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COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES OF RELIGIOUS COUNSELORS IN IMPROVING PROSPECTIVE BRIDES AND GROOMS' KNOWLEDGE ABOUT MARRIAGE READINESS

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ABSTRACT

Marriage readiness is an essential foundation for family stability and social harmony. However, many couples enter marriage without sufficient emotional, psychological, and spiritual preparation, leading to increased marital conflicts and divorce rates. This study addresses the problem of how religious counselors can effectively communicate to improve prospective brides' and grooms' understanding of marriage readiness. The research aims to identify communication strategies that foster active learning, self-reflection, and transformation during premarital counseling. Employing a systematic literature review approach guided by the PRISMA framework, this study analyzed 32 publications from 2015 to 2025 obtained from databases such as Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and Consensus. Data were examined using thematic analysis to categorize communication styles, religious messaging techniques, and interaction patterns. The findings indicate that empathetic communication, participatory dialogue, and the use of religious storytelling significantly enhance participants' engagement and comprehension of marital roles and responsibilities. Conversely, didactic and one-way communication methods tend to reduce counseling effectiveness. The study concludes that effective communication serves as both a pedagogical and spiritual bridge, transforming religious premarital counseling into a meaningful process that enhances marriage readiness and promotes long-term marital stability.

Keywords: Communication strategies, religious counselors, premarital counseling, marriage readiness, empathy, faith-based communication

1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of low marital readiness among prospective brides and grooms has become an increasingly complex and multidimensional social issue. Although premarital counseling programs have been widely implemented by religious institutions and government agencies, divorce rates in Indonesia continue to rise annually, indicating a persistent gap between theoretical understanding of marriage and the psychological readiness of individuals entering marital life (El Firdous et al., 2023; BPS, 2023). Marital readiness encompasses psychological, social,

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economic, and spiritual dimensions that must be comprehensively understood prior to establishing a household (Sugiarti et al., 2021). However, a number of studies reveal that prospective couples' understanding of marital responsibilities and dynamics remains limited, particularly with regard to religious values and2 interpersonal communication (Rahman & Omar, 2022; Utami et al., 2023).

Although existing literature has emphasized the importance of religious communication within premarital counseling, there remains an analytical gap concerning how systematic communication strategies employed by religious counselors can effectively enhance marital readiness (Hernawati & Susanti, 2023). Much of the previous research has been predominantly descriptive, focusing on moral or spiritual benefits without sufficiently elaborating the communication approaches used from a theoretical and contextual perspective (Sutanto et al., 2024). Consequently, the primary research gap addressed in this study lies in the lack of in-depth analysis of effective religious communication strategies that are relevant to contemporary social challenges, such as the influence of social media, shifts in cultural values, and the increasing individualization of marital values among young Muslim generations.

In this context, communication strategies are defined as structured approaches utilized by religious counselors to convey moral, spiritual, and social messages effectively to prospective couples. These strategies include empathic listening, dialogic engagement, value-based persuasion, and reflective counseling, which are grounded in religious communication theory and Islamic counseling approaches (Al-Najjar, 2022; Rahman & Omar, 2022). Empathic approaches enable counselors to establish emotional rapport with counseling participants; interactive dialogue facilitates the exchange of experiences; and Qur'anic value-based persuasion fosters spiritual awareness of marriage as both an act of worship and a social responsibility (El Firdous et al., 2023).

Nevertheless, prior studies indicate inconsistent findings regarding the effectiveness of religious communication. While most research highlights the success of empathic communication in enhancing emotional readiness, it has not sufficiently addressed the limitations and challenges faced by counselors, such as inadequate professional training, hierarchical cultural norms, and resistance to open communication (Hernawati & Susanti, 2023; Sutanto et al., 2024). These conditions underscore the need for a critical analysis that not only affirms the benefits of religious communication but also identifies its weaknesses and the social contexts influencing its implementation.

Beyond its practical contribution to strengthening premarital counseling programs, this study also offers a theoretical contribution through the development of a conceptual framework that integrates religious communication theory with marital readiness theory within an Islamic context. This research aims to examine how communication strategies employed by religious counselors can enhance prospective couples' understanding of marital readiness across psychological, social, and spiritual dimensions. Specifically, the study seeks to address the academic gap concerning how religious communication can be contextually adapted to respond to shifting values and cultural changes among young Muslim generations in the modern era.

By analyzing various religious communicat2ion approaches applied in premarital counseling, this study is expected to provide both empirical and theoretical foundations for the development of an integrative and context-sensitive Islamic counseling communication model. The findings are anticipated to enrich the literature on religious communication and serve as a reference for religious institutions and government agencies in designing premarital counseling programs grounded in Islamic spirituality that are more relevant and sustainable.

2. METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review (SLR) to comprehensively synthesize prior research on communication strategies used by religious counselors to enhance marriage readiness among prospective brides and grooms. The SLR approach enables a structured and replicable process for identifying, evaluating, and integrating prior evidence across counseling, communication, and religious education domains (Snyder, 2019; Booth et al., 2021).

