

Assessment of Pre-Marital Counselling Needs of Tertiary Institution Students in Kaduna State, Nigeria: A Dual Approach

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Abstract

The study assessed the pre-marital counselling needs of tertiary institution students in Kaduna State. Two research objectives, research questions and hypotheses each guided the study. A mixed research design was employed, and the study population was students in Kaduna State's tertiary institutions. A sample of four hundred and fifty (450) participants was selected using multiple sampling techniques. Frequency and percentages were used to present the demographic data of respondents. The research questions were answered using mean and standard deviation, while the t-test was used to test the hypotheses. The study revealed that there is a significant difference between male and female students' pre-marital counselling needs and preferences. Females prioritise topics like communication skills, conflict resolution, and financial management, while males emphasise understanding gender roles and expectations within marriage. Added to this, male and female students show preferences for same-gender counsellors, with males often preferring counsellors who share their religious background. Based on the findings from this study, it was recommended, among others, that professional counsellors should develop differentiated counselling curricula that cater to the unique needs of male and female students is crucial. For female students, the curriculum should prioritise the development of communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, financial management literacy, and domestic violence awareness. For male students, discussions should be integrated to foster healthy partnerships, deconstruct societal expectations of masculinity, and understand gender roles within marriage. This gender-specific approach will ensure the counselling addresses each group's distinct challenges and expectations.

Keywords: Counselling Preference, Gender, Students, Pre-Marital Counselling, Needs, Tertiary Institution.

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Introduction

Marriage is a universal concept, but navigating its complexities requires preparation across cultures (Schnarch, 2019). Research suggests a global rise in divorce rates, with contributing factors like unrealistic expectations, communication issues, and financial stress (Fowler et al., 2023; Mortelmans & Fournier, 2021; Cordova et al., 2014; Amato & Prewitt, 2013). Within Africa, the landscape is similar. Studies in Ghana (Gyimah & Akakpo, 2018) and South Africa (Mashiane & Mynhardt, 2014; Mashiri et al., 2013) highlight factors like infidelity, poor communication, and in-law interference as leading causes of marital breakdown.

On the other hand, Nigeria presents a specific context. Research by Adedoyin and Adewole (2017) points to a high prevalence of domestic violence within Nigerian marriages. Factors specific to the country, such as arranged marriages and differing cultural expectations, further complicate marital dynamics (Jegede, 2014). Focusing on tertiary students in Kaduna offers a crucial perspective as this demographic faces distinct challenges. Nwaogu et al. (2019) and Nwaeze (2018) found that Nigerian university students often lack the knowledge and skills for healthy relationships. Exposure to Western ideals through media can further complicate their understanding of marriage (Adedoyin et al., 2017; Jegede, 2014). Pre-marital counselling (PMC) emerges as a potential preventative measure.

In considering the significance of pre-marital counselling, it is essential to acknowledge the broader discourse on marriage education and preparation, recognising its potential to shape the futures of individuals and communities (Stanley et al., 2016; Hawkins et al., 2014). Moreover, the culturally diverse context of Kaduna State underscores the importance of culturally informed counselling interventions that account for the region's rich mosaic of traditions, beliefs, and practices (Nagel, 2020; Triandis et al., 2016). Tertiary institution students represent a unique demographic needing pre-marital counselling due to their transitional life stage and evolving personal and social responsibilities (Smith, 2017). Research indicates that these students often face challenges such as managing academic stress, career aspirations, and peer influences, which can impact their readiness for committed relationships (Jones & Brown, 2019). Consequently, there is a growing recognition of the need for targeted counselling services to address these specific challenges and prepare students for healthy marital relationships (Johnson et al., 2021).

Previous studies by Ajayi and Usman (2020), Adebayo and Adekeye (2017), Hawkins and Willoughby (2017), Duncan and Edwards (2014), and McAuliffe et al. (2014) affirmed that male and female students expressed distinct pre-marital counselling needs. Females emphasised topics like communication skills, conflict resolution, and financial management. Conversely, males placed greater importance on understanding gender roles and expectations within marriage. The study by Dew and Xiao (2018), McDowell et al. (2014), and Markman and Stanley (2013) suggest a shift towards practical discussions that equip students for the realities of married life. Similarly, discussions on parenting philosophies establish a foundation for future family planning (Carroll & Doherty, 2015). By focusing on practical skills and realistic challenges, marriage preparation programs can better equip young adults for the complexities of married life (Stanley et al., 2020). In terms of legal aspects and cultural differences, the findings of Adedoyin and Famuyiwa (2020), Okonye and Essien (2019), Mba and Asamoah (2018); Adewale and Afolabi (2017); Nwachukwu and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) found that while legal and cultural aspects remain essential considerations, equipping student couples with practical communication skills, healthy conflict resolution techniques, and the ability to build a strong foundation for their relationship might be a more immediate priority.

