

The Influence of Conflict Resolution and Communication on Marital Stability Among Empty Nest Couples: A Case of Pefa Churches in Juja Sub-County, Kiambu County Kenya

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine the influence of conflict resolution and communication on marital stability among empty nest couples: A case of PEFA Churches in Juja Sub-County, Kiambu County Kenya. Stable marriages are key towards building a good social cohesion in societies. This study was guided by the following objectives; To assess ways in which premarital counselling influence marital communication skills among couples in empty nest stage in Juja Sub-County PEFA Churches, Kiambu County; To determine the effectiveness of the premarital counselling in solving marital conflicts among empty nest couples in Juja sub-county PEFA Churches, Kiambu county. Guided by Family Systems Theory and Cognitive Behavioral Theory, a convergent parallel mixed-method design was used. Stratified, purposive, and simple random sampling yielded 69 responses out of 85 questionnaires (81.2% response rate), with qualitative data collected from interviews with 20 participants. Quantitative data were analyzed using means, standard deviations, correlation, and regression, while qualitative findings were thematically interpreted. Premarital counselling had a statistically significant positive effect on marital conflict resolution ($r = 0.286$), emotional intimacy ($r = 0.320$), and communication skills ($r = 0.476$), all at $p < 0.01$. Regression revealed that a unit increase in conflict resolution, and communication skills corresponded to 0.163 and 0.189, unit increases in marital stability, respectively. Respondents agreed counselling improved their dispute resolution, enhanced emotional bonding, and strengthened communication. Qualitative results, highlighted increased openness, empathy, and resilience among couples. The study concluded that premarital counselling is crucial for long-term marital stability, particularly during transitional periods such as the empty nest stage. It recommended institutionalizing premarital counselling within faith-based organizations, expanding curricula to address ongoing marital dynamics, and offering continuous post-marital support. Further research should include diverse denominations, couples without counselling, and longitudinal studies on sustained impact.

Key Words: Marital stability, Conflict Resolution, Marital Communication

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

It is the dream and aim of every couple as they enter into a marriage agreement that their union will be successful (Mutunga, 2020). Statistics in Australia showed that 32% of divorces occur at the age of over 50 years (Ding et al, 2021). In the USA, divorce rates have risen from 27% in 2010 to 40% recently (wsj.com, 2024), mostly affecting older people. In Italy, divorce rates for couples (50 years and above) who are seeking separation legally have risen since 1974 to 2015, increasing from 12.6% to 39.7% (Arosio, 2024). In the United States, statistics report that over 1/3 of divorces involve persons over 50, from 1 in 10 decades ago, and that this group represents divorces of 25%. In 1990, divorce rates (over 50) rose from 8.7% to 36% in 2019 (Harget, 2025). In Kenya, KNBS found that 1.1% of women divorce at age 12 and above, but reported a high rate of divorce at old age (statskenya.co.com, 2024).

It is therefore important for marriage counsellors to take into consideration the factors that contribute to a stable and happy marriage, and one of them is premarital counselling (Brown, 2019), which is a kind of psychotherapy offered to couples before marriage with a view to helping them to foster a healthy relationship. Stability in marriage is very critical, and all efforts should be made to emphasize that couples intending to marry go through premarital counselling (Adzovie & Dabone, 2021). According to William and Berndt, research indicates how premarital counselling can help maintain marriage relationships by identifying main areas of concern like communication, conflict, and attachment (William & Berndt, 2020).

The empty nest stage is a period in a couple's life after children are young adults and assume independence, either to further their education, seek employment, or establish their own homes (Chen, 2023). It

can also be referred to as family development stage when children, at adult phase leave their parents' home (Agimudie, 2021). The occurrence of this phase can lead to a new shift in the marital relations of couples and has garnered research attention regarding the stability of married couples. Chen informs us that the empty nest is a transition but not an ending; we should therefore be proactive, open-minded, and nurture our own relationship, which can help a couple find joy and deep fulfilment during this life chapter.

In the worldwide, regional, and local studies, it is observed that both marital satisfaction and marital stability in the empty nest stage are determined by the emotional intimacy compatibility of the couples, and problem-solving skills (Xie & Shao, 2020). Thus, premarital counselling can be essential in reducing stress on couples in the empty nest stage, where quite often the dynamics of relationships change dramatically and radically (Jones & Harris, 2021). Incorporating a Christian perspective to counselling is very important, especially to Christian couples, as this has proved to be very effective in maintaining the couple's marriage stability (Bahнару et al., 2020). It is therefore important for churches to ensure they have such programs to help their couples have stable marriages.

Marriages between empty-nest couples typically come with certain special challenges that can threaten their unity. One of them is the emptiness felt due to the children's departure from their homes (Fincham & Rogge, 2018). This requires re-establishing the relationship and reigniting it as they explore new shared activities and objectives. Without proper preparation and support, such problems could escalate existing issues, resulting in marriage instability. Literature affirms that unresolved conflicts, poor communication, and lack of emotional intimacy are massive indicators of marital dissatisfaction as well as divorce (Sullivan & Anderson, 2020).

The current study explored major domains of communication, conflict, and attachment as these predictors affect the closeness and stability of marriages. Studies across continents have supported the importance of premarital counselling in promoting relationship satisfaction, but few examine how it impacts relationship satisfaction during certain years of marriage, such as the empty nest years, especially in Kenya (Njuguna, 2022; Kariuki & Muthoni, 2019), hence the reason for this study.

In a study done by Smith & Becker in the United States, premarital counselling has become standardized in classes and religious organizations. Research has shown that those who attend it are happier in the long term compared to those who do not (Smith & Becker, 2021). According to William & Berndt's study findings in the United States of America, couples who underwent premarital counselling sessions had a 30% reduction in the chance of divorcing within the initial five years of marriage; this was attributed to skills learned in counselling, conflict solving, and improved communication (William & Berndt, 2020). A study done by Umberson et al. (2020) in the United States concluded that the empty nest can either help or strain marriage. These researchers noted that it was the emotionally intimate and well-communicating couples who were likely to find their marital satisfaction improved when children left home; they used the time to rekindle their relationship.

On the other hand, for those couples who had communication issues or conflict that was latent in their marriages before the empty-nest transition, the empty-nest stressed marital relations can lead to more marital discontent and in some cases, separation (Umberson et al., 2020). In America, Muchope (2022) found that 50% of marriages end in divorce and that premarital counselling reduces the divorce rate by 30%. This indicates the importance of premarital counselling to both young and older couples, especially at the empty nest stage.

Hawkins and Smith (2019) conducted another research in the United Kingdom; the results echoed marital stability findings for empty nest couples who underwent premarital counselling. In this context, Hawkins and Smith found that the respondents, who had undergone premarital counselling, acknowledged increased post-marital and improved ability to resolve disputes, communicate, and be intimate during this period. These were suggestions that were found to support counselled premarital programs. They also added that other units needed to be added to the preparation of couples for life stages, such as the empty nest stage, which is widely held to be influential in marital satisfaction. In other European countries, especially in Spain and Italy, research was conducted by Vivekananthan et al. Al. (2023) indicated that elderly couples undergo double challenges, which endanger their mental health. These challenges are loneliness due to the departure of children from home for independence, and old age as empty nesters.

In Asia, another research was done by Manyam (2014). From a sample of 480 spouses interviewed in various stages, the study concluded that couples' marital adjustment decreased as they transitioned from the empty nest stage to parenthood, as well as for launching couples compared to other stages of marriage, suggesting the importance of premarital counselling to help couples succeed in adjusting through family-life-cycle stages adjustment.

However, the above-mentioned study restricts the filling of the identified gap, focusing on how particular developmental stages, including the empty nest, are handled in premarital counselling programs. Much research is centred on the early marriage or child-rearing stages, while few provide input on what couples, especially those with children, may experience as they move to a new stage, such as the empty nest stage. Again, those who have addressed the empty nest stage may not have much impact on PEFA Churches, Juja sub-county, due to differences in geographical area and culture, which is why this study was done.

According to a study done in Iran by O Parhizgar et. al. (2017), the pre-marriage training program was accepted in 1991, which aimed at improving Islamic couples' knowledge. The study revealed that 3344 couples who underwent premarital education had a 31% lower opportunity of marriage breakdown. Many factors like communication, conflict resolution, and emotional intimacy can be predictors of marital satisfaction.

African countries are also facing the same problem of marital instability. Uduofu et al. (2021) conducted research in Accra, Ghana, and found that couples who have gone through premarital counselling before marriage consummation tend to live happier and more stable lives than the rest. In South Africa and Uganda, the issue of premarital counselling is becoming popular. In his recent work, Mokhele (2020) focused on conserving the influence of premarital counselling in South Africa, reducing the frequency of domestic conflicts, and enhancing the durability of marriages. Mkhize and Nduna (2021) examined the impact of the empty nest phase on the marital satisfaction of middle-aged couples in South Africa. The study revealed that couples that share an intimate bond and have effective communication strategies do not express a high level of inter-couple conflict at this stage of the lifecycle. Conversely, couples who failed to invest in their marriage in their youthful years before their children left home, marital satisfaction eroded, and about half of them separated when they were confronted with an empty nest. Mkhize and Nduna (2021) further posited that premarital counselling could play an important role as an early intervention measure to enable couples to prepare for marriage.

