Counselling needs of secondary school students during the post-COVID-19 period

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the counselling needs of secondary school students as they face challenges in the post-pandemic era. It examines six domains of counselling needs: personal development, academic, family, emotional, peer relationships, and career development. A sample of 400 students from four secondary schools was selected using a cluster sampling technique. The study, which employed the quantitative research method, utilised the Secondary School Students' Counselling Needs Assessment Instrument to gather data from the respondents. The analysis revealed a significant gap between students' desired and current needs across all six counselling domains, with personal development emerging as the most required by the students, followed by academic, emotional, career development, peer relationships, and family needs. The study also investigated gender differences in counselling needs, showing that while both male and female students share similar patterns of counselling needs, female students have shown larger gap scores, which indicate gender-specific counselling needs that school counsellors must recognise and address in their intervention strategies. The research findings emphasise the need for school counsellors to develop tailored intervention programmes that specifically address the highlighted needs, providing students with necessary support as they navigate the evolving educational landscape of the post-pandemic era. The study highlights the vital role of responsive counselling services in promoting students' well-being and academic success, ensuring they are equipped to adapt to the new educational and social challenges they face.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is unique as it focuses on identifying secondary school students' counselling needs as they navigate the challenges of the post-COVID-19 period. While several studies have assessed counselling needs among secondary school students before and during COVID-19, research on post-COVID-19 counselling needs is scarce and limited.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis of unprecedented scale, has led to a multitude of political, economic, and social challenges. In the realm of education, it has given rise to a cohort often referred to as the 'lost generation' who are grappling with learning poverty. This phenomenon directly results from the strategies and policies implemented to address the constraints of the prevailing systems during the lockdown period (Abu, Asimiran, Abdullah, & Alias, 2023; Malik, 2023).

Implementing new teaching and learning methods during the pandemic has presented teachers and students with complex challenges. Extensive research has indicated that online learning has the potential to adversely impact students' mental health, leading to increased levels of stress, fear, anxiety, and depression (Zin, Ismail, Rozali, & Isa, 2021). Moreover, a separate study highlighted a concerning statistic, reporting that 1.85 million school students in Malaysia lack the necessary Information Technology (IT) devices and internet connections to actively participate in online classes, making many students unable to attend the online classes (Hassan & Ibrahim, 2021).

In response to the challenges posed by COVID-19 on students' well-being, school counsellors have taken on a vital role (Pincus, Hannor-Walker, Wright, & Justice, 2020; Villares, Starrett, & Limberg, 2022). The action involves planning and implementing comprehensive support strategies beyond the existing individual and group counselling services. The comprehensive programmes addressed mental health, preventative measures, and self-management skills to equip students to adapt to the pandemic's effects (Akgul, Brown, & Karch, 2021).

Designing and implementing school counselling programmes under any circumstances is a complex task that demands a comprehensive effort. Therefore, Erford (2015) recommends that school counsellors thoroughly analyse students' needs when designing the school counselling programme. This ensures alignment between the proposed programme or intervention and the specific requirements of the students. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Education (KPM) underscores the importance of conducting needs assessment analyses before initiating school counselling programmes (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (KPM), 2015). Numerous researchers, such as Thompson (2001); Nyutu (2007) and Wong and Jusoh (2015) have also emphasised the importance of school counsellors identifying the needs of their students. This systematic approach allows school counsellors to adapt and develop guidance and counselling programmes that effectively address student challenges.

1.1. Problem Statement

The assessment of counselling needs has become an essential part of school counselling services. The information gathered through this needs assessment will help school counsellors identify their students' critical needs components. Additionally, counselling needs assessments can help counsellors refine the existing programmes to meet the specific needs of their student population (Akram, 2021).

A study conducted to assess the counselling needs of secondary school students in Malaysia provides valuable information. Before the pandemic, students' counselling needs were categorised into six components: academic, personal development, emotional, career, family, and peer relationships. The results of the study also show that most students have placed academic needs as their primary intention to be fulfilled, followed by personal development needs in second place, and emotional needs in third place, while career, family, and peer relationships in fourth, fifth, and sixth place (Jailani, 2021).