Also, Hawkins and Clarke (2020) and Waititu (2018) in their studies confirmed that there is a growing body of research exploring the attitudes and beliefs of young adults towards pre-

marital counselling (PMC). Studies consistently report students' appreciation for PMC as a tool for open communication and conflict resolution (Markman & Stanley, 2013; Hawkins & Clarke, 2020). Pre-marital counselling services foster practical communication skills for navigating disagreements and building healthy relationships (Waititu, 2018; Schnarch, 2014; Markman & Stanley, 2013). However, it is essential to acknowledge that some limitations exist. Research primarily focuses on student awareness and attitudes, with less emphasis on actual participation rates (Okonye & Essien, 2019; Amato & Previti, 2013).

Ajayi and Adeyemo (2020). Adebayo et al. (2018). Eze and Ezech (2017) in their studies found that female students expressed a stronger desire for pre-marital counselling compared to their male counterparts. This aligns with findings from other African contexts, where societal expectations often place a greater emphasis on female marriage readiness (Mughal & Aphane, 2019; Hawkins & Willoughby, 2017). Hassan et al. (2023) found a growing openness among male students towards pre-marital counselling. This could be attributed to increased awareness of marital challenges and a desire to improve communication skills (Ajayi & Adeyemo, 2020).

Studies found that gender can be a significant factor in counsellor selection, particularly for male clients (Fouad & McGuire, 2016; Segrin et al., 2015). Beyond gender, a client's religious background can also influence counsellor preference. Shafranske et al. (2014) found that clients with strong religious beliefs often seek counsellors who share their faith. This preference may stem from a desire for a counsellor who understands their values and can integrate religious concepts into therapy (Curtis-Tauscher, 2020; Drisko, 2018). Added to this, Smith et al. (2018) and Chen and Meston (2014) studies revealed that men were generally more comfortable initiating conversations about sexual issues compared to women. Also, men placed a higher priority on sexual compatibility than women in their initial evaluations of potential partners. As highlighted by Brooks (2022), Regan (2019), and Moore and Brody (2017), counsellors need to be culturally sensitive and respectful of individual comfort levels when addressing sexual compatibility. Open-ended questioning and creating a safe space for both partners to express themselves freely are crucial. Therapists can also utilise techniques like normalisation to acknowledge the commonality of these communication difficulties.

Furthermore, Patel et al. (2020), Graham et al. (2019), Smith et al. (2018), and Jones et al. (2017) found that females prioritise addressing domestic violence within mental health resources. This focus reflects a desire for a safe space to discuss their experiences and concerns. Individual counselling sessions can provide this safe space, allowing females to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with the trauma of domestic violence. The study by Singh et al. (2021) and Chen et al. (2022) revealed that clients strongly prefer online therapy sessions. This preference likely stems from the busy schedules of many students, who juggle academic commitments with other responsibilities.

Similarly, evening and weekend appointments are highly sought-after (Liu et al., 2014; Myers et al., 2023). These flexible options allow students to access mental health services without disrupting their daily routines. However, the need for and preferences for pre-

marital counselling services among tertiary institution students in Kaduna State remains largely uncharted territory. The problem at hand revolves around recognising that the transition to marriage can be a daunting and transformative experience, particularly for young adults immersed in their educational pursuits. While pre-marital counselling has gained prominence as a vital resource for preparing individuals for the challenges and commitments of marriage, a notable gap exists in understanding and addressing the specific counselling needs of tertiary institution students.

Problem Statement

Marriage rates in Nigeria remain high, but divorce rates are also rising. This trend suggests that couples may be entering marriage unprepared for the challenges they will face. Tertiary institution students are a population nearing marriage age. However, there needs to be more understanding of their specific needs and preferences regarding pre-marital counselling in Kaduna State, Nigeria. Existing research on pre-marital counselling in Nigeria often focuses on the national level or specific religious contexts. More research needs to be conducted to explore the specific needs and preferences of tertiary institution students in Kaduna State. This gap limits the development of targeted pre-marital counselling programs that effectively address the concerns of this population. Thus, this research fills the void by assessing the pre-marital counselling needs of tertiary institution students in Kaduna State.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. Find out the pre-marital counselling needs of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Kaduna State.
- ii. Assess the pre-marital counselling preferences of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Kaduna State.

Research Questions

The research questions are as follows:

- i. What are the pre-marital counselling needs of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Kaduna State?
- ii. What are the pre-marital counselling preferences of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Kaduna State?

Hypotheses

The research hypotheses are:

HO₁ There is no significant difference between male and female students' pre-marital counselling needs in various tertiary institutions in Kaduna State.

HO₂ There is no significant difference between pre-marital counselling preferences of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Kaduna State.