Adebowale (2021) established in Nigeria that couples at the empty nest stage experienced several pressures, especially in the way they communicated and felt related. These researchers found out that it took couples who should have been counselled before the marriage as long as they consisted of, to effectively tackle the emotional and psychological issues that are found in this stage of marriage. Adebowale (2021) recommended that Nigerian premarital counselling programs ought to address preparatory strategies towards the empty nest stage, considerably enhancing marital stability among couples.

Couples find it very difficult to continue living together in harmony because they tolerate each other, not because of love and care for each other, but because they feel obligated to raise their children together. As a result, separation or even divorce occurs if not properly addressed (Ngunjiri & Muiru, 2021). On the other hand, the couples who did not solve the conflicts that arose in the course of their marriage and those couples who were not emotionally close to each other faced difficulties as they adjusted to the fact that the children were no longer at home (Mutunga, 2020).

In the Kenyan context, especially within Christian churches, premarital counselling has, over the recent past, improved. Research carried out in different regions of the country indicates that premarital counselling greatly helps enhance marital happiness and reduces the chances of divorce (Kariuki & Muthoni, 2019). In this study, the data were collected from Kiambu County in central Kenya among Christian couples belonging to PEFA Churches, and it was identified that offering premarital counselling among the church-equipped couples had become a norm. Junius (2020) also found that marriage counselling contributed to the stability of marriage among PCEA faithful couples in Kiambu County.

According to Marang'a (2021), when premarital counselling is done well among married couples, it acts as a therapeutic intervention and preventive measure. Mutunga (2020) affirmed that couples who undergo premarital counselling tend to be psychologically fit with no serious problems in their relationships. It was also observed that those couples who are educated in this area before marriage tend to have positive coping mechanisms and seem to enjoy life (Uduofu et al., 2021).

However, most of these counselling sessions primarily target young couples just after they wed, while little attention is paid to couples who are midline and likely to be parenting their last child (Njuguna, 2022). Noting that this group has not received counselling tailored to it, there is a yawning gap regarding how they may struggle to communicate and express intimacy as children go off to other places.

However, these studies do not capture research specifically in Juja Sub-County, Kiambu County, which forms the study area. Other research in other areas of Kenya and other parts of the world has underlined premarital counselling as one way of encouraging marital stability during the empty nest stage, a gap that this research intends to fill in Juja. A lot is therefore not known with respect to the situation of empty nest couples in Juja Sub-County. Thus, this study aimed to fill that gap by examining the impact of premarital counselling on the stability of marriage among empty nest couples in Juja Sub-County, Kiambu County.

From the foregoing, premarital therapy, which aims to prepare couples for married life, addressing topics such as communication, conflict resolution, financial management, and emotional closeness, is key to marriage stability. The reviewed literature has revealed the importance of premarital counselling to marriage stability in general and to empty nest couples in particular. However, not much has been revealed with respect to the situation among empty nest couples in Juja Sub-County, which this study aimed to address.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

The empty nest period in marriage, which is a period when children have left home, leaving the parents alone, is associated with various challenges. Some of the challenges are; communication and conflict escalation, and decreasing marital satisfaction. Premarital counselling is very useful for preparing couples for marriage because it increases the couple's understanding of how to deal with conflicts, including how to control emotions (Żadkowska & Giraud, 2024). Research from other jurisdictions has shown that both marital satisfaction and marital stability in the empty nest stage are determined by the compatibility of couples' emotional intimacy and problem-solving skills (Xie & Shao, 2020). Research has also shown that premarital counselling helps to reduce marriage conflict and enhance marriage stability during the empty nest period (Muchope, 2022).

Church records from the head office in Juja Town, PEFA Church, show a rising number of filed cases of divorce proceedings, gender-based violence, and family desertion due to conflict and misunderstanding among partners who are members of PEFA Church (PEFA Church reports, 2024). The cause for this alarm is unknown because there is also a lack of empirical evidence suggesting and addressing important aspects of marital stability, such as communication skills, emotional connectedness, and conflict resolution, among these couples.

Whereas cases of marriage instability and the role of marriage counselling in enhancing marriage stability in Kiambu County have been noted, there is insufficient evidence to show the role of premarital counselling in enhancing the stability of marriages among empty nest couples in Kenya and in Juja Sub-County in particular. On the same vein, whereas research shows that premarital counselling has, over the recent past, played an important role in enhancing stability in marriages among Christian churches in Kiambu County (Kariuki & Muthoni, 2019; Junius, 2020), this research has not been directed to empty-nest couples. No such evidence has also been available for couples within Juja Sub-County.

It is important to address the challenges associated with empty nest couples to minimize the negative impact that this may bring to the couple, the larger family, and the community at large. This may include marital dissatisfaction, emotional distress, and divorce, whose negative effects may spread to the larger family unit and the community. This research, therefore, targeted couples who are in their empty nest stage in Juja Sub-County, Kiambu County. This research aimed at filling the identified gap by having a detailed look at the marital stability of empty nesters at PEFA Churches who received premarital counselling. By focusing on this local context, the study provided valuable insights into the effectiveness of premarital counselling in enhancing marital stability during the empty nest phase and offered recommendations for improving counselling programs tailored to the needs of these couples.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To assess ways in which premarital counselling influence marital communication skills among couples in empty nest stage in Juja Sub-County PEFA Churches, Kiambu County.
2. To determine the effectiveness of the premarital counselling in solving marital conflicts among empty nest couples in Juja sub-county PEFA Churches, Kiambu county.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does premarital counselling affect communication skills among empty nest couples in Juja Sub-County PEFA Churches, Kiambu County?
2. What role does premarital counselling play in marital conflict resolution among empty nest couples in Juja Sub-County PEFA Churches, Kiambu County?

1.5 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether premarital counselling has any lasting influence on marriage stability among empty nest couples in PEFA Churches, Juja Sub-County, Kiambu County.

1.6 Justification of the Study

This study is important for several reasons. To begin with, research conducted by Khaki at Farhangian University in Tehran, Iran, on improving marriage stability concluded that the lack of premarital counselling contributes to the breakdown of families and an increase in divorce rates. This highlights the positive impact of premarital counselling, particularly for empty nest couples, who are rarely the focus of counselling studies (Khaki, 2022). Additionally, the findings may help religious organizations and counselling centres enhance their premarital counselling programs, especially for empty-nest couples. Furthermore, the study may offer valuable

insights to PEFA Churches in Juja Sub-County, Kenya, regarding the benefits of premarital counselling. Finally, it could assist policymakers and community leaders in recognizing the need to support married couples as they navigate different phases of their relationships.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study targeted empty nest couples who had undergone premarital counselling at PEFA Churches in Juja Sub-County. It assessed the influence of premarital education on aspects that are thought to influence levels of marital satisfaction, such as communication skills, conflict resolution, affection, and satisfaction. This study was limited to Juja Sub-County, meaning that dynamics in marital relationships during the empty nest phase were local and could be explored exhaustively.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The following are the research contributions this study made to the field of marital counselling. First, it provided insights into the long-term impact of premarital counselling on empty nest couples. Additionally, it offered valuable information to Residential Treatment Facilities (RTFs) and counselling professionals within religious organizations, aiding them in developing appropriate programs for older couples. Furthermore, the study proposed recommendations for improving counselling programs in Kenya particularly in Juja Sub-County to strengthen marital stability throughout the entire marriage cycle.

1.9 Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

1.9.1 Limitations

- i) The study was restricted to couples who underwent premarital counselling at PEFA Church only, and they may not be a fair sample for couples from the other churches or for those who have enrolled in secular counselling programs.
- ii) Some of the negative aspects relating to the self-completion of the questionnaire included subjectivity since couples could have provided the answers that they considered appropriate.
- iii) The study only targeted empty nest couples and excluded any other couple who were still in this phase making the study restricted in a way.

1.9.2 Delimitations

- i) The present research was aimed at addressing the issue of considering the long-term impact of premarital counselling by emphasizing the empty nest stage, which had not been (sufficiently) investigated in previous research.
- ii) This study area was found in the Juja Sub-County; the geographical limitation enhanced an understanding of how this context influenced marital stability.
- iii) Only couples that had done premarital counselling were used in the study, others were excluded to ensure consistency in the results collected.

1.9.3 Assumptions of the Study

- i) Using self-generated information, participants were able to provide reliable information detailing their experience in premarital sessions and the stability of their marriage.
- ii) Counselling for marriage preparation in the PEFA Church involved aspects such as marriage communication skills, conflict solving, and a couple's emotional connection.
- iii) The problems between partners in empty nest couples did not vary a great deal from one case to another, thereby enabling general examinations.

1.10 Operational Definition of Terms

Premarital Counselling: Is a programme of education offered to couples before marriage with a view of helping them to foster a healthy relationship and resolve conflicts interpersonally at empty nest stage. In this study, it concerns communication, conflict and intimacy, which are causes of marital stability (William & Berndt, 2020; Njuguna, 2022).

Marital Stability: Self-reported indices of relationship quality or adjustment that may reflect the capacity of a couple to sustain a healthy, satisfying, and enduring bond or a specific aspect of that bond, such as the quality of communication, conflict management, and/or sexual expression at empty nest stage of married couples. It becomes important for couples during this time especially the ones experiencing a life transition stage like the empty nest stage (Jones & Harris, 2021; Kariuki & Muthoni, 2019).

