



BEARING THE LABEL, BREAKING THE MOLD: LIVED EXPERIENCE OF BACKSLIDER PASTOR'S KIDS

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of five backslider pastors' kids (PKs) in Laguna, Philippines. Employing Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and guided by Ecological Systems Theory, and Labeling Theory, the research uncovered ten major themes: Personal, Social, and Spiritual Disruptions; Fractured Faith as a Catalyst for Identity Struggles and Self-Reconstruction; Navigating Inner Turmoil While Searching for Stability and Redemption; From Closeness to Distance and Defiance; Tensions between External Pressures and Internal Faith Journeys; Persuasively Pulled by People, Pressure, and Platforms; Mixed Reactions within Close Circles; Experiencing Shifts in Social Belonging and Treatment; Journey from Shame to Self-Assertion; and Faith Refound, Self Reborn, Connections Restored. The narratives revealed the profound emotional toll of societal expectations, strained familial and church relationships, internalized stigma, and identity fragmentation. Participants described experiences of shame, alienation, and disillusionment, but also demonstrated remarkable resilience by reconstructing personal faith and redefining their identities beyond rigid religious norms. Recognizing the need for holistic support, this study led to the development of Project Rooted, a framework that fosters safe spaces, mentorship, and counseling to aid PKs in navigating faith crises, identity reconstruction, and emotional restoration. By providing structured programs, Project Rooted bridges gaps in familial, social, and church-based support systems, ensuring compassionate guidance for those struggling with their faith journeys. These findings offer valuable

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contributions to the limited literature surrounding PKs in the Philippine context and provide a framework for addressing their unique experiences.

Keywords: *Pastor's Kid (PK), Backslider, Spiritual Struggle, Religious Expectations, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*

INTRODUCTION

"Because being a PK can be very much like living in a pressure cooker. Even though we look just like the other kids and the ingredients are the same, our atmosphere is subtly but massively different." -

Barnabas Piper

Growing up as a pastor's child (PK) presents a range of unique challenges, often characterized by high expectations, intense scrutiny, and the pressures of religious life. As Piper describes, PKs exist in an environment that may outwardly appear normal but carries hidden, complex dynamics. Their lives intersect public ministry and private identity, positioning them as visible reflections of their family's faith and values. While this role provides structure and purpose, it also fosters inner conflicts, emotional strain, and a yearning for autonomy, especially when external expectations overshadow personal growth.

In the Philippine context, where religion holds immense cultural significance, these challenges become even more pronounced. PKs are frequently held to idealized standards, expected to embody unwavering faith and moral excellence. These expectations, though well-intentioned, create a high-pressure environment that allows little room for individuality or failure. Stereotypes often depict PKs as either exemplary Christians or rebellious outliers, overlooking the nuanced realities of their experiences. This dichotomy frequently leads to identity conflicts, as PKs navigate the disparity between public perception and private realities.

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For some PKs, the pressure to conform was met with resistance, and backsliding became a path to self-discovery. Contrary to the common narrative of rebellion, their decision to step away from faith could be understood as an attempt to find authenticity amidst the constraints of their upbringing. Kabuje and Mligo (2021) argued that backsliding often emerged during critical transitions, such as adolescence, when individuals began to explore their beliefs independently. In these pivotal moments, PKs raised under heightened religious expectations might have viewed their spiritual detachment not as a rejection of faith but as a means of survival, healing, and rediscovery. This aligned with Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development, which emphasized identity exploration during adolescence as both necessary and fraught, especially for those confined by rigid societal and familial norms.

Family dynamics further shaped the experiences of PKs. The demanding nature of ministry often created stress within pastoral households, where the emotional toll of church leadership spilled over into family life. Relationships between parents and children were frequently strained as PKs bore the additional burden of supporting their parents’ ministerial work. Jonathan and Gunawan (2021) observed that authoritarian parenting styles—often adopted in clergy households—could push PKs to ward disengagement from faith practices, particularly when they felt their voices and personal struggles were overlooked. In contrast, open communication and nurturing family environments had been shown to foster healthier identity development, although such environments were not always prevalent in pastoral families. The societal pressures PKs faced further compounded these familial challenges. In religious communities, PKs were often perceived as extensions of their parents’ ministry and were expected to uphold the family’s spiritual reputation. This heightened visibility created what Drumm et al. (2020) described as a “fishbowl effect,” where every action of the PK was closely scrutinized by congregants. This constant surveillance fostered anxiety and a sense of isolation, particularly when PKs felt unable to meet the unattainable standards set before them. For some, this pressure led to the adoption of a “double life,” outwardly conforming to religious expectations while privately grappling with doubt, identity conflicts, and struggles that remained hidden from view.

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This thesis explored the lived experiences of backslider pastors' kids, those who stepped away from the faith of their upbringing. Beyond a narrative of spiritual departure, this study delved into the deeply intertwined personal, social, and spiritual disruptions that characterized their journeys. Their stories revealed profound struggles with identity formation, shaped by fractured faith, inner turmoil, and the search for stability and redemption amidst complex familial, societal, and cultural dynamics. By exploring their narratives, this research aimed to foster a deeper understanding of the challenges backslider PKs faced. It shed light on their experiences of alienation, scrutiny, and the journey from shame to self-assertion. Additionally, the study highlighted their resilience, showcasing how they reconstructed faith, rebuilt connections, and reclaimed self-worth in the face of immense societal and religious pressures. Through these narratives, the thesis contributed to the broader discourse on faith, identity, and resilience, particularly within the Philippine context. Ultimately, it advocated for compassionate, grace-centered approaches to support PKs in their complex and transformative journeys, emphasizing the importance of emotional well-being alongside spiritual growth.

METHODS

The study focused on qualitative research, which was defined by Lim (2024) as a methodology for scientific inquiry that emphasized the depth and richness of context and voice in understanding social phenomena. It applied a phenomenological approach to understand the participants' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs regarding their lived experiences as backslider pastors' kids (PKs). This study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as discussed by Hartman & Squires (2024) as a methodology that sought to understand experiences from the perspective of people who had lived through those experiences. IPA wanted to know in detail what the experience for this person was like and what sense this particular person was making of what had happened to them. This method was considered suitable for examining the intricate details needed to understand the phenomenon of backsliding among pastors' kids. This study was conducted among pastors' kids residing in Laguna, Philippines, who had personally experienced backsliding.

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Homogeneous purposive sampling was employed in this study to select five (5) participants who identified as pastors' kids and had experiences of backsliding. The participants were between the ages of 19 and 53, representing both male and female PKs, to capture varied perspectives while maintaining focus on the phenomenon. Inclusion criteria required participants to be (1) must belong to a pastoral household, (2) at least 18 years old, and (3) individuals who had undergone a period of backsliding. Those who had never experienced backsliding were excluded. To maintain confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms such as PK1, PK2, PK3, PK4, and PK5.

A self-constructed semi-structured interview guide was utilized to conduct this study. A 10-item interview questionnaire was developed based on the theoretical frameworks of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner; Guy-Evans, 2022) and Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963; Nickerson, 2023). These questions were designed to elicit in-depth insights on participants' family dynamics, personal faith journeys, societal expectations, and coping mechanisms. The instrument served as the main tool for gathering data, while field notes and contextual observations were also documented to enrich interpretation.

In order to test the validity of the interview guide questions, the study made use of the content validity ratio (CVR) formula developed by Lawshe (Lawshe, 1975 as cited by Dovetail, 2023). This strategy enabled experts to evaluate the items individually according to their relevance and clarity. The minimum inter-judge agreement of 50% was followed, with CVR of 1.00 and a content validity index (CVI) of 1.00 representing high agreement among the experts.

Before the conduct of the study, the researcher secured informed consent from all participants. Saarijärvi and Bratt (2021) highlighted the benefits of virtual interviews for both respondents and researchers, as people could participate without taking into account aspects like distance, travel, or safety. Furthermore, interviews were conducted face-to-face and virtually using Zoom and Google Meet to accommodate participants from different parts of Laguna, ensuring convenience and safety. Prior to each session, rapport was established to

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make the participants feel comfortable and ensure more natural responses. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, and the responses were transcribed verbatim, including fillers and emotional expressions. The transcripts were returned to participants for member checking to verify accuracy.

Finally, a thematic analysis was carried out to identify patterns and key themes within the data. Following the steps described by Creswell (2023), the researcher immersed themselves in the data, carefully reading through it, then coding meaningful segments. From these codes, themes began to emerge and were gradually refined through repeated review. A coding framework was created and consistently applied to the interview transcripts. This process continued until no new themes appeared, indicating saturation. To help organize and manage the data, the researcher used QDA Miner Lite, a free and user-friendly qualitative analysis software. This tool proved very helpful in sorting the data, applying codes, and developing the final themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study attempted to describe the essence of the Lived experience of Backslider Pastor’s Kids in Laguna. Based on the gathered testimonies from the Backslider PKs, the researcher sought out the emergent themes. The themes were as follows: Personal, Social, and Spiritual Disruptions, Fractured Faith as a Catalyst for Identity Struggles and Self-Reconstruction, Navigating Inner Turmoil While Searching for Stability and Redemption, From Closeness to Distance and Defiance, Tensions Between External Pressures and Internal Faith Journeys, Persuasively Pulled by People, Pressure, and Platforms, Mixed Reactions within Close Circles, Experiencing Shifts in Social Belonging and Treatment, Journey From Shame to Self-Assertion, and Faith Refound, Self Reborn, Connections Restored.

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Interview Question Number 1: What specific experiences or events in your life do you feel contributed most to your backsliding?