During the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak, the counselling needs of secondary school students have shifted towards prioritising emotional needs over academic needs (Savitz-Romer, Rowan-Kenyon, Nicola, Alexander, & Carroll, 2021). As the pandemic evolves into a new phase, it becomes imperative to re-evaluate the current priority of counselling needs among secondary school students. This assessment is vital for school counsellors in organising comprehensive programmes that provide students with the necessary guidance and support to navigate life's challenges.

1.2. Research Objectives

To examine the gap size scores in counselling needs components perceived as important by secondary school students during the post-COVID-19 period.

To examine the differences in gap size scores in counselling needs components perceived as important by male and female students during the post-COVID-19 period.

1.3. Research Questions

The research questions in this study are:

What are the gap size scores in counselling needs components perceived as important by secondary school students during the post-COVID-19 period?

What are the differences in gap size scores in counselling needs components perceived as important by male and female students during the post-COVID-19 period?

1.4. Research Hypotheses

Alternative Hypothesis 1 (H_1): There is a significant difference between Column A (desired needs) and Column B (current needs) of counselling needs components among secondary school students during the post-COVID-19 period.

Alternative Hypothesis 2 (H_2): There is a significant difference between Column A (desired needs) and Column B (current needs) of counselling needs components among male and female secondary school students during the post-COVID-19 period.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Need is a simple word, but understanding it is immensely complex. It is complex because people are complex; their customs, values, economics, social, and physical environments, to name a few, give rise to needs.

The experts in needs assessment analysis have defined 'needs' as a gap between what is and what should be, or it is a gap between the current condition and a desired condition or discrepancies between what is (current condition) and what should be (desired results) (Altschuld & Watkins, 2014; Gupta, Sleezer, & Russ-Eft, 2014; Kaufman & English, 1976; Watkins, Meiers, & Visser, 2011; Wiggins, 1987). In the context of the gap analysis, two potential outcomes emerge, with the possibility of either positive or negative scores. A positive score suggests actionable steps to meet the assessed population's needs, while a negative score highlights the need for refinement or alteration in service delivery. To illustrate a sample, a negative score in a needs assessment survey may signal that a company or organisation should discontinue its existing services because most people no longer require them (Guyette, 1983).

Many theories (for example, Herzberg's Two Factor Theory, Alderfer's Existence, Relatedness and Growth (ERG) Theory and McClelland's Acquired Needs Theory) have defined needs as an aspect derived from human motives (Haque, Haque, & Islam, 2014). Motives are needs in the human mind that reflect the pattern of behaviour and actions. For example, when people are hungry, this feeling will lead them to commit actions of searching for food and selecting what type of food they want. Hunger produces a mental preoccupation with the desire to extinguish the need, leading to behaviour that will reduce hunger and the need for food.

In defining needs, Abraham Maslow has shifted from the traditional need theory of motivation to a more humanistic approach with his hierarchy of needs. Maslow proposed that human needs can be arranged in a hierarchy from lower to higher needs: (a) physiological, (b) safety, (c) belongingness and love, (d) self-esteem, respect, and independence, (e) information, (f) understanding, (g) beauty, and (h) self-actualization. Maslow believed that individuals must fulfil lower-level needs before the next need in the hierarchy can be addressed (Kaur, 2013).

Maslow's hierarchy of needs offers a comprehensive framework for understanding and condensing human needs. Firstly, Maslow posits that 'needs' are ingrained in human genetic structures. Secondly, he organises them into nine distinct components: physiological, safety, belongingness, self-esteem, respect and independence, information, understanding, beauty, and self-actualisation. Thirdly, Maslow emphasises that the needs follow a hierarchical sequence, necessitating the fulfilment of lower-level needs before higher-level ones can be attained. Fourthly, Maslow outlines self-actualisation as the pursuit of ultimate life satisfaction. Studying this theory is essential for developing a counselling framework tailored to the needs of secondary school students.

For example, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs has been instrumental in directing research on the needs for school counselling by demonstrating that students' needs can be categorised into various domains. Nyutu (2007) conducted

a study discussing the counselling needs of secondary school students in Kenya, which were divided into five components: human relations, career development, self-development, social values, and study skills. Similarly, Dogar, Azeem, Majoka, Mehmood, and Latif (2011) classified the counselling needs of secondary students in Pakistan into five basic components: educational, vocational, social, emotional, and behavioural. In Malaysia, Jailani, Taha, and Elias (2022) identified six components of needs: academic, personal development, emotional, career, family, and peer relationships.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

This study utilised a quantitative research methodology, and the cross-sectional survey method was chosen as the research design.

