

# The Adventist Emerging Adult And Their Quest For Identity: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study

Istiarti B. Sarempaa<sup>1\*</sup>, Adlai Wilfred Tornalejo, Zandritiana Lovanomena,  
Blessy Priscilla Kasingku, Charmaine Gayle C. Ang,

*Adventist International Institutes of Advanced Studies*  
[sarempaai@aiaas.edu](mailto:sarempaai@aiaas.edu),

**Abstract** - Emerging Adult (EA), aged 18–25, is a transitional phase in life during which individuals actively explore their identity. This stage is characterized by a process of retrospection and introspection. During this time, the EA feels “in-between” adolescence and adulthood and frequently reevaluates their identity and purpose in life. Those who are born and raised in the Seventh-day Adventist homes are not an exception. They encounter challenges as they navigate the tension between their faith-based upbringing and the societal norms of the world. This complex interplay between cultural assimilation and religious beliefs can potentially create a crisis of identity among Adventist EAs. To date, limited empirical research has been conducted on the lived experiences of EAs from Adventist backgrounds who are studying at non-Adventist institutions in the Philippines. This study aimed to explore the narratives of EAs to understand how their unique upbringing shapes their identity, sense of belonging, and purpose. This study utilized hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the lived experience of Adventist EAs within Seventh-Day Adventist churches in Cavite, Philippines. The data were collected through phenomenological interviews following Moustakas’ (1994) interview framework. The data was analyzed using Van Manen’s (1990) lifeworld elements. Findings revealed EAs’ identity quest across lifeworld dimensions: spatiality, temporality, relationality, corporeality, and materiality. Participants framed these experiences as underscoring the central role of faith and as integral to the broader process of identity formation. This study concluded with the statement of the essence of the lived experiences of the Adventist EAs and their quest for identity.

**Keywords:** Emerging adult, born-Adventist, identity, Adventist identity, hermeneutic

## I. INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood (EA), aged between 18 and 25, is a transitional life stage where individuals actively explore their identity (Arnett, 2000). During this phase, EAs feel “in-between” adolescence and adulthood (Barry & Nelson, 2005), leading them to question their identity, religious beliefs, and life purposes (Paloutzian et al., 1999). They also engage in a search for meaning, which becomes central to their development (Furrow et al., 2004). Their quests encompass several dimensions. According to Barry and Nelson 2005, EAs “(a) question the beliefs in which they were raised, (b) place greater emphasis on individual spirituality than affiliation with a religious institution, and (c) pick and choose the aspects of religion that suit them best” (p. 246). In addition, EAs have the highest prevalence of participating in health-risk behaviors, including the use of drug and alcohol. This, in part, stems from

the desire to belong to the mainstream society. EAs then are prone to identity crisis, meaning that they wrestle with integrating their childhood upbringing and societal influence.

EAs who are born and raised in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) homes are not an exception. They encounter challenges as they navigate the tension between their faith-based upbringing and the societal norms of the world. This complex interplay between cultural assimilation and religious beliefs can potentially create a crisis of identity. Within this context, this study focuses on the experiences of EAs born and raised in an Adventist home (hereafter, born-Adventist) in the Philippines who are studying in public universities. As a minority group, they face challenges that potentially impact their religious identity. Particularly, the pressure to conform to and the longing to integrate into their surrounding in school sometimes conflict with their upbringing as SDAs. This include, but not limited to, going to cinema, clubbing, hanging out on Saturday or Friday evening. Hence, this study aims to explore their lived experiences in order to understand how their unique upbringing shapes their religious identity, sense of belonging, and purpose.

The design used in this study is a hermeneutic phenomenology. It investigates the lived experiences of born-Adventist EAs in their search for their religious identity as well as the meaning that they ascribed to those experiences. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of born-Adventist EAs as they explore their religious identity in the Philippines?
2. What meaning do born-Adventist EAs ascribe to their lived experiences as they explore their religious identity in the Philippines?