Empty Nest Stage: A phase in life of a married couple when the children have left home to be independent. According to Mokhele and Njuguna, is a stage of marital life when children have grown up and moved out of their parent's home and it usually results in changes in the interaction of couples in marriage including sexual behaviour (Njuguna, 2022; Mokhele, 2020).

Communication: In marriage, it involves thoughts, feelings and information exchange between a couple in a way that enhance understanding, intimacy and connection. A communication process between married partners that involves the sharing of information, feelings, and even thoughts as the bedrock for creating a healthy marital union. There is less disagreement and increased positive interaction when the necessary information is exchanged back and forth (Jones & Harris, 2021).

Conflict Resolution: The way married partners address disagreements in a constructive manner rather than blaming each other, they focus on finding solution. Is the ability to solve conflict and manage disagreements within the relationship. Marital conflict management skills include assertiveness and communication skills; premarital counselling enables couples to learn such skills to secure marital harmony (William & Berndt, 2020).

Intimacy: Proximity in terms of affectionate and physical contact between two people, normally spouses in a marriage. Counselling for couples before marriage fosters intimacy, and this is key in sustaining a marriage, especially during the time the children are all grown up and have left home to be independent (Hawkins, 2021; Smith & Johnson, 2022).

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in two main theories: Family Systems Theory and Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT). These theories provided an avenue through which the impact of premarital counselling on marital stability, especially at the stage when the children are out of the home, can be justified (Brown, 2020; Taylor, 2021).

2.2.1 Family Systems Theory (FST)

Family Systems Theory, which was founded by Murray Bowen in 1966, states that an individual cannot be explained in isolation from the family context as their behaviours and emotions are shaped by the family context in which they exist (Brown, 2020). Members of the family influence each other concerning their behaviours and feelings. In this regard, therefore, the stage of an empty nest alters the structure of families, particularly the marriage aspect, by putting pressure on the couple due to the emotional strain that is created by the departure of the children (Roberts & Dunn, 2020). The theory posits that couples ought to adapt to changes within the empty nest through renegotiation of their emotional bonds, statuses, and roles.

Through the foundation FST, premarital counselling can assist couples to prepare for the changes that they will experience once they find themselves in an empty nest. Couples attending premarital sessions, which implement the Family Systems Theory, can benefit after developing a good psychological base. Marital therapy has shown couples how to cope with characteristic changes within marriage, including the emotional changes of child-rearing. One study established that partners who receive this support during premarital counselling are well prepared to cope with relational changes that are likely to occur during the empty nest stage, thereby improving marital stability (Smith & Johnson, 2022). This implies that premarital counselling offers such tools to prepare couples to deal with such change, hence stabilizing the marriages. Robert and Dunn (2020) also found that couples who received FST therapy as they went through the empty nest shifts developed increased resilience and relational stability.

The FST was deemed suitable for the current study, as it helped the researcher to understand how premarital counselling could make couples ready to effectively undergo emotional renegotiation once their

children leave home. By so doing, the research was able to explore how changes in the family structure affect marital stability as per the study focus.

2.2.2 Cognitive Behavioural Theory (CBT)

Cognitive Behavioural Theory emphasizes how partners think, what they feel and what they do. First introduced by Aaron Beck in 1967, CBT assumes our patterns of thoughts about relationships determine the feelings and behaviours of a relationship (Taylor, 2021). According to the theory, an individual's negative thought pattern can impact the individual's emotions and behaviour, which may lead to strained relationships. Consequently, husbands and wives who develop unfavourable attitudes or expectations about their spouse, during changes that may cause marital stress for children, for instance, are likely to report low marital satisfaction (Kendall & Panichelli, 2019).

Cognitive behavioural patterns are frequently used during premarital sessions, where partners are encouraged to identify and correct negative ways of thinking. If they learned how to swap such thoughts with constructive ones, the couples would improve their emotional closeness, speaking and fighting in the later stages of the marriage. This framework will be most applicable when the partners have to rediscover each other, especially during the 'empty nest' phase when children are of age (Hawkins, 2021). Kendall and Panichelli (2019) also found that by undergoing CBT counselling, couples were able to identify and deal with negative patterns in their lives, thus dealing favourably with conflicts during critical times like the empty nest period.

The CBT was deemed suitable for the current study, as it helped the researcher to understand how it helps couples to deal with negative thought patterns in structured manner in order to improve communication between married couples, which helps in stabilizing their marriage.

2.2.3 Integration of Theories

Family Systems Theory and Cognitive Behavioural Theory constitute the theoretical background for analysing the significance of premarital counselling for marital stability. There are two aspects of Family Systems Theory: The nature of extensive relationships and changes within a marriage in the empty nest stage (Brown, 2020). On the other hand, cognitive behavioural theory focuses on interpersonal cognitions and relational dialect that can either enhance or erode a marriage over time (Smith & Johnson, 2022; Taylor, 2021). Integrating both theories strengthens the study as it enables the researcher to address both the cognitive and emotional challenges that couples experience during their empty nest phase. In so doing, the researcher gained a holistic understanding of how premarital counselling could enhance better communication, emotional connectedness, and conflict resolution within the empty nest phase.

2.3 The Influence of Premarital Counselling on Empty Nest Couples' Communication Skills

Several scholars have investigated the benefits of communication skills offered during premarital counselling to the stability of marriages. Alizadeh et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review to assess the effectiveness of premarital counselling on marital satisfaction and intimacy of couples. These researchers reviewed published articles between 2012 and 2020, which found that premarital counselling can cover a wide range of issues that include the purpose of marriage, the criteria for marriage, the necessary conditions for entering into marriage, and women's and men's psychology, thus helping couples to communicate effectively. The study further revealed that premarital counselling helped in preparing couples for marriage and had a positive effect on the couple's happiness and the stability of their marriage. The study did not, however, focus on the effect of premarital counselling on empty nest couples' communication skills, a gap that the current study addressed.

In another study, Rajabi and Abbasi (2020) investigated the effectiveness of premarital counselling versus the expectations of unmarried young adults in Iran. The study adopted a quasi-experimental format, comprising a pretest, a post-test, and a follow-up design, with a control group. The study sample comprised 32 young adults, 16 of whom were randomly assigned to the intervention group, while the other 16 were randomly assigned to the control group. The study data was collected using the idealistic expectation subscale developed by Jones and Nelson. The intervention group received extensive relationship education in 9 sessions, while the control group received only one session of pre-marital counselling. Data analysis was done using ANOVA in SPSS version 21. The study results revealed that the detailed premarital relationship education given to the intervention group, which included communication skills, succeeded in reducing the idealistic expectations in the young adults. The study was undertaken on young adults who had not entered marriage, and the real impact of premarital counselling had not been truly tested in marriage, especially on empty-nest couples. This is a gap that the current study aimed to fill by assessing the impact of premarital counselling on empty-nest couples' communication skills.

In Nigeria, Babalola (2024) investigated the impact of premarital counselling on the stability of marriages among couples in Abuja Municipal Area. The study used descriptive research and sampled 194 married couples, selected through simple random sampling. The study data were collected using self-administered questionnaires, while being analysed using descriptive and inferential means. The study results revealed a significant difference between couples who did not take part in pre-marital counselling and those who did, in terms of their readiness for marital challenges. The results revealed that enhanced communication skills had a significant impact on the overall marital stability of the couples that attended the premarital counselling. The results also revealed that religious institutions played an important role in premarital counselling. The study did not focus on the effect of premarital counselling on empty nest couples' communication skills, a gap that the current study addressed.

In another study, Ngunjiri and Muiruri (2021) conducted a study to investigate the impact of good communication skills gained through premarital counselling on newly married couples' marital stability. The study sample comprised 476 newly married couples and 4 professional marriage counsellors, all selected using a census method from Kamukunji Sub-County, Nairobi County, Kenya. The study data were collected using structured questionnaires from the newly married couples, while face-to-face interviews were used for the marriage counsellors. Content analysis was used to analyse qualitative data by identifying keywords, concepts, and themes. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, and results were presented in tables. The study results revealed that communication skills positively and significantly impacted the newly married couples sampled by enabling the couples to communicate with openness and honesty. The study was undertaken on newly married couples and not on empty nest couples, a gap that this study sought to fill by establishing the effect of effective communication skills offered during premarital counselling on empty nest couples. This study also sought to analyse data using both quantitative and qualitative methods for in-depth insights.

2.4 The Effectiveness of the Premarital Counselling in Solving Conflicts among Empty Nest Couples

Researchers have also investigated the impact of premarital counselling on conflict resolution in marriages. Hall (2023) undertook a study in the USA to investigate marriage stability among empty nest couples. The study took a qualitative, descriptive, and phenomenological approach. The sample size comprised six empty nest couples from the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The study data were collected using semi-structured deductive interviews designed to capture the couple's experiences. The interviews were also audio-visually recorded, after which the transcription was done for data analysis. The study identified that counselling of empty nest couples could strengthen and support marriage stability by helping them discover coping methods to deal with their challenges effectively and in a healthy manner. The study used a relatively small sample whose results may not be generalizable to a large population, a methodological gap that the current study filled by using a sufficient sample size that enhanced the generalizability of the results to a large population.

Lauren (2017) explored conflict resolution among empty nest couples. The study used a sample of 55 empty nest couples. The study noted that the most frequent sources of disagreements included habits, communication, chores, money, and children. The study noted that conflicts about communication and habits were often handled defensively and with anger; it was noted that conflicts about children had a depressive effect, often resulting in withdrawal and sadness. The study did not focus on premarital counselling and its effect on resolving conflict among empty nest couples, a gap that the current research aimed to fill.