3.2. Site

This study was conducted at 'Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan' or National Secondary School (SMK) in Malaysia. SMKs were purposefully selected due to their status as public secondary schools that welcome students from diverse regions across Malaysia. Unlike certain secondary schools with stringent prerequisites, such as a strong academic record or excellence in sports and co-curricular activities, SMKs employ an inclusive enrolment process. SMKs admit students from varied cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, religious affiliations, worldviews, and disparate geographical locations. This diversity underscores the importance of investigating the counselling needs of secondary school students in Malaysia.

3.3. Sample and Sampling Procedures

As of July 2020, the Ministry of Education reported a total of 2,037,433 secondary school students throughout Malaysia. Due to the impracticality of conducting a comprehensive survey for all students simultaneously, a sampling technique was necessary to select representative respondents from the population. To determine the sample size, the Yamane formula was employed:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

n = Sample size required.
N = Number of people in the population.
e = Allowable error.

After applying the Yamane formula, it was determined that a reasonable sample size for this study would consist of 400 individuals.

The respondents for this study were selected using the cluster sampling method. The researchers used a single-level cluster technique to select the schools participating in this study. As a result, four secondary schools were identified, and 100 male and female students aged 13 to 17 years were randomly selected from each of the selected schools. This approach ensured that the students from different schools were represented while simplifying the sampling process by selecting the entire cluster as the primary sampling unit. Random selection within each cluster helped ensure the diversity and representativeness of the sample.

3.4. Instrument

In order to assess the difference in counselling needs among secondary school students, data was collected from 400 respondents using the 'Secondary School Students' Counselling Needs Assessment' instrument developed by Jailani (2021). The instrument contains two parts: Part A focuses on demographic information, including items related

to gender, age and race. Part B addresses counselling needs, and items are divided into six components: personal development needs (six items), academic needs (four items), family needs (five items), emotional needs (three items), peer relationship needs (three items), and career development needs (four items).

The items in Section B were categorised into two columns: Column A delineated the envisioned ideal conditions of being a student (desired needs). In contrast, Column B outlined the current conditions reported by the respondents (current needs). To emphasise the variations in scores between Columns A and B, respondents were presented with six distinct scoring scales: 1 – Strongly Disagree; 2 – Disagree; 3 – Partially Disagree; 4 – Partially Agree; 5 – Agree; and 6 – Strongly Agree.

Prior to the full-scale research exercise, a pilot test was conducted on 40 respondents. The Cronbach's Alpha scores for Columns A and B of the instrument indicate high reliability: 0.96 for Column A and 0.94 for Column B. Table 1 illustrates the reliability scores of the instrument.

Table 1. Reliability scores of the instrument.

Cronbach's alpha	N of items
0.96	25 (Column A)
0.94	25 (Column B)

In summary, with its comprehensive structure, apt content coverage, coherent scoring system, and proven high reliability, the instrument demonstrates an effective tool for assessing counselling needs among secondary students.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedures

Descriptive and inferential statistical analyses were employed to elucidate the research findings. The data were entered into SPSS version 26 for analysis, and the paired samples t-test formula was used to determine the discrepancies or gaps between the desired and the current counselling needs of secondary school students in Malaysia. The results were explained through indices such as the t(df) value, significant (p) (< 0.05) value and the mean (M) scores of each counselling needs component.

The mean score (M) and standard deviation score (SD) for each component was analysed to determine the magnitude of the gap scores and prioritise counselling needs components accordingly. As Samuels (2014) emphasises, a score nearing 2.0 indicates a pressing need to focus on reducing the identified gap.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

The data were gathered from four different schools. 400 respondents have participated in the study, and their demographic backgrounds are explained in Table 2. The results showed that 38.5 per cent (n = 154) of the respondents were males, and 61.5 per cent (n = 246) were females. Most respondents were 15-year-olds or 25.5 per cent (n = 102), and 17-year-olds shared the same percentage of 25.5 per cent (n = 102) of the total population. The second largest was 16-year-olds, with 20.3 per cent (n = 81); the third largest was 14-year-olds, with 18.5 per cent (n = 74) of the total population; and the fourth group was 13-year-olds with 10.3 per cent (n = 41). 93.0 per cent (n = 372) of the respondents were Malays, 1.5 per cent (n = 6) were Chinese, and 5.5 per cent (n = 22) were Indians.