Understanding the lived experiences of born-Adventist EAs is significant in that it provides insights into how they construct and negotiate their identity in a multifaceted environment. Moreover, the findings of this study can support educators, church leaders, and families in fostering the holistic development of EAs as they navigate the intersection of faith, identity, and social belonging.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity is defined as the distinguished character or personality of an individual. It also refers to our sense of who we are as individuals and as members of a social group. The Seventh-day Adventist understanding of identity is ingrained in Scripture which has its foundation on God as the Creator. "God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." (Gen. 1:27 ESV; Gen 2:22–24). An emphasis is placed on the principle that man is created in the image of God as this expression was used for man alone indicating its utmost position in God's act of creation. Being created in the image of God indicates purpose, significance, and the role of man. Man's creation in the image of God indicates his place in creation as superior to other creatures, a little lower than the angels and little less than God (Ps 8:5). Aecio Cairus (2000) posits, "Humans are an image of God, not as an extension of His being, but as a portrait achieved by His creative design" (p. 207). It can be said that created in the image of God can mean purpose, relationship, and autonomy.

Statement of belief #6 in the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventists sums this understanding as "The first man and woman were made in the image of God as the crowning work of

Creation, given dominion over the world, and charged with responsibility to care for it" (Adventist.org, 2025). This Seventh-day understanding of identity can be seen as one sided because it just shows a fixed point when actually defining and understanding identity is a complex issue. Bruinsma (2015) suggests that, "should we insist on defining *the* Adventist identity, that definition should, at the very least, find its center in the sublime assurance that true Adventists are sons and daughters of God" (pp. 6-8).

EAs often question their identity. Literature have shown that EAs are generally college students (Côté, 2002), after which more transitional processes follows. During this identity development period, EAs have many questions pertaining to marriage, carrier, and religious beliefs (Withbourne, Sneed, & Sayer, 2009). Of particular interest of this study is the EAs quest for identity in relation to their religious beliefs. The intersection between faith and social belonging is complex among EAs. On the one hand, several studies have demonstrated the positive influence of religion on human development (Furrow, King, & White, 2004). For the EAs in particular, faith holds a significant place in several dimensions of personal growth, including identity, purpose, social responsibility (Furrow et. al., 2004). Moreover, faith serves as coping mechanism for EAs when confronting with existential questions, especial in dealing with suicidal thoughts (Taliaferro et al., 2009). On the other hand, other factors that contribute to the positive impacts on EAs include educational institutions where they adopt certain values and traits (Park, 2004). EAs in general leave home and seek a strong relationship with others outside (Scarf et al., 2004). For them, a sense of belonging is a prerequisite to benefit from any kind of support system - be it churches, school environment, or general society. There is then a potential for shifts and adaptations in their religious affiliation, during which EAs tend to embrace different views and adopt a range of perspectives. This, in turn, contributes to a decline in their level of religious commitment (Lee, 2002). This pattern is particularly prevalent among college and university students (Bryant et al., 2003; Uecker et al., 2007; Stopa & Lefkowitz, 2010). Therefore, this study explores the lived experiences born-Adventist EAS in order to understand how their unique upbringing shapes their religious identity, sense of belonging, and purpose.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to explore how born-Adventist youth in public universities make sense of their spiritual and social experiences. Rooted in interpreting lived experience, this method was well-suited to examining how faith is internalized within secular contexts. The research was conducted in Silang, Cavite, Philippines, with five purposively selected participants, supplemented by snowball and maximum variation sampling to capture diverse perspectives. Data were collected through online, in-depth interviews (Moustakas, 1994), conducted via Zoom, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified through member checking. Analysis followed Van Manen's lifeworld framework—temporality, spatiality, relationality, corporeality, and materiality—to uncover the dimensions shaping participants' experiences. Trustworthiness was ensured through Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, supported by member checking, triangulation, and detailed documentation.

#### A. *Researchers Reflexivity*

As Adventists shaped by the faith's cultural, spiritual, and educational values, we bring insider insight to this research, but also the risk of bias. To address this, we adopt a reflexive stance, examining how our background may influence interpretation while remaining open to participants' distinct experiences. Guided by hermeneutic phenomenology, we seek to co-create meaning, balancing insider knowledge with critical reflection to ensure participants' voices remain central. While our upbringing provides valuable context, we remain committed to rigor, authenticity, and non-judgment in representing the lived experiences of Adventist students in secular academic settings.

#### *B. Ethical Considerations*

Throughout the study, ethical practices according to Creswell and Poth's (2018) framework were followed. Before conducting the study, permission from the school's Ethical Review Board and gatekeepers was secured. Participants received an invitation letter and an informed consent form, which outlined the study's purpose, confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and their personal information remained anonymous. No physical or mental harm was anticipated, and participants were free to withdraw at any time. During data collection, a safe environment was maintained, and data was securely stored. In the analysis stage, the data were transcribed, translated, and sent to participants for verification. Proper citation practices were followed, and upon publication, copies of the study were shared with contributors and participants.