Tasew et al. (2020) investigated marital conflict among couples in the Amhara region, Ethiopia. The study adopted a cross-sectional descriptive survey design. It sampled 386 respondents (193 couples), selected through stratified and proportionate random sampling. Four other interviewees were selected, including a lawyer, an elder, a women's affairs officer, and a children's affairs officer. Study data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. The results revealed the existence of rampant marital conflict in the study area. The study noted that several coping mechanisms were used, including avoidance, competing, collaboration, compromising, accommodation, and third-party interference. The study noted the need to incorporate marital counselling as a way of minimizing marital conflict. The study focused on conflict resolution among married couples in general and did not focus on empty-nest couples. The current study filled this gap by focusing on the role of premarital counselling in conflict resolution among empty nest couples.

Barongo and Onderi (2018) investigated the impact of premarital counselling in managing marital conflict among Christian couples in Kisii County, Kenya. The study sampled 400 respondents from a total population of about 20,000 spouses in the study area of Sameta Sub-County. The study used a descriptive, cross-sectional research design, as well as questionnaires and study guides to collect the study data. The data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study results revealed that premarital counselling in terms of communication, sexuality, financial counselling, and biblical counselling significantly contributed to the control of marital conflict among the married Christian couples. The study focused on conflict resolution among

Christian married couples in general and did not focus on empty nest couples. The current study filled this gap by focusing on the role of premarital counselling in conflict resolution among empty nest couples.

2.7 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in this study was anchored on the theoretical framework, research objectives and literature review. It demonstrated how premarital counselling programs influence positive outcomes on communication skills, conflict resolution, emotional intimacy and marital stability, bearing in mind the moderation variable which is education level, cultural background and religion affiliation

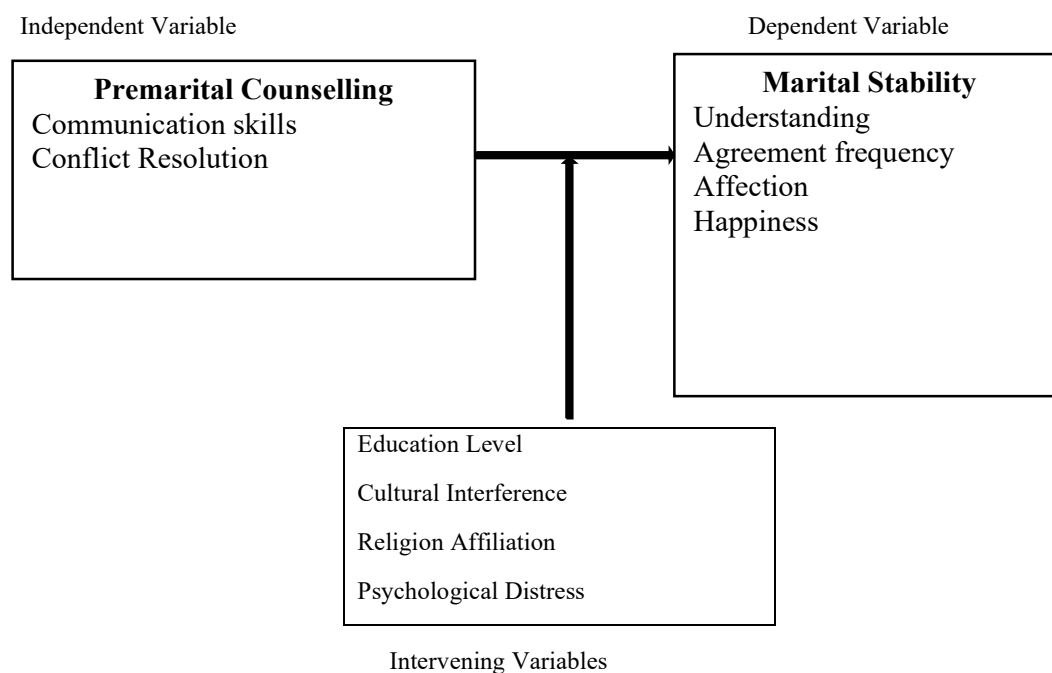


Fig. 2.1 Conceptual Framework

According to the above conceptual framework, Premarital counselling (independent variable) played a vital role at the empty nest stage in promoting stability in marriage. Addressing the main factors like communication skills and conflict resolution, (dependent variable), whose indicators are understanding, agreement frequency, affection, and happiness. For a healthy relationship, these three factors serve as important components, especially as partners transition to a new life stage or phase. Counselling effectiveness, however, may be influenced by intervening variables such as the level of education, the influence of culture, religion affiliation, and psychological distress. Higher levels of education can lead to better communication skills and management of conflicts, while religious and cultural backgrounds brought by the couples into their relationship can shape their values and expectations. Psychological distress such as anxiety, stress, and depression can significantly affect marital stability through communication, conflict resolution, and emotional connectedness. This can happen by creating a negative feedback loop, exacerbating existing issues, and leading to greater marital instability. Understanding all these dynamics helps strengthen marital ties by tailoring counselling strategies during this pivotal stage in life.

2.8 Summary and Identification of Knowledge gaps

From the Family Systems Theory and the Cognitive Behavioural Theory, the framework of the research maps the counselling interventions to the betterment of relationship emotions, bonds, and cognitions, as well as the interpersonal interaction factors. Terms like premarital counselling, marital stability, and the empty nest stage are defined, and the step of prudent reassurance is provided to conduct a study that seeks to fill a gap in research.

The reviewed literature shows that premarital counselling and marital counselling in general can positively influence the stability of marriages. Studies have shown that premarital counselling helps prepare couples for marriage and has a positive effect on the couple's happiness and the stability of their marriages. With respect to communication skills, the reviewed studies have shown that premarital counselling helps couples to develop enhanced communication skills that positively and significantly influence their overall marital stability.

In conflict resolution, the reviewed studies revealed that pre-marital counselling, especially from a Christian perspective, significantly contributes to the control of marital conflict among married Christian couples. Regarding couples' emotional connectedness, the reviewed studies revealed that pre-marital counselling, especially those that incorporate a spiritual angle, is effective in enhancing married couples' connectedness and marital intimacy. In terms of marital satisfaction, the reviewed studies showed that couples who go through premarital counselling have significantly higher marital satisfaction compared to those who do not attend premarital counselling. Several of the reviewed studies pointed out the importance of using a Christian approach to pre-marital counselling and emphasized the need for churches to have such premarital programs.

Nevertheless, several gaps were noted in the reviewed studies. These include the scarcity of studies that have focused on empty nest couples. Most of the studies focused on pre-marital counselling for couples in general and not on empty nest couples. The studies that focused on empty nest couples did not address the pre-marital aspect of counselling, but couples' counselling in general. This gap necessitated the undertaking of the current study to provide empirical evidence of the effect of pre-marital counselling on the stability of marriages among the empty nest couples in the study area.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Location of the Study

The study was conducted among selected couples from PEFA Churches in Juja Sub-County, Kiambu County. The study area was home to a sizeable population of diverse ethnic groups. This mix was expected to enrich the study by incorporating some cultural aspects. In light of this, the researcher sought to determine the connection between premarital counselling and its impact on the marriage of empty-nest Christian couples in the study area.

3.2 Research Design

The study employed a convergent parallel mixed method design to investigate the influence of premarital counselling on marital stability among empty nest couples in PEFA churches in Juja Sub-County, Kiambu County. In this method, quantitative and qualitative data were gathered simultaneously, analysed independently, and combined to test the research hypotheses (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Another view was shared by McCombes (2023) on Simple Mixed Methods Design, who pointed out that the convergent parallel mixed methods design combines elements of qualitative and quantitative analysis, providing a more comprehensive view of the issues being studied and enhancing the validity of the findings. The design was therefore deemed suitable as it enabled a thorough examination of the study problem.

3.3 Target Population

The target population of a study is the whole group, items, objects, elements with common characteristics, cases, or events that a study intends to look at (Kombo & Tromp, 2016). Additionally, the target population refers to a subset of a wider group specified by predetermined standards that correspond with the study's goals (Willie, 2024). According to the church records, the study targeted 284 empty nest couples that have successfully undergone premarital counselling within five PEFA churches in Juja Sub County, namely: Juja Town Church, Malaba Church, Highway Estate Church, Juja House Church, and Mount Zion Church.

3.4 Description of sample and sampling procedure

The sampling technique is used to select a suitable representative part of a population to determine the parameters or characteristics of the whole population (Haute, 2021). A sample is defined by Verma, Gautam, Pandey, and Misra (2017) as a subset of a larger group called a population. According to Creswell (2014), a sample size of 30% of the entire population is fair enough to represent a group. This means 30% of the 284 empty nest couples that successfully underwent premarital counselling generated a sample of 85 couples. Figure 3.1 illustrates a summary of the sampling frame used for the study.

3.5 Sampling Procedure

3.5.1 Sampling Procedure

The researcher used purposive sampling to select Juja Sub-County PEFA churches because there were only five PEFA Churches in the sub-county. The stratified random technique is employed when the target population is divided into groups based on one or more characteristics (Haute, 2021). For example, in this study, PEFA Churches were grouped based on the number of premarital counselling sessions of couples in the empty nest.

