Atmospheric Design Semiotics Influence on Young People’s Experiences and Place Identity: A Case Study in an Australian Megachurch

Nina Hansopaheluwakan

Bachelor of Design (Honours) in Visual Communication
Master of Design (major in Graphic Design)

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at
Monash University in August 2019
Faculty of Education
Copyright Notice

© Nina Hansopaheluwakan (2019).

Under the Copyright Act 1968, this thesis must be used only under the normal conditions of scholarly fair dealing. In particular, no results or conclusions should be extracted from it, nor should it be copied or closely paraphrased in whole or in part without the written consent of the author. Proper written acknowledgement should be made for any assistance obtained from this thesis.
Abstract

Living in a contemporary world can be challenging for young people, particularly in finding their own identity. Various factors like relationships, events, interactions within different environments, and other aspects in young people’s lives are influencing their identity construction. This study investigates a Pentecostal megachurch that was found to have a particular atmosphere that aligns with and affects the identity of younger generations. This religious institution has a large number of young members and families; and therefore, it reflects the interests of contemporary society and popular culture that relates to the current generation.

Many studies have discussed the values and practices of the megachurch. However, the influence of the atmospheric environment and the communication design has been subjected to limited investigation. This study aims to explore how young people perceive the megachurch environment and how those experiences influence their place identity. Building on existing work on the megachurch environmental influence on young people’s place identity, this research investigated the ways megachurch atmospheric design semiotics influence young people’s experiences and their place identity through a site of engagement and place attachment. In this study, I introduced a term atmospheric design semiotics and defined it as a multi-sensory spatial experience from the interactions with an environment that generates personal and particular moods, feelings, interpretations, values, and meanings.

A review of the literature entails an understanding of megachurches, young people in the contemporary era, and theories of place identity. This has informed the current qualitative exploratory single case study that uses a combination of semi-structured interviews, participants’ journals, and observational notes as research methods. Respondents were recruited on a voluntary basis from a megachurch in Sydney, Australia. The megachurch uses a pseudonym of Transcendence Megachurch for confidentiality purposes. The interviews
were conducted with twelve members of the megachurch, aged between 20 to 29 years old. The participants were from Australian and international backgrounds, such as Indonesian, Chinese, Malaysian, Korean, and Japanese. This study drew upon an adapted model of Lalli’s (1992) three stages of urban-related place identity development and Breakwell’s (1986) Identity Process theory (IPT). The conceptual framework formed the basis of analysing young people’s perspectives on the atmospheric design semiotics and how the meanings were influencing their place identity.

Analysis of the data demonstrated that the megachurch place identification was associated with the experiences of place materiality, social interactions, continuation, and personal attachment to place. The results indicate that the contemporary religious artefacts that were reflected in the megachurch atmosphere play an important role in developing young people’s place identity. The study found that it is important for a megachurch to incorporate popular culture within the atmospheric design features, by including these three factors: behavioural, social, and affective modalities. Particularly, when it is designed for young people as part of contemporary society, who are searching for meanings through experiential religious practices.
Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university or equivalent institution and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Signature:

Print Name: Nina Hansopaheluwakan

Date: 7 August 2019
Ethics

The research undertaken for the study reported in this thesis received an approval from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC). Project Code: 2016-1006. Date of Approval: 07 November 2016.
Conference Papers during Candidature


Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I thank God for His unconditional love and strength. He has given me the courage to keep going and overcome all challenges.

I gratefully acknowledge Monash University for the funding and financial assistance through the scholarships awarded to me in undertaking this study. This research was supported by the Monash International Postgraduate Research Scholarship (MIPRS) and Monash Graduate Scholarship (MGS). Undertaking this PhD is a life-changing experience for me and it would not be possible to do without the support I received from many people. I thank all participants in this study who were so cooperative in sharing their perspectives.

In this occasion, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Nish Belford and Dr Renee Crawford for their expertise, guidance, mentoring, advice, support, contributions, and patience throughout my study. It has been an honour to be their PhD student. Nish and Renee have taught me how good research is done. I deeply appreciate all their contributions of time, constructive feedback, and the sincere support I needed to complete the thesis during tough times in this PhD pursuit.

I would also like to say a heartfelt thank you to my mum, dad, mother in law, brother, and sisters for their support and encouragement. A special thanks goes to my beloved husband, Mozes Edward, who has been by my side in all seasons of my life. Thank you for always believing in me, encouraging me to follow my dreams, and making it possible for me to finish what I started.

Many thanks to the Faculty of Education research graduate office team for their assistance and all academic staff who participated in my milestone panels who provided me with valuable insights and feedback for this research. Lastly, I greatly appreciate Dr Margaret Thorne and Dr Jane Milloy for providing the grammar and language editorial services of this thesis.
# Table of Contents

Copyright Notice........................................................................................................i

Abstract......................................................................................................................ii

Declaration ...............................................................................................................iv

Ethics ..................................................................................................................v

Conference Papers during Candidature.................................................................vi

Acknowledgements .............................................................................................vii

Table of Contents ...............................................................................................viii

Glossary of Terms ..............................................................................................xv

Definitions ..........................................................................................................xvi

List of Tables .....................................................................................................xxi

List of Figures ....................................................................................................xxii

**Chapter 1: Introduction** ..................................................................................1

1.1 Chapter Overview ..........................................................................................2

1.2 Context of the Study ....................................................................................2

1.3 Researcher’s Positioning .............................................................................9

1.4 Statement of the Problem ..........................................................................12

1.5 Research Aims and Questions ..................................................................16

1.6 The Significance of the Study ..................................................................18

1.7 Thesis Structure .........................................................................................19

1.8 Chapter Summary .......................................................................................20

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** ........................................................................22

2.1 Chapter Overview ........................................................................................22

2.2 Introduction ..................................................................................................22

2.3 Young People in the Contemporary Era ...................................................23
2.3.1 Challenges faced by young people in the contemporary society ..........25
2.3.2 Spirituality and popular culture in young people transition ...............27
2.4 Religious Emotion within Rituals and Space ..................................28
2.5 Megachurches and the Underlying Religious Concept .........................30
  2.5.1 Concepts of the megachurch ............................................32
  2.5.2 Characteristics of megachurches ........................................36
    2.5.2.1 Megachurches with non-traditional orientation ..................38
    2.5.2.2 Megachurches with conventional orientation ....................40
    2.5.2.3 Megachurches following a composite approach .................41
  2.5.3 Pentecostalism and popular culture ....................................43
  2.5.4 Megachurches worship experience and their engaging messages .......44
  2.5.5 Megachurches in the Australian context ................................47
2.6 Chapter summary ........................................................................50

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework ......................................................51
  3.1 Chapter Overview .......................................................................51
  3.2 Introduction ...............................................................................51
  3.3 Understanding Communication Design and Semiotics as a Concept .......52
  3.4 Atmospheric Design Semiotics ..................................................55
    3.4.1 Atmosphere and sense of place ..........................................58
    3.4.2 The semiotics production in the context of megachurch setting ...59
  3.5 Place Identity ............................................................................61
    3.5.1 Concept of place identity ..................................................61
    3.5.2 Five functions of place identity ........................................63
    3.5.3 Stages of place identity ....................................................64
  3.6 Place Identity as a Conceptual Framework ....................................64
3.6.1 The three levels of place identity adapted from Lalli (1992) and three stages of identity development: urban-related place identity phases ...............67

3.6.2 Framing the discussion by utilising the adapted model .................72

3.7 Chapter summary ..................................................................................76

Chapter 4: Research Methodology ............................................................77

4.1 Chapter Overview ....................................................................................77

4.2 Introduction ...............................................................................................77

4.3 Research Orientation .............................................................................79

4.3.1 Case study research approach ............................................................79

4.3.2 Semiotics approach ..........................................................................83

4.4 Research Context and Participants .........................................................84

4.4.1 Research site .........................................................................................84

4.4.2 Recruitment process ..........................................................................84

4.4.3 Participants profile .............................................................................85

4.5 Data Generation and Strategy ...............................................................86

4.5.1 Data collection procedure ..................................................................87

4.5.2 Data collection methods .....................................................................88

4.5.2.1 On-site observations .....................................................................89

4.5.2.2 Semi-structured interviews ...........................................................90

4.5.2.2.1 Use of visual materials during the interviews .........................91

4.5.2.3 Participants’ journal records ............................................................95

4.5.2.4 Visual data ......................................................................................96

4.6 Data Analysis and Interpretation ............................................................96

4.7 Ethical Consideration .............................................................................100

4.8 Reliability and Validity of Data ............................................................101
4.9 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Design ........................................103
4.10 Chapter Summary .........................................................................................104

Chapter 5: Research Findings ........................................................................105

5.1 Chapter Overview .........................................................................................105
5.2 Introduction ....................................................................................................105
5.3 Behavioural and Sensory Experience at Transcendence Megachurch ..........108
   5.3.1 Recognition of atmospheric design features at Transcendence Megachurch ......................................................108
   5.3.2 Transcendence Megachurch distinctiveness compared to the more conventional churches ........................................118
   5.3.3 Transcendence Megachurch was perceived as a contextually relevant environment ......................................................121
   5.3.4 Place and event satisfaction at Transcendence Megachurch ......................127
5.4 Empathetic and Subjective Construction at Transcendence Megachurch ......129
   5.4.1 Social acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch ........................................129
   5.4.2 Revisits/continuity of attendance - Transcendence Megachurch environment constancy formed through repeated experiences ..............................................132
   5.4.3 Sense of belonging was preceded by site of engagement within Transcendence Megachurch ........................................134
   5.4.4 Group development established through togetherness and activities within Transcendence Megachurch .................................................................137
5.5 Existential and Unconscious Perception of Transcendence Megachurch .........141
   5.5.1 Loyalty to Transcendence Megachurch .....................................................142
   5.5.2 Transcendence Megachurch enhanced self-esteem ....................................143
5.5.3 Subjective well-being - Transcendence Megachurch encouragement towards life balance and positivity .................................................................146

5.5.4 Self-efficacy was facilitated and supported by place (Transcendence Megachurch) .................................................................149

5.6 Chapter Summary .................................................................................................................................152

Chapter 6: Discussions .............................................................................................................................154

6.1 Chapter Overview .............................................................................................................................154

6.2 Introduction ..........................................................................................................................................154

6.3 Spatial Experience Encountered Through Multi-sensory and Materiality Exposure to Atmospheric Design Features in Transcendence Megachurch ........................................156

6.3.1 Transcendence Megachurch is perceived as a unique and ecstatic experience by young people .................................................................................................................................160

6.3.2 Transcendence Megachurch environment culturally aligns with young people and their preferences for spirituality .................................................................................................................................163

6.4 Activities and Interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as the Influences on Young People’s Experience with the Place .................................................................168

6.4.1 Sense of acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch – positive motivation towards continuity of attendance and further involvement .........................................................172

6.4.2 Transcendence Megachurch community role in social development and strengthening the bond to the church .................................................................................................................................174

6.5 Conceptuality and Significance of Transcendence Megachurch as the Influences on Young People’s Place Identity .................................................................................................................................178

6.5.1 Place attachment encourages individual confidence, sense of worthiness, and devotion to Transcendence Megachurch .................................................................................................................................182
6.5.2 Stability, sense of freedom, and affection offered in Transcendence Megachurch construct young people’s place identity

Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Chapter Overview

7.2 Transcendence Megachurch, Young People’s Experiences, and Place Identity

7.2.1 Research aims

7.2.2 Research questions and sub-questions

7.3 Results

7.4 Young People’s Perceptions of Transcendence Megachurch’s Atmospheric Design Semiotics and their Place Identity

7.4.1 Transcendence Megachurch: the environment facilitates young people’s religious experience and spiritual needs

7.4.2 Transcendence Megachurch: social acceptance and sense of worthiness are obtained from how young people felt socially valued

7.4.3 Transcendence Megachurch bridges a sense of community and belonging for young people

7.5 Implications

7.6 Limitations

7.7 Recommendations

7.8 Final Reflections

References

Appendix A: MUHREC Approval

Appendix B: Explanatory Statement for Research Participants

Appendix C: Consent Forms
Appendix D: Interview Questions .................................................................245
Appendix E: Interview Excerpt .................................................................249
Appendix F: EeL Conference Paper – Peer Reviewed ..................................274
Appendix G: LICE Conference Paper – Peer Reviewed .............................299
## Glossary of Terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Australian Bureau Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPT</td>
<td>Identity Process Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUHREC</td>
<td>Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Atmosphere</strong></th>
<th>The ambience of a place that has the ability to evoke particular impressions, feelings, and affections to the attendees.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Atmospheric design semiotics</strong></td>
<td>A spatial experience (Bille, Bjerregaard &amp; Sorensen, 2015) that evokes particular moods and feelings (Bohme, 2002) involving numerous sensory experiences (Zumthor, 2006) from the symbolic visual communication design and interactions within the environment, which eventually generate individual impressions, emotions, interpretations, perceptions, values and meanings (Bille et al., 2015; Edensor, 2012; Fisher &amp; Drobnick, 2012). For instance, a music festival with specific themes can bring individuals a certain feeling or mood, or sometimes recall past experiences of a similar kind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Audience</strong></td>
<td>Group of people who attend the megachurch services and may not necessarily join the church as the registered members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Built environment</strong></td>
<td>The human-created environment that is made to assist people’s activities and lives ranging from buildings to parks. Bartuska (2007) suggests four characteristics of the built environment to define it. First, the built environment is</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ranged extensively as it is referring to everything that is human-made, constructed, created, modified, arranged, or maintained. Second, it is created from human minds to serve human needs, values, and purposes. Third, the built environment is created as a mediation of environmental change for human’s convenience and well-being. Lastly, each of the built environment aspects is “defined and shaped by context; each and all of the individual elements contribute either positively or negatively to the overall quality of environments both built and natural and to human-environment relationships” (Bartuska, 2007, p. 5).

Contemporary
Current period of time, related to things occurring and belonging to the present.

Megachurch
A Pentecostal church that has a weekly attendance of at least two thousand attendees (Baird, 2006; Ellingson, 2007; Sargeant, 2000; Wade, 2016). The range of the service offered in a megachurch is varied and created purposely to cater to different needs of people. This type of Christian church is primarily characterised by its contemporary worship style by utilising sophisticated media technology in delivering their services, activities, and events (Goh, 2008). Unlike the more traditional type of churches, megachurch’s ways of communication are more fluid and casual.
Pentecostal

A movement within Protestant Christianity, in which the identity and the mission of the movement are framed by the personal experience with God and the theology of baptism in the Spirit (Clifton, 2009).

Place attachment

The third level of sense of place suggested by Shamai (1991). This phase refers to an emotional attachment to a place, where it has personal meaning for the attendee. For Shamai (1991), the place attachment is “a centre of personal and collective experience and that identity combines with the meaning of the place and its symbols to create a ‘personality’ of the place” (p. 350).

Place identity

Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983) define it as “a sub-structure of self-identity of the person consisting of broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives” (p.59) including “beliefs, perceptions or thoughts that the self is invested in a particular spatial setting (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001, p. 238). It is considered as a self-interpretation based on individual emotional attachment to a physical spatial setting (Ujang, 2012; Qingjiu & Maliki, 2013) that formed through the accumulation of experience with that place (Budruk & Stanis, 2013). It is composed of the meanings and perceptions associated with the environment. Qazimi (2014) believes that place identity
consists of environmental observation and interpretation. For instance, an individual will develop a place identity to a place where he/she spends some time, becomes familiar and attached to the physical setting and environment. The longer the time spent in the space, the stronger the place identity would be.

Semiotics

An analytical tool that is used to interpret meanings from the signs by looking at the sociocultural contexts. The signs in this study refers to the religious artefacts and design resources used in the church, such as the colours, visual graphics, lights within the megachurch ambience.

Sense of place

A feeling, symbol, and/or a particular characteristic possessed by a place that makes it different from others. In the words of Datel and Dingemans (1984), sense of place is defined as “the complex bundle of meanings, symbols, and qualities that a person or group associates (consciously and unconsciously) with a particular locality or region” (p.135). It is also known as genius loci that refers to a location’s distinctive atmosphere or a “spirit of place” (Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

Site of engagement

A combination of material place, time and history that facilitates interaction in establishing contextual meaning (Norris, 2004). Scollon (2001) defines a site of engagement
as “the real-time window opened through an intersection of social practice and meditational means that make that action the focal point of attention of the relevant participants” (p. 3-4). In the context of this study, the experience those young people engage with results in an “adventure” as they are involved in religious activity with specific dedication, beliefs, and perceptions related to their prior knowledge and other experiences.
List of Tables

Table 3.1 *Comparison between Canter’s (1997) Four Facets of Place and Transcendence*
*Megachurch Place Identity Informing Factors* .................................................. 74

Table 4.1 *Research Participant Profile and Demographics* .................................. 85

Table 4.2 *Research Procedures* ............................................................................. 88

Table 5.1 *Data Categories and Themes Derived from the Twelve-participant Data* .... 107

Table 6.1 *The Correlation between Discussion Vignettes 6.3 with the Category and Themes from the Findings* .......................................................... 157

Table 6.2 *The Correlation between Discussion Vignettes 6.4 with the Category and Themes from the Findings* .......................................................... 170

Table 6.3 *The Correlation between Discussion Vignettes 6.5 with the Category and Themes from the Findings* .......................................................... 180
List of Figures

Figure 2.1 Diagram showing traits of megachurch ......................................................37

Figure 3.1 Place identity formation in Transcendence Megachurch case study

Lalli’s (1992) original model of urban-related identity suggests three stages of
identity development ........................................................................................................68

Figure 3.2 Place identity construction process and informing factors in Transcendence
Megachurch case study ..................................................................................................73, 155

Figure 4.1 Research design of Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric design semiotics as
an influence on young people’s place identity .................................................................82

Figure 4.2 Transcendence Megachurch spatial atmosphere picture 1. November 12, 2016....92

Figure 4.3 Transcendence Megachurch spatial atmosphere picture 2. November 26, 2016....92

Figure 4.4 Transcendence Megachurch spatial atmosphere picture 3. December 3, 2016......93

Figure 4.5 Transcendence Megachurch spatial atmosphere picture 4. December 10, 2016....93

Figure 4.6 Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere during a sermon. December 10, 2016....94

Figure 4.7 Transcendence Megachurch visual graphics picture on the church’s screen.

December 17, 2016..........................................................................................................94

Figure 4.8 Data analysis process (adapted from Creswell, 2011) ........................................99

Figure 5.1 Three screens utilised by Transcendence Megachurch to assist the praise and
worship. November 26, 2016.....................................................................................110

Figure 5.2 Transcendence Megachurch visual graphics was displayed on the stage screen.

December 3, 2016..........................................................................................................111

Figure 5.3 Transcendence Megachurch concert-like atmosphere during praise and worship.

November 12, 2016.....................................................................................................113
Figure 5.4 Large screen on Transcendence Megachurch stage was used to assist the preaching by displaying the speaker and bible verses. December 10, 2016........................114

Figure 5.5 The Transcendence Megachurch lighting arrangements and ambience of the church auditorium during praise and worship. November 26, 2016.........................116

Figure 5.6 The ambience of the Transcendence Megachurch auditorium during preaching. November 26, 2016.................................................................117

Figure 5.7 The ambience of the Transcendence Megachurch auditorium during praise and worship. November 26, 2016....................................................................119

Figure 5.8 The ambient lighting in the Transcendence Megachurch auditorium during praise and worship. November 26, 2016.........................................................122

Figure 5.9 The auditorium lights in Transcendence Megachurch were turned off during praise and worship to establish a more focus and serene atmosphere. December 17, 2016..123

Figure 5.10 A visual graphics displayed in Transcendence Megachurch service that accentuated contemporary and secular approach. December 17, 2016.................126

Figure 5.11 A visual graphics displayed on Transcendence Megachurch screen before the service begin. December 10, 2016.................................................................136

Figure 5.12 A conference video of preaching accompanied by inspiring message was displayed on Transcendence Megachurch screen. December 17, 2016....................151
Chapter 1

Introduction

I think it’s [Transcendence atmospheric design approach] really relevant. Like I said, sometimes I attended [Transcendence Megachurch] by myself and I like to just worship without any hesitation, not holding back. I like to worship fully, and the way they set it [ambience] up like it gets dark during the praise and worship. The whole lights and everything really enhance the atmosphere. For me, I think the atmosphere is very important. Being able to express myself, that’s really important. I’m quite an extrovert person and I’m quite expressive too. People would know if I’m sad or happy, but at the same time I like how Transcendence [Megachurch] brings the atmosphere, [it] helped me to express myself better, something that I can’t do at home or the cell group or the [other] church. I need that atmosphere to support me to be myself (Darrel, 2017, February).

Darrel’s view about the importance of spatial atmosphere, from his experience in attending a megachurch, has given him a sense of the strong impact that a place can have on an individual. Not only the atmospheric design elements enhanced the whole experience, but it also gave him a personal meaning he could not get elsewhere. Darrel’s perceptions and experiences reveal how site of engagement has a profound influence in ways young people construct place identity within a megachurch. So far, there is a dearth of research that has examined the notion of site of engagement and young people’s place identity in megachurch settings but with far less emphasis on the experiences of young people in the Australian context. This notion calls for an investigation in researching how spatial experience in a megachurch gives meanings to young people, and more importantly, how they establish place
attachment while these factors influence place identity within a megachurch setting. This thesis offers a new direction in investigating young people’s experiences and perceptions of atmospheric design semiotics in a megachurch in Sydney, Australia that influences their interactions and place identity as explored from the three standpoints mentioned below. First, the study examines young people’s perceptions of atmospheric elements as the built environment in a megachurch. Second, the study investigates the ways activities and interactions in a megachurch environment encourage young people to establish place attachment, and therefore, site of engagement. Third, the study explores the outcomes of young people’s interactions with megachurch atmospheric design semiotics and the built environment and how it influences their place identity.

1.1 Chapter Overview

The first section of this chapter introduces the rationale for the study by presenting the context of the study, my positionality as the researcher, and the statement of the problem. The chapter then outlines the aims, research questions and the significance of the study that underpin the research. In the last part, the chapter concludes by providing the definition of terms that are used in the study and the structure of the thesis.

1.2 Context of the Study

We live in a modern world where concepts of self within the social and cultural context can be ambiguous. This is particularly challenging for young people to define who they are. Erikson (1963) headed a discussion about “identity crisis”, which has often been a major issue in the transition from childhood to adulthood. Young people, in particular, have their identities influenced by various events, relationships, interactions within different environments, and other aspects of their lives (Gee, 2000; Paris, Byrnes & Paris, 2001). A
social institution such as a religious site is one of the environmental influence to identity. As reported by Simmons (2011a), Rick Strelan believes that the main reason why young people aged between 16 and 25 years old are attracted to megachurches is because of simple and direct answers provided to all questions in their lives.

According to Delaney (2005), at least 20 percent of young Australians aged between 15 and 29 years old are attending church services on Sundays, and one-third of the attendees are Pentecostal. Simmons (2011b) reports that Pentecostalism in Australia is considered as a charismatic Christian church movement that has the highest weekly attendance and the youngest members compared to other Christian denominations, with the average age of 25 years old. There is an assertion that young people are searching for a religious experience as it offers them a form of experience, encounter, and discovery, and it also makes them feel good about themselves and the world around them (Delaney, 2005; Nilan, 2007).

Many have argued that the contemporary megachurch offers more than just a religion for young people (Eagle, 2015; Schaller, 1992). Dr. Hey from Christian Heritage College emphasises, “many traditional churches have found it hard to attract the younger generation and that Pentecostal churches seemed to fill a gap for young people and families seeking a more experiential form of religion” (Simmons, 2011b, para. 6). Similarly, Davis and Yip (2004) conducted a study, which revealed that one of the reasons why megachurches are appealing to young people in Australia is because of the relevance to them in identifying with the place and its atmosphere in different ways. As institutions, megachurches offer a space and place to young people to explore interests in an environment that gives freedom to express themselves openly with opportunities to be who they are (Gee, 2000). This notion leads to a concept of place identity where personal meanings and perception, associated with the environment, have formed through the accumulation of experience with the place (Budruk & Stanis, 2013).
Megachurches have been attracting considerable attention across the world as they are established in various countries including the United States, South Korea, Singapore, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Goh, 2008). A growing body of research literature has discussed the theological perspectives and practices, including the values and beliefs, the musical factor, and the political and economic aspects of megachurches (e.g., Baird, 2006; Biddle, 2007; Charboneau, 2015; Connell, 2005; Riches & Wagner, 2012; Wade & Hynes, 2012). As yet, not much has been discussed about how materiality factors in forms of visual communication within these churches and its influence on their members’ place identity and in particular, to young people’s experiences and perspectives. This study focuses on how young people establish place identity while being an active member of a megachurch in Sydney, Australia. For the purpose of this research, this particular megachurch throughout the study will be called using the pseudonym “Transcendence Megachurch”. This measure is in place due to ethical considerations and confidentiality issues with reference to this site.

Megachurches have a number of distinct characteristics as suggested by Goh (2008) and Connell (2005). They are defined as “a contemporary worship style prominently featuring electronic musical instruments and media, dynamic and charismatic speakers, services geared towards ‘seekers’ rather than mature believers, international links and networks, informality in dress and atmosphere” (Goh, 2008, p. 285). Demographically, young and well-educated people between 20 to 40 years of age dominate most congregations of these churches (Goh, 2008). Around 20 percent of young Australians attend churches on Sundays (Delaney, 2005). In Australia, there are growing megachurches that are based in different states. For instance, there are different megachurches that are well established in the big cities in Australia. Among those are CityLife Church, Planetshakers, and Crossway Baptist Church, which are all based in Melbourne. Hillsong Church and C3 Church Global (formerly Christian City Church
International) are located in Sydney, and Riverview Church is based in Perth, whereas Influencers Church (previously known as Paradise Community Church) is in Paradise, the north-eastern suburbs of Adelaide. However, one of the most well-known contemporary megachurches in Australia is Hillsong Church that based in Sydney, New South Wales. This megachurch, as claimed by Ferguson (2005), is “Australia’s fast-growing brand of Christianity” (p.35), and it is believed to be “what is probably the largest church in Australian history” (Hillsong Church, 2014) followed CityLife Church in Melbourne in second place (Zwartz, 2004).

Despite the growth of the charismatic church movement, Hicks (2012) suggests that Australia is currently experiencing a decline in religiosity. In the Australian Bureau Statistics records, the percentage of people with no religion has increased from 22 percent in 2011 to 30.1 percent in 2016 (ABS, 2018). The membership of most established churches has declined drastically, particularly among young people (Biddle, 2007). However, it may not be the case with the Pentecostal churches. About 37.4 percent of a particular megachurch (Hillsong Church) have members aged between 20 to 34 years old (Hillsong Church, 2017); although this age group of people is rarely considered as being active church members or having any other religious affiliations (Nilan, 2007). Hicks (2012) claims that Hillsong Church is both “relevant and accessible” to young people (para. 8). Cox (1994) categorised Hillsong Church as one of the “designer churches” (p.272) or a church “without humility or mystery; without learning or dignity; superficially egalitarian, populist and popular, and inherently materialist and anti-intellectual” (Connell, 2005, p. 330). Richard Sauerman, a strategy director at Shift Australia adds that one of the factors that attract young people the most is its lively contemporary music (Hicks, 2012). In comparison to other religions, Partridge (2016) confirms that “it is the contemporary Christian music industry that has been most successful in pressing popular culture into the service of religion” (p. 567-568). In the
words of Paul Geerling, a senior pastor at Brisbane’s Metro Church, “it’s keyboards, bass
drums, guitars – it’s what you’d probably hear on the radio in pop culture” (Simmons, 2011b,
para. 14). The contemporary style of megachurch music is one aspect that affects the
atmospheric environment, which tends to attract younger people as it aligns with what they
consume and experience in their generation.

A slogan of “Welcome Home” is used by Hillsong Church when welcoming people. The church is seen as a “home” where people can freely express themselves the way they are in this place. This is an integral part of feeling welcomed, which the megachurch promotes to create a sense of belonging among members. Religious affiliation does not have to be boring and stagnant. On the contrary, it could be wrapped with something that young people would prefer. The whole strategy of megachurches seem to be geared as to how to stay abreast with the current trends and culture, and remain connected with the holy while “seeding” the same theological message (Hicks, 2012).

As stated by the senior pastor of Hillsong Church, “the message is the same, but our
methods have to change” in explaining the cultural style approach adopted for church services (Hicks, 2012, p. 28). Similarly, a senior pastor at Brisbane’s Metro Church mentions that young people are attracted to the movement because of its ability to communicate traditional messages in a contemporary way (Simmons, 2011b) or what Zwartz (2004) refers to as “businesslike flair and focus” (para. 5). Weightman (1993) believes megachurches have grown because attendees feel comfortable in “large institutions that increasingly typify modern society” (p. 15) and that they are specifically targeted to meet the needs of the young (Delaney, 2005). Zwartz (2004) also mentions that significant effort has been made to attract young people.

The methods that Hillsong Church adopt in their services are successful in attracting younger people compared to other churches because they are specifically tailored to the
audience (Charboneau, 2015). This has been proven by large numbers of young people who have participated in the church over the last decade. More and more young people are recruited (Delaney, 2005; Pryor, 2005; Simmons, 2011a). For instance, one regular member at Hillsong Church describes the messages as very relevant to her as a young person and that everyone can relate to (Charboneau, 2015). In fact, an increasing number of young people are choosing churches that meet their needs as statistics show that this demographic of members in Pentecostal megachurches is growing while attendance in others has declined (Delaney, 2005). The younger generations tend to seek adventure, excitement and new things to explore. The lively contemporary music, membership in youth groups, interactive services, and smaller prayer groups are different options proposed by Pentecostal megachurches.

Pryor (2005) believes that the activities within Hillsong Church have shown that many young people are searching for meaning. Similarly, Rebekka Sommer, an adolescent psychologist from the University of Technology in Sydney, describes,

a big part of young people attending active churches and youth groups is the sense of fun and belonging. Predominantly, we live in isolation; the music, the support and the community provided by churches can make young people feel enormously better about themselves (Delaney, 2005, p.3).

Delaney (2005) also refers to a 19-year old church member’s church experience as thus: “everybody makes their own experiences from it” and this testimony can be viewed as an exciting approach from a megachurch that defines young people’s experience (p.3). Similarly, there are other testimonies from young members of a megachurch in referring to how the energy within the church is high and that their faith is expressed more through physical dimensions, which also contributes to enhancement of their sense of experience (Delaney, 2005; Lisee, 2012).
As mentioned by Ellingson (2010), megachurches have a sense of “edutainment” and that is crucial to their practices. The music, performances, and simple repetitive lyrics have been attracting a staggering number of young members. These churches not only capture the interests of young people but they are also making sure “that there will never be a dull moment” (Sargeant, 2000, p.31). This built atmosphere is considered as conducive for the recruitment of young people, offering them the megachurch experience (Wade & Hynes, 2012). Delaney (2005) claims that Hillsong Church has made young people feel better about themselves, as they participate throughout the service and within congregations. Hillsong Church offers something that is on the edge and dynamic, which other conventional churches fail to offer. A Christian Research Association Reverend, Dr. Philip Hughes, argues that the nature of Christian religion has now become “a consumer and lifestyle choice” (Delaney, 2005, p. 19). Bielo (2004) argues that personal experience is genuine and empowering; emotion and experience are more important than doctrinal approach to the moral identity construction.

Christianity in the context of a megachurch is no longer a religion that has been passed on from the family, parents or traditions but it is based on personal preferences and satisfaction levels. Millennials believe that in an evangelical church, the relationship with the divine is distinctive with a direct and personal approach (Charboneau, 2015). On the other hand, Rebecca Huntley believes that Pentecostal churches have also benefited from the willingness of young people to move between churches and faiths as they are attracted to things that promise short-term solutions and happiness” (Delaney, 2005, p. 2). It is believed that these young people would try a church for several years then leave if it does not suit them.

As discussed above, a Pentecostal megachurch is a new territory for young people to experience religiosity, spirituality, education, and entertainment (Thumma & Bird, 2015).
However, there is not much research about the practices of megachurches and their influence on young people’s place identity. From these perspectives, this study aims to examine young people’s perceptions of the atmospheric design semiotics in Transcendence Megachurch in Sydney, Australia. The study explores how young peoples’ perceptions and interactions encourage place attachment, and hence, site of engagement, and how they influence their place identity within this megachurch’s setting. The definitions of atmospheric design semiotics, place attachment, place identity, site of engagement, built environment and other terminology used in this study are provided in the Definitions Section.

1.3 Researcher’s Positioning

Within the last three years, I have worked as a lecturer within the Visual Communication/Graphic Design department in an Australian university. After completing my Bachelor degree in Visual Communication Design from an Indonesian university in 2007, I have also worked in the same field for over ten years in three Indonesian universities. Besides my teaching roles for a few years, I also worked as a professional graphic designer. The completion of a Master’s degree in Visual Communication Design in an overseas university in Sydney, Australia was fuelled by my parents’ ambitions for me to complete higher level academic studies as they did not have the chance for further study after high school. Hence, my further studies, and pursuing a PhD degree, also motivated me to leave Indonesia and focus on developing my academic career in Australia.

Living in Sydney for two years, I often visited Transcendence Megachurch on a casual basis. Although I was born in a Buddhist family, I never attended a Buddhist school or was involved in any related religious organisations in Indonesia. My parents were keen for me to have a Catholic education. Therefore, I completed my schooling from early childhood to high school in a Catholic school, which has also exposed my understanding and basic knowledge
of Christianity. My husband is Christian born and his late father served as a priest in the Netherlands church before he returned to Indonesia, and it was my husband who introduced me to the initial ideas, concepts, and exposure to megachurches. Although, I thought I had an idea of how the church functions through its religious practices, my megachurch experience in Australia has offered me a very different insight and concept of Christianity. In comparison to other conventional churches, I found Transcendence Megachurch very fluid and dynamic in its practice. The visual communication and design elements and the arrangements around the music, multimedia design, lights, and the live worshipping practices always attracted my attention.

With my expertise in the visual communication and design field, and from personal observations, I found the use of contemporary media resources and technology contributed greatly in building the atmosphere and interaction within the church, which also signalled a profound influence on the moods and experiences of the church members. From another perspective, with my teaching experience and expertise in the visual communication and design field, I was always curious about how the environment has an influence on capability and motivation in students’ learning activities (Ellsworth, 2005). In the megachurch context, the sophisticated use of media and technology, as well as references to current and popular culture, have always encouraged me to learn more about the different aspects that contribute to the church’s “atmosphere”. For instance, the environment and site of engagement of young members, alongside the atmospheric experience of a megachurch with live worshipping practices have been something that I was keen to investigate further. Similarly, the attraction of a large number of young people to this institution has been a motivation in this study to further understand this social phenomenon and its influence on young people’s experiences, more so with place attachment and their place identity. Being keenly interested, I wanted to explore the ways in which design elements such as the use of lights, sounds, and visualisation
in a megachurch atmosphere, instil and motivate young people’s interests and interaction, albeit the religious practices around their faith, beliefs or spirituality can mean for them. Hence, I have neither been keen to investigate the use of Christianity and the gospel, nor intended to judge the biblical teaching adopted by megachurches in this study. Instead, I have attempted to explore the relationship between the megachurch atmosphere and its influence on young people’s place identity. This study examines the meanings of participants that are attached to their perceptions, experiences, and interactions within the church as a site, their engagement with live worshipping practices, and their relationships with the church as a community.

Although, I am aware of the numerous controversies around megachurches in regards to their practices (e.g., Chambers, 2015; Ferguson, 2005; Snow, 2015). For instance, Chambers (2015) reports that Hillsong Church made a hundred million dollars from its Australian operations as charity which is tax exempt. In another article, Ferguson (2005) mentions that megachurches have “hijacked the Godly movement” by turning it into fellowship and tapping into business and politics by using the religion (p. 36). Expressing his concerns, Philip Powell, a Pentecostal preacher and a former general-secretary of the Assembly of God states,

many of these ministers have made themselves multi-millionaires. They are no more than business magnates who benefit from the tax-free status of corporations that they lead. They are not ‘pastors’ but business managers who have cashed in on a loophole in the Western government tax system (Ferguson, 2005, p. 36).

However, there are many other studies that suggest megachurches promote engagement and relevancy among young attendees (e.g., Davis & Yip, 2004; Delaney, 2005). For instance, in the study by Davis and Yip (2004), the emphasis on a personal relationship
with God and the relevancy of the messages for a younger generation, were some of the threads described by the participants aged between 17 to 22 years old. Similarly, Delaney (2005) concludes that “a growing number of young people are choosing to attend churches that better meet their needs through options such as youth groups, lively music, smaller prayer groups, and interactive services” (para. 12). Based on this contention, I have framed my thesis to investigating how the megachurch environment influences the younger congregation members through engagement with the atmospheric design semiotics, while also looking at their attachment to the place and its influences on their place identity.

1.4 Statement of the Problem

This study explores how the aspects of atmospheric design semiotics are perceived and influence young people’s place identity when they attend services and join activities, and interact in the Transcendence Megachurch environment. In this study, the combination of materiality variables (in forms of audio, multimedia visual, colour, lighting, and spatial arrangement), interactive activities, and personal existential perception within the chosen site are explored. The study focuses on exploring the contextual atmosphere and the influences of atmospheric design semiotics on young people’s place identity. Using an exploratory single case study, this study involves the voluntary participation of 12 participants who attend Transcendence Megachurch and shared their views based on their experiences.

The participants in this study are young people from various religious, ethnic and cultural backgrounds who attend Transcendence Megachurch on either a casual or regular basis, and some are also actively involved in the church’s activities. There are seven males and five females and they are from different walks of life as professionals, workers, or university students. For the purpose of this study, the participants are referred to as “young people” and they have all been provided with a pseudonym in keeping with their anonymity.
and privacy. The other details about the participants profile the sampling and data collection and analysis procedures and will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Aged between 20 to 29 years old, these young people have been involved in various church activities including weekly services, conferences, connect groups, and other events as volunteers or as regular congregations. As volunteers, the young members of Transcendence Megachurch predominantly offer their services in spaces such as the foyer, the welcome lounge, and the reception area. More importantly, there is a high level of young people’s presence and active participation within the congregations and services. For instance, this is when they engage with the live worshipping practices by singing, clapping, and dancing accordingly to the songs in the services or events. Some are even more involved as volunteers, attend bible study, prayers groups or church conferences. The sermon delivered by the preacher creates great enthusiasm for young people attending the services and they usually cheer and clap in their unique style. Simmons (2011b) suggests that compared to other traditional churches where the congregations are expected to be silent and calm during the service, Transcendence Megachurch offers a contemporary religious experience, which is equally fun yet holy at the same time.

The word atmosphere is commonly used to describe collective affects, such as mood, feeling, ambiance and others (Anderson, 2009). A sense of place in an atmosphere, as Rodaway (1994) suggests, appears to define something ambiguous as there is a sense of vagueness in how to define this term. Anderson (2009) describes the given affective qualities as being “remarkable for the singularity for those who feel it” (p. 78). Anderson (2009) also adds that “the experience occurs alongside the formation of subjectivity, across human and non-human materialities, and in between subject/object distinctions” when describing the relationship between subjective states, feelings, and emotions of their attendant (p.78). Based on Anderson’s (2009) assertion, there is a suggestion that the atmosphere influences the
individual’s place identity since every place has a personal meaning to its attendee, and that each one’s interpretation can be perceived differently from the others.

Bohme (1993) believes that atmospheres are indeterminate and they seem to fill the air with a certain tone and feel like a haze. In addition, the author contends that the atmosphere can be staged, built, and anticipated that depend entirely on the material world and subjective qualities (Bohme, 2013). The atmosphere in this study refers to everything formed by signs through the use of physical or tangible variables and materiality within Transcendence Megachurch. Semiotics is one of the analytical tools used to translate the meaning of signs and codes in a message, as in this case, the atmosphere of the church. Van Leuween (2005) argues that the semiotics resources are “the actions and artefacts that we employ to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically or by means of technologies” (p.3). In this context, the study of semiotics helps the understanding of the nature of meanings and meaning-making involved within these signs and how they are being socially contextually interpreted and become meaningful. Ignelzi (2000) defines meaning-making as “the process of how individuals make sense of knowledge, experience, relationships, and the self” (p. 5).

In this study, I use the term atmospheric design semiotics, which integrates numerous perspectives in defining atmosphere and semiotics. Atmospheric design semiotics is a spatial experience (Bille, Bjerregaard & Sorensen, 2015) that evokes particular moods and feelings (Bohme, 2002) involving numerous sensory experiences (Zumthor, 2006) from the symbolic visual communication design and interactions within the environment, which eventually generate individual impressions, emotions, interpretations, perceptions, values and meanings (Bille et al., 2015; Edensor, 2012; Fisher & Drobnick, 2012). Atmospheric design semiotics has an influence on the meaning-making process (Clough, 2010) in interactions with the materialities of space in the forms of explicit engagement and communication (Pink, Mackley & Morosanu, 2014). Based on this premise, atmospheric design semiotics in this study refers
to all signs that contribute to the meaning-making process and this includes forms of tangible variables such as visual design artefacts, sound system and music, colours and lighting intensities as part of the megachurch environment.

Norris (2004) describes site of engagement as a combination of material place, time and history that facilitates interaction in establishing contextual meaning. In the context of this study, the site of engagement refers to the materiality within Transcendence Megachurch where the aforementioned variables contribute to how young people interact in a particular spatial and contextual experience (atmospheric design semiotics). The site of engagement in this context is defined as to how young members engage through a sense of “adventure” as involved in a religious activity through the use of music, audio sound, light, large screens, and multimedia design while they also encourage specific dedication, beliefs, and perceptions within that space. Delaney (2005) reports that the Pentecostal style of worship in Christian churches offers “choose your own adventure” approach, which then defines young generations (para 28). During worships, the audience sings, sways, and dance to the music rhythmically, often with eyes closed and hands in the air. Wade and Hynes (2012) argue that one important element in the megachurch phenomenon is what they called as affective dynamic, which is more than mere expressions of subjective emotions from “a kind of physics of experience, the potential energy of social world residing in ourselves, and the interplay between the two” (Massumi, 2002, as cited in Wade & Hynes, 2012, p. 175). The spectacular excitement and indescribable megachurch experience are producing a sense of “being on the cutting edge of something” (Connell, 2005, p. 322), which recognised as adventurous by the megachurch attendees. The collective enthusiasm within the environment is spontaneous and intense, yet it brings comfort to the audience.