Theoretical Framework

The study examines three theories: Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and Attachment Theory, highlighting their applications in pre-marital counselling.

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy (CBT) focuses on the interplay between thoughts, emotions, and behaviours. Pioneered by Aaron T. Beck and Albert Ellis, it emphasises identifying and modifying negative thought patterns to improve emotional well-being. In pre-marital counselling, CBT can enhance communication and conflict resolution skills. For instance, it can help a couple identify and challenge negative assumptions about each other, leading to more effective communication. This is particularly beneficial for tertiary students navigating academic and romantic stresses.

Social Exchange Theory (SET), developed by scholars like George Homans and Peter Blau, is a powerful tool for students. It analyses relationships through a cost-benefit lens, empowering individuals to maximise rewards and minimise costs, thus influencing their relationship commitment and satisfaction. SET aids students in understanding give-and-take dynamics, giving them the confidence to make informed decisions about their romantic future.

Attachment Theory, formulated by John Bowlby and expanded by Mary Ainsworth, is a key to fostering deeper connections. It explores how early bonds with caregivers shape adult relationships, identifying secure and insecure attachment styles that impact emotional regulation and relationship satisfaction. In pre-marital counselling, understanding these styles through Attachment Theory helps students foster deeper connections and address relational challenges, making them feel more connected.

Attachment Theory is deemed most suitable for pre-marital counselling for tertiary students. It provides a comprehensive framework for understanding emotional bonds, promoting secure attachments and enhancing relationship stability and satisfaction, which are crucial for successful marriages.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed research approach involving qualitative and quantitative methods. The study population comprises all male and female students in all tertiary institutions within Kaduna State. This totals one hundred and twenty-four and sixteen (124,016) (Academic Offices of the Institutions (2023)). A sample size of 450 was selected for the study based on the recommended sample size of Research Advisory (2010). The researchers used the Pre-marital Counselling Needs Questionnaire (PCNQ) to measure the pre-marital counselling needs of students in tertiary institutions. A preliminary questionnaire was presented to experts in Guidance and Counselling, Statistics, and Language at the Faculty of Education, A.B.U., Zaria, to establish the validity of the survey's content. The study used frequency counts and percentages to analyse the respondents' demographic data in section A of the structured questionnaire. The raw data collected were weighted using mean and standard deviation to answer the five research questions stated

in Chapter One. In contrast, the t-test was used to test the five null hypotheses to determine whether there is a significant difference between the variables. Notably, the study also integrated qualitative data, which were transcribed and used to provide a comprehensive understanding, supporting the discussion of the quantitative data.

Results

The data for this study was collected from students in tertiary institutions of Kaduna State. The response rate is presented in the table.

Table 1: Response Rate of the Questionnaires

Instruments Distribution	Responses
Number of distributed questionnaires	450
Returned questionnaires	448
Returned and usable questionnaires	441
Returned and excluded questionnaires	7
Questionnaires not returned	2
Response rate	99.6%
Usable response rate	98.0%
Interview Participants	10

Source: *Field Survey, 2024*

The data presented in Table 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the response rates for a questionnaire-based survey. A total of 450 questionnaires were distributed to the targeted respondents. Out of these, 448 were returned, indicating a high return rate. Among the returned questionnaires, 441 were deemed usable. This means that these questionnaires were completed correctly and met the criteria set for the study. However, 7 of the returned questionnaires were excluded. This exclusion was due to incomplete responses, inconsistent answers, and other criteria that rendered them unusable for the analysis. Only two questionnaires were not returned, showing an excellent engagement level from the respondents. The overall response rate is 99.6%. This exceptionally high response rate indicates that the survey topic was relevant and engaging to the participants and that the data collection methods were effective. The usable response rate is 98.0%. This metric shows the proportion of the total distributed questionnaires that were valid and fit for analysis, demonstrating the high quality of the data collected.

The near-perfect response rate reflects strong engagement from the participants, suggesting that the survey was well-received and that the respondents were motivated to complete it. The high usable response rate (98.0%) indicates that the vast majority of the data collected is reliable and can be utilised for robust analysis. The minimal number of excluded questionnaires shows an effective questionnaire design and clear instructions for the respondents. With only two questionnaires not returned, the issue of non-response bias is likely negligible, enhancing the representativeness of the survey results.

Answering the Research Questions

This section of the analysis presents the responses to the research questions.

