

Article

Understanding Unbelief in a Catholic School Setting: A Qualitative Inquiry Among Selected Disaffiliated Gen Z Students

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Correspondence: aracal@dlsud.edu.ph**Abstract**

This study explores the lived experiences of Generation Z unbelievers studying within Catholic high schools in the Philippines, where religious identity is deeply intertwined with moral formation and daily institutional life. Despite the dominance of Catholic practices such as mandatory prayers, theology classes, and school rituals, a number of students quietly diverge from theistic belief. Using a qualitative inquiry approach, the research investigates how these unbelieving students construct meaning, negotiate moral values, experience psychosocial and cultural costs, and cultivate well-being outside religious frameworks. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, prolonged onsite classroom observations, and three months of online observation in Facebook groups for unbelievers. Guided by Social Interactionism Theory, Stigma Theory, and Multiple Secularities Theory, the study reveals that participants form meaning and ethical frameworks through critical thinking, academic exposure to philosophy and world religions, digital information-seeking, and reflective engagement with diverse belief systems. Although they retain certain moral lessons from their religious upbringing, they rebuild these within secular, humanistic, and rational orientations. Findings also show that unbelieving students experience varying degrees of stigma, concealment, and identity tension, shaped by family religiosity, school norms, and societal expectations. Despite these challenges, they cope through online communities, peer support, and personal autonomy. By highlighting the nuanced negotiations of belief and identity within a faith-centric environment, the study fills a significant gap in Philippine scholarship and contributes to broader discussions on youth religiosity, secular identity formation, and the evolving landscape of meaning-making in contemporary Filipino society.

Keywords: belief, non-belief, religion, secularism, youth**Suggested citation:**

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Introduction

In a 2022 study by Sugiarto, Kahmad, and Huriani, it has been found out that there is a growing number among Generation Z (born 1995 to 2009) who choose not to affiliate themselves with religion. Living in a society with growing dependence on technology while still being afflicted with global problems such as poverty and war, most members of the Gen Z are seeing religion as unnecessary to their lives anymore, which involves not thinking about religion and not believing in God anymore. Gen Z people are becoming more comfortable describing themselves as “atheists”, “agnostics”, or “unbelievers”, far from what was accustomed to the generations before them (Sugiarto, Kahmad, & Huriani, 2022). Openly admitting that one does not have or does not believe in a religion used to be a controversial way to introduce someone, but lately, it has become something as ordinary as asking for someone’s blood type, personality type, or even astrological sign.

Unbelief is increasingly visible within Generation Z (born 1995–2009). A 2022 study by Sugiarto, Kahmad, and Huriani shows that many Gen Zs are choosing atheist, agnostic, or non-religious identities as global crises, scientific advances, and postmodern values reshape their view of religion. Unbelief is defined by Sevinc, Metinyurt, and Coleman (2017) in terms of three overlapping criteria: a lack of belief in God, a non-religious orientation, and the explicit declaration of one’s stance. Bullik et al. (2024) note that they may still engage in spiritual questioning, such as pondering the possibility of a higher being or afterlife, even if they lean toward scientific reasoning.

Agnosticism is a “deliberate epistemic stance” characterized by suspending judgment due to insufficient evidence (McGrath, 2021). Agnostics view this neutrality as a rational response to the unknown, occupying a “middle ground” between theism and atheism while maintaining a “questioning attitude” (Archer, 2022). In contrast, atheism is the belief that no God exists, historically associated with religious non-affiliation (Oppy, 2021). This worldview often rejects the supernatural in favor of the physical world (Millem, 2019). However, these definitions frequently spark public misconceptions that atheism lacks purpose or is rooted in hatred (Speed, Coleman III, & Langston, 2018). Consequently, atheists often face prejudice, being unfairly stereotyped as immoral or evil (Brewster et al., 2016). In the United States, this manifests as blatant discrimination, including slander, social ostracism, and being characterized as untrustworthy by theistic majorities (Łopuszańska et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, Catholic identity is deeply woven into family life and national culture. Religious upbringing, which involved Sunday Mass, prayer, devotion, shapes moral and social values (Baring, 2018). The country even has a high