This study followed the PRISMA 2020 framework for transparent reporting and used qualitative content analysis to interpret communication practices and their implications for marriage readiness (Moher et al., 2009; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). To ensure conceptual depth, the review combined content analysis for extracting descriptive patterns and thematic analysis for identifying latent meanings. These two analytical approaches were integrated sequentially content analysis informed the coding structure, while thematic analysis developed cross-study themes, following guidance from (Nowell et al., 2017).

Data Source and Search Strategy

Data were obtained from Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, Taylor & Francis Online, and Consensus Academic Database, covering publications from 2015–2025. Search strings were adapted to each database using Boolean operators, truncation, and controlled vocabulary (e.g., MeSH terms for "religious counseling" and "communication strategies").

Search strings:

- "religious counseling" AND "communication strategies"
- "premarital counseling" AND "marriage readiness"
- "faith-based communication" AND "family education"
- "religious counselor" AND "interpersonal communication"

Search adaptation and result documentation were tracked in an Excel logbook detailing the number of hits per database (Google Scholar: 41; ScienceDirect: 26; Taylor & Francis: 18; Consensus: 10).

After removing duplicates and nonrelevant titles, 52 full-texts were screened. A total of 32 studies met the inclusion criteria, which represented data saturation based on the recurrence of thematic patterns and concept redundancy (Kitchenham & Charters, 2007).

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria ensured that selected studies were relevant and methodologically sound.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Published between 2015–2025 (English or Bahasa Indonesia).
2. Focused on faith-based or religious premarital counseling.
3. Discussed communication strategies or marriage readiness outcomes.
4. Peer-reviewed and accessible in full text.

Exclusion criteria:

1. Purely theological or doctrinal discussions.

2. Secular counseling with no religious component.
3. Non-peer-reviewed conference abstracts or duplicates.

Each included article underwent a quality appraisal using the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) checklist for qualitative studies and the MMAT (Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool) for mixed-method designs (Hong et al., 2018). Studies scoring below 50% on quality indicators were excluded to ensure methodological rigor.

Data Extraction and Risk of Bias Assessment

A three-phase extraction procedure was used, following (Tranfield et al., 2003)

1. Screening: Titles and abstracts were assessed for relevance.
2. Full-Text Review: Data on author, year, country, method, and key findings were extracted.
3. Coding and Categorization: Thematic coding was conducted using NVivo software.

To minimize bias, two independent reviewers coded the data. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through consensus meetings, and intercoder reliability was calculated (Cohen's $\kappa = 0.82$), indicating strong agreement. Reflexivity was maintained through researcher memos documenting interpretative decisions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The analysis generated three meta-themes:

1. Counselor Communication Styles (empathy, listening, feedback);
2. Religious Messaging Techniques (Qur'anic storytelling, moral analogies, reflective discourse);
3. Interactional Dynamics (dialogue, participation, trust-building).

Cross-comparison between Islamic and Christian counseling studies identified consistent communication patterns but highlighted contextual differences, such as hierarchical versus dialogic counseling approaches [(Rahman & Omar, 2022); (El Firdous et al., 2023)].

Ethical Conidderations

Although this study used secondary data, ethical rigor was ensured by:

1. Maintaining representational fairness, avoiding overgeneralization across faith contexts.
2. Upholding interpretation ethics, acknowledging cultural sensitivity in religious discourse.
3. Preventing confirmation bias by reporting contradictory findings. These steps align with recommendations for ethical qualitative synthesis (Resnik, 2018; Bettany-Saltikov, 2016).

Reliability and Validity

Reliability was reinforced through dual coding and repeated database searches at two different time intervals. Validity was established through peer debriefing with three subject-matter experts in communication and religious counseling (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and triangulation across study designs (qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods) (Patton, 2015).

Each step was documented in an audit trail, ensuring transparency and enabling replication. Weighting of studies was applied according to quality appraisal scores: high (4 points), medium (3 points), low (2 points). Studies rated below medium were used only for contextual interpretation, not theory building.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The systematic literature review identified 32 eligible studies examining communication strategies of religious counselors in premarital education. Three interrelated themes emerged:

1. Empathic and Dialogic Counselor Communication Styles
2. Integration of Religious and Psychological Approaches
3. Participatory and Transformative Counseling Models

These themes collectively demonstrate that religious premarital counseling is not limited to knowledge transmission but involves a relational, reflective, and value-based communication process that shapes emotional, spiritual, and social readiness for marriage. However, the literature also shows significant variation in outcomes depending on counselor competence, cultural context, and program design.

Empathic and Dialogic Counselor Communication Styles

Empathic and dialogic engagement consistently appear as the strongest predictors of marriage preparation outcomes. Counselors who apply active listening, non-judgmental dialogue, and emotional validation enhance participants' trust and self-reflection, key aspects of marital readiness (MaryMetilda, 2016); (Irman et al., 2021).
In Indonesia's KUA programs, empathic communication helps couples confront sensitive issues such as financial management and conflict resolution more openly [(Rizky et al., 2024)].