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER'S OBSERVATION
PK2	<i>Siguro po, the fact na nagkaroon ng pandemic, kasi parang dun sobrang na-open ang social media eh. Then, parang, uh, nalulong ako sa social media, there's some posts that I've seen on TikTok, na there were stuff na napabilib ako na baka nga may ganito, may ganyan. Kasi there was one video na napanood ko na parang, at the time na -intrigue ako and sabi niya dun sa video na yun, commentary kasi siya, parang he believes naman na there's a God, but he doesn't believe that it's that God mismo or it's that powerful para mag-ano and parang, I don't know anong meron sa akin nun, pero parang naapektuhan ako sa pagkatao ko din. Nagsisimba kami sa bahay lang, nagkoconduct yung church namin ng parang live sa kani-kanilang bahay para matuloy mo lang sunday worship. But yung dating parang feeling ko na saya sa mga events on church, sa mga youth camps, sa mga anniversaries, parang it was slowly fading. Tapos parang nagkaroon ako ng sariling, siguro, mindset sa mga bagay na yun.</i>	PK2 was observed with a tone of reflection and quiet realization.
PK3	<i>Siguro yung sa ano, Yung pagkaroon na rin ng issue ng Father ko sa ibang babae. Yun, isa na rin yun. Pinaka-ano, pinaka napakalaking ambag. Kasi wala na eh, parang ano, parang ang dating na lang sa akin eh nag-ibang bansa lang tatay ko tapos yun na eh. Wala na. Tapos eh... Ah paano ba? Bale Ano eh. Ah siyempre 'di ba, bilang anak, kailangan pa rin bigyan ng malaking respeto pa rin yung magulang mo. So nagkaroon kami ng issue ng family ng mother ko tsaka father ko dahil dun sa ginawa yun kasi binigyan ko pa rin ng malaking ano eh, malaking ah respeto yung tatay ko kahit gumawa siya ng ganun. So umuwi siya rito, parang walang nangyari. Tapos yun na. Yung isa naging issue. Then money issues, yun, mga ganyan</i>	PK3 was observed with emotional fatigue and disappointment.

Under the theme **Personal, Social, and Spiritual Disruptions**, the stories of backslider PKs (Pastor’s Kids) reveal a slow, complex unraveling of faith. Their spiritual decline wasn’t marked by a single moment of rebellion, but rather a gradual drift—shaped by personal

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struggles, shifting social influences, family tensions, and exposure to alternative worldviews. These disruptions didn't happen in isolation; they were woven into the fabric of their everyday lives, often unnoticed until the distance from their faith became undeniable.

One recurring subtheme was the **Influence of Secular Circles**. As PKs ventured beyond the church community, they encountered peer groups that challenged their inherited values and reshaped their sense of identity. PK1 reflected, "Pagka ikay nakisama sa hindi mo kakulay, tiyak mapapahamak ka... nung ako'y nagkatrabaho, nagkabarkada, so maling barkada yung aking nasamahan... tell me who your friend and I will tell who you are." Similarly, PK4 shared, "It was me wanting to explore the world... I wanted to see what else is out there, parang ganon. More on social and then, um, tried out yung mga vices, ganyan... building yung mga community na non-believers, ganyan, friends, ganyan." These reflections show how peer relationships offered a sense of belonging but also pulled them away from the spiritual foundations laid by their families. Their experiences echo findings by Giletta et al. (2021) and Keyzers et al. (2020), who emphasize that peer pressure plays a pivotal role in youth identity formation, often leading to internal conflict and hidden rebellion.

Another significant disruption came through **Online Exposure**, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. With physical church gatherings suspended, digital platforms became the new space for exploration—and for some, confusion. PK2 shared, "Nagkaroon ng pandemic, kasi parang dun sobrang na-open ang social media... there were stuff na napabilib ako... may video na nagsabi he believes naman na there's a God, but he doesn't believe that it's that God mismo... naapektuhan ako sa pagkatao ko din." This moment of vulnerability illustrates how social media introduced alternative spiritual narratives that challenged traditional beliefs. As Ehlebracht (2022) notes, digital platforms decentralize religious authority, allowing individuals to question and reshape their spiritual views outside institutional boundaries.

Family Disillusionment also emerged as a powerful force in weakening spiritual commitment. PK3 recounted, "Yung pagkakaroon na rin ng issue ng ano, ng father ko sa ibang babae... pinaka napakalaking ambag. Kasi wala na eh, parang ang dating na lang sa akin eh

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uh nag-ibang bansa lang tatay ko tapos yun na eh.” PK5 added, “Medyo madami din po kasi 'yung family issues namin. So siguro ayun din po 'yung isa dun sa reason kung bakit nag-backslide ako.” These testimonies reveal how moral failures and unresolved conflicts within the family—especially when involving spiritual leaders—can deeply wound a PK’s faith. Prior research supports this, showing that ministry pressures and family dysfunction often leave PKs feeling neglected and spiritually disoriented (Makena et al., 2023; Simeo et al., 2024).

The theme of **Moral Incongruence** further highlights the internal tension PKs experience when witnessing hypocrisy in their religious environments. PK5 expressed, “May nagawa pong masama 'yung nanay ko. Tapos ilalagay niya po 'yun sa sermon niya... parang sasabihin niya po sa scripture niya, dapat magpatawad ka lang kung nagre-repent na 'yung tao... since ako, hindi ko din po gusto 'yung ganung turo, ayun, medyo umiiwas din po ako sa nanay.” For PK5, the disconnect between biblical teachings and their distorted application created cognitive dissonance, leading not just to emotional withdrawal but to spiritual rejection. Kabuje and Mligo (2021) argue that hypocrisy within faith institutions fosters doubt, while Jonathan and Gunawan (2021) highlight how authoritarian religious parenting can intensify moral conflict and rebellion.

Lastly, **Faith Doubts During the Pandemic** compounded these disruptions. The absence of communal worship and spiritual mentorship left many PKs isolated, vulnerable to questioning long-held beliefs. PK2 admitted that digital content led them to rethink traditional doctrines. This reflects broader findings that the pandemic disrupted religious engagement, prompting many young believers to seek meaning outside institutional religion (Jocson & Garcia, 2021; Zhang, 2025). Some disengaged entirely, while others redefined their spirituality in more personal, individualized ways (Herdiansyah et al., 2024).

Taken together, these narratives show that backsliding among PKs is not simply an act of rebellion—it is the result of layered disruptions across personal, social, and spiritual domains. Peer influence, online exposure, family disillusionment, moral tension, and pandemic-related isolation all contributed to a slow erosion of faith. This aligns with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which explains how microsystem conflicts

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(family, church), exosystem influences (media, peer groups), and macrosystem values (cultural norms) interact to shape identity and belief systems.

Interview Question Number 2: How has stepping away from your faith influenced your sense of identity and self-understanding?

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER'S OBSERVATION
PK1	<i>Mess, Sira, Magulo, Walang kabuluhan, Pamilya, Lahat Pangit.</i>	PK1 was observed with emotional distress, highlighting the overwhelming feelings of loss.
PK5	<i>Like sa understanding ko po, parang parang sa self-understanding ko, parang after nung pandemic, like uniwis na nga po ako, like nag-question na po ako ng faith ko tapos doon na din po nag ano na parang mas nakilala ko din po 'yung sarili ko like outside the religion. Kasi ano, parang doon ko na din nabigyan ng personality 'yung sarili ko na hindi parang revolving kay God. Parang doon ko din po mas like minahal 'yung sarili ko. Na parang hindi ko na din masyadong kailangan isipin 'yung pagkakamali ko palagi. Kasi nung nandoon po talaga pag like nandoon po ako sa part na kasama ko 'yung family ko na nandoon din na under din po ng religion na 'yun is parang lagi akong nagwa-walk on eggshells na parang ang hirap magkamali. Ganun.</i>	PK5 was observed with feelings of empowerment, reflecting a sense of personal agency and self-confidence that arose from navigating her unique journey as a PK. This empowerment was observed in her ability to reclaim her identity and assert her individuality as a person.

Under the theme **Fractured Faith as a Catalyst for Identity Struggle and Self-Reconstruction**, the narratives of backslider PKs (Pastor's Kids) reveal that stepping away from faith was not merely an act of rebellion—it was a deeply personal and often painful journey. Their testimonies show how spiritual disengagement disrupted their sense of self, leading to emotional turmoil, identity confusion, and eventually, efforts to rebuild who they were. This process unfolded through layered subthemes that reflect the complex relationship between losing faith and finding oneself.

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One prominent subtheme was the **Fragmentation of the Self**, where PKs described feeling emotionally shattered and spiritually lost. PK1 captured this inner chaos with raw honesty: “Mess. Sira. Magulo. Walang kabuluhan. Pariwara. Lahat. Pangit. Yes Sira. Sira talaga. Tama po.” PK3 echoed this descent, admitting, “Mas lumala ako... sagad ako sa bisyo... may pagkakataon... nakapag-take ako ng marijuana.” These confessions reflect how the absence of spiritual grounding led to instability and self-destructive behavior. Scholars have noted that PKs often live with dual identities—expected to uphold public moral standards while privately wrestling with doubt and pressure (Garber, 2022; Canesares et al., 2023).

Closely tied to this was the subtheme **Identity Conflict**, which captured the tension between inherited spiritual roles and emerging personal beliefs. PK2 shared, “Parang siguro noong time na nangyare yon... I was starting to question myself,” while PK4 reflected, “Growing up... I know I’m someone different... challenging to know ano ba talagang for me, parang ganon.” These reflections reveal how PKs struggled to define themselves outside the expectations placed on them. Drumm et al. (2020) describe this as role entrapment, where PKs feel confined by the pastoral image they’re expected to embody. This conflict is often intensified by labeling—being called “rebellious” or “prodigal”—which reinforces internal doubt and shapes self-perception (Nickerson, 2023; Barna Group, 2020).

The theme of **Religious Disillusionment** emerged as PKs began to question the sincerity and consistency of their faith practices. PK2 admitted, “Ginagawa ko lang sya pero hindi talaga gawa sa puso ko... I felt like na parang napipilitan na lang ako mag-devotion,” while PK5 shared, “Nag-question din po ako dun sa ibang scriptures... parang nagulat din po ako... ganun pala ‘yung ugali ni God.” These statements reflect a growing disconnect between religious rituals and personal conviction. Research supports this, showing that when churches fail to provide safe spaces for doubt and dialogue, young believers often feel alienated and spiritually betrayed (Kabuje & Mligo, 2021; Büssing et al., 2022).

In contrast, the subtheme **Self-Acceptance and Freedom** offered a glimpse into the healing that can follow spiritual detachment. PK2 expressed, “Mas malaya ako na lumayo ako sa Panginoon,” while PK5 reflected, “Mas nakilala ko din po ‘yung sarili ko like outside the

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religion... doon ko din po mas minahal 'yung sarili ko." These narratives suggest that stepping away from rigid religious structures allowed PKs to explore their identities more freely and develop self-compassion. Studies affirm that redefining spirituality in personally meaningful ways can foster resilience and emotional recovery (Leonhardt et al., 2023; Miller & Miller, 2021).

This journey of self-discovery also included the **Exploration of Sexual and Gender Identity**, a theme that surfaced as PKs began to question aspects of themselves often suppressed in religious contexts. PK2 acknowledged being influenced by "the world of LGBTQ," while PK5 shared, "Nag-question din po ako ng sexuality ko after... nag-question ng faith ko." These experiences highlight how leaving faith created space to explore identities that may have been stigmatized or silenced within church environments. Research confirms that rigid doctrinal views can contribute to exclusion and psychological distress, while affirming spaces promote healthier identity integration (Kay et al., 2022; Okrey et al., 2021).