number of Catholic schools that aim to converge religious identity with academic performance and success. Given this backdrop, atheism and agnosticism are often seen as alien and threatening. Following this line, unbelieving students in a Catholic school may experience first-hand the tension between their ideals and their schools' principles and values that have religious origins. Such institutions are not neutral educational environments; they are deeply integrated in a philosophical-educational approach that unites all forms of faith with life and learning. Catholic schools emphasize the inherent dignity of every person and aim to form students into lifelong disciples, prioritizing the development of the whole person—mind, body, and soul—toward their ultimate salvation, making it challenging for non-believers to navigate such environment.

The 2020 Philippine census reported only 0.04% (43,931 individuals) as non-religious, though independent estimates suggest the irreligious may constitute up to 11%, particularly among Gen Z. Agnostics face social stigma as "deviants" (Dumaop et al., 2023), but find community in groups like Philippine Atheism, Agnosticism, and Secularism, Inc. Research indicates that younger single males are the demographic most likely to shift toward agnosticism (Aguilar et al., 2024).

While the International Social Survey Program records atheists at 1% (Mangahas, 2022), sampling limitations likely mask a larger population. Aldama (2025) describes Philippine atheism as a multifaceted pursuit of intellectual and moral independence. Embracing this belief system is linked to higher self-awareness and liberation from religious restrictions (Cuayzon, 2022). Furthermore, younger atheists view the absence of belief as a rejection of perceived religious hypocrisy and irrationality (Agbulos et al., 2024).

In circumstances like these, Stigma Theory (1963) may be used to assess how unbelief is perceived as a tainted individual, considering that they are in an environment that sees the act of questioning the existence of God as deviant and immoral. Their chosen belief is then seen as a moral failing, and unbelievers are not only the minority statistically, but they are also the minority morally. However, it is undeniable that meaning-making and the formation of personal beliefs are mostly affected by various factors outside of the immediate family, such as media, peers, and the internet. Social Interactionism Theory (1969) posits that these resources contribute to how an individual forms their identity; meanings are created and assigned through symbols, people, and situations, and may be modified through communication and interaction. Lastly, Multiple Secularities Theory (Wohlrab-Sahr & Burchardt, 2012) highlights that individuals lean towards secularities based on frameworks and shared histories, and is a normal by-product of modernization. In the concept of religion, this

theory has shown that people are now deriving secular beliefs from religion, and instead of following established religious groups, the Gen Z cohort is embracing the modernity of their belief systems.

The landscape of religious beliefs is slowly evolving along with the changing times, in particular, with the younger generations. Despite growing interest in Gen Z's shifting religiosity, there remains a dearth of local research examining active unbelief among young Filipinos, especially within Catholic educational institutions. While global and U.S.-based studies have examined irreligion among youth, the unique experience of unbelieving students embedded in faith-based schools—where religious instruction is central to moral formation—has not been addressed in Philippine scholarship. This study, therefore, investigates how Gen Z unbelievers, in particular, self-identifying atheists and agnostics, in Philippine Catholic schools navigate their religiously structured environments, focusing on answering these questions: (1) In what ways do young unbelievers construct meaning and moral values outside of a religious framework?; (2) What psychosocial, cultural, or identity-related do Gen Z unbelievers experience within a predominantly Catholic school environment?; (3) How do these students cultivate well-being, fulfillment, and a sense of community beyond religious institutions?

Employing a qualitative inquiry approach, the research addresses the diversity and the commonality among the responses, experiences, and coping mechanisms of the selected Gen Z participants of the study. In-depth interviews and onsite and online observations are utilized to obtain rich narratives and perceptions of the participants who are self-identifying unbelievers—atheists and agnostics in particular. This fills a critical gap in Philippine religious scholarship by providing nuanced, context-sensitive insights into how Gen Z non-belief coexists with, resists, transforms, or adapts to Catholic schooling environments. Notably, such experiences have been largely undocumented in local literature—even as global trends document growing irreligion among younger generations. For instance, recent reporting indicates that younger Filipinos are drifting away from traditional piety and reshaping their spiritual identities, even within Catholic-majority contexts, highlighting the timeliness and relevance of this study. In the long run, data collected from this research may serve as a way for parents, teachers, school administrators, and other concerned parties to identity and understand the changing religiosity and belief systems of the Gen Z cohort, opening a space for dialogue and mutual understanding which can lead to a fruitful relationship across all generations and beliefs.