Research literature suggests various perspectives about place identity (Cuba & Hammon, 1993; Ujang, 2012; Qazimi, 2014; Qingjiu & Maliki, 2013). However, in this study
an adaptation from Lalli’s (1992) perspective of looking at urban-related place identity, as developed through three stages of understanding place identity (the process of identification, subjective construction of the town or city with respect to an urban environment, and the processes of identification and being identified with a town - Lalli’s original version), has been considered as a theoretical framework in analysing young member’s experiences and their perceptions within Transcendence Megachurch as well as the influences of atmospheric design semiotics on their place identity.

An adaptation of the three stages from Lalli’s (1992) model is presented from the following three main categories:

(1) The behavioural and sensory experience at Transcendence Megachurch.
(2) The empathetic and subjective reconstruction of Transcendence Megachurch.
(3) The existential and unconscious perception of Transcendence Megachurch.

These three stages are explained in more detail in the theoretical framework in Chapter 3 under Section 3.5.

1.5 Research Aims and Questions

This research aims to:

- Understand young people’s perceptions of their personal interactions with atmospheric design semiotics (the music and audio systems, multimedia thematic visual communication projector screens, singing, lighting arrangements, live performances, and interactive worshipping activities that are not limited to cheering, waving, clapping, and gesture responses) within megachurches as a site of engagement and place attachment.
• Investigate young people’s interactions with atmospheric design semiotics on a personal level and as part of a community membership have an influence on their place identity.
• Explore how atmospheric design semiotics in megachurches contributes to the “inherent values” and “contextual atmosphere” to influence young people’s place identity.
• Examine the influences on young people’s experiences with Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric design semiotics as the result their interaction with the place, while also investigating their perspectives, interpretations, perceptions, beliefs, and meanings attached to this place.

The following main research question and sub questions frame this study.

**Main Question:**
In what ways do megachurch atmospheric design semiotics influence young people’s experiences and their place identity?

**Sub-questions**
1. How do young people perceive the atmospheric elements in a megachurch as the built environment?
2. In what ways do the activities and interactions in a megachurch environment encourage a site of engagement and place attachment for young people within the church?
3. What are the possible outcomes resulting from young people’s interactions with the megachurch atmospheric design semiotics and its members and how does it influence their place identity?
1.6 The Significance of the Study

Much concern has been expressed in relation to young people struggling with isolation social interaction and an identity crisis within the contemporary society (see the work by Biddle, 2007; Delaney, 2005; Putnam, 2000; Simmons, 2011a). Young people’s identity development can be influenced by a range of internal and external factors. Internal factors are significant to personal traits of individuals and relate to issues such as genetics and personal characteristics, whereas external factors refer to the outside environment and influences that can affect one’s identification.

In furthering an understanding of young people’s identity, this study attempts to explore their perceptions of a megachurch experience and their interactions. However, this research is narrowed to examine the influence of atmospheric design semiotics only in one Transcendence Megachurch. It explores how young people are engaged with the site and build an attachment with the place while influencing their place identity. The spatial and contextual atmosphere (atmospheric design semiotics) in this particular Transcendence Megachurch, is examined in ways it creates a site of engagement for young people. Thus, the findings explore young people’s experiences and perspectives in defining their place identity.

This study will provide better insights into the role of visual communication and design in megachurches. A success parameter of any communication is whenever the interpretation of signs from the readers’ perspective has the closest meaning to the intended message produced by the sender and its ability to build a personal connection with targeted audiences. This study will contribute to the gaps in current research in the field as to how atmospheric design semiotics and the built ambience with the use of communication design and spatial experience are essential to young members place identity in the context of a Transcendence Megachurch.
In applying theoretical consideration to the answers of the questions above, and thus providing outcomes, this study will:

- Contribute to new knowledge on how “contextual atmosphere” and communication design (atmospheric design semiotics) within megachurches have a significant influence on young people’s place identity within the Australian context.
- Provide a broader perspective on how atmospheric design semiotics play a significant role in contemporary religious sites like megachurches and how it influences young people’s place identity.
- Make recommendations as to how young people find megachurches as a site of engagement (pertaining to their interactions with the contextual atmosphere and the atmospheric design semiotics) where they learn “the right values” which influences their place identity, sense of belonging, and agency.

1.7 Thesis Structure

Chapter 1 introduces the background and rationale for the research, provides insight into the concept of a megachurch and its tendency to attract younger people as they are transitioning into adulthood. This chapter also states the research aims, research questions, significance of the research, definitions of different terminology used in the study, and presents the thesis structure.

Chapter 2 is the literature review about young people in the contemporary era, including their life challenges, spirituality, and popular culture that accompany their transitional phases. The literature review also examines the concept, characteristics, and Christianity within the Australian context.
Chapter 3 presents the conceptual framework on which the research was framed. The term atmospheric design semiotics is introduced in the first part of the chapter. Then, the second part discusses the concept of place identity. The last part presents the development of an adapted model used in this research, and how the model is utilised to frame the discussion.

Chapter 4 is the research methodology chapter, which begins with the research paradigm and approach and describes qualitative case study and the research design, including all research methods from recruitment, sampling, data collection, ethical considerations, and the process of data analysis and interpretation used in this study.

Chapter 5 reports the detailed results of the research from the interviews with young people and their journal records, which are presented under different categories and themes as framed by the adapted model of place identity of Transcendence Megachurch.

Chapter 6 discusses the findings, based on the themes and sub-themes from the analysed data and the discussion is presented under different vignettes.

Chapter 7 involves a discussion, which probes further so as to gain an understanding about the emergent issues in relation to the implications and recommendations of this research. This chapter also summarises the research project, including the limitations, implications, and conclusion.

1.8 Chapter Summary

The rationale and background for this study have been reported in this chapter. It provides an outline of challenges in the adulthood transition phase. The literature shows that religion and spirituality are a part of their lives. Contemporary megachurch as one religion place is considered to be chosen by young people because of its relevancy, convenience, and freedom offered. The meanings sought by young people lead to the problem statement that will be addressed in this research. Atmospheric design semiotics is introduced as a new term
because it influences the meaning-making process in interactions with space and place identity. This will be explained in Chapter 3 and briefly discussed as the lens to look at the ways young people interpret their perceptions about the Transcendence Megachurch spatial experience (including interactions, activities, and other involvement). This chapter concludes having stated research aims, main research question and sub-questions, research significance, and definition of terms followed by outlining forthcoming chapters in this thesis. In the next chapter, the literature review discusses the young people, their challenges in the context of the contemporary era as well as the megachurch concepts and its practices.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter outlines the review of the literature in relation to the study that is presented in two sections. The first section outlines the context of young people in the contemporary era. This section also provides the understanding of different challenges faced by young people as part of contemporary society, and how spirituality and popular culture take part in their transition to adulthood. The next part of this chapter discusses megachurches and the underlying religious concepts in relation to this study. This section outlines the concepts of the megachurch, the characteristics of megachurches that consist of non-traditional and conventional orientation, and the composite approach. It then continues with a discussion around religious emotion within rituals and space, followed by megachurches worshipping experience and its engaging messages. The chapter concludes by discussing the relationship between Pentecostalism and popular culture, and the literature around megachurches in the Australian context.

2.2 Introduction

A megachurch is a type of church that has at least 2,000 attendees at their weekly services (Baird, 2006; Ellingson, 2007; Sargeant, 2000; Wade, 2016). However, the size does not satisfy the fact that a big congregation of people believing in a particular faith creates a megachurch. The word “mega” is taken often to represent the concept of a large congregation, while in fact, megachurches offer more than just a religious site for most of their members. Unlike any traditional churches, megachurches provide a new Christian landscape for their
members to fulfil their spiritual, emotional, educational, as well as entertainment needs (Eagle, 2015; Schaller, 1992). In current changing social and cultural contexts, megachurches have addressed modern society’s religious needs and desires.

Although variations occur in megachurches their patterns of operations and dynamics of leadership display similarities. Thus, unlike traditional churches that are built on spiritual nourishment and growth, megachurches are widely established by providing spiritual, economic, and other life aspects through breakthroughs, which Wade (2016) refers to as “contemporary total institution” (p. 663). Ronch (2012) argues that the dynamics of churches are taking a collective social phenomenon with individual spiritual connection disregarded. This chapter reviews to a broader extent past literature on the megachurch atmosphere and also examines the impact it has on young people’s place identity (Wright, 2017). This chapter also draws on a major concern from the fact that megachurches are becoming more popular in addressing modern society religious needs and people’s aspirations, which include redressing of socioeconomic issues, doctrinal equity, and appreciation of personal linguistic identities in the church (Connell, 2005; Hong, 2003).

2.3 Young People in the Contemporary Era

The demographic traits across the globe account for the younger generation as the significant population in most of the societies. Norris (2011) in her study draws upon the presumptions relating to adoring control in megachurch leadership. The author further states how megachurches incorporate the dynamic culture to win the consent of the significant population of younger people. Similarly, while advancing culturally, megachurches have therefore proven that the gap has been closed in losing younger people who are increasingly a substantial part of the audience and promote their growth. The Hillsong church is regarded as one of the most well-known and largest megachurches in Australia (Connell, 2005). Hepburn
(2017) suggests that this megachurch considers the attributes of younger people in the modernity and its approaches to spiritual matters that prove enticing to the youth as it focuses on a communication process that emphasises the visual sharing of information (Hepburn, 2017).

The vibe and atmosphere across the megachurches distinguish these institutions among their operations and other large traditional churches; for instance, Goh (2008) mentions these churches incorporate contemporary worship style, advanced media and electronic platforms, charismatic leadership, informal dressing, and the undefined general atmosphere. As Wright (2017) contends, the congregation of megachurches also have a huge population that is young but well-educated. Thus, the atmosphere of the church depicts a dynamic denominational atmosphere that changes with the demands of members based on their socioeconomic requirements and the task of still pursuing to nourish them spiritually (Wright, 2017). This semiotics of the atmosphere creating the uniqueness of Transcendence Megachurch will broadly be discussed later concerning the characteristics of megachurches and what the spatial experience means for young people.

Transcendence Megachurch directs a lot of focus to the impression created through attractive information provided to its members. The church also provides an opportunity for young people to develop a sense of identity by integrating their culture to the way of worship, and in winning their goodwill to worship in their sanctuaries (Yip & Hoon, 2016). Dougherty and Whitehead (2011) assert that identity in megachurches is driven by the congregational voluntary contribution of time and resources. The religious identity involves a key role for all members advocating for commitment to come together as a primary group of worship (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). Thus, it is expected that the religious connection creates a sense of belonging especially for groups from diverse backgrounds.
A range of associated services for most of the megachurches also reflect the interests of young people. For instance, the megachurch provides platforms for the young to advance their talents through music, leadership via mega conferences, and reach out to the world through evangelism and television platforms to enhance their popularity growth (Ackley, 2017). The programs are implemented with the aim of improving the religious experience that has proved to drive both spiritual nourishment and economic growth for the youth. In his review on the global phenomenon of Hillsong Church, Marti (2017) found that a Christian rock concert held in the 1980s targeted the youth who needed to create a self-proclaimed success. The event motivated the church growth through lobbying and attracting young people who felt their interests had a strong link with its traditions. Therefore, as Wells (2016) purports, the contemporary Christian adopted by the megachurch of Hillsong creates an avenue to empower spiritual growth in a more current approach to attract young people to the church.

2.3.1 Challenges faced by young people in the contemporary society.

Life struggles and challenges are part of life transitions that young people have experienced in the event of identifying their identity (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015). For the last decade of the Twentieth century, fundamental restructuring was witnessed in addressing challenges and struggles that young people had experienced for so long (Jakelic, 2016). The global reshaping of culture and the economic process has been a source of the difficulties that young people have undergone. Degen, Melhuish, and Rose (2015) suggest that the changes in the religious approach have given rise to a modern era. The megachurches have capitalised on such dynamics to address the real-life challenges among the young people prompting them to engage in immoral activities to sustain their livelihood. Borch (2014) suggests that the
assumption about “risky” involves the aspects of politics, ethical, and moral judgments that young people undergo and face difficulty to manage.

The element of risk in contemporary society is passive in that the younger generation is exposed to vices more than morals that define a bright future. Among challenges young people face, there is an indication of “high rates of sinning and low rates of holding purity” that goes hand in hand with religious matters (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015, p.556). Cieslik and Pollock (2017) ascertain that categorising the role of risk has taken a broader impact in contemporary religious situations. In particular, this is regarding aspects of dynamics in the political and economic world where young people find themselves more vulnerable at the receiving end. In such situations, young people are perceived as vulnerable to immoral behaviour associated with factors limiting a successful life (Syed & McLean, 2016). Taking risks in modernity, life creates a category of social memberships that define societal order (Ross, 2017).

For instance, young people who opt for specific social membership acquire a particular identity that distinguishes them from the rest of their peers. Cieslik and Pollock (2017) assert that the pressure from the dynamism experienced in contemporary society risks reshaping of families, employment, and communities to accommodate most of the younger generation neglected by those with alignment to a globalised world. The modernity of a society is also characterised by features that create an aspect of uncertainty for young people (Putnam, 2000). Remarkably, the resistance from some of the traditions to integrate new concepts of doing things creates uniqueness and differences among the youth, which hinder progress for those tied to fixed cultures. Therefore, the norms and values that define ways of life differ depending on the flexibility of society to accommodate modernisation and treasure what matters to all members (Collins, Bai, Crampton, Fischer, D'Andrea, Dean & Cherney, 2019).
McMullin (2018) contends that the growth of global hazards has contributed to modernisation, especially for the younger generation. A broader feeling is that degradation of traditions creates a society in which young people must remain reflexive to succeed in their daily practices. The concept of global hazards refers to structuring the organisation to fit a few who have the potential to guide their lives despite the withdrawal of support by the culture and those deemed as community leaders (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015). Thus, with modernisation, young people draw attention to experts’ criticism on life issues, which have a direct impact on individual traits. Young people often need adequate support to identify self-capabilities and lead a normal life.

### 2.3.2 Spirituality and popular culture in young people transition.

According to Williams (2016), spirituality and cultural context provide the foundational elements for young people to construct their identities as they transition into adulthood. David and Moody (2015) point out that the Australian spiritual culture that emanated from organisations such as Hillsong megachurches incorporated more of a modernised era to help young people to transition to adults. Megachurches have provided an avenue to focus on integrating traditions to theology and hence, this promotes transitions based on the seeker’s orientations (Smith, 2017). Seeker’s orientation is purely an attribute of megachurches bringing in spiritual encounter through incorporating secular lifestyles of young people into worship. The seekers refer to individuals who were never affiliated with any churches or those who were dissatisfied with other churches, and the main strategy to win them is to “offer activities (often in secular based interests) to make it ‘easy’ to attend” (von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012, p. 360). At the early stage of attendance, the seekers are encouraged to participate as a “free rider” where they have no obligation to volunteer, tithe, provide offerings, or have any further involvement. In regards to place identity, most young
people living in such lifestyles find it easy to feature in the churches and advance their spirituality. The theoretical concept of place identity is broadly discussed in Chapter 3.

The literature on megachurches suggests that in the course of younger people transitioning, the church innovates the way theology is spread to accommodate the aspect of modernisation of lifestyles. David Canter (1997) reviews the scale of interaction as the levels that define environmental situations. Thus, megachurches are conscious of this concept in that most churches consider the transition of young people through incorporating new stylishness to win masses to their congregation. Duff (2010) explains that the environmental situations also involve the church’s embracing of a casual dress code to entice young members to the church. Similarly, this approach supports them in transitioning to adulthood through different approaches that assist them to reconsider, change, and consider dressing in a godly manner (Ward, 2016).

2.4 Religious Emotion within Rituals and Space

James (1981) believes that emotion situated at the heart of religion, and that religion is expressed through emotional experiences. Riis and Woodhead (2010) argue that religions are associated with emotion, and any emotion can be religious. Religious emotion occurs within a religious context and is an integral part of its social and symbolic relations. According to Rudolf Otto (1917, as cited in Riis & Woodhead, 2010), religion is related to a distinctive mental state that is “ineffable and inexpressible”, in which he calls it as “numinous” (p. 57). Despite the ambiguousness of its nature, the numinous here blends amazement, attraction, fascination, and fear, which arises when the individuals feel the divine presence. Edwards (1971, as cited in Riis & Woodhead, 2010) believes that the religious emotions are beyond personal matter, but it constitutes from mutual relations between “an agent, a religious community, and sacred symbols (scriptures, sacraments, and, from the confessional point of
view, God)” (p. 58). As opposed to Edwards’ (1971) view, James (1981) contends that religious emotion is most likely to occur as consequences of the private relations between humans and God. Nevertheless, this study found that the emotional aspects emerged as an integral part of a complex relationship between agents, cultural symbols, and social formations.

Emile Durkheim (1912) understands that feeling or emotion is the product of religion and society. A person can experience intense emotion through the participation of social practices and beliefs (Riis & Woodhead, 2010). For Durkheim (1912), emotions are not produced through individual solitude experience, but rather through structured gatherings, in which he coined as *Collective Effervescence*. Riis and Woodhead (2010) identify the terminology as “an ecstatic sentiment generated by a concentration of members at periodic rituals” (p. 61). The authors illustrate the collective energy as a sort of electricity that formed through the conjoined practices that carry the participants into an extraordinary degree of exaltation. Durkheim (1912) believes that the feelings become real when they are confirmed collectively, and the religious emotions are resulted from “a communion of experience and comfort resulting from solidarity” (cited in Riis & Woodhead, 2010, p. 62). Religion, in this sense, is offering a relationship where the members’ lives are more foundational, community-based, true, and with it an emotional restructuring.

The symbolic relations of religion grow through the combination of material, social elements, and bodily action rituals (Riis & Woodhead, 2010). In the context of this study, the worshipping activities are one of the rituals practised in Transcendence Megachurch, which also the focal point of the research. Borrowing the illustration by Riis and Woodhead (2010) on the influence of these aspects, they wrote:

The combination of a beautiful and richly furnished religious building (or a dedicated religious site in a natural landscape); music, drumming, and other sounds; use of
natural and artificial light; fragrances and scents; coordinated bodily actions; scripted performances; symbolic foci of attention; the recitation of traditional words and texts – all can move participants into a different realm of feeling and relating. (p. 71).

The above exemplification indicates that the religious emotions are closely related and intertwined with the religious space, the ambience of the place, as well as the communication design elements, which in this study refers to atmospheric design features of the megachurch. The relationship between religious emotions, spatial experience, and collective is inseparable.

Nevertheless, it should be recognised that such emotional ordering is not static since it is constantly produced, interrupted, and reproduced in the lives of religious communities and their members. Geertz (1971, as cited in Riis & Woodhead, 2010) recognises such process as dialectical since “our feelings shape our reality, and what we take to be real shapes our feelings” (p. 67). Therefore, the place identification emerged from the religious experiences should also be acknowledged as an ongoing process that changes over time, and may result vary one from the other.

2.5 Megachurches and the Underlying Religious Concepts

Megachurches have driven ambitions and intentions (Yip & Hoon, 2016) as congregations share a lot of ordinary aspects of worship in comparison to other churches. However, megachurches should not be seen as spiritual realities and a form of religious practice that build on distinctive measures, although they equally pursue quite similar spiritual objectives as compared to other churches. Studies across the religious divides consider megachurches as new structures developed to enhance diversity in spiritual nourishment among the followers (Lisee, 2012; Newton, 2018; Singleton, 2016). The size of the churches
explain not only their uniqueness but also a distinctive religious reality that defines their operational systems.

Yip and Hoon (2016) refer to the dynamics of the church in relying on the social phenomenon rather than on a particular individual associated with a specific religious faith. With differences in opinions set to affect the megachurches, the leadership embraces dynamics of innovation and modernisation of culture to win most followers, especially the younger members who have a broader interest in discoveries (Mandes & Sadloń, 2018). The rise of large churches in the past decades proves that congregational life has an attachment to modernisation and honoring of existing cultures.

There is a symbolic significance attached to megachurches, in which it offers an explanation to both spiritual life and relationship that members need to uphold to enhance co-existence in the dynamics and change of cultures in society (Connell, 2005). The communication strategies, especially with megachurches in Australia, have proved vital in reaching out and attracting large followers. Believing that the church is in a “communication business” as suggested by Brady Boyd, a pastor of New Life Church in the U.S (Endacott, Hartwig & Yu, 2017, p. 132) is a significant statement, which as Chong (2015) highlights, demonstrates how the growth of megachurches is hinged on excellent ways of reaching out to the masses.

The consent of communication must align with the traits of the identified audience (Spaulding & Formentin, 2017). This aspect has become a significant tool used by Hillsong churches regarded as the brand “designer” in that they adjust their way of communication to accommodate their target audiences (Baker & Robards, 2016, p. 62). Here, the design approach in the context of Hillsong is applied to review how the intended message is received and reacted to by the followers (Davies, 2017). In addition, it is within these scales that
Transcendence Megachurch learns the traits of the audience and uses the designed systems to nurture the spiritual and economic growth and sustenance of its congregations.

The other factor involves the aspect of design build on physical traits. Day and Lövheim (2015) discuss how evolution and growth in megachurches have been promoted through the adoption of contemporary ways of preaching, programming, and services to promote transitioning within modernisation cues. With an obligation of modern ways implemented to attract the younger generation to megachurches, the leadership is also sensitive to nurturing transition of the young to adults in ways that preserve holiness and cultural aspects of society. For instance, Jules and Maynard (2016) suggest that moving along life paths for the younger generation brings transitions that are planned and unplanned. The Transcendence Megachurch accommodates this conception in that it is conscious of people’s experiences with changes. Jules and Maynard (2016) also believe that every new chapter of life experience opens a chance of growth that enables their sessions, programs, and services to accommodate such considerations.

2.5.1 Concepts of the megachurch.

An internalised investigation of megachurches shows sharing of uniqueness but common systems, programs, and more importantly, the traits that make this church distinct from other conventional churches (Niemandt & Lee, 2015). The word mega is often used to represent the concept of a large congregation within megachurches, which offer more than just a religious site to most of its members (Shelby, 2016). Megachurches were established mostly since the 1980s, now they operate in numerous countries including “the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand” (Goh 2008, p.284).
Megachurches had their origin traced in the United States between the 1970s and 1980s. The historical spread of churches reveals that similar forms of big churches existed across European countries in the 1740s (Lee, 2016). Though issues about technology were not yet at incumbent stages, engaging measures to the population growth of the churches was a principal aim for every church. Megachurches grew from the contemporary issues that forced churches to reintroduce tactics of commanding masses, but more through the use of social related issues that form part of livelihood in winning spiritual consent of the followers and seekers (Dowson, 2017). Apart from extending and growing in its population of firm believers and followers, megachurches have initiated a revolution in theology (Lee & Dreyer, 2018). As Han and Krägeloh (2018) concur this theological change with megachurches establishes traits, which are specifically tailored to incorporate modern society and contemporary culture on ways of worship.

According to Shelby (2016), previous studies suggest megachurches are a new concept of Christianity whereby the church attempts to update religious messages, which are then communicated to followers while adopting a popular cultural style in programming and propagating sermons. Examined from the concepts of modernisation, megachurches are considered as innovative and groovy as they includes possibilities to merge the casual as well as allowing stylish dress codes (Wade, 2016). In particular, the emphasis on a secular-like music genre, and the theatrical and live worshipping practices with the contemporary style of preaching, programs, and services are common traits within megachurches as part of building their exterior image and interior atmosphere and environment around religious activities.

Thumma and Bird (2015) agree that unlike other traditional churches, megachurches provide a new Christian landscape for their followers to fulfill their spiritual, emotional, educational, as well as entertainment needs. In the current changing social and cultural context, megachurches have addressed modern society’s religious needs and desires (Jakelic,
Megachurches have addressed issues of unemployment and spiritual nourishment needs; for example, most of the current churches operate successful schools, health facilities, and counseling institutions to promote the social welfare of followers. Other churches have integrated platforms to ensure young people advance their talents especially for those undertaking a secular-gospel based entertainment.

Size is the most attributed concept of megachurches, and they are often distinguished by a number of characteristics: “a contemporary worship style prominently featuring electronic musical instruments and media, dynamic and charismatic speakers, services geared towards ‘seekers’ rather than mature believers, international links and networks, informality in dress and atmosphere” (Goh 2008, p.284). With a well-established practice with similar purposes and goals, megachurches focus on shared traits and they are well known for their concert style of preaching in adopting evangelical songs, use of music, light, ambiance, and incorporating secular styles in advancing talents (Goh, 2008; Shelby, 2016).

Thumma (1996) firmly believe that megachurches as a new phenomenon in the religious space have characteristics that are specifically tailored to the modern society and culture (Eagle, 2015; Twitchell, 2004). The sermons and other events that are communicated to the audience often express a generalised picture of the megachurches’ objectives in transforming society (Syed & McLean, 2016). Singleton (2016) also contends that megachurches tend to influence and have much control over the followers’ spiritual lives. There are three conventional methods of communication which are used by megachurches: (1) non-traditional approach meant to attract the “unchurched”; (2) architectural style targets building worship based on realities of everyday life; and (3) composite orientation used as a linking factor to the first two approaches (Son, 2018). There are specific messages, which are distinctive and conceptualised to target followers, mainly young people as mentioned earlier from the targeted shared traits of megachurches (Thomas, 2017).
From a non-traditional approach to target mostly the unchurched, megachurches focus on creating religious platforms to review traditions, thus, enabling more acceptable norms within its practices as a modern church. A major obligation of this method is to ensure that individuals having a strong belief of church traditions, which embraces flexibility in accommodating religious matters within contemporary living. The architectural style (conventional aspects) focusses on expressing realities of modern living, which other traditional and orthodox churches fail to observe. Their communication style aims to match the growth of megachurches, while maintaining its roots, yet offers ways to transform the life of its followers. With a composite approach in its communication style, megachurches retain traditional aspects of worship; however, they equally advocate modernised ways in their congregations (Thumma, 1996). As unique sanctuaries, megachurches blend traditions and contemporary religious worship to accommodate different age groups of followers. Their different communication methods are based on their individual set structures (Son, 2018), which relies heavily on lifestyles and trends.

Willow Creek Community Church leader, Bill Hybels, refers to megachurches as a new way to attract the younger generation. As Eagle (2015) and von der Ruhr and Daniels (2012) suggest, there is much attention drawn to how megachurches are to set market adjustment and flexibility unlike any other religious institution offering their services to the community. In addition to this argument, Wade (2016) reviews megachurches as “seeker-oriented” churches (p.672) – a term which delineates megachurches’ intentions in focusing on attracting large followers from diverse cultural backgrounds, while embracing openness and diversity. These seekers represent individuals who have never been affiliated with any church and those who were dissatisfied with other churches. The main strategy in winning them is to “offer activities (often in secular based interests) to make it ‘easy’ to attend” (von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012, p. 366). Hence, the interest of megachurches is to organise sessions that attract
a bigger audience, winning their consent and fully regarding them as followers of true spirituality (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015).

In the early stage of attendance, the seekers are encouraged to participate as a “free rider” (von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012, p. 372) with no obligations to volunteer, tithe or give offerings and provide other commitments to the church. However, the dominant conceptions around the growth of megachurches in the 1980s from most of the early religious scholars tend to differ around the claims that followers have no obligation to meet the operational cost of the church, which is usually high (Davies, 2017).

2.5.2 Characteristics of megachurches.

Megachurch traits are majorly redefined and based on the layout and key roles churches have spearheaded in society. The major traits include the mega aspect, strategic location, similarity of shared information, and distinctive visionary identities (see Figure 2.1). These traits give a clear picture of how the megachurches develop and the goals they pursue in society. The characteristics of megachurches established in large congregations where the size of church commands (O’Dell, 2010). The mega-sized trait expounds the original identifying brand for the churches as explained by many people who attend weekly fellowships and services (Niemandt & Lee, 2015). The large congregation (mega) and the reputation of the church creates a correct impression for society in enabling the sanctuaries to earn continuous growth (Spaulding & Formentin, 2017).

The second trait - the strategic location has its trace in the suburbs of large cities (Wright, 2017). Previous studies state how churches in metropolitan suburbs have faster growth, as strategically the suburban areas often offer expansive plots of land needed for large buildings, which can accommodate thousands of attendees for services and religious activities (Davies, 2017). The mega concept is thus used to define such churches usually situated in
thriving suburban areas such as megachurches in Korea (Kim, 2015). These megachurches are equipped with all kind of resources including financial breakthroughs and congregations to enhance their expansion (Perales & Bouma, 2018).

![Diagram showing traits of megachurch](image)

*Barnes (2010) contends that this is a crucial aspect in sustaining the growth of megachurches and its practices, which also prioritise and heavily consider contemporary culture as part of the worship and church business execution component. Lee (2016) notes that often there are restrictive zoning regulations within suburbs in countries such as South Korea and Australia, as compared to other traditional urban areas in big cities or business districts. Within these suburbs, there are often high demographics of potential megachurch attendees who are “consumer-oriented, highly mobile, well-educated middle-class families” (Lee & Dreyer, 2018, p. 2); for instance, Protestant churches have a reputation, which is often associated with contextual aspects mostly in relation to particular suburban areas, languages, and histories of the attendees (Sterland, Powell, Pepper & Hancock, 2018).

Similarly, with rapid growth and multiple languages spoken among people within such suburban areas, megachurches acquire an understanding of ways of life and profiles of
potential attendees. This provides an opportunity for the founders to have a platform that is directed to spiritual command while also targeting a massive number of followers (Tkaczynski, 2017). Frederik (2015) describes the influence of globalisation and change on the way people experience, perceive, and shape cultures and contexts. Furthermore, the author states that at the same time this is a phenomenon, which encourages a hybrid of local and global contemporary settings and cultures to merge. Consequently, megachurches seem to take into account all of these features to enforce both traditional and contemporary factors in religious matters to achieve a massive following in spreading the gospel.

2.5.2.1 Megachurches with non-traditional orientation.

From a non-traditional orientation, megachurches have attempted to attract religious seekers and the unchurched using unconventional and informal ways (Harkness, 2010). The approach is uniquely devised by the church to ensure that attracting the modernised population is different from traditional individuals (Spaulding & Formentin, 2017). This orientation is expressed by theological scholars as the most prevalent form of megachurches established in the 1980s, whereby the main aim is to create new religious structures that are acceptable and relevant to the modern society by using a common approach (Shelby, 2016). As further explained by Sanders (2016), the building of churches through non-traditional messaging tends to adopt quite ordinary looking structures, which duplicate everyday structures such as office complexes, schools, and warehouses.

Inside these structures, people are greeted by worshippers in large lobbies with well-lit signs, information booths, and often a mall-like courtyard complete with refreshments (Cornelio, 2018). These aspects became clear after an examination of six megachurches in the United States (Dowson, 2017). One of the discovered factors regarding the success of megachurches is the control of thousands of attendees in a single service and more so about
the leadership factors mastered in quite exemplary ways (Newton, 2018). McMullin (2018) mentioned megachurches in the United States as an example, which has most of such institutions led by talented individuals who not only command popularity but are also respected across society. Sanders (2016) mentions that some of the current speakers in the most prominent megachurches are highly gifted in communication. Personality dynamics is adopted by Hillsong megachurches in Australia, as Sanders (2016) further refers to speakers who use non-traditional approaches to integrate changes of elements held by culture and society in their sermons, to focus on a strong gravity of attraction around their churches.

The religious seekers orientation has its uniqueness of adoption as an attribute for megachurches sourced from the American churches (Wade, 2016). Chuck Smith at Calvary Chapel was the Pioneer of this trait before it spread to the Australian religious culture (Syed & McLean, 2016). Hepburn (2017) adds that the “seeker sensitive churches” saw an opportunity to accommodate the modernised generation as believers through integrating their attire, clothing styles, and ways of communication into the church systems (p. 42).

The process of preferring their music and languages is ascertained by many theological scholars to be in line with the gospel message (Yip & Hoon, 2016). The theoretical perspective of the megachurch reviews the atmosphere of the church established on the need to develop spiritual experience based on followers lives (Wells, 2016). Through this inquiry, the atmospheric design approach and its semiotics within a Transcendence megachurch are investigated, particularly on the relationship with young Christians’ identity construction (Han & Krägeloh, 2018). The major aspiration of non-traditional orientation is that megachurches like Hillsong have their structure majoring on both orthodox and contemporary aspects of the church.
2.5.2.2 Megachurches with conventional orientation.

The conventional orientation of megachurches embraces more traditional Protestantism but in a larger scale (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). The architectural style adopted by this category of megachurches is often a Neo-Gothic or Colonial design, which is mostly seen in Australia and South Korea (Tkaczynski, 2017). Similarly, more Christian symbols and ornaments are used in the interior decoration and exterior architectural elements of these megachurches. Peter Zumthor, a scholar on environmental atmosphere, asserts that the audience perceives the surroundings based on their emotional sensibility (Sørensen, 2015). Megachurches, in a similar vein, establish an atmosphere that accommodates the emotional sensibility of young people by constructing and working around different traits that create the atmosphere within these churches.

The atmosphere created within the place, in this case megachurches, facilitates personal interaction between the attendees and the church environment, which then encourage the place attachment through regular attendance and participation. Pink, Mackley, and Morosanu (2014) argue that atmospheres are felt from inside, within, and they are “felt differently by different people” (p. 353). This emotional engagement constructed within each individual works differently since each person has his/her own traits, prior knowledge, perspectives and vary interpretation of the spatial interaction. For instance, the megachurch atmosphere could convey particular memories to an individual who has experienced the similar environment. It may also evoke a certain emotion or feeling, depending on the individual’s perception, which is explored in this study.

The music played and recommended attires also have strong relevancy to the sermons and command a huge following (Sterland et al., 2018). Megachurches within the United States enjoy a Westernised culture influencing the atmosphere that promotes the influence of its churches globally. Jules and Maynard (2016, p. 144) found that “saddleback style” is a
significant breakthrough for normal orientation for megachurches in the United States. Saddleback style is a technique involving a well-formalised atmosphere to receive visitors in the church to make them feel comfortable according to their preferences as this is considered a priority. The approach is quite different especially in Hillsong megachurches that have widely invested in a secular-based gospel music as a platform to bring on board mostly young people.

2.5.2.3 Megachurches following a composite approach.

A composite approach adopted by some megachurches is described as the blending of non-traditional and conventional aspects to the architecture, service and sermons (Ward, 2016). Most of the churches integrating a blend of these two components are found in South Korea where megachurches are taking root and growing adversely. The architecture of the church buildings represents a mixture of traditional and modern forms (Spaulding & Formentin, 2017). Usually, the exterior of the buildings may look like an orthodox church with a large theatre-like auditorium interior, to accommodate individual seating, and an adaptable stage to support audio systems (Thomas, 2017). Nevertheless, whatever aspects a megachurch adopts, the main message is to impress their attendees, particularly the first-timers (Lee, 2016). Creating a reputation especially among the young people is essential in attracting them behind a composite approach within megachurches.

The identities of distinctive features of megachurches include reliance on spiritual matters, the pride of being associated with a church, and the essence of achieving self-esteem. Megachurches are built on distinctive visionary identities as Kang and Bodenhausen (2015) describe this aspect as the fourth characteristic of the church identity. From a distinctive visionary perspective, the intention of each church is based on future needs in achieving these aspects within a modernised world. The literature refer to the distinctive visionary plans of
megachurches suggesting its aim is to attract a vast multitude of attendees for further expansion and growth (Syed & McLean, 2016; Tkaczynski, 2017). As suggested by Ross (2017), the Hillsong megachurch in particular, focuses on developing a “visual identity” by incorporating different ways of influencing the audience’s lives in using music and casual dress codes; thus, offering various possibilities for the followers.

Powell and Pepper (2018) emphasise the concept of distinctive visionary, whereby they define the focus of megachurches towards developing a “profound identity” (p.292) in giving the followers first priority to establish an identity within the church. The profound identity also shapes experience and relies on the materialistic aspects of megachurches. A significant consideration is the use of materials to create an appealing atmosphere that is meant to attract a broader congregation in the churches (Ross, 2017). The atmosphere of the church includes light and worship music to create an ambiance in advancing individual talents, yet in a secular style in building a unique identity.

The fifth trait of megachurches as explored by Wells (2016) draws upon the extensive diversity of attendees within a single service. Religious studies depict megachurches as capitalising on the uniqueness in their messages and in accommodating diverse audiences from different cultural backgrounds (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015). With diverse interests among activities, megachurches accommodate modernisation to influence young people who make up a large proportion of megachurch congregations. Thumma and Bird (2015) contend that megachurches also adopt a spiritual entrepreneurial culture that is embedded in an innovative way into the church in keeping with new trends on their part when executing worship roles and practices.

Research conducted around innovation from a spiritual approach of megachurches revealed that a business-like model is adopted across religious activities to clearly understand what the diversified audience in the church demands (Powell & Pepper, 2018). Another
attribute of the church is to introduce its members to digitised equipment that control events delivery to ensure that the background of megachurches is appropriate (Ackley, 2017). With most of the megachurches situated in suburban regions, previous researchers argue that most of the congregations are made up of middle-class families (Singleton, 2016). Thus, numerous members are highly educated young people and the majority are in their mid-30s coming from multi-racial groups (Chong, 2015; Kurien, 2017). As suggested by Ward (2016), megachurches have similarities within their congregations, with attendees’ having common experiences and influences on their lives and identities. For instance, Spaulding and Formentin, (2017) suggest that a particular sub group of people in society pertaining to mostly to the “higher class” are more influentially associated to the traditions of megachurches, and are considered as established groups in adopting a classy experience (Sørensen, 2015). As reviewed by current religious studies, megachurches thrive in regions surrounded by reputable schools, big hospitals, and famous shopping malls (Syed & McLean, 2016). Congregations therefore, feel priviledged to use these facilities makes them feel proud to be identified with the church and its facilities (Kang & Bodenhausen, 2015).

2.5.3 Pentecostalism and popular culture.

Pentecostalism is emerging as an identity of Christianity adopted by megachurches to accomplish the aspect of popularising the modernised ways of worship. Stephens (2017) argues that Pentecostalism is the second largest subgrouping of Christianity globally, and its strategy of addressing cultural shifts determines how well a megachurch will enjoy its influence. Believers across the divides of Pentecostal churches have a “hot and cold” relationship with mass entertainment, and secular grounded music finding its way into areas of worship (Thomas, 2017, p. 86). Pentecostalism seems to borrow much from the evangelistic purpose and shuns away from this modernised music that they address as doomed
and the source of a sinful life (Duff, 2010). However, due to popular culture and the need to keep a massive congregation, access to mass culture and willingness to adjust to pop music faith is developing as a way to attract and retain young groups in megachurches (Lee & Dreyer, 2018).

Pentecostalism has become a popular religious approach bound by fork cultures seeking to transform religious traditions right from the bottom (Singleton, 2016). The most strategic plan reviewed by recent research is that most megachurches with a Pentecostal background equate the call of a mission to entrepreneurship (Latinovic, 2016). Capitalising on congregational talents with a secular connection such as music is seen as an evolving culture of transforming the church and encouraging distinctive identity (Endacott et al., 2017).

Stephens (2017) found that periods of widespread culture reforms and combinations are taking their course in the renewal approach of Christianity to keep the traditions of religion and also make them relevant to the modernised world. However, traditional members of the church, especially Catholics, who have a diverse views in this concern, in that Protestant (Pentecostals) are really against the modernisation of Christianity. A similar view is followed by Catholics who have a strong belief about orthodox church rules, towards strict observance of specific structures, mostly highly inflexible. The iron law of Christianity in modernity applies extensively among the Catholics in that they uphold doctrinal and moral boundaries (Rymarz & Cleary, 2016).

2.5.4 Megachurches worship experience and their engaging messages.

Research conducted on spiritual experiences in the Western countries has proved that religion is the major influence of masses that trigger feelings of transcension to define spiritual interest (Davies, 2017). The approach explains the reason behind the success enjoyed by megachurches, which based their sermons on personal spirituality, crucial in keeping and
attracting new and broader audiences (Goh, 2008). Carey (1996) argues that the success of Pentecostal churches in attracting large numbers of attendees attributed to their worship style, which utilises the modern communication tools and current technology. Similarly, Chant (2000) believes that it is the primacy of spiritual experience that focusing on “an experiential and sensate encounter with God” (p.41) in Pentecostal churches that appeals to many people.

…Pentecostalism is a true child of the twentieth century… The most distinctive feature of Pentecostals is their mode of worship, which includes praying with the hands outstretched, dancing, speaking in tongues, faith healing, cheery singing and other exuberant practices led by a preacher. They are anti-intellectual to the extent that they stress inherent spiritual authority rather than mastery of theology or any formal ritual. This formula has proved incredibly successful in recent times to the continued bemusement of outsiders (Carey, 1996, p. 188).

As Wagner (2017) explains, megachurches offer intense multisensory experiences through worship music, which employs the use of multimedia technology, concert-like stages, large screen projectors, and audio systems. Baker (2019) also refers to the atmospheric experience in megachurches, particularly with live worshipping practices that have music presentations, which makes it easy to attract young people to congregations.

The aspect of contemporary Christianity also comes into existence among the Pentecostal megachurches (Jakelic, 2016; Woodhead, 2016). Megachurches structure their preaching and worship towards the spiritual needs of the attendees, but more exclusively from a secular approach (Baker, 2019), in which Ingalls (2018) called as “worship concerts” (p. 39). In her studies, Ingalls (2018) found that “a series of specific sonic moves and bodily gestures embedded in performance serve to authenticate the concert as worship, forming a ‘concert congregation’” (p. 42). In contrast to the traditional churches, Johnson (2018)
emphasises how the worship experience in megachurches is followed by a blended-type in
bridging technology as an aspect that refers to contemporary trends (music, sound, lights,
ambiance, and incorporating secular style dancing) to incorporate spiritual encounters with
the large congregation.

The contemporary style of worship in Pentecostal churches allows the members to
interact with God personally in the more tangible ways through material forms, which at the
same time enhances the religious experience. Hughes (1996) believes that “the feeling
dimension of worship is important to [Pentecostals as] they expect to ‘sense the presence of
God’” (p. 16). Since rituals evoke religious emotions, Evans (2006) argues that music became
a powerful medium for believers to express the undescrivable feelings. Evans (2006) further
states that the Pentecostalism is a brand of Christianity, which is now recognised globally
through congregational songs as their product (Ingalls, 2018). This reproduction allows the
worship experiences to be shared internationally. In his book entitled Open Up the Doors:
Music in the Modern Church, Evans (2006) categorises the contemporary Christian music
into four themes: intimacy/relational; transformation/dedication; confessional; thanksgiving
and testimony. The lyrics of each music impart or echo the Bible directly to represent God’s
word. It is through the music, the congregation often pray or sing along to bring themselves to
be in a process of dialogue with God (Evans, 2006).