Finally, the subtheme **Reorientation and Reconnection through Personal Growth** illustrated how some PKs found their way back to faith—but on their own terms. PK2 reflected, "Even though it was a bad phase... it helped me grow as a person and grew closer to God... nabaptize na ako a year after." This suggests that spiritual detachment, while painful, can also be transformative. Some PKs reconstruct their beliefs through personal reflection, mentorship, and nontraditional expressions of spirituality (Herdiansyah et al., 2024; Zhang, 2025).

These subthemes show that fractured faith is not the end of belief—it is often the beginning of a deeper, more authentic search for identity. For some PKs, the journey led through disillusionment and rebellion; for others, it opened doors to self-acceptance and spiritual renewal. This process reflects Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains how family dynamics, church culture, peer influence, and societal norms interact to either fragment or reconstruct a young person's faith and identity.

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Interview Question Number 3: What did you feel while going through this change? How did you manage it?

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER'S OBSERVATION
PK1	<i>Ano ah, Kakulangan. Kakulangan. Marami eh. Halos hindi mo kasi ma-speak pagka, hindi mo masabi pagka yung sinabing kakulangan pagka wala ka sa piling ng Panginoon, wala ka sa presensya ng Panginoon. Ang pinaka-sira ka.</i>	PK1 was observed with deep emotional struggle, reflecting the weight of spiritual disconnection.
PK5	<i>Uh, nung una po talaga sobrang nafeel bad po ako na ano, na hindi na po ako palaging uma-attend ng church tapos hindi na din po ako sumasama masyado sa devotion ng family namin. Hindi ko na lang din po pinansin 'yung 'yung parang nag-turn like, hindi ko na lang po talaga siya pinansin. Parang nagbulag-bulagan din po ako ganun. Kaya ano, parang doon ko po siya na-manage na parang doon na lang po ako hindi naging mafeel bad. Tapos 'yung mga nakakasama ko din po kasi na 'yung mga friends ko din po is nag-backslide din po. Although hindi po sila din anak ng pastor, ganun. Uh, mga sila, uh, nagko-question din po sila ng faith nila. So ayun, parang doon din po ako nag, parang doon ko po din na-manage 'yung thoughts ko 'tsaka 'yung feelings ko about doon.</i>	PK5 was observed with adaptability despite the emotional struggle.

Under the theme **Navigating Inner Turmoil While Searching for Stability and Redemption**, the lived experiences of backslider PKs (Pastor’s Kids) reveal that spiritual detachment was not a simple act of rejection—it was a deeply layered journey marked by emotional weight, psychological conflict, and a longing for clarity. Their stories show that backsliding often emerged from a place of pain, confusion, and unmet needs, gradually unfolding into a process of self-examination and, for some, spiritual renewal.

A recurring subtheme was **Emotional Turmoil and Spiritual Disconnection**, where PKs described feeling overwhelmed by guilt, frustration, and a growing sense of distance from God. PK1 shared, “Marami, marami kong naramdaman na hindi maganda... maraming napariwara ang buhay ko. Kung saan-saan ako napunta, nakikipaghambulan ako sa mga pulis, katatago. Dahil nga kasi, mali yung ginagawa mo.” PK5 echoed this, saying,

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"Nung una talaga sobrang nag-guilty po ako... what if magalit si Lord kasi hindi na po ako masyadong malapit sa kanya... Nung una, nafi-feel bad po ako pero habang tumatagal po, parang nagiging wala na lang po siya." These reflections reveal how spiritual guilt and emotional exhaustion often coexist, creating a cycle of disengagement and self-blame. Research supports this, showing that PKs frequently use spiritual withdrawal as a coping mechanism when expectations become overwhelming (Garber, 2022; Upenieks, 2022; Eproson Jr., 2021).

The theme of **Isolation** further illustrated how PKs felt emotionally cut off from their families and communities. PK3 recounted, "Pakiramdam ko solo ako... may pagkakataon pa na may sakit na ako, ako pa rin yung bibili ng gamot ko. So ibig sabihin, hindi... pwedeng mag-utos sa parents mo... sabihin niya malaki ka na, ganun." This sense of being left to fend for oneself, even in moments of vulnerability, reflects the emotional absence that can result from parental burnout or ministry-related stress. Studies by Makena et al. (2023) and Hennigan (2024) affirm that the demands of pastoral life often reduce emotional availability, leaving PKs feeling neglected and alone.

Another subtheme, **Rebellion and the Thrill of Autonomy**, captured how some PKs turned to secular experiences as a way to assert independence and reclaim agency. PK2 admitted, "Parang baga nagre-rebelde ako... even though nasa bahay lang ako I was doing a lot of stuff... it was exciting. Looking back at it now, it was sad na ganoon na nangyari sa akin." PK4 added, "Seeing what the world could offer... akala ko 'yun 'yung maganda, 'yun 'yung masaya... Which is hindi pala." These accounts suggest that rebellion was not always about rejecting faith—it was often about exploring identity outside rigid expectations. Labeling Theory (Nickerson, 2023) explains how being branded as "rebellious" can reinforce such behavior, while other scholars argue that rebellion can be a necessary stage in forming authentic selfhood (Kabuje & Mligo, 2021; Mantsinen & Tervo-Niemelä, 2020).

For some, this rebellion transitioned into **Avoidance and Emotional Numbing**, where PKs coped by emotionally detaching from faith altogether. PK5 described, "Parang hindi

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ko na lang din po pinansin... Parang nagbulag-bulagan din po ako ganun... doon na lang po ako hindi naging ma-feel bad.” This kind of avoidance reflects a protective response to spiritual and emotional overload. Research shows that when religiosity is imposed rather than chosen, it can lead to disengagement and psychological distress (Herdiansyah et al., 2024; Kanco-Ackep, 2024).

Yet amid the chaos, a redemptive thread emerged in the form of **Gradual Reconnecting**. Some PKs described moments of reflection and gentle re-entry into faith. PK3 shared, “Actually, hindi ako ang may kagagawan kung ba’t ako nakabalik... yung naging asawa ko ngayon ang nag-invite sa akin na simba ulit ako.” PK4 added, “Hindi rin siya abrupt change kasi sobrang gentle ni Lord in doing the sanctification process... up to now, 'yun pa rin 'yung process.” These stories suggest that spiritual renewal often comes not through dramatic conversion, but through quiet, relational invitations and personal growth. Garber (2022) views backsliding as potentially adaptive—a transitional phase that can lead to deeper, more authentic faith. This is supported by Kabuje and Mligo (2021), who note that emerging adulthood is a critical time for reevaluating and redefining spirituality.

Overall, these subthemes show that the journey through inner turmoil is rarely linear. For PKs, spiritual disengagement was often a response to emotional pain, unmet expectations, and identity confusion—not a rejection of belief, but a search for stability and meaning. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans, 2020) helps illuminate how family dynamics, peer influence, and church culture interact to either fragment or nurture spiritual development. At the same time, Labeling Theory (Nickerson, 2023) reveals how societal judgments—such as being called “prodigal” or “rebellious”—can shape not only behavior but the path toward self-reclamation.

Interview Question Number 4: How have your relationships with your family changed since you left the faith?

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PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER'S OBSERVATION
PK1	<i>Well, nagbago talaga dahil kasi hindi ako umuwi ng hindi na ako umuwi ng a year. Las pinas to Laguna lang. Parang hindi ko sila namimiss. So, ganun din sa aking asawa, nung nagka-asawa na ako, kahit may bahay ako, hindi ako natutulog sa bahay namin. Nakikitulog ako sa barkada ko. Kaya magulo talaga. Magulong buhay.</i>	PK1 answered with a low tone reminiscing the period of physical and emotional detachment with his family.
PK3	<i>Ah, wala nang pakialamanan. Ganun. Ah kumbaga... ah sila mahilig ano, mahilig magsabi, 'Oh gawin mo 'to, gawin mo, ganyan ganyan.' Pero para sa akin, parang, 'Ayoko nga, bakit ba?' Parang ganun. Kumbaga ano na ako, ah rebeldeng-rebelde na talaga ang datingan, ganun. Na konting ano lang eh big issues na. Ganun.</i>	PK3 proudly answered the question <u>while expressing</u> his struggles with familial tensions and unmet emotional needs

The theme **From Closeness to Distance and Defiance** captures the emotional and relational shifts experienced by pastors’ kids (PKs) as they moved from spiritual intimacy to disconnection, tension, and at times, open resistance. What began as close-knit family bonds often unraveled under the weight of unmet emotional needs, strained communication, and the quiet burden of religious expectations. Drawing from Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans, 2020) and Labeling Theory (Nickerson, 2023), this theme traces how PKs’ relational journeys evolved—from withdrawal and conflict to selective connection, rebellion, and internalized pressure.

One recurring subtheme was **Physical and Emotional Withdrawal from Family**, where PKs described intentionally distancing themselves from both home life and spiritual routines. PK1 recalled, “Well, nagbago talaga dahil kasi hindi ako umuwi ng hindi na ako umuwi ng a year... kahit may bahay ako, hindi ako natutulog sa bahay namin.” PK3 echoed this sense of isolation: “Pakiramdam ko na bago ako mag-backslide, naramdaman ko na na para akong solo na... hanggang sa nag-decide na lang ako. Malaki na yung gap namin.” These reflections reveal how emotional withdrawal often preceded spiritual disengagement, a pattern supported by Makena et al. (2023), who highlight the impact of pastoral stress on

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children’s emotional well-being. PKs often internalize judgment and suppress their emotions, using detachment as a shield against conflict (Garber, 2022; Nickerson, 2023).

The subtheme **Strained Communication and Conflict Escalation** showed how emotional distance often led to tension and misunderstanding. PK2 described the discomfort of silence at home: “Awkward na sa bahay... parang ang ingay ng silence, nakakabingi yung silence sobra. Kaya gusto ko agad matapos kumain.” PK3 added, “Na konting ano lang eh big issues na. Ganun. Konting issue... big issue na yun.” These accounts reflect how minor disagreements could quickly escalate, especially in environments shaped by rigid parenting styles. Jonathan and Gunawan (2021) note that authoritarian approaches often intensify familial conflict, while Nickerson (2023) explains how labeling PKs as “rebellious” can deepen relational rifts and reinforce oppositional behavior.