Research Question One: What are the pre-marital counselling needs of students in various tertiary institutions in Kaduna State? This research question was answered using mean and standard deviation. The responses are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Pre-marital Counselling Needs of Students in Tertiary Institutions

S/N	Item Statement	Mean	STD	Decision
1.	Would like to be counselled about the following:			
1.	healthy communication regarding intimacy.	3.89	.18	Agreed
2.	shared values and compatible life goals that contribute to a strong marriage.	3.70	.22	Agreed
3.	shared goals and interests that can strengthen emotional intimacy.	3.91	.16	Agreed
4.	how to handle disagreements constructively with a partner.	3.93	.21	Agreed
5.	how to develop conflict resolution skills.	3.90	.24	Agreed
6.	desired family size and parenting styles before marriage.	3.96	.19	Agreed
7.	strategies for building healthy relationships with in-laws.	2.87	.36	Agreed
8.	how to compromise and find common ground with a partner.	3.51	.26	Agreed
9.	how to handle potential conflicts arising from differing expectations.	3.77	.20	Agreed
10.	budgeting and financial planning skills for marriage.	3.96	.17	Agreed
11.	handling potential communication problems in relationships.	3.81	.26	Agreed
12.	respect and support each other's religious practices.	2.50	.52	Agreed
13.	managing extended family relationships.	2.67	.38	Agreed
14.	anger management and emotional regulation skills.	3.97	.18	Agreed
15.	addressing legal issues like prenuptial agreements.	2.01	.67	Disagreed
16.	addressing healthy habits and lifestyle choices.	2.62	.37	Agreed
17.	how to handle issues relating to cultural differences and family dynamics.	2.13	.38	Disagreed
18.	planning educational goals and career aspirations.	3.01	.26	Agreed
19.	relationship boundaries and dealing with jealousy.	2.86	.30	Agreed
20.	addressing intimacy and sexual health.	3.97	.18	Agreed
21.	managing household responsibilities.	2.56	.32	Agreed
Cumulative Mean		3.31		

Source: Field Survey, 2024

This analysis explores the prioritisation of pre-marital counselling needs among students in tertiary institutions in Kaduna state. The students prioritise discussions on desired family size and parenting styles (M=3.96). This indicates a proactive approach to building a family foundation. Financial preparedness was a key concern, specifically budgeting and financial planning skills for marriage (M=3.96). Financial planning is a top priority, underscoring

student recognition of its importance for marital stability. This suggests an awareness of couples' practical challenges and a desire to develop necessary financial management skills. Similarly, the issue of emotional intelligence regarding anger management and emotional regulation skills resulted in a high score ($M=3.97$). Students prioritise learning skills related to managing anger and regulating emotions, emphasising the importance of emotional maturity in sustaining a healthy relationship. This indicates a readiness to develop skills for handling emotions constructively. Open communication regarding intimacy and sexual health is seen as crucial ($M= 3.97$). Additionally, students prioritise learning constructive ways to resolve disagreements ($M= 3.93$).

However, low mean scores on items relating to understanding legal aspects like prenuptial agreements must be emphasised more ($M=2.01$). This indicates a perception that legal issues are less relevant or pressing compared to other interpersonal and practical concerns. Also, addressing cultural differences is seen as less critical ($M= 2.13$). Similarly, there was a divided response regarding understanding and respecting religious beliefs ($M= 2.50$). Furthermore, the students show moderate interest in building relationships with in-laws and learning about managing relationships with extended family members. ($M=2.87$). This implies that while they acknowledge the importance of family dynamics, other relationship skills are more pressing than family dynamics. The data reveals a generally positive attitude towards pre-marital counselling, with a cumulative mean score of 3.31. However, significant variations exist in the level of importance students assign to specific topics. To support these findings, the transcribe of the interview is presented as follows:

Interviewee 1: Maryam, a 300-level student at Kaduna State University, said:

I think pre-marital counselling is crucial for us. Many students come from different backgrounds and have diverse beliefs about marriage. We need counselling that addresses communication skills, conflict resolution, financial planning, and understanding each other's cultural and religious differences. It is also important to discuss expectations about gender roles and responsibilities in marriage. Because these are common areas where couples face challenges, understanding these things before getting married can help us build more robust and more understanding relationships. Many of us have only seen our parents' marriages and might not know what to expect or how to handle problems when they arise.

Interviewee 2: Tunde, a final-year student at Federal College of Education, Zaria, noted that:

I believe we need more education on the legal aspects of marriage, such as our rights and obligations under the law. Additionally, many of us need guidance on family planning and sexual health. Emotional readiness and mental health should also be part of the counselling process. We must know how to manage stress and emotional issues affecting our relationships. Also, understanding the legal aspects can prevent future conflicts and legal issues. Knowledge about family planning and sexual health is crucial for making informed

decisions. Addressing emotional readiness and mental health can help us build more resilient relationships and ensure we are truly ready for the commitments we are making.