Ellingson (2016) states that the engaged message dwells on God's love repeatedly
emphasised in megachurch sermons and teachings. Similarly, scholars theorise this “spiritual
highness” with the experience of God’s love being turned into a kind of “drug” that a
congregation is always eager to receive every single Sunday or at a session during the week
(Ellingson, 2016, p. 84). Furthermore, the megachurch brings out the experience of
“highness” by engaging unique ways of worship (Ward, 2016). With the use of technology,
megachurches also appeal to emotions in creating a spiritual experience as accessible within a short span of time to thousands of their followers (Spaulding & Formentin, 2017).

The typical program of the megachurches follows the conventional structure of other traditional Pentecostal sanctuaries (Shelby, 2016). However, according to Thomas (2017), in order to achieve distinctiveness and earn relevance in the modernised world, predictability of adopted structures command security. Further research by Williams (2016) shows that the message shared and worship experience will be in line with the megachurch regulations, but must also be sensitive to the younger generation based on their music and life interests. With the need to take considerable control over the expanding congregation, the shared messages are frequently repeated to construct groups that have self-transformation into church norms and operations (David & Moody, 2015).

Though the churches create controversies, creative adaptation of messages and worship has been found to encourage positive feedback and provide spiritual influence to their members, particularly the younger ones. Kilde (2015) suggests that the younger worshippers see the spiritual impact and megachurches as part of elements to shape their future ambitions. The megachurches seem to understand the formula for emphasising “how” to communicate the message through tangible materiality, rather than merely relying on its theological content (Spaulding & Formentin, 2017). From a non-traditional orientation, megachurches have attempted to attract religious seekers and the unchurched using unconventional and informal ways (Harkness, 2010). The approach is uniquely devised by the church to ensure that attracting the modernised population is different from traditional individuals (Spaulding & Formentin, 2017).

2.5.5 Megachurches in the Australian context.

Carey (1996) identifies four major changes to religious pattern in Australia at the end
of the twentieth century. First, it is the emergence of a truly secular society. Second, the rapid increase of the number of New Age belief systems and para-religious activity, such as human rights and environmental groups. Third, the rise of converted Christian sects like Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, and Seventh Day Adventists. Lastly, the rise of new form of Christianity known as Pentecostalism, which is now the fastest growing religious movement in Australia. According to Evans (2006), the Pentecostalism in Australia began as a rural phenomenon, which mostly attended by middle-class society.

Attendance at churches in Australia does not reflect strong religiosity (Newton, 2018). Megachurches, however, pin on the global growth of Pentecostal churches (Lee, 2016). In Australia, Hillsong is one of the favorite brands taking the world by surprise through its immense growth (Eriksen, 2015). The uniqueness of this church is contributing to the religious context in Australia from its positive impact locally, and also on an international scale (Wells, 2016). As Parkes (2017) highlights, current research on megachurches developed in Australia has pointed out that Hillsong is known for its sophisticated marketing techniques and popular music to attract the interests of its audience. The dynamics of the church relate to wide trends in social platforms with millions of followers who are attracted by the powerful branding of popular music (Spaulding & Formentin, 2017). Marti (2017) describes the online popularity of Hillsong branding to have also promoted physical influence that has helped the church in expanding majorly among the younger generation. Young people consider the church to offer them a platform to pursue their dreams, especially in the world of music. The dynamics of the megachurch in Australia has led to a decline in religious transformation within Western Christianity to religious and the spiritual plural (Dowson, 2017). Singleton (2016) also reviews a series of dynamics explored by Billy Graham, an American evangelist, who toured and studied churches in Australia.

In Australia, therefore, there seems to be a shift from predominant Christianity of the
1960s to non-religious and advanced religious practices in recent days (Goh, 2008).

According to Eriksen (2015), young people are most affected with this social shift, mostly in ways of worship, which has a profound effect in increasing the number of followers. Ward (2002) suggests that churches in the past enjoyed strong attendance, consequently playing essential roles in society. Churches went beyond the essence of only meeting the members’ spiritual needs. However, this pattern has drastically changed with Christian participation involved in the traditions of churches and paved the way for megachurches’ dominance (Jakelic, 2016). Recent studies ascertain that turning from divine Christianity has resulted in a broad influence of generational effects, which is driven by pressures from younger people to have self-identity and more control over their social and spiritual lives (Singleton, 2016).

According to Perales and Bouma (2018), the Hillsong megachurches are at the centre of spiritual dynamics and pluralism in Australia, which promotes a strong social atmosphere. The technique involves a well-formalised atmosphere to receive visitors in the church and make them comfortable in that they feel their social life is equally valued in the church. For instance, the activities involving sports activities, camps, and music competitions depict religious trends that match to secular world and its ways of using music concerts in attracting younger generation (Johnson, 2018). Additionally, megachurches are closing down the discriminative nature of orthodox churches sidelining modernisation, while limiting younger generation to have an identity as developed by their programs and practices.

The megachurches in today’s perspective have their congregations commonly dominated by the young but very educated followers. Thus, the unique identity of megachurches is composed of several doctrinal, denominational, linguistic-cultural, socioeconomic, and branding differences. The atmosphere that the church settles for helps to manage the retention of the young congregation and more importantly earn them an identity within the global scales (Latinovic, 2016). The scholars’ opinions on atmosphere perceived by
megachurches value the positions, and practices that the individual church enjoys. Within the range of semiotics and spatial approaches, Transcendence Megachurches have proved to have a cognitive-pragmatic approach to materialise the intangible things in the life of Christianity (Klaver, 2015). In developing a perfect environment that attracts a wide range of younger worshippers, the megachurches focus on real practices that they adopt and the growing size of the congregation.

2.6 Chapter Summary

This study examines the megachurch atmosphere and its atmospheric design semiotics in ways these factors influence young people’s place identity. How the participants perceive the atmospheric elements within their experiences, activities, and interactions, as well as how the outcomes influence their place identities, are the central questions investigated in this research. The literature reviewed in this chapter has helped in identifying the gaps that have not been addressed in previous studies, while shedding light on the significance of this study in understanding young people’s religious practices, the role and functioning of megachurches in Australia from its progressive diverse context.
Chapter 3

Conceptual Framework

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the underlying context of young people’s identification process on spirituality that involves environmental elements, then it discusses the understanding of semiotics and communication design as a concept. The two major related aspects discussed in this chapter are atmospheric design semiotics and place identity, which are then outlined in separate headings. Following this, the chapter describes the adapted model of place identity as utilised in this study, based on the above-mentioned factors. The chapter concludes in presenting the use of the adapted framework towards the analysis and the presentation of the findings, and the discussion of the results.

3.2 Introduction

Identification of the young generation on spiritual matters triggers perception based on objects and environment within religious practice. A theoretical approach by Lalli (1992), in conjunction with Breakwell’s (1986) Identity Process Theory (IPT), assess some levels of place identity that conform to generational needs. The atmospheric design semiotics and sense of place involve the architectural design of a religious environment to adjust the mood of individuals and influence their feelings. The theoretical levels suggested by Lalli (1992) and IPT also reveal the subjective construction of structures in suburban areas to trigger identity as a direct consequence for involved parties. The symbolic and subjective functions of objectives identifiable with the environment create a major platform for one to associate an identity with such depictions (Kilde, 2015). Breakwell’s (1986) IPT model further asserts that
the first identity that young people may rely on concerning spiritual matters could depend on the principle of distinctiveness.

Considered from this context, the megachurch offers a unique environment from which young people can draw on their identities through the dominant brand of music, atmospheric place, and interactions. Breakwell (1986) suggests that place identity is enforced when individuals can show uniqueness that is far beyond their peers. The continuity principle, which is the second aspect in this model, describes the place as a significant element for diverse identity (Griffo, 2014). The pride of being associated with a positive place supports self-esteem and identity; thus, placing megachurches in the best position to grant young people an opportunity that displays their capabilities.

3.3 Understanding Communication Design and Semiotics as a Concept

Communication through design medium has been part of human daily lives since it is useful for “everyday design, everyday people and everyday communications” (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006, p. 20). Visual culture is part of the everyday living (Mirzoeff, 1999) where material culture and visual artefacts are powerful means in communicating and constructing meaning. Every message, including the religious-related or biblical, is communicated through design, whether it is received consciously or unconsciously. Farson (2008) claims that design has the ability to change the world as it has the power to transform culture, enlighten education and nurture society. It is the influence of communication design integrated into the Transcendence Megachurch spatial arrangement and ambience that is examined in this study. Baldwin and Roberts (2006) argue that “even the most trivial piece of design has the potential to affect people’s lives in some way” (p. 72) since the impressive outputs can be resulted from smallest inputs of design (David & Moody, 2015). Similarly, Buchanan and Margolin (1995) contend that design has persuasive power aside from its contribution to the formation of
value. Design attains its power because it has the ability in creating situations where it forms people’s actions more than their own trait, custom, genetics, intentions and any other aspects of personal character (Farson, 2008). Nevertheless, often this influence power of design is unnoticeable.

According to Umberto Eco (1985, as cited in Caesar, 1999), communication study is the result of cultural phenomenon investigation. Eco’s statement leads to the understanding of visual communication design process, where it is developed to communicate the message through media technology. Frascara (2004) defines visual communication design as a process of conceiving, programming, projecting and realising a visual communication by the use of industrial means to transmit a specific message to a specific audience. Furthermore, Riley (1997) sees design as cultural communication where it generates visual messages, which not only allowing us to know how the actual design function but also letting us to make social meaning through them. Despite of its complex technology, design has an experiential function to build interaction between design artefacts and the user. It accentuates the importance of design experience. The experience comes from interaction and all design is experience design. Albeit of its inability to control, design defines the experience (Information Architects, 2010), in which design constructs its meaning through experience. Without experience, design would be meaningless.

Communication is perceived as production of meaning that relies upon social conventions (Eco, 1985; Riley, 1997; Moriarty, 1994). By way of explanation, a communication design is arbitrary: a message means different for different people depending on different factors. Therefore, it is called as ‘open text’ (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006). In contrast with Moriarty’s (1994) view that the interpretation of visual information meaning is highly subjective and projective, Parsa (2012) argues that unlike most written and spoken
language, visual signs are not arbitrary. The author believes that visual signs are unchangeable even though they are created for specific purposes within particular context.

One of the analytical tools to interpret the social meaning of communication design is through semiotics (van Leeuwen, 2005). The focal point of communication is indicated by the semiotics definition by Jakobson (as cited in Sebeok, 1991) that semiotics is the transfer of messages in which the sign systems are situated. Moriarty (1994) asserts, “messages are made of signs and conveyed through sign systems called codes; the more we share the same codes in a communication exchange, the closer our meanings will be” (p.1). In order to analyse meaning of visual objects, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) propose a visual grammar tool known as semiotics. They believe that the use of semiotics lens is appropriate since every object is culturally specific. Semiotics is socially constructed and relies upon social conventions in which that signs are produced (Eco, 1985). In this sense, signs embedded in design are culturally specific for particular community where the meanings are shared. Therefore, the contextual meanings from the Transcendence Megachurch spatial experiences that were perceived and interpreted by the participants are the focus of this study.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) believe that design involves all available resources for message representation. Van Leeuwen (2005) defines semiotic resources as “the actions and artefacts that we employ to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically or by means of technologies” (p. 3). In the context of this study, the semiotics resources includes each atmospheric elements utilised within Transcendence Megachurch environment. One of the contemporary focus of semiotics lies within communication aspects, and is relevant to communication design (Moriarty, 1994). Deely (1990) argues that it would be impossible to describe semiotics without referring to communication design aspects and its functions.

Buchanan and Margolin (1995) describe that design intentionally generates a sense of value by using all available means including five classifications. The first category is the use
of form, colour, texture and materials. The material objects are formed as communication tools, which enable themselves in creating emotional responses to the respondents. The next is through the use of symbols and metaphors. The symbolic elements are used to generate the communication messages indirectly. The meanings are associated with the social and cultural context where the communication design is presented. The third aspect is historical form that has function to implant objects to the society, which plays significant role in building the collective unconsciousness. The fourth aspect is the affordances element that shows people what objects are able to do. It may refer to the functionality of design objects as semiotics resources. Lastly, histories and myths are created to build connections with human desires and beliefs. In practice, these elements rely on each other and inseparable.

In this study, the theories of communication design, semiotics, and spatial aspects are utilised to investigate the influence on megachurch environment. The new terminology of atmospheric design semiotics that is used in this study will be discussed in the next section, followed by the adapted model that was developed as the conceptual framework.

### 3.4 Atmospheric Design Semiotics

The atmosphere has always been associated with designing professions and architectures (Griffero, 2014; Pallasmaa, 2014). Scholarly and public opinions refer to an atmosphere as a certain mental or emotive tone, in permeating a particular environment, adjusting the mood of individuals and in consolidating feelings. The approach considers impressions, materiality, perceptions, emotions, and values (Bille et al., 2015; Edensor, 2012). According to Bille et al. (2015, p.6), the atmosphere has a dual understanding as “a meteorological phenomenon” and “a spatial experience of affect and materiality”. The atmosphere does not merely offer the sense of familiarity, but simultaneously “opens up alternative interpretations and possibilities” (Fisher & Drobnick, 2012, p.36). Meanwhile,
Zumthor (2006) introduces an atmospheric approach that involves numerous sensory experiences, and in following his attitude, Pink et al. (2014) identify a mundane atmosphere as generative of sensory, competent, and empathetic forms of engagement and communication.

A semiotics approach refers to the meanings of the environmental signs that signify the uniqueness of such an organisation and what it can offer. The church in this context uses semiotics components as a brand to reach out to a young audience and help them have a place identity (Yip & Hoon, 2016). Wagner (2017) suggests the spatial semiotics approach has seemingly played a significant role in the success of most current thriving megachurchoes. Borrowing from Richardson’s (2017) views, the semiotics theoretical approach and the spatial logic aspects in the inquiry are examined by showing some of the broader influences of the Transcendence Megachurch in developing contemporary Christianity. Megachurches have shown very clearly the displacement of materiality from orthodox church architecture and iconography. In adopting alternative semiotics and performance they have aimed to reconcile individual private spiritual encounters with “the mega” aspect of the church (Goh, 2008, p. 288).

Another study conducted by Edensor and Sumartojo (2015) attest that the atmosphere is not only dependent on the skills of the designer, but more on how well-involved parties use contemporary issues to influence the identites of others. Transcendence Megachurch in Australia uses its exposure to modern Christianity to create character for the young generation; thus, in return promoting its large congregations (Connell, 2005). The spatial atmospheric design semiotics, which is part of new trends in Christianity, has prompted uniqueness in megachurches as distinguished from the other large and tradition-oriented churches (Goh, 2008). The contemporary traits of Transcendence Megachurch show distinctive features including new methods of worship (Klaver, 2015). These methods feature
contemporary media technologies, such as sophisticated electronics, high-class musical instruments, charismatic speakers, and services meant to recruit seekers rather than mature believers (Harkness, 2010). With a need to ensure the atmosphere is recently defined, international links of the church are well setup, network established, and dressing code is encouraged to show freedom of choice without criticism.

The atmospheric design semiotics in the megachurches does not occur occasionally, but is often produced to satisfy a certain inquest that relates to megachurch expansion. Edensor and Sumartojo (2015) conducted another study that shows atmosphere not only depends on the skill of the designer, but also the particular qualities of the spaces, materiality, media, and elements manipulated through design. The megachurches have been keen on integrating contemporary approach in the surroundings areas of worship. The above scholars settled for a view that use of certain colours, lights, rituals, and sounds in megachurches depicted a familiar place with the strange environment made to define a sense of belonging (Böhme, 2017). The transformed atmospheres can provide a socially integrative, interactive and emotionally engaging experience (Ronch, 2012).

Another study by Degen et al. (2015) also stressed that the essence of the atmosphere represents visual representations. They further discovered that the illustrations are reflections of historical values about the feeling and meaning of place. Physical natures of the megachurches are also different across different locations, and these traits command some dominance over traditional churches placing them in a better position to attract larger congregations. Notably, the experience of space connects emotion and memory with visuality and materiality. This explains that the tangible materiality within the atmosphere is taken through human’s senses, that starts from the eyes (Day & Lövheim, 2015).

Therefore, visual is one “gateway” to get into the atmospheric experience, even though the accumulation of a scene is always more-than-visual (Edensor & Sumartojo, 2015).
Many researchers view young people’s place identity to go hand in hand with physical factors that offer its accommodation. Megachurches are always striving to create an environment that is visually enticing while providing programs that are broadly inclusive in the modernised culture.

3.4.1 Atmosphere and sense of place.

Focussing on creating an atmosphere and a sense of place, megachurches have attracted political science scholars to establish the kind of techniques the church deploys in attracting masses. Megachurch membership, especially within the Transcendence Megachurch, show a high number of followers within just a short period of time (within two years after its launch). According to various theological researchers, the sheer size of megachurches, its atmosphere and environment is central in attracting people. For instance, owning or even running programmes on live TV’s for these churches create the concept of being “big” (Fisher & Drobnick, 2012).

Based on the assumption that megachurch atmosphere creates the concept of being big is highly convincing to the public in believing that such churches with its size command growth in terms of membership. A sense of place is set to be manageable depending on how megachurches address issues of the growth. In most cases the megachurches leadership print pamphlets stating that big is always beauty. Research conducted by Qazimi (2014) confirms such perception among the followers that megachurches target big commissioning and that their size show a massive sharing of enormous spirit in one place. The American megachurches create an avenue to explore the atmosphere and a sense of place based on the need for commissioning new church keepers and followers.

However, in his study Thomas (2016) asserts that giving people what they need depends on the set atmosphere and their sense in defining place. For example, most of the
mature attendees in megachurches in the United States feel that the current culture has exposed the young to fast-paced media and technology. This has prompted an urge by members of the church to initiate similar platforms within the operations of the church to ensure that the spiritual experience among the young is also fast-paced. More precisely, megachurches are tailored to provide an atmosphere that shows relevance to technological and cultural needs among the congregation (Lath, Goyal & Kaler, 2016). Research conducted on the sense of place within megachurches show that pastors strive to create a contemporary environment for the unchurched who are willing to come and attest unique spiritual experiences (Hepburn, 2017).

Megachurches accommodate and address the unsatisfying experiences of new followers retreating from traditional churches. Another essential review from theological studies is that before engaging in the services of megachurches, most of the pastors anticipate learning about the church environment and how it can be more conducive in making followers feel more comfortable. As Böhme (2017) describes, some of the leaders go to the extent of conducting community polls to ensure the environment and a sense of the place meets the broader expectations of the congregation. The logic of the megachurches’ environment is also built on the assumption of a sharing and entertaining worship. Ellingson (2016) suggests that such an experience creates an emotional frenzied environment nearing a concert atmosphere where members can experience religious inclusivity. Megachurches therefore, focus on both atmosphere and a sense of place in reconstructing traditional religious ideas, more in line with the young people’s values and interests in also offering an opportunity to develop an identity.

3.4.2 The semiotics of production in the context of megachurch setting.

The semiotics approach of the megachurches is established on physical environmental attributes, technological content, and how the church designs its deliverance. The notion of
semiotics also involves an examination of the relationship between signs and symbols meant to send a strong message to the audience (Faizan, 2019). The atmosphere of the megachurch does not entirely rely on the knowledge of the designer, but also the space created to promote an appealing impression. The semiotics production, especially the lighting arrangement, rituals, colour, and sound installation adopted by the megachurches creates “strange places” that will automatically draw attention (Ward, 2015). The transformed atmosphere through the elements provides social integrative, interactive, and emotionally engaging experiences among the congregation (Palmer, 2017).

According to Degen et al. (2015), the art of music is designed with the objective of secular concerts to target and create an atmosphere that connects emotions to materiality and spiritual experience. The context of the megachurch setting, which is based on the semiotics aspect of spacing uses two approaches: binding and bonding. According to Stenglin (2008), binding is a tool used to assess interpersonal meaning about an atmosphere, space, and attributes. Therefore, the variable and invariable features of megachurches draw from a wide surrounding area to entice a large audience attracted to the spacious and equipped installation of sound and decorations. On the other hand, bonding assumption shows the extent to which the congregation link the place and atmosphere (Marti, 2017). Through the close connection, young people attracted to megachurches feel a sense of belonging to the church, and more importantly, share solidarity with fellow members (Janson, 2016).

Through an established bond, a semiotics production creates an identity with a certain megachurch. The multimedia content that also shapes the megachurches environment through the binding approach is driven by technological advances (Norris, 2011). A good example is explored through the use of illumination during festival atmospheres of churches, especially within the Transcendence Megachurch. The technological approach develops artificial lighting during the festivals to enhance valuable delivery and create a mood within that space.
Edensor (2015) suggests that such effects can be obtained through design, lighting, event management logistics, music, and performance. For instance, Merola (2018) mentions that the atmosphere offered in Hillsong auditoriums bring a spiritual presence, which is created from a combination of indirect signs (sound, light, and screen captions) and accompanied by a series of mood-enhancing images flashed on the set screen.

3.5 Place Identity

3.5.1 Concept of place identity.

Place identity combines two concepts of “identity” and “place”. The concept of place identity is considered as an individual emotional attachment to a physical spatial setting (Ujang, 2012; Qingjiu & Maliki, 2013), which is formed from the accumulation of experience with that place (Budruk & Stanis, 2013) as composed by the meanings and perception associated with the environment. In the words of Shamai (1991), “a place is never merely an object, but part of a larger whole that is being felt through the actual experience of meaningful events” (p. 348). Qazimi (2014) believes that place identity consists of environmental observation and interpretation. In short, place identity can be defined as “an interpretation of self [that] uses environmental meaning to symbolise or situate identity” (Cuba & Hammon, 1993, p. 112).

While transitioning the young generation to adults, Transcendence Megachurch in Australia has developed initiatives and programs that create a spiritual identity for young people to transform their lives (Davies, 2017). Gleeson and O’Neill (2018) argue that in subjective construction, a second element involves the development of place identity to affect how people change their lives to fulfill spiritual ambitions. Further, the process of identification with a particular urban centre reveals a symbolic assumption of the younger transformation depending on the church cultural assumptions (Tkaczynski, 2017).
Demographically, the Australian culture, as compared to that of the western countries, has its congregation in megachurches dominated by young people aged between 20 and 30 years old (Singleton, 2016). Thus, the communication process of Transcendence Megachurch is closely linked to Breakwell’s (1986) IPT as expounded widely in the conceptual framework section.

The first impression towards spiritual transition as described by Singleton (2016) is directed to young people’s use of place to create an identity distinction from others. For instance, the Transcendence Megachurch uses communication in different areas to conceptualise visualised information designed to develop a unique status among young people (Newton, 2018). The second principle of the transitioning aspect identified by Breakwell (1986) involves continuity in the sense that it provides preservation of the personal identity (Eagle, 2015). Places are used in this context to construct individual stories, especially based on memories related to depictions of life. A greater range of services offered by the Transcendence Megachurch supports this assumption, which ranges from music, TV programs, and charity organisations. These components create a transitioning platform in that the young grow to adults through a range of programs that uphold their identity and promote distinctiveness (Merola, 2018).

The last principle on transition by Breakwell (1986) explores the aspect of self-efficacy associated with the belief of handling situational demands. The atmosphere of megachurches in Australia promotes ritualism with a sense of entertaining and transforming the young. Dowson (2017) mentions how self-efficacy is, therefore, used as a platform to integrate real spiritual experience with self-attributes to grow to adults with moral uprightness as advocated by the Transcendence Megachurch.

Place identity is defined as a component of personal distinctiveness from the rest of peers or others in a particular environment. It is also a process through interaction with places that individuals describe themselves as having a sense of belonging to a specific area or
environment. Most of the literature previously examined by researchers (e.g., Cuba & Hammon, 1993; Feldman, 1990) point out that a positive correlation exists between the variable of a specific population and atmosphere attributes to enhance the sense of belonging that individuals feel. The aspect of place identity is explored from three-level processes by Lalli (1992) and the IPT by Breakwell (1986).

### 3.5.2 Five functions of place identity.

Breakwell (1986) developed the IPT in respect to identification of the physical environment. The characteristics explored in this context relate to components of dynamics, social product of the interaction between memories, and consciousness and the organisation constructs. The first place identity principle of the theory is distinctiveness that plays a significant role in identifying unique traits of individuals and distinguishing them from others. The second function considers enhancing continuity, which is based on the assumption that the kind of places people associate with provide a sense of endurance to preserve one’s identity; for instance, individuals can use a continuity function to construct live stories by reviewing memories and components that form part of their daily lives.

The third function involves creating a place identity based on self-esteem. A positive evaluation of oneself is set in comparison to a group to establish exclusivity that individuals have a sense of belonging in a particular environment (Baker & Robards, 2016). The self-efficacy, which is a principle and functional element of place identity enhance abilities of individuals to believe in their potential to cope with situational factors. Jules and Maynard (2016) note that the identity-structure in dynamic environments such as megachurches regulates accommodation and the assimilation process. The approach involves the absorption of new components and adjusting to new atmosphere components to rhyme with the environmental elements. Therefore, the theory of place identity based on the above principles
and functions shed light to the mainstream of ignorance. These approaches established a clear record that physical environment is a crucial factor in human identity.

3.5.3 Stages of place identity.

Lalli’s (1992) stages review the position and potential to reveal and affirm individuals’ statuses since the environment is significant concerning social, emotional, and behavioural aspects. The concept of identity shows that every stage has a link to the local environment in terms of geographical, traditions, and personal heritage. The three-stages of place identity, especially in developing urban centres as identified by Lalli (1992) are as follows.

First, the process of identification is the perception and categorisation of similarity between objects, such as things, individuals, groups, or environment. Second, a subjective construction of the town or city is set concerning an urban environment. This stage does not imply the development of place identity as a direct consequence, but indeed, constitutes a necessary basis for individual distinctiveness. Thirdly, there are processes of identification when being identified with a town. This step means a partial equivalence between individuals and their urban environment, or particular attributes and specifications of it. The symbolic and subjective function of objects and environments makes such an identification possible, which megachurches have widely applied. The overall assumption from the three stages is that the megachurches have grown to accommodate sub-urban traits. Therefore, any church with an aspiration of becoming well-suited to religious modernisation needs to target sub-urban traits.

3.6 Place Identity as a Conceptual Framework

The two aspects, sense of place and place identity, share almost the same concepts but are different from the final impact they generate. Place identity capitalises on the behavioural-settings that can be compatible with the particular environment to achieve individual identity.
The perspective of place identity includes conceptions that define the physical location and attributions of megachurches, human traits, and embraced activities. David Canter, a psychologist in 1979, who inspired by the behavioural settings theory, developed a transactional view of parameters that point out the relationship between place and person as independent (Anton & Lawrence, 2016). Similarly, Lalli (1992) stresses that place identity is not referring to the identity of a location, but “the relational aspect from the viewpoint of the individual” (p. 291). The transactional concept in this context capitalises on the person or the environment showing how each can earn identity depending on the surrounding factors (Shamir, Arthur, & House, 2018).

The term sense of place refers specifically to the perception held by the individual rather than the position of interest. This particular aspect of place is usually defined as an exclusive component of the entity. However, there are some elements with limitations, in that not all geographical areas have an opportunity to experience this entity. A sense of place can further be explored as an inner feeling that individuals express as part of imagining to know the living area (Lara, 2018). In the context of Transcendence Megachurch and other megachurches across the globe, the sense of place is defined as providing an identity. In relation to young people as members of megachurches, their identities are expressed in a way to integrate their knowledge into church programs. The position in the context of these identities refers to distinctive tangible and intangible features that create association and feelings to advance talents like music (von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012). Hence, a sense of place in relation to atmosphere and identity alludes to the complex rationale that exists between humans and the environment that surrounds their operations (Cieslik & Pollock, 2017).

For the purpose of this study, a conceptual framework around place identity has been devised to explore young people’s identification with a Transcendence Megachurch and ways
their interactions influences their place identities. In devising this conceptual framework, the three stages of identity development on urban-related place identity from Lalli’s seminal work (1992) has been used to develop the three levels of place identity as examined in this study.

These three stages of identity development on urban-related place identity from Lalli’s work (1992) include:

1. The process of identification is the perception and categorisation of similarity between objects such as things, individuals, groups, or the environment.
2. Subjective construction of the town or city with respect to an urban environment. This stage does not imply the development of place identity as a direct consequence, but certainly constitutes a necessary basis for it.
3. Processes of identification and being identified with a town. This step means a partial equivalence between individuals and their urban environment, or particular attributes and specifications of it. The symbolic and subjective function of objects and environments makes such identification possible.

These three stages also informed three categories used in the findings chapter in analysing the participant’s interviews, their journal responses, and the researcher’s observation on the site:

(1) Behavioural and sensory experience of young people in the environment of Transcendence Megachurch;
(2) Empathetic and subjective reconstruction in Transcendence Megachurch of young people toward identification in relation to place;
(3) Existential and unconscious perceptions of Transcendence Megachurch

These three categories also nested into other group themes that emerged from the raw data. The data analysis and presentation are described further in the findings Chapter 5 (under Section 5.3, 5.4, and 5.5). Some of the themes being drafted and informed by an adaption of
Breakwell’s (1986) IPT are also explained further in the following Section 3.6.1. Drawing on the themes, vignettes were constructed for the discussion of findings as proposed in Section 3.6.2.

The four facets of place from Canter (1997) has been examined as another informing component of place identity. In the case of Transcendence Megachurch place identity, three components were identified that consist of (1) spatial experience encountered through multisensory and materiality exposure to design atmospheric features in Transcendence Megachurch; (2) activities and interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s experience with the place; and (3) the conceptuality and significance of Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s place identity.

3.6.1 The three levels of place identity adapted from Lalli (1992) and three stages of identity development: urban-related place identity phases.

The urban-related identification phases suggested by Lalli (1992) is aligned with the context of Transcendence Megachurch as an urban built environment, which is located in Sydney New South Wales and is Australia’s most populated region in 2018 (ABS, 2018). Based on the approach of this study, three stages of place identity formation in terms of interpretation of this process, have been adapted and developed as a conceptual framework, and presented in Figure 3.1.

In order to give a broader understanding of the research problem, this study adopts a conceptual framework, rather than single theoretical lens. The conceptual framework is referenced as a synthesis from three different theories by borrowing and bringing together a number of related concepts in exploring the research question. Imenda (2014) suggests that the researcher “synthesize” the existing literature in regards to the given situation (p. 189),
thereby in this study representing an integrated way to examining the problem (Liehr & Smith 1999). Hence, Lalli’s (1992) three stages of identity development, IPT (Breakwell, 1986), and Canter’s (1997) four facets of place identity were used in devising an adapted model (see figure 3.1) to gain a broader understanding of the research problem.

Figure 3.1 Place identity formation in Transcendence Megachurch case study - Lalli’s (1992) original model of urban-related identity suggests three stages of identity development

The three levels of place identity adapted from Lalli’s (1992) work represent the processes involved in young people’s identification with Transcendence Megachurch and these are represented as three main categories and subsequent themes grouped underneath for the analysis of findings in the study.

(1) The first level is the Behavioural and Sensory Experience at Transcendence Megachurch. This first level and category increase the awareness of being in a Transcendence Megachurch setting and the sense of orientation in that place. It also
situates place identity formation in regards to initial sensory experiences of young people within Transcendence Megachurch as a new setting. Themes that have emerged from the findings under this level/category are:

i. Recognition of atmospheric design features at Transcendence Megachurch. This theme refers to the ways young people describe the physical attributes, communication forms, and atmospheric design aspects that are captured by the human senses.

ii. Transcendence Megachurch distinctiveness compared to the more conventional churches. In Breakwell’s model (1986), one of the place identity principles is distinctiveness. He proposes that place identity is established when an individual uses place identification to distinguish oneself from others. In this study, distinctiveness relates to the ways the young people distinguish Transcendence Megachurch from other churches in terms of the atmosphere, design style, and communication approach toward the attendees and deliverance of its services.

iii. Transcendence Megachurch was perceived as a contextually relevant environment. This theme represents the place relevancy of Transcendence Megachurch towards the participants’ culture and preferences.

iv. Place and event satisfaction at Transcendence Megachurch as a theme is also considered as to how young people express their fulfilment, joy, or the pleasure derived from the Transcendence Megachurch experience.
(2) The second level is the Empathetic and Subjective Construction of Transcendence Megachurch. It refers to the subjective experiences of young people concerning identification in relation to Transcendence Megachurch. The subjective reconstruction of place is described as a sense of belonging to place. This is the middle phase of the identification process, which involves subjective cognitions and perceptions. At this level, it is assumed that individuals start to establish personal relationships with Transcendence Megachurch as their experiences within the environment also relate to another variable that has emerged from the data. Themes from the findings under this level/category were:

i. Social acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch refers to the experience of social blending when young people join the church, which occurs during initial visits.

ii. Revisits/continuity of attendance – Transcendence Megachurch environment constancy formed through repeated experiences. This principle is based on an assumption that the place provides a sense of continuity, which also helps to preserve personal identity. Twigger-Ross and Uzzell’s (1996) study provides empirical evidence of Breakwell’s (1996) theory that a place provides a sense of continuity of the self, as the respondents of this study have lived at the same or similar type of place for a long time. Place can be used by individuals to construct their life stories, based on memories of the place-related elements (e.g., activities, objects, significance) or what Taylor (2010) refers to as environmental constancy.

iii. Sense of belonging was preceded by site of engagement within Transcendence Megachurch. This theme refers to the attachment or rootedness to the
megachurch environment. It is the way participants feel emotional connections and belongingness to Transcendence Megachurch. Lalli (1992) argues that general attachment contains “more unspecific items and aims at the measurements of a general sense of being at home” (p.294).

iv. Group development established through togetherness and activities within Transcendence Megachurch. This theme explains the social engagement of how the participants feel stronger connections to Transcendence Megachurch as they develop a sense of community by taking part in the social activities of the church.

(3) The third level is the Existential and Unconscious Perception of Transcendence Megachurch. It refers to the unconscious perceptions that Transcendence Megachurch brings to young people. Being identified with the place and attachment to the place is a particular reflection about deepest place identity, which is the third phase of the identification process. In this phase, the residents of Transcendence Megachurch have unconsciously become an integral part of the environment, and it is a part of themselves as individuals. Themes that have emerged from the findings under this level/category are:

i. Loyalty to Transcendence Megachurch – this is defined as the strong feelings of bonding that young people feel as a result of dedication and devotion. At this stage, the participants have stronger commitments to the church. In the words of Lalli (1992), “personal commitments are of central importance for the stability of self-concept” (p. 295).
ii. Transcendence Megachurch enhanced self-esteem is the theme that refers to “a positive evaluation of oneself or the group with one identifies” (Wang & Chen, 2015). Breakwell (1986) identified self-esteem as an identity principle where people use place identification to distinguish themselves from others. Researchers (Korpela, 1989; Twigger-Ross, Bonaiuto, & Breakwell, 2003) found that the pride of being in a particular place can support self-esteem.

iii. Subjective well-being – Transcendence Megachurch encouragement towards life balance and positivity. This theme relates to the way participants feel the balance and sense of optimism in different aspects of their lives as the result of their involvement in Transcendence Megachurch.

iv. Self-efficacy was facilitated and supported by place (Transcendence Megachurch). The fourth principle, self-efficacy is associated with a belief of abilities to cope with situational demands. In Breakwell’s (1986) principles of identity, self-esteem is a principle where qualities of the place or environment facilitate the residents’ lives in various ways.

3.6.2 Framing the discussion by utilising the adapted model.

The discussion chapter focuses on a reflection of the informing factors of place identity, which the researcher developed based on data findings and literature. Hence, the three levels of place identity construction have led to three categories (behavioural and sensory experience at Transcendence Megachurch; empathetic and subjective reconstruction at Transcendence Megachurch; and the existential and unconscious perception of Transcendence Megachurch) in informing the significance of place identity within this study.
Based on Canter’s theory (1997), the three informing factors are considered and described in the discussion chapter to contribute to young people’s experiences with place identity within Transcendence Megachurch (see Figure 3.2):

**Figure 3.2** Place identity construction process and informing factors in Transcendence Megachurch case study

In Figure 3.2 the three informing factors of place identity are presented as:

1. Spatial experience encountered through multi-sensory and materiality exposure to atmospheric design features in Transcendence Megachurch, which refers to the physical setting (form);
(2) Activities and interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s experience with the place relate to activities performed in the place (function);

(3) Conceptuality and significance of Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s place identity draws on the concept of the place, that can be delivered through imagination and communicational design to represent the significance of the environment. These inextricable aspects inform each other while showing the connections of place identity, as constructed when these three aspects are performed.

In the context of this study, Canter’s facets of functional differentiation and scale of interaction were combined as one category (activities and interactions occur in Transcendence Megachurch) as both aspects represent the site of engagement, and therefore can be merged. In table 3.1 the comparison between Canter’s model and the vignettes that structure the discussion chapter is presented.

Table 3.1

*Comparison between Canter’s (1997) Four Facets of Place and Transcendence Megachurch Place*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Informing Factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Canter’s (1997) Four Facets of Place theory</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional differentiation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place Objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale of Interaction</th>
<th>Activities and interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s experience with the place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transcendence Megachurch was perceived as a contextually relevant environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transcendence Megachurch distinctiveness compared to the more conventional churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Place and event satisfaction at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Revisits/continuity of attendance – Transcendence Megachurch environment constancy formed through repeated experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Social acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aspect of Design</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spatial experience encountered through multi-sensory and materiality exposure to</td>
<td>• Recognition of atmospheric design features at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>atmospheric design features in Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>• Transcendence Megachurch distinctiveness compared to the more conventional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Place and event satisfaction at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unlike in Canter’s theory, this study involving Transcendence Megachurch, and the place identity construction is examined using the three aspects of the informing factors. The activities and interactions occurring in Transcendence Megachurch are combined in the same category. As previously mentioned above, the themes from each level of place identity were used in the findings chapter.

### 3.7 Chapter Summary

An understanding of the dynamics of megachurches as a distinct religious reality goes beyond its sheer size and popularity (Martin, 2017). Literature suggests megachurches as a new social phenomenon – a new structural and spiritual organisation which has successfully incorporated aspects of a “modernized culture” in attracting diverse audiences (Thumma, 1996). In this chapter, different theoretical lenses and perspectives describe a sense of place and place identity, as a conceptual framework in identifying diverse aspects, which influence and inform young people’s perceptions from their participation and interaction in a Transcendence Megachurch. The next chapter outlines the qualitative paradigm and an exploratory case study design used as the research methodology for this study.
Chapter 4
Research Methodology

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the rationale for a qualitative research case study employed for this research project. It outlines the research orientation with a case study approach and provides an insight into a semiotics approach and the theoretical framework, which inform the research methods used to examine the problem under investigation. Following this, the chapter describes the research site and all the phases of the research processes, including the sampling and profiles of the participants, ethical considerations, and the research methods including the use of semi-structured interviews, journaling and the researcher’s observations. The chapter concludes by describing the measures taken within the above-mentioned methods to analyse and interpret the data as well as data reliability and validation before discussing the strengths and limitations of the research design.

4.2 Introduction

A qualitative research approach is useful in interpreting data while giving a reliable and better understanding of the complex reality in any particular situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) suggest that qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach to the world. Hall (1995) mentions that place is one of the key discourses in culture that functions to stabilise identities “beyond the play of history” (p. 181). Similarly, Lalli (1992) believes that place identity can be viewed as part of the self, and as an aspect of an individual’s identity. Kraus (2000) mentions that the notion of identity has
involved many arguments in the past. Additionally, Kraus (2000) further acknowledges that research in the area of identity needs more attention both empirically and theoretically; and for this reason, he argues that a qualitative research methodology is the best approach for investigating identity. In this study, a qualitative enquiry has been utilised to explore the research problem to obtain a better understanding of the issue from the participants’ points of view (Creswell, 2014; Flick, 2008) as based on their experiences, perspectives, and histories (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Furthermore, a qualitative research provides an opportunity for researchers to describe a contextual phenomenon using various data sources (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

Qualitative research is concerned with “meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions of things” (Berg, 2001, p. 3). This study has investigated participants’ meanings about their spatial experiences within a megachurch, with the view of examining how they negotiated personal relationships in this environment and subsequently in constructing place identity. However, personal experiences and their meanings are highly subjective. Therefore, this study has focused on examining multiple enquiries from a qualitative stance using a case study of different participants’ narratives. Diverse participants’ perspectives provided rich qualitative data in examining the meanings and messages (semiotics) within their responses; therefore, maximising the validity of the findings (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Participants personal perspectives, thus, uncovered their individual experiences of the megachurch environment in regards to the atmosphere, live performances, and their interactions with other fellow members. The semiotics framework provided a detailed account of how signs and symbols convey meanings from different standpoints – participants’ experiences and their interactions with the place as in the church environment (Manning, 1987). As cited in Lalli (1992), Graumann (1990) mentions that there is intentional interaction between individuals and the environment.
Intentional interaction here refers to the world of things, persons, and events as experienced by the individual (Taylor, 1964). In the words of Schneider (1986), the environment is “conceptualised as the intentional correlate of the individual’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioural activities” (p. 205). As this study relates to the environment and atmospheric design of Transcendence Megachurch, looking at the environment as an essential aspect in constructing an individual’s place identification and place identity has been crucial in assigning meanings to the participants perceptions and experiences.

4.3 Research Orientation

4.3.1 Case study research approach.

Cohen et al. (2018) argue that any case in the social sciences can be categorised as a case study. Yin (2009) contends that case studies have the ability to understand how ideas and abstract can fit together. In practice, case studies “investigate and report the real-life, complex, dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instance” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 376). The focus of this inquiry comes under social science as it investigates humans’ experiences and the established relationships within a megachurch, which affects young people’s place identification. In the words of Stake (1995), a case study is “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi).