### **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This section presents the results of the study as well as the discussion with the existing literature. To answer the first research question, the result is presented following Van Manen's (1990) lifeworld elements, namely: spatiality, temporality, relationality, corporeality, and materiality. The meaning-making was also presented to answer the second research question. The section is closed with a statement of essence.

#### *A. Spatiality*

Spatiality refers to how the space or the environment was experienced by the participants as they went through the phenomenon (Van Manen, 2016). Under this lifeworld element, there are three themes emerged: (a) favorable environment, (b) tempted with worldly orientations/inclinations, and (c) Adventist minority.

The participants were studying at the public university; despite this, they found that the environment in the university was favorable. They did not encounter many challenges, especially when it came to Saturday classes. They were not mandated to join the class on Saturday, as one participant mentioned, "People are very accepting of my religion. And from very early, there's not been a conflict, like forcing me to attend or forcing me to show up" (Ruben, p. 17, Codebook 2024). Having the presence of an Adventist professor in the public university was a blessing for the students. One participant noted, "I'm asking for help every time that there's a conflict on my schedule, or yeah, and like Sabbath, then this is going to help me. So it's not much of a struggle to be an Adventist in a non-Adventist school." (Leah, p. 1, Codebook 2024). In addition to that, the classmates were understanding – both Adventist and non-

Adventist friends. The space that was experienced in this setting was rather accommodating for the emerging adult born-Adventist studying in a public university.

However, despite the favorable environment, the participants were not immune to the worldly inclinations or orientations present in the environment. One participant commented, *"Every time that I meet them, my outside church friends, we just want to have fun, try new things, like new things"* (Leah, p. 6, Codebook, 2024). The openness of the environment made it easier to explore activities outside the church, which at times posed challenges to their commitment.

Thus, spatiality in this context was experienced as both accommodating and challenging, marked by supportive structures and relationships, but also shaped by temptations and the realities of being a religious minority. Kuusisto (2009) emphasizes that the religious community shapes youth by instilling denominational values, providing identity, and offering social capital for them and their families. Yet, adolescents also face tensions between belonging and differentiation as they balance minority faith values with wider society, often creating their own meaningful ways of being Adventist.

### B. Temporality

Temporality lifeworld denotes certain incidents that connect participants to their past, present, or future concerning the phenomenon (Van Manen, 1990). In this study, the participants experienced temporality in the forms of (a) painful church experiences, (b) enduring lack of family religious practices, and (c) benefits of church involvement over time. These temporal dimensions reveal how faith experiences are remembered, sustained, and carried forward.

The participants' experiences with the church were not all pleasant. In the present, these emerging adults often feel a sense of loneliness due to generational gaps. As one participant expressed, attending church sometimes felt like being caught 'in between': *"There's the young ones, you can be friends with them, but you can't relate to them. And they can't relate back to you, because the people that you relate to are not here, they have their own set of friends"* (Ruben, p. 21, Codebook 2024). These feelings of disconnection lessened their motivation to participate in church life. Beyond the church setting, participants also recalled negative experiences within their homes, particularly the absence of shared family worship. One reflected: *"Even if we're Adventists, our relationship is not like the traditional relationship of an Adventist family. . . . We're not like that"* (Leah, p. 6, Codebook 2024).

At the same time, participants acknowledged positive formative experiences that shaped their Adventist identity. From a young age, they were introduced to the Lord through Bible stories. These narratives of biblical characters became embedded in their lives, reinforced by daily worship practices common in Adventist homes, such as morning and evening worship. One participant summarized the impact of these practices: *"The good experiences help me grow personally even though I am not in the Adventist community. They also taught me how to stand firm in my faith"* (Rachel, p. 29, Codebook 2024). According to O'Connor et al. (2002), those who did not rebel against their beliefs and who maintained weekly church attendance, were significantly more likely to remain active in their faith. Early religious practices lay the foundation for faith, but adolescent choices and exploration, characteristic of EAs theory (Arnett, 2000), are key in shaping and sustaining religious identity into adulthood.