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative inquiry approach to explore the contextualized experiences of Gen Z unbelievers within Philippine Catholic high schools. By analyzing participants' stories and observations, the research uncovers how these individuals navigate religious environments.

Using purposive-convenience sampling, the study recruited four (4) participants from prominent Catholic schools, reaching data saturation. The selection criteria focused strictly on definite unbelievers—specifically self-identified atheists and agnostics—to capture the tension between their lack of belief and the Catholic school setting. Students still questioning their faith or those from non-sectarian institutions were excluded to maintain this specific focus. To verify participants, the study employed a validated screening tool adapted from the Duke Religion Index (2010), using implicit statements to ensure objectivity. Interviews were guided by themes from Manalang's (2021) research, focusing on:

- a. Motivations for leaving religion.
- b. Social stigma, exclusion, and pressure.
- c. Experiences of moral and intellectual autonomy.
- d. Constructing ethics and values outside religious frameworks.

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and interpret meanings within the conversational data. The researcher followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

- a. Familiarization: Repeated reading of transcripts.
- b. Generating Initial Codes: Systematically tagging significant data.
- c. Searching for Themes: Grouping codes into potential themes.
- d. Reviewing Themes: Refining themes against the data set.
- e. Naming Themes: Assigning definitive names to significant findings.
- f. Producing the Report: Interpreting themes in relation to research problems and literature.

This iterative process allowed emerging insights to inform the study, leading to a deeper understanding of the participants' lived realities.

Results

Based on the responses of the participants, the following themes were generated that respond to the research questions.

Constructing Meaning and Moral Values Outside of Religion

The four participants came from different religious denominations. Participant 1, who is a Grade 12 student, identifies as an agnostic but was previously a Catholic. Participant 2, also a Grade 12 student, identifies as an agnostic as well, but came from

a Christian denomination, specifically, from Victory Church. Participant 3, a recent college graduate, identifies as an atheist but was previously affiliated with *Iglesia ni Cristo*. Participant 4, also an atheist, is a fourth year college student who was previously with Christ's Commission Fellowship Church. All four participants are currently enrolled in (or, in the case of Participant 3, graduated from) a Catholic school and had spent their grade school and junior high school in Catholic basic education institutions.

The participants shared that they find meaning in a world without God nor religion through establishing critical thinking and philosophy learned from non-religion subjects in school. The participants admitted that they have used the principles taught in school to establish their belief systems, for instance, Participant 3 and Participant 4 used the lessons from their Social Sciences classes in high school to find out what they can believe in without the influences of religion. However, the origins of their morals as unbelievers still have an influence of their past religious affiliations. The participants shared that they still retain moral lessons from past religious education in school, and despite not believing in religion nor in God anymore, they still appreciate religious teachings as feasible moral frameworks. Participant 2 also shared that her Catholic education strongly influenced how she sees right and wrong in different situations.

Psychosocial, Cultural, and Identity-related Costs Encountered by Gen Z Unbelievers

Psychosocial costs may refer to discomfort brought by their unbelief to their social circles, such as families, peers, and communities. There is the lingering feeling that they are being excluded or are considered odd and different. Cultural costs may refer to the loss or negotiation of cultural belonging, which may relate to family traditions or school and community activities because of their non-belief. Lastly are the identity-related costs, which may refer to the dissonance they experience within themselves, such as suppressing their own labels just to avoid conflict or exclusion. These circumstances are present in the experiences of the participants who have chosen to stand firm with their unbelief.

Firstly, the participants shared that the psychosocial cost they encounter is their family members being disappointed in them. Participant 1 and Participant 3 narrated that their family members, especially their parents, are hoping that they would go back to attending and participating in church activities. On the other hand, Participant 2's and Participant 4's family members are avoiding discussions about religion and unbelief in front of them; for instance, Participant 4, who had openly shared her atheism to her parents, always notices that her mother does not refer to her as an "atheist", but simply someone who is in a confusing phase in her life.