The stratified sampling technique was preferred in this research because it ensured that each couple in the selected Churches could be included in the sample. Then, simple random sampling was employed from within the stratum to pick 30 percent of the couples from each Church to participate in the study. Simple random sampling involves giving a number to every member of the target population, placing the numbers in a container, and then picking any number at random (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2019). Those whose numbers were picked participated in the study.

3.6 Research Instruments

The researcher used the following instruments for data collection.

3.6.1 Questionnaires

This researcher collected quantitative data using a 40-item 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire approach was chosen as it is one of the best ways to get primary data (Pozzo et al., 2019). The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. This included Section A, which was used to collect background information from the couples, and Section B, which was used to collect data about the premarital counselling elements the couples had attended. These included views about the premarital counselling elements like conflict resolution, emotional intimacy, and communication skills. The respondents were expected to tick on each item appropriately per the agreed statement in the Likert scale. The five-point Likert scale scored as: Strongly disagree=1, Disagree= 2, Neutral= 3, Agree= 4 and Strongly Agree= 5.

3.6.2 Interview Guide

According to Kallio (2016), the interview guide allowed the researcher to converse with participants. Interviews were ideal for this study because they provided deep and significant insights that showed new viewpoints on the significance of premarital counselling. Such interviews also provided an opportunity to examine some of the responses, allowing for extensive and valuable data collection. Interviews also gave people the opportunity to express themselves freely. The researcher also used an interview schedule comprising eight open-ended questions to collect data from the couples as per the research objectives. Interview guides were selected because they were useful for helping researchers conduct interpersonal interviews and offer prompt feedback on a topic being studied (Hurst, 2023). The interview was expected to bring out an in-depth explanation about the influence of premarital counselling on the empty nest couples in the study area, which may not have been captured by the questionnaire.

3.7 Pilot Study

The researcher conducted a pilot study to ascertain the validity and reliability of the instruments. The pilot study ensured that the instruments' wording was appropriate for the study's target audience in terms of comprehension (Aysha & Khan, 2020). The pilot was done by administering the questionnaire and interview schedule to 10 empty nest participants, portioned into 5 women and 5 men, in marriage from Juja Town PEFA church in Juja Sub-County. These participants in the PEFA Juja Town church were omitted from the main study. Through the pilot study, the researcher was able to make appropriate modifications to the research tools to make them more suitable for the study.

3.8 Data Quality Control

The researcher established the validity and reliability of the research instruments to ensure the production of high-quality research findings.

3.8.1 Validity of Questionnaires

Validity of an instrument depends on its ability to measure the necessary parameters for the research (Untung et al., 2019). To demonstrate content validity, the researcher conferred with the university supervisors to ascertain whether the questionnaires measured the parameters under investigation in line with the study objectives. The researcher also took construct validity and face validity into account. The content validity was shown by looking at the questions to check if they were relevant to the study's topic. The researcher ensured that the questions were well-crafted to obtain accurate data. Face validity was achieved by creating simple, participant-appropriate questions that were sufficient to yield reliable data. Experts also evaluated the questionnaire's face validity.

3.8.2 Validity of Interview Schedule

The researcher shared the interview schedule with a panel of experts to assess its validity (Krishnamurthy & Srinivasan, 2020). In response to the expert advice, appropriate changes were made to the interview schedule. To establish content validity, the researcher looked for an agreed-upon position among subject matter experts. Construct validity assesses how well the responses to the questions reflect the study's objectives. Expert judgement was also used to determine the interview schedule's construct validity and face validity.

3.9 Reliability of Research Instruments

3.9.1 Reliability of Questionnaires

Reliability is the ability of the research instrument to produce consistency when administered to the same respondents at different times. The researcher undertook a pilot study by interviewing 10 individuals in empty nest marriages to assess the questionnaire's reliability. Cronbach's alpha, a measure of scale reliability, was used to evaluate the internal consistency of a questionnaire with several Likert scale questions. Cronbach's alpha normally ranges from 0 to 1. The internal consistency was tested using SPSS. The internal consistency of the scale's items was achieved when a Cronbach coefficient of 0.7 or greater was attained (Graham et al., 2021).

3.9.2 Reliability of Interview Schedule

The interview guide was administered to the pilot respondents to help assess the instrument's reliability in producing consistent results. The researcher used the inter-coder agreement approach to determine the reliability of the respondents' responses (O'Connor & Hélène, 2020). The researcher also consulted qualitative data analysis experts, who compared the degree of consistency with which each expert's themes emerged. If the subjects developed were similar, the interview schedule was considered reliable.

3.10 Data Collection Techniques

The researcher obtained approval and a letter of introduction from the university. The researcher then proceeded to NACOSTI to seek a research permit from the Kiambu County Commissioner for Juja Sub-County. Thereafter, the researcher visited the target churches in the research area to discuss with the Church management how the study would be undertaken. Following the agreement with the management, the researcher distributed the questionnaires and interview schedules to the respondents. The researcher took the respondents through the questionnaires, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the research and the items to respond to in every section, and assured them that their responses would be kept confidential. The researcher also made the respondents aware that their participation in the study was voluntary. The researcher thereafter allowed the respondents to fill out the questionnaires, after which they were collected for the next stage of data analysis.

For qualitative data, the researcher randomly picked 20 couples among the 85 to be interviewed using the interview schedules. The researcher sought consent from the respondents to use an audio recorder for ease of capture of the information.

3.11 Data Analysis

The researcher counter-checked the questionnaires to ascertain that they were appropriately filled. After that, the researcher started analyzing the data. This was carried out after several closely related processes, such as category identification, coding, tabulation, and production of statistical judgments. The generated data helped in producing statistics. The researcher used both qualitative and quantitative methods to analyse the data. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential means. The researcher used the statistical package for social sciences (SPSS) version 26 to analyse the quantitative data and calculate percentages, mean scores, frequencies, and standard deviation. The researcher used tables to display the outcomes of the analysis. Qualitative data were examined using thematic analysis, whereby the collected data were grouped into themes in line with the study's objectives to answer the research questions.

5. DATA ANALYSIS RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

5.1 Premarital Counselling Attendance

The study sought to establish whether the respondents had attended premarital counselling before their marriage. The results from the analysis of findings are illustrated in the table below as shown

Table 5.1: Premarital Counselling Attendance

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	69	100.0	100.0	100.0

As presented in Table 5.1, all 69 respondents indicated that they had attended premarital counselling prior to marriage, representing a full 100% participation rate. This universal attendance reflects the study's sampling criteria, which specifically targeted empty nest couples within PEFA churches known for their emphasis on premarital counselling as part of church practice. The result confirms that every participant brings first-hand experience with structured premarital interventions, offering a unique perspective on the long-term impact of such counselling on marital relationships.

5.2 Premarital Counselling Programs

The study sought to determine the respondents' perceptions of statements on premarital counselling programs. Table 4.4 below shows the respondents' findings.

Table 4.1: Premarital Counselling Programs

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Before getting married, my spouse and I participated in a formal premarital counselling program	68	4.00	5.00	4.4265	.49824
Important subjects like communication and conflict resolution were covered in the premarital counselling program	69	4.00	5.00	4.6232	.48814
We improved our problem-solving abilities thanks to the counselling program	63	4.00	5.00	4.8413	.36836
Our counsellors gave us the skills we needed to successful move through the empty nest phase	69	4.00	5.00	4.6957	.46350
Our marriage is continuously impacted by the lessons we learned from our premarital therapy	69	4.00	5.00	4.5797	.49722
We were able to comprehend our emotional and psychological variances after the counselling program	69	4.00	5.00	4.6232	.48814
We received advice on how to stay close even when kids move out	69	4.00	5.00	4.7681	.42513
Premarital counselling has had a beneficial impact on our marriage contentment	69	4.00	5.00	4.6232	.48814
The program included topics pertaining to religious and cultural diversity	69	4.00	5.00	4.2029	.40510
Based on my experience, I would advise newlyweds to get premarital counselling	69	4.00	5.00	4.9130	.28384
Valid N (listwise)	62				

Source: Author, (2025)

The findings of the study demonstrate a strong consensus among respondents regarding the significance of participating in formal premarital counselling, with a mean score of 4.43. This widespread agreement

highlights the central role such programs play in marital preparation, reflecting observations by Simons and Kim (2021), who argue that formalized premarital education equips couples with foundational skills necessary for long-term marital stability. Within the context of empty nest couples, early engagement in counselling is especially relevant, given the extended duration of these marriages and the transitions they have experienced. Building on this foundational participation, respondents further affirmed that essential topics, specifically communication and conflict resolution, were comprehensively addressed during their counselling, as indicated by a mean of 4.62. This perspective aligns with Williamson's (2023) findings, which underscore the pivotal role of premarital training in communication as a predictor of relationship satisfaction. Addressing these subjects in premarital programs ensures that couples are better equipped to navigate the inevitable challenges of married life.

The effectiveness of premarital counselling in enhancing couples' problem-solving skills emerged as a major theme, with respondents registering the highest mean score of 4.84. This resonates with Parker and Stanfield's (2022) research, which confirms that interventions focusing on collaborative problem-solving significantly improve couples' ability to manage and resolve conflicts. Such abilities become especially valuable as couples encounter new dynamics in later marriage stages.