Before the study, the data were examined for accuracy in data entry, missing values, skewness, and kurtosis coefficient. All items were entered correctly in this study, and the skewness and kurtosis coefficients were stable. The data then were examined with the sample paired t-test.

For the first research question, the results indicate that there are significant differences between items in Column A (the desired needs) and Column B (the current needs) for personal development needs: Column A (M = 5.339, SD = 0.520) and Column B (M = 4.523, SD = 0.791); [t(399) = 22.639, p = 0.00]; academic needs: Column A (M = 5.346, SD = 0.599) and Column B (M = 4.512 , SD = 0.810); [t(399) = 22.135, p = 0.00]; family needs: Column A (M =

5.424, SD = 0.585) and Column B (M = 5.069, SD = 0.805); [t(399) = 10.472, p = 0.00]; emotional needs: Column A (M = 5.332, SD = 0.683) and Column B (M = 4.491, SD = 0.951); [t(399) = 18.013, p = 0.00]: peer relationship needs: Column A (M = 5.381, SD = 0.663) and Column B (M = 4.938, SD = 0.783); [t(399) = 12.290, p = 0.00]; and career development needs: Column A (M = 5.541, SD = 0.563) and Column B (M = 5.053, SD = 0.771); [t(399) = 13.772, p = 0.00]. Table 3 and 4 explain the details.

Table 2. Demographic information.

Demographic profile	Number of respondents N = 400	Valid percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	154	38.5
Female	246	61.5
Age		
13-years-old	41	10.3
14-years-old	74	18.5
15-years-old	102	25.5
16-years-old	81	20.3
17-years-old	102	25.5
Race		
Malay	372	93.0
Chinese	6	1.5
Indian	22	5.5

Table 3. Discrepancies of means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for column A and column B.

Counselling needs domains	Desired/Current needs	Mean (M)	N	Std. deviation (SD)	Std. error mean
Personal development needs	Column A	5.339	400	0.520	0.026
	Column B	4.523	400	0.791	0.040
Academic needs	Column A	5.346	400	0.599	0.030
	Column B	4.512	400	0.810	0.041
Family needs	Column A	5.424	400	0.585	0.029
	Column B	5.069	400	0.805	0.040
Emotional needs	Column A	5.332	400	0.683	0.034
	Column B	4.491	400	0.951	0.048
Peer relationship needs	Column A	5.381	400	0.663	0.033
	Column B	4.938	400	0.783	0.039
Career development needs	Column A	5.541	400	0.563	0.028
	Column B	5.053	400	0.771	0.039

Table 4. Paired samples t-test.

Counselling needs domains	Mean (M)	Std. deviation (SD)	Std. error	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)
Personal development needs	0.816	0.721	0.036	0.745	0.887	22.639	399	0.00
Academic needs	0.834	0.753	0.038	0.760	0.908	22.135	399	0.00
Family needs	0.355	0.678	0.034	0.288	0.422	10.472	399	0.00
Emotional needs	0.841	0.934	0.047	0.749	0.933	18.013	399	0.00
Peer relationship needs	0.443	0.720	0.036	0.372	0.513	12.290	399	0.00
Career development needs	0.488	0.709	0.035	0.418	0.558	13.772	399	0.00

The paired-sample t-test results, as demonstrated above, uncovered significant disparities between the desired needs outlined in Column A and the current needs detailed in Column B of the instrument. These disparities reflect secondary school students' acknowledgement of the gaps between their aspirations and current circumstances across the six components of counselling needs. These findings offer valuable insights for school counsellors, guiding them towards effectively prioritising activities or programmes to bridge these gaps. The study's results affirm the acceptance of the first hypothesis (H_1), demonstrating a significant difference between the desired and current needs among secondary school students. To further elucidate the first research question, which aimed to identify the gap sizes of counselling needs components perceived as crucial by secondary school students in the post-COVID-19 period, the mean (M) for each element was divided by its standard deviation (SD), with detailed results provided in Table 5.

Table 5. Gap size scores.