As for the cultural costs encountered by the participants, they all noted and highlighted that they do encounter the stigma of being an unbeliever in a predominantly Catholic country. They shared that their own family members and the school community also place pressure on them, for instance, Participant 3 shared that

when she first informed the people close to her that she is an atheist, they dismissed her, stating that she is only undergoing a phase and she just needs to pray more frequently to resolve this struggle. The participants also noted the existing stereotype and misrepresentation. Participant 3 shared that she would hear people calling her a “Satanist” because they equate unbelief with siding with the Devil. Participant 1 also noted that, as a queer individual, he felt like he cannot connect to religion because of the existing stigma not only toward unbelief but also toward his gender identity within the church.

Lastly, identity-related costs, for the participants, are encountered in their schools which adhere closely to Catholic teachings and practices. They have all agreed that, in the Catholic schools they came from or where they are currently studying, there were instances that they needed to disassociate themselves in activities and events concerning Catholicism. For example, Participant 3 shared how she would always be left inside the classroom whenever there were Catholic-related events happening in their school. Although people knew she was a member of *Iglesia ni Cristo*, this somehow served as a cover to the fact that she was already a growing unbeliever in her heart. Participant 1, who is also taking religion-related subjects as part of school requirements, has admitted to answering essays that tailor-fit the subject, even if it meant that it was not a genuine answer that would reflect himself. Participant 2, on the other hand, would still attend the activities required in her Catholic school such as prayers and masses, however, she would describe them as an “inconvenience”; she only attends for the sake of compliance. Participant 1 also shared how he was asked to lead the prayer in class one time, and he still complied by reciting a memorized prayer. The fact that the school had required students to memorize an institutional prayer somehow helped Matt navigate this circumstance; there is no need to come up with a personal devotion or reflection to be included in his prayer which may challenge his agnostic worldview. Discussions about religion were also open for the two. Participant 2 would still recite in class with fervor, but not because she was sharing something close to her heart, but only because her answer would count for recitation points in her grade. All the participants agreed that they tend to conceal their beliefs in order to prevent conflicts from arising.

Well-being, Fulfillment, and Community beyond Religion

Despite the challenges encountered by the Gen Z unbelievers, in particular, self-identified atheists and agnostics, in their lives due to their identities, they are still able to form ways to maintain a healthy mindset and lifestyle that can mitigate the negative experiences they have. The most prominent response from the participants is that they obtain their well-being through the self-formation of moral values beyond religion. Participant 4 shared that she believes that actions are more important than religion, reiterating that as long as an individual does good deeds, religion is not necessary anymore. Participant 3 also shared that the goodness of a person is the key element to have a healthy life, as maintaining good behavior—even outside of the beliefs that

there is a God guarding an individual's every move—does contribute to the internal regulations of one's being.

In lieu of religious teachings, the participants have expressed that they are leaning towards spiritual secularity, or the concept of spirituality without religion. For example, Participant 1 sees the universe as his guide; whenever he feels stressed or overwhelmed, he “talks” to the universe, as he believed that the universe could return the wishes and requests he would share as people and their environment are connected to each other. For Participant 2, despite admitting that she does not follow any specific secular belief as of the moment, she considers human philosophy as admirable.

As for their fulfillment outside of religion, the participants shared that this now stems from the satisfaction they obtain from practicing critical thinking through how they had previously examined their religions and beliefs. The unpleasant experiences they had from their past religions made the shift to unbelief reasonable for them, for instance, Participant 3 admitted to devoting a substantial amount of time online, just reading posts and comments that question the teachings of their church, after hearing negative news about some of their church's members and teachings. Participant 2, on the other hand, experienced being avoided by her friends because her grandmother (who was a pastor in their church) would force her friends to attend their Bible studies. Fulfillment also comes from having an open mind and being accepting and understanding of other people's beliefs. Participant 4 shared that she is now open to different beliefs, and this mindset has given her peace of mind.