### C. Relationality

Relationality, or lived relation, refers to how individuals experience themselves in connection with others, whether through intimacy, distance, belonging, or exclusion (Van Manen, 1990). In this study, relationality was evident in family, social, church, and personal interactions. Family and personal influences provided the foundation of faith. Bilha reflected, *"I can include my parents, especially my mother. I saw how faithful she is in her work and in her duties and responsibilities as a church officer"* (p. 33, Codebook 2024). Beyond family influence, Rachel described forming her own conviction: *"When I developed my own idea of how to stand in my own faith, I began to reflect and decided to have my own personal devotion in life, without them instructing me"* (p. 31, Codebook 2024). At the same time, external pressures challenged faith identity. Dina admitted, *"I have not questioned myself, not until that person questioned me that question"* (p. 11, Codebook 2024). Ruben also noted the weight of others' expectations: *"People look up to me, . . . they say that I was good, I was great. So I think it's the people that make me stay"* (p. 17, Codebook 2024).

The church community itself was both supportive and alienating. Leah shared, *"I have a good experience. I think it affects me, my identity as an Adventist. Maybe when the time comes, I'm going to be a missionary like our elders"* (p. 5, Codebook 2024). Yet she also described exclusion: *"I feel being left out sometimes because we have different perspectives. . . . So being an Adventist affects my religion and my other friends who are not Adventist"* (p. 6, Codebook 2024). These contrasting experiences mirror broader findings that spiritual formation is shaped not only by the denominational culture in which individuals are raised, through its teachings and practices, but also by their level of participation in church youth programs (O'Connor et al., 2002). Jacobs et al. (2018) further shown that identity formation is reinforced by structural and relational influences, such as years spent in Adventist schools and the degree of parental involvement in church life. Relationality deeply shaped participants' identities, showing that faith was not only a personal commitment but also something continually formed and tested through relationships with family, peers, church, and the self in relation to others. This dynamic resonates with emerging adulthood theory (Arnett, 2000).

#### D. Corporeality

Corporeality, or lived body, refers to how individuals experience the world through their physical presence, emotions, and embodied identity (Van Manen, 1990). For the participants, corporeality was expressed through fulfillment, jealousy, growth, and changes in outward appearance. Experiencing fulfillment as an Adventist was described as an embodied joy and sense of contentment. Leah reflected, *"We're just laughing, singing, yeah, like that. And I just can't ask for more. I'm content with my religion"* (p. 3, Codebook 2024). Similarly, Bilha emphasized how the embodiment of faith grounded her identity:

*Definitely a wonderful feeling that you get to understand your identity. Because if you don't understand your identity, it's kind of hard to navigate in life. . . . So being an SDA and having faith really helped me navigate the way I should go.* (p. 35, Codebook 2024)

Yet participants also acknowledged experiencing jealousy when their bodily restrictions as Adventists prevented them from joining certain activities. As Leah admitted, *"It's okay for them to go watch cinema without me, but I can't help but get jealous because they get to experience things like that"* (p. 7, Codebook 2024). At the same time, experiencing personal growth was embodied in maturity, self-awareness, and communication. Rachel explained, *"As I grew up and matured in my*

*faith, I realized how important it is to present myself well — how I dress, how I converse, the words I use, and how these affect my interactions*" (p. 31, Codebook 2024). Rachel added, *"The way I dress and how I speak — those are some of the changes I saw in myself"* (p. 31, Codebook 2024). Corporeality was lived through emotions, embodied practices, and visible changes, revealing that faith was not only internal but also deeply expressed and negotiated through the body.

#### E. Materiality

Materiality, or lived things, refers to how individuals experience the physical and material dimensions of life, including resources, practices, and standards that shape their faith (Van Manen, 1990). For the participants, financial constraints were a primary concern, as all noted that the main reason for not attending an Adventist school was the cost. Yet even within such limitations, their Biblical Congruence provided a strong anchor, affirming their conviction to remain Adventist. Ruben shared, *"Because what I can see there, that's true. And it supports the verse that the Bible can be used in many aspects, in teaching, in discipline, etc."* (p. 25, Codebook 2024). Their faith also moved from doctrine to practice, with participants stressing that lived discipleship, more than abstract teachings, sustained their commitment. As Rachel reflected, *"I realized how important it is to be a disciple, especially in this kind of setting"* (p. 30, Codebook 2024). Ramirez et al. (2014) shows that faith identity is also shaped by socialization processes that channel individuals into service and obedience to faith practices.