Counselling needs domains	Mean (M)	Std. deviation (SD)	Gap size (0.00)
Personal development needs	0.816	0.721	1.13
Academic needs	0.834	0.753	1.11
Family needs	0.355	0.678	0.52
Emotional needs	0.841	0.934	0.90
Peer relationship needs	0.443	0.720	0.61
Career development needs	0.488	0.709	0.69

According to Samuels (2014) a gap size approaching or reaching 2.00 indicates a pressing need for relevant stakeholders to address or consider closing the identified gap. The gap size for each essential counselling needs component, as recognised by the respondents, is presented in Table 5. Notably, personal development needs (1.13) emerged as the most crucial component, urging school counsellors or administrators to prioritise it in planning comprehensive counselling programmes. Academic needs (1.11) ranked second in priority, followed by emotional needs (0.90), career development needs (0.69), peer relationship needs (0.61), and family needs (0.52).

The study's second research question aimed to scrutinise variations in gap scores within counselling needs components deemed significant by male and female students in the post-COVID-19 period. Firstly, the dataset comprised 154 male respondents (n = 154) and 246 female respondents (n = 246), tested with the paired-sample t-test. Further elaboration on the specifics of this examination can be found in Table 6, 7, 8 and 9.

Table 6. Discrepancies of means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for male respondents.

Counselling needs domains	Desired/Current needs	Mean (M)	N	Std. deviation (SD)	Std. error mean
Personal development needs	Column A	5.317	154	0.514	0.041
	Column B	4.604	154	0.672	0.054
Academic needs	Column A	5.321	154	0.555	0.045
	Column B	4.489	154	0.749	0.060
Family needs	Column A	5.425	154	0.510	0.041
	Column B	5.152	154	0.706	0.057
Emotional needs	Column A	5.357	154	0.621	0.050
	Column B	4.669	154	0.853	0.069
Peer relationship needs	Column A	5.284	154	0.671	0.054
	Column B	4.838	154	0.755	0.061
Career development needs	Column A	5.492	154	0.572	0.046
	Column B	5.044	154	0.740	0.059

Table 7. Paired samples t-test (Male respondents).

Counselling needs domains	Mean (M)	Std. deviation (SD)	Std. error	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Personal development needs	0.713	0.652	0.053	0.609	0.817	13.564	153	0.00
Academic needs	0.833	0.786	0.063	0.708	0.958	13.150	153	0.00
Family needs	0.273	0.617	0.050	0.174	0.371	5.483	153	0.00
Emotional needs	0.688	0.812	0.065	0.559	0.818	10.523	153	0.00
Peer relationship needs	0.446	0.749	0.060	0.327	0.565	7.388	153	0.00
Career development needs	0.448	0.677	0.055	0.340	0.556	8.215	153	0.00

The results shown in Table 6 and 7 depicted significant differences between Column A (the desired needs) and Column B (the current needs) of all counselling needs components as marked by the male respondents. Firstly, personal development needs: Column A (M = 5.317, SD = 0.514) and Column B (M = 4.604, SD = 0.672); [t(153) = 13.564, p = 0.00]. Secondly, academic needs: Column A (M = 5.321, SD = 0.555) and Column B (M = 4.489, SD = 0.749); [t(153) = 13.150, p = 0.00]. Thirdly, family needs: Column A (M = 5.425, SD = 0.510) and Column B (M = 5.152, SD = 0.706); [t(153) = 5.483, p = 0.00]. Fourthly, emotional needs: Column A (M = 5.357, SD = 0.621) and Column B (M = 4.669, SD = 0.853); [t(153) = 10.523, p = 0.00]. Fifthly, peer relationship needs: Column A (M = 5.284, SD = 0.671) and Column B (M = 4.838, SD = 0.755); [t(399) = 7.388, p = 0.00], and finally, career development needs: Column A (M = 5.492, SD = 0.572) and Column B (M = 5.044, SD = 0.740); [t(153) = 8.215, p = 0.00].

The results of the female respondents showed similar patterns. Table 8 and 9 explain the details.

Table 8. Discrepancies of means (M) and standard deviations (SD) for female respondents.