Community formation, as per the participants, is still possible in the presence of unbelief. However, unlike theists whose communities are in the circle of religion, agnostics and atheists find communities mostly online. The online space has become a shared community of their own, just like how Participant 1 and Participant 3 explored other beliefs and questioned theirs through different websites. For instance, before Participant 1 labelled himself as an agnostic, he attempted to explore paganism through TikTok. Participant 3 also used online posts and social media sites to question her beliefs in a healthy discourse, while obtaining information about different practices concerning atheism. This became a healthy venue for them to interact with like-minded individuals without prejudice and fear.

Discussion

The themes that emerged from the participants' responses provide a nuanced picture of how unbelievers navigate life as students of Catholic institutions. The discussion that will follow is supported by past studies that support the sentiments of the participants.

Constructing Meaning and Moral Values Outside of Religion

A study by Zuhdiyah, Khodijah, and Ramdani (2024) purported that schools become a venue for students to explore and assess the beliefs they have. The reflective

and experiential dimensions of forming beliefs are manifested through classroom interactions, writing reflection papers, group discussions, and even service-learning activities. These activities allow students to engage in moral education, negotiating their beliefs along the way as they compare their lived experiences to the teachings they encounter in school. This is also in line with the findings of Li, Kang, and Chen (2023), who mentioned that school-based experiences contribute to how young students shape their beliefs. For instance, their study highlighted that augmented reality activities in school can teach children religion diversity. Interactive learning environments become social spaces where children not only learn the subjects in their curriculum; they also learn about the world around them while developing critical thinking and empathy and a sound assessment of their own beliefs vis-à-vis other people's. The responses of the Gen Z participants once again reflect the concept of "invisible religion", as per Luckman, Kaden, and Schnettler (2022). The Gen Z cohort finds meaning inwardly, religion included, as they try to make sense of the world through unique experiences and what works best for them. The school becomes a laboratory for this; while they begin learning the contents of the curriculum, they process these lessons along with their own personal values and dispositions and compare them with those of their peers. As they synthesize these differences and similarities, they begin to think critically of the imposed beliefs by their family or relatives. Breaking free from the imposed beliefs leads to the discovery that they can establish their own, free from institutionalized ones.

As expressed by the participants in the previous discussions, they still retain their morals despite not belonging or not affiliating with any religious organization. These experiences somehow concur with the findings of Zrinzo (2015), stating how unbelievers may still draw upon the basic tenets of religion to discuss and describe their morality, even if they are already operating outside of a religious framework. The study highlighted that moral frameworks have been described using religious terms for quite a long time, therefore, it is now difficult to separate the language people use in describing religion and morality. Aldama's (2025) explanation of this phenomenon relates this to how pervasive religion is among Filipino families. Growing up with past religions, unbelievers like Participant 2 and Participant 4 already have the tenets of Catholicism and Christianity embedded within themselves, using it as a framework to establish their moral compass even if they have already left the religion. Moreover, bits and pieces of their past religion's teachings still reach them since both of them are still enrolled in Catholic schools.

Using the Social Interactionism Theory that focuses on how people create and share meanings through social interactions and shared symbols, the narrations of the participants uncovered how atheists and agnostics make sense of their lives, find purpose, and even establish moral values outside of religion. Instead of turning down all religious influences, individuals like Participant 2 and Participant 4 morally reconfigure the codes and teachings of their religious past through their present, more personal, frameworks of understanding. Their prior knowledge of Bible stories, moral

lessons, and theology classes illustrates how previous social experiences in religious contexts had given them symbolic anchors—language, rituals, and moral dichotomies—that not only provide these ethical bases but continue to influence their ethical reasoning. Fether (2023) also wrote that morals are not inherently tied to religion. Unbelievers, especially those who identify as atheists and agnostics, can develop a moral framework since morality does not disappear without religion. They instead use a different basis, for example, they use human rights and collective responsibility as basis rather than the commands of a higher being. Similarly, Stahl (2021) purported that unbelievers share the same dilemmas and values as believers, however, the former just tend to lean towards “individualizing” moral foundations, such as endorsing the protection of vulnerable people and valuing care, fairness, justice, and equality. Without religious frameworks, many unbelievers rely more on outcome-based reasoning (consequentialism) and less on traditions, sanctities, authorities or group loyalty.