An exploratory holistic single case study (Yin, 2003) was used in this methodological approach because it offers an in-depth analysis of people, experiences, events, and relationships within particular contexts. This type of case study can be used to produce hypotheses that are measured in larger-scale research or other studies (Cohen et al., 2018). Yin (2014) defines a case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon [the ‘case’] in-depth and within its real-world context” (p. 16). According to
Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000), case studies allow researcher reporting of complex dynamic interactions of human events, relationships, and any other unique factors. Case studies serve as a research strategy where little is known of the topic. Therefore, Baxter and Jack (2008) note that the proposition may not exist due to the limited source of literature, knowledge, and information.

Denscombe (2014) suggests that case studies are characterised by focused processes, interactions and relationships, an in-depth study in one natural setting, holism, and multiple methods of data collection. Similarly, Cohen et al. (2018), Baxter and Jack (2008), and Yin (1994) agree that a number of data technologies may be used in case studies, such as documentation, archival records, participant observations, and interviews. These research methods can be applied to individuals but also to a group or an entire community. The strategy of using multiple resources underline the advantages of adopting a case study, whereby Patton (1990) and Yin (2003) believe it will intensify the credibility of data. In this study, I utilised site observations, interviews with participants, and other related documentation (such as audio visual materials and participants’ journal records) as data collection tools. Verschuren (2003) argues that the researcher is a fundamental feature in the case study, which therefore, may be associated with the researcher’s personality.

Cohen et al. (2018) comment that the researcher has an obligation to “address reflexivity and to address or report participants’ views on the case in question” (p. 377). Furthermore, Cohen et al. (2018) argue that researchers have an integral role in creating the knowledge in qualitative enquiry, therefore they should be looking at their “positionality” as part of the research process (p. 302). It is impossible to detach the researchers’ views as they are part of the world that they are investigating (Cohen et al., 2018). Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013, p 15) label this as a reflexive case study as personal reflections of the researcher are included as part of the research.
Qualitative enquiry is not a neutral activity (Cohen et al., 2018) because “accompanying this relinquishment of neutrality is a focus on self-consciousness and self-awareness [as] we are studying ourselves and others” (Preissle, 2006, p. 691). Bettez (2015) and Pillow (2010) comment that reflexive researchers bring their own personalities, characteristics, values, beliefs, experiences, demographic aspects (such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and backgrounds), knowledge, prejudices, theories, politics, and conceptual frameworks to the research, which are “often mediated through and are combined with issues, power and status” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 302). The reflexivity component of the study is further discussed in Section 4.8 in this chapter.

Yin (2009) believes that case studies have the advantage over historical studies as they include direct observation and interviews. Cohen et al. (2018) argue that a case study should avoid using a single lens in its application because “there are multiple, multivalent realities operating in a situation, and the researcher’s view and interpretation is only one of many” (p. 377). The method is believed to have the ability to portray the real situation by capturing the close-up reality, rich detail, and description (Geertz, 1973) of the participants’ experiences, perceptions, and feelings about a particular situation (Cohen et al., 2018). In order to gain an in-depth understanding of the atmospheric design semiotics influence on young members place identities in megachurches, a case study is used in this study, rather than phenomenological research in order to validate findings and extend knowledge.

This study does not utilise a phenomenological approach although there is a focus on emphasising the description of young people’s subjective experiences, feelings, beliefs, and convictions (Welman & Kruger, 1999) and their interpretations of the world (Kruger, 1988). The main reason for this is because in phenomenological research, the researcher’s perspective, values, and beliefs should be set aside and kept neutral (Denscombe, 2014). Thus, in this study, the real life experiences of the participants and the specificity of the
Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere provided an opportunity to portray individuals’ feelings regarding the ambiance while also examining their perceptions. The fact that the participants and the researcher were physically present at the actual location, allowed both parties to be immersed in the experience and the atmosphere, which eventually provided a better understanding of the events. Figure 4.1. depicts how the research methods were implemented in the study.

![Figure 4.1](image)

*Figure 4.1 Research design of Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric design semiotics as an influence on young people’s place identity*

The exploratory single case study collected three types of data including semi-structured interview responses from twelve participants, four participants’ journal records,
and the researcher’s note from site observations. The triangulation of data was utilised before the data analysis phase to ensure reliability and validity (Cohen et al., 2018). Each procedure is discussed in the forthcoming sections in this chapter.

### 4.3.2 Semiotics approach.

The study places emphasis on the analysis of the semiotics resources through megachurch activities, in order to investigate significance and meaning that participants have drawn from their individual experiences and perspectives. From different studies (Casey, 2001; Cole & John, 2001), as cited in Mueller and Schade (2012), Low (2011) found a relationship between the sensible spatial aspects and the collective development of meanings associated with them. In this study, semiotics is a useful framework to assist place signification and meaning from an analysis of participants’ personal experiences to understand their place identity (Low, 2011). According to Appleyard (1979),

> expression of personal or group identity can be achieved through the connotative character of an environment. This is perhaps the most intangible and forgotten quality of environmental action, but it is most significant, for it affects the visceral quality, the feel of a place (p. 149).

The argument shows the linkage between visible qualities of the built environment in the church, and personal connections or attachment to a place with recurrent subjective meanings. The sense of belonging, place attachment, and the site of engagement were created through the connections the participants made with the site and their experiences, which also influenced certain elements of their place identity.
4.4 Research Context and Participants

4.4.1 Research site.

While Transcendence Megachurch has churches in 21 different countries, this study was conducted at only one campus, which is located in Waterloo, Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. The main reason for choosing this particular church as the research site was because this campus has been the most prominent branch of Transcendence Megachurch in attracting a large number of congregations from various backgrounds (Sygall, 2012). Since it was opened in 1999, Transcendence Megachurch in Waterloo has always been the second icon of the church after its headquarters in the Greater Western Sydney. The strategic location within the City of Sydney has made this campus easily accessible due to free shuttle buses available for people from Central Station to the site. This extra service has allowed people to attend the church services easily.

4.4.2 Recruitment process.

The strategy of purposeful random sampling has been adopted in this study. In order to discover, comprehend, and gain insight, Merriam (1998) advises employing a purposeful sampling strategy. This strategy takes a random sample of interviews with a specific research aim. In addition, purposeful random sampling is useful to increase the credibility of results (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan & Hoagwood, 2013). Initially, I contacted the church committee and volunteers and asked them to invite any members, who met the criteria of this research, and were willing to participate.

Twelve participants were recruited for the study. The recruitment process was based on the willingness of voluntary participation. The initial age group targeted for the participant was 18 to 25 years old. However, the church members who responded to the invitation were between 20 to 29 years old. Therefore, the ethics application was amended for this change.
Ethics approval was sought from the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) before any initial contact was made to the church (please see Appendix A for ethics approval). Participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time, and if they decided to do so, and any data related to their personal profiles and experiences would be removed from this study.

### 4.4.3 Participants profile.

The participants involved twelve young people consisting of seven males and five females from Australian and international backgrounds. Aged between 20 to 29 years old, these participants had recently joined Transcendence Megachurch, and they had been members ranging from a period of about two months to nine years. There was a diverse demographics among the participants, with five Australians (male and female Caucasian and mixed races), three Indonesians, one Japanese, one Korean, one Chinese and one Malaysian. Table 4.1 provides a detailed profile and the demographics of the young people who participated in this research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Type of membership</th>
<th>Attendance period</th>
<th>Data collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>Retail staff</td>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>Waiter</td>
<td>Weekly, regular</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>Indonesian</td>
<td>Casual staff</td>
<td>Weekly, volunteer</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mable</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>University student</td>
<td>Weekly, regular</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.5 Data Generation and Strategy

This study attempted to examine participants’ interactions within a Transcendence Megachurch and ways their experiences influenced their place identity. Identity construction is a not a static process and tends to change constantly over time (Gee, 2000; Norris, 2008; Wodak, de Cicilia, Reisgl, & Liebhart, 2000). As expressed by Kraus (2000, p. 12), in order to “make identities talk” participants should not be understood as to what Bruner (1990) calls the “lemon-squeezer” but should be approached in ways that their experiences contribute to a meaning-making process. For instance, all data collected should always be checked with the participants to ensure the validity of the interpretations (see Section 4.8 about member-checking and triangulation techniques). Semi-structured interviews are also useful in clarifying the true meanings and the place identification process from participants’
perspectives as it allows the researcher to actively interact with participants and their responses.

As previously stated in Chapter 1 (see Section 1.4), atmospheric design semiotics has an influence on the meaning-making process (Clough, 2010), in interactions with the materialities of space in the forms of explicit engagement and communication (Pink et al., 2014). Therefore, the participants’ perspectives, their perceptions and thoughts about their interactions with the atmospheric design semiotics in Transcendence Megachurch became a key point to investigate in this study.

Building on the notions that identity can change over time as an ongoing process, this study has portrayed how place identity, in particular within the megachurch alongside communication design trends and the influences of popular culture also constantly evolve. For instance, place identification constructed by the participants during data collection may be different from another period of time or in other churches. All participants were exposed to the live worshipping practices. These various practices all performed differently, therefore, were not the same for each participant. Besides, other experiences (such as work, school, family, and community events) encountered by participants may also contribute to the individual’s identity. However, this study focuses only on the place identification of the participants from their Transcendence Megachurch’s experience.

4.5.1 Data collection procedure.

The collected data were gathered by contacting the church committee and participation was voluntary. For triangulation purposes, the participants’ data collected from the interview responses and journal records were combined with the researcher’s notes from the site observations. Table 4.2 provides a description of all procedures that were taken for data
collection, which consisted of the research participants, recruitment methods, and data generation and analysis methods.

Table 4.2

*Research Procedures*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Participants</th>
<th>Participants Recruitment methods</th>
<th>Data Generation method</th>
<th>Data Analysis method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Twelve members of Transcendence Megachurch aged between 21-29 years old who actively attend Sunday services at Transcendence Megachurch Sydney Waterloo campus</td>
<td>Voluntarily participation by contacting church members and volunteers</td>
<td>- Interviews - The researcher’s observations - Participants’ journal records</td>
<td>Explicitation process (bracketing, clustering meanings, summarising, extracting themes) followed by interpreting and inductive reasoning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.5.2 Data collection methods.

Data was collected from multiple instruments including interviews, the researcher’s observations and participants’ journal records. Cohen et al. (2018) note that data collection methods including semi-structured or open interviews, observations, narrative documents, and journals tend to be used in interpretive paradigm case studies rather than other methods. Cohen et al. (2018) argue that case studies act in accordance with reliability and validity. The
data collection from three different sources was important to ensure the triangulation of findings between data sets (Holloway, 1997), when all data are contrasted to acquire validation if sharing similar findings (Groenewald, 2004). The use of multiple data sources was useful in addressing the research questions, and in producing “convergent validity” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 381). The triangulation technique is further explained in Section 4.8, and in the section below each type of collected data is discussed.

4.5.2.1 On-site observations.

Cohen et al. (2018) argue that observation lies at the heart of many case studies. Creswell (2011) has highlighted four advantages of observations. First, it allows the researcher to gain first-hand experience with participants. In other words, the researcher has the opportunity to experience the real setting of the study. Second, during observations, the researcher is able to record any information as it occurs. Third, the observations allow the researcher to identify if there are any unusual aspects. Finally, it is also useful in identifying any sensitive topic or issue that might affect the participants.

Another view presented by Tuckman (1999) perceives that in undertaking qualitative research, often the researcher observes the actual setting in order to unfold the phenomenon and understand how things happen. In this study, the researcher’s reflection is based on insite observation, with direct access to the megachurch. The researcher has adopted a complete observation to maintain distance from the events and participants, in order to avoid an influence on them (Flick, 2009). Yin (2014) argues that the diversity of data provides the evidence needed for the researcher to generate conclusions that gives credibility, reliability, and validity to the case study. The use of reflective memos from the field notes and observation data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006) provided further insights for the researcher to engage in reflection, analysis and self-critique in the data analysis process (Maxwell, 2005).
During the data collection period, there were four observations conducted (two every month at the beginning and middle of the month). Each observation session lasted for about two hours. During the observation phase, I observed all activities related to Transcendence Megachurch happening during the Sunday services for a period of two months. From the observations, I took notes and photographed the overall atmosphere and ambience of Sunday services while particularly focusing on the lighting arrangements, music and sound, visual communication series projected on large screens behind the stage, and also any other effects employed in support of the service. From my observations, I could see the impact of the atmospheric design semiotics on the young members’ behaviours, and in particular, in their interactions with the ambiance and site. The young member’s actions, responses, gestures, personal attributes, style preferences, and facial expressions revealed a lot about their engagement, interaction, attachment, and identification to the place and its atmosphere.

4.5.2.2 Semi-structured interviews.

Semi-structured interviews were instrumental in addressing the specific dimensions of the research questions, and offered more indepth insights of the participant’s individual experiences while also giving them space to offer new meanings to the topic of the study (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Data collected from the interviews focused on participants’ experiences and interactions within the Transcendence Megachurch environment. The semi-structured type of questions were useful in uncovering the participants’ perspectives, as it facilitated elaboration of the topic based on their personal experiences.

There were 12 participants who were interviewed in this study and the individual interviews were conducted between November 2016 and April 2017, while the participants’ journal records were also collected during that period. Each interview took around 45 minutes to an hour depending on the detail involved relating to the participants’ individual views and
experiences. For instance, the questions were targeted as to (i) what they think about the church’s atmospheric design semiotics? (ii) how they describe their first experience, feelings, and impressions attending the church? (iii) how and in what ways they perceive the site of engagement (if any occurs) within the environment? (iv) in what ways the interactions and site of engagement may be relevant for young people like them? (v) how it possibly affects them as a young person and individual? The full list of interview questions are attached in the Appendix D. Depending on the interviewees availability and consent, most interviews happened as face-to-face interactions and through Skype, and these were audio recorded (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Bailey, 2007). However, few participants opted to hand over written responses.

4.5.2.2.1 Use of visual materials during the interviews.

Whilst the interview guide provided an outline and topic of the interview, an additional element of audio and/or visual materials were introduced. These consisted of additional materials such as photographs and videos of Transcendence Megachurch. Harper (2002) recommends photo elicitation as “a tool to develop deeper and different knowledge” to what “can be gained from standard interviews” (Sonn, Qualye, & Kasat, 2015, p. 89). For Hodgetts, Chamberlain, and Groot (2011), photo elicitation is more than just a methodological tool, but it is “a practice through which people actively engage in constructing meanings about identities, community, and belonging to place” (Sonn et al., 2015, p. 90). Borrowing the concept of visual methods (Becker, 1981; Kraus & Fryrear, 1983), photographs are used in social science research; hence, in this study photographs and videos were also used to stimulate the participants’ memory on a generic experience of the Transcendence Megachurch in the first part of each interview. The live worshipping practices as portrayed in Figure 4.2 to Figure 4.5, while Figure 4.6 showcase the atmosphere during the
sermon session. Figure 4.7 depicts the visual graphics that were used in the worship session (lyrics of the worship song), and the church news of the Transcendence Megachurch about its events and activities. All of the photographs were shown to the participants during the interview.

Figure 4.2 Transcendence Megachurch spatial atmosphere picture 1. November 12, 2016.

Figure 4.3 Transcendence Megachurch spatial atmosphere picture 2. December 17, 2016.
Figure 4.4 Transcendence Megachurch spatial atmosphere picture 3. December 3, 2016.

Figure 4.5 Transcendence Megachurch spatial atmosphere picture 4. December 10, 2016.
Figure 4.6 Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere during a sermon. December 10, 2016.

Figure 4.7 Transcendence Megachurch visual graphics picture on the church’s screen. December 17, 2016.
The depicted ambience of the church atmosphere as shown in the photographs was utilised to remind the participants of their experiences, interactions, and engagement to the place. It included the ways in which Transcendence Megachurch uses multimedia projections, lighting arrangements, the atmosphere of the crowd, and the interactions between the messages from the songs and the interaction of the attendees in the auditorium.

A study by Kraus (2000) found that the use of photographs helps in starting a discussion about self-image. Similarly, Zevi (1957) mentioned that a film has the ability to capture spatial experiences of a building even though there are limitations in representing such experiences. Nevertheless, the actual data collected from participants’ testimonies were based on their individual experiences. Therefore, these visual tools were merely used as stimulants.

4.5.2.3 Participants’ journal records.

In addition to observations and interviews, I contacted all the participants and invited them to write/record a journal that would prompt them to uncover further personal experiences about their interactions, more so with the church atmospheric settings at a Sunday service. The journal notes were valuable in obtaining detailed, close-up, and personal views from the participants. Cohen et al. (2018) describe this type of data as instrument triangulation, which is useful to assist the triangulation of the data (p. 265). From the twelve young people who participated in this research, four participants voluntarily agreed to record their journals for the additional collection of data. These four participants are Australians, and among them two males and two females. One of the female participants is a Korean Australian.
4.5.2.4 Visual data.

The use of visual data and methods have grown significantly in the social sciences and psychology. Reavey (2011) shares that psychology researchers use visual approaches to explain how “the rich embodied and spatial texture of experience” that “cannot be fully captured by language-based/monomodal perspectives” (p. 5). One relevant example is the study about environmental spaces that related with individuals inhabitants, emotional and embodied elements of experience that are “always present but rarely directly acknowledged in qualitative research (Brown, Reavey, Cromby, Harper, and Johnson, 2008, as cited in Reavey, 2011, p. 6). According to Shohel (2012), image-based information is a key component of human progress in many distinct subject domains, including education. The image-based research approach in interpretative studies is a technique using both still and moving images. Images can provide details of events, memories, emotions and meaning of experiences since they allow moments to be captured and kept for recalling and sharing purposes. Therefore, Shohel (2012) argues that “images have great potential as a medium of expression” (p. 272).

Visual images that were taken during the site observations utilised as one set of data. The use of images is useful to assist the data triangulation. Shohel (2012) stresses the needs to apply mix-method interpretive study for understanding social or human problems by “building a complex interpretative and holistic image of a multi-layered social world” (p. 273). The visual photographs and data interpretation are inserted as parts of the findings themes in Chapter 5.

4.6 Data Analysis and Interpretation

Baxter and Jack (2008) mention that in most qualitative studies, the data collection and analysis could occur at the same time. According to Cohen et al. (2018), the data analysis is an ongoing process; therefore it is “subject to continual modification, addition, refinement,
excision, extension and amendment” (p. 644). Analysis of data was undertaken by coding (Creswell, 2011) while summarising and interpreting the findings. This initial data analysis was important in locating recurring themes that appeared throughout the interview responses.

The patterns were identified based on similarities and differences that arose from themes in the interviews. The procedure started with collecting data from interviews and discussions, then developed into themes from the data, whereby relevant theory and the theoretical framework were used to support the discussions. The overall analysis was referred to the research questions and adopted abduction (Thomas, 2016) to infer an explanation for the inquiry, with a conclusion based on data findings. Thomas (2016) defines abduction as “making a judgement concerning the best explanation for the facts you are collecting” and he argues that it is appropriate for case studies (p.70). With an interpretation of the research findings, I aimed to clarify and make sense of the participant’s responses (interviews and journal records) along with my observational notes and reflective memos.

Hycner’s (1999) explication process was adopted as “a way of transforming the data through interpretation” (Groenewald, 2004, p. 17). As recommended by Hycner (1999) researchers need to avoid the term “analysis” since it usually means breaking the data into parts, which can potentially lose the whole context of the phenomenon, while the explication process offers otherwise. Hycner’s explication process consists of five steps, which are:

1. **Bracketing and phenomenological reduction.**

Zinker (1978) explains that phenomenological implies a process that puts emphasis on participants’ unique experiences. In order to do that, the bracketing was useful for the researcher’s personal view or preconceptions (Miller & Crabtree, 1992). This was because “the here and now dimension of those personal experiences gives phenomena existential immediacy” (Groenewald, 2004, p.18). In this study, I used the observation notes in the bracketing to accompany the participants’ responses from the interviews.
The notes were clustered based on the relevancy with the subtopics of the interview responses.

2. *Indicating units of meaning.*

In order to avoid inappropriate subjective judgement, I consciously used bracketing in my own presuppositions. The collected data were reviewed by checking the similarities of the multiple sources of data (interview responses, participant journals, and researcher’s notes) to ensure that the data were clustered based on similar meanings.

3. *Clustering units of meaning to form themes.*

Groenewald (2004) suggests using bracketing as one more layer in this stage in order to remain true with the phenomenon. By grouping units of meaning together, the clusters of themes were formed (Creswell, 1998).

4. *Summarise and validate interviews.*

In this stage of the process, a *validity check* was required for every necessary modification. This was done by cross-checking information with the participants. This information was provided in the consent forms that were signed by all participants before they attended the interviews.

5. *Extracting themes that are general and unique from all interviews to make a composite summary.*
Once phases one to four were completed, I located common themes in the last phase from all the data. This approach has ensured that the summary reflects the overall “horizon” of the phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004).

Figure 4.8 showcases Creswell’s (2011) hierarchical approach in building the analysis of data. It consists of six steps: preparation of data for analysis, thorough reading of the data, coding process, generated descriptions, and themes for analysis that present a process model based on themes to interpret the meaning of data.

*Figure 4.8 Data analysis process (adapted from Creswell, 2011)*
Once all the raw data were collected, each type was organised and prepared for analysis. All of the data were flagged with the participants’ names and colour coded based on the source types (interview responses or journal records). Any notes and modifications or participants’ clarifications, which were added in the transcriptions were also organised accordingly. The data were then reviewed and thoroughly re-read to find common threads that could be used for coding. In the coding process, the data were divided into two sections: themes and descriptions. After the separation, each theme and description were examined to observe the interrelations between each other followed by interpreting the meanings.

4.7 Ethical Consideration

The ethical issue was taken into consideration since it involved humans as one of the main sources. The researcher obtained ethics approval for data collection from the Monash University Human Resource Ethics Committee (MUHREC). Participation was voluntary, and the participants had the right to withdraw from this research at any time. More details about participation and contribution were clarified in the MUHREC explanatory statements and consent forms (see Appendix B and C).

Punch (2000) states that all data from people to people in social research should involve consent, access, and associated social issues. Therefore, the researcher has ensured that research information about the study’s purpose was given to all the respondents before they decided to participate, as well as the reasons why they had been chosen as participants. Confidentiality, anonymity, and respondent’s privacy were also secured by assigning a pseudonym for each of the participants. As stated in the consent form, the original data would be kept in secrecy with no access to the third party. The issue of confidentiality was addressed by including an explanation in the consent form that all data would be kept securely in the Monash University system over a certain period and only be accessible to the researcher.
Depending on the participants’ preferences and availabilities, they were able to choose in which way they felt more comfortable to respond to the interview questions. The participants thus, were advised that they could participate in face-to-face conversations, or via Skype, and written responses was also proposed as an alternative. I assured the participants that there would be no judgements in regards to their answers and they were encouraged to be honest in sharing their experiences and views.

4.8 Reliability and Validity of Data

Reporting of the data findings included raw data (participants’ own words), a summary of data (the themes and sub themes), and analysis of what the results meant in relation to the research questions and aims. Reliability is maintained by keeping “internal consistency” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 382) throughout the data collection, transcription, data analysis, and presentation. This way, the findings not only provide accuracy and optimise the rigour of the study, but also refer to the actual research plan.

According to Cohen et al. (2018), the concurrent validity in case studies can be achieved through the use of multiple sources and evidence, in addressing the research questions and to yield convergent validity (p. 381). Furthermore, the authors argue that the multiplicity of sources can include “triangulation of data, investigators, perspectives, methodologies, instruments, time, locations, and contexts” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 381-382). The methods adopted in this study used different sources of data (interviews, journal records, researcher’s observation) so validity was maintained.

As the data was collected and analysed, I integrated the process with member-checking. Baxter and Jack (2008) suggest that the member-checking process allows the researcher to discuss and clarify his/her interpretation of the data with the participants. Moreover, the process of member-checking provides an opportunity for participants to give
additional perspectives on the issue. In addition to that, as the researcher, I also integrated my own reflections that were based on field notes during the observations.

Through this convergence, the researcher’s own biases were minimised and data credibility was optimised. Although qualitative research tends to possess subjective elements, it has the potential to overclaim the “truth”. In light of this matter, Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that any research bias has to be identified and acknowledged. In addition, Cohen et al. (2018) note that the researcher’s bias of prejudice and suspicions can be addressed by using the method of reflexivity.

According to Denscombe (2014), the researcher uses conceptual tools that are obtained from different sources such as values and culture. Hammersley (1992) argues that researcher bias is the main issue in qualitative research; however, the researcher does not begin the study “with a clean sheet” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 88). In this research, my own values, background, experiences, knowledge, and personal perspectives have been lenses “to look at and interpret the already-interpreted world of participants” (p. 302). As a reflexive researcher, my positionality has influenced each stage of the research (Bettez, 2015; Pillow, 2010). However, as Thomas (2016) points out the importance of the researcher’s positionality and a subjective stance with interpretative case studies to play a central role in the interpretation of the findings. For instance, as a previous attendee at Transcendence Megachurch Sydney, and also having a professional background in Visual Communication Design, I already had my own impressions, perceptions, and experiences before the research commenced. These aspects have influenced the formulation of the research topic and questions, data collection strategies, access to the site, analysis, and interpretation. Therefore, my role as the researcher has impacted and mediated the research process and outcomes to some extent (Cohen et al., 2018). However, more from my positionality and subjectivity in the interpretations of the findings (Thomas, 2016).
4.9 Strengths and Limitations of the Research Design

By conducting this study in a single location, the research is focused on investigating the phenomenon at the particular site, which is Transcendence Megachurch in Waterloo, Sydney, Australia. Denscombe (2014) identifies that one advantage of a case study is the suitability for smaller research, which can provide a holistic view of a complex social phenomenon. Hence, “the case study approach can fit well with the needs of small-scale research through concentrating effort on one research site (or just a few sites)” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 63). Another strength of a case study research is that it allows the researcher to present the participants’ views as they occurred. Wellington (2015) adds that case studies are beneficial because they are “strong on reality” and have the ability to attract readers’ attention, and are accessible and illustrative (p. 174). This research also makes use of the natural setting that occurs at Transcendence Megachurch, which Denscombe (2014) notes is particularly relevant within a case study approach. He further explains how this “approach is concerned with investigating phenomena as it naturally occurs”; therefore, “there is no necessity for the researcher to impose controls or implement changes to key factors or variables” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 63). The other advantages of this research design are the use of multiple sources of data that have the ability to “capture the complex reality under scrutiny” (Denscombe, 2014, p.63).

On the contrary, this research design also has two limitations in its practice. The first is the tendency to focus on processes rather than outcomes since it uses qualitative data and interpretive methods. Therefore, case studies are often perceived as “ill-suited to analyses or evaluations” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 64). Second, Wellington (2015) and Denscombe (2014) suggest that the case study adopted in this research can be vulnerable to criticism, in regards to generalisations made from its findings. In social sciences and case studies, the value of generalisation is unrealisable (Thomas, 2016). It is difficult to generalise the outcome of the
study since “what is offered in social science is probabilistic generalisation” (Thomas, 2016, p. 69). According to MacIntyre (1985), the value of generalisation in social sciences will always be limited by the unpredictability of human agency and variability of social life. The findings from this study are limited and subject to the context of one megachurch only. However, the findings contributed to the existing literature on the topic while extending new knowledge about young people experiences in a megachurch in the Australian context. The findings can also inform educators and policymakers to take into consideration the influence of atmospheric design semiotics elements of the place, bring a further understanding of learning experiences for young people, and what processes are involved in place identity construction within such religious institutions. As this project was conducted within one particular megachurch in Australia, an extension for further studies in other states within Australia and other countries is recommended.

4.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the methodology and the research approach adopted to investigate the research questions by utilising a qualitative case study. The research design and processes for each research method and the data analysis was reported. In concluding this chapter, the trustworthiness, as well as the ethical considerations, strengths and limitations of the research design of the study was discussed.
Chapter 5

Research Findings

5.1 Chapter Overview

The first part of this chapter begins with an introduction to the research questions for this study. The chapter then outlines the research findings obtained from 12 semi-structured interview responses, four journal records, and the researcher’s notes from site observations. This is followed by themes and categories from the research findings, derived from collected data and utilising a table. The rest of the sections in this chapter provide a discussion of the findings in each theme from the categories.

5.2 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from journal records and interviews with 12 participants. The responses are presented in three primary categories and sub-themes (see Table 5.1) in relation to the research question and sub-questions of the study. The themes and sub-themes in particular examine how the atmospheric design semiotics within Transcendence Megachurch environment affects young people’s place identity.

Main Question:
In what ways do megachurch atmospheric design semiotics influence young people’s experiences and their place identity?

Sub-questions
1. How do young people perceive the atmospheric elements in a megachurch as the built environment?
2. In what ways do the activities and interactions in a megachurch environment encourage a site of engagement and place attachment for young people within the church?

3. What are the possible outcomes resulting from young people’s interactions with the megachurch atmospheric design semiotics and its members and how does it influence their place identity?

Atmospheric setting in the context of this study refers to the live stage performance in the megachurch, which is praise and worship, preaching styles, music and audio settings, different coloured lighting arrangements, as well as visual graphics content used in church weekly services. An adapted place identity model based on the works of Lalli (1992) and Breakwell (1986) is used to analyse a subjective feeling of identification in the Transcendence Megachurch physical environment from participants’ perspectives. These findings contribute to examining how the participants describe influences of atmospheric design features within the church, to inform their identities through meanings and values symbolised in the Transcendence Megachurch environment.

Table 5.1 presents three key categories that emerged from the data interviews and journal records, which are then discussed in the forthcoming sections in this chapter. The three categories of the data findings were emerged by differentiating the types of responses, which made relevant connections to the research sub-questions.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Behavioural and sensory experience at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>5.3.1 Recognition of atmospheric design features at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3.2 Transcendence Megachurch distinctiveness compared to the more conventional churches</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3.3 Transcendence Megachurch was perceived as a contextually relevant environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.3.4 Place and event satisfaction at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4 Empathetic and subjective construction at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>5.4.1 Social acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4.2 Revisits/continuity of attendance – Transcendence Megachurch environment constancy formed through repeated experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4.3 Sense of belonging was preceded by site of engagement within Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.4.4 Group development established through togetherness and activities within Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5 Existential and unconscious perception of Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>5.5.1 Loyalty to Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5.2 Transcendence Megachurch enhanced self-esteem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5.3 Subjective well-being – Transcendence Megachurch encouragement towards life balance and positivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.5.4 Self-efficacy was facilitated and supported by place (Transcendence Megachurch)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3 Behavioural and Sensory Experience at Transcendence Megachurch

This study proposes that the combination of atmospheric design semiotics elements in Transcendence Megachurch plays an important role in young people’s experiences with place identity. Therefore, the first category of data as reflected in the research question is focused on participant perspectives concerning the atmosphere of the space, and their interpretations of the atmospheric elements within the space in the Transcendence Megachurch. The findings from the qualitative responses show that there are four themes under behavioural and sensory experiences, which deal with the recognition of atmospheric design features in the Transcendence Megachurch. The distinctiveness of the site is compared to the more conventional churches, and the Transcendence Megachurch discussed as a contextually relevant environment, which offers place and event satisfaction. All themes under this category were constructed based on the layers of spatial requirements, specifications, perceptions, and contexts that were utilised within the environment. The environment in this context refers to the Transcendence Megachurch space in the church weekly services.

5.3.1 Recognition of atmospheric design features at Transcendence Megachurch.

The first function of place identity refers to the way atmospheric elements are recognised by participants during their interactions with the spatial setting. This is when most of the participants, particularly those who came to the church service for the first time, showed recognition. Exposure to different signs and relatively new elements within the space triggered specific feelings.

Darrel, a 25-year old regular attendee was very impressed with the technology utilised by Transcendence Megachurch in delivering its services and noticed a recent adaptation
applied on the digital screens used at the church service. He mentioned that the church now uses side screens for worshippers while the middle screen is used for accompanied graphics.

    It was good. I noticed this actually, about last year or so they tend to have more patterns rather than just people. In Danks street service they have these three big screens, and the ones on left and right [screens] show the person, close up to the worship leader. But the one in the middle now is just patterns, moving images or something like that. I don’t think it’s the theme. It’s just they do artworks and all these patterns, colours or moving images, and things like that.

Figure 5.1 illustrates the three screens utilised at Transcendence Megachurch to support the service deliverance and elevate engagement with the attendees. The tools for visual enhancement includes the use of large LCD projection equipment, which also optimises the interaction with the congregation in delivering church news, preaches, and lyric presentation. In the words of Ingalls (2018), “the omnipresence of digital visual media has led to the rise of a new kind of specialist in churches: the ‘visual worship’ expert, responsible for locating and curating vast libraries of visual materials, designing or downloading song-lyric slides, and attending to presentational media during congregational singing” (p. 178). Digital projection technology enabled Transcendence Megachurch to project not only song lyrics, but also other visual media, including images, graphics, videos, and other texts for contemplation during worship. As mentioned by Darrel, by providing those screens, the church was able to “communicate” better with their members.
Figure 5.1 Three screens utilised by Transcendence Megachurch to assist the praise and worship. November 26, 2016.

By making it possible to adjust the design and communication across different screens, this has been an aspect that has improved engagement for viewers. The multimedia graphics visualised on the stage screens were utilised in building place attachment for the attendees, as shown in Figure 5.2. Not only the screens enabled the worship leaders to be seen up-close and provided texts for the music lyrics that increasing the participation level, but they were also useful as a medium to share the church news, updates, and bible verses.
Figure 5.2 Transcendence Megachurch visual graphics was displayed on the middle screen. December 3, 2016.

As a contemporary Christian church, Transcendence Megachurch aligns its practices to current culture and trends, which can be seen through its music and vibes. In her journal, Lizzie, a 26-year old Korean Australian described her experience from a service she attended one Sunday. Lizzie enjoyed the service and said how her experience was nothing like the other churches that she had attended before.

Every time those doors open [before the Sunday service], there’s always a feeling of the rush but it’s all fun. In the meantime, while we chitchat, I just watch people bustling around or mingling whilst waiting for the service to start.
At 18:00, the service starts with intro music and we all stand up to worship but this week was different. On that Sunday, it sounded like club music with no lyrics just electric guitar and drums, which was very targeted to the Powerhouse age group [18-25 years old].

There was a solo performance of one of Bethel’s song called “Pieces” with an amazing video presentation. The whole presentation was simple but profound in a way and I think it’s because it was simple. If it were too complicated with wordings and various cast members acting, it would’ve distracted my attention from the main part, which is the song in itself. But each scene had one actor/actress performing which I believe placed more emphasis on the lyrics and scene that reflected the lyrics. So ultimately, the whole video presentation flowed smoothly and simple, which it should be. Then worship began with an upbeat song. Everyone was all in focus, jumping, singing, and dancing. It does resemble a little bit like a concert show with all the lights beaming off at different angles and changing colours accordingly to the tempo of the music and background themed projectors on the big screens. Because we weren’t seated so close to the stage, the sound was great. It wasn’t alarmingly loud, it’s actually better quality compared to some cinemas where the sound system is right above you and it aches your ear at times. I guess Transcendence invested in the sound systems to make it hearing friendly.

Transcendence Megachurch as described by Lizzie above has material qualities that were close to younger generations or at least experienced by them outside the religious sphere. The atmosphere of Transcendence Megachurch during praise and worship illustrated in Figure 5.3.
The ambience of the auditorium was set as informal, fun, exciting, as what Lizzie referred to a music concert. The church members and all attendees were encouraged to express themselves freely without hesitation. They were allowed to dance, singing along, and move around following the music beats. The liberty of individual expression motivated in this type of megachurch was supported by professional technology and design features.

Several other participants shared their previous experiences attending other churches before they knew about Transcendence Megachurch and mentioned the difference in the communication approach, as being fresh, yet effective for them. For instance, the use of screen projectors is considered useful during the services, as not only is the church message delivered, but it also creates a sense of connection between the church and attendees by encouraging more people to come to church. Aiden, a 25-year old professional who has been
involved in Transcendence Megachurch for three months as a volunteer, believes that this church makes sure everyone is able to access information, announcements, and verses related to the preaching. Figure 5.4 portrays a screen that was used to assist the preaching activity, where it displayed the bible verse as mentioned by the preacher.

![Figure 5.4 Large screen on Transcendence Megachurch stage was used to assist the preaching by displaying the speaker and bible verses. December 10, 2016.](image)

Jason’s interview response supported this idea. Jason is a 23-year old Malaysian who has been attending Transcendence Megachurch as a regular for four years.

*Screen projectors in the church are really helpful as they help with the service. For example, if the members of the church did not bring their bible, it [the verse] will be up on the screens so we can read along as well.*
Axel, an international student from Indonesia highlighted the significance of Transcendence Megachurch in utilising digital technology to assist in recruiting new members to its services and also maintaining their regulars’ attendances.

*I think it’s important because it is the way to attract the newcomers as well as the regular members, so they will always keep updated with what is going on, what is more to come in the future. Because for different modes of delivering information such as posters or flyers, people can just hold it for a second and then they just leave it on the chair. But for digital marketing like it’s part of the service so people sit down and they get to listen and see the church’s news. So yeah, I think it is a really important part of the church’s life.*

When Aiden shared his perspective about one of the Sunday services he had attended, he admitted that the service was well structured and professionally organised. Aiden also added that these services assist in providing the relevant atmosphere for each activity within the service.

*Transcendence Megachurch presented much of the information in the form of videos, where the video focuses on interviews with individuals and their experiences in their lives (testimonies). The videos give more room for creativity such as music, colour tones, and expressions of the interviewee. This is generally accompanied by dimmed lights as well for more privacy and intimacy to the video. During the praise and worship, the room lights are turned off with only the spotlights on. The smoke together with the spotlight creates an aweing atmosphere.*

Figure 5.5 exhibits the ambience during the praise and worship in Transcendence Megachurch, whereas Figure 5.6 portrays the auditorium setting during preaching moment.
Both pictures displayed how the lighting adjustments were arranged differently, depending on how the activities were intended to be.

*Figure 5.5* The Transcendence Megachurch lighting arrangements and ambience of the church auditorium during praise and worship. November 26, 2016.

Praise and worship activities were intended to be an intimate moment between church members and God. For this purpose, the auditorium lights turned off and the spotlights were set according the mood and music rhythms. Oftentimes, the smoke on stage was added to intensify the atmosphere and assist the attendees to immerse themselves into the spiritual experience. In contrast to praise and worship moments where the members were stimulated for personal expressions within the dark environment, the auditorium lights on the ceiling were turned on during the preaching (see Figure 5.6).
During the preaching, the bright setting of the auditorium allowed the church members to taking notes while focusing on the sermon. Unlike the praise and worship moments, in this activity, the church members were led to sit, relaxed and composed.

All of the participants who were not familiar with Transcendence Megachurch or any similar contemporary megachurches. However, they were able to identify the atmosphere in the space, particularly relating to the tangible aspects. Furthermore, the participants stressed on the importance of the church in maintaining member attendance through its engaging deliverance.
5.3.2 Transcendence Megachurch distinctiveness compared to the more conventional churches.

Transcendence Megachurch is also seen as something different and a refreshing experience because the worship style and communication approach tend to adjust to current culture, which is considered as a breakthrough in Christian churches. Participants believed that the Transcendence Megachurch space has crucial atmospheric aspects that intentionally elevate the mood of the attendees. Also, the participants felt that Transcendence Megachurch is different from other churches, particularly compared to the ones that still use traditional approaches.

Lizzie, who has been attending the Transcendence Megachurch [Waterloo campus] for about eight months, and as a casual member she shared her first experience in the interview. She remembered her first impression as if she had attended a non-related Christian church due to its atmosphere.

*I was mesmerised that a church can be this cool and almost like a clubbing vibe. So I was quite in awe and surprised to think and questioned myself “is this a church for real?”. But because it’s a big church, I felt lost in the crowd. It was very lively and reminded me of a city night market vibe. A lot of young people and didn’t seem like a church at all because I used to go to the Presbyterian church and during the service it was pretty quiet. Also, I thought it felt very cliquey so I was glad I came with friends. I was not familiar with Transcendence Megachurch because I’ve never been to a church which gives a concert vibe. So energetic, full of life.*

The energetic vibe of the Transcendence Megachurch service was illustrated in Figure 5.7.
Figure 5.7 The ambience of the Transcendence Megachurch auditorium during praise and worship. November 26, 2016.

Also, Lizzie admitted that the environment was different from what she had in mind before she came to this Transcendence Megachurch.

*Overall communication was nothing I would’ve imagined. From the seat drops and to digital church news were same standards as you get in cinemas and other professional settings. The standard they prepare is beyond what I had ever expected because I had no idea about Transcendence Megachurch. I only heard about it once in my lifetime.*
Another participant, Shawn, a 23-year old Japanese was impressed by the communication approach of Transcendence Megachurch. Shawn described the difference in atmosphere by comparing Transcendence Megachurch with more traditional churches.

*Transcendence Megachurch approach is quite new to me, especially the worship style. However, I think it is very cool since they are using different techniques of lighting, screens, and all other stuff to support the church and services.*

Being different from other typical churches is essential for Transcendence Megachurch to reach out to the younger generation. The responses from participants indicate that the megachurch offers something that is different and current at the same time, when compared to their previous experiences. Similarly, recent literature also suggests that many young people tend to see conventional churches as old fashioned and label them as boring (Davis & Yip, 2004). In this study, the responses from young people indicate how the church approach and communication methods are essential for them. Hence, it can be argued that young urban people, particularly those in their twenties, are keen to have some different experiences that are unique and dynamic as offered by Transcendence Megachurch.

In summary, the findings under this theme have demonstrated that the first experiences of the participants had given them impressions of a unique place. Previous experiences in similar settings (often secular-based), such as attending live concerts or music festivals, have influenced young people’s perceptions toward the atmosphere and spatial environment at Transcendence Megachurch. Lalli (1992) identifies this as “external evaluation” where residents use a self-enhancement function to evaluate places by comparing their uniqueness and characteristics to other environments. In this regard, the evaluation process in the
previous theme (recognition of atmospheric design features in Transcendence Megachurch) of the findings has also shaped the abilities of participants to differentiate between Transcendence church and other churches by comparing their features.

5.3.3 Transcendence Megachurch was perceived as a contextually relevant environment.

In this section, the findings refer to individual and subjective perceptions regarding the Transcendence Megachurch experience, particularly relating to the participants’ engagement and experience within the environment and the atmospheric design semiotics (lights, sound, music, live worshipping ambiance, multimedia graphics, and design visualisation projected on screens).