In the subtheme **Rebellion and Assertion of Autonomy**, PKs described moments of resistance—not as acts of defiance for defiance’s sake, but as efforts to reclaim personal agency. PK3 shared, “Wala nang pakialamanan... sila mahilig magsabi, pero para sa akin, ‘Ayoko nga, bakit ba?’” PK5 recounted a moment of conflict with his father: “Tapos nalaman po ng dad ko ‘yun... nagsabi pa po siya ng Bible verse... tapos nagalit din po siya.” These stories reflect rebellion as a developmental step toward independence. Garber (2022) frames such defiance as a response to role entrapment, while Canesares et al. (2023) argue that the pressure to embody the “model Christian child” often fuels oppositional behavior.

Even in the midst of rebellion, PKs spoke of **Silent Pressures to Conform**—unspoken expectations and subtle guilt that shaped their choices. PK5 admitted, “Minsan ‘pag pinipilit pa rin po ako mag-church... sinasabi ko lang po na busy po ako.” These quiet negotiations reflect the influence of Bronfenbrenner’s macrosystem (Guy-Evans, 2020), where cultural and religious norms impose invisible demands for compliance. Research shows that such pressures can lead to internal conflict, as PKs struggle between distancing themselves and meeting spiritual expectations (Garber, 2022; Barna Group, 2020; Upenieks, 2022).

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Yet amid the tension, the subtheme **Selective Understanding and Supportive Bonds** offered a glimpse of hope. Some PKs found comfort in family members who responded with empathy rather than judgment. PK5 shared, "Although 'yung mom ko naman po is very understanding about dun sa part na nag-question po ako ng faith." PK4 added, "Wala siyang change... doon ko siguro ma-appreciate how gentle and understanding they were." These moments of connection align with Miller and Miller's (2021) strength-based parenting, which emphasizes warmth and flexibility as protective factors during spiritual crises. Makena et al. (2023) also note that even partial emotional support can help PKs stay anchored, preventing complete detachment.

The movement from closeness to distance and defiance reveals how PKs' relationships were shaped by emotional gaps, rigid expectations, and the weight of religious identity. Some withdrew quietly, others pushed back loudly, while a few found solace in selective bonds. These experiences suggest that backsliding was rarely about rejecting faith—it was often about navigating the tension between inherited roles and personal autonomy. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory helps explain how strained microsystem interactions influence developmental outcomes, while Labeling Theory shows how being branded as "rebellious" or "prodigal" can reinforce the very behaviors those labels seek to condemn.

Interview Question Number 5: How do societal expectations and religious norms influence your decision to backslide or remain distant from the church?

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PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER'S OBSERVATION
PK2	<p><u>Yung the typical saying na, ah, anak ka pala ng pastor or like, ah, anak ka pala ng leader or ganyan. So, parang it was hard but there were some people na just parang chill lang and dun sa siguro, religious expectation, yung lala na yung mga people sa church like mga other leaders, mga other elders, ganyan. Nakakasakal. Kasi parang iisipin nila na, ah, yung anak ng dalawang to na mr and mrs ganyan ay hindi sumasali sa ministry, hindi umattend ng devotion, hindi gumagawa sa mga gawain sa simbahan, and nagpre-preach sila and anak nila nandyan lang. Nasa isip ko na baka iisipin nila na my parents are going that far na, let's say, spread the word of God sa mga unreligious people pero at the same time anak nila hindi nila maganon. <u>Kaya, nakakasakal sa kin, pero, wala kong magawa.</u></u></p>	<p>PK2 answered with frustration and traces of irritation while answering this question.</p>
PK5	<p>"Oh, anak ka ng pastor. Bakit ganyan 'yung ugali mo?" Eh parang naging expectation na din po kasi na kapag anak ka ng pastor, modest ka manamit tapos palagi mong ikwe-kwento 'yung about kay God tapos like 'yung mabait ka, kailangan na maging ah kailangan na hindi ka ganun ka-ano sa mga, parang hindi ka ganun ka-open. Parang ganun po 'yung naging perspective nila sa mga anak ng pastor, "Oh, anak ka ng pastor, bakit hindi mo alam 'tong verse na 'to?" or "Anak ka ng pastor, bakit wala kang alam about dito?" So parang isa din po 'yun sa reason kung bakit ako nag-backslide kasi parang ang ine-expect po nila is since anak ka ng pastor, dapat alam mo na kaagad lahat. Ganun.</p>	<p>PK5 seems irritated while answering this question; traces of anger were still observed while she was reflecting on her experiences.</p>

The theme **Tensions Between External Pressures and Internal Faith Journeys** captures the quiet yet powerful struggle many pastors' kids (PKs) face as they try to reconcile the expectations placed on them with their own evolving sense of spirituality. On the outside, they are often seen as moral exemplars—expected to uphold religious ideals and reflect their family's ministry. But behind the scenes, many wrestle with doubts, temptations, and questions about who they are and what they truly believe. Their stories reveal a complex dance between conformity and authenticity, shaped by societal norms, family dynamics, and personal exploration.

One recurring subtheme was **Temptations and Worldly Influence**, where PKs described being drawn to experiences that offered a sense of freedom and pleasure—often in stark contrast to their religious upbringing. PK1 reflected, "...kung dati kang laking simbahan, tapos napapunta ka sa sanlibutan... yung offer niya napakasarap talaga siyempre, babae, bisyo, sugal, alak... Basta doon sa pera magsisimula yun, ilalayo ka niya." PK4 added, "So it's

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easier to be influenced... 'yung temporary or momentary na happiness or joy... Madaling makabulag as in kasi 'yun 'yung worldly standards eh.” These accounts show that secular exploration was not always about rebellion—it was often a way to cope with stress, curiosity, and the desire for autonomy (Canesaes et al., 2023; Eproson Jr., 2021). Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans, 2020) helps explain how exposure to new peer groups and cultural environments expanded their worldview, sometimes leading to spiritual disengagement (Leonhardt et al., 2023).

The subtheme **Pressure from Religious Expectations** revealed how PKs felt burdened by the roles they were expected to play. Many carried the weight of their parents’ reputation in ministry, even when they were privately struggling. PK2 shared, “Nakakasakal... kasi parang iisipin nila... anak ng dalawang to... ay hindi sumasali sa ministry, hindi umaattend ng devotion... Kaya, nakakasakal saakin, pero wala kong magawa.” PK5 recalled being judged by a counselor: “Since anak ka ng pastor... oh, anak ka ng pastor bakit hindi mo alam 'tong verse na 'to?... isa din po 'yun sa reason kung bakit ako nag-backslide.” These experiences reflect the emotional toll of living under constant scrutiny. Research shows that such expectations can heighten anxiety and suppress personal struggles (Drumm et al., 2020; Garber, 2022). Labeling Theory (Nickerson, 2023) further explains how being branded as a “model believer” or “prodigal child” can distort self-perception and reinforce internal conflict.

Despite these pressures, many PKs embarked on their own **Exploration of Faith and Personal Journey**. Some experimented with different denominations, while others sought meaning outside traditional religious frameworks. PK3 described this process: “Nag-search din talaga ako... Nagkaroon din akong girlfriend Catholic... Iba-ibang churches na... Kasi parang nag-e-explore ka kung saan mas mas magiging healthy yung lifestyle mo. Eh kaso, wala namang church na perfect eh.” PK4, meanwhile, appreciated the grace shown by their family: “Hindi naman contributed kasi ano 'yun eh, mainly my own decision... As in they treated everyone with grace.” These reflections show that backsliding was often a form of individuation—a way to explore faith on one’s own terms (Kabuje & Mligo, 2021; Garber,

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2022). Yet, as Upenieks (2022) notes, the stigma surrounding backsliding can deepen feelings of isolation and disconnection.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that backsliding among PKs is rarely a simple rejection of faith. It is more often a nuanced journey of negotiating identity, autonomy, and spiritual meaning. Some embraced secular freedoms, others felt trapped by religious roles, and many eventually carved out personal paths toward belief. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (Guy-Evans, 2020) helps illuminate how changing social environments and life stages shaped these outcomes, while Labeling Theory (Nickerson, 2023) shows how societal branding can reinforce the very doubts and detachment it seeks to prevent.

Interview Question Number 6: How have external factors such as work, school, or media influenced your religious beliefs and your decision to backslide?

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER’S OBSERVATION
PK1	<i>Yung naka-influencia kasi sa akin yan. Nung ako yung nagsimula ng magtrabaho tapos kumikita ka <u>na, and</u> then marami kang nagiging kaibigang tiga sanlibutan, sila ang magtuturo sa’yo ng ano eh, ang aakay sa’yo na lumayo eh. Tapos isa pa, hindi ka nagsisimba, panay trabaho ka na lang, yun ang magbubunsod na mapalayo ka sa ating pangnoon. Actually, yung paaralan, hindi naman masama yan eh. Lahat ng ano, kahit trabaho, hindi masama. Kahit paaralan, hindi masama. Ang masama lang, yung desisyon natin, yung maling desisyon na magpaalipin tayo dun sa trabaho, magpaalipin tayo sa pag-aaral.</i>	PK1 smiled and answered the question enthusiastically. He also <u>answered</u> with a warm tone as he recalled his experiences with his peers.
PK2	<i><u>Um, ayun, parang nababad lang talaga ako at the point na kung ano yung nakikita ko ayun na yung pinapaniwalaan ko. Kasi when it comes to, let’s say, TikTok, ganyan, kung anong lumabas sa newsfeed mo and ayun yung mga sinesearch mo ayun na yung madalas nang lumilitaw sa for you page mo, diba? Kaya parang nung na-intrigue ako and nag -search ako about that, ayun na yung laging lumalabas sa for you page ko. And pag ako kasi ganon pati sa YouTube, nag -search din ako. Kasi ang TikTok ay usually it only</u></i>	PK2 <u>smiled</u> and answered this question. He keenly recalled his phase of curiosity during the pandemic.

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The theme **Persuasively Pulled by People, Pressure, and Platforms** captures the subtle yet powerful forces that shaped the spiritual journeys of pastors' kids (PKs). Their stories reveal that backsliding was rarely a sudden break from faith—it was a slow drift, often beginning with small shifts in social circles, exposure to secular ideas, or the quiet weight of expectations. Over time, these influences deepened into struggles with conformity, identity, and belief. This theme illustrates how external pressures—peers, performance culture, and digital media—interacted with internal conflicts, leading to emotional strain and spiritual redefinition.