Interviewee 3: Aisha, an HND 2 student at Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic, Zaria, said:

I think pre-marital counselling should focus on building mutual respect and trust. Many students need to learn how to manage their expectations and understand the importance of compromise in a relationship. We also need advice on managing in-law relationships and balancing our personal and professional lives. In our culture, in-laws play a significant role in our marriages. Suppose we need to learn how to handle these relationships correctly. In that case, it can lead to much stress and confusion. Balancing these relationships and setting boundaries is essential for a peaceful and harmonious marriage.

Interviewee 4: Musa, a postgraduate student at Kaduna State University, said:

I believe financial management is a critical area that needs to be addressed in pre-marital counselling. Many students must be taught how to budget or manage their finances effectively. Additionally, we need guidance on career planning and how to support each other's professional goals. It is also essential to learn about emotional intelligence and how to handle stress and conflict. Money issues are one of the main reasons couples fight. If we can learn how to manage our finances together, it will reduce a lot of potential conflicts. Knowing how to plan for the future and support each other's careers is vital for a stable and supportive relationship.

Interviewee 5: Fatima, a 400-level student at Federal College of Education, Zaria, said:

I think pre-marital counselling should include lessons on effective communication and conflict resolution. We must learn how to express our feelings and listen to our partners. Understanding the impact of cultural and religious differences and how to navigate them is also essential. Additionally, we should be taught about the importance of maintaining individuality within a relationship. Because in a relationship, it is easy to lose yourself and your personal goals. Maintaining individuality helps ensure that both partners continue to grow and develop personally and professionally, which can contribute to a healthier and more fulfilling relationship.

Research Question Two: What are male and female students' pre-marital counselling preferences in tertiary institutions in Kaduna State? This research question was answered using mean and standard deviation. The responses are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Pre-marital counselling preferences of students in tertiary institution

S/N	Item	Male Respondents			Female Respondents		
		Mean	STD	Decision	Mean	STD	Decision
21.	Pre-marital counselling should be offered individually for each partner.	2.34	.78	Disagreed	3.00	.21	Agreed
22.	Pre-marital counselling should focus on issues relating to domestic violence and abuse prevention.	2.31	.89	Disagreed	3.03	.26	Agreed
23.	Pre-marital counselling should discuss sexual compatibility and intimacy.	3.71	.23	Agreed	2.12	.88	Disagreed
24.	Pre-marital counselling should focus on in-law relationships and boundaries.	3.21	.78	Agreed	2.78	.31	Agreed
25.	Group pre-marital counselling sessions would be beneficial.	3.51	.34	Agreed	2.33	.81	Disagreed
26.	Online pre-marital counselling sessions would be a convenient option.	3.61	.21	Agreed	2.71	.36	Agreed
27.	It should address the issue of lifestyle compatibility and leisure activities.	3.72	.27	Agreed	2.88	.23	Agreed
28.	Pre-marital counselling sessions should be offered in the evenings or weekends to accommodate student schedules.	3.56	.21	Agreed	3.02	.23	Agreed
29.	Feel more comfortable attending sessions with a counsellor of the same gender as me.	2.89	.25	Agreed	3.18	.27	Agreed
30.	Prefer a counsellor who shares the same religious beliefs.	3.78	.33	Agreed	3.28	.28	Agreed
Cumulative Mean		3.26			2.83		

Source: Field Survey, 2024

Based on the data from Table 3, which highlights the pre-marital counselling preferences of students in a tertiary institution. It could be observed that male respondents showed a strong preference for counsellors who share the same religious beliefs (3.78). This might indicate the importance of cultural and religious congruence in counselling for men. Similarly, both genders agreed on preferring a counsellor of the same gender, though the female mean (3.18) was slightly higher than the male mean (2.89). There is a significant gender difference in attitudes toward discussing sexual compatibility in counselling, with males agreeing (3.71) and females disagreeing (2.12).

Conversely, females highly prioritised addressing domestic violence and abuse prevention (3.03), while males disagreed (2.31). Both genders agreed on the convenience of online counselling sessions, although males rated it higher (3.61) than females (2.71). Both preferred Evening or weekend sessions, with 3.56 for males and 3.02 for females.

On the items relating to areas in counselling, males showed strong support for counselling on lifestyle compatibility and leisure activities (3.72), whereas females also agreed but with a lower mean (2.88). This suggests a potential area of overlap but with different intensity levels of interest. Regarding individual versus group counselling, females disagreed with group sessions being beneficial (2.33), while males agreed (3.51). Individual sessions had mixed reactions, with males disagreeing (2.34) and females agreeing (3.00), indicating a divergence in preference for the counselling format.