Axel, a university student from Indonesia expressed his view about the music at Transcendence Megachurch, which is easy to listen to and memorable.

*I like the music. Most of the lyrics come from the bible. I think it comes from the heart of the people who made the music, so it’s so real. It’s like once you listen then you can learn from it. Not memorise it, but suddenly it’s just stuck easily in your mind.*

One of the factors mentioned by participants as being essential for Transcendence Megachurch services is its lighting. This lighting is specially arranged according to the music played, beats and rhythm, and some highlighted and related-lyrics. Different lighting compositions can be seen during praise and worship, where the attendees are left to pray in a mostly dark atmosphere. James mentioned the usefulness of the ambient lighting (where the lights follow accordingly to the music beats and rhythm) utilised by Transcendence Megachurch in establishing the atmosphere during worship (see Figure 5.8).
Figure 5.8 The ambient lighting in the Transcendence Megachurch auditorium during praise and worship. November 26, 2016.

All the respondents agreed that the adjustment level of the lighting has created a perfect atmosphere for them to stay focused. See Figure 5.9 where the lighting was arranged differently according to the rhythm of the worship music. Mable said that the lighting arrangement at Transcendence Megachurch is appropriate. For a university student like her, the atmosphere with perfect lighting arrangements and adjustments assist her to concentrate more on the worship.

The lighting is well coordinated with each song; it really helps people to immerse in the atmosphere when worshipping God. I feel peaceful and quiet [worshipping in the dark]. I think it is good to create this atmosphere to talk to God. Since it is dark, we can’t see other people but God.
Figure 5.9 The auditorium lights in Transcendence Megachurch were turned off during praise and worship to establish a more focus and serene atmosphere. December 17, 2016.

Aiden, on the other hand, thinks that the music performed in Transcendence Megachurch plays a major role in making the service more compatible for young people like himself.

*Generally, the music seems to be more electronic in the Transcendence Megachurch, probably just the season and taste in music which I would assume suits more to the younger generations.*

*All in all, a very cool and up to date vibe about the church, which would appeal to the younger generations more. The way they transitioned from worship to announcements, to the sermon was all smooth and in a way where*
you feel comfortable, not awkward. You are somehow encouraged to express yourself freely in this environment.

Darrel equally shared his view about the church’s atmosphere and mentioned how this experience enabled him to express himself freely, and how this atmosphere suited him as the lighting arrangements, audio background, and music were set according to suit the event purposes. For instance, during the worship moments, the setting of the place is arranged following the content of the songs. The auditorium is darkened with stage lighting arranged following the music beats, and the visual graphics with song subtitles are shown on the large screens to engage and encourage audience participation in singing and interacting within the environment. Experiencing these aspects in the church atmosphere, Darrel believes that Transcendence Megachurch is able to deliver its engaging services because it has always adapted to current trends and styles and this is important to attract young people like himself.

I think it’s [Transcendence atmospheric approach] really relevant. Like I said, sometimes I attended [Transcendence Megachurch] by myself and I like to just worship without any hesitancy, not holding back. I like to worship fully, and the way they set it [atmosphere] up like it gets dark during the praise and worship. The whole lights and everything really enhance the atmosphere. For me, I think the atmosphere is very important. Being able to express myself, that’s really important. I’m quite an extroverted person and I’m quite expressive too. People would know if I’m sad or happy, but at the same time I like how Transcendence brings the atmosphere, [it] helped me to express myself better, something that I can’t do at home or in the cell group or the church [Place of Hope]. I need that atmosphere to support me to be myself.
Other than the Transcendence Megachurch music genre, some other participants thought that in order to remain current and attractive to younger generations, it is important for the church to utilise advanced technology in delivering their services. For instance, Axel also shared his view about technology that plays an important role in delivering the services.

*In the morning services there are older people and adults, whereas in the evening services there are more young adults and teenagers, so the sound system is louder [than the morning one]. The lighting also is very impressive, how they always communicate in every song with the lighting itself. They change it once every two or three months, the changes correlated to the season. For instance, in the summer they have a different installation of the lighting, also for the backdrop as well as the song preview. Like now, as Christmas is coming, they just installed another lighting arrangement more like the Christmas Carols and more like a Christmas theme. So, I think they have a very good theme for each time they install the lighting for the stage and around the audience itself.*

Five respondents from interviews agreed that digital technology is able to provide better vision and auditory access for people to focus on the services. In addition to that, the importance of applying digital technology is functional since it makes the service more engaging, encourages involvement at church, and has the ability to create the intended atmosphere more quickly. Axel also added that by looking at the quality of the atmosphere created, it is almost unbelievable how a church can achieve such professional standards.

Lizzie thought that the Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric approach has to be attractive for young people as it is a crucial factor in the long term. For Lizzie, adapting to the
audience preferences is one of the key aspects for winning young people. Similarly, Aiden added that the church becomes more meaningful for him as he understands what is being updated out there by using a more-secular approach (see Figure 5.10).

*It is relevant in that they are able to adapt to the current culture and make most people in the demographical sense feel somewhat comfortable. Their professionalism allows you to focus on God more. Churches that are run in a less professional fashion, we have tendencies to get distracted to those faults.*

*Figure 5.10* A visual graphics displayed in Transcendence Megachurch service that accentuated contemporary and secular approach. December 17, 2016.

All the responses in this theme referring to the materiality and tangible aspects of the environment are also part of the design atmospheric features of Transcendence Megachurch. Informing factors of place identity will be further explained in the discussion chapter.
5.3.4 Place and event satisfaction at Transcendence Megachurch.

The findings in this theme demonstrate that the participants described their experiences positively, and they even coined it as unforgettable and enjoyable. For example, Mable emphasised her first experience in the church as a positive one. As a 24-year old Chinese student who has attended the church for two years now, Mable mentioned how she enjoyed the music and the concert style atmosphere.

*I love it, it [the service] was like a music concert! Personally, I really love music and like going to a music concert. I am very happy to know Transcendence Megachurch because now I can go to church and a music concert at the same time! It was amazing and unforgettable. Transcendence Megachurch is totally different from the normal church that I have ever been to. The atmosphere is so great, like a music concert. After the first experience at Transcendence, I know I must come back again, I love this place.*

Mable’s responses have shown that young members such as herself find a sense of connection with Transcendence Megachurch as the worshipping style offers a secular experience. Biddle (2007) argues that “followers [of megachurches] can feel the security and companionship without giving up on the material benefits of modern life” (p. 3).

In comparison to a previous experience in a different megachurch in Korea, Kyle admitted his current experience at Transcendence Megachurch in Sydney is quite unique and different. For instance, Kyle described the atmosphere as more inviting and energising and suited to his age group as a young person. It is interesting to note that Kyle is a worker from Korea, who has been attending Transcendence Megachurch in Sydney for only seven months. He was raised in a conventional Christian family that followed traditions. In a typical church
in Korea, Kyle added that young people are expected to respect their elders and follow social norms.

The concept of adopting traditional values is highly influenced by the historical background of Christianity in Korea. The teaching was initiated in the late sixteenth century and history has shown that religion in itself faced many challenges and turbulence in practice (Grayson, 2006). For instance, Grayson (2006) notes that a major social conflict of legal equality for women still happened between the 1970s to the 1990s. The conflict indicates that social norms play an important role in Christianity. Furthermore, Baker (1997) identifies the concept of “Koreanization or localisation of the clergy” adopted by Korean churches as being where national values are promoted. In contrast with the megachurch concept, the “Koreanization” approach has made the conventional churches embrace social traditions in their practices. For Kyle who grew up within a “Koreanization” church, attending Transcendence Megachurch is a new experience, and to the best of his knowledge, there is no church in Korea that uses this type of approach.

*It feels exciting whenever I come to the service in [Transcendence Megachurch] Waterloo because it is not boring. I don’t feel tired at all since it is far from silence. Again, comparing to the church I attend in Korea, the service makes me bored and tired, I feel unexcited.*

The satisfaction and excitement from the activities and interactions between the participants at Transcendence Megachurch are main factors that have determined the involvement of young people in the long term. Transcendence Megachurch has been adopting its deliverance to the attendees’ preferences, which are often associated with recent trends. Popular culture is often associated with something that is entertaining, emotional, accessible, commercial, and has the ability to attract mass (Harris, 2011). Not only is the service
considered as engaging and exciting but it also invites more people to join. The spatial design features in the church atmosphere, including the multi-sensory aspects that enhance the experience, are important features in how Transcendence Megachurch is perceived as a unique and ecstatic place. This aspect is further discussed in Section 6.3.1 in the next chapter.

5.4 Empathetic and Subjective Construction at Transcendence Megachurch

The second category represents the deeper level of involvement where the participants felt the sense of connection and belonging to the church. In the level of empathetic and subjective construction of Transcendence Megachurch, the participants as young people understand the environment better through further development of participation, engagement, and continuation. There are five themes in this level that are social acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch, revisits/continuity of attendance – Transcendence Megachurch environment constancy formed through repeated experiences, sense of belonging was preceded by site of engagement within Transcendence Megachurch, and group development established through togetherness and activities within Transcendence Megachurch.

5.4.1 Social acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch.

The participants emphasised one of the key factors that enhanced their initial experiences within a Transcendence Megachurch was that of social acceptance. They felt welcomed regardless of their backgrounds, past histories or socio-economic statuses. Most of the participants agreed that the church was relatively easier to join compared to the more traditional ones where the members often know each other.

As an international student, Elle found that adapting to a new environment was challenging. Similarly, Elle mentioned that social interaction made her feel comfortable and as if she had found a new “family” with her membership in the church community. After two
years living in Sydney, Elle decided to become a regular member and a volunteer for different activities and the social environment in the church encouraged her.

*I was a student in Sydney, living apart from my family. I used to feel lonely and scared. But the people at Transcendence at Danks campus welcome me with open hands and include me in their prayer. Transcendence Megachurch is a family no matter who you are, where you came from, your cultural background, your past history, and everybody is there for you.*

An international attendee from Korea, Kyle, admitted that feeling part of the church community from his experience, interaction, and personal views.

*I don’t have any friends or family here in Australia, so when I came to Transcendence Megachurch for the first time, I really wanted to make friends with people from different backgrounds. Usually, in Korea we only hang out with other Koreans. But in Transcendence Megachurch, I could meet so many international people like Japanese, Chinese, Indonesian, and so many other nationalities.*

As a 20-year old Malaysian Australian, Jason has regularly attended Transcendence Megachurch for the past four years. Jason mentioned that he has good memories of his first experiences in the church. For him, Transcendence Megachurch is not only mega in size but it also provides friendliness for newcomers. Often in the more traditional churches, members know each other better as they socialise in smaller environments. Usually members in congregations become regular as they are introduced through families. In light of this, it was surprising for participants to have similar approaches while attending this megachurch.
It’s really big [the church], it was not like any other church that I have attended. Despite its big size, the people there are so friendly and welcoming. I felt like I mattered even though I did not know anyone.

Shawn thinks that the Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere has encouraged him to join the community. Being accepted has been an important factor for Shawn, as he had never visited Australia before.

The people here are so kind, they make you go with the flow naturally. I really respect their communication style that is friendly and open minded.

From the different responses of the participants, social acceptance in the church is important for them, particularly for those with international backgrounds who are temporary residents such as students or workers. In reference to place identity, social acceptance elevates the level of familiarity between the attendee and the place. Over time, this will enhance the sense of belonging and personal association to the place (Breakwell, 1986).

As Putnam (2000) suggests, Australia as one of the modern western societies is facing some personal trends happening in the lives of young people that might lead to emptiness and fear. These occurring trends in the modern era include personal isolation, individual emphasis, and significance of private consumption. Most participants who have international backgrounds mentioned that living in a big western city like Sydney still brings a sense of loneliness and individualism, despite it being a multicultural society. Facing these concerns, Transcendence Megachurch offers mentors and support groups with also simple procedures to recruit new members (Biddle, 2007).
5.4.2 Revisits/continuity of attendance – Transcendence Megachurch

Environment constancy formed through repeated experiences.

The stability of person-place relationships from past experiences facilitates some forms of identity construction that develop over time (Lalli, 1988). Many young attendees mentioned an unforgettable first impression from the visual attraction of the atmosphere. The influences of the atmospheric design semiotics and their first experience in the church has determined continuity and long-term attendance for many members (Charboneau, 2015). Furthermore, the environment and interactions within the megachurch drive young people go with the flow naturally.

The sense of familiarity within Transcendence Megachurch has encouraged Darrel to become a regular at church because the excitement is enjoyable for him as an attendee.

> I am familiar with that and I enjoy it. I come every weekend and knowing that I would get that same atmosphere that it is such a Transcendence thing. The combination of lighting, the worship, sometimes dance or the presentation. On a Sunday night live [service] sometimes they show multimedia instead of preaching. I’m quite familiar with those and I really enjoy it, absolutely.

Darrel believes that it is essential for Transcendence Megachurch to utilise and stay current with trends in order to attract young people as their members, particularly those who never been to church. Furthermore, Darrel believes that the more strict and formal churches can be intimidating for newcomers. However, in referring to his own experience, Darrel considers the weekly service deliverances and performances are aspects of the church, which have attracted him the most. These factors have also encouraged Darrel to revisit the church.

> I notice that like sometimes they sort of do the lighting in accordance with the songs, which is professionally done. It feels like you are in a concert sort of
thing. And to put that kind of thing weekly I think it’s really really impressive. I get excited each week! On the way to church I always thought like ‘oh I hope they’ll sing this song and that song. I’m looking forward to sing their songs.’

Elle was really impressed with Transcendence Megachurch the first time she came. For Elle this church was like no other, and the experience led her to become a part of the community. As an international student who lived in Australia on her own for the first time, the culture, people, and place seemed foreign. She felt that she did not belong anywhere. As Elle felt displaced in Australia initially, she slowly began to enjoy the church experience.

*I was born and raised in a Catholic family. At the beginning I was introduced to the church by a good friend of mine and the whole praising and preaching in Transcendence is completely different from how I was brought up hence I felt uncomfortable. As time goes by, I enjoy being a part of Transcendence family.*

*The gospel feels alive and enriches me as a Catholic person.*

A similar view was shared by Lizzie as she thinks that the Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere is key to her engagement and deeper experience to build connections and regularity in attending the church. Lizzie, in particular, stresses her feeling of self-worth and a stronger sense of belonging to the church community.

*My personal experience is different because it meant more than the atmosphere I get. I didn’t feel welcome in the beginning but during the service, there was an in-depth impression I got whilst the pastor was preaching. With that, I kept attending Transcendence Megachurch even though I felt lonely and felt a bit like an outsider. Mainly the culture was different compared to the church I previously attended, where people would approach a new person, not the other way around.*
Moreover, after a while that experience from being mesmerised with all atmospheric design semiotics aspects transitioned to an experience of belonging, loved and being ok with confusion about life and all.

From the responses of all participants, it seems that most of them have developed a stronger sense of self-worth while attending the church. The participants mentioned the encouragement they received as new members when attending the service for the first time. The comfort and security they were given on the first visit motivated them to keep attending. Having positive impressions as first-time attendees encouraged them to continue to visit. Over time, the familiarity of being in the church and enjoying the comfort, community, and activities has strengthened a sense of belonging and bonding with the church. Continuity as one of the principles of identity (Breakwell, 1986, 1992) facilitates a place in providing a “sense of continuity” of the self as the respondents have attended or lived in the same place or similar type of place for a certain period of time (Feldman, 1990).

5.4.3 Sense of belonging was preceded by site of engagement within Transcendence Megachurch.

Church involvement that leads to further affiliations is encouraged through participation in the community and related social activities, whereby young people establish a stronger sense of belonging to the church. In this study, the participants referred to a feeling of needing a “space” where they were offered privacy, flexibility, and freedom. These criteria resonated in many of their responses and it was crucial for them, particularly while deciding whether they might join this megachurch.

Darrel came from a more traditional church with the conventional type of liturgy and worship style. Regardless of the unfamiliarity of the new approach in Transcendence
Megachurch, he felt that the overall atmosphere has built the sense of proximity between him and God. Before attending Transcendence Megachurch, Darrel was close to his church community since it was smaller in size as a congregation. Nevertheless, Darrel believed that the music at Transcendence Megachurch has delivered an engaging experience that bridges his experience with God and himself as his worshipping moments feel intimate and personal.

"It’s funny because growing up I attended one of the old school churches with just choirs and organs, pianos, or probably sometimes like violins and some of those big drum things. It’s just one not like the whole set of drums. However, coming from that background and then attending Transcendence, I would say it’s been a great experience like I didn’t really feel ‘oh this is too loud or things like that.’ I think the way they bring the songs is really enhancing the experience. Sometimes during those moments of worship, I feel that I was really close to God I think because I can feel such a presence. So yeah, I never felt it’s too loud or distracting."

Regardless of the feelings evoked by the Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere and environment, each individual has his/her own perception about the experience that encourages a sense of attachment to the place.

As an Australian university student, Melody shared a quite different view when she described her impression about the Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere, particularly with the communicational design, which includes lighting, visual graphics, and live worshipping music. Using a metaphor to narrate her experience, Melody felt that the atmospheric elements were relevant with the “Divine concept” of her understanding. Through this comprehension, Melody felt more connection and comfort towards the place. This connection for Melody started to build place attachment and a sense of belonging to Transcendence Megachurch.
I really like the view and design at the service. I feel very comfortable as I step into Transcendence Megachurch with the vibrant colours and designs which I remembered at that time was sort of like the angel wings. It really made me feel a sense of belonging and as if I stepped into the house of God, where it can be seen that so much effort was put into designing the lightings or decorations. I would say that they really relayed the message well in terms of making people feel at home in the church. I am really thankful that I can call Transcendence Megachurch my home.

Before the services started, Transcendence Megachurch projected a visual graphics accompanied by welcoming words, and that the church was offering assistance to the members (see Figure 5.11) who are troubled and in need.

Figure 5.11 A visual graphics displayed on Transcendence Megachurch screen before the services begin. December 10, 2016.
Some other participants, like Mable, mentioned that the familiarity of Transcendence Megachurch is growing as the other church she went to was very quiet and strict, leaving no space for expression or freedom for her as a young person. Mable described her relational attachment to Transcendence Megachurch as homey whenever she comes to church and as an incomparable feeling that grows within her.

*Transcendence Megachurch always gives me the feeling of back to home because I am an overseas student. I don’t know anyone except the students and teachers at my school.*

The sense of belonging within Transcendence Megachurch as a particular environment was discussed by most of the participants in this study, more so concerning how it promoted and built their social relations (Low & Altman, 1992). For participants who are international students, and being in Australia for the first time and away from family and friends, it gave them a sense of insecurity and isolation. These participants agreed that Transcendence Megachurch has helped them to acculturate in the host environment and establish new connections and social interactions with other people.

**5.4.4 Group development established through togetherness and activities within Transcendence Megachurch.**

Being part of the Transcendence Megachurch community by joining cell groups (often referred as Bible study groups), church conferences, and volunteering activities form stronger bonds in the church community. Not only does the church society build togetherness but it also strengthens bonding within the church environment.
Axel noticed that the community at Transcendence Megachurch has given him the opportunity to shape his communication and leadership skills, particularly after he decided to become involved in more activities within the church.

_TRANScendence Megachurch has changed me a lot from the interaction with the people because I’m involved with the Connect Group as well. It really changed my perspective and got me more open-minded. It gets me more mature overtime since I attended in the year of 2012 up until now [2016].

_Previously, when I just came here to Australia I was pretty much shocked because during [my] university foundation, you have to do things like group projects with people from different countries. However, coming to Transcendence Megachurch, I went to the camp a few years ago and encountered these people from various backgrounds. I think from this experience, I have improved the way I communicate and was able to adapt to a new environment easily. It also improves my leadership skills in terms of bringing up related events for the Indonesian community [at Transcendence Megachurch]. I mean taking into part of this leadership community as well. For instance, in the previous event, we have this welcome party for the newcomers every semester in the church. I am involved in one of the committees as well._

Another aspect mentioned by the respondents relates to language and communication skills. These social skills were also mentioned as an important contribution in building their confidence and group development within the Transcendence Megachurch community. Having many friends from international backgrounds has encouraged Shawn to speak more, which has also contributed to further improvement in his English language skills.
I feel chatty to other people now. This experience has been inspiring me to make more friends. This is my first time going to Australia, I have no friend or family when I arrived here seven months ago. After the Sunday service, I usually meet my friends from international backgrounds like Korean and Indonesian. There are other Japanese people too.

 Compared to when I came to Australia the first time, I was hesitant to speak English with other people so it was very hard to improve myself. It was challenging. Now that I have met new friends, I have become chattier, not that shy anymore. I can feel that my English is better.

For Darrel who came from a more traditional church, attending Transcendence Megachurch was overwhelming and different at first. He commented on the huge space and how it took him some time to adapt and blend in with the church community. Darrel admitted that having a small group within the church community has helped him to build a sense of belonging. It also has given him a sense of connection to the church.

 Back then [in 2006] probably it was a bit foreign when I first came. And actually I didn’t just attend the Sunday’s service, I attended the youth service on Friday night. Back then it was on Friday night at [Baulkham] Hills. So if anything it was a bit foreign cause maybe this was my first time attending megachurch and I just felt sort of like a bit out of place, but I just kept on turning up – maybe that’s the reason why I didn’t really volunteer. I attended with my Dad and Mum on Sundays and then on Fridays I went with my sister to the youth service, but I didn’t really feel like really connected. Yes I made some friends but not really sort of, maybe because back then I was quite known in my previous church like everyone knew me sort of thing, so when I first came
here I just thought like oh this was such a big place and I didn’t really feel very familiar. But I think now if anything that really helped is the community in [Transcendence] church. For example, I knew Prilly (the Transcendence Megachurch volunteer who recruited him for this interview) and then started going again for the last couple of months and she introduced me to a few people and then it started to felt homey again.

Knowing more people at church, making new friends, and being part of a group within the Transcendence Megachurch community was a big change for Darrel. Interaction within the church atmosphere has won Darrel’s heart by giving him a sense of belonging and strengthening the bond he has with the church. Recognising that being part of the community, and getting involved with more activities at Transcendence Megachurch, has helped Darrel to overcome the feeling of “alienation”. In the other church Darrel attended, most of the members knew him well, which was a benefit of a smaller-scale organisation. Darrel admitted that he was reluctant to blend in with the crowd at Transcendence Megachurch because the church was large and it was not easy for him to mingle as a newcomer. However, Darrel’s view then changed after he encountered “togetherness” in a new group, both inside and outside the church.

The way I experience the Transcendence Megachurch is probably different from the others. I mean during the first eight years I was attending there, I wasn’t really attending with a certain group but at the same time I like how I was able to come by myself and then express myself to God during the praise and worship. But then for the last two months, it’s a different feeling because I get to know Prilly and her crowd, so it enhances the experience. I like to talk to new people, being able to meet those new people. In terms of Transcendence,
the church itself and the atmosphere they bring. I think it’s just helping me to express myself more. And the fact that nowadays this community, the people like Prilly and those guys, it sorts of like brings out myself as a person, like the extrovert me to know people more and new people. That adds to the experience.

The second level of place identity construction or the empathetic and subjective reconstruction of Transcendence Megachurch, according to the findings from this study suggest various factors as promoted by church activities and members’ interactions. There were influences from a combination of members’ interactions within the church environment and the atmospheric design semiotics formed at the first level (behavioural and sensory experiences at Transcendence Megachurch). These influences added to the activities the participants joined in at church and the community also contributed to developing place identity. In other words, the participants’ repeated church experiences created place attachment, familiarity, relevancy, and togetherness that provided a more established and deeper engagement with place identity as maintained through continuation.

5.5 Existential and Unconscious Perception of Transcendence Megachurch

The last category represents the deepest level of involvement between the participants and the Transcendence Megachurch environment. At this stage, the participants are expected to be unconsciously associated with the place as they identify themselves as members rather than attendees of the church. From the findings, there were four themes that emerged from this category: loyalty to Transcendence Megachurch, Transcendence Megachurch enhanced self-esteem, subjective well-being – Transcendence Megachurch encouragement towards life
balance and positivity, and self-efficacy was facilitated and supported by place (Transcendence Megachurch).

5.5.1 Loyalty to Transcendence Megachurch.

Most of the participants felt some kind of connection to the Transcendence Megachurch as they learned about the church through its reputation, participation, and their frequent attendance. The more they became involved with church activities, the more they felt they belonged to this place. For example, Wilma, a 22-year old university student from Indonesia, believes that the popularity of Transcendence Megachurch has been heavily influenced through music, which is recognised internationally. Wilma did not feel the church was unfamiliar to her when attending the first time because she knew about it even before she came to study in Australia.

Transcendence Megachurch’s music has been recognised globally since years ago when I was little. Even though the music goes international, that was not the case with the church itself. So when I moved to Australia and started attending Transcendence Megachurch, it feels like home since my very first attendance because I have been familiar with their songs.

From Wilma’s responses, and as other participants emphasised, the sense of familiarity of the place and the reputation of Transcendence Megachurch have been beneficial in establishing stronger connections for attendees. Therefore, these connections have led to unconscious loyalty for the place. Lalli (1992), in his study on urban-related identity, refers to the term “commitment” as defining one of the place identity dimensions and believes that individual commitments are essential for the stability of self-concept. It can be argued that the feeling of being “suitable to the place” (relevancy), and the comfort produced by the sense of
“familiarity” within Transcendence Megachurch, affects how young members perceive the church and how it encourages their loyalty and further commitment.

Ultimately, Wade and Hynes (2012) argue that it is accurate to rate the loyalty of megachurches loyalty as a “lovement” where “the production of loyal subjects is crucial, with loyalty being directed not merely toward the beliefs and practices embedded in the institution but as a brand” (p. 178). The term lovemark refers to the highest level of brand evolution as when “loyalty beyond reason” is generated (Foster, 2007, p.8).

5.5.2 Transcendence Megachurch enhanced self-esteem.

Transcendence Megachurch has developed a positive reputation among young people like Wilma. This was discussed in the previous section in reference to Wilma’s views when expressing her loyalty to the church. Loyalty is a significant factor, which seems to be taken into account by the younger generation in making choices related to finding compatible communities, in terms of their religious faiths and beliefs or considering the church more as a place for social interaction, where there is freedom to express themselves, socialise, and interact with others within the same age group.

_I know sometimes people my age are shy to tell their friends that she/he is going to church. Transcendence Megachurch’s atmosphere, however, has a really different reputation where I can be proud of going._

In his article, Biddle (2007) mentions that young members of traditional churches tend to be alienated by their peers since they are labelled as boring. Wilma’s response aligns with this notion as she feels more pride when sharing her attendance with her friends at Transcendence Megachurch.
Similar to Wilma, some participants think that a church is not a “cool” place for young people to “hang out” because they believe that Christian teachings are ancient, overly dictating, while being rather contradictory to their contemporary values. Transcendence Megachurch, on the other hand, offers dynamic and current methodology in delivering the message based on different variables including mainly its usage of technological tools in building a more inviting and conducive atmosphere for young people. The lively and “feel-good” vibe of the environment provides a bridge for the younger generations by refuting the common understanding of church (Baird, 2006). Hence, this new perspective boosts their self-esteem and sense of pride when attending the church (Baird, 2006).

Interacting with the Transcendence Megachurch environment, and having attended the church for about three years, Axel could feel a difference within himself. According to Axel, there are improvements within himself that associated to confidence, a better mindset, and positivity.

\[I\ have\ improved\ my\ confidence\ in\ how\ I\ can\ share\ God’s\ message\ towards\ the\ people\ around\ me,\ for\ the\ people\ who\ haven’t\ known\ God\ yet.\ I\ can\ relate\ what\ I\ have\ obtained\ to\ share\ it\ with\ them.\ So\ yeah,\ I\ feel\ more\ confident\ in\ telling\ the\ stories.\]

One teaching that often forwarded to Transcendence Megachurch members is that as Christ-followers, all congregations are encouraged to learn and share the good news about Jesus so that everyone can be saved through Him. In his experience, Axel mentioned that as he started to participate further in the church’s activities, he developed a motivation to reach out for people and take them to Transcendence Megachurch. Being in the same place regularly has brought comfort in him, which after some period of time it developed a stronger attachment,
sense of belonging, and positive determination to contribute further to the church. Aligns with Baker and Robarts (2016) argument that exclusivity established in a particular environment is encouraging a positive evaluation of the individual, the place attachment of Transcendence Megachurch stimulates self-esteem as one function of place identity.

As for Lizzie, Transcendence Megachurch has given her more room to be herself within the church community. Not only does the environment encourage her to express her true identity, but it also gives positive changes to her life.

*I had a bit more confidence because I didn’t really have to focus on impressing anyone with how I wear clothes or simply via aesthetics factors. This was because I felt in my previous experience of the pressure to fit in with the people who are alike.*

The sense of comfort offered by Transcendence Megachurch to attendees has contributed to stronger feelings of attachment to the place. The Transcendence Megachurch environment has given the respondents encouragement to feel better about themselves and take pride in the place (Breakwell, 1986). The situational demands and pressures, which are often expected from more traditional churches, have not been experienced by these young people. Hence, they believed that the freedom of expressing their true selves within the Transcendence Megachurch has helped them in improving some aspects of their lives. The megachurch environment has also allowed them to build positivity, confidence, and a better frame of mind. Being in a positive community has also encouraged these young members to share their positive experiences with other people, particularly with those who are new or less familiar with the Transcendence Megachurch.
5.5.3 Subjective well-being – Transcendence Megachurch encouragement towards life balance and positivity.

This theme refers to the participants’ subjective reflections of the positivity they felt from their interactions, involvements, and relationships with the Transcendence Megachurch, which led to them feeling mentally healthy, happy, well-balanced, and well satisfied with their lives. Most of the participants mentioned about their experiences in giving them a sense of well-being in many aspects of their lives. They experienced the more positive attitudes, feeling of comfort and acceptance of themselves.

After attending Transcendence Megachurch for the past eight months, Lizzie noticed some positive changes in herself. Lizzie mentioned about the positive changes in her mindset as she feels transformed in the way she looks into relationships with others. Now Lizzie is more aware of others and has becomes less self-centred.

At first, I decided to help out in the church to get to know people better which was my only reason but it changed me for the better. I didn’t think giving help would benefit me personally as much.

Ultimately the way I think in general has changed in being more aware of the world around me and globally. This helped me to see beyond my own world basically and grounded me more in life rather than following and comparing myself with other friends who are further down the track in their career life.

Lizzie believed that the Transcendence Megachurch experience has improved her as a person.

Over the years of attending Transcendence Megachurch, I’ve noticed a change in the way I think about my future that has definitely changed. I’m no longer stressed about it; I guess through this church it helped me to have more faith. I’ve also changed in the ways I help out and build compassion for others.
Lizzie mentioned that her perspective about the world and towards herself has changed since she has been attending church regularly. She has been able to personally reflect on her experiences and she believes that the interaction in the church has positively impacted on her emotionally. Previously, Lizzie was struggling to understand the world around her, as she felt insecure and lost due to unexplainable emotions, not knowing how to overcome the confusion and questions in her life. After some time at church and becoming familiar with the atmosphere and Christianity teachings, Lizzie then started learning to accept her worries reasonably through emotional expressions. Lizzie found that her personal Transcendence Megachurch experience has brought her to a deeper understanding of her true self as an individual. Lizzie has also realised that it is acceptable to have and to express emotions when facing different phases in life. For her, it was the atmosphere of the church that brought her into an improved emotional state as she felt God’s presence and unconditional love within the place.

_I’m an emotional person and coming here, I understood what it all meant through faith and learning of the Word. Sometimes where I get sad or angry or just emotional and there are other times I don’t even know where it’s coming from. It does cause confusion not knowing. Also, coming from a corporate world, crying is perceived as weak and you shouldn’t show your ‘weak’ side if you want to survive. So especially when I get sad, I try to hold it or hide from people. However, coming here I learnt that it’s not a sign of weakness at all. It’s a gift from God where I can express myself through emotions. And being angry and grumpy at times is ok and not perceived as a bad thing for a Christian. In addition, after knowing this, during worship I get emotional from deep within. Something I can’t really explain fully but all I know is God loves me for who I am including all my past._
In noticing an emotional impact within himself since attending Transcendence Megachurch, Jason believes that his experiences have provided him with a valuable life lesson derived from Christianity.

*I learn how to love others selflessly as Christ does and the Bible taught me so with the famous verse: John 3:16. One example I learned is to speak slowly but be quick to listen. This is a very useful form of communication. Nowadays, a lot of people love to speak their mind but not many people would want to spend their time and listen. Another example is that I learn to control my anger. I used to get annoyed and angry easily but after I attended Transcendence Megachurch, joined the courses and having church members praying for me week after week, I became a better person.*

Some respondents agreed that the Transcendence Megachurch positive environment is contagious and it has gradually improved the quality of their lives. The excitement, familiarity, positivity of the community and the church environment, as well as the self-esteem, which grew throughout the spatial identification process have stimulated better mindset of the church members. Through experiences and participation, the church members were noticing good mental health, high life satisfaction, and a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. The Transcendence Megachurch environment inspires a view of church significance and conceptuality, derived from experiences and unconscious perceptions from within the church. The sense of affection, stability, and comfort are mentioned by participants as important elements in personal improvements followed by their self-concepts.
5.5.4 Self-efficacy was facilitated and supported by place (Transcendence Megachurch).

Self-efficacy in terms of the participant’s experiences in this study indicates more about the individual’s belief in his or her ability to overcome life challenges, particular tasks, and situations to produce desired outcomes in life. The Transcendence Megachurch environment, according to respondents from participant’s, promoted positivity, confidence, and well-being, thereby assisting and encouraging them to develop self-efficacy.

For Elle, joining Transcendence Megachurch has been more than just attending a church as it has also transformed her emotionally in a positive way. Through the experience of interacting with the church’s environment, Elle has improved her sense of acceptance concerning most of life’s problems.

*The Transcendence experience knows no end. I had a bad experience back then and struggled with the question ‘Who am I?’ ‘What does it mean to be a person?’ and ‘Do I matter?’ After I start attending Transcendence, I now believe that I am here for a reason and God has completed my ‘storybook’ and He will guide me through it if I simply surrender. I have become calmer when I face problems because I believe problems are not from God. I believe there is always a solution to problems and through this season of resolving the problem and/or waiting season, I am on the process to become a better person.*

Regardless of the short period that Aiden has spent at the church, he admitted that he has changed into a better person since attending Transcendence Megachurch.

*Everyone has similar goals or bettering themselves and aligning themselves to Jesus. I have noticed a difference after joining this church. Since the whole*
congregation is generally happy and positive about life, it is quite contagious and puts you in a better frame of mind.

Sharing a similar response, Axel expressed that the whole experience in Transcendence Megachurch has changed him for the better, particularly regarding seeing things more positively. With more optimism and growing self-confidence, Axel feels that he is able to face and overcome any life challenges. Axel believes that the Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric experience and its place have encouraged and facilitated some positive feelings and self-efficacy within him.

I feel that I can improve myself regarding seeing things positively, more like looking at the positive sides and always be grateful of what I’ve done in the past and what’s more to come in the future, to be more expectant for the things that are going to come. So yeah, I feel like I have become more a positive person. I can tell from my sharing experience with my friends; I can look at things differently. Instead of looking at things negatively I can encourage them to always look at the bright side of everything that happens in our lives.

Differently, Shawn feels that the Transcendence Megachurch environment has changed his mindset, and given his life a meaningful purpose. The church as a place has encouraged Shawn to embrace the future with some positive insights from his experiences within the church. The excitement of the Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric environment has promoted enthusiasm in Shawn’s life, and he has become more excited about his future.

Somehow, it [the interaction experience] encourages me to start thinking about my future goals, and how to plan for the future. Some messages make me really
inspired and motivated so that I can do something more challenging for my life. It makes me feel more optimised. I have noticed that my life is getting better now since I attended Transcendence Megachurch.

Figure 5.12 showcases one example of the inspiring and motivating messages that was delivered by the speaker during the preaching. Sometimes, the invited speaker was a guest preacher who delivered the sermon in Transcendence Megachurch headquarter in Sydney. The live conference video technology utilised by the church enabled other locations to view and experience the same message in real-time.

\[\text{Figure 5.12} \text{ A conference video of preaching accompanied by inspiring message was displayed on Transcendence Megachurch screen. December 17, 2016.}\]

In looking at the third level of the place identity construction process, the personal understanding of the church as the built environment has gradually formed the sense of
identification to the place. The existential and unconscious perceptions of Transcendence Megachurch show how these have led to more positive mindsets and emotional improvements within the participants. Religious services and activities within the church such as a social network and set of positive values are considered to be beneficial to physical and mental health (Helliker, 2005). Since attending the church, participants in this study believe that the ability to overcome life challenges and “identity crises” has helped them. This is despite many of them, as young people, living in Sydney and facing challenges as local residents and international students because they are from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The participants’ different perspectives underline how Transcendence Megachurch has become a fundamental aspect of their lives, which has led to conceptuality, significance, and informant aspects of this church with its particular place identity.

5.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the findings of young people’s experiences in the Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric design semiotics from collected data, which includes semi-structured interviews, participant journal records, and the researcher’s site observation notes. The findings are presented in three main categories with four themes under each category respectively, as shown in Table 5.1 provided in Section 5.2.

In summary, the three levels of place identity phases represented by each category differentiate the degree of intensity of an individual relationship with Transcendence Megachurch as a place of interaction. The first level serves as the initial contact between the respondents and the place (Transcendence Megachurch). It refers to the first-time experiences that are often characterised by amusement of the atmosphere, advancement of technological support, and church events delivery, as the common features of a megachurch. The second level represents a deeper engagement between the respondents and Transcendence
Megachurch as participants started to feel more familiar with the environment through its community and various activities. Finally, the last and highest level depicts the deepest relationship between respondents and Transcendence Megachurch. In this phase, the church was perceived to be an accommodating place as it encourages positive impacts and well-being for the respondents. With a stronger attachment to Transcendence Megachurch, as developed within the three levels, the respondents have gradually adapted their identification to the place and therefore place identity at the Transcendence Megachurch.

Based on Canter’s (1997) four facets of place, the findings indicate that there are three informing factors of place identity: materiality forms in the aspect of design, activities in the scale of interaction and functional differentiation, and conception in the place objectives. These three informing factors of place identity within the Transcendence Megachurch are further discussed in the next chapter.
6.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the discussion of the research findings from this study. The current study’s findings have revealed three place identity informing factors (as adapted from Canter’s (1997) four facets of place) from the three-level place identity processes in Transcendence Megachurch. The chapter begins with a brief introduction to the adapted model employed for this research project that is illustrated in a diagram. The chapter then discusses the three informing factors of Transcendence Megachurch place identity in separate sections, where each outlines two subthemes. The informing aspects include: (1) spatial experience encountered through multi-sensory and materiality exposure to atmospheric design features in Transcendence Megachurch; (2) activities and interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s experience with the place; and (3) conceptuality and significance of Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s place identity. Each section begins with a table that shows the connections between the categories, themes, and vignettes of the discussion using a colour coding system. The chapter concludes with a summary of the discussion of the research study.

6.2 Introduction

The study’s findings have been classified into three levels of the place identification process (Lalli, 1992) and the themes are categorised based on the characteristics and the depth of connection between the respondents and a Transcendence Megachurch as a built environment. Figure 3.2 illustrates how the adapted model, used in this study, and the
connections between categories, themes, and the place identity informing factors as influential factors of place identity development of young people within the Transcendence Megachurch spatial environment. As previously discussed in Chapter 3, the four facets of place (Canter, 1997) have been examined as three informing factors in Transcendence Megachurch place identity.

Figure 3.2 Place identity construction process and informing factors in Transcendence Megachurch case study

The forthcoming sections in this chapter (part 6.3, 6.4, and 6.5) will utilise tables to locate the connections between categories, themes, and the vignettes used for discussion. The tables (6.1, 6.2, and 6.3) employ colour coding to show the links between the emerged themes from
the findings and the subvignettes. Each colour represents the classification of the subvignettes and how they relate to the four themes in each level of Transcendence Megachurch place identity development process.

6.3 Spatial Experience Encountered Through Multi-sensory and Materiality Exposure to Atmospheric Design Features in Transcendence Megachurch

The first place identity informing factor refers to the spatial environment experience, that is related to the materiality exposure and physical features in Transcendence Megachurch. This informing factor recognises the technical and operational aspects that were executed in the services and events run in the church that affected the respondents’ experiences. This vignette is related to the first level of place identity: the behavioural and sensory experience at Transcendence Megachurch.

As outlined in Chapter 3 Section 3.5.1, the first level of the place identity development process situates the place identity formation, in regards to multi-sensory experiences of young people within Transcendence Megachurch, as a new environment. Four themes that have emerged under this category include:

1) Recognition of atmospheric design features at Transcendence Megachurch
2) Transcendence Megachurch distinctiveness compared to the more conventional churches
3) Transcendence Megachurch was perceived as a contextually relevant environment
4) Place and event satisfaction at Transcendence Megachurch

The themes revealed how the spatial environment and experiences were encountered through the multi-sensory elements and features that enhance the overall atmosphere of Transcendence Megachurch. This notion used as a discussion vignette mainly focused on
looking at the church as an environment. There are two subsections that arise under this discussion point, which will be discussed in Section 6.3.1: Transcendence Megachurch is perceived as a unique and ecstatic experience by young people; and in Section 6.3.2: Transcendence Megachurch environment culturally aligns with young people and their preferences for spirituality.

Table 6.1 presents the correlation between the first level of the place identity construction processes, the behavioural and sensory experience in Transcendence Megachurch, the themes emerged under the category, and the first vignette used in the discussion: spatial experience encountered through multi-sensory and materiality exposure to atmospheric design features in Transcendence Megachurch.