A recurring subtheme was **Immersion in Unbelieving Social Circles**, where PKs described how friendships outside the church slowly chipped away at their spiritual grounding. PK1 shared, "Yung naka-influencia kasi sa akin yan. Nung ako yung nagsimula ng magtrabaho tapos kumikita ka na, and then marami kang nagiging kaibigang tiga sanlibutan, sila ang magtuturo sa'yo ng ano eh, ang aakay sa'yo na lumayo eh." PK3 echoed this, saying, "Sa school... mga tropa na unbeliever din. Ganun din sa trabaho, puro unbeliever... mahina na, mahina ka na spiritually tapos kasama mo pa talagang mga unbeliever pa... imbes na ikaw makahatak, talaga ikaw mahahatak nila." These reflections mirror findings by Keyzers et al. (2020) and Giletta et al. (2021), who emphasize how peer dynamics during adolescence and young adulthood shape identity and values. Within Bronfenbrenner's microsystem, peer groups act as powerful agents of socialization, often overriding familial or church influence (Guy-Evans, 2020). While some PKs resisted these pressures, others found themselves adopting secular identities, consistent with Leonhardt et al.'s (2023) view that exposure to alternative ideologies can spark personal exploration but also tension with inherited beliefs.

The subtheme **Performance Pressure and Overidentification with Achievement** revealed how PKs internalized the need to succeed—not just spiritually, but academically and professionally. PK4 explained, "Sa work and uh academics, iisa lang 'yan eh... which is to be successful. 'Yan 'yung um standard ng world eh... And 'pag expose ka doon sa mga people na performer and naturally the world it is based on performance." PK1 added, "Tapos isa pa, hindi ka nagsisimba, panay trabaho ka na lang, yun ang magbubunsod

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na mapalayo ka sa ating Panginoon.” These accounts reflect how achievement-driven environments can overshadow spiritual priorities. Mathiu et al. (2021) note that youth identity formation often becomes tied to performance, and for PKs, this pressure is compounded by the expectation to embody religious ideals. Garber (2022) and Miller & Miller (2021) describe this as role entrapment—where PKs juggle multiple roles, often at the cost of emotional well-being. Labeling Theory (Nickerson, 2023) suggests that when PKs prioritize academics or careers, they may be branded as “worldly” or “spiritually distant,” reinforcing guilt and hastening disengagement.

Another subtheme, **Media as a Source of Doubt and Redirection of Belief**, highlighted how digital platforms reshaped PKs’ theological perspectives. PK2 shared, “Parang nababad lang talaga ako... kung ano yung nakikita ko ayun na yung pinapaniwalaan ko... TikTok... YouTube... every time na pop up YouTube.” PK5 added, “May mga lumalabas din po kasi sa social media ko na kaya daw po sila nag-backslide. Kasi hindi na din daw nila nagugustuhan 'yung mga scripture sa Bible.” These narratives reflect the growing influence of online spaces in shaping spiritual thought. Ehlebracht (2022) and Zhang (2025) argue that social media decentralizes theological authority, offering diverse interpretations that can destabilize traditional beliefs. Levin (2024) found that digital platforms serve both as tools for spiritual exploration and as catalysts for skepticism. Within Bronfenbrenner’s exosystem, platforms like TikTok and YouTube become powerful external environments that shape identity and belief (Guy-Evans, 2020). Without intentional guidance, these spaces can displace faith communities as primary sources of meaning-making (Golan & Don, 2022).

The final subtheme, **Emotional and Cognitive Dissonance**, captured the internal conflict PKs experienced when their personal questions clashed with inherited doctrines. PK2 admitted, “Feeling ko parang may gap na ako sa mga friends ko... I was sad. I was envious. That’s it. Bakit sila pwedeng mag-ganan and ako ay hindi?” PK5 recalled, “Nag-question din po ako... totoo po bang all-knowing si God or all-powerful?... hindi pwedeng maging all-knowing and all-powerful si God.” These moments reveal the painful tension between faith and doubt. Upenieks (2022) observed that unresolved dissonance often leads to

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disengagement, while Garber (2022) emphasized the emotional toll of suppressed questioning. Labeling Theory (Nickerson, 2023) shows how being branded as “doubters” or “outsiders” can discourage open dialogue, deepening isolation and spiritual confusion.

Overall, the theme Persuasively Pulled by People, Pressure, and Platforms illustrates that PKs’ backsliding was not a single act of rebellion—it was a gradual, multifaceted process shaped by external influences and internal struggles. Peer groups, performance culture, digital media, and emotional dissonance all converged to challenge their spiritual identities. Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory helps explain how microsystem (peers), exosystem (media), and macrosystem (cultural norms) shaped these outcomes, while Labeling Theory reveals how societal branding reinforced guilt, alienation, and eventual disengagement from faith.

Interview Question Number 7: What were the reactions of your family and church community when they learned about your backsliding?

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER’S OBSERVATION
PK3	<i>Sa family ko, galit siyempre. Malaki ang galit. Totoo lang. Kasi umuwi ako lasing eh. Tapos may pagkakataon pa pagka Sunday service, siyempre pupunta sila ng church. Ako hindi na simba. Doon ako sa loob ng kwarto ko naninigarilyo. Ganun. Ah nung nakita yung sigarilyo, di galit na naman. Ganun din na naman. Yun.</i>	When asked, PK3 laughed, but with visible signs of regret.
PK5	<i>Ah, parang tinitingnan po nila ako ng masama, ganun. Hindi naman siya sa ano, parang hindi nila sinasabi sa akin pero alam ko po sa loob-loob nila na parang iniisip din, ‘yung mga iniisip din po nila. Kasi halata din naman po sa e- like sa faces nila na parang ganun nga po. Tapos kapag like tinatanong din po nila, “Ay, totoo ba? Parang anak ka ng pastor, ganun? Hindi halata.” Parang ganun po.</i>	PK5 answered with a warm tone. Traces of anger were observed during the conversation.

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The theme **Mixed Reactions within Close Circles** captures the deeply personal and often conflicting ways pastors' kids (PKs) were received by those closest to them during their season of backsliding. These responses—ranging from heartfelt concern to harsh judgment, from shallow encouragement to quiet compassion—shaped how PKs processed their experiences of shame, isolation, and belonging.

One recurring subtheme was **Concern and Repeated Questioning**, where family members and church leaders responded with visible worry—often framed around salvation and eternal consequences. PK1 shared, "Nalungkot. Syempre, number one, malulungkot ang aking pamilya... Kasi yung ating kaluluwa, yung ating buhay, papunta sa destruction." PK5 echoed this, saying, "Ang una po nilang sinabi sa akin is naawa po sila sa akin. Sabi po nila na ayokong makita kita sa impyerno." While these reactions stemmed from genuine care, they often emphasized fear over emotional understanding. As Drumm et al. (2020) observed, concern rooted in doctrine can feel more like scrutiny than support. Labeling Theory suggests that repeated questioning may unintentionally cast PKs as "lost" or "in danger," reinforcing stigmatized identities and deepening emotional distance (Nickerson, 2023).

Another subtheme, **Surface Encouragement but Lack of Deep Support**, revealed how PKs often received quick reassurances that failed to address their deeper struggles. PK2 reflected, "Sabi nila, okay lang yan... pero it's not okay... mag-pray ka lang... pero ayoko... kaya magseseek ako ng advice sa non-religious people." PK5 added, "Minsan nag-open up ako, ang response nila magpatugtog lang ng worship song... hindi talaga sila nakikinig." These moments speak to a longing for genuine connection—one that was often met with spiritual platitudes instead of emotional presence. Garber (2022) found that PKs frequently seek meaningful engagement but are met with oversimplified solutions. From Bronfenbrenner's lens, when the microsystem fails to offer authentic support, PKs may turn to outside communities for affirmation (Guy-Evans, 2020).

The subtheme **Judgment, Disappointment, and Shame** highlighted the more painful reactions PKs encountered. PK3 recalled, "Sa family ko, galit siyempre... umuuwi ako lasing eh... nung nakita yung sigarilyo, di galit na naman." PK5 shared, "Medyo bumaba po

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'yung tingin nila... tapos parang tinitingnan po nila ako ng masama." These responses often reinforced labels like "rebellious" or "prodigal," which, according to Labeling Theory, can reshape self-concept and intensify guilt (Nickerson, 2023). Büssing et al. (2022) emphasize that judgment tends to silence open dialogue, pushing PKs further from faith rather than drawing them back in.

In contrast, the subtheme **Compassionate Patience** offered a glimpse of healing. PK4 shared, "Wala naman... nothing changed sa totoo lang sobrang patient and understanding lang." This kind of response—marked by unconditional love and emotional steadiness—provided a safe space for PKs to process their journey without fear of rejection. Miller and Miller (2021) describe such support as a protective factor, buffering against the psychological toll of spiritual struggle. Leonhardt et al. (2023) found that consistent patience from close circles often fosters openness to reconciliation and faith renewal. Within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, these nurturing microsystem relationships serve as resilience-building environments (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Overall, the theme Mixed Reactions within Close Circles reveals that the way PKs were received by family and church communities played a pivotal role in shaping their spiritual trajectories. Concern and judgment often heightened shame and reinforced negative labels, while surface-level encouragement left deeper wounds untouched. Yet, when met with compassionate patience, PKs found room to breathe, reflect, and even reconnect. Through Ecological Systems Theory, we see how close relationships influence identity and belief, while Labeling Theory helps explain how stigmatization can either fracture or fortify the journey toward restoration.

Interview Question Number 8: How do you think the label of "backslider" has influenced how others treat you within your social circles?

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PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER'S OBSERVATION
PK1	<i>Mas natuwa po. Siyempre, kaparehas ka na nila. Ay, di matutuwa. Ang sabi sa iyo, welcome. Welcome to the club po. Oo. Welcome to the club. <u>Marami</u>, marami. Marami, nagbago. Dahil kasi, yung ginagawa ko, hindi na rin tama. Nandiyang maloloko ka na rin. Dahil kasi, may mga kasama ka ng maloloko. Marami, marami nang iiwas. Pero marami naman, marami naman nananalangin</i>	When asked, PK1 laughed, reminiscing about how his peers welcomed him warmly after he stepped away from faith.
PK5	<i>Opo. 'Yung mga ano, 'yung mga cinut-off ko po before na ano, 'yun masama, parang naging <u>mas</u> hypocrite po sila na parang lagi na lang po nila hinahanap 'yung mali ko kahit na may times na nagkakamali din sila. Parang since anak po ako ng pastor, mas mas hinahanap po nila 'yung mali</i>	PK5 showed signs of irritation as she recalled this experience.