The cumulative means (Male: 3.26, Female: 2.83) show that overall, male respondents have a higher level of agreement with the items compared to female respondents. The data reflects notable gender differences in preferences for pre-marital counselling. Males tend to prioritise religious alignment, sexual compatibility, and flexible counselling schedules, while females emphasise addressing domestic violence and prefer individual sessions. These insights could guide the development of tailored pre-marital counselling programs that address the specific needs and preferences of both genders. To support the above findings, the qualitative findings from the interview are presented as follows:

Interviewee 1: John, 22, is a male and 400 level B.Ed student at Federal College of Education, Zaria, said:

I think pre-marital counselling is vital. It helps couples understand each other better and prepares them for marriage. It is something I would consider before getting married. I want the counselling to cover communication skills, conflict resolution, and financial management. These are crucial areas that can make or break a marriage. Also, I would prefer a professional counsellor with experience in marriage counselling. It does not matter if they are male or female as long as they are knowledgeable and approachable.

Interviewee 2: Amina, 21, 300 level female student of Kaduna State University, reaffirmed the quantitative findings by saying:

Pre-marital counselling is essential to me. It helps couples to prepare for marriage and avoid common pitfalls.... It should include topics like emotional intimacy, roles and

responsibilities in marriage, and parenting skills. These are essential for a healthy marriage. I prefer a female counsellor, especially someone who understands cultural and religious perspectives. It makes me feel more comfortable discussing personal issues. Institutions should partner with local religious organisations to offer counselling services. Also, integrating counselling into the curriculum as an elective could encourage more students to attend.

Interviewee 3: David, 24 years old, 200 level Male student of Federal College of Education, Zaria said:

I believe pre-marital counselling is necessary. It prepares couples for the realities of marriage and helps them build a strong foundation. I would like it to cover areas like financial planning, effective communication, and dealing with in-laws. These are often sources of conflict in marriages. I prefer a male counsellor, someone who can provide practical advice and relate to my experiences as a man. Also, providing online counselling sessions could be very convenient for students. Added to this, offering evening or weekend sessions would accommodate busy schedules.

Interviewee 4: Fatima, 23 years, a Female student of Nuhu Bamalli Polytechnic, Zaria, gives her thoughts on her preference for pre-marital counselling by saying:

Pre-marital counselling is essential. It prepares couples for the challenges of marriage and helps them understand each other better. The counselling should cover conflict resolution, financial management, and cultural expectations. These are essential aspects that can affect a marriage. I prefer a female counsellor with experience dealing with couples from diverse backgrounds. It is crucial to have someone who understands the cultural context. Institutions like Poly should collaborate with community organisations to provide counselling services. Offering group sessions also reduces costs and encourages more students to attend.

Interviewee 5: Ibrahim, 25 years old, a Male student of Federal College of Education, Zaria, said:

I think pre-marital counselling is beneficial. It equips couples with the tools they need to handle marital issues effectively. Topics like sexual health, financial planning, and communication skills are essential to me. These can significantly impact the success of a marriage. I do not have a strong preference for the counsellor's gender. What matters most is their expertise and ability to relate to young couples. Offering free counselling services through the institution's health centre would be great. Also, providing resources like books and online materials can help students needing more time for in-person sessions.

Test of Hypotheses

This section tests the hypotheses developed for this study. The results are presented as follows.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant difference between male and female students' pre-marital counselling needs in various tertiary institutions in Kaduna State. This hypothesis is tested using an independent sample t-test, and the result is presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of Test of Students' Pre-Marital Counselling Needs

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	STD	M.D	Df	T	P
Pre-marital counselling needs	Male	221	36.96	2.88				
	Female	220	24.18	2.94	12.78	439	2.87	0.01

Calculated p value = 0.01 < 0.05, t computed = 2.87 > 1.96 at df 439

Table 4 presents the analysis of an independent sample t-test to compare the means of two groups (male and female students) to determine if there is a statistically significant difference in their pre-marital counselling needs. It could be observed from the table that the mean pre-marital counselling need score for male students (36.96) is significantly higher than that for female students (24.18). Also, the calculated p -value (0.01) is less than the significance level (0.05), and the computed t -value (2.87) is greater than the critical value of t (1.96) at 439 degrees of freedom. Since the p -value is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis of no significant difference between male and female students' pre-marital counselling needs in tertiary institutions of Kaduna state is rejected. Thus, this implies that male and female students require different approaches or emphasis in pre-marital counselling programs. In other words, counselling services should be tailored to address the specific needs of male and female students separately.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant difference between pre-marital counselling preferences of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Kaduna State. This hypothesis is tested using an independent sample t-test, and the result is presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Summary of t-test on pre-marital counselling preferences of students

Variable	Gender	N	Mean	STD	M.D	Df	T	P
Pre-marital counselling preferences of students	Male	221	35.75	1.94				
	Female	220	27.09	2.16	8.66	439	2.11	0.01

Calculated p value = 0.001 < 0.05, t computed = 2.11 > 1.96 at df 439

The analysis in Table 5 shows a significant difference in pre-marital counselling preferences between male and female students, with male students having a higher mean preference score (35.75) than female students (27.09). Therefore, the null hypothesis that states no significant difference is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis, which suggests a

significant difference in gender preferences. In other words, the significant difference in pre-marital counselling preferences implies that gender-specific considerations are essential when designing and implementing pre-marital counselling programs in tertiary institutions in Kaduna state. Institutions need to channel their counselling services to address male and female students' unique preferences and needs to ensure effectiveness and engagement.