Table 6.1
*The Correlation between Discussion Vignettes 6.3 with the Categories and Themes from the Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes from findings</th>
<th>Vignettes used for discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural and sensory experience at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>• Recognition of atmospheric design features at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>6.3 Spatial experience encountered through multi-sensory and materiality exposure to atmospheric design features in Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transcendence Megachurch distinctiveness compared to the more conventional churches</td>
<td>6.3.1 Transcendence Megachurch is perceived as a unique and ecstatic experience by young people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Transcendence Megachurch was perceived as a contextually relevant environment</td>
<td>6.3.2 Transcendence Megachurch environment culturally aligns with young people and their preferences for spirituality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Place and event satisfaction at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Spatial knowledge, in this particular Transcendence Megachurch, created experiences offering not only a sense of familiarity, but also individual breakthroughs to possibilities of excitement, joy, and affection. The atmospheric design semiotics experience attached to the multi-sensory aspect of the environment adjusts the mood of individuals in a particular setting to satisfy their feelings. Although the spatial experiences have close links to materiality, it embraces a culture of impression, affecting the church members’ perceptions, and it also enhances the members’ values, and evokes emotions. The atmosphere within the Transcendence Megachurch environment involves such multi-sensory aspects, and offers a mode of expression to the public (Richardson, 2017). Such experiences involve the defined church surroundings, which are generated from the competent way of communicating the biblical message dynamically. More importantly, Transcendence Megachurches propose inclusive engagement through communication. The findings of the current study also confirms that communication approaches within a Transcendence Megachurch is essential in connecting with young people (Davis & Yip, 2004).

Megachurches also reside on the semiotics approach that includes both the multi-sensory and material exposures in making connections. Such approaches assists in bringing out the uniqueness of a religious experience, especially in young people, while it also matches their lifestyles and preferences. Thus, to influence the perceptions of potential followers, megachurches adopt sensory cues. One example of this is the way megachurches deliver their live worshipping practices, which is very similar to the genre of popular music that young people like. In addition to this music genre, the deliverance of the service and the use of technology (concert-type performances) correspond to contemporary culture and lifestyle of young people.

Edensor (2015) purports that to amass material gains, Transcendence Megachurches use the spatial experience as a branding tool. Now that the religion in the West, mostly follow
Pentecostalism has shifted from traditional norms to consumer choice and lifestyle (Delaney, 2005), megachurches integrate the contemporary approach in their atmospheric environment to attract younger members. Likewise, Transcendence Megachurches build a unique atmosphere and environment to promote the church activities and its popularity among young people. Richardson (2017) contends that the megachurches like the Transcendence Megachurch has a profound influence on multi-sensory and materiality exposures. These experiences are suggested to emanate from an adoption of contemporary Christianity and some of the traditional measures of a conventional spiritual experience. The combination of traditional teaching from Christianity and the popular culture fuses the contemporary ways in delivering the biblical messages (Hicks, 2012). From this current study, young people found multi-sensory and material exposures within the church’s spatial setting as distinctive features, which differentiates Transcendence Megachurch from the other churches.

In the context of urban-related identity, Lalli (1992) argues that place identity dimensions include an “external evaluation”, which contains an evaluative comparison between one place and another in regards to their uniqueness and characteristics. It is another aspect of a new experience, as the participants of this study mentioned to influence their interaction with the Transcendence Megachurch as the built environment. The design aspect of Transcendence Megachurch and the physical characteristics of the setting is a central aspect that was analysed to identify place identity informing factors in this section. Based on the multi-sensory and materiality aspects of Transcendence Megachurch in the findings, there are two subvignettes identified and discussed in the upcoming sub-sections.
6.3.1 Transcendence Megachurch is perceived as a unique and ecstatic experience by young people.

A study conducted in the University of Washington found that megachurches worshipping services can trigger the “feeling of transcendence and changes to brain chemistry – a spiritual ‘high’ that keeps congregants coming back for more” (Lisee, 2012, para. 1). Corcoran (2012, as cited in Lisee, 2012) argues the feelings that occur in the megachurches are perceived as a divine experience, rather than merely euphoria because of the church’s uniqueness. The uniqueness and delighting aspect of the Transcendence Megachurch has been described to have the ability to develop the different approaches adopted for worship (Porter, 2018). The integration of a contemporary way of doing things is justified from its broader connection to the secular world (Harkness, 2010). Harkness (2010) also states that the megachurch brings out the kind of uniqueness that urge the young people to feel interested in joining. The atmosphere in the megachurch sparks excitement with distinctive incorporated features such as contemporary music and performances, a lively and casual vibes from an interactive services. In order to create strong positive emotional experiences (Lisee, 2012), new approaches are adopted by Transcendence Megachurches, which are in alignment to cultures of contemporary societies, which also meets the needs and preferences from material attributes.

As mentioned by the participants Axel, Darrel, and Lizzie, the sophistication of the technological support played a big part in the Transcendence Megachurch deliverance. The ecstatic experience, attracted the interest of young people as they mentioned the features of modern tools, high quality musical equipment, and the professional standards similar to secular concerts and live music performances (see Figure 5.3 and Figure 5.5 in section 5.3.1, and Figure 5.7 in section 5.3.2 of Chapter 5). The findings have confirmed Goh’s (2008) description of how megachurches operate their services by creating contemporary vibe and
atmosphere to align with younger generation’s preferences of spirituality. Borrowing the words by Ingalls (2018), it is that “through audiovisual worship media experiences on small personal screens and large projection screens in church, conference, and concert settings, once-separate aural and visual strands of evangelical devotion are drawn together into a powerful experiential whole” (p. 172). As Abraham (2018) suggests, the live worshipping practices in megachurches encourage pop entertainment as a form of worship to attract a broader audience to the church. The author further adds that “the subjective inner states are cultivated through the use of the highest forms of technology and craftsmanship the secular culture industry can offer” (Abraham, 2018, p. 18). This approach resonates with younger people and contemporary society who usually live in big cities, such as Sydney since the church promotes a holistic personal form of religion (Abraham, 2018) to gain “large, young, and growing” followers (Charboneau, 2015, para. 21).

Ellingson (2016) argues that modern media, adopted by the megachurches, involves elements of current technologies and high creativity, which also enhances the leadership and charisma of individuals who run the services and events. These interactive worshipping practices in a megachurch setting grow the interests of young members in embracing the culture of Christian music and in adopting a secular approach to religion. The participants embraced the liberty of the worshipping ritual in the Transcendence Megachurch, which allows them to move and dance in accordance to the live worship music (see Figure 5.3 in section 5.3.1 and Figure 5.7 in section 5.3.2 of Chapter 5). This freedom of expression gives them an opportunity, which young people seem unable to find when attending conventional churches, as Darrel mentioned the atmosphere within the Transcendence Megachurch supported him to genuinely express himself.

The new experience of a secular-based worship style is meant to recruit new youthful generations into megachurches. The style of adopting such pop culture for the megachurches
is influenced by the interior design. The visual aesthetics and large spaces within this setting, also enhance the overall atmosphere during the events and activities. Transcendence Megachurch has a dark ceiling and side walls, to emphasise on the lighting in the worship performances, while creating contrast and less distraction from any interior features. Latinovic (2016) suggests, the worship in the megachurch environment, promotes and engages rock concert spiritual sessions, which rely heavily on current technology on delivering secular music genre while attracting the interest of young people. Participants in this study also mentioned similar experiences as Aiden believed the music genre supported by high technology equipment within the church’s live worshipping music targeted an audience of younger people. Thus, an event of worship, conferences or any other activity linked to the the church engaging with popular culture created a more conducive atmosphere and more room for integrating new technological advents from the secular world to the space of spiritual worship.

Lizzie highlighted cultural adaptation as an important factor that makes young people feel more familiar, comfortable, and able to maintain their focus to the church service. From the findings, Aiden and Mable agree that the secular-alike experience offered in the Transcendence Megachurch provides a sense of comfort in establishing connections between young people. Kyle commented on how the more conventional churches are different in embracing traditional norms and values, and they are quite opposite to the Transcendence Megachurch approach. The atmospheric design semiotics, identified from the physical traits within the spatial setting in Transcendence Megachurch. It also drives attention to the second level of the place identity development process as experienced by young people in this study, under the empathetic and subjective reconstruction of the church, as will be discussed in Section 6.4 later.
In regards to Transcendence Megachurch spatial experience and atmospheric design features exposure, male and female participants have shown different character in illustrating their experiences. The male participants were more focused on the technical aspects of the environment, and they tend to examine the spatial elements literally. In their responses, Darrel, Jason, Axel, and Aiden highlighted the technology utilised by Transcendence Megachurch in delivering its services. It includes the use of screens, digital format of communication, videos, and sound systems. As opposed to the males, the female participants’ responses were described based on their feelings about the church’s experience. Some females were using metaphor to illustrate what they have experienced emotionally. For instance, Lizzie used “city night market vibe” to describe the ambience of Transcendence Megachurch during the Sunday service. Another example was when Melody used a metaphor of “angel wings” when she recalled the church’s atmosphere during one of the services at church.

6.3.2 Transcendence Megachurch environment culturally aligns with young people and their preferences for spirituality.

The Transcendence Megachurch expands its practices by targetting the younger population. Guest (2017) notes that a contemporary consideration for the megachurch is fueled by an obsession and need to influence, earn recognition, and attract new members. The “search orientation” campaign the megachurches adopt disregards pursuance of mature and the old-religious stable followers, which potentially convinces young people to join the church, whom in need or search of an identity (Zwart, 2004). Zwart (2004) states that megachurches have made a significant effort to attract younger people to join the church and become regular members. A response from Mable also stresses how worshipping in a dark environment has helped her to focus to God while finding herself immersed in a peaceful atmosphere. The privacy generated from the ambience that was created by Transcendence
Megachurch also reflects the characteristic of contemporary society, in which individuals seek a place that could free them from life pressures and social expectations. This way of worship also indicates a personal isolation, which has been forwarded by Putnam (2000) as part of the current society’s issue. Therefore, the church builds its identity that resonates with the characteristics and needs of contemporary society.

With a growth of more young people within the broader population, in many other countries like the USA, South Korea, Indonesia (Niemandt & Lee, 2015; Yip & Hoon, 2016; Zwartz, 2004) and Australia, megachurches are motivated to target younger generations so as to keep their religious preaching and practices relevant to contemporary Christianity (Thumma & Bird, 2015). Participants in this study commented on how the Transcendence Megachurch environment is relevant for younger people like them, as it offers current sophistication aligning to the digital era and millennial generations (Charboneau, 2015; Simmons, 2011b). Megachurches offer an experiential religious form that sought by the younger generations and families, which is not found in traditional churches.

The positive experience expressed by Kyle as he compares the differences between the Transcendence Megachurch approach and churches in Korea indicates that the environment and ambience align with contemporary culture and expectations. Not only was he impressed by the Pentecostal worship practices, but at the same time, it also confirms that the religious emotions of the late modern societies are expected to be taken seriously. There was a desire for the young generations to be heard and be able to express their emotions in the religious sphere. This was the fundamental emotional tensions (Riis & Woodhead, 2010, p. 157) between the religious authority and the church members when the individuals’ feelings are defined by power, norms, and traditions. The imbalance in dialectics occurs because there is a difference in the conventional approach that has always been practised regardless of the shifts...
in contemporary society. Consequently, more and more young people are attracted to megachurch, in which they could freely express themselves.

From this current study and as Perales and Bouma (2018) contend, megachurches align to younger generations while leading in granting freedom of expression and secular approaches to music incorporation in the worship sessions. The Transcendence Megachurch embraced a “secular” culture production (Abraham, 2018, p. 2) and standardised performances through refined technologies (Sanders, 2016) to entice more young people into joining and being active in the church. The megachurches technologies here refer to the professional equipment and technologies that are used for supporting the live worshipping sessions, as in the lighting arrangement, sound systems, and large screens that enhance the religious experiences at church (see Figure 5.8 and Figure 5.9 in section 5.3.3 of Chapter 5).

Sanders (2016) refers to younger generations who are more apt to secular cultures, that have more openings, opportunities, and a platform to deliver and enjoy music and advance their religious experiences. In her comments about the megachurches’ execution strategy of its communication, Pryor (2005) points out that “the music and slogans would have to be convincing, because to their credit, young people smell lameness like dogs smell fear” (para. 14). The findings have shown that young people love the fact that they can sing, dance, enjoy great music, and throw their hands in the air in the church live worshipping sessions. Baird (2016) concurs on such experiences with young people in the church where “there is an energy and buzz to most of the services that are totally lacking from most traditional churches” (para. 14). Participants in this study also describe similar enthusiasm in the worshipping moments that providing excitement, comfort, and freedom of expression however also the privacy in a “clubbing-like” (Lizzie, Mable, Aiden, Darrel, and Kyle) atmosphere. The vibe offered by megachurches’ environment was tuned to what young generations find and experience outside the realm of religious belief.
The Pentecostal megachurches have realised a form of sincerity in the aspect of a secular culture as integrated to their worship style in church services and which is more attractive to current young generation. As highlighted from the participants in this study, the atmosphere in the church is very relevant for younger people and it shows that the Transcendence Megachurch is a preferred spiritual choice for many young people (Charboneau, 2015; Hicks, 2012). Wade (2016) contends that megachurches also attempt to establish stronger bonds through a process of gradually weaving the seeker into the church’s fabric. Through their interaction and experiences, the participants (Lizzie, Kyle, Elle, Darrel, and Mable) in this study also had more solid relationship with the church with their positive experiences as compared to the other churches they attended previously. As pointed out by David and Moody (2015), the Australian spiritual culture was emanated from megachurches, which then incorporated a modernised era to help young people to transition to adults.

Young people’s active contribution to megachurches practices and the ways they engage, appreciate, and interact within the church atmosphere (live worshipping practices, church conferences, events and weekly services) has been crucial for megachurches’ growth and increasing popularity from a unique profile and image of religious experience in the current society. Conner (2017) suggests this contemporary spiritual experience targets young people to incorporate distinct doctrinal, denominational, linguistic-cultural, socioeconomic, and branding differences. Megachurches like the Transcendence Megachurch in this study “have made use of contemporary popular music forms and performance techniques, and their songs and performance styles are marketed to other churches in Australia and internationally” (McIntyre, 2007, as cited in Jennings, 2014, p. 216). Wilma, a participant in this study, from Indonesia, mentioned that she has been knowing the Transcendence Megachurch before living in Australia because of its popularity and reputation worldwide. People connect with
Christians from all over the world through music and they form a sense of belonging, and identity through singing similar and familiar songs (Joseph, 2018).

From the cultural perspective, the ethnicity and race of the participants have shown remarkable distinction on their views. Respondents who came from the more conservative nations tend to perceive Transcendence Megachurch environment as a novel place. For instance, Kyle who was born and raised in Korea believed that it may not be appropriate to adopt and deliver informal service like Transcendence Megachurch in Korea. It is because the social norms and hierarchy in Korea are essential in any religious practices. Older people should always be respected and young people are expected to obey and hold back their emotional expressions. Similar outlook was expressed by Shawn, a Japanese worker who have never experienced a church’s atmosphere like Transcendence Megachurch. The typical church services in Korea and Japan is formal and highly structured, means there is little room for liberty and personal expression.

Another Asian country like Indonesia, however, appear not to be as contrast. The Western ideals and modernity influences on Christianity religious practices have been contracted in Indonesian contemporary Christian churches (Yip & Hoon, 2016). Many of those megachurches are using worship music composed by western megachurches labels, which sang in English. The familiarity of the songs and culture has assisted the transition phase of the members from Indonesian churches to Transcendence Megachurch Australia, particularly those who were study in Sydney like Axel and Wilma. Formed in 1998, the Transcendence Megachurch worship band has started to promote its songs internationally (Riches & Wagner, 2012). On the other hand, the Australian respondents who have Asian descendants like Lizzie (Korean Australian) and Melody (Malaysian Chinese) situated themselves in between Eastern and Western cultures, with the more fluid acculturation. They
were not as liberty as the Australians (such as James, Darrel, and Aiden), but also were not as conservative as the Asian born participants (particularly Kyle and Shawn).

The religious experiences offered in Transcendence Megachurch have also built positive impressions in particularly, among its first-time attendees. Mable, another participant in this study, expressed her amusement when referring to her first experience attending the Transcendence Megachurch. From one unforgettable and exciting visit to the church, Mable believes it was a turning point for her in making a further commitment to the church. As a seeker-type of megachurch, the Transcendence Megachurch also designs its worship for seeker’s satisfaction. The activities incorporate secular approach and lifestyle, which for Aiden was easy to understand and more meaningful for younger generations, making them easy to attend with no obligation required. Tennent (2010) concurs it makes them committed to “impacting the culture by portraying Christianity as useful, relevant, and user-friendly” (p. 29). The seekers who join the church are encouraged to represent the church as a good Christian community that has a positive contribution for the contemporary society.

6.4 Activities and Interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as the Influences on Young People’s Experience with the Place

The second informing factor of the Transcendence Megachurch place identity refers to the interactions and engagement occurring within the spatial environment. According to Norris (2004), a site of engagement is a combination of material place, time, and history that facilitates interaction in establishing contextual meaning. This informing factor recognises the relational aspects between Transcendence Megachurch and young people in all activities that affect their experiences. It includes any actions involved in the interaction with the church atmosphere, as a place, and all social activities that occur within the environment. This
vignette is related to the second level of place identity: Empathetic and subjective reconstruction at Transcendence Megachurch.

Under this category and in relevance to the themes emerged from the findings, the discussion under this vignette draws on activities and interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as an influence on young people’s experience with the place. Four themes that emerged under this category are:

1) Social acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch
2) Revisits/continuity of attendance – Transcendence Megachurch environment constancy formed through repeated experiences
3) Sense of belonging was preceded by site of engagement within Transcendence Megachurch
4) Group development established through togetherness and activities within Transcendence Megachurch

The themes revealed how the site of engagement were established through the individual interactions with the atmosphere of the Transcendence Megachurch and the social activities within the church community. There are two subsections under this discussion, in Section: 6.4.1 : sense of acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch – positive motivation towards continuity of attendance and further involvement; and in Section 6.4.2 : Transcendence Megachurch community role in social development and strengthening the bond to the church.

Table 6.2 presents the correlation between the second level of the place identity construction process, the empathetic and subjective reconstruction at Transcendence Megachurch, the themes emerged under the category and the next vignette used in the discussion: activities and interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s experience with the place.
Table 6.2
The Correlation between Discussion Vignettes 6.4 with the Categories and Themes from the Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes from findings</th>
<th>Vignettes used for discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2nd level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic and subjective reconstruction at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>• Social acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>6.4 Activities and interactions within Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s experience with the place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Revisits/continuity of attendance – Transcendence Megachurch environment constancy formed through repeated experiences</td>
<td>6.4.1 Sense of acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch – positive motivation towards continuity of attendance and further involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Sense of belonging was preceded by site of engagement within Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>6.4.2 Transcendence Megachurch community role in social development and strengthening the bond to the church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Group development established through togetherness and activities within Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Singles functions organised by the churches attract young people seeking the usual meaning of a spiritual encounter in their lives. The activities of these sessions grow to a point that young people demand the megachurch as a place to satisfy their spiritual needs. In sharing his experience about the Transcendence Megachurch, Axel identifies his leadership skills from the activities and volunteering opportunities in allowing him to interact with others. In this context, the broader interactions initiated by the church leadership promotes
subjective construction in helping young people gain more interest in spiritual growth. Yip and Hoon (2016) draw upon the symbolism of the megachurch, whereby they suggest it enhances place identity, for young people, closer to cultural and modernisation cues that define contemporary society. Lizzie points out that the Transcendence Megachurch facilitates the interactions among the attendees by providing a community lounge to mingle at the church, in between the services. She believes that the facility has helped people connect with each other and build a sense of community, as part of their religious activity.

The Transcendence Megachurch invest more efforts in incorporating the lifestyles of the young in the church, which also enhances their experience with place as based on equity. The concept of equity in this context, involves a form of religious life that incorporates the modern attributes to Christianity teaching for all members. The megachurch as an organisation, adapts and changes over time to ensure the young generation has an equal opportunity of acknowledgement in the church. In response to this equality, Kyle appreciates how the Transcendence Megachurch environment encourages a two-way communication where everyone in the church is welcome to interact with the preacher regardless of their age.

Conner (2017) explains the music offered in the church gives young people more opportunities to develop and practice rock music. This practice has been consistent in attracting many other young peers to join the church. The freedom of using contemporary music within the church services exposes young people to develop a place identity, while also promotes an inner realisation of the young talents and spiritual capabilities (Craddock, 2017). Within this practice, Transcendence Megachurches operate for attracting massive followers and more young people. Norris (2011) contends that such experiences encourage young people to develop and enact their identity, from both a spiritual and environmental exposure. Thus from the findings of this study, it can be argued that megachurches are a potential driver in establishing young people’s aspirations and ambitions (Norris, 2011). In the context of this
study, the Transcendence Megachurch as a place, encourages those personal qualities from the young individuals, in relation to their interactions with the place.

6.4.1 Sense of acceptance at Transcendence Megachurch – positive motivation towards continuity of attendance and further involvement.

The sense of acceptance in megachurches is rooted in elements of equity, whether one is saved or merely a “searcher” for spiritual nourishment (Bartolini, MacKian, & Pile, 2017). Baker and Robards (2016) argue that the connection young people have with the church is developed from a feeling that the megachurch offers a sense of belonging and encourages solidarity among the congregations. The first impression of a positive impact towards the young, is that they get unconditional acceptance in the megachurches. Due to the personal history of excommunication from a former church, in which their needs were not met (Hong, 2003), the Transcendence Megachurch takes an opportunity to welcome a new seeker soul to the congregation. Young people have talents, which get incorporated into church sessions. The interests for music, communication, and leadership skills are some of the talents that are utilised within the church activities, events, and services. In his study, Craddock (2017) found that there is great potential from the young people, which can be explored through training, and that growth can be maintained and sustained over time. The author also argues that the training in church is beneficial for young people’s personal spiritual growth. Axel admitted that he develops communication and leadership skills from his involvement in church social activities such as joining a cell group and the welcoming committee for the Indonesian community at church. Participants with international backgrounds (Elle, Shawn, and Kyle) also commented on how they were warmly welcomed at the Transcendence Megachurch on their first visit. When attending the church, Shawn and Darrel mentioned how the atmosphere of the church allows the communication and interactions flow naturally. It was also one main
reason for them to join the church and become regulars. Thus, this feeling of social acceptance encourages continuity, leads to the familiarity of the place, and generates stronger bonding to the Transcendence Megachurch.

Young people’s interest and talent in music was taken into consideration to provide them with a meaningful purpose and immersion with the atmospheric space and experience in the church (Craddock, 2017). Craddock (2017) further argues that the outward nature of megachurches contributes to how young people can explore their interests in music, while expressing their talents, emotions, and convictions in building a strong sense of identity and belonging. The foundation of megachurch’s sincerity works on incorporating a modernized culture, while the noble aspect grows with an attitude to promote inclusivity among young people. Such traits position the Transcendence Megachurch as a knowledge innovative environment where young people can experience site of engagement and place attachment, that facilitate place identity. Thus, worship in the megachurch not only authorises spiritual dynamics for young people, but it also targets to motivate them as young “elites” to join the church in pursuance of spiritual nourishment.

Synan and Yong (2017) agree upon the urgency to maintain a continuous attendance at the church within a secular environment. The objective is always to incorporate more young members to church while enhancing their spiritual nourishment and holiness (Synan & Yong, 2017). Participants in this study (Elle and Jason) felt welcomed as newcomers regardless of their cultural background, past history, or socio-economic status. The church atmosphere was perceived as offering the “right formula” for the younger generations to establish an affiliation with the Transcendence Megachurch.

From Breakwell’s (1986) view as expounded from the identity theory model, there are many motivational and various factors in promoting continuity. In megachurches, continuity can be regarded as a function for taking the initiative to change a church to a place of
endurance for young members to feel at home (Mandes & Sadłoń, 2018). The Transcendence Megachurch therefore, provides an avenue, which is solely interactive and considerate of one another as congregations in Christianity. The positive impressions from the social acceptance motivated the participants (Kyle, Axel, and Darrel) to get involved with more activities offered by the church. Axel mentions that the social interaction in the Transcendence Megachurch has transformed him, for the better, through different activities. Through the continuation of attendance, the young members in this study became familiar with the church environment as they started to develop sentiments of being at home. Melody and Mable confirmed a sense of acceptance and familiarity making them feel more connected and attached to the church with a “homey” feeling, or the feeling of being at home. Lizzie also believed that a stronger feeling of attachment grew after she attended the services casually for about a year or two. Therefore, the bonds are formed after the interactions become stronger as more time is spent in the same place (Lewicka, 2011, as cited in Davis, 2016).

6.4.2 Transcendence Megachurch community role in social development and strengthening the bond to the church.

Megachurches offer much support to social development through their huge community composed of diverse ethnic groups. Ferrier (2005) argues that one apparent promise of megachurches is the community offered since it gives people the opportunity to meet others. Hepburn (2017) asserts the church brings bonding in the community through the compassion and by sharing the love of Christ. Norris (2011) points out that one of the approaches on social development in a megachurch, is that the church programs are tailored to everyday survival for every single member. Members are also guided to become good Christians from the centred discussions in the services. Moreover, the charismatic preachers
also emphasise that it is impossible to keep spiritual principles while failing to balance issues of life, such as personal relationships with family and community.

Transcendence Megachurch encourages its members to unite as a church community, in living a life with Christian values as taught in the Bible. Bosch (1991) emphasises that group development within the church is established as “salvation does not happen to isolated individuals” (p. 144). Most participants in the study admit that the Transcendence Megachurch’s community has played a vital role in building social skills, which later transform them in becoming the fervent members of the church community. According to Marcouyeux and Fleury-Bahi (2011) the social meanings of places “emerge and evolve through interactions between individuals, social groups, and their environment” (p. 345). Social meanings are argued as influential factors to place identification (Marcouyeux & Fleury-Bahi, 2011). Darrel mentioned how the community at church has enhanced his religious experiences. He has built a stronger attachment to the church since he joined a small group from similar “stage of life” (Connell, 2005, p. 324), with whom they spend time inside and outside the church. Delaney (2005) argues that peers have played an important role in church recruitment, since taking examples from parents is faded. Most Christian families, like Darrel’s, have a tradition for parents and their children to attend a church together as a family. However, it was the peers within a “same-age” community that influenced him to get more involved with the church while having friends to share various activities together. Putnam (2000) and Ferrier (2005) agree that the current society is struggling with personal isolation and that social institution provide a sense of belonging to individuals. The participants felt more attached to the Transcendence Megachurch within an environment that provided them a sense of community within a good Christian life. The church becomes more meaningful for the participants since they identified themselves as active members of the congregations.
Bonding with the Transcendence Megachurch is widely experienced by young people. Young members, as suggested by the participants (Darrel, Aiden, and Mable), had an opportunity to freely express their ideas, beliefs, and live within a contemporary and secular lifestyle. The church membership and social interaction was thus, a platform to develop further social meanings and identity. The church capitalises on social services to benefit the society at large however, offer more insights for young members in convincing them to become part of a megachurch family. Such initiatives by the church include cell groups, conferences, volunteering opportunities for events, or more casual social interaction in knowing other church members before or after the services. Through the existence of small groups in the Transcendence Megachurch, people are transitioning from passive crowds to more active contributors (Connell, 2005). Therefore, further involvement based on interests and passion is encouraged and include participation in different church activities from volunteering in the usher team, to creative design, or part of the choir for the services.

Transcendence Megachurch does not only rely on music and the sermon to reach and bond with its members and the broader society as it invests in excellently executed spiritual marketing. Axel notes the importance of digital marketing in the Transcendence Megachurch a strength to the church growth with new members. According to Aiden, the Transcendence Megachurch offers opportunities to connect to each other through technological support. News broadcasted in services, activities and events opportunities, and testimonies from other members are part of such technological access in meeting the needs of church members and in encouraging further participation. In this sense, the church facilities promote social meanings and engagement for many members who form “place dependence” and place attachment as sub-dimensions of place identity. According to Stokols and Shumaker (1981) the concept of place dependence is associated with the quality of place both physically and socially when compared to the resources provided in other places. Hernandez, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, and
Hess (2007) believe that these sub-dimensions contribute and facilitate the place identity. In her responses, Lizzie indicates that the Transcendence Megachurch as a religious place has the ability to accommodate the personal needs of the members. She mentions that the church provides different activities, facilities and events for everyone’s religious and personal growth from cell groups, conferences, bible college, to a welcome booth for informal mingles (Connell, 2005). Lizzie relates to her experiences in strengthening a bond to the church with more social development being part of the church community.

The whole activities offered in Transcendence Megachurch as above mentioned refer to Collective Effervescent theory by Emile Durkheim as previously discussed in Chapter 2 section 2.4. Olaveson (2001) mentioned that collective effervescent is at root of an affective phenomenon since it involves “intense emotional surge” and excitement (p. 107), which refers to the atmospheric design features and spatial experience at Transcendence Megachurch discussed above in point 6.3.1. Durkheim believes that religion is the source of everything social (Durkheim, 1899, as cited in Olaveson, 2001). In his book entitled *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim presented a symbolic model by which the society’s knowledge inevitably expressed as collective representations through rituals as it provides strength and progressively giving society cohesion. He suggests that the religious activities form and unify the society, in this case the Transcendence Megachurch community. As a contemporary Christian church, Transcendence has differentiate its approach whereby the current society are taken into account and culturally assimilated to the religious practices. Through his prognostication, Durkheim even predicted that religion would take some form because “all religions are social phenomena” and they are “immortal” as the creative process lies within the society and is perpetual (Pickering, 2014, p. 476). He believes that the new forms would be rational, have to admit freedom of thought, the right of criticism and of individual initiative (Durkheim, 1897, as cited in Spaulding & Simpson, 2002).
Transcendence Megachurch has three social characteristics of the new form of religion as identified by Durkheim. First, Transcendence Megachurch represents the ‘mega’ congregation while expresses the unity of society and its most sacred values through contemporary approach. Second, Transcendence Megachurch holds regular services at church where individuals are given the opportunity of “affirming the values of society by some ritualistic expression” while providing “inspiration and new insight into social life” (Pickering, 2014, p. 478). The activities demonstrate the contemporary social expression, which at the same time reflects the cultural integration of the community. Third, the new form of religion in Transcendence Megachurch contains some references to what Durkheim labelled as “objective knowledge” about personal and social worlds in which people live. This explains why the participants believe that the experience and “message” delivered in Transcendence Megachurch made sense to them and easier to understand. The approach was felt to be more rational, logical, and reasonable as the degree of knowledge increasingly control this aspect of Christianity.

6.5 Conceptuality and Significance of Transcendence Megachurch as the Influences on Young People’s Place Identity

The third informing factor of the Transcendence Megachurch place identity refers to the significance and conceptual meanings that gradually established from the previous phases. This informing factor identifies the importance and impacts of the relationship formed between the Transcendence Megachurch and young people from all of their experiences. These concepts resonate with respondents’ personal experiences, views, knowledge, memories, and emotional feelings towards the Transcendence Megachurch. This vignette is related to the third and deepest level of place identity: the existential and unconscious perception of Transcendence Megachurch.
Under this category and in relevance to the themes examined in the findings, this section presents a discussion on the influences on young people’s Transcendence Megachurch experience with place identity. Four themes that have emerged under this category are:

1) *Loyalty to Transcendence Megachurch.*

2) *Transcendence Megachurch enhanced self-esteem.*

3) *Subjective well-being – Transcendence Megachurch encouragement towards life balance and positivity.*

4) *Self-efficacy was facilitated and supported by place (Transcendence Megachurch).*

The themes revealed how the Transcendence Megachurch environment and the values of the church have informed the participants’ personal interactions and relationship within the place in influencing their place identity. There are two subsections that arise under this discussion point, which will be discussed in Section 6.5.1: place attachment encourages individual confidence, sense of worthiness, and devotion to Transcendence Megachurch; and in Section 6.5.2: stability, sense of freedom, and affection offered in Transcendence Megachurch construct young people’s place identity.

Table 6.3 presents the correlation between the third level of place identity construction process, the existential and unconscious perception of Transcendence Megachurch, the themes emerged under the category and the next vignette used in the discussion: conceptuality and significance of Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s place identity.

The Transcendence Megachurch, like any other big church promotes uniqueness through being mega and distinctiveness. The unique aspect of the church is that it attracts a growing membership, which dominates the church at a range of age between 20-30 years old (Singleton, 2016). Mandes and Sadłoń (2018) discuss Christian religion in a globalised
culture and focus on the maintenance of the church as being upwardly mobile and highly transient for churches, which especially geographically located in areas with suburban traits.

Table 6.3
The Correlation between Discussion Vignettes 6.5 with the Categories and Themes from the Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Vignettes used for discussion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3rd level</td>
<td>• Loyalty to Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>6.5 Conceptuality and significance of Transcendence Megachurch as the influences on young people’s place identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existential and unconscious perception of Transcendence Megachurch</td>
<td>• Transcendence Megachurch enhanced self-esteem</td>
<td>6.5.1 Place attachment encourages individual confidence, sense of worthiness, and devotion to Transcendence Megachurch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Subjective well-being – Transcendence Megachurch encouragement towards life balance and positivity</td>
<td>6.5.2 Stability, sense of freedom, and affection offered in Transcendence Megachurch construct young people’s place identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-efficacy was facilitated and supported by place (Transcendence Megachurch)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such areas have a diverse population where megachurches are located, for instance, in Poland and Australia megachurches predominantly include an internationally mixed demographic with people of different ages and professions including students, workers, and visitors.
(Mandes & Sadłoń, 2018; Zwartz, 2004). There is a regulatory significance for megachurches set up within suburban locations while forgoing mostly urban and countryside areas. Location choices are strategic in attracting members, where the residents are keen in joining social institutions. Similar to the other megachurches, the Transcendence Megachurch in Waterloo Sydney is within a high-growth area of diverse population demographics. Simmons (2011b) argues that Pentecostal churches like the Transcendence Megachurch in this study “seemed to fill a gap of young people and families seeking a more experiential form of religion” (para. 6). As a seeker-oriented church, the Transcendence Megachurch tailors to the needs of the audience (Charboneau, 2015) while also carefully accommodating the various needs of the individuals at their different stages of affiliation with the church (von der Ruhr & Daniels, 2012).

Megachurches in the suburban areas (e.g., Hillsong Church in Sydney, Perth, Melbourne, Gold Coast; CityLife Church in Melbourne) have access to highly educated members at a youthful age, and other individuals working in promising professions within densely populated suburbs. Synan and Yong (2017) have a view that maintaining members involves a great strategy of promoting social engagement, especially through giving hope, restoring justice, and having a belief in interpersonal solutions, rather than structured approaches. Megachurches offer a place that promotes confidence and often resolution to problems for members (Tazanu, 2016). Lizzie mentions that the Transcendence Megachurch experience has helped her to overcome life challenges, become more positive in dealing with other life experiences, and professional challenges. The regulatory approach often binds the members in a duty while ensuring they can enact attainable efforts in devising beneficial solutions in their lives (Hepburn, 2017). Large worship gatherings such as in the Transcendence Megachurch demonstrate control on the members attendance, which is part of their motto and intention of being mega in size. From this current study, there are some
transformations from the participants perspectives, in reference to an improvement of the mood, mindset, and more optimistic outlook of life while living as Christians.

Johnson (2018) notes that maintaining attendance at church has a significance of creating a massive worship built on pseudo-intimacy and live studio performance. The identity of place, based on the church’s components show that worshipers become passive viewers with a broader experience of religious exposure. From live worshipping practices that generate intimacy for young members within the megachurches, the “pseudo-intimacy” is also fostered by close monitoring by pastors and the other church team within small groups, in regards to members and their families. There is a current view of the megachurches, which is being criticised based on its business aspect (Ferguson, 2005). This criticism is emphasised from the pastors active involvement as an “energy star” who “[engage] the congregation through an accessible, informal, and emotional sermon” (Lisee, 2012, p. 19) in attracting more followers. Megachurches have adopted breakthrough technologies in preparing their music live performances and in keeping the worshipers updated on activities with live, active, and a more connected means of communication and entertainment. Jason, Axel, and Aiden agree that the large screens support the services and these are highly useful and effective tools in enhancing communication with church members. They added that the more engaging the services were, it attracted more attendees to feel physically connected and emotionally attached to the church.

6.5.1 Place attachment encourages individual confidence, sense of worthiness, and devotion to Transcendence Megachurch.

Hidalgo and Hernandez (2001, as cited in Marcouyeux & Fleury-Bahi, 2011) define place attachment as a productive relationship between an individual and a particular place that motivates a desire to maintain connections with that place. The participants’ (Lizzie, Elle,
Melody, Darrel, Wilma, Jason, Aiden, and Shawn) responses indicate that they build place identity as they feel attached to the church (Giuliani, 2003; Hernandez et al., 2007). Place attachment generates identification processes as argued by Cuba and Hummon (1993) and Lalli (1992), which also acts as a sub-dimension of place identity (Marcouyeux & Fleury-Bahi, 2011).

The diverse influence from the participants’ perspectives established another distinctive aspect on place identity, in which the Transcendence Megachurch is positioned as a unique organisation that offers experiential religion (Saunders, 2015). The participants commented on the uniqueness of the Transcendence Megachurch, which is one aspect in attracting young members to join, participate, and maintain continuity with attendance. Kyle commented on the contemporary communication approaches, which he thought resonated with him as a young person. He mentioned that it offers him more liberty, as opposed to other conventional churches, where the traditional norms are strictly applied. Place attachment and identification processes were also established through new experiences and acquaintances with the church environment, services, and both physical and social activities.

The participants demonstrated an unequivocal experience with the church and their place identity. Their experiences included different aspects and interaction with the site including rituals, worship, and serving the community on compassionate events. Perales and Bouma (2018) emphasise how such activities promote interaction with the environment and influence place identity of the members. Similarly, Ellingson (2016) suggests place identity capitalises on the behavioural-settings and in the context of the Transcendence Megachurch, there is more emphasis in ensuring how individuals within their different roles and stages of their spiritual experience have an opportunity to prove their ambitions. The church incorporates physical attributes in contemporary society to make the members identify themselves and feel part of megachurch geographically and functionally (McMurtrie, 2012).
Established members of the Transcendence Megachurch undergoing worship, social events, and church-oriented activities tend to develop place attachment and place identity. Most participants underline positive changes within themselves since they started to attend Transcendence Megachurch on a regular basis. Darrel started to feel a sense of belonging and a sense of worthiness as he joined a small group at Transcendence Megachurch. Attending services at church became activities he looked forward to since he has a community to hang out with. He even mentioned how he started to look after himself better after making more friends at church. Another example, Axel has acquired more confidence in social and communication skills through an active involvement with the church activities. Differently, Lizzie felt that her experience is a personal journey where the whole Transcendence Megachurch experience has gradually transformed into knowledge and understanding that shaped her as an individual. The church has given her particular meanings that are useful for her life guidance.

Williams (2016) points out that the megachurch concept capitalises on the personal attachment that members of the church have on the institution and key activities that describe their identity. In this sense, the place identification processes in the church preceded by place attachment (Cuba & Hummon, 1993; Lalli, 1992). Devotion to the Transcendence Megachurch grows as an outcome of both atmospheric design semiotics and place identity, and involves tangible and intangible efforts engaged by the church to promote a feeling of association among the members (Yip & Hoon, 2016). Whereas, place attachment formed from the Transcendence Megachurch experiences is perceived as lovemarks by the members (Wade & Hynes, 2012). Wade and Hynes (2012) suggest that “the affective labour of the congregation works to make seekers feel the comfort of being ‘at home’ while generating contagious enthusiasm and fomenting loyalty beyond reason” (p. 177). One example was drawn from Mable’s response where she proudly expressed her fondness and devotion to
Transcendence Megachurch. The positive Transcendence Megachurch first experience has motivated her to keep attending and become loyal to the church. Impressed by the live worshipping music performances, Mable developed more interests and a liking in all aspects of the church activities. After two years of regular attendance to the Transcendence Megachurch, Mable concurs on a fulfilment of her aspirations, needs, and expectations while having a strong attachment to the place. Wade and Hynes’ (2012) argument on the megachurch’s loyalty beyond reason (Foster, 2007, p.8) as lovemarks is confirmed by the participant’s (Mable, Kyle, Darrel, and Melody) testimonies.

The Transcendence Megachurch develops interactive connections with the members for which the church gets its accreditation and identity in profiling its image within a global scale. The worship across different megachurches is unique as it incorporates a subjective and standardised service. The services with a global experience, in which delivered internationally seek to inspire both the diverse populations of born-again and new church seekers towards spiritual nourishment (Craddock, 2017). Megachurches are actively engage in promoting a secular culture while also sticking to an excellence in using pop rock music to attract more followers (Abraham, 2018).

6.5.2 Stability, sense of freedom, and affection offered in Transcendence

Megachurch construct young people’s place identity.

The Transcendence Megachurch, like any other megachurch, creates a powerful symbolic presence of vital public congregations in society (Stolz & Usunier, 2019). Lath et al. (2016) state that the stability of the church relies on the landscape plans put in place and the undisputable sacred space that its members enjoy while promoting the church popularity. However, those efforts are not established when plans to nurture the young people, who make
the most significant part of the congregation, are not well integrated into most of the church systems.

Bille et al. (2015) contend that materiality exposure within these megachurches and including the Transcendence Megachurch in the study arises from its foundation onto modernisation. The geographical location, especially, in suburban regions where residents tend to dwell temporarily. However, they seek some form of stability and belonging (Lindenbaum, 2012) is one of the criteria, which helps to establish megachurches. Evangelical megachurches produce a sense of community in suburbs, which lack equivalent secular social institutions (Connell, 2005; Thumma & Leppman, 2011).

Megachurches provide freedom of expression in ways that young people can earn no criticism in the way they present themselves in engaging and expressing themselves. The liberty can be performed by blending in with the live worshipping practices in events and services, and interacting with the preaching. Equally, such interaction gives young people access to a spiritual significance. Kyle as a participant in this study emphasised that young people are treated equally in the Transcendence Megachurch, and the atmosphere of the church is meaningful as it corresponds well with him.

Kilde (2015) notes that megachurch environment provides the spiritual encounter, which has some roots to the concept of ritualism associated with a sense of entertainment although this is a measure of commanding dominance against the old set churches with strict rules. Von der Ruhr and Daniels (2012) argue that the entertainment in megachurches aims to transform young people, in how they might consider religion and spiritual experiences as atypical to their interests. However, megachurches provide a place to incorporate worship and create a strong link between young people and the church culture (Barnes, 2010).