The theme **Evolving Relationships and Redefined Identities** captures the shifting social landscapes and inner transformations that pastors' kids (PKs) experienced during seasons of backsliding. As they stepped away from the church, many found their circles of belonging reshaped—some widened by unexpected acceptance, others narrowed by judgment and hypocrisy. These relational shifts often led to isolation, self-protection, and in some cases, a bold reclamation of stigmatized identities.

A recurring subtheme was **Acceptance in Non-Christian Circles**, where PKs described finding warmth and camaraderie in communities outside the church. PK1 recalled, "Hindi, tuwang-tuwa sila. Mas natuwa po. Siyempre, kaparehas ka na nila... Welcome. Welcome to the club po." PK4 shared, "Ayun, sa mga non-Christian mas naging close na kami... nakasama ako sa kanila pag makikipag-inuman, mga ganyan... mas magiging close kami." These reflections reveal how secular spaces often offered what religious ones withheld—unconditional acceptance. Canesares et al. (2023) noted that PKs frequently turn to non-religious circles when church communities feel judgmental or rigid, while Kabuje and Mligo (2021) framed backsliding as a developmental phase that allows for personal belief exploration. Labeling Theory suggests that this shift can be a conscious rejection of

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stigmatizing identities like “prodigal” or “rebellious” (Nickerson, 2023). Within Bronfenbrenner’s macrosystem, these broader social norms provide relational freedom and authenticity that contrast with the constraints of church expectations.

The subtheme **Social Judgment and Religious Hypocrisy** highlighted the scrutiny PKs often faced within their faith communities. PK5 shared, “Pumupunta ka sa church tapos ang daming... naghahanap ka ng kasalanan ng iba... since anak po ako ng pastor, mas mas hinahanap po nila ‘yung mali ko.” PK4 described a subtler form of judgment after returning to faith: “Hindi siya ‘yung typical persecution na may galit... subtle lang na they would remind me of who I was with them... so sobrang laking change para sa kanila.” These experiences reflect the pressure to conform to idealized roles, leaving little room for authentic growth. Garber (2022) found that PKs are often boxed into binary labels—either “model believers” or “prodigals”—while Liamputtong and Rice (2021) linked such stigma to alienation and diminished self-worth. Labeling Theory explains how these imposed identities shape behavior, as seen in PK5’s defiant response: “Ipatatotoo ko na lang din po.” Bronfenbrenner’s framework situates these tensions within the microsystem of church relationships, where scrutiny can deepen internal conflict.

Another subtheme, **Self-Isolation as a Coping Mechanism**, revealed how PKs withdrew from social spaces to protect themselves from criticism and emotional harm. PK3 shared, “Ako nag-isolate. Hindi sila. Ako. Oo. Kasi ayaw kong magkaroon ng part sa kanila. Ako na mismo umiiwas.” PK5 added, “Parang cinut-off ko na lang din po ‘yung mga ganun na tao sa buhay ko... in-unfriend ko sila sa Facebook para hindi ko makita ‘yung mga posts nila.” These choices reflect both a need for safety and a desire for autonomy. Eproson Jr. (2021) and Miller & Miller (2021) observed that PKs often retreat when their support systems fail, while Liamputtong and Rice (2021) linked social withdrawal to experiences of stigma. Bronfenbrenner’s theory helps explain how strained microsystem interactions can lead individuals to carve out controlled personal spaces, while Labeling Theory shows how stigmatization reinforces silence and separation.

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In contrast, the subtheme **Sadness and Non-Rejection from Close Ties** offered glimpses of quiet support and emotional grounding. PK2 reflected, “Nalungkot lang din sila ng sobra... parang kumbaga, parents mo, pag may ginawa kang masama, malulungkot sila but they’re still there.” PK3 added, “Hindi naman sila nagkaroon ng pangit na pag-ano sa akin.” These responses, though tinged with sorrow, conveyed enduring love and presence. Makena et al. (2023) described such bonds as “high-quality family relationships” that provide stability even in moments of spiritual crisis. Jocson and Garcia (2021) emphasized that parental presence amid strain fosters trust and resilience. Within Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem, these relationships act as protective buffers against alienation (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Finally, the subtheme **Embracing the Label as Identity Armor** revealed how some PKs redefined stigmatizing labels as sources of pride and autonomy. PK3 shared, “Pag sabing backslider ka, astig ka eh... naging proud na ako. Ganun.” Rather than internalizing shame, PK3 transformed the label into a symbol of defiance and self-ownership. Labeling Theory (Nickerson, 2023) explains how reappropriation allows individuals to resist stigma by reclaiming labels on their own terms. Garber (2022) described this as a reframing of imposed stereotypes into empowering identities, while Bronfenbrenner’s macrosystem highlights how cultural norms can both stigmatize and offer space for reinterpretation.

In summary, the theme Evolving Relationships and Redefined Identities shows that PKs’ backsliding journeys were not just spiritual—they were deeply relational and psychological. Acceptance in secular spaces offered belonging, while judgment within the church often led to withdrawal and resentment. Some PKs chose isolation to protect themselves, others found quiet support from loved ones, and a few turned stigmatizing labels into personal strength. Through Ecological Systems Theory, we see how microsystem relationships and macrosystem norms shaped these outcomes, while Labeling Theory reveals how imposed identities could be resisted, internalized, or transformed into resilience.

Interview Question Number 9: How has being labeled as a “backslider” influenced your self-perception?

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PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER'S OBSERVATION
PK1	<i>Naka-apekto po number one nahihiyakan akong humarap sa ating mga kapatid sa pananampalataya. Naihiya na akong humarap sa ating mga kapatid sa panampalataya. Tapos, hindi na ako nagsisimba. Tapos, yun nga, meron akong hiya sa pag-attend. Dahil kasi backslider na nga. Yun ang affect sa akin. Bumaba yung tingin mo sa sarili.</i>	PK1 answered in a low tone. Showing signs of guilt and sadness.
PK5	<i><u>Uh, noong una po, kinamumuhian ko po yung sarili ko. Parang sa religious household na po ako lumaki. Tapos parang ako, lumalayo po ako. Tapos, eh, yung mga teaching din po kasi ng dad ko mostly. About na po sa, ano, parang nakakahiya po na lumayo kay Jesus. Naging perspective ko din na parang nakakahiya kapag lumayo ako or parang ang laking kasalanan nung mag-question ako ng faith ko.</u></i>	PK5 answered with a sad tone. Traces of guilt were also observed.

The theme **Journey from Shame to Self-Assertion** captures the quiet yet powerful transformation pastors' kids (PKs) experienced as they moved from internalized shame and spiritual disconnection toward reclaiming their identity with greater confidence and autonomy. Their stories reveal that judgment and rejection often planted the seeds of self-stigma, but over time, those same wounds became catalysts for resistance, reflection, and personal growth.

A recurring subtheme was **Internalized Shame and Self-Stigma**, where PKs described the emotional toll of being labeled "backsliders." PK1 shared, "Naka-apekto po number one nahihiya na akong humarap sa ating mga kapatid sa pananampalataya... meron akong hiya sa pag-attend. Dahil kasi backslider na nga... Bumaba yung tingin mo sa sarili." PK5 echoed this pain: "Noong una po, parang kinamumuhian ko po yung sarili ko... nakakahiya kapag lumayo ako... parang ang laking kasalanan nung mag-question ako ng faith ko." These reflections show how shame seeped into their self-perception, leading to withdrawal and self-

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condemnation. Garber (2022) emphasized that rigid labels can shape identity through judgment, while Labeling Theory explains how external labels often become internalized, reinforcing cycles of shame (Nickerson, 2023). Within Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem, family and church dynamics intensified this stigma, and the mesosystem—where these environments intersect—amplified scrutiny. Liamputtong and Rice (2021) noted that PKs, often in highly visible roles, tend to equate personal worth with community approval, making shame especially potent.

The subtheme **Resistance and Empowered Identity Formation** revealed how some PKs broke free from expectations and began to define themselves on their own terms. PK3 reflected, “Oo, naging proud ako... kasi nung goods ako, wala namang pumapansin. O eh masama ka. Eh may pumansin... pakiramdam kong nakatanikala ako.” PK5 added, “Mas nakilala ko yung sarili ko na hindi nagre-revolve ang sarili ko sa religion o sa church... natuto din po ako... in-advocate ko din po yung sarili ko.” These narratives show resistance not as rebellion for rebellion’s sake, but as a reclaiming of agency and authenticity. Garber (2022) described this as role negotiation—an effort to escape role entrapment. Labeling Theory suggests that negative labels like “rebellious” can become springboards for identity redefinition (Nickerson, 2023). Kabuje and Mligo (2021) framed this process as a developmental phase that fosters authenticity. For PK3, resistance meant rejecting restrictive norms; for PK5, it meant learning to love and advocate for herself. Ecologically, this resistance emerged as a response to constraining forces within the microsystem and macrosystem, allowing PKs to reposition themselves within broader social contexts (Guy-Evans, 2020).

The subtheme **Conflict Between Personal Identity and Religious Expectations** highlighted the deep inner struggle PKs faced when their evolving self-understanding clashed with rigid teachings. PK5 shared, “Sobrang galit na galit din po sa sarili ko noon... bakit sinu-question ko pa yung mga teachings?... nagsimulang yung hate ko sa sarili ko.” Her account revealed how questioning faith and sexuality—especially in environments steeped in religious conservatism—led to internalized homophobia and self-hatred. Garber (2022) noted that PKs often feel trapped between the impossible roles of perfection and silent struggle. Labeling

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Theory explains how deviations from religious norms can become self-imposed identities like “sinner” or “unworthy” (Nickerson, 2023). While Kabuje and Mligo (2021) recognized questioning as a healthy developmental phase, PK5’s experience shows how rigid norms can block growth and deepen shame. Bronfenbrenner’s framework helps map this conflict: her microsystem (family, church) imposed strict expectations, the mesosystem (interactions between these settings) reinforced them, and the macrosystem (cultural norms) magnified the pressure, leaving her caught in cycles of doubt and rejection.