Discussion of Findings

The study found a significant difference between male and female students' pre-marital counselling needs in tertiary institutions of Kaduna state. This supports the previous findings of Ajayi and Usman (2020), Adebayo and Adekeye (2017), Hawkins and Willoughby (2017), Duncan and Edwards (2014), McAuliffe et al. (2014), which found that male and female students expressed distinct pre-marital counselling needs. Females emphasised topics like communication skills, conflict resolution, and financial management. Conversely, males placed greater importance on understanding gender roles and expectations within marriage. This aligns with broader research highlighting women's focus on emotional intimacy and communication, while men prioritise practical aspects and role clarity. Similarly, addressing societal expectations of masculinity and navigating healthy partnerships could resonate more with male students.

Descriptively, the study revealed that students prioritise practical discussions that equip them for the realities of marriage. The top concerns are financial preparedness, communication skills, and navigating potential conflicts around parenting styles. This aligns with the research of Dew and Xiao (2018), McDowell et al. (2014), and Markman and Stanley (2013) suggest a shift towards practical discussions that equip students for the realities of married life. Similarly, discussions on parenting philosophies establish a foundation for future family planning (Carroll & Doherty, 2015). By focusing on practical skills and realistic challenges, marriage preparation programs can better equip young adults for the complexities of married life (Stanley et al., 2020).

Interestingly, legal aspects and cultural differences, while still relevant, hold less immediate importance. This might suggest building strong relational skills before tackling more complex areas. This resonates with the findings of Adedoyin and Famuyiwa (2020), Okonye and Essien (2019), Mba and Asamoah (2018), Adewale and Afolabi (2017); Nwachukwu and Isiugo-Abanihe (2014) that while legal and cultural aspects remain essential considerations, equipping student couples with practical communication skills, healthy conflict resolution techniques, and the ability to build a strong foundation for their relationship might be a more immediate priority. Overall, students recognise the value of pre-marital counselling in establishing a solid foundation for their future marriages. This is in line with the submissions of Hawkins and Clarke (2020) and Waititu (2018), who state that there is a growing body of research exploring the attitudes and beliefs of young adults towards pre-marital counselling (PMC). Studies consistently report students' appreciation for PMC as a tool for open communication and conflict resolution (Markman & Stanley, 2013; Hawkins &

Clarke, 2020). Pre-marital counselling services foster practical communication skills crucial for navigating disagreements and building healthy relationships (Waititu, 2018; Schnarch, 2014; Markman & Stanley, 2013). However, it is essential to acknowledge that some limitations exist. Research primarily focuses on student awareness and attitudes, with less emphasis on actual participation rates (Okonye & Essien, 2019; Amato & Previti, 2013).

The study revealed a significant difference between pre-marital counselling preferences of male and female students in tertiary institutions in Kaduna State. This concurs with the findings of Ajayi and Adeyemo (2020), Adebayo et al. (2018), and Eze and Ezeh (2017), which found that female students expressed a stronger desire for pre-marital counselling compared to their male counterparts. This aligns with findings from other African contexts, where societal expectations often place a greater emphasis on female marriage readiness (Mughal & Aphane, 2019; Hawkins & Willoughby, 2017). A study by Hassan et al. (2023) found a growing openness among male students towards pre-marital counselling. This could be attributed to increased awareness of marital challenges and a desire to improve communication skills (Ajayi & Adeyemo, 2020).

Descriptively, gender preferences for counsellors emerge as a critical factor. Male students often seek counsellors who share their religious background, fostering a sense of trust and cultural understanding. Both genders lean towards same-gender counsellors, with a stronger preference for females. This might be due to the perceived ability of female counsellors to understand female experiences better. These findings reaffirm previous studies which found that gender can be a significant factor in counsellor selection, particularly for male clients (Fouad & McGuire, 2016; Segrin et al., 2015). Beyond gender, a client's religious background can also influence counsellor preference. Shafranske et al. (2014) found that clients with strong religious beliefs often seek counsellors who share their faith. This preference may stem from a desire for a counsellor who understands their values and can integrate religious concepts into therapy (Curtis-Tauscher, 2020; Drisko, 2018).