Psychosocial, Cultural, and Identity-related Costs Encountered by Gen Z Unbelievers

A study by Manalang (2021) defined the cost of unbelief as the social, familial, and cultural burdens or tensions that begin to permeate whenever an individual distances themselves from a community that is strongly religious. In the case of the participants, the cost of their unbelief (as an atheist or as an agnostic) is predominantly manifested in their familial relations. The participants all came from religious families, albeit belonging to different affiliations. However, it is common among them that their relatives, in particular their parents, are having difficulties accepting who they are or even opening up to the possibility that the participants are not willing to partake in religious practices or even stop from believing in God anymore. This rings true for Participant 3, whose atheism is only labelled as “agnosticism” by her parents as the latter is more neutral, therefore, is more acceptable for them compared to her being an “atheist”. McGrath (2021) purported that agnosticism refers to the suspension of belief that there is a God. By most religious parents’ standards, agnosticism is safer, as this would still mean that there is still a trace of faith left in their children.

A similar study by Bandinia (2025) showed that there is an existing stigma within families for individuals who have decided to label themselves as unbelievers. Family and community expectations play a role in this prejudice; Participant 2, for instance, came from a family of pastors, therefore, there is an existing expectation for her as a member of the said family to also uphold the same values and image as her pastor relatives. This resonates with the findings of Novianti et al. (2021), wherein families who are closely tied with their religion are usually expected to maintain a certain reputation within their church or their religion’s social circle, and having a member who deviates from it is immediately perceived negatively.

Aldama’s (2025) study stated that unbelievers encounter “default exclusion” — the state of being judged or misunderstood by a religious environment simply for not adhering to what the majority believe in. As the participants are surrounded by

religious folks every day, they are also the frequent subject of scrutiny. Albeit subtle, they can still sense that their school peers are not fully accepting them, especially since the school gives them daily reminders that it is an institution that centers on faith in God, something that the participants do not really have. This is similar to the findings of the study of Lambert et al (2025), wherein it has been identified that there is a prevalent moral distrust against atheists among theistic individuals. Since theists depend their value systems on religion and the belief in God, they immediately assume that atheists cannot be trusted because of their lack of belief in religion and God. Atheists are also framed negatively since they outwardly reject a community identity, which is being a Catholic in a religious country. Suhaib (2025) also purported that atheists are generally perceived as untrustworthy because they are seen by theists as “discursively irresponsible”. Their rejection of theistic claims reflect that they place the burden on theists to prove that a God really does exist. Their rejection of the belief in God is seen as an irresponsible and immoral, and theists would immediately label them as Satanists as it is the easiest, and most logical for them, to process. Bullik, Hornshaw, and Shirck (2024) found that the stereotypes and prejudice encountered by unbelievers are deeply shaped by the cultural expectations of the communities in which they are embedded.

The participants’ experiences are a suitable example of how Stigma Theory, especially Erving Goffman’s (1963) idea of spoiled identity can be used as a lens to understand them. Spoiled identity refers to the social discrediting that happens when one’s identity is different from what is culturally valued. Atheists and agnostics within the participants’ religiously homogeneous environments are seen as those who have a discredited or discreditable identity, for instance, a kind of identity that has to either be hidden or controlled in order to escape social punishments. The participants experience the cultural and identity-related costs of unbelief as something that is deeply ingrained in the moral framework of the family, which sees religiosity as being good and as belonging. Hiding their unbelief serves as a way of dealing with the loss of social support thereby saving the spot of acceptance which is compatible with Mackey et al.’s (2021) conclusion that unbelievers are likely to conceal their identity to avert identity threat. This stigma is also perpetuated in their schools where it is taken to be a matter of institutional and cultural domains and where the Catholic-centered activities serve as a way of defining the moral boundary between the believers and the non-believers. By using Stigma Theory, the participants’ voices show that forms of unbelief, as far as religiously saturated social systems are concerned, are not only personal viewpoints but spoiled identities which have to be constantly negotiated in order to obtain or keep up with belonging, safety, and dignity in families, schools, and faith-dominated cultural spaces.