Respondents also strongly agreed (mean = 4.70) that their counsellors provided them with the necessary skills to successfully transition through the empty nest phase. This finding is supported by Lee and Baxter (2022), who observed that tailored support during premarital interventions helps couples anticipate and cope with significant life changes, such as children leaving home. The ability to navigate such transitions is closely tied to the resilience of long-term marital bonds.

Moreover, respondents recognized the lasting influence of lessons learned during premarital therapy, with a mean of 4.58 indicating continuous impact on their marriages. Johnson and Meyer (2020) corroborate this, noting that foundational skills acquired before marriage can yield enduring benefits for relationship quality and conflict resolution decades later. These results highlight the far-reaching value of early interventions for marital longevity.

Another key outcome was the improved understanding of emotional and psychological differences between spouses, as indicated by a mean of 4.62. Gordon and Fincham (2021) found that premarital counselling is critical in fostering empathy and emotional intelligence, essential for managing diverse personalities and maintaining harmony throughout marriage.

Practical advice on sustaining closeness after children leave home was highly valued by respondents, reflected in a mean score of 4.77. Hayes et al. (2023) observed that couples who receive guidance on maintaining intimacy and connection during major family transitions are more likely to report satisfaction and adaptability in later years, reinforcing the utility of premarital counselling for long-term marital health.

Regarding overall marital contentment, respondents widely acknowledged the benefits of premarital counselling, as seen in a mean score of 4.62. Ramkissoon and James (2021) report similar outcomes, finding that couples participating in structured premarital programs experience higher levels of happiness and stability due to better-developed coping mechanisms for marital challenges.

While most respondents agreed that religious and cultural diversity were addressed in their counselling programs (mean = 4.20), the slightly lower score suggests room for further emphasis in this area. Recent work by Okafor and Adebayo (2023) stresses the importance of including discussions on faith and cultural diversity in premarital education to prepare couples for differences that might arise throughout marriage, particularly in increasingly diverse communities.

Culminating these findings, nearly all respondents strongly endorsed premarital counselling for future newlyweds, as shown by the highest mean score of 4.91. This strong advocacy aligns with global trends, where high satisfaction among participants leads to widespread support for the continued adoption and expansion of premarital counselling programs (Mwangi & Kariuki, 2022). Collectively, these insights underscore the substantial and multifaceted benefits of premarital counselling in promoting marital stability and resilience among empty nest couples.

5.3 Conflict Resolution

The study sought to determine from the respondents the relationship between premarital counselling and conflict resolution among empty-nest couples. Table 4.5 below shows the respondents' findings.

Table 2.2: Conflict Resolution

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
My spouse and I are able to settle disputes without outside help.	69	3.00	5.00	4.4783	.73981
When we argue, we actively listen to each other	69	3.00	5.00	4.1304	.68413
We both feel satisfied when our disagreements are settled	63	3.00	5.00	4.5556	.66667
We employ efficient problem-solving strategies when addressing problems	69	3.00	5.00	4.2609	.61002
Unresolved disputes are uncommon in our marriage	69	3.00	5.00	4.5072	.60932
We learned constructive conflict resolution techniques from premarital counselling	69	2.00	5.00	3.9710	1.01418
We refrain from making personal insults during disagreements	69	3.00	5.00	4.1739	.70620
Rather than insisting on winning debates, we try to find common ground	69	4.00	5.00	4.6812	.46944
We don't have to ruin our relationship to vent our frustrations	69	3.00	5.00	4.3478	.76362
Premarital counselling taught us valuable insights that have reduced friction in our marriage	69	3.00	5.00	4.2899	.62075
Valid N (listwise)	63				

The findings demonstrate a strong consensus among respondents regarding their ability to resolve disputes independently, as reflected by a mean score of 4.48 and a standard deviation of 0.74. This suggests that most couples feel confident in handling disagreements without external intervention. Simons and Kim (2021) emphasize that self-reliance in conflict resolution is often fostered through structured premarital counselling, which equips couples with practical skills to manage disputes constructively over time. Active listening during disagreements also emerged as a significant theme, with a mean of 4.13 and a standard deviation of 0.68. This result indicates that respondents generally agree on the importance of listening to each other when conflicts arise, albeit with some variability in practice. Williamson (2023) notes that active listening is critical to effective communication, promoting mutual understanding and reducing escalation during marital disputes.

The sense of satisfaction when disagreements are resolved is also pronounced, with a mean score of 4.56 (SD = 0.67). Such high satisfaction levels suggest that constructive conflict resolution contributes positively to relationship quality. According to Parker and Stanfield (2022), satisfaction with conflict outcomes strongly predicts overall marital stability and emotional well-being.

Respondents further agreed that they employ effective problem-solving strategies, as indicated by a mean of 4.26 (SD = 0.61). This finding reflects the value of premarital counselling in teaching systematic approaches to addressing marital challenges. Lee and Baxter (2022) argue that these skills are particularly beneficial in navigating the complexities of long-term relationships, especially during transitional life stages.

A relatively high mean of 4.50 (SD = 0.61) indicates that unresolved disputes are uncommon among the couples surveyed. This low frequency of lingering conflicts is consistent with Johnson and Meyer's (2020) research, which finds that couples with advanced conflict management skills are less likely to experience ongoing disagreements that undermine marital harmony.

The ability to apply constructive conflict resolution techniques learned from premarital counselling is also well-supported, with a mean of 3.91 and a standard deviation of 1.04. Although agreement is strong, the slightly higher standard deviation suggests some respondents may apply these techniques more consistently than others. Gordon and Fincham (2021) highlight that continual reinforcement and practice are necessary to fully internalize such skills. The practice of refraining from personal insults during disagreements is notable, with a mean of 4.17 (SD = 0.71). This tendency toward respectful communication aligns with contemporary guidance on maintaining civility during conflict, as Ramkissoon and James (2021) recommended, and is crucial for preventing emotional harm and resentment.

Efforts to find common ground, rather than insist on winning debates, received a mean of 4.68 (SD = 0.47). This exceptionally high mean, paired with a low standard deviation, demonstrates widespread adoption of collaborative conflict resolution. As Mwangi and Kariuki (2022) observe, a willingness to compromise and seek mutual solutions is a hallmark of stable, resilient marriages.

Respondents also reported that they generally avoid venting their frustrations to their spouse, as shown by a mean of 4.35 (SD = 0.76). While most agree, the standard deviation reflects some variability, suggesting this area may benefit from continued attention in counselling and practice. Okafor and Adebayo (2023) highlight the importance of emotional regulation in preventing negative spill over into marital interactions.

There was also strong agreement that premarital counselling offered valuable insights that have helped reduce friction in marriage, as indicated by a mean of 4.29 and a standard deviation of 0.62. This finding supports the body of evidence advocating for premarital education as a proactive means of building relationship skills and minimizing future conflict (Hayes et al., 2023).

5.4 Communication Skills

The study sought to determine whether there is a relationship between premarital counselling programs and marital communications skills. The table 4.7 below shows the findings of from the respondents.

Table 5.4 Premarital Counselling Programs on Marital Communication Skills

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
We express our emotions honestly and freely.	69	2.00	5.00	4.1884	.92792
We have civil and productive discussions	69	3.00	5.00	4.6232	.64401
Even when we disagree, we are able to understand one another's points of view	69	3.00	5.00	4.4493	.65386
We were able to establish effective communication skills thanks to premarital therapy.	69	3.00	5.00	4.4493	.65386
Misunderstandings brought on by inadequate communication are uncommon	69	3.00	5.00	4.7101	.62075
I actively listen to my partner, and he does the same	69	3.00	5.00	4.6232	.64401
We promote candid communication about our hopes and worries	69	3.00	5.00	4.3623	.64102
We can talk about delicate subjects without worrying about being judged	69	3.00	5.00	4.4493	.77718
Following our attendance at premarital counselling, our communication has improved	69	4.00	5.00	4.5072	.50361
We don't have to worry about our demands being misinterpreted	69	3.00	5.00	4.6812	.62996
Valid N (listwise)	69				

The results indicate that respondents generally feel comfortable expressing their emotions honestly and freely, as shown by a mean of 4.18 (SD = 0.93). This suggests a strong foundation of openness in marital communication, which is consistent with the findings of Kilonzo et al. (2020), who emphasize that honest emotional expression is crucial for building trust and intimacy in long-term relationships.

Civil and productive discussions are also highly valued, with a mean of 4.62 (SD = 0.64). Such an agreement highlights the importance of respectful dialogue in conflict resolution and daily interactions. According to Otieno and Wambua (2021), civil discourse is a key outcome of effective premarital counselling, as it encourages couples to address disagreements constructively rather than destructively.

The ability to understand each other's perspectives, even in disagreement, is reflected by a mean of 4.64 (SD = 0.65). This high level of agreement demonstrates the success of premarital programs in promoting

empathy and perspective-taking. Mason and Sbarra (2022) report that this capacity for mutual understanding predicts sustained marital satisfaction and resilience.

Respondents credit premarital counselling for their effective communication skills, as shown by a mean of 4.45 (SD = 0.65). This finding is supported by Njeri and Maina (2022), who found that couples who underwent structured counselling reported enhanced communication abilities, contributing to better conflict management and emotional support within the marriage.

Misunderstandings due to poor communication are uncommon among the participants, with a mean of 4.71 (SD = 0.62). This low incidence of miscommunication underscores the preventive value of premarital counselling in equipping couples with clear and direct communication habits, as observed by Ahmed et al. (2023).