Counselling needs domains	Desired/Current needs	Mean (M)	N	Std. deviation (SD)	Std. error mean
Personal development needs	Column A	5.352	246	0.525	0.033
	Column B	4.472	246	0.854	0.054
Academic needs	Column A	5.361	246	0.625	0.040
	Column B	4.526	246	0.847	0.054
Family needs	Column A	5.423	246	0.628	0.040
	Column B	5.016	246	0.858	0.055
Emotional needs	Column A	5.316	246	0.720	0.046
	Column B	4.379	246	0.992	0.063
Peer relationship needs	Column A	5.442	246	0.652	0.042
	Column B	5.001	246	0.795	0.051
Career development needs	Column A	5.571	246	0.556	0.035
	Column B	5.058	246	0.791	0.050

Table 9. Paired samples t-test (Female respondents).

Counselling needs domains	Mean (M)	Std. deviation (SD)	Std. error	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Personal development needs	0.881	0.755	0.048	0.786	0.976	18.296	245	0.00
Academic needs	0.834	0.734	0.047	0.742	0.927	17.833	245	0.00
Family needs	0.407	0.710	0.045	0.317	0.496	8.983	245	0.00
Emotional needs	0.936	0.992	0.063	0.812	1.061	14.803	245	0.00
Peer relationship needs	0.440	0.703	0.045	0.352	0.529	9.826	245	0.00
Career development needs	0.513	0.728	0.046	0.422	0.605	11.049	245	0.00

It appears that there are noteworthy disparities between Column A (representing desired needs) and Column B (reflecting current needs), suggesting that addressing students' counselling needs necessitates attention to six key

components: personal development, academic, family, emotional, peer relationships, and career development. The results have shown the following indicators, firstly, personal development needs: Column A (M = 5.352, SD = 0.525) and Column B (M = 4.472, SD = 0.854); [t(245) = 18.296, p = 0.00]. Secondly, academic needs: Column A (M = 5.361, SD = 0.625) and Column B (M = 4.526, SD = 0.847); [t(245) = 17.833, p = 0.00]. Thirdly, family needs: Column A (M = 5.423, SD =0.628) and Column B (M = 5.016, SD = 0.858); [t(245) = 8.983, p = 0.00]. Fourthly, emotional needs: Column A (M = 5.316, SD = 0.720) and Column B (M = 4.379, SD = 0.992); [t(245) = 14.803, p = 0.00]. Fifthly, peer relationship needs: Column A (M = 5.442, SD = 0.652) and Column B (M = 5.001, SD = 0.795); [t(245) = 9.826, p = 0.00], and finally, career development needs: Column A (M = 5.571, SD = 0.556) and Column B (M = 5.058, SD = 0.791); [t(245) = 11.049, p = 0.00].

The study's findings also show that the second hypothesis (H₂) built for this study has been accepted. To quantify the gap size of each counselling needs component, the Mean (M) was divided by the Standard Deviation (SD). Table 10 and 11 illustrate male and female respondents' detailed gap size scores.

Table 10. Gap size scores (Male respondents).

Counselling needs domains	Mean (M)	Std. deviation (SD)	Gap size (0.00)
Personal development needs	0.713	0.652	1.10
Academic needs	0.833	0.786	1.06
Family needs	0.273	0.617	0.44
Emotional needs	0.688	0.812	0.85
Peer relationship needs	0.446	0.749	0.60
Career development needs	0.448	0.677	0.66

Table 11. Gap size scores (Female respondents).

Counselling needs domains	Mean (M)	Std. deviation (SD)	Gap size (0.00)
Personal development needs	0.881	0.755	1.17
Academic needs	0.834	0.734	1.14
Family needs	0.407	0.710	0.57
Emotional needs	0.936	0.992	0.94
Peer relationship needs	0.440	0.703	0.63
Career development needs	0.513	0.728	0.73

From the gap size scores of male and female respondents, the priority of the counselling needs is arranged according to the following sequences: personal development and academic needs. Third, emotional needs; fourth, career development needs; fifth, peer relationship needs; and sixth, family needs. Although the prioritisation remains consistent across genders, there are slight variations in the magnitude of the gap size scores. For instance, the gap score for personal development needs is 1.17 for female and 1.10 for male respondents. Similarly, for academic needs, the scores are 1.14 for females and 1.06 for males. This pattern persists across emotional needs (Females = 0.94, males = 0.85), career development needs (Females = 0.73, males = 0.66), peer relationship needs (Females = 0.63, males = 0.60), and family needs (Females = 0.57, males = 0.44).