There are a variety of services, which the Transcendence Megachurch offers to its followers and more importantly to the unchurched. Gorin (2018) explains the unchurched as
individuals who lack a particular church experience, a place for spiritual nourishment, and accommodation of their diversities. In the modern world, the unchurched people are also considered as members excommunicated by their own churches (Gorin, 2018) as those churches could not fulfil their needs and desires. Griffero (2014) describes the simplicity of the church stems from its ways of operation, that is established from the flexibility to accommodate every seeker's interest. Much of the sessions offered seem to promote non-religious approach by offering a comfort to the audience, particularly the younger generation. Aiden mentioned how the music genre used in Transcendence Megachurch is suitable for the younger generation as it reflected the popular music, which is mostly consumed by young people. Partridge (2016) argues “it is the contemporary Christian music industry that has been most successful in pressing popular culture into the service of religion” (pp. 567-568).

Thumma and Bird (2015) argue that unlike the traditional-oriented churches, Transcendence Megachurch has a modern aspect of planning its session to ensure recruits have freedom of choice. It is up to young people’s choice in joining the church, depending on their interests as members. A participant in this study, Shawn, expressed that the communication approach adopted by the Transcendence Megachurch is less intimidating, which makes the newcomers feel welcome and blend in naturally. In addition, the church also encourages freedom, encouragement, and offer to join the community as Christian family, where the members could seek life assistance during difficult times (see Figure 5.11 in section 5.4.3 and Figure 5.12 in section 5.5.4 of Chapter 5).
Freedom of “secular programs”, especially in the music played during church service attracts a broader interest among the young, for they feel that their interests have a chance of respect and incorporation, as part of the megachurch family. Most participants in the current study expressed their interests were initially promoted by the church live worshipping music. Durkheim (1976, as cited in Jennings, 2014, p. 214) suggested that “Pentecostalism fits inside religion as part of the sacred, while popular music snuggles comfortably in the sphere of the profane.” In the context of the Transcendence Megachurch, the combination of the sacred and the profane, and that the relationship between Pentecostalism and popular music is symbiotic and illicit (Jennings, 2014). Joseph (2018) argues that music is an essential part of Christian worship as “it may be seen as a way to approach God through sound, whereby the expression and experience of God’s presence through song brings the act of worship to life, thereby transforming the feel and mood of worship” (p. 190). The repetition applied in the Transcendence Megachurch worshipping music and service structure also plays a vital aspect, since the repetition determine how the group constructs, transfers, and controls meanings (Groppe, 1984). Axel, another participant, admitted that the Transcendence Megachurch music was easy listening and memorised since it was performed repetitively. Similarly, Darrel described that he was looking forward to the songs each time he attended services. The interests and fondness have brought meanings that has built stronger attachment to the church for young people.

Different studies undertaken in Australia found that musical engagement such as singing has social, psychological, emotional, health, cultural and linguistic benefits (Hays, 2005; Joseph, 2009; Southcott & Joseph, 2013). Being part of the Transcendence Megachurch congregation and a large music worship group has created a strong sense of social and communal belonging (Jacob, Guptill, & Sumson, 2009). Through togetherness, the church members seek social support and companionship because the musical engagement “not only
an enjoyable special interest activity, but can also be beneficial for the health and wellbeing” (Gridley, Astbury, Sharples, & Aguirre, 2011, p. 6). The findings from the study have confirmed that through continuity of attendance and participation to the Transcendence Megachurch, the participants generate meaning-making from their interactions and in promoting place attachment and place identity.

6.6 Chapter Summary

The place identity for young people within the Transcendence Megachurch in this study was examined from three distinctive levels, and included their behavioural and sensory experience, their empathetic and subjective reconstruction, and an existential and unconscious perception. As discussed from these different vignettes, the Transcendence Megachurch has not only offered personal place identity to the participants, but also promoted a breakthrough for their young members in both their spiritual and personal growth. The spiritual nourishment still remains a major objective for such Transcendence Megachurches, while their objectives are to align to younger generations through opportunities in incorporating a secular-based Christian music through live worshipping practices. Notably, the participants with the international background, which include individuals with no specific church affiliations, find it easy to settle in megachurches. The reason is because megachurches operate with more flexibility in attracting members from diverse demographics and profiles. Transcendence Megachurches in suburban areas have a strategic vision for prioritising modernisation in worship thus targeting younger generation, who are considered as the denominators for guiding influence and future growth of the church.

The chapter has presented different vignettes explored predominantly on the place identity, which Transcendence Megachurch grants to their young followers. The behavioural and sensory experience enhances distinctiveness and social acceptance within the church.
environment. Empathetic and subjective construction promotes continuity of attendance, and a sense of belonging, especially to the young members. Existential and unconscious perception shows loyalty that megachurch followers have with the institution. Further, the concept of existential and unconscious perception supports the subjective well-being and self-efficacy among the members in constructing place attachment and place identity. The conclusion draws upon the wider picture of the Transcendence Megachurch as a source of spiritual nourishment and a place where the young members develop place identity as part of their personal identity. The next chapter will discuss the conclusions of the study, the implications, and recommendations for future research.
7.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a summary of the conducted study. It then outlines the results of young people’s interaction with a Transcendence Megachurch. The chapter then looks at how young people interact with the church environment (atmospheric design semiotics features) and other members, through the site of engagement and place attachment in influencing their place identity. The implications and limitations of the study are presented with recommendations and other suggestions for recommending future research.

7.2 Transcendence Megachurch, Young People’s Experiences, and Place Identity

The aims and research questions in this study were designed to examine young people’s perceptions of the built environment and the atmospheric design semiotics in a Transcendence Megachurch, as well as the interaction and experiences through site of engagement and place attachment as factors in influencing their place identity.

7.2.1 Research aims.

- Understand young people’s perceptions of their personal interactions with atmospheric design semiotics (the music and audio systems, multimedia thematic visual communication projector screens, singing, lighting arrangements, live performances, and interactive worshipping activities that are not limited to cheering, waving, clapping,
and gesture responses) within megachurches as a site of engagement and place attachment.

- Investigate young people’s interactions with atmospheric design semiotics on a personal level and as part of a community membership have an influence on their place identity.
- Explore how atmospheric design semiotics in megachurches contributes to the inherent values and contextual atmosphere to influence young people’s place identity.
- Examine the influences on young people’s experiences with Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric design semiotics as the result their interaction with the place, while also investigating their perspectives, interpretations, perceptions, beliefs, and meanings attached to this place.

### 7.2.2 Research question and sub-questions.

**Main question**

In what ways do megachurch atmospheric design semiotics influence young people’s experiences and their place identity?

**Sub-questions**

1. How do young people perceive the atmospheric elements in a megachurch as the built environment?
2. In what ways do the activities and interactions in a megachurch environment encourage a site of engagement and place attachment for young people within the church?
3. What are the possible outcomes resulting from young people’s interactions with the megachurch atmospheric design semiotics and its members and how does it influence their place identity?
7.3 Results

In their study conducted in Australia, Davis and Yip (2004) found that the relevancy of megachurches as a place and their atmospheres perceived as one of the reasons why young people are attracted to attend the church. The phenomenon contradicts with the fact that young people are considered as the least demography of religion affiliation (Biddle, 2007). There is an assertion that the megachurches’ activities shown that many young people are searching for meaning (Pryor, 2005), and the megachurches seem to meet their needs and desires for spirituality. The factors around megachurches’ atmospheres such as the lively worshipping performances, interactive services, contemporary music, and the social activities have been claimed to be the aspects that made young people feel better about themselves (Delaney, 2005). These notions show that the megachurch atmosphere contributes to the feel-good vibes that experienced by young people.

This current study was inspired by how little is known about megachurches’ atmospheres and young member’s multi-sensory experiences and perceptions with place identification and attachment with megachurches while such factors influences their place identity. This study examined young people’s interactions with the material environment of the church (atmospheric design semiotics), while also exploring the site of engagement and place attachment as factors influencing young member’s their place identity. The interactions with the material aspects of the church environment and the relational aspects from young people’s interactions with other church members, were both significant factors in understanding their bonding and attachment to the place. The study findings revealed key points of the young people’s perceptions, interaction, and place identification process with the Transcendence Megachurch in Sydney, Australia.

First, the behavioural aspects of the place were examined. This modality represents the place dependency where individuals performed a variety of activities at a Transcendence
Megachurch, which involves materiality and physical elements of the place to sustain the interactions and site of engagement. Such experiences include the refined technologies employed in the live music worship performances (audio system, lighting arrangement, accompanied visual graphics), preaching, and church news visualised on large screens. Young people immerse themselves into the spiritual activities within the place through religious artefacts.

Second, the study investigated how social modality leads to a group identity from religious affiliation. Within their experiences with the Transcendence Megachurch spatial environment, young people establish a sense of community through participation in small groups and church activities. As will be discussed in Section 7.4.3, spiritual growth and personal development are encouraged in this manner.

Thirdly, the affective impression encouraged by a sense of familiarity and continuation of attending and experiencing the spatial environment of the church were examined. The findings suggest that emotional affection felt towards the Transcendence Megachurch establish a sense of attachment and stronger bond to the place.

The points mentioned above will be further discussed in separate headings within the next section that outlines the young people’s perceptions with atmospheric design semiotics and place identity in a Transcendence Megachurch.

7.4 Transcendence Megachurch: Young People’s Perceptions of the Atmospheric Design Semiotics and Place Identity

The main findings from this study suggest that young people find the material environment (atmospheric experiences) and their interactions (site of engagement and the place attachment) with the Transcendence Megachurch influence their place identity. The participants’ testimonies indicate how the church offers a positive encouragement, and allows
them to connect with each other, in building a community that affects their lives positively. The sense of familiarity and comfort offered by the church builds the continuation of attendance, a sense of belonging, and a further involvement, which assisted and influenced their construction of place identity.

There were three major points suggested from the participants’ views in relation to their Transcendence Megachurch atmospheric design semiotics experience and place identity. First, the Transcendence Megachurch environment facilitates young people’s religious experience and spiritual needs. Second, the social acceptance in the Transcendence Megachurch generates a sense of worthiness as young people feel socially valued. Finally, the community formed from small groups in a Transcendence Megachurch provides a sense of belonging that is critical for personal growth socially, physically, and mentally. Each of the points will be further discussed in separate headings below.

7.4.1 Transcendence Megachurch: the environment facilitates young people’s religious experience and spiritual needs.

The mode of expression offered in a Transcendence Megachurch (Richardson, 2017) and multi-sensory ways of the communication approach applied in the spatial environment are essential in attracting and connecting with young people (Davis & Yip, 2004). In their article, Yip and Hoon (2016) forward a discussion that religious artefacts in church construct the identity. According to Iedema (2007), religious artefacts consist of sounds, words, images, and movements. Yip and Hoon (2016) believe that religious artefacts are not a mere “object”, but they “articulate and materialise a religious organisation’s ideologies, theology, and identity” (p. 479). The religious artefacts (such as the graphics, visual communication design style, music, sound systems, lights) are effectively applied within the church atmosphere that aligns with the culture of contemporary societies, where the church is located. Yip and Hoon
(2016) argue that in the church services, “the congregation, the music performance, the architectural space, the people (audience, song performers, church pastors) visually and physically enact the ‘church identity’ through experience” (p. 479). This suggests that the religious artefacts give a Transcendence Megachurch an identity through the spatial experiences encountered by the attendees, their atmospheric design semiotics, which then leads to the place identity.

The cultural adaptation was identified by participants as an important aspect to maintain the relationship with young people. The findings of the study suggest that young people feel more comfortable, understood and accepted if the church is able to fulfil their spiritual needs, desires and expectations in forms of materiality as “contemporary total institution” (Wade, 2016, p. 663), in which the traditional churches failed to address (Baird, 2006; Simmons, 2011b). Materiality and sophisticated technological support play a major role in live worship performance that adopts the popular culture that matches with younger generations preferences of spirituality and lifestyles (Charboneau, 2015; Hicks, 2012). The Transcendence Megachurch offers a holistic religious experience (Abraham, 2018) that combines Christianity and secular approach (Baker, 2019) for young individuals who are longing for spiritual needs (Freudenberg, 2016) and meanings in their lives (Nilan, 2007).

7.4.2 Transcendence Megachurch: social acceptance and a sense of worthiness are obtained from how young people felt socially valued.

The study findings conclude that the connection between young people and the Transcendence Megachurch is partly initiated by social acceptance. As the church seeker, these young people are impressed with the warmth of the church community, and they find Transcendence Megachurch less intimidating compared to the more traditional churches they attended before. Baker and Robards (2016) note that megachurches offer a sense of belonging
and solidarity among congregations in developing a relationship with young people. In this study, many of these young people were seeking acknowledgement and a place to belong and their interests could be attended at the church. The Transcendence Megachurch, thus, offered comfort and made them feel good about themselves. The casual and welcoming environment of the church’s “comfort-inducing settings” atmosphere (Wade, 2016, p. 664) allowed the young people in this study to blend in naturally within a new community where they felt socially valued. A sense of worthiness was in particular experienced by the participants who were from an international background as they are seeking a place to belong.

7.4.3 Transcendence Megachurch bridges a sense of community and belonging for young people.

From a regularity of attendance at the Transcendence Megachurch, young people found more social acceptance and a sense of familiarity and place attachment within the church’s community. The “attractions” (Eagle, 2015) and activities offered by megachurches while matching the different interests of young people brings a significant support in the edutainment approach (Ellingson, 2010) of such institutions. Moreover, Transcendence Megachurch encourages its members to join small groups to maintain their interests and involvement in the church. The small groups play a major role in keeping the church members, as they give social support, solidarity, togetherness, and a sense of community within the megachurch. In the words of Daljit Gill, the CityLife pastoral ministry leader (as cited in Zwartz, 2004), “… we have to a neighbourhood spirit so people don’t feel they are lost in a large church. In the small groups people build authentic community, and that’s where personal growth takes place” (para. 17). The findings confirm that a Transcendence Megachurch facilitates the sense of belonging in smaller groups that influence young people’s continuation of church attendance, personal development, social skills, and attachment to the
church. The social support was also mentioned as one important aspect in young people’s personal growth.

7.5 Implications

The study found that young people construct their place identity through interactions, involvement, attachment, and continuation. Place identity is afforded more prominence in the immediate subjective construction of place (Hernandez et al., 2007). The site of engagement at a Transcendence Megachurch determines the continuity of attendance and long-term involvement to the church, which encourages loyalty and the loyemarks to the place. The simplicity and repetition of the religious activities performed (McIntyre, 2007) in a Transcendence Megachurch play an important role for edutainment (Ellingson, 2010) and into the continuation of activities in the long term. Activities and interactions in the Transcendence Megachurch enhance place attachment, spiritual growth, and identification to place.

The harmonious attachment and identity can provide the individual with a contextual sense of belonging (Aitken & Campelo, 2011), purpose and meaning (Tuan, 1976), invert or intensify daily behaviour (Osman, Johns, & Lugosi, 2014) or characteristics (Lee, Arcodia, & Lee, 2012), and increase intention to revisit a specific place (Murphy, Moscardo, & Benckendorff, 2007). The approaches used by the Transcendence Megachurch is very much relevant to young people’s preferences and interests, which thus, facilitates the construction of place identity from the interactions within the church environment, the members and other related aspects. Borrowing the words by Riis and Woodhead (2010), “religious emotional regimes affect human character rather than offering only passing sensation” (p. 89). The feelings derived from the atmospheric design features of the Transcendence Megachurch spatial experience has the ability to shape the individuals’ emotional dispositions, and hence permanent relational stances towards the church. Cultural alignment between a Transcendence
Megachurch and young people is an important factor, which assists in place identification of young members that influences their place identity.

7.6 Limitations

This research project was designed to investigate the atmospheric design semiotics features of an Australian megachurch and its influences on young people’s place identity. The researcher is aware of the diversity of trajectories and experiences outside the church’s environment may also be a determining factor of an individual’s identity. However, the varied experiences of the “multiple identities” and a “sense of multiple belonging” (Portes & MacLeod, 1996, p. 527-528), which may be obtained from other settings or affiliations, is an area of investigation that needs to be further explored further. Therefore, the findings drawn from the research are limited to influences of place identity and its construction within only the context of one Transcendence megachurch in Sydney, Australia.

The other limitation of this study is the qualitative data and the researcher’s subjective interpretation of the participants responses. Shaughnessy, Zechmeister, and Zechmeister (2003) suggest that case studies tend to have lack of control and there is a potential of bias from the researcher and participants’ self-reporting since it is based on selective personal memory. The authors further argue that case studies may attract verification bias when the interpretation understate or overstate the case (Cohen et al., 2018). Hence it may be difficult to validate the findings considering the place identification processes of the participants, may still be in progress and might be influenced by other variables. The study conducted in another area/region with a different demographic profile may yield different results compared to the findings of this study. Again, the unpredictability of human agency and the variability of social life restrict the value of generalisation of this study (MacIntyre, 1985).
7.7 Recommendations

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Literature suggests that religious artefacts are essential in building place identity with a church. Atmospheric design semiotics features in a megachurch’s spatial setting are planned and organised accordingly. Such spatial environment should be well designed in accordance to the place identification of the members, their place identity that further build the purposes of activities, interactions, and engagement.

2. The atmospheric design semiotics features and communication approach of megachurch’s are important in matching the contemporary needs of young members. Alignment with innovation and new technology are significant aspects of megachurches, which keep young members interested and bonded to the place. Within contemporary societies popular culture is embraced by young people. The megachurch is one of the places where young people in this study mentioned they could obtain social acceptance, a sense of belonging, comfort, and bonding. The megachurches’ approach in recruiting young members is highly successful in comparison to traditional churches. Hence, this study has also shown how religious settings that are able to fulfil the aspirations and needs of young people through modern communication styles, can play a significant role in attracting them.

3. It is important for megachurches to include all three modalities (behavioural, social, and affective) within the atmospheric design semiotics features and the environment, as each of them enacts different measures in supporting young people’s place identity construction. Proshansky, Fabian, and Kaminoff (1983) define place identity as “a sub-structure of self-identity of the person consisting of broadly conceived, cognitions about the physical world in which the individual lives” (p.59) including “beliefs, perceptions or thoughts that the
self is invested in a particular spatial setting (Jorgensen & Stedman, 2001, p. 238). The individual emotional attachment to a physical spatial setting (Ujang, 2012; Qingjiu & Maliki, 2013) that formed through the accumulation of experience with that place (Budruk & Stanis, 2013) composed of the meanings and perceptions associated with the environment. As an individual spends more time in a megachurch, the more he or she develops a stronger attachment to the environment that comprises physical dependence, social connections, and a sense of belonging to the place. It then establishes a particular and personal bonding to a megachurch that facilitates the place identity construction. Once the behavioural, social, and affective aspects are fulfilled, the individual can identify the megachurch as a sub-structure of his or her identity.

4. As discussed in the limitation above, it is recommended to conduct further study in another area/region with a different demographic profile that may also involve teenagers to obtain different results. Within the context of megachurch environments, the adapted model of atmospheric design semiotics can be utilised as the analysis framework.

7.8 Final Reflection

This research has offered an understanding of atmospheric design semiotics features within the megachurch, and its influences to young people’s place identity. The study provides initial knowledge of the field and the insight for further explorations in building deeper understanding. As literature suggests (Charboneau, 2015; Davis & Yip, 2004; Jakelic, 2016; Pryor, 2005; Wells, 2016; Williams, 2016; Zwartz, 2004), it is important for religious institutions to embrace young people’s needs and interests while providing them experiences to develop their spiritual and personal growth. Megachurches offer a significant contribution in providing young people with religious experience in fulfilling their needs and aspirations.
There are different factors that influence young people’s place identity with the megachurch. From this study, young people attending a Transcendence Megachurch felt the modern and material aspects of the church with the multi-sensory experiences and technology with live music performances, which made them feel closely connected with the place. Such experiences build bonding, regular attendance, and more social acceptance, as different to other traditional churches. More than just a measure of evaluating behaviours, this study on young people interactions in a Transcendence Megachurch has revealed that atmospheric design semiotics features incorporated into the planning and design of events within the built environment (Brennan Horley, Connell, & Gibson, 2007) can influence site of engagement, place attachment, and hence influence place identity.
References


Ferguson, A. (2005, May 26-Jun 1). Prophet-minded: Pentecostal churches are not waiting to inherit the earth. They are taking it now, tax-free. *BRW, 34*-41.


https://doi.org/10.1108/17538331211209068


Reichenstein, O. (2010, September 17). *Can experience be designed?* Retrieved from https://ia.net/know-how/can-experience-be-designed-2


Thomas, H. M. (2016). *Preaching to the converted: making responsible evangelical subjects through media* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://curve.carleton.ca/2f4a34f7-69b5-4d06-8916-de0bb2342377


http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/crer/vol15/iss1/20


doi:10.1177/0967828X16674132


Appendix A: Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee (MUHREC) Approval

Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee

Approval Certificate

This is to certify that the project below was considered by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Committee was satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and has granted approval.

Project Number: 1006
Project Title: Megachurch Atmospherical Semiotics as an Influence on Young People Identity Construction
Chief Investigator: Dr Nish Belford
Expiry Date: 07/11/2021

Terms of approval - failure to comply with the terms below is in breach of your approval and the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

1. The Chief Investigator is responsible for ensuring that permission letters are obtained, if relevant, before any data can occur at the specified organisation.
2. Approval is only valid whilst you hold a position at Monash University.
3. It is responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure the project is conducted as approved by MUHREC.
4. You should notify MUHREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
5. The Explanatory Statement must be on Monash letterhead and the Monash University complaints clause must include your project number.
6. Amendments to approved projects including changes to personnel must not commence without written approval from MUHREC.
7. Annual Report - continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an Annual Report.
8. Final Report - should be provided at the conclusion of the project. MUHREC should be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected completion date.
9. Monitoring - project may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by MUHREC at any time.
10. Retention and storage of data - The Chief Investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of the original data pertaining to the project for a minimum period of five years.

Thank you for your assistance.

Professor Nip Thomson
Chair, MUHREC
Appendix B: Explanatory Statement for Participants

EXPLANATORY STATEMENT

Transcendence Church members

Project: Megachurch *atmospheric design semiotics* as an Influence on young people’s identity construction

**Chief Investigator's Name:** Dr Nish Belford

**Department of Education**

**Phone:** + 61 03 99059143

**email:** nish.belford@monash.edu

**PhD candidate:** Nina Hansopaheluwakan

**Phone:** 0406 656 129

**email:** nina.hansopaheluwakan@monash.edu

You are invited to take part in this study. Please read this Explanatory Statement in full before deciding whether or not you wish to participate in this research. If you would like further information regarding any aspect of this project, you are encouraged to contact the researcher via the phone number or email address listed above.

**What does the research involve?**
Aim of the study

Megachurch offers a space and place to young people where they express themselves as who they are. The atmosphere in megachurches provides experience that reflects the interest of young generation. However, how these atmosphere influence young people identity construction so far is under studied. This research explores how young people reflect on their interaction within megachurch atmosphere and how these experience influence their identity as an individual.

As a participant, you are invited to share your personal experience on any interaction with Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere (music and audio systems, lighting arrangements, visual screen projectors and all related interactive activities within the auditorium) especially in their Sunday services. The first aim of this research is to understand young people's perceptions of their personal interaction with atmospheric design semiotics (the music and audio systems, thematic visual communication projector screens, lighting, live performances, singing and all related interactive worshipping activities) within megachurch as a site of engagement. Secondly, this research is useful to investigate how young people's interactions with atmospheric design semiotics on a personal level and as a part of a community membership have an influence on their identity construction. Finally, this research aims to explore how atmospheric design semiotics in megachurches contributes to the inherent values and contextual atmosphere to influence young people identity construction.

Selection criteria and participation in this research

Participation in this research is voluntary and if you agree to be part of this study you will be requested to fill in the consent form (the details are explained in the next section).
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be requested for either a face-to-face or Skype interview that will be organised at a time or location that suits you. The duration of the interview will be not more than 45 minutes. Otherwise you can opt to respond to the questions in written and send it by email to the researcher.

**Consent process to participate in the project or withdrawing from the research**

The consent process is an important step for you to complete as you will be asked to sign it off, if you decide to be part of the research.

**The consent form will ask you:**

1. If you freely agree to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Explanatory statement.

2. If you consent to participate in an interview either face to face or through Skype and that the interview will be audio recorded. Otherwise you can opt to respond to the questions in written and send it by email to the researcher.

3. If you agree that a pseudonym name will be used to refer you and to any information in regards to your responses that will be used through this project and for publications or presentation in any public form to ensure that you remain anonymous.

4. If you wish to be contacted after the interview in regards to any draft of article that will be published from this study

5. If wish to review any part that refers to you and to modify any content before any publications.

6. If you wish to be notified about any publications arising from this study.
The consent form will include other information such as:

- Once you fill in the consent form you will need to return it with your signature directly or as a scanned copy attachment to email address provided.
- As a participant you will have the right to withdraw from further participation in this research at any stage, if you wish to do so.
- That you have been given a copy of the Explanatory statement and consent form.

Possible benefits and risks to participants

The findings of this research will contribute to new knowledge on how 'contextual atmosphere' and 'communication design' (*atmospheric design semiotics*) within megachurches has a significant influence on young people's identity construction within the Australian context. This research will also provide a broader perspective on how *atmospheric design semiotics* play a significant role in contemporary religious sites like megachurches and how it influences young people's identity. Finally, this research will also make recommendations on how young people find megachurches as *site of engagement* (pertaining to their interaction with contextual atmosphere and the *atmospheric design semiotics*) where they learn themselves better which influences their identity, sense of belonging and agency.

This research involves low risk and the participation is based on voluntary willingness with all rights to withdraw from the research at any time and any data related to their personal profile and experiences will be removed from the research. This research will be conducted within minimum harm, discomfort or any inconveniences for you as the participant. In addition, you will be given an option to remain anonymous where your responses will referred to a pseudonym name.
Confidentiality

As a participant you will be given the option to be identifiable or to be anonymous. In case you want to be anonymous, a pseudonym name will be used to protect your identity. Data will be confidential and accessible only to the researcher.

Storage of data

Data will be stored in accordance to Monash University regulations. It will be locked in a filing cabinet and on password protected computers only accessible by the researcher. Data will be transcribed and stored for a period of 5 years after which time the data will be destroyed.

Results

Synthesising of data and findings and discussion will be published as part of doctorate thesis of Monash University. As a participant you will be asked through the consent form if you wish to be contacted after the interview or submission of written responses, and if you wish to be sent a draft of any article arising from this study before any publication. This procedure will allow you to review any part that refers to you and to modify any content according to your instructions if you wish to do so. In the consent form you will also be asked if you wish to be notified about any publications arising from this study.

Complaints

Should you have any concerns or complaints about the conduct of the project, you are welcome to contact the Executive Officer, Monash University Human Research Ethics (MUHREC):
Thank you,

Dr Nish Belford and Nina Hansopaheluwakan
Appendix C: Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
Transcendence Church members

Project: Megachurch Atmospheric Semiotics as an Influence on young people’s identity construction
Chief Investigator:
Dr Nish Belford
Department of Education
Phone: +61 03 99059143
Email: nish.belford@monash.edu

PhD student:
Nina Hansopaheluwakan
Phone: 0406 656 129
email: nina.hansopaheluwakan@monash.edu

I have been asked to take part in the Monash University research project specified above. I have read and understood the Explanatory Statement and I hereby consent to participate in this project. Please fill and sign the consent form and return it as a scanned copy attachment to my email address.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I consent to the following:</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I freely agree to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Explanatory statement.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consent to participate in an interview either face to face or through Skype and that the interview will be audio recorded. Or I will respond to questions in written.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I consent for the researcher to use a pseudonym name where information about my responses is referred to through project and any publications or presentation in any public form to ensure that I remain anonymous.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wish to be contacted after the interview in regards to any draft of article that will be published from this study</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wish to review any part that refers to me and to modify any content according my instructions before any publications.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I wish to be notified about any publications arising from this study</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data that I provide during this research may be used by the researcher in future research projects</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been given a copy of the Explanatory statement and consent form</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a participant I have the right to withdraw from further participation in this research at any stage, if I wish to do so.</td>
<td>☐</td>
<td>☐</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name of Participant

Participant Signature     Date
Appendix D: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Transcendence Megachurch Waterloo members in Sydney

This research study explores the experiences of eight members of Transcendence Megachurch city campus in Waterloo Sydney. This study focuses on young people identity construction that developed and built upon their interaction with megachurch’s atmosphere.

You are invited to take part in this research and if you agree to participate you need to make sure you have read and understood the explanatory statement that underlines aims, objectives, and targeted outcomes of this research. You should also make sure that you have signed the consent form.

You can choose to keep anonymity and in that case a pseudonym name will be used to refer to your responses.

The interview or a written response to the questions might take up to 45 minutes of your time. Please do not feel obliged to answer all questions if you are uncomfortable to do so. Thank you very much for taking time to attend the interview questions, your effort is much appreciated.

PART A

Name or Pseudonym name:

Gender: Male/Female (please circle your answer)

Age: ______ years old

Current occupation:

Country of birth:

Country of residence:

Your first language:

Your dominant race (up to 2 dominant races, e.g., Chinese and Australian):

Total period of staying in Australia:

_________ year(s) _________ month(s)
PART B

Are you born as a Christian? (please circle your answer)
Yes / No

How long have you been attending Transcendence Megachurch Waterloo?

How often you attend Transcendence Megachurch Waterloo? (please circle your answer)
Weekly / Fortnightly / Monthly / Annually / Occasionally

In what capacity you attend Transcendence Megachurch Waterloo? (please circle your answer)
Regular member
Casual attendee
Volunteer
Other (please specify) ______________________________

Are you familiar with contemporary megachurch before you attending Transcendence Megachurch?
Yes / No, this is my first-time experience

PART C

How would you describe your first experience (your first impression and feeling) attending Transcendence Megachurch service in Waterloo campus?

Do you feel familiar with Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere? (please specify your answer)

Yes, because _______________________________________________________

No, because _______________________________________________________

246
Do you noticed the way Transcendence Megachurch presented information (such as visual images, themes, graphics, lyrics, live music performances) in support to their service? (please circle your answer)

Yes / No, I didn’t pay attention

Do you think it is important for Transcendence Megachurch Waterloo utilises digital technology in delivering their services? (please specify your answer)

Yes, because __________________________________________________________

No, because __________________________________________________________

Based on your overall impression, how do you describe your personal view about Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere and their overall communication design?

What is best to describe Transcendence Megachurch music?

Do you feel any discomfort hearing loud audio when attending Transcendence Megachurch services? (please specify your answer)

Yes, because __________________________________________________________

No, because __________________________________________________________

How would you describe Transcendence Megachurch lighting arrangements?
What do you feel when worshipping in mostly dark environment?

What do you think about Transcendence Megachurch’s effort in providing screen projectors for the service?

PART D

In what way do you think that Transcendence Megachurch Waterloo atmospheric approach is relevant to someone like you?

How Transcendence Megachurch experience means to you personally?

How would you describe your personal identity in relation with your interaction and experience attending Transcendence Megachurch so far?

Have you noticed any emotional impact on you as an individual when you are attending Transcendence Megachurch services?

Have you noticed any difference in your personal being as a young person since you attend Transcendence Megachurch?

Thank you very much for your time responding to these questions, your contribution is greatly appreciated.
Appendix E: Interview Excerpt

Researcher

Thank you very much, Darrel, for participating in this research study. I assume you already know the topic of this research since you have read the Explanatory Statement and signed the Consent Form. This interview will ask you to share your experience in Transcendence Megachurch Waterloo regarding their space and atmosphere. There is no pressure for you to answer any questions, so if you are not comfortable answering, we will move on to the next one. Let us start with your background, shall we? First of all, were you born as a Christian?

Darrel

Yeah, my dad and mum are Christian, and what was it uhm like grandma as well and [our] bigger family is also Christian. So yeah like a full Christian family, pretty much.

Researcher

How long have you been attending Transcendence Megachurch?

Darrel

Well, this is the interesting bit. So, I was attending Transcendence Megachurch in 2006 and then in 2014 I started to attend another church (Place of Hope) in Ultimo, but like lately the last couple of months or so I have been going to Transcendence because the youth service in my church is like uhm is not cancelled but they don’t have any over January and February period, so normally in during that time I just go to Transcendence.
Researcher

You mentioned that you have been attending Transcendence Megachurch for several months, can you tell me exactly how long?

Darrel

For this time, it’s been like two months but before that I was attending Transcendence for eight years pretty much, so since 2006 through to 2014 I was attending Transcendence Megachurch.

Researcher

Do you notice any difference between now and then?

Darrel

Yeah, if anything the music and I suppose the combination of lighting and presentation and stuff is definitely much more high-tech nowadays, like there’s a lot of stuff going on which is cool, cause back then I think uhm I love it, it’s good. It’s a unique element of Transcendence Megachurch I suppose.

Researcher

And how often you attend Transcendence Megachurch, for example is it weekly, fortnightly or monthly?

Darrel

Now is weekly pretty much, [in] the last couple of months.
Researcher

In what capacity you are attending Transcendence Megachurch? Is it like casual, regular or maybe volunteer?

Darrel

I would say within the last two months it’s been like a regular attendee but over 2014, 2015 and 2016 it’s more casual, and then between 2006 and 2014 it was regular attendee as well.

Researcher

So can we say that you are a regular attendee then?

Darrel

Yeah pretty much, but I’ve never volunteered.

Researcher

Do you mind telling me the reason behind that?

Darrel

[chuckles] I just thought uhm I think back then I wasn’t really into serving too much, and then when I started going to the other church I started serving there but I don’t know I just thought maybe uhm like they didn’t really need my help so much in the way cause there’s so many people already, there’s so many volunteers already.
Researcher

Are you familiar with the concept of contemporary megachurch before you attending Transcendence Megachurch?

Darrel

Yeah definitely.

Researcher

If so, can you share with me your previous experience of attending contemporary megachurch like Transcendence?

Darrel

Well, I didn’t attend. I just heard that there are some megachurches or big churches with similar concept as Transcendence, I just knew it but never attend any of them. I just knew Transcendence since 2006. I know that Transcendence is a church because I was actually doing some research [about it] before, like Transcendence United, Transcendence Worship, and then I found that there’s actually a church. Before that I thought it was a band sort of thing. So I suppose like before 2006 I just didn’t know how it feels but I knew that there are megachurches around.

Researcher

Okay, now let us move to the next section. How would you describe your first experience, like your impression and feeling attending Transcendence Megachurch?
Darrel

Okay, back in 2006 [chuckles] it felt different, it felt big it’s ah.. how would I say.. it felt a bit like I attended a conference, put it that way.. rather than a church the first time I went there. Maybe because of my background I suppose. My old church [before Transcendence Megachurch] was more of the old school type of church, like the one with piano.. and you know sort of like a choir, it’s like that so.. not so much.. it’s not charismatic, put it that way.

Researcher

Do you feel familiar with Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere?

Darrel

Now yes, but as in back then probably it was a bit foreign when I first came. And actually I didn’t just attend the Sunday’s service, I attended the youth service on Friday night. Back then it was on Friday night at [Baulkham] Hills. So if anything it was a bit foreign cause maybe this was my first time attending megachurch and I just felt sort of like a bit out of place, but I just kept on turning up – maybe that’s the reason why I didn’t really volunteer. I attended with my dad and mom on Sundays and then on Fridays I went with my sister to the youth service, but I didn’t really feel like really connected. Yes I made some friends but not really sort of, maybe because back then I was quite known in my previous church like everyone knew me sort of thing, so when I first came here I just thought like oh this was such a big place and I didn’t really feel very familiar. But I think now if anything what really helped is the community in [Transcendence] church. For example, I knew Prilly (the Transcendence Megachurch volunteer who recruit him for this interview) and then started going again for the last couple of months and she introduced me to few people and then it
starts to felt homey again. In fact, over the whole eight years that I was there I was more like an attendee, that’s why I didn’t volunteer because I wasn’t really get planted. I didn’t go to connect group or anything, so I just kept on attending – leaving- attending – and leaving straight away after. You know what I mean I didn’t really mingle to people.

Researcher

You did mention that you now have this particular group within Transcendence Megachurch, what is it like for you?

Darrel

Yeah I would say so. I mean, I’m in a unique situation right now so.. I mean for the last couple of months I’ve just been attending it [Transcendence Megachurch] and sort of hanging out with Prilly and her crowds. So I went out to have dinner couple of times with them but I’m still attending my church’s cell group and later on when the youth service comes back on my church [Place of Hope] then maybe I start attending that. I know the people in Transcendence [church] but I just don’t like to go to the Connect group or things like that.

Researcher

I know you have been sharing your experience on how you feel familiar with the church as you go along and make friends. Do you feel familiar with the atmosphere of Transcendence Megachurch? I am referring to the more specific sphere here like their visual communication design, the lighting, the music, and other related aspects.
Darrel

Oh yeah, very much! I am familiar with that and I enjoy it. I come every weekend and knowing that I would get that same atmosphere that it is such a Transcendence thing. The combination of lighting, the worship, sometimes dance or the presentation. On the Sunday night live [service] sometimes they show a multimedia instead of preaching. I’m quite familiar with those and I really enjoy it, absolutely.

Researcher

And do you noticed the way that Transcendence Megachurch presents the information like visual images, themes, graphics, lyrics, live music performances in support to their service?

Darrel

Yes, certainly!

Researcher

Then do you think it is important for Transcendence Megachurch utilises digital technology in delivering their services?

Darrel

Yeah, and I think it’s because Transcendence is really strives towards bringing more people in and I think that’s why they do sort of using the visual and media and all that. Because sometimes if people just come in, especially for those who have never been to church then they only stick to preaching, maybe doesn’t really get the message across to those guys. By
them experiencing the whole, the lighting, the media and all that stuff, then they can see that ‘oh this is something cool!’

**Researcher**

And you don’t think that those [atmospheric design aspects] are too distracting to people?

**Darrel**

I don’t think so. If anything, it complements it. I think it’s because their preaching is also good, it’s great even! The preaching message is really really good so even if they have like lights and other stuff to sort of like back it up but I know that the essence is that the preaching of the Word is already great, so I won’t get distracted by those other things. One of the clearest example of that is this: sometimes while someone is preaching, the person who is playing the keyboard stays and keep on playing, so it sets the ambience of it. It enhances the Word [preached]. I tend to pay attention to details so I know.

**Researcher**

Based on your overall impression, how you describe your personal view about Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere and their overall communication design?

**Darrel**

I think it is really really good. I mean if not the best, it’s certainly one of the best in the country. Their creative teams, I mean the way they present it is really really good. But at the same time, without straying away from the essence. They present it with a purpose, which is why it’s good.
**Researcher**

Moving on to their music, what is best to describe it?

**Darrel**

Oh really good, great! The message is simple really, it’s all about Jesus. They [Transcendence Megachurch] convey how Jesus is really well through their songs. It’s something that someone hasn’t like uhm they never come to church, they can listen to the songs and probably get a glimpse about who Jesus is and they would end up going ‘oh so who this Jesus is and can I know about Him more’ that’s when you can invite them to church. I would be quite comfortable giving a CD that contains Transcendence songs to someone who is not really Christian.

**Researcher**

So you are saying that Transcendence Megachurch put their music as a starting point for people to learn about Christianity?

**Darrel**

Yeah, oh certainly. I know there’s a couple of my friends who are not Christian but they enjoy listening to Transcendence songs because the songs are really good. So yeah, I would be comfortable giving those songs to them. Especially lately that they have Young & Free and they have all these youth music, it seems like their music is blending with the way the music of the world is. Some of those music has beats, the melody and all that. If you listen to it on the radio, you would think that it’s just the normal secular song but it turns out it’s a Christian one.
Researcher

Looking at many of the music video of Transcendence Megachurch services, it looks like they have a ‘concert’ style to their service. Do you feel any discomfort hearing loud audio when attending the service?

Darrel

Oh certainly not. It’s funny because growing up I attended one of the old school churches with just choirs and organs, pianos, or probably sometimes like violins and some of those big drum thing. It’s just one not like the whole set of drums. However, coming from that background and then attending Transcendence, I would say it’s been a great experience like I didn’t really feel ‘oh this is too loud or things like that.’ I think the way they bring the songs is really enhancing the experience. Sometimes during those moment of worship I feel that I was really close to God I think, because I can feel such presence. So yeah I never felt it’s too loud or distracting.

Researcher

And how would you describe their lighting arrangements?

Darrel

Really really good! I notice that like sometimes they sort of do it in accordance with the songs, which is professionally done. It feels like you are in a concert sort of thing. And to put that kind of thing weekly I think it’s really really impressive. I get excited each week! On the way to church I always thought like ‘oh I hope they’ll sing thing song, this song and that song, I’m looking forward to sing their songs.’
Researcher

What do you feel when worshipping in mostly dark environment?

Darrel

I think it’s certainly creates more privacy, to me anyway. I have attended Transcendence a few times by myself and I feel comfortable doing that. Certainly, it was helped by the fact that during the worship it was dark, so that even if I lift my hand or I don’t know if I cry, people sometimes don’t notice it, which is great. That’s what I like anyway. If it’s really bright then maybe I tend to hold back a bit because people would see me if I cry or if I start lifting my hands.

Researcher

What do you think about Transcendence Megachurch’s effort in providing screen projectors for the service? If you notice, on the stage they have like a very big screen as the background.

Darrel

It’s good, especially during the preaching you can see the person’s face better if they are so far. During the whole service I think it enhances it. I enjoy it, I like that. During the worship, they show the worship leader’s close up face, and during the tithe and offering, they also close up on the person as well. It definitely creates better communication as supposed to people try to look at that one person on the stage and sometimes from a bit far you can’t really feel that connection.
Researcher

You mentioned a few times that you really enjoyed your time in Transcendence Megachurch’s service. In what way you think the church’s atmospheric approach might be relevant to someone like you?

Darrel

I think it’s really relevant. Like I said, sometimes I attended [Transcendence Megachurch] by myself and I like to just worship without any hesitant, not holding back. I like to worship fully, and the way they set it [atmosphere] up, like it gets dark during the praise and worship. The whole lights and everything really enhance the atmosphere. For me, I think the atmosphere is very important. There is a difference like sometimes when I’m just doing a cell group with my friends I can still worship as well in that situation but I think at church [Transcendence] with the lighting and the whole dark room, it really enhances the experience. I just felt I was more connected to God. Those kind of things are really relevant to me. Let’s just put it on one side [Transcendence Megachurch] and look at my church [Place of Hope] on the other side for example. At the moment they can’t really turn off the lights and they can’t do the lighting and all that. So I tend to be a bit hesitant at this church. I don’t lift up my hand just because it’s bright and everyone is the same, they don’t really lift up their hands and things like that. I knew that if I start lifting up my hand and start doing this [showing excited face with eyes shut] then people would say ‘what the heck?’ but I could do all that at Transcendence. I think that’s really important to me.