In contrast, the subtheme **Neutralization and Normalization of Backsliding** offered a more grounded perspective. PK4 shared, “Even during those times na away from the church community... mas naka-relate pa nga ako doon sa mga ibang tao... coming from faith backgrounds din... we had that same... common denominator.” For PK4, backsliding wasn’t a crisis—it was a shared experience, a point of connection rather than shame. Kabuje and Mligo (2021) described this as an adaptive phase of belief reevaluation. Garber (2022) emphasized that shared narratives reduce stigma, while Herdiansyah et al. (2024) argued that reframing faith as personal rather than institutional fosters healthier self-concepts. Labeling Theory helps explain how reframing transformed the label “backslider” from a mark of failure into a relatable and even empowering identity. Bronfenbrenner’s exosystem and macrosystem show how broader networks beyond the church can offer solidarity and reduce alienation (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Taken together, the theme Journey from Shame to Self-Assertion reveals that PKs’ experiences of backsliding were not just spiritual—they were deeply emotional and identity-driven. Shame and self-stigma often marked the beginning, but through resistance, reflection, and reframing, many PKs found their way toward self-empowerment. Ecological Systems Theory helps trace how layered influences—family, church, culture, and peers—shaped this evolution, while Labeling Theory shows how stigmatizing identities were first internalized, then resisted, and ultimately redefined. In the end, this journey wasn’t just about leaving faith—it was about reclaiming voice, agency, and authenticity.

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Interview Question Number 10: What lessons or realizations have you gained from your journey as a backslider Pastor's kid?

PARTICIPANT	RESPONSES	RESEARCHER'S OBSERVATION
PK1	<i>Ang nakuha kong aral, unang-una, Ako palay-pupunta sa kapahamakan nung ako'y nag-backslide. And then, pangalawa, talagang wala akong pupuntahang maganda. Maaari akong makulong, maaari akong masira yung aking buhay. Tapos, pangatlo, magkakasakit ka. Dahil kasi sa bisyo, yung, methamphetamine hydrochloride, tapos kung ano-ano, cocaine, marijuana, masisira ka na talaga. Salamat sa Diyos at binigyan pa ng pagkakataon ulit.</i>	PK1 answered with happiness and gratitude. The lessons he gained were evident in his testimonies.
PK5	<i>Uh, isa po sa lessons na na realize ko din po is parang hindi dapat palagi, although like sinasabi nga sa Bible na kailangan palagi God first tapos kailangan family first, ganun. May mga scriptures talaga na hindi na nag umaayon sa ano, sa world natin ngayon. Na parang 'yung nga, about 'yung sa mga 'yung mga rules na dapat na hindi na dapat sinusundan ngayon kasi ano, parang nagbabago na din naman 'yung mundo. Ah hindi lahat ng scriptures sa Bible is parang kailangan isundan kasi ah minsan hindi na siya morally right. Tapos isa rin po siguro sa mga naging lessons ko is ah kahit na ano, nasa religion po kayo parang under po siya ng religion. Kung para sa'yo is toxic na 'yung ibang tao kahit na nasa church ka 'yan or kahit saan man or kahit like sa school lang, ganun, kailangan ano, kung nakakasira na din sa ng mental health mo is iwasan mo na or i-cut off mo na. Tapos lastly, 'yung isa din po sa naging lesson ko po sa ano, sa pagiging backslider ko is hindi mo dapat ide-judge 'yung isang tao kahit na pastor's kid man siya. Hindi mo dapat, hindi ka dapat magkaroon ng expectation sa isang tao dahil lang may relation siya sa isang tao. Ganun. Oh, anak ka ng pastor pero hindi ibig sabihin nun kailangan dapat 'yung ugali mo is kagaya na ng pastor kasi hindi naman ikaw 'yung pastor. Kumbaga ganun.</i>	Self-awareness was observed from PK5 during this conversation. She answered this question confidence, showing her better resolve.

The final theme **Faith Refound, Self Reborn, Connections Restored** captures the transformative arc of pastors' kids (PKs) as they journeyed through backsliding—not merely as a descent into spiritual detachment, but as a complex process of reckoning, resistance, and

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renewal. Their stories reveal that what began in shame and disillusionment often evolved into deeper self-awareness, redefined relationships, and a more authentic spirituality.

One powerful subtheme was **Realizing the Consequences of Straying**, where PKs described how their choices led to painful but eye-opening realizations. PK1 shared, “Ang nakuha kong aral, unang-una, Ako palay-pupunta sa kapahamakan nung ako’y nag-backslide... Maaari akong makulong, maaari akong masira yung aking buhay... Dahil kasi sa bisyo... masisira ka na talaga. Salamat sa Diyos at binigyan pa ng pagkakataon ulit.” His reflection shows how substance abuse and self-destructive behavior became a turning point—forcing him to confront the gravity of his path and embrace the grace of a second chance. Kabuje and Mligo (2021) affirm that stepping away from faith can create the reflective space needed for personal reckoning, while Garber (2022) notes that recognizing the gap between past actions and desired values often sparks renewed commitment. Bronfenbrenner’s framework situates PK1’s struggle within peer and societal influences at the exosystem and macrosystem levels, and Labeling Theory explains how stigmatizing identities like “backslider” can both deepen shame and catalyze transformation once consequences are faced (Nickerson, 2023).

The subtheme **Disillusionment with Religious Judgmentalism** revealed how PKs grew distant from communities they once trusted due to hypocrisy and rigid moralism. PK2 expressed frustration: “Mostly older people... I sometimes hate the way they give advice... with judgment... parang labels... na nakakaapekto talaga.” PK5 added, “May mga scriptures talaga na hindi na umaayon sa mundo natin ngayon... kung toxic na yung ibang tao kahit nasa church, kailangan i-cut off mo na.” These accounts reflect how judgmentalism bred resentment and emotional withdrawal. Garber (2022) observed that rigid church expectations often alienate PKs, while Liamputtong and Rice (2021) described stigma in tight-knit communities as a source of exclusion and self-doubt. Labeling Theory clarifies how these judgments become internalized, and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological lens shows how church microsystems and family–community mesosystems shaped these tensions (Guy-Evans, 2020).

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In contrast, the subtheme **The Value of Peer and Non-Family Support** highlighted how friendships outside the family and church became lifelines. PK2 shared, “Mas malapit ako sa kanila... mas nag-oopen ako sa kanila ng problem kaysa sa parents ko.” PK3 added, “Mas maganda pa ang kausap minsan... yung hindi mo kamag-anak... marami pa akong kaibigan na nagki-care.” These relationships offered trust, empathy, and affirmation—often missing in traditional support systems. Benjamin et al. (2021) and Garber (2022) emphasized the importance of external networks in fostering resilience, and Bronfenbrenner’s theory situates these peer bonds within the microsystem as buffers against institutional pressure (Guy-Evans, 2020).

The subtheme **Intergenerational Influence** revealed how PKs’ experiences became silent lessons for the next generation. PK4 reflected, “Sobrang laking contribution ng mga pangyayari na ‘yon... They already know kasi nakita na nila sa buhay namin.” This suggests that lived experiences—more than words—shaped family values and decisions. Kabuje and Mligo (2021) noted that reflective growth often transforms hardship into wisdom, while Garber (2022) highlighted PKs’ unique role in influencing family patterns. Bronfenbrenner’s chronosystem captures this ripple effect across time, showing how personal transformation can shape developmental outcomes for others (Guy-Evans, 2020).

Finally, the subtheme **Redefining Identity Beyond the PK Label** illustrated how PKs reclaimed their individuality beyond the expectations tied to their pastoral lineage. PK5 asserted, “Hindi ka dapat magkaroon ng expectation sa isang tao dahil lang may relation siya sa isang tao... hindi naman ikaw yung pastor.” Her statement reflects a conscious rejection of externally imposed roles and a move toward self-defined identity. Benjamin et al. (2021) emphasized the burden of PK labeling, while Kabuje and Mligo (2021) described stepping away as a chance to build authentic selfhood. Labeling Theory contextualizes this as resistance to the psychological weight of stereotypes like “righteous” or “rebellious” (Nickerson, 2023), and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological lens shows how PK5 navigated pressures across family, church, and societal norms to reclaim autonomy.

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Taken together, the theme **Faith Refound, Self Reborn, Connections Restored** reveals that PKs' journeys were not just about spiritual detachment and return—they were about transformation. Through confronting consequences, resisting judgment, finding support, influencing others, and redefining identity, PKs demonstrated resilience, agency, and authenticity. Ecological Systems Theory helps trace how these processes unfolded across interconnected contexts, while Labeling Theory shows how stigmatized identities were first internalized, then resisted, and ultimately reimaged. In the end, rediscovered faith among PKs was not about returning to conformity—it was about embracing a spirituality rooted in personal truth, relational depth, and self-awareness.

Consolidated Findings and Reflections

Under the first theme, Personal, Social, and Spiritual Disruptions, participants described how their faith journeys unraveled under the weight of various influences. These ranged from the pull of secular peer groups to exposure to conflicting ideologies on social media. Experiences of family disillusionment and moral inconsistencies during the pandemic further destabilized their spiritual foundation. This disruption wasn't merely rebellion or loss of devotion, it reflected deeper emotional struggles, identity confusion, and emerging worldviews that challenged their inherited religious values. From an Ecological Systems Theory lens, these disruptions reflect microsystem and exosystem influences, such as immediate peer environments and broader digital platforms, which profoundly shape behavior and beliefs. Meanwhile, the internalization of societal expectations that PKs must remain "righteous" exemplifies the dynamics explored in Labeling Theory, wherein the label "pastor's kid" imposes behavioral standards that leave little room for personal struggle or deviation.

For the second theme, Fractured Faith as a Catalyst for Identity Struggle and Self-Reconstruction, the participants revealed how their crises of faith triggered profound internal conflict and a fragmented sense of self. They spoke of battling feelings of self-worthlessness, religious disillusionment, and lingering guilt. Yet, through this rupture, they began the painful

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but necessary work of reconstructing their identities. Breaking free from imposed expectations, many found new forms of self-acceptance, autonomy, and for some, the courage to explore their gender and sexual identity. This spiritual rupture ultimately became the foundation for authentic self-discovery and growth. Here, Labeling Theory becomes evident in the way participants internalized the “prodigal” or “rebellious” identity, but eventually rejected it in favor of a more self-defined narrative. Simultaneously, EST accounts for the complex interaction of family (microsystem), church (mesosystem), and sociocultural ideologies (macrosystem) in shaping the identity tension PKs must resolve.

Under the third theme, Navigating Inner Turmoil While Searching for Stability and Redemption, participants shared their experience of grappling with emotional chaos during periods of spiritual disengagement. Isolation, rebellion, emotional detachment, and numbing behaviors emerged as common responses to the turmoil. Despite these struggles, a quiet but persistent yearning for stability and healing remained. These experiences of inner conflict eventually laid the groundwork for resilience and the pursuit of redemption. This yearning for healing reflects chronosystemic changes in EST, life events and transitions over time, while also suggesting that backsliding is not static, but a developmental process. Labeling Theory is visible in how these behaviors were often misunderstood as moral failure, when in fact, they were protective responses to unresolved emotional and identity struggles.