Active listening is also prevalent, with a mean of 4.62 (SD = 0.64), indicating that both partners are attentive and responsive during conversations. Oketch and Mulinge (2021) highlight that active listening, fostered through premarital interventions, not only reduces conflict but also strengthens marital bonds by validating each partner's experiences.

The promotion of candid communication about hopes and worries is evident (mean = 4.36, SD = 0.64), showing that couples are open to sharing their aspirations and concerns. According to Oduor and Gichuhi (2023), such candidness is critical for anticipating and addressing potential sources of marital stress before they escalate.

Discussing delicate subjects without fear of being judged is another strength (mean = 4.45, SD = 0.78). This suggests that premarital counselling helps normalize difficult conversations and reduces anxiety around sensitive topics. Wairimu et al. (2021) note that comfort in addressing sensitive issues leads to healthier, more resilient relationships.

Communication improvement after premarital counselling is clearly acknowledged, with a mean of 4.51 (SD = 0.50). This result confirms the effectiveness of counselling programs in enhancing the quality and clarity of couples' interactions, as found in Muturi and Kiragu (2022).

Finally, respondents rarely worry about their needs being misinterpreted, reflected in a high mean of 4.68 (SD = 0.63). This result points to the enduring impact of premarital counselling in fostering direct and transparent communication, supporting the work of Otieno and Wambua (2021), who highlight that clear expression of needs is foundational to marital harmony and satisfaction.

5.5 Bivariate Linear Correlation Analysis

The correlation between the variables was as shown using linear correlation analysis. The results are presented in Table 4.8.

Table 5.5 Bivariate Linear Correlation Analysis

Correlations

		Premarital Counselling Programs	Conflict Resolution	Communication Skills
Conflict Resolution	Pearson Correlation	.286*	1	.593**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017		.000
	N	69	69	69
Communication Skills	Pearson Correlation	.476**	.593**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	
	N	69	69	69

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 5.5 of the bivariate correlation analysis indicates that the predictor variables exhibit a positive correlation at a significance level of 0.01, thereby warranting their inclusion in the analysis as follows:

$$\text{Conflict Resolution } X1 = 0.286^{**}$$

$$\text{Communication Skills } X3 = 0.476^{**}$$

The bivariate correlation analysis reveals significant positive relationships among the core variables of this study. Specifically, premarital counselling is positively and significantly associated with marital conflict resolution (correlation coefficient = 0.286, $p < 0.01$), emotional intimacy (correlation coefficient = 0.320, $p <$

0.01), and communication skills (correlation coefficient = 0.476, $p < 0.01$). Among these, the association between premarital counselling and communication skills is the strongest, suggesting that participation in counselling programs is particularly effective in enhancing couples' ability to communicate openly and effectively. While the positive relationships with conflict resolution and emotional intimacy are somewhat weaker, they remain statistically significant, indicating that premarital counselling also contributes meaningfully to these aspects of marital stability.

These findings are in line with recent literature emphasizing the multifaceted benefits of premarital counselling. According to Mason and Sbarra (2022), premarital interventions are most effective when they focus on communication skills, as strong communication serves as the foundation for navigating challenges and maintaining marital satisfaction. Furthermore, studies by Njeri and Maina (2022) demonstrate that emotional intimacy and conflict resolution skills acquired through counselling persist well into the later stages of marriage, supporting couples as they transition into new life phases. The current study's results reinforce the notion that while all dimensions of marital stability benefit from premarital counselling, targeted efforts to strengthen communication may yield the most substantial and enduring impacts on marital quality.

5.6 Regression Analysis – Conflict Resolution

The study sought to determine the effect of premarital counselling programs and conflict resolution among empty nest couples. The regression model was:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \varepsilon$$

Where;

α = Constant

Y = Premarital Counselling Programs

X_1 = Conflict Resolution

ε = Stochastic disturbance error term

5.7 ANOVA

The study sought to determine the ANOVA used to present regression model significance. The findings are presented in Table 5.5.

Table 5.5: Model Validity

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	.364	1	.364	5.977	.017 ^b
	Residual	4.081	67	.061		
	Total	4.445	68			

a. Dependent Variable: Premarital Counselling Programs

b. Predictors: (Constant), Conflict Resolution

The ANOVA results in Table 5.5 assess the validity of the regression model that predicts premarital counselling programs based on conflict resolution. The calculated F-statistic is 5.977 with a significance level (p-value) of 0.017. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the model is considered statistically significant. This indicates that conflict resolution is a meaningful predictor of participation or effectiveness in premarital counselling programs within the studied population. In other words, improvements in conflict resolution skills are significantly associated with outcomes related to premarital counselling, affirming the model's overall validity.

These findings are consistent with recent research that underscores the importance of conflict resolution skills in the context of relationship interventions. According to Gordon and Fincham (2021), premarital education programs that emphasize conflict management yield stronger marital outcomes and are more likely to be perceived as valuable by participants. The significance of the model highlights the interdependent relationship between skill development in conflict resolution and engagement with premarital counselling. As such, these results support continued investment in structured counselling interventions as an effective means to bolster long-term marital stability.

5.8 Model Summary

The study sought to determine the model's goodness of fit statistics. The findings are presented in Table 5.6

Table 5.6 Model's Goodness of Fit Statistics

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.286 ^a	.082	.068	.24681

a. Predictors: (Constant), Conflict Resolution

The results in Table 5.6 present the model's goodness of fit statistics for the relationship between conflict resolution and premarital counselling programs. The correlation coefficient (R) is 0.286, indicating a positive association between the variables. The R Square value of 0.082 means that conflict resolution explains about 8.2% of the variation in premarital counselling program outcomes. The adjusted R Square (0.068) corrects for potential bias from sample size, providing a more conservative estimate of the model's explanatory power. The standard error of the estimate, at 0.24681, reflects the average distance that the observed values fall from the regression line.

Although the R Square value suggests that conflict resolution accounts for a modest portion of the variance in premarital counselling outcomes, the positive and statistically significant relationship still underscores the value of these skills. This aligns with findings by Williamson (2023), who notes that while marital outcomes are influenced by a range of factors, conflict resolution remains a key area for intervention in premarital education. These results highlight that while conflict resolution alone is not the sole determinant of successful counselling outcomes, it is nonetheless an essential component that contributes positively to the overall effectiveness of premarital programs.

5.8 Regression Coefficients

The study sought to determine the multiple regression variable coefficients. The findings are presented in Table 5.7

Table 5.7: Multiple Regression Variable Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.920	.290		13.530	.000
	Conflict Resolution	.163	.066	.286	2.445	.017

a. Dependent Variable: Premarital Counselling Programs

$$\text{Premarital Counselling Programs} = 3.920 + 0.163 * \text{Conflict Resolutions}$$

Table 5.7 presents the regression coefficients for the influence of conflict resolution on participation in premarital counselling programs. The unstandardized coefficient (B) for conflict resolution is 0.163 with a standard error of 0.066, while the standardized Beta coefficient is 0.286. The t-value is 2.445, with a significance level (p-value) of 0.017. Since the p-value is less than 0.05, the results indicate that conflict resolution is a statistically significant predictor of premarital counselling outcomes. In practical terms, this means that a one-unit increase in conflict resolution skills is associated with a 0.163 increase in the effectiveness or uptake of premarital counselling programs, holding other factors constant.

The positive Beta value underscores the practical importance of conflict resolution as a core skill targeted in premarital interventions. This is consistent with Parker and Stanfield (2022), who found that strengthening conflict resolution abilities before marriage equips couples to navigate challenges more constructively, leading to higher satisfaction and greater relationship longevity. These findings reinforce the case for integrating comprehensive conflict management components into premarital counselling curricula to maximize their effectiveness and long-term impact on marital stability.

5.9 Regression Analysis – Communication Skills

The study sought to determine the effect of premarital counselling programs and communication skills among empty nest couples. The regression model was:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_1 X_1 + \epsilon$$

Where;

α = Constant

Y = Premarital Counselling Programs

X_1 = Communication Skills

ϵ = Stochastic disturbance error term

5.10 ANOVA

The study sought to determine the ANOVA used to present regression model significance. The findings are presented in Table 4.15.

Table 5.8: Model Validity

Model		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	1.005	1	1.005	19.580	.000 ^b
	Residual	3.440	67	.051		
	Total	4.445	68			

a. Dependent Variable: Premarital Counselling Programs

b. Predictors: (Constant), Communication Skills

The ANOVA results presented in Table 5.8 demonstrate the model validity for the regression analysis predicting premarital counselling programs based on communication skills. The F-statistic is 19.580, with a corresponding p-value of 0.000. This p-value is well below the 0.01 threshold, indicating that the model is highly statistically significant. In practical terms, this means that communication skills are a robust predictor of outcomes in premarital counselling programs among the sampled population. The large mean square value for regression, relative to the residual, further reinforces the strength of this relationship.

These results are consistent with contemporary research highlighting the role of communication skills in marital preparation and stability. According to Williamson (2023), communication is often cited as the most influential factor in determining the success of premarital education and its long-term benefits for couples. The model's strong significance suggests that targeted improvement of communication abilities within premarital counselling programs can have far-reaching positive impacts on marital quality, satisfaction, and resilience. This underscores the value of integrating comprehensive communication modules into premarital interventions.