However, several studies also note limitations. Counselors lacking professional training may confuse empathy with moral preaching, reducing its relational impact [(Putra & Amin, 2023)]. Institutional time constraints and hierarchical relationships between counselors and participants can further limit open dialogue. This demonstrates that empathy is not universally effective—its success depends on both counselor skill and cultural receptivity.

Integration of Religious and Psychological Approaches

The integration of faith-based values and psychological techniques represents a progressive evolution in premarital counseling models. Many studies emphasize that religious narratives, when aligned with emotional education, produce a holistic understanding of marriage encompassing moral, cognitive, and affective dimensions [(Sari & Wibowo, 2022); (Stanley et al., 2020)].

Islamic counseling often utilizes *Qur'anic storytelling* to translate virtues like *sabr* (patience) and *rahmah* (compassion) into practical actions [(Choiriyah & Al-Kattani, 2020)], while Christian frameworks such as *PREPARE/ENRICH* integrate Biblical reflection with conflict management skills. Despite these synergies, several tensions exist. Studies reveal potential conflict between religious authority and psychological openness, particularly regarding gender equity and emotional disclosure [(Alam & Rahman, 2020); (Rahim et al., 2023)]. Overemphasis on doctrinal instruction can restrict participatory dialogue especially for women suggesting the need for reflexive communication ethics that balance authority with empathy. Methodologically, most studies depend on self-reported outcomes rather than observed behavior, raising concerns about response bias and short-term validity (Nowell et al., 2017). Future research should therefore include longitudinal follow-up to verify lasting behavioral change.

Participatory and Transformative Counseling Models

A distinct trend across recent studies is the shift from didactic teaching to participatory and transformative models. These emphasize role-play, interactive dialogue, and joint reflection, allowing couples to co-construct meaning rather than passively receive instruction (Sutoyo et al.,

2023; Wasik, 2024; Lestari et al., 2020).This aligns with Islamic principles of *musyawarah* (mutual consultation) and *shura* (collective decision-making), framing marriage as a cooperative spiritual journey (Hasan et al., 2022).

However, effectiveness is highly context-dependent. In conservative communities, open dialogue about sexuality or finances is limited by cultural taboos, forcing counselors to use metaphorical communication or indirect narratives (Rahman & Omar, 2022). Cross-religious comparisons indicate that while participatory models improve short-term satisfaction and communication skills, their long-term impact on marital stability remains unclear (Yusof et al., 2023).

This suggests that participatory counseling should not be viewed as a universal model but rather adapted to sociocultural realities and supported by counselor reflexivity.

Table 1. Thematic Summary of Findings

Theme	Indicators	Supporting Studies
Empathic and Dialogic Communication	Active listening, validation, reflective dialogue, trust-building	MaryMetilda (2016); Irman et al. (2021); Rizky et al. (2024); Alam & Rahman (2020); Olatunji & Adediran (2020)
Integration of Religious and Psychological Approaches	Qur'anic or Biblical storytelling, moral analogies, emotional education	Sari & Wibowo (2022); Choiriyah & Al-Kattani (2020); Stanley et al. (2020); Maretha et al. (2021); Nurhadi & Malik (2022)
Participatory and Transformative Models	Role-play, joint reflection, shura-based dialogue	Sutoyo et al. (2023); Wasik (2024); Lestari et al. (2020); Putra & Amin (2023)

Implications and Critical Analysis

The synthesis demonstrates that communication quality—not religious content alone—determines counseling effectiveness. Effective premarital programs require empathic dialogue, integrative reflection, and participatory engagement to build holistic readiness.

However, three critical observations emerge:

1. Methodological fragility: Most studies rely on short-term, self-reported measures without behavioral follow-up.
2. Contextual constraints: Cultural taboos, gender hierarchy, and limited counselor training restrict openness.
3. Theoretical gaps: The reviewed literature rarely articulates a unified communication theory for faith-based counseling, leaving room for conceptual refinement.

Thus, the review advocates for integrating critical communication theory and intercultural counseling frameworks into future religious counseling research. Empathic, integrative, and

participatory strategies are valuable but only when grounded in ethical reflexivity, contextual sensitivity, and empirical rigor.

4. CONCLUSION

This review reveals that effective religious premarital counseling relies on communication strategies that integrate empathy, dialogic interaction, and participatory engagement. These approaches foster emotional awareness, moral understanding, and relational preparedness among couples.

However, findings also expose several limitations. Many studies are based on self-reported perceptions, limiting their predictive value for long-term marital stability. Contextual variations such as cultural taboos, gender norms, and institutional hierarchy significantly influence communication effectiveness. Institutional structures and limited training opportunities further restrict counselors' ability to apply these strategies consistently in practice.

Theoretically, the study underscores that communication in religious counseling should be understood not merely as message delivery but as a co-constructed meaning process influenced by culture, power, and spirituality. Practically, programs should emphasize counselor competence, reflexivity, and cultural adaptation to ensure inclusivity and balance.

Future research should also explore cases where empathy-based or participatory methods produce limited or contradictory outcomes, to better understand boundary conditions and structural determinants of counseling effectiveness. Longitudinal and comparative studies across diverse religious settings are essential to validate these strategies' enduring impact on marital stability and relational growth.

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