Well-being, Fulfillment, and Community beyond Religion

Brewster et al. (2021) highlighted how family support is relevant to the well-being of unbelievers. Unfortunately, unbelievers—atheists, especially—tend to receive

lower support from their own families, leading to a worsened well-being. This may be reflected in the initial narratives of the participants, who, in their own way, experienced the stigma from their own family members. However, Brewster et al. also found out that unbelievers, over time, adapt a process of “identity consolidation” — they slowly but consistently develop coping skills, build networks, or cultivate self-acceptance, all of which contribute to their well-being. Isomaa (2024) also noted that atheists, most importantly so-called “new atheists”, emphasize the practice of rationality, science, and critique of religion. These are the foundations of unbelievers’ fulfillment: the practice and observation of individual thinking without the restrictions of religion. Moreover, unbelievers have also been found to engage more in analytic thinking activities, showing reflective reasoning, according to Uzarevic and Coleman III (2021).

Nelson, Abeyta, and Routledge (2021) highlighted that unbelievers, most especially atheists, experience meaning through self-determined goals. Their own understanding of existence has led them to create their own value and purpose in life, seeing that the absence of a higher omniscient being allows them to actively construct meaning. The study also showed that atheists almost shared the same scores as theists in the measures of life meaning, suggesting that belief in God is not a prerequisite for perceiving life as meaningful. The participants’ belief regarding how religion is not central in their lives anymore reflects a postmodern approach to religion. Davie (2021) purported that religion is no longer the default framework in identifying moral guidance, as religion is increasingly interpreted and overshadowed by individualized meaning-making. Societies now offer different frameworks for meaning and morality, and as the younger generation become more adept with exploring communities and groups of various beliefs through online means, they become more open and well-versed in understanding and accepting these different worldviews. Religion is no longer socially compulsory for living a meaningful life, which directly resonates with postmodern sensibilities. Benedikter (2020) also related how the more recent postmodern approach to religion stemmed from a more digitized approach to gaining and learning belief systems—from traditional means to online platforms and virtual spaces. The prevalence of these digital spaces enables individuals to find their own meaning with their spirituality, building communities beyond traditional churches and spiritual congregations. This has also led to the spread of postmodern sensibilities, wherein there is distrust towards grand narratives and focus and value placed on unique, personal experiences.

As for the unbelievers’ choice of using online spaces to build their communities, Chalfant (2022) purported that these spaces allow a certain level of anonymity, especially when an unbeliever has been shunned by their family or social circle in real life. The existing stereotypes against their group led to them to become protective of their real-life identities compared to theists. Online spaces such as social media sites and forums function as disseminators of information, social support groups, and even for identity management. Duile (2021) also highlighted that unbelievers tend to prefer

private, closed spaces rather than open ones, as they still fear judgment and prejudice. Social media in particular has become an outlet for them to discreetly meet and socialize with other unbelievers in a safe manner.

The participants' subjective experiences of the central ideas of Multiple Secularities Theory, which argues that different social, cultural, and historical contexts give rise to different secularities, are lived realities of the theory. In the case of this research, young unbelievers reveal a distinctly Filipino mode of secularity which is not like most globalized forms of secularity that often reject religion; instead, the latter is reinterpreted as a source of moral and spiritual life. Their ethical selfhood constructed through empathy, honesty, and human decency is a lived example of how secular morality can be integrated in a religiously inclined community without being antagonistic. It is a kind of existence that does not pose the question of "religion versus secularism," thus these people are plural and dialogical secularity carriers that enable them to have personal autonomy, yet they are still capable of using the moral vocabulary that has been passed down by religious traditions. Moreover, their active participation on the internet and in communities based on advocacy is an indication of the emergence of new "secular spheres" where the formation of identity, belonging, and meaning is possible outside the fold of religious institutions. These digital and social contexts are the new stages for the construction of moral and existential frameworks through methods such as reflection, discussion, and shared values. Hence, the participants' real-life stories serve as evidence of the fact that secular life is not the negation of belief but the diversification of practices for meaning-making, a notion that is in line with Multiple Secularities Theory which points to the co-existence and interaction of religious and secular logic in everyday life.