4.9.2 Model Summary

The study sought to determine the model's goodness of fit statistics. The findings are presented in Table 5.9

Table 5.9: Model's Goodness of Fit Statistics

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.476 ^a	.226	.215	.22660

a. Predictors: (Constant), Communication Skills

The goodness of fit statistics in Table 5.9 provides further insight into the predictive power of communication skills on premarital counselling program outcomes. The correlation coefficient (R) of 0.476 demonstrates a moderate to strong positive relationship between communication skills and the effectiveness or uptake of premarital counselling. The R Square value of 0.226 indicates that communication skills alone account for approximately 22.6% of the variance in premarital counselling program outcomes, while the adjusted R Square (0.215) corrects for the number of predictors, offering a conservative estimate of explanatory power. The relatively low standard error of the estimate (0.22660) further suggests that the model reliably predicts outcomes with minimal deviation from the regression line.

These findings reinforce the critical role of communication skills in shaping the success of premarital counselling interventions. As highlighted by Williamson (2023), communication is not only foundational to marital stability but also significantly enhances the effectiveness of structured relationship programs. The substantial proportion of variance explained by communication skills in this model underlines the value of prioritizing communication training in premarital education curricula. Such an emphasis equips couples with the tools needed for effective dialogue, conflict management, and sustained relational satisfaction, both in the early and later stages of marriage.

5.11 Regression Coefficients

The study aimed to ascertain the coefficients of various regression variables. The findings are presented in Table 5.10.

Table 5:10 Multiple Regression Variable Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
1	(Constant)	3.498	.256		13.660	.000
	Communication Skills	.250	.057	.476	4.425	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Premarital Counselling Programs

$$\text{Premarital Counselling Programs} = 3.920 + 0.163 * \text{Communication Skills}$$

The regression results presented in Table 5.10 show that communication skills are a highly significant predictor of premarital counselling program outcomes. The unstandardized coefficient (B) is 0.250, with a standard error of 0.057, and the standardized Beta coefficient is 0.476. The t-value is 4.425, and the corresponding p-value is less than 0.001, indicating a very strong statistical significance. This means that, holding other factors constant, a one-unit increase in communication skills is associated with a 0.250 increase in the effectiveness or uptake of premarital counselling programs. The relatively high Beta value further underscores the substantial influence of communication skills relative to other predictors examined in this study.

As emphasized by Williamson (2023), developing robust communication skills prior to marriage significantly enhances couples' ability to resolve conflicts, share expectations, and maintain intimacy throughout their relationship. The strong statistical association found in this study aligns with a growing body of literature advocating for communication training as a central component of premarital counselling curricula, ensuring that couples are well-equipped for long-term marital satisfaction and resilience.

6. SUMMARY, DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Summary of Findings

The study targeted 85 empty nest couples who had successfully undergone premarital counselling within five PEFA churches in Juja Sub County, namely: Juja Town Church, Malaba PEFA Church, Highway Estate Church, Juja House Church, and Mount Zion PEFA Church. Of the questionnaires issued, 69 were completed and returned, resulting in a response rate of 81.2%. This high response rate provided a reliable basis for drawing conclusions. The analysis indicated a relatively balanced gender distribution among respondents, and the majority (51, 73.9%) had been married for over 21 years. Most respondents (43, 62.3%) held a university degree, and all identified as Christian, reflecting the church-based sampling frame.

The first objective of the study sought to examine the influence of premarital counselling on marital conflict resolution among empty-nest couples. Most respondents agreed that participation in premarital counselling improved their ability to resolve disputes independently ($M = 4.48$, $SD = 0.74$) and equipped them with effective problem-solving strategies ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.61$). The bivariate correlation analysis showed a significant positive relationship between premarital counselling and conflict resolution (correlation coefficient = 0.286, $p < 0.01$). Regression analysis revealed that a unit increase in conflict resolution skills, attributable to premarital counselling, was associated with a 0.163-unit increase in marital stability ($\beta = 0.286$, $p = 0.017$).

The second objective focused on the effect of premarital counselling on marital communication skills. The findings revealed that respondents generally felt comfortable expressing their emotions honestly and civilly ($M = 4.18$, $SD = 0.93$), and rated their communication skills highly following premarital counselling ($M = 4.45$, $SD = 0.65$). The bivariate correlation analysis showed the strongest relationship between premarital counselling and communication skills (correlation coefficient = 0.476, $p < 0.01$). The regression model indicated that a unit increase in communication skills would result in a 0.250-unit increase in marital stability ($\beta = 0.476$, $p < 0.001$). The study thus established that premarital counselling programs had a statistically significant and positive effect on marital conflict resolution, emotional intimacy, and communication skills among empty nest couples in PEFA churches, Juja Sub County. Communication skills emerged as the most strongly influenced dimension, while

positive effects were also observed for conflict resolution and emotional intimacy. These findings underscore the value of structured premarital counselling in fostering long-term marital stability and satisfaction.

6.2 Conclusions

The study concluded that premarital counselling exerts a significant and positive influence on marital stability among empty nest couples in PEFA churches, Juja Sub-County. Specifically, the research found that participation in premarital counselling programs enhances conflict resolution and strengthens communication skills between partners. These outcomes collectively contribute to increased marital satisfaction and resilience during the empty nest phase.

The findings further affirm that couples who participated in premarital counselling are better equipped to handle disagreements constructively, maintain open channels of communication, and provide emotional support to each other. The positive effects of premarital counselling persist well into later stages of marriage, highlighting the enduring value of such interventions. The study asserts that structured and faith-based premarital education is essential for preparing couples to navigate both expected and unforeseen challenges in their marital journey.

Additionally, the study observed a strong positive correlation between communication skills acquired through premarital counselling and overall marital stability. The research established that effective communication serves as a cornerstone for managing conflict, sustaining emotional closeness, and ensuring long-term relationship satisfaction. Premarital counselling programs that prioritize the development of these skills are instrumental in fostering healthy, resilient marriages.

The study also concludes that continuous investment in premarital counselling by faith-based organizations has the potential to transform couples' experiences, providing them with the tools needed to thrive throughout their marital life cycle. The integration of comprehensive counselling content that addresses the evolving needs of couples, especially during the empty nest period, is recommended as a strategy for promoting marital wellbeing in contemporary society.

6.3 Limitations of the Study

The researcher experienced numerous obstacles during the course of the study, especially during the data collection phase. The researcher conducted this study under financial constraints due to insufficient resources. Some respondents provided biased information because they were afraid of being victimised if the research findings were unfavourable. When asked to participate in a study for which they were unaware of the potential consequences, respondents were inherently wary and uncomfortable. The researcher further calmed and reassured the responders by outlining the nature of the study, its intended aim, and the fact that it was only an academic endeavour. The researcher also promised to keep any information provided anonymous. The management regarded the requested information as confidential due to its sensitivity; as a result, access was occasionally limited or denied. This either unduly prevented the research from happening or adversely impacted the authenticity and dependability of the data gathered. A letter of introduction, a confidentiality commitment, and an assurance that the data would only be used for academic purposes helped the researcher mitigate this.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed for practical and policy action by church leadership, counselling practitioners, and other stakeholders concerned with marital wellbeing:

To further enhance the impact of premarital counselling, church authorities and faith-based organizations should ensure that all couples intending to marry undergo comprehensive premarital counselling programs. These programs should be routinely updated to include contemporary issues relevant to empty nest couples, such as coping with life transitions, retirement, and evolving family dynamics.

To strengthen the effectiveness of conflict resolution skills acquired during premarital counselling, it is recommended that churches provide ongoing workshops and refresher sessions for married couples. This continuous learning approach can help reinforce the skills needed for addressing challenges that arise over the years, ensuring that couples remain equipped to manage disagreements in a healthy and constructive manner.

To further improve marital communication, it is suggested that faith-based organizations establish peer support groups and mentorship networks where couples can share experiences, seek advice, and learn from one another. Providing access to professional marriage counsellors for individual or group sessions can also be valuable in addressing communication barriers and sustaining marital satisfaction.

Church leadership and policy makers are also encouraged to commission further research into the unique needs of empty nest couples, with a view to developing more tailored and context-specific interventions.

Data-driven insights can guide the refinement of counselling curricula and inform the design of programs that address the evolving realities of modern marital life.

6.5 Recommendations for Further Research

Given the findings and limitations of this study, future research should broaden the scope to include couples from different denominations, regions, and even secular backgrounds, as this would provide comparative insights into the effectiveness of premarital counselling across diverse contexts. It is also recommended that future studies include couples who did not participate in any form of premarital counselling, allowing for a more robust evaluation of the intervention's direct impact on marital stability, conflict resolution, emotional intimacy, and communication skills. Employing longitudinal designs that track couples over several years would offer a clearer understanding of how the benefits of premarital counselling persist or evolve across various stages of married life.

Furthermore, subsequent research could explore how factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and educational background moderate the effectiveness of premarital counselling, thereby guiding the development of more inclusive and tailored programs. It would also be valuable to examine the role of post-marital interventions, which include ongoing counselling and peer support groups, in sustaining marital satisfaction over time. Integrating mixed methods approaches that combine both quantitative and qualitative data can provide a richer, more holistic understanding of couples' experiences. Lastly, comparative studies evaluating faith-based versus secular counselling programs could shed light on the unique contributions of each approach to marital stability and overall relationship satisfaction.

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