5. DISCUSSION

The results of the paired sample t-test, which examined the agreement among secondary school students in Malaysia regarding their counselling needs, revealed significant differences between their desired and current needs. These differences were evident across six domains: personal development, academic needs, family needs, emotional needs, peer relationships, and career development. The gaps between the desired and current needs create a need gap that school counsellors must address with proactive activities in these areas. The study's findings also prioritised the six components of counselling needs, providing valuable information for counsellors designing tailored interventions. This is especially important for developing comprehensive counselling programmes in resource-constrained

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environments. According to Erford (2015) and needs assessment in school counselling programmes serves two purposes: facilitating counsellors' understanding of the diverse needs of the school community and establishing priorities to drive continuous improvement of comprehensive developmental counselling initiatives.

The study successfully prioritised the counselling needs of secondary school students in the following order: personal development, academic needs, emotional needs, career development, peer relationships, and family needs. These findings contrast with a study conducted by Jailani (2021) before the COVID-19 outbreak, which identified academic needs as the primary counselling priority, followed by personal development, emotional needs, career development, peer relationships, and family needs. The shift in counselling priorities suggests that students' awareness has evolved due to their experiences during the pandemic. COVID-19 has significantly impacted the mental health and well-being of individuals, particularly students who have faced disruptions in their education, social interactions, and daily routines. As a result, students may have re-evaluated their priorities, placing personal development at the forefront to better prepare for future challenges. The study's findings align with Maslow's concept that humans seek to fulfill their basic and primary needs before addressing others.

The study's findings also support the idea that self-development and emotional well-being have become a priority for students in the post-pandemic era of COVID-19. This is significantly correlated with the results of studies conducted by Naff, Williams, Furman-Darby, and Yeung (2022) and Yim, Rahim, and Sedhu (2022) which have found that the pandemic has caused an increase in cases of anxiety and depression among the younger generation. This urges the relevant authorities to formulate intervention programmes that deal with mental health and emotional resilience among school students.

In the second part of the study, the results of the paired sample t-test on male and female students revealed a significant difference between their desired and current needs across six counselling domains. The difference indicates that both male and female students agree on the necessity for assistance in addressing gaps in personal development, academic pursuits, emotional well-being, career development, peer relationships, and family needs.

Additionally, the study found variations in the gap size scores between genders, with female students showing larger gaps than male students across all six measured domains. This finding aligns with previous research on gender differences in preferences, treatment, and counselling needs. For example, Liddon, Kingerlee, and Barry (2018) indicated that while men and women may prefer similar counselling therapies, they differ in the intensity or emphasis placed on certain aspects of treatment, coping behaviours, and help-seeking. These differences stem from personal norms, systemic influences, or individual experiences.

6. CONCLUSION

The results of the paired sample t-test assessing the counselling needs of secondary school students in Malaysia indicated notable variations between their preferred and existing needs across six key areas: personal development, academic, family, emotional, peer relationships, and career development. This research underscores the crucial role of school counsellors in addressing these disparities by developing targeted interventions tailored to the prioritised domains identified in this study.

The study's findings revealed a clear hierarchical order among these domains, with personal development taking precedence, followed by academic, emotional, career, peer, and family needs. These shifting priorities, particularly the increased focus on personal development after the COVID-19 pandemic, reflect the changing needs of students in the post-pandemic era, where mental health and emotional resilience have become essential considerations.

Additionally, there are discernible gender differences in the gap scores across the counselling needs domains, with female students showing greater variations than male students. This finding aligns with existing literature highlighting gender-specific counselling needs, emphasising that counsellors must recognise and address these individual differences in their interventions.

This study emphasises the pressing necessity for educational institutions to adapt to students' changing needs, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. This requires a dedicated commitment to a student-centred approach that prioritises personal development, emotional well-being, and resilience within educational strategies.

The research concludes that tailored and comprehensive counselling programmes in educational settings must be informed by an understanding of student needs and preferences. By focusing on personal development and emotional well-being, educators and counsellors can better support students as they navigate the challenges of the post-COVID-19 era and work on building self-confidence, as recommended by researchers such as Erford (2015) and Schmidt (2014).

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