Conclusions

This research uncovers the ways in which Filipino Gen Z unbelievers understand the world, form their identities, and experience happiness despite the fact that they come from religious and Catholic-dominated families and schools. Their stories depict that lack of faith in God does not mean that one lacks morality or that one's existence is empty; instead, it means that one's inherited moral concepts and values are transformed into one's own personal frameworks. By using Social Interactionism Theory as a base, the participants in the study depict that their understanding of life happens during conversations and interactions where they reinterpret and share moral and spiritual symbols. Their ethical guide, which most of the time comes from empathy, human decency, and critical reflection, unveils that moral awareness is still there without the presence of divine authority. Interestingly, the findings in this research oppose the ideas of moral psychology and religious sociology which suggest that being religious is a prerequisite for being moral. It also supports the works of Zrinzo (2015) and Nelson et al. (2021) which were done earlier and which these authors have referred to, that morality without religion is not only feasible but also it can often be very reflective.

The data also provide considerable support for Goffman's Stigma Theory by showing how atheists and agnostics living in a Catholic environment feel that their identities are "spoiled". The participants' efforts at hiding or downplaying their point of view indicate that, in unbelief contexts, this is still a socially risky type of behavior in faith-oriented settings. The participants' tactics such as masquerading, keeping quiet, or self-censoring all reflect the adaptive ways in which they negotiate for the right to belong at the same time as they disclose the bias that is institutionalized in schools and families.

Moreover, the results from this research suggest that the problem of stigmatization suffered by atheists and agnostics in a Catholic environment should be dealt with by interventions informed by policy, which can foster pluralism in educational institutions and introduce modules that depict non-religious worldviews as morally legitimate perspectives. The study is also a comprehensive framework for the elaboration of the Multiple Secularities Theory and the expansion of its scope within the Philippine context. The participants serve as an example of dialogical secularity, which is a situation where religious and secular moralities cohabit without hostility. Their presence in the networks of advocacy, virtual communities, and reflective activities is the indication of the emerging secular fields—these are areas that are not controlled by religious institutions but are available for creating meaning, belonging, and ethical living.

The findings of the study suggest that there is now a changing landscape with regards to how the Gen Z cohort process and reflect on their religion. Far from what was accustomed to the generations before them—wherein religion was based on what was passed down by their parents or grandparents—the Gen Z cohort explores the belief systems available for them based on their own perspective, their own experiences, and own interactions with a variety of people they encounter in reality and in virtual spaces. Gone are the days when the youth automatically follow what their parents tell them based on established religions; youth nowadays find meaning, purpose, and well-being through secular spaces where people are not labeled by religion but are acknowledged through values of empathy, respect, and inclusivity.

The gravity of religion's influence is slowly changing as young people nowadays are either ignoring or rejecting the concept of a higher being serving as a moral compass for people's actions. As per the participants, one can be a good person even without believing in God, suggesting that morals should come from the inside of a person rather than believing that someone else should inspire an individual to become a moral person. The experiences shared by the participants also show that they are now valuing relationships with their friends and peers more, probably more than their families and church communities, emphasizing that they are now more concerned with maintaining peaceful relationships with everyone, and if religion becomes a hindrance to this, they would be quicker to sacrifice religious affiliations. This can be perceived as a postmodern approach to religion and spirituality—truth can be seen in multiple angles, based on what yields a positive outcome from each

person. The Gen Z youth is now rejecting meta-narratives, especially those from large and established religions, in favor of individualized beliefs. Their faith is experiential, and their truth is based on what works best for them. Spirituality is not strictly tied to institutionalized religion anymore, but is now a matter of choice guided by human values of empathy, respect, and inclusivity.

The growing recognition of diverse moral sources is necessary not only for the development of inclusive moral education but also for creating environments which are conducive to respect for conscience-based belief, as well as non-belief. These non-religious youth's lived experiences match in pointing out that morality, meaning, and spiritual well-being are not the exclusive domain of people of faith, but are rather expanded through freedom, reflection, and community.

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