Differences also surface regarding discussions on sexual compatibility. Males view it as an essential topic, while females tend to be more hesitant. This highlights the need for counsellors who can navigate sensitive topics with cultural sensitivity and respect for individual comfort levels. This is in line with the previous research findings of Smith et al. (2018) and Chen and Meston (2014), which found that men were generally more comfortable initiating conversations about sexual issues compared to women. Also, men placed a higher priority on sexual compatibility than women in their initial evaluations of potential partners. As highlighted by Brooks (2022), Regan (2019), and Moore and Brody (2017), counsellors need to be culturally sensitive and respectful of individual comfort levels when addressing sexual compatibility. Open-ended questioning and creating a safe space for both partners to express themselves freely are crucial. Therapists can also utilise techniques like normalisation to acknowledge the commonality of these communication difficulties.

Furthermore, females prioritise addressing domestic violence and individual counselling sessions, reflecting a desire for a safe space to voice concerns and develop coping

mechanisms. This aligns with previous research affirmations of Patel et al. (2020), Graham et al. (2019), Smith et al. (2018), and Jones et al. (2017) that females prioritise addressing domestic violence within mental health resources. This focus reflects a desire for a safe space to discuss their experiences and concerns. Individual counselling sessions can provide this safe space, allowing females to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with the trauma of domestic violence.

Beyond gendered priorities, the study found that both genders value the flexibility of online sessions and evening/ weekend options, catering to busy student schedules. This supports the previous studies by Singh et al. (2021) and Chen et al. (2022), which revealed that clients strongly prefer online therapy sessions. This preference likely stems from the busy schedules of many students, who juggle academic commitments with other responsibilities. Similarly, evening and weekend appointments are highly sought-after (Liu et al., 2014; Myers et al., 2023). These flexible options allow students to access mental health services without disrupting their daily routines.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the growing body of research on pre-marital counselling preferences among university students in Nigeria, revealing significant variations in needs and preferences based on gender. The findings indicate that female students prioritise communication skills, conflict resolution, and financial management, while male students place greater emphasis on understanding gender roles and expectations within marriage. Both genders, however, prioritise practical discussions that equip them for the realities of marriage, such as financial preparedness, communication skills, and navigating potential conflicts around parenting styles. Legal aspects and cultural differences, though still relevant, hold less immediate importance compared to building solid relational skills, suggesting a focus on preventive education that equips students with effective communication and conflict-resolution techniques.

Students acknowledge the value of pre-marital counselling in establishing a solid foundation for their future marriages, with a stronger preference observed among female students compared to their male counterparts. This aligns with findings from other African contexts. Both genders show a preference for same-sex counsellors, with a stronger inclination towards females, and the religious background of the counsellor can also be a significant factor in counsellor selection. The research highlights the need for counsellors to navigate sensitive topics like sexual compatibility with cultural sensitivity and respect for individual comfort levels. Female students, in particular, prioritise addressing domestic violence and individual counselling sessions, reflecting a desire for a safe space to voice concerns and develop coping mechanisms.

Both genders value flexible scheduling options, such as online sessions and evenings/weekends, to accommodate busy student schedules. These findings suggest that pre-marital counselling programs should be tailored to address gender-specific needs and prioritise the development of practical skills that enhance communication, conflict

resolution, and financial management. Furthermore, incorporating flexible scheduling options like online sessions and evenings/weekends is crucial for optimising student participation. Counsellors should employ culturally sensitive approaches and create safe spaces for open communication, especially regarding sensitive topics like sexual compatibility and domestic violence.

Contributions and Limitations of the Study

This study sheds light on the specific pre-marital counselling needs of tertiary institution students in Kaduna State, Nigeria. This information can be used to develop targeted counselling programs that address their unique concerns. Also, finding a significant difference between male and female student needs is crucial. It highlights the importance of developing counselling approaches to cater to these diverse needs within the same population. By employing a mixed-methods approach (quantitative and qualitative), the study provides a more robust understanding of the students' perspectives than relying solely on quantitative data. However, the study's focus on tertiary institution students in Kaduna State limits the generalizability of findings to the broader Nigerian context or other countries. Further research in other regions is needed.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following are recommended to improve pre-marital counselling among students in tertiary institutions of Kaduna State:

- i. Professional counsellors should develop differentiated counselling curricula that cater to the unique needs of male and female students, which is crucial. For female students, the curriculum should prioritise the development of communication skills, conflict resolution strategies, financial management literacy, and domestic violence awareness. For male students, discussions should be integrated to foster healthy partnerships, deconstruct societal expectations of masculinity, and understand gender roles within marriage. This gender-specific approach will ensure the counselling addresses each group's distinct challenges and expectations.
- ii. Counsellor-working students in tertiary institutions should offer flexible scheduling options such as online counselling sessions and evening/weekend slots. This flexibility will accommodate students' busy schedules, enhancing their ability to participate in pre-marital counselling without conflicting with their academic commitments.

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