At times, perceptions versus reality created tensions when others failed to embody the Adventist ideals they valued, but even these struggles reinforced their determination to live out the faith more authentically. The call to uphold Adventist standards was also linked to resilience, as participants chose to stay in the church by reframing negativity into growth. Ruben noted, *"I always give them... a positive view. Because it's easy to lose yourself in sadness and forget to see what beauty lies beyond it"* (p. 24, Codebook 2024). Finally, their dependence on divine guidance was a central reason for staying Adventist. Ruben expressed this reliance clearly: *"Do your best, but leave it to God when you do the things that you do"* (p. 27, Codebook 2024). Viewed through the lens of emerging adult theory (Arnett, 2000), these accounts illustrate how young people navigate identity formation in contexts of uncertainty and competing pressures. For the participants, the interplay of financial hardship, service opportunities, community expectations, and reliance on God reflects both the fluidity and resilience of identity during this life stage. Materiality, then, was not simply about external limitations but about how emerging adults integrated challenges into their ongoing construction of a meaningful Adventist identity.

#### F. Meaning-Making

For born-Adventist emerging adults in public universities, the meaning they ascribe to their experiences centers on faith in God, perseverance through challenges, and viewing their identity as a lifelong journey. First, faith in God gave participants confidence that they were never alone in their struggles. Rachel shared, *"In my personal struggles, I know that the Lord never abandons me. As the verse says, when you are with the Lord, you walk alongside Him"* (p. 31, Codebook 2024). Leah echoed this assurance with a vivid metaphor: *"Even if my life became dark, it's full of darkness, there's one light that I'm seeing, and that light is enough for me to be hopeful that I'll get out of this darkness"* (p. 9, Codebook 2024). Such expressions reveal how faith sustained them through uncertainty. Second,

participants understood challenges as essential for growth. Leah reflected, *"I realize now that those challenges make me a strong person. Like, God gave those challenges for me to be a stronger person"* (p. 9, Codebook 2024). For Ruben, hardships were not only formative but also purposeful: *"Those bad things are necessary for your growth, your upbringing. And maybe, just maybe, it's your calling to experience that so you can help others"* (p. 24, Codebook 2024). Here, difficulties became reframed as part of God's design for resilience and service, reinforcing Arnett's (2000) view of emerging adulthood as a period where struggles are integral to identity exploration and meaning-making.

Finally, participants viewed religious identity as a journey and process. Bilha described this ongoing shaping: *"Being a born Adventist is definitely a journey . . . of identifying your identity, building up your faith, building new relationships, and improving yourself to become a better youth, which is also for other people"* (p. 37, Codebook 2024). Rachel used the image of a flickering candle: *"There are times when struggles make our light grow dim, . . . but since I was rooted and kept drawing closer to Him, my candle keeps producing light"* (pp. 32–33, Codebook 2024). Their metaphors capture both fragility and resilience, showing identity as something continually tested yet renewed. In this sense, faith formation becomes a lifelong journey that matures alongside personal growth (Jankiewicz, 2019). These meanings help explain why, despite the difficulties of navigating secular contexts, they remain rooted in Adventism as both an anchor and a guide for becoming.

## V. STATEMENT OF ESSENCE

Born-Adventist emerging adults studying in public universities represent a minority navigating a complex space of faith and identity. They wrestle with personal battles of self-doubt, fear of losing face, and the lure of worldly temptations, while also experiencing social alienation, envy, and the tension of confronting questions that challenge their Adventist beliefs. Their sense of religious identity is deeply tied to relationships with church, family, and peers, relationships that are at times supportive but often marked by distance or struggle. Yet, despite these challenges, they ascribe meaning to their experiences through faith in God, viewing trials as opportunities for perseverance, and embracing identity as an ongoing journey of growth. Ultimately, being a born-Adventist emerging adult is not only a struggle for belonging but also a path toward resilience and fulfillment in living out their faith.

Future research could examine how Adventist emerging adults navigate religious identity across diverse cultural or university contexts and the long-term effects of church, family, and peer influences on faith development. This study was limited by the imbalance in participant gender (four females and one male), which may have skewed findings toward female perspectives. In a practical sense, churches can foster intergenerational mentorship and safe spaces, families can encourage open dialogue and nurturing practices, and Adventist institutions can provide support systems for students in public universities to help them maintain their faith while managing challenges.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author led the study, conducting interviews and drafting the methodology, results, and discussion. The second author assisted with interviews and developed the biblical framework, while the third author prepared the introduction and literature review. The fourth and fifth authors supported

transcription and formatting. All authors collaborated on data analysis and contributed to refining the manuscript.

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