Researcher

So how this experience means to you personally?
Darrel

Being able to express myself I think, that’s really important. I’m quite an extrovert person and I’m quite expressive too. People would know if I’m sad or happy, but at the same time I like how Transcendence brings the atmosphere, [it] helped me to express myself better, something that I can’t do at home or the cell group or the church [Place of Hope]. I need that atmosphere to support me to be expressive.

Researcher

How would you describe your personal identity in relation with your interaction and experience attending Transcendence Megachurch so far?

Darrel

The way I experience Transcendence is probably different from the others. I mean during the first eight years I was attending there, I wasn’t really attending with a certain group but at the same time I like how I was able to come by myself and then express myself to God during the praise and worship. But then for the last two months, it’s a different feeling because I get to know Prilly and her crowd, so it enhances the experience. I like to talk to new people, and being able to meet those new people. In terms of the Transcendence, the church itself and the atmosphere they bring, I think it’s just helps me to express myself more. And the fact that nowadays this community, the people like Prilly and those guys, it sorts of like brings out myself as a person, like the extrovert me to know people more and new people. That adds to the experience.
Researcher

So are you saying that now you feel more belong to Transcendence Megachurch now that you know more people?

Darrel

Yeah certainly, I would say so.

Researcher

Have you noticed any emotional impact on you as an individual when you are attending Transcendence Megachurch services?

Darrel

It really depends on the preaching, because sometimes you get that one of those preaching that’s like ‘Oh my God, that preaching is really me! That message was really for me. Oh my God, yeah he’s right, I was like that! Sometimes it’s funny because I actually had some moments of discovery of myself during those preachings. I didn’t notice that I was like that. So in terms like how it changed me as a person or my personality, that really happened during the preaching. Not so much the atmosphere the lighting, the singing and all that stuff on the worship, it’s more during the preaching. So the whole atmosphere thing not really impacting me or my personality.

Researcher

Then, in terms of your personal being as a young person, did you notice any difference since you attend Transcendence Megachurch?
Darrel

Well, I guess it depends. Let me share a bit of background about myself. I used to go to local school here in Australia where a lot of people there were atheists, and I didn’t really want to tell them that I attended Transcendence. Because I think in the face of Australians, Transcendence was sort of seen like such a big church which only care about your money so I didn’t really want to tell them that I actually went to Transcendence. On the other side, in the face of my international friends [later in university] I would proudly say that I attend Transcendence because they think it’s a cool thing to be part of Transcendence. I guess it depends on who the audience is. To me, especially to my international friends, yes I’m proud that I’m a part of Transcendence Megachurch. But for the other Australians or any other people, I don’t really open about this and proud of it.

Researcher

Do you know any other Australians that attend Transcendence Megachurch?

Darrel

Well, it’s the Australians that I hang out with, like my high school friends and my work mates. I know as when I go to church, there’s obviously a lot of other Aussies. Like today, I met some, which is a cool thing. However, the Australians as in my world, they don’t like the whole idea of Christianity so if you tell them that you go to Transcendence, they’d even would sneak more at you and would say ‘ooh you go to Transcendence? You’re just one of those money- grabbing Christian person’ which is why I don’t really tell them like loudly that I go to Transcendence.
Researcher

I see, and so far, did you feel any difference within you as a young person since you attend Transcendence Megachurch?

Darrel

I think so, like I said I discovered quite a lot about myself because of the preaching and a lot of it helps me during the time I do life. Like when I went to uni, when I went to school, and then when I go to work. I still quite remember like yeah the preaching was really good, like they mentioned [to] do this, and do that. I just try to put it in a practical way, I mean you kind of do that for preachings anyway. Regardless of what church you go to, you try to apply the preaching of the Word to your everyday life.

Researcher

Alright, I can see how Transcendence has changed your personal being internally. I went there a few times before and see how the church people were warmly welcome everyone in. I see that they also have a very good social skills and seemed like a very ‘cool’ kids, as in their trendy appearance. How about when you entering this kind of church for the first time, did you see any changes in you since then?

Darrel

I do. I used to be a bit geeky, I didn’t really care what I was wearing. Then I started going to Transcendence and I’ve noticed that people dressed up very well. I started thinking that I must wear something nice or something that is not too dorky or something that is not just too usual. I usually put a bit effort to my appearance when I go to Transcendence.
Researcher

Is this effort you are doing in order to be accepted in the community?

Darrel

Not so much to be accepted, but it’s more so I don’t look odd. Back then I attended the church just being myself, but now because I know a bit more people at Transcendence, especially this international people and you know they go to Transcendence Megachurch really dress up well. So I tend to dress up too when I’m going to Transcendence, like I tend to think ‘Okay if I turn up in Transcendence wearing this, then what would people think of me?’, so yeah it [Transcendence Megachurch people] influences the way I dress to church. Maybe not so much back then when I was attending Transcendence in very first time, when I was attending the church by myself, I didn’t care. But I think now that I know more of the community and then I started to know more people in Transcendence, I tend to be wanting to represent myself better. Because back then, when I was attending by myself, I don’t care.

Researcher

Is it because there was no one knows you?

Darrel

Yeah exactly, I just [used to] wear shorts, thongs, and be like whatever.

Researcher

It sounds like change in a good way for you.
Darrel

Yeah and I suppose it’s more like the people driven, a community driven. Because when you started going to those places like the whole community dress up well and they all look cool, then you would want to be a part of that, obviously.

Researcher

And so you feel more cool now?

Darrel

Hahaha yeah probably, I would say so.

Researcher

You mentioned that these international people you hang out with are used to dress up when they go to church. Do you think that it might be influenced by their culture back there?

Darrel

Yeah, I know that the people [there] used to dress up nicely when they go to church, especially when they are singles right? They always tend to do it hahaha and they want to be noticed. I think it’s more of an Asian thing, because I have seen some of the white people and the Aussies that attend Transcendence, they just dress normal, just shirts and jeans and what not. I think usually Asians want to look good in front of their friends, especially when you are single or you want to impress a lady in church or something like that.
Researcher

Alright Darrel, now I would like to hear more about your experience in the service you attended this week.

Darrel

Oh you mean the one I have just attended?

Researcher

Yes, today’s service. Would you mind to share more about it? What do you think about the church atmosphere today?

Darrel

It was really good, especially because Taya Smith was there. She is a really good worship leader I think.

Researcher

Oh nice and I heard that she is the best in Transcendence for now.

Darrel

Yeah yeah

Researcher

And what about their lighting arrangements?
Darrel

It was really good, but I think the last week’s one was better because the lighting followed the music which was really nice. You know the song ‘Let There Be Light’, well basically they have this drum beats and the lighting sort of followed that last week, which is really cool.

Researcher

And they don’t have that song this week?

Darrel

No they actually have this song [earlier] today, but they didn’t have the same lighting. It was just one light, sort of just bright and I notice these things.

Researcher

What about their overall audio system and music?

Darrel

It’s brilliant as always!

Researcher

Do you know if they hire professionals to create the whole thing?

Darrel

I heard sometimes they train people well.
Researcher

Are they volunteers?

Darrel

I don’t know but I got a feeling they are. This lighting and stuff, you can just teach people about it.

Researcher

When you mentioned about they train people well and teach them, you mean that they send the volunteers to training sessions?

Darrel

Yeah I don’t know, maybe. Again, you might want to ask that question to someone who’s actually volunteer in church. I don’t know how they do it really.

Researcher

You mean you don’t know how they do it but somehow it turns out nice?

Darrel

Yes, exactly!

Researcher

What about their projectors and video screens in today’s service?
Darrel

It was good. I notice this actually, about last year or so they tend to have more patterns rather than just people. I don’t know if you have seen this too. In Danks street service they have these three big screens, and the one in left and right [screens] show the person, close up to the worship leader. But the one in the middle now is just patterns, moving images or something like that.

Researcher

Is it some kind of sessional themes, like monthly or weekly that they have in church?

Darrel

I don’t think it’s the theme. It’s just they do artworks and all these patterns, colours or moving images, and things like that. I notice that they started doing this in the last one and half years or so. Before that, it was just the close up on the worship leader on all three screens so I think it’s really good like now that they do all these graphics. It adds to the experience by them doing that.

Researcher

And do you feel any distraction because of that?

Darrel

No, I don’t think so. I think it complements it. It enhances the experience.
Researcher

Is there any relevancy between the preachings and those graphics shown?

Darrel

No I don’t think so, there is no connection between the two. They [the graphic images] are more connected to the songs rather than the preaching. For example, for the praise song, it’s a bit jumpy, beaty and more colourful whereas for the worship song, like ‘Let There Be Light’ they do like a picture of the cross then the colours and imagery, I mean the graphics are more soft for the worship song, which is why it’s good. It complements the experience, because it gets boring if you see in the screens just the face of the worship leader. I think that’s why they started doing that, which is why it’s really good.

Researcher

By seeing all these things within the atmosphere, how do you feel inside? Do you see any influence on you from experiencing the atmosphere?

Darrel

Well not really, if anything it’s during that moment only. I’m still as extrovert or as expressive as I am. It’s not because I go to church then all of a sudden I becoming more bubbly or something like that. However, I must admit that it’s more influenced by the people at church, not so much the service itself. The people I know, the people I get introduced. For example, if I get introduced to a lot more people, I becoming more open and chattier rather than I just go by myself. When I attended Transcendence just by myself, I just felt like nothing really changed. Afterwards, maybe I was just impressed by the Word
but nothing really changed in me. But if I went there and then afterwards I met up with Prilly and she introduced me to some friends or I get to see more friends, after that I become bubbly, chatty, and I feel more satisfied.

Researcher

You mean like meeting those people at church completes the overall experience?

Darrel

Yes, exactly! So yeah it’s more the people than the service.

Researcher

You mentioned that once you know Prilly, you started to know more people at Transcendence Megachurch. Do you mind to share a little bit on how you and Prilly know each other? Was she the one who approached you at church?

Darrel

No, it’s actually a bit funny. We both happened to be doing this thing called Nike Run Club, so we run in a club that is in the city. We never met there. I just posted on their Facebook page asking ‘is the run still on tonight?’ because normally we always run every Monday night from the city. I remember it was on one of those Mondays where it was a bit raining. When I posted the question there on the Facebook page, then all of a sudden Prilly just commented on my post and answered yes. She also added that it was nice to have more people to join the run. We didn’t meet at church, we didn’t get introduced at church. It’s interesting, and then she messaged me and asked me what days I would normally go to the Nike Run Club but I didn’t get to see that message at all. Bear in mind that when I posted
on that Facebook group it was back in 2014 or 2015 and I didn’t get to see Prilly’s message. You know in [Facebook] messenger if a stranger message you, it goes to a different tab. You wouldn’t see in the normal Facebook messenger tab, so I just realised the end of last year [2016] and I’m like ‘Oh my God, sorry I didn’t know that you messaged me’. Then we started talking things like that and then I found out that she goes to Transcendence, so I’m like ‘Oh yeah maybe we should go to church together’. So that’s how I started going to [Transcendence Megachurch] Doody street. It was only couple of months that I attended regularly, because before that I was going to my other church [Place of Hope]. That’s how I knew Prilly.

Researcher

I see, thanks for sharing.

Darrel

That’s okay. Personality wise I’m a little bit the same like Prilly, we are both extroverts and we like to meet new people so I quite enjoy having a conversation like this.

Researcher

Thank you very much for taking the time answering all the interview questions and your participation.

Darrel

No worries, I’m glad to be of help.
Appendix F: EeL Conference Paper – Peer Reviewed

The Influence of the Site of Engagement within an Australian Megachurch on a Young Attendee’s Identity Construction Process: Atmospheric Semiotics used as a Self-reflection Model

Nina Hansopaheluwakan
Faculty of Education, Monash University

Abstract

Drawing from my current PhD, which is investigating “Megachurch Atmospheric Semiotics as an Influence on Young People Identity Construction: A Case Study in Australia”, this paper, in particular, relates to the examination of the influence of atmospheric semiotics and the site of engagement on young people’s identity construction within an Australian megachurch. Atmospheric semiotics is explored through a theoretical lens by borrowing an adaptation of David Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1974), where the four-stage cycle is used to demonstrate how young people’s concrete experiences within a megachurch, and their engagement with the site’s atmospheric semiotics, influence their construction of a “new” identity. Through a single-case study approach, data was collected through semi-structured interviews from twelve young people attending the Transcendence Megachurch in Waterloo Sydney. Findings from this study were analysed using an atmospheric semiotics self-reflection model, which was adapted from David Kolb’s experiential learning framework. The discussion focuses on one participant in particular who has been attending the church for two years. The participant’s perspective on a megachurch atmospheric experience showed that the initial feeling of excitement from the atmosphere has gradually
promoted further exploration into signs and interpretation, sense of connection, meanings, relevancy, and finally the adjustment of some part of this person’s identity.

Key words: atmospheric semiotics, identity construction, self-reflection, young people, megachurch

Introduction

Living in a contemporary world, the concepts of self within the social and cultural context can be ambiguous. This is particularly challenging for young people in defining themselves. Discussion about an “identity crisis” has always been a major issue in transitioning from childhood to adulthood (Erikson, 1963). Various events, relationships, and environments have been believed to have an influence on young people’s identities in particular (Gee, 2000; Paris, Byrnes, & Paris, 2001). It has been discussed in many studies that environmental experience is one influence in the process of constructing identity (Ravelli, 2008; Wetherell, 2013). A social institution like a megachurch is one of them. A megachurch attracts young people because it offers the simple and direct answers to all questions in their lives (Simmons, 2011). In addition, a megachurch offers young people the opportunity to express themselves freely within the space, which is also giving them opportunities to be themselves. Many researchers have argued that a contemporary megachurch is seen as more than just a religion for young people, especially for those who are between 15 to 29 years old (Delaney, 2005). The form of experience offered in a megachurch makes these young people feel welcomed, and better about themselves as well as the world around them (Delaney, 2005; Nilan, 2007).
This paper considers the interrelationship between young people’s identity construction and site of engagement by focusing on a megachurch in the Australian context. Many scholars have argued that the experience and interactions on the environment contribute greatly to influencing identity construction. There are previous studies that have examined the atmosphere within different fields and spaces (Edensor, 2015; Ravelli & McMurtrie, 2016; Ravelli, 2008; Ronch, 2012; Stenglin, 2008) and how it has influenced identity construction (Gee, 2000; Norris, 2008). One particular study by Goh (2008) about spatial semiotics in an Australian megachurch discusses materiality and Christianity in contemporary time. However, the exploration of communication design within a megachurch atmosphere, and its influence on young people’s identity construction, is a field that is so far understudied. This suggests that other research insufficiently addresses issues in regards to correlation between spatial semiotics and identity. However, this is an important area of study that needs further investigation into such concepts and related influences.

This paper explores the influence of atmospheric semiotics and site of engagement on young people who attend a Transcendence Megachurch, the largest contemporary megachurch in Australia. David Kolb’s experiential learning theory (1974), which is a four-stage cycle (atmospheric semiotics self-reflection model), has been used as a theoretical framework to examine young people’s immersive experiences and their engagements with the site’s atmospheric semiotics. The atmospheric semiotics here refer to the particular spatial atmosphere including materiality and tangible aspects of the space such as lighting and design arrangements, colours and themes, audio systems and music, and visual graphics and communication design. Young people’s perspectives on identity refer to the reflective self-concept obtained from personal interaction within a megachurch atmosphere and to the engagement with the site. It also indicates that an individual’s identity is formed as a result of the consequences of specific contexts in which he or she exists. Atmospheric experience
accentuates the idea that reality of the experience builds on individuals’ identities, (Bille, Bjerregaard & Sorensen, 2015) and this ongoing process shapes and constructs their identities, by eventually forming “new” identities. In particular, the discussion focuses on one participant’s perspective while using the atmospheric semiotics self-reflection model. This focus on this participant’s perspective relates to the atmospheric experience encountered within a megachurch space and the process is divided into four separate stages to examine the influence on this person’s identity. The process starts from exposure of initial signs within a megachurch surrounding such as lighting arrangements, design and themes, audio systems, and any other type of communication design that are used during the service. Throughout the next three phases, the discussion highlights how these experiences were instrumental in starting to form the site of engagement, and as more involvement occurred within the space, these eventually had an influence on their initial identities.

A megachurch in the Australian context: practices and its influences on young audiences

Indefinite size of the megachurch in Australia has been arguably criticised because the number varies at different locations. However, with more than 200,000 attendants each week, Australian Pentecostal megachurches in total have become the second largest congregations after the Catholic Church (Ferguson, 2005). As a new Pentecostal Church is established every four days in Australia, the spectacular number of megachurch attendants, particularly among young people aged between 15 to 29 years old, show that these churches are growing rapidly.

A previous study (Davis & Yip, 2004) revealed that one of the reasons why megachurches are appealing to young audiences is because of their relevancy in ways in which they identify with the place and atmosphere. Adaptability and strategies have been applied by Transcendence Megachurch in dealing with changes in society. These strategies
are shown in Table 1. Using the latest technology and visual communication design to spread their message, this megachurch is turning societal and attitudinal changes into desirable trends.

**Table 1**

Transcendence Megachurch Strategies (adapted from Biddle, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Changes in society</th>
<th>Transcendence Megachurch strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobile society increase</td>
<td>Sets the location that fits cars, instant network/community, connect groups based on similarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership reduction in organization</td>
<td>Have two locations that enable large number of congregations, establish support groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative experience in conventional churches</td>
<td>Modern buildings, informal service format (Connell, 2005) motivate interaction and participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear of changes in social standards</td>
<td>Providing books, DVDs and conferences, supporting traditional gender roles, being critical in broken home issues and same sex relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switch location to outer suburbs</td>
<td>Easy access and church's transportation provided, located in outer growth area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology development</td>
<td>Creating great experience with contemporary media technology (Connell, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society's complexity challenge</td>
<td>Offering simplicity, mentors, and support groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualism</td>
<td>What makes people feel good and be themselves</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increases the value of feeling good</td>
<td>Offer wide ranges of stimuli, such as songs, DVDs, CDs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Transcendence Megachurch is creating a great experience with contemporary media technology (Connell, 2005) through its music, audio system, lighting arrangements, themed stage and screen projectors (Fig.1). This approach offers a new perspective on how the church offers different sides of Christianity yet with a traditional theological message.

Figure 1. Atmosphere of Transcendence Megachurch Australia service

What are atmosphere and atmospheric semiotics?

Despite its common association with professional design and architecture, atmosphere is defined as a particular mental or emotive tone permeating a particular environment by adjusting to the mood of an individual and consolidating it with his or her feelings (Bohme, 2002). The atmospheric approach involves numerous sensory experiences (Zumthor, 2006), and affective and empathetic forms of communication (Pink, Mackley & Morosanu, 2014) that generate feelings, moods, and meaning for people who experience this (Bille et al., 2015; Bohme, 2002; Pink et al., 2014). In short, atmosphere is everything formed by signs through the use of physical or tangible variables and materialities within a
particular space. Meaning-making produced within the given context is likely to generate influence (Wetherell, 2013) in favour of individuals’ identity construction.

Semiotics is one of the analytical tools used to translate signs and codes meaning in a message, which in this case is communication design within the atmosphere. The semiotics resources are “the actions and artefacts that we employ to communicate, whether they are produced physiologically or by means of technologies” (van Leeuwen, 2005, p.3). In this context, the study of semiotics helps the understanding of the nature of meanings involved within these signs and how they are socially contextually interpreted and become meaningful.

This study introduces the term atmospheric semiotics, which means a spatial experience (Bille et al., 2015) that evokes particular moods and feelings (Bohme, 2002) involving numerous sensory experiences (Zumthor, 2006), which eventually generate individual impressions, emotions, interpretations, perceptions, values, and meanings (Bille et al., 2015; Edensor, 2012). Based on this premise, atmospheric semiotics in this study refers to all signs that contribute to the meaning-making process and includes forms of tangible variables such as visual communication design artefacts, sound systems and music, and colour and lighting intensities as part of a megachurch environment. Similarly, the site of engagement is described as a combination of material place, time, and history that facilitates interaction in establishing contextual meaning (Norris, 2004). The contextual experience young people engage with results in an “adventure” as they are involved in religious activities with specific dedication, beliefs, and perceptions.

**Conceptual framework**

Identity construction is described as a continuous process that changes constantly. Researchers (Baldwin & Roberts, 2006; Gee, 2000; Norris, 2004) have agreed that identities
evolve over time influenced by experience as individuals tend to develop their sense of identities through their interactions within the social environment. Gee (2000) mentions that one way to define identity is through discourses, which refer to specific experiences over time that are both social and historical (Gee, 2000; Norris, 2011) within the environment. In turn, these communicational modes promote insight into identity construction (Norris, 2011). Despite identity always changing, and it may never be fully formed, Norris (2011) believes that this path and personal narrativisation constitute individual’s identities. As individuals interact socially in various situations and events, they engage emotionally by bridging a connection with the given environment. This relationship, in turn, shapes their personal perspectives about the world, which eventually may influence the construction of their identities.

Etienne Wenger provides further insight into how people construct their identities through five characteristics (Wenger, 2004). They are identified as negotiated experience, community membership, learning trajectory, nexus of membership, and a relationship between the local and the global. The third characteristic, which is very relevant for this paper is identity as a learning trajectory. This characteristic view identity as an incomplete ever-changing learning process. People define who they are by their historical paths, where they have been, and where they are going. Also, this characteristic, highlights people’s life timelines including their past, present, and future. Through their paths, people learn new things and this learning experience shapes them from time to time.

Similarly, David Kolb’s experiential learning theory (Kolb & Fry, 1974; Kolb, 1984) sets out four stages of the learning cycle (Fig.2) that initially starts with concrete experience, followed by reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation before an individual does his or her own experimentation. The author believes that a person’s preferred style is influenced by various factors such as educational experience, basic knowledge, social
environment, or the personal nature of cognitive structure. In his theory, the new concepts are developed through the new experiences, which are related to the way someone learns. In borrowing the author’s words, “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.38). The author further argues that the abstract concepts obtained from these experiences can be modified then applied in a various range of situations.

The first stage of this model is concrete experience, which refers to a new experience encountered by individuals or the re-interpretation of the existing experience. In this phase, individuals are exposed to their own feelings about their experiences and preferences as likeness or attraction would determine if they wish to continue to the next stage. For instance, if a person is attracted to an exciting experience, he or she would decide that they want to know more about their experience, enjoy the experience for a longer period, or to develop a relationship with the experience, which can lead to experiential/spatial engagement.

Figure 2. Experiential learning theory by David Kolb (1984)
The second stage is a reflective observation where individuals start reviewing the experience and try to obtain understanding. Once people become interested in the experience, they initiate taking a closer look by observing the environment, surroundings, various aspects, and elements that are related to it. Afterwards in the third phase, which is the assimilating stage they think and watch whereby the abstract conceptualisation is developed. This is where the individuals as learners create new ideas based on their reflections from the previous process. The thinking process and reflection leads learners to analysis and conclusions.

Finally, the last stage is the converging period where they apply ideas by actively being involved in experimentation, which in turn creates a new experience. Throughout this whole process, a person performs two variables but not at the same time. The first is processing, which refers to the way people approach a task and the other is the perception that refers to a human’s emotional responses. For example, a learner cannot perform Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualisation (AC) in at the same time as they are both in the same axis. Similarly, both Reflective Observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE) cannot be performed at the same time.

Basically, these four stages can be grouped into two-by-two matrix as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2**

Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflective Observation (RO) - <strong>Watching</strong></th>
<th>Active Experimentation (AE) - <strong>Doing</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concrete Experience (CE) - <strong>Feeling</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE/RO</td>
<td>CE/AE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverging</td>
<td>Accommodating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel and watch</td>
<td>Feel and do</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Atmospheric semiotics as experiential self-reflection – Adapted from Kolb’s model of experiential learning**

By adopting Kolb’s model of experiential learning, the atmospheric semiotics as experiential self-reflection is developed by adjusting the stages within a megachurch atmospheric environment. This model will be used as an analytical framework in the study.

*Figure 3. Atmospheric semiotics as experiential self-reflection adapted from Kolb’s model of experiential learning*
In Kolb’s experiential learning model, the first stage is the experience on the atmosphere that refers to a concrete experience, which evokes certain feelings and is also the initial point in atmospheric semiotics where young people have encounters with the spatial atmosphere and are exposed to signs. These feelings, which Burkitt (2012) refers to, relate to one of the essential ideas of reflexivity. Burkitt argues that emotional reflexivity influences “self-feeling and make us who we are because these “value judgements make us feel something about ourselves” (Burkitt, 2012, p.466). The experience is followed with more interest as these young people wish to explore more things through their observations. The abstract conceptualisation in Kolb’s model is replaced with site of engagement, which is more relevant to the context of identity construction. When the meaning from observations are being produced, the abstract concepts form the connection. After this, while the learners in Kolb’s experiential learning model are involved in experimentation as the learning application, the atmospheric semiotics model focuses on signs interpretation through a personal connection in constructing the “new” identity. The framework will analyse the findings by dividing the experiences into four different stages where the description of each experience informs the next stages and reflects the whole process. The findings will be interpreted based on the literature and will refer to the research questions.

**Research Methodology**

*Research Site and Participant Profile*

In this single case study (Thomas, 2013; Lichtman, 2010), the data was collected from Transcendence Megachurch Australia in Sydney Waterloo that is one of its locations. This qualitative approach is appropriate since it involves the specific and detailed investigation of a category of young people in a chosen campus of Transcendence
Megachurch (Lichtman, 2010) and focuses on their interpretations, perspectives, feelings, and traits.

“Melody” is the pseudonym for a 20-year old Australian university female student who has been attending the church for two years as a casual attendee. Melody was originally born in Malaysia and has been living in Australia for more than ten years and has and became an Australian citizen when she was 13 years old. Melody’s is of Chinese descendancy but Australian culture and education has been a major influence as her parents sent her to an Australian school when she was nine years old. Even though Melody was a Christian from birth, the megachurch atmosphere was new to her and this was a first-time experience. Since attending Transcendence Megachurch for the first time, Melody has become a regular attendee at this church for more than two years and often invites her friends along to introduce them to the concept of a megachurch and its music.

Data Collection Method

The data were collected using a qualitative approach through a semi-structured interview. The interview questions were divided into four sections that include personal details and background, involvement capacity in the church, related concrete experience, and identity and self-reflection on the experience. In addition to the interview, Melody was also invited as a volunteer to share her personal journal about her impressions, feelings, and personal meanings concerning her experiences at the Transcendence Megachurch service she attended, particularly regarding its atmospheric settings and environment. In addition to demographical questions, these are examples others that Melody was asked in the interview:

1. How would you describe your experience (impressions and feelings) attending the Transcendence Megachurch service in Waterloo?
2. In what way do you think that the Transcendence Megachurch Waterloo atmospheric approach is relevant for someone like you?

3. What does a Transcendence Megachurch experience mean to you personally?

4. Have you noticed any difference in your personal being as a young person since you attended Transcendence Megachurch?

Data Analysis

Data analysis was undertaken by coding (Creswell, 2011), summarising, and interpreting of the findings. This initial data analysis was important in locating recurring themes that appeared throughout the interview responses. The procedure started by collecting data from interviews and discussions, then developed themes from the data, whereby relevant theory and a theoretical framework were used to support discussions. The overall analysis referred to the research questions and the findings are contextual as this is a single case study with a small sample of twelve participants (Lichtman, 2010).

Findings

This section discusses findings thematically using Kolb’s framework. Specifically, it starts with a description of Melody’s (the participant’s) concrete experience. It then goes through the exposure of signs within the megachurch environment when Melody started to observe the surroundings and generated meanings, which lead to the next stage that is site of engagement. In this phase, there was a sense of connection being produced, which made the whole experience relevant to her own life and expectations. As Melody related the experience from her perspective, the meanings produced made more sense and took her to an identity adjustment phase, which is the new identity negotiation in the last stage of the cycle.
Stage 1: Concrete experience in the atmosphere

When attending Transcendence Megachurch, Melody and all participants experienced a wide range of activities including worshipping activities, listening to sermons from the preachers, socialising with friends, and watching the church television.

A spatial experience within atmospheric semiotics starts with the exposure to signs in a megachurch environment. Young people experience materiality of the church through a combination of various forms such as music and audio systems, lighting arrangements, graphic images, and video projected on screens. Tangible variables, which are supported and delivered by technological resources, facilitate the interaction between a megachurch and its young audiences. The overall display of this atmosphere communicates a particular message to these young people, by giving certain impressions and provoking feelings for a megachurch. Melody describes her impression about the Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere and comments on its communication design:

“\textit{I really like the view and design. I feel very comfortable as I step into Transcendence Megachurch with the vibrant colours and designs \ldots where it can be seen that so much effort was put into designing the lighting or decorations}”. \textit{Materiality of the megachurch experience was described by Melody as something that suits her personal preference as she mentioned that she likes what she has seen. Melody was able to described clearly from her memories that one of the characteristics of the church is the energising atmosphere that is reflected through its designs and colours. Also, Melody admitted that the atmosphere gives her a sense of comfort and welcoming, considering that this is her first experience attending a megachurch:}

“\textit{I don’t feel familiar with the Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere because my home church was not like that}”.
Despite her unfamiliarity with the new environment, Melody did not take any steps back or avoid the space. On the contrary, this new experience for Melody has been impressive and has made her want to stay and enjoy the atmosphere. On another occasion, Melody also mentioned her fondness for Transcendence Megachurch music:

“I feel comfortable hearing loud audio when attending the church because I love the beat of the music”.

Since Melody’s first encounter with a megachurch spatial experience, this impressive and positive experience has resulted in her becoming a regular attendee for about two years. Furthermore, Melody even excitedly expressed how this megachurch was something she looked forward to and said, “I really enjoyed my time in Danks [street] service and I would definitely return again.”

**Stage 2: Reflective Observation on atmospheric elements**

The feeling of excitement from the first phase motivated Melody as a young person to pay more attention to the atmosphere through an activity of observation based on what she saw and felt:

“Regarding the atmosphere, I feel like the lighting arrangements and screen projectors have been placed in an appropriate manner where people sitting and looking from all angles can see clearly… I always sit in front but from the front I feel the audio systems were on point too - neither too loud nor soft - it’s very clear when the music plays or when the pastor preaches.”

Melody further stressed how the lighting has been arranged perfectly to accommodate each purpose within the service.

“During praise and worship, it has good lighting arrangements but during the sermon, it is a bit dim to take notes.”
In addition, Melody recognised that there were different lighting adjustments for every occasion and admitted that the way Transcendence Megachurch congregations worship in a mostly dark environment was appropriate by stating: “...if it is not too dark, it is good. Dim is good.”

Apart from the lighting arrangement, Melody also noticed that the screen projectors provided for the service were useful: “I really appreciate their effort (in providing screen projectors) so people can see from every angle”.

These technical aspects are important to support and create the overall “feel” of the atmosphere, which is also an essential feature in generating a particular mood for the people within the space. This is when a person starts to correlate observation and his or her feelings as an individual. Melody referred to a familiar situation to describe her megachurch experience as to where she put herself within the experience. In responding to a question on why Melody thought that the Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere was relevant for her, she mentioned:

“As a university student, I really enjoy this vibrant church where everyone is so alive, with full energy to worship God. It reminds me of the atmosphere of being in a nightclub where everyone just goes there to forget their problems/relieve stress. But in this case, we are handing all of our worries and problems to God, giving God all of that we have and just worshipping God wholeheartedly. It really shows me that we can be just as pumped up being in a church with a good community rather than a nightclub where we have to pay money just to enjoy ourselves”.

Initially, Melody referred to her megachurch atmospheric experience as if she was attending a secular event. Once Melody situated herself into the spatial experience, she started to build a connection with the space and atmosphere as the material signs were personal for her.. The
meanings produced in this reflective observation phase directed Melody into a deeper relationship, which explains how the site of engagement arises.

**Stage 3: Site of engagement with megachurch atmospheric semiotics building personal meanings**

Meanings arise from all signs and begin to be produced as they start to make sense. At this stage a personal connection is gradually developed as concrete reality from the atmospheric experience forms an abstract concept (Kolb, 1984). From the results of observation and connection, the signs are transformed and the production of meaning initiates a site of engagement when the atmospheric experience is considered as something relevant to this individual.

Melody has developed a relationship with the spatial experience in the megachurch as she often expressed her liking for the church and believes that the atmosphere is relevant for someone like her. As Melody keeps attending the megachurch more often, the experience becomes more meaningful and personal:

“I really love the service and it feels like home. God has been using the amazing Transcendence Megachurch to speak to me in so many different ways and to encourage me in different seasons of my life. I have encountered many good friends as well in the church. I am really thankful that I can call Transcendence Megachurch my home.”

Referring to the colours and design of the church atmosphere, Melody suggested that the overall arrangement was an influence:

“It really made me feel a sense of belonging and as if I stepped into the house of God, where it can be seen that so much effort was put into designing the lighting or
decorations. I would say that they really relayed the message well in terms of making people feel at home in church.”

Melody continued to describe her experience and her view about the atmosphere that has helped her to be more engaged with the church:

“I also feel that church news is mandatory to show and update the church on the events happening in Transcendence [Megachurch], and it also encourages us to be more involved in church.”

Apart from the communication design aspects of the service like decorations, colours, audio systems, themes, and lighting arrangements, Melody also mentioned the Transcendence [Megachurch] music and expressed how this was the main interest that keeps her coming to Transcendence [Megachurch] and that it also influences her:

“The part I liked best was the music. It speaks to me whenever I worship God as the lyrics are also the living word.”

From her statement above, she indicated that she became connected with the church through her experience with the music, and the arrangement of the space with all the physical communication design aspects. These atmospheric experiences make a meaningful and personal connection for Melody with the site of engagement. Melody admitted that the church has sent the “message” using the signs, symbols, and audio frequency that are effectively utilized and understood by her. The site of engagement gradually conceives the interpretation of meanings that have been produced previously. The understanding of Melody’s interpretation shows how this influence creates a new identity, or at least a certain part of identity is negotiated.
Stage 4: New identity as a result of self-reflection and negotiation of meaning

The identity construction arises gradually over time as the adjustment process complements the individual’s natural identity. An additional feature is included through the experience of signs, signification, and the interpretation process, which eventually promotes the adjustment of the new identity. Following the appearance of the new identity, this individual will reflect on the personal meaning that creates another experience. In regard to this notion, Melody has indicated some changes in her identity since attending Transcendence Megachurch and her first statement was about noticing an emotional impact within herself: “I feel more spiritual and pay more attention to feeding my soul with God’s word.”

Aligned with her expression above, Melody asserted:

“I have been baptised since I came to Transcendence [Megachurch] and feel I am walking closer with God. Ever since I attend connect groups as well, we grow together as a group learning more about Jesus and to take His word to a deeper level as well. I learnt that even though I am a university student, I am a university student of God. God can use me in so many ways I never imagine to reach to other people, even just by starting with small steps or inviting someone to church, being a friend to someone, or investing more in personal relationships.”

When Melody mentioned about being baptised and attending connect groups, these activities were new experiences for her where she made an adjustment into the church community, socialised and learned with her connect groups about Jesus and Christianity teaching. Through these activities, Melody also developed a new identity of being a more spiritual, open minded, and religious person as she had mentioned previously. This cycle occurs each time a new experience of atmosphere is encountered. When a person progresses through this four-stage sequence, a relatively new identity is constructed. Moreover, Melody admitted that the particular atmosphere of the church motivated her to keep attending services:
“The difference I have noticed before and after was before I didn’t really look forward to going to church because I always had this boring image of church in my head from attending other churches. But now after attending Transcendence [Megachurch], I feel more psyched and pumped going to church. My family also told me they noticed a difference in me that I was more talkative, friendly, and not so uptight all the time anymore.”

From Melody’s past experiences attending other churches, the Transcendence Megachurch atmosphere offers a more exciting, interesting, and fun time for Melody. Through Melody’s participation in the church activities, she and her family are able to distinguish some changes in her identity as a young person. Individuals possess different knowledge, previous experiences, interpretations, understandings, levels of education, cognitive abilities, and and personality traits. Since each one of them is not identical, this model would turn out differently for different individuals.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Based on participant perspectives in these preliminary findings, young people tend to describe their sensory experiences in a megachurch atmosphere by comparing them with familiar events and the environment they have experienced outside. These are experiences that evoke and generate similar impressions, emotions, and feelings when young people engage within the atmosphere of this place. Furthermore, the participant agreed that the megachurch atmospheric experience produced personal meanings and added another aspect to her identity, which provided her with a more positive frame of mind.

Atmospheric semiotics as an experiential self-reflection model adapted from Kolb’s model has been used to address the influence of spatial semiotics and site of engagement on identity construction. Throughout the whole process, the experience in each phase gradually
generates a site of engagement, which influenced Melody’s identity. By looking at how these experiences were described by Melody underlines the feelings of excitement that are offered from a megachurch. This suggests that megachurch atmospheric semiotics has a significant contribution to young people’s participation, thus empowering them to become regular attendees and to become involved in more activities by connecting with groups and serving the church as volunteers. The connection they feel with the church in turn creates new experiences. In each experience, the learning process begins with signs exposure and identification before it moves to a more thorough observation, sense of connection, and identity adjustment. Young people begin the entire four-stage cycle of atmospheric semiotics and keep developing their new identities with new experiences, (as self-reflected and negotiated meanings), which can be associated with what Wenger (2004) terms as negotiated experience. To this end, the experience of atmospheric elements in the megachurch has influenced young people’s interaction with the space and is motivating for site of engagement while influencing their identity adjustments to some extent (Ravelli, 2008).

References


Implicit Anomalous Pedagogy? Exploring the Atmospheric Semiotic Experiential Approach in Megachurch Communication Design Signification and its Relationship with Identity Construction

Nina Hansopaheluwakan

Arts and Design Faculty
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
nina.hansopaheluwakan@canberra.edu.au

Abstract

This study presents the exploration of atmospheric semiotics experiential approach to the identity construction process and its interrelation with pedagogical value. Using the atmospheric semiotics model by adapting David Kolb’s experiential learning theory and Stuart Hall’s circuit of culture, this qualitative study aims to demonstrate how young people's experience and engagement with a megachurch atmosphere can influence their identity construction process. Data collected concerns the points of view of twelve participants who attend Transcendence Megachurch in Sydney Australia.

1. Introduction

A definition of identity is often challenging to describe, particularly for young people who are struggling with an identity crisis issue. Not only the concepts of self can often be ambiguous within social and cultural contexts, but coping with the sense of belonging can also be very difficult. Various events, relationships, and environments have been believed to have an influence on young people’s identity [1]. Environmental experience in a social institution like a megachurch is one influence that has a potential to shape the identity construction process. A contemporary megachurch is attractive to young people since it offers freedom of expression within the space, giving them opportunities to be who they are in simple and direct ways.

Many scholars have argued that the experience and interaction within a particular environment are influential for identifying the construction process. This paper is derived from my ongoing PhD study and investigates the correlation of young people’s identity construction through contemporary megachurch site engagement in the Australian context, an exploration so far understudied. Previously, studies have examined atmosphere within particular spaces [2] and how it has an influence on identity construction [1]. The analysis on these subliminal experiences is based on an atmospheric semiotics model [3]. I developed this approach by borrowing David Kolb’s experiential learning theory [4] and Stuart Hall’s circuit of culture [5]. I argue that the identity constructed through these experiences can be categorized as implicit anomalous pedagogy, a terminology initially introduced by Elizabeth Ellsworth [6] in 2005.

2. Related works and existing gap

Ellsworth believes that anomalous places of learning such as architectural sites, exhibitions, events, public spaces, media types or performances are “inventing processual paths, communicative instruments, theatrical performances, provocative interactive encounters – with pedagogical intent,” in ways that emphasize “non-cognitive, nonrepresentational processes and events such as movement, sensation, intensity, passage, and self-augmenting change.” [6] The design aspects tend to combine their pedagogical force, which invite sensations simultaneously to accommodate the individual’s identity negotiation, a concept of experience and becoming. Ellsworth further calls on any future potential for such anomalous pedagogy application, which will unfold through this study. Two studies that represent two different categories that fall within this notion are physical [2] and virtual [7] environments.

There is one particular study that looks at Australian megachurch spatial semiotics [8], however the correlation between the atmospheric experience signification, pedagogy and identity construction was not explored.
3. Atmospheric Semiotics model

Identity construction is a continuous process that evolves constantly in addition to each individual nature identity, such as genetics, races, and personalities. These identity changes are influenced by experience [1] which are represented through the repeated cycle in Figure 1. Atmospheric semiotics in the context of this study has an ability to accommodate the identity construction process of individuals as they encounter the atmospheric experience (through sensations, interactions, intensities, engagements and any other sensing stimulations). In the signification process, individuals encounter materiality of the space, which is delivered through technological resources. After the signs exposed are perceived, the individuals correlate themselves and feel personal connections with the atmosphere, and then the identity construction process starts.

![Atmospheric Semiotics Model](image)

Figure 1. Atmospheric semiotics as experiential self-reflection adapted from Kolb’s model of experiential learning and Hall’s circuit of culture

4. Methodology

The data for this qualitative study was collected from Transcendence Megachurch, a pseudonym for an Australian megachurch, which is located in Sydney. In combination with site observations, twelve participants both male and female aged between 20 to 29 years old were voluntarily recruited for semi-structured interviews and personal journal records. After the data collection, the analysis will be undertaken by clustering, coding, summarizing, and interpreting of data findings.

5. Preliminary Results

Based on participant perspectives in these preliminary findings, young people tend to describe their megachurch experience by comparing it with events that are familiar to them. These are experiences that generate similar emotions, feelings, impressions and perceptions as they engage within the atmosphere. Overall, participants agree that a megachurch atmospheric experience produces self-reflection and personal meanings, which have unexpectedly changed their perceptions, thus providing them with more positive frames of mind.

6. Conclusions

Despite this model application being limited to an Australian megachurch context, I believe this framework could be beneficial for applying to different settings. It would be fruitful to see further study within a broader context using this approach to learn the feasibilities and limitation of the model.

7. Acknowledgement

The author would like to express her gratitude to Dr. Nish Belford and Dr. Thanh Pham, the research supervisors and lecturers from the Faculty of Education at Monash University, for their wisdom and constructive feedback that greatly improved this manuscript.

8. References