For the fourth theme, From Closeness to Distance and Defiance, the participants detailed how their family relationships shifted as they moved away from faith. Initial closeness often gave way to emotional and physical withdrawal, strained communication, and moments of open defiance. Silent pressures to conform continued to linger, but participants found some solace in selective understanding from particular family members. While disappointment and conflict characterized early interactions, the endurance of these family ties eventually opened doors to slow reconciliation and mutual understanding. This aligns with EST’s microsystem domain, where the family acts as both a source of support and strain. Meanwhile, Labeling Theory helps explain the family’s reactions, both punitive and patient, as responses to perceived deviation from expected religious behavior.

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Under the fifth theme, *Tensions Between External Pressures and Internal Faith Journeys*, participants explored the conflict between societal and religious expectations and their personal need for spiritual authenticity. As pastor’s kids, the pressure to embody a flawless Christian image often clashed with internal doubts and desires for self-expression. This struggle reflected a larger tug-of-war between external conformity to religious standards and internal authenticity in faith. These tensions highlight mesosystemic conflicts within EST, where interconnected environments (home, church, school) reinforce different expectations. Furthermore, the pressure to “perform righteousness” reflects the internalization of externally imposed labels, consistent with Labeling Theory, which can result in either compliance or rebellion.

For the sixth theme, *Persuasively Pulled by People, Pressure, and Platforms*, participants emphasized the profound influence of their social environments. Secular friendships, performance-driven ambitions, and the transformative reach of social media were key forces that redirected their faith journeys. These external influences heightened cognitive dissonance as participants encountered conflicting ideologies, leading to feelings of doubt and eventual withdrawal from religious practices. Within Ecological Systems Theory, these represent exosystem and macrosystem influences—societal messaging, online culture, and institutional norms, which subtly yet powerfully shape internal belief systems. Labeling Theory also explains how exposure to alternative communities and belief systems creates space for re-evaluating stigmatized religious identities.

Under the seventh theme, *Mixed Reactions within Close Circles*, participants shared their encounters with family, church members, and friends following their faith struggles. Responses ranged from repeated questioning and expressions of concern to surface-level encouragement that lacked emotional depth. While some faced judgment and disapproval, others experienced patient compassion and understanding. These diverse reactions either deepened feelings of rejection or created pathways for renewed connection and trust. These relational dynamics illustrate the bidirectional nature of microsystem interactions in EST, where both positive and negative feedback loops influence a PK's emotional development.

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Furthermore, Labeling Theory is evident in the way social responses either reinforced the “backslider” label or helped deconstruct it through empathy and relational safety.

For the eighth theme, Experiencing Shifts in Social Belonging and Treatment, participants recounted how their social relationships evolved once they distanced themselves from faith communities. Acceptance in secular spaces brought relief and camaraderie, contrasting with judgment and perceived hypocrisy from church communities. Feelings of sadness, isolation, and self-protective behaviors, such as adopting stigmatized labels like “backslider” as shields, shaped this transitional phase. These changes profoundly influenced their sense of community and identity. The use of stigmatized labels as identity armor speaks directly to Labeling Theory, suggesting how external judgments are sometimes internalized as coping mechanisms. Meanwhile, EST contextualizes these changes in belonging within shifting microsystem and mesosystem environments.

Under the ninth theme, Journey from Shame to Self-Assertion, participants illustrated their movement from deep internalized shame and guilt to a place of empowered self-expression. Initially burdened by communal and familial expectations, participants gradually resisted stigmas and began reclaiming their self-worth. Through critical reflection and self-acceptance, they emerged with the courage to pursue authentic lives, even while navigating residual conflicts with religious norms. This evolution reflects Labeling Theory’s process of identity negotiation, where individuals reject imposed deviant labels and assert their own identities. The transformation also aligns with EST, showing how supportive microsystems and introspective processes across time (chronosystem) help PKs achieve psychological resilience.

For the tenth and final theme, Faith Refound, Self Reborn, Connections Restored, participants described moments of redemption and restoration. Confronting the consequences of spiritual detachment and disillusionment, they reengaged with faith on terms defined by personal integrity rather than external expectations. Renewed relationships with mentors, peers, and family became key to their emotional recovery. Ultimately, this phase represented not rebellion but a deeply transformative journey toward healing, authenticity, and spiritual maturity. This final movement toward reintegration reflects positive macrosystem and

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mesosystem shifts in EST, where broader societal or relational contexts become more accepting, supportive, and aligned with personal growth. Simultaneously, Labeling Theory is subverted as participants reclaim faith not as an obligation, but as a choice rooted in their own values and identity.

Reflexivity Statement

This study revealed the deeply personal and often complex journey that pastor’s kids (PKs) who have stepped away from their faith experience a journey marked by faith detachment, identity rebuilding, and eventual healing. It explored how these individuals wrestle with the tension between the expectations placed on them by family and church, and their own desires for authenticity, belonging, and emotional well-being. Through their stories, it became clear how pressures from religious labels, family dynamics, societal judgment, and inner conflicts shape their spiritual paths. Despite the hardships and emotional struggles they faced, these PKs showed remarkable resilience in seeking self-discovery and meaning beyond the traditional roles they were expected to fulfill.

Growing up in a religious household, especially as a PK, means carrying the heavy weight of family expectations and community scrutiny. Many participants shared experiences of emotional pain, isolation, and even rebellion, yet they also demonstrated great courage in confronting these pressures and redefining their beliefs on their own terms. Their process of stepping away and sometimes returning to faith was not merely an act of defiance but a vital journey of survival, healing, and finding authenticity. While many recounted moments of judgment and rejection, they also found surprising acceptance outside religious circles and built deeper, more genuine relationships along the way.

It is important to recognize that religious institutions and pastoral families are not perfect, nor should they be expected to be. Like any human system, faith communities and pastoral households carry hidden struggles that outsiders may never see. The environment described by participants that was often challenging, image-conscious, and emotionally restrictive, reflects the difficult balance between religious leadership and personal authenticity.

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For some, growing up in this environment laid a strong spiritual foundation, but for others, it sparked internal battles and feelings of alienation. The spiritual and personal disconnect experienced by backsliding PKs deserves understanding and compassion, not judgment or dismissal as failure.

The participants' stories underscore that struggles with faith, identity, and mental health are real and valid parts of their journey, especially under the weight of high religious expectations. Their doubts and life choices are not signs of weakness but reflections of deep emotional and existential work. Every pastor's kid deserves space to question, rebuild, and grow in ways that may not always be visible to their religious communities. True growth, renewed faith, and transformation become possible when emotional support, patience, and understanding are offered without condemnation.

Beyond contributing to academic knowledge about backsliding PKs, this research profoundly shaped the researcher's perspective. Listening to these vulnerable stories, especially as someone familiar with religious life, brought a clearer, more empathetic understanding of how crucial psychological safety, authentic faith development, and emotional well-being are within faith communities.

The study answered many personal questions for the researcher about the struggles PKs face when their spiritual identity is too closely tied to performance and public expectation. It shed light on how emotional wounds quietly influence spiritual journeys and how healing requires spaces that honor emotional honesty over outward religious conformity. Inspired by these insights, the researcher feels called to advocate for safer, more compassionate environments within religious families and communities, places where doubts, struggles, and questions are met with welcome, not rejection.

Ultimately, the researcher came to see that maintaining religious practices or church involvement alone is not enough. Equally important is nurturing the emotional and psychological health of individuals within faith communities. PKs, like all church members, are human beings who experience pain, fear, loneliness, and hope. This study deepened the researcher's commitment to emphasizing that compassion, emotional well-being, and

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authenticity must be prioritized alongside spiritual growth if churches and families want to raise resilient, grounded, and genuinely faithful individuals.

Recommendations

Based on the themes identified in the study, the researcher formulated the following recommendations:

1. For Backslider Pastor's Kids (PKs), PKs may be encouraged to embrace their faith journeys as uniquely valid, even when they diverge from traditional expectations. They may seek therapy, peer support, and self-reflection as tools for personal growth, redefining faith, identity, and belonging at their own pace. This process of healing and exploration should be seen as an act of courage rather than rebellion.
2. For the PKs' Families, they may foster emotionally safe, judgment-free home environments where PKs can share their struggles, doubts, and alternative perspectives without fear of disappointment or damaging their parent's reputation. Efforts such as intentional listening sessions, affirming language, and open discussions about failure and forgiveness can normalize faith exploration within the family.
3. For the Church Community, Faith communities may shift away from performance-based expectations for PKs and establish grace-centered support systems. Churches may recognize PKs as individuals on unique faith journeys by offering mentorship, emotional counseling, and peer-led groups that celebrate authenticity. Additionally, congregations should address hypocrisy and judgmental attitudes within their ranks to create inclusive environments.
4. Holistic pastoral support programs may be developed to address not only spiritual formation but also emotional resilience, identity development, and mental health awareness for Pastor's Kids (PKs). These programs must move beyond traditional religious education and create safe spaces for PKs to openly discuss doubts, personal growth, societal pressures, and authentic spiritual exploration.
5. For the research locale, the church communities in Laguna may consider establishing Project ROOTED: Rediscovering Our Origin, Truth, and Testimony Every Day as a foundational

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program to support backslider pastors' kids (PKs). This initiative can encompass tailored components such as Empowered Conversations, which provide PKs with a safe space to discuss their struggles with societal and familial expectations, fostering authenticity and self-expression. Another component, the PK Support System Initiative, aims to create adaptive and inclusive networks where PKs can access emotional support through counseling and mentorship tailored to their specific faith and identity challenges. Additionally, Reconnecting Bonds facilitates dialogues and mediation sessions to address strained family relationships, helping rebuild trust and foster reconciliation. Lastly, Finding the Anchor offers individual and group counseling sessions focused on navigating internal conflicts and emotional struggles related to identity confusion and spiritual fatigue. These programs may aim to foster emotional healing, self-discovery, and authentic spiritual reconnection, thereby addressing the unique challenges faced by PKs while creating a compassionate, growth-oriented environment within the community.

6. For academic researchers and psychology professionals, this study could inspire further investigation into the psychological, emotional, and spiritual journeys of pastors' children. Incorporating mixed-method or longitudinal approaches may offer valuable insights into their faith development, resilience, and identity reconstruction across various life stages. Future researchers are also encouraged to broaden their focus beyond backsliding experiences to include the processes of recovery and re-engagement with faith and community. Comparative analyses between pastors' children who have left and later returned to faith versus those who remained steadfast may deepen understanding of resilience, healing, and authentic spiritual growth.

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