2008) identified sexual relationship as a common characteristic in *tsukiau* dating. Even further, some participants in their study viewed sex as the core of the relationships as it increases intimacy and communication between couples and become the key difference which distinguish *tsukiau* from friendship. In accordance to this, a comparative study by Sprecher and Hatfield (1996) suggested that, although their level of permissiveness may be lower than American's and Russian's, Japanese men and women generally view sexual intercourse within dating relationship as acceptable.

This positive attitude towards premarital sex may be related to Japanese tradition view on sexual relationship. Ueno (2003) argued that the concept of virginity did not exist among traditional rural Japanese society. It was common for young people to be sexually active. Village girls may start receiving night visit from the village boys after their first menstruation (Ueno, 2003).

Contrary to Japanese acceptance, premarital sex is generally unacceptable in Indonesian society. Forth's (2004) study on Nage and Keo people in the island of Flores suggests that some forms of premarital sex might be acceptable in the past. However, it might be more of an exception than the norm. In Indonesian contemporary society, at least, premarital sex is frowned upon. Religious teachings are embedded and intertwined tightly with people's lives, especially in terms of marriage and child-rearing practices (Hartono et al., 2017). Family is viewed as the building units of the community and the state (Asyari & Abid, 2016), so marriage and sexual relations are strictly regulated. Only heterosexual sex within monogamous marriage is considered acceptable (Hald & Mulya, 2013). Virginity, especially of women, is valued highly as something that should be protected and



reserved for future marriage partner (Smith-Hefner, 2005; Rusmiati & Hastono, 2015). Premarital sexual practices tend to be perceived as the influence of westernisation and globalisation through popular media (see Jaafar et al., 2006). Dating relationship is accepted as long as it does not involve sexual relationship, and media depiction of teenage sexual activity tends to be associated with high risk of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy (Holzner & Oetomo, 2004). Nonmarital pregnancy is viewed as shameful and humiliating, especially for the women's family (Smith-Hefner, 2005).

This does not mean that Indonesian dating practices are free from sex. Some studies (e.g.: Holzner & Oetomo, 2004; Jaafar et al., 2006; Hardon & Idrus, 2015; Rusmiati & Hastono, 2015) indicated that many young people actively engaged in sexual activities, ranging from manual stimulation to sexual intercourse. However, fear from social repercussion make the acts tend to be done in secrecy. Cohabitation may be punished by social exclusion, harassment, coercion into legal marriage, or sudden wedding ceremonies enforced by local community members (Bennett, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

This paper has presented a comparison between Japanese and Indonesian dating cultures. The establishment of gender roles in dating and the changing attitudes towards marriage seem to be similar in the two cultures. However, the different emphasis on the importance of formal confession suggests the possibility of misunderstanding and miscommunication before an intercultural dating relationship can even be established. Among the established couples, differences in the attitude towards premarital sex may posit another challenge. With one person embraces sex as a vital source of intimacy while the other tries to fight the desire from fear of humiliation and social punishment, open discussion around the issue may be necessary for the couple to maintain their relationship.\*\*\*

### **Limitations**

This paper is written based on the available and accessible academic articles on Japanese and Indonesian dating practices, which were mostly published in English. Considering the limited number of the publications, further research beyond a review on literature is needed to capture the actual intercultural challenges faced by couples who come from the two different Asian cultures.

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