



An Exploration of the Experiences of Adult Third Culture Kids in Relation to their Sense of Belonging and Social Identity

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Abstract: The present study examined the experiences of Third Culture Kids (TCKs), focusing on their ideas of “home,” perceptions of their origins, sense of belonging, and identity formation. The overarching research question guiding the investigation was, “What are the experiences of TCKs in relation to their sense of belonging and social identity?” Participants were required to be at least 18 years old, free from any current mental health diagnoses, and classified as TCKs according to the provided criteria. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim. The collected data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. Three key themes were identified: a) On the Verge of the Cultural Spectrum, b) I Don’t Belong Here, and c) In the Eyes of the Public. The findings highlighted the complexity of belonging and identity among TCKs, particularly in relation to navigating multiple cultural influences, feelings of not fully belonging to a single place or culture, and the ways in which their identities may be perceived by others. Overall, the study demonstrated that experiences of home, belonging, and social identity among TCKs are complex and shaped by their exposure to different cultural and geographical environments. Despite certain limitations, the study met its objective and provides insights that may contribute to a better understanding of the experiences and challenges faced by TCKs.

Keywords: *qualitative research, Third Culture Kids, thematic analysis, identity, belonging*

FOUNDATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE TERM THIRD CULTURE KIDS (TCKS)

The concept of “Third Culture” was first coined by Ruth Hill Useem and her husband, John Useem, in their study of American workers in India (Useem et al., 1963). Their research revealed how these expatriates engaged with their Indian counterparts, forming a unique cultural framework incorporating aspects of their home culture (the first) and the host culture (the second). This “third culture” was not a blend of the two but an intermediary space facilitating their interaction and understanding (Useem et al., 1963). Ruth Useem focused on the children of expatriates, defining Third Culture Kids (TCKs) as those raised in a distinct third culture because their parents worked abroad. Her research identified shared experiences among TCKs that transcended differences in nationality, whether related to their passports or host countries, and regardless of their parents’ professions, such as missionaries, diplomats, military personnel, or business professionals. A pioneering article introduced the TCK concept, highlighting how growing up across multiple countries can shape children’s development, particularly their cultural identity, sense of belonging, and ability to adapt to different cultural environments (Useem, 1973, as cited in Tan et al., 2021).

Globalisation and technological progress have greatly enhanced international mobility, resulting in many children growing up in cross-national and cross-cultural settings. Growing up across different cultural environments can have both positive and challenging effects on children's development. Such experiences may foster cross-cultural skills, multilingualism, and a broader worldview, while frequent transitions may also hinder the development of a stable sense of identity and belonging. Parents often relocate abroad for roles such as missionaries, government officials, businesspeople, healthcare professionals, educators, and military personnel. They acknowledge that children can gain advantages from living in a foreign country, such as acquiring cross-cultural skills, becoming multilingual, and developing a broader perspective on the world. Nevertheless, parents also worry about enrolling their children in boarding schools and about their struggles with feelings of rootlessness and insecurity when they return to their home culture (Wrobbel, 1988).

Children reside internationally for various reasons, including immigration, refugee status, or as expatriates. While these experiences share similarities, they also differ. TCKs reside outside their passport countries due to their parents' temporary lives abroad (Tan et al., 2021).

Roughly 281 million individuals, representing 3.2% of the world's population, are international migrants. This figure has gradually increased from 173 million in 2000 to 221 million in 2010, with forecasts indicating ongoing growth (United Nations, 2020, as cited in Donohue, 2022). When parents, educators, society, and peers shape a child's identity and self-concept, these influences often shift with each cultural transition, creating a unique identity development process distinct from that of individuals raised in a single cultural setting. Schaetti (1996) expands on Bennett's (1993) notions of "encapsulated marginality" and "constructive marginality," which describe two strategies for coping with the experience of growing up abroad (Fail et al., 2004).

Children raised in international environments frequently acquire bilingual or multilingual skills early due to their immersion in diverse languages and cultures (Eidse & Sichel, 2004). This linguistic diversity fosters a broader perspective and adaptability, contributing to their open-mindedness (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009). The unique experiences of living in various countries expand their worldview, allowing them to understand and appreciate different cultural contexts deeply (Eidse & Sichel, 2004; Ezra, 2003). Moreover, TCKs typically show a heightened interest in global politics and foreign languages compared to their peers who remain in their birth countries (Davis et al., 2010; Useem & Downie, 2011, as cited in Kwon, 2018). This international upbringing broadens their linguistic skills and enhances their cultural sensitivity and global awareness, making them more attuned to international issues and diverse perspectives (Kwon, 2018).

IDENTITY AND BELONGING FROM TCKS' PERSPECTIVE

Throughout history, many efforts have been made to articulate identity. Thinkers from philosophy, psychology, and sociology have devoted significant effort to exploring the essence of identity (Cockburn, 2002). Belonging refers to an individual's sense of connection to a specific group, location, or social status (Effects et al., 1974), while "social location" indicates one's status within the societal structure. Frequent transitions and relocations experienced by TCKs have significant implications for their identity formation. Travelling

and moving are typical for TCKs, and establishing deep roots in one location is rare. Even those TCKs who remain in one place for extended periods are usually surrounded by others who frequently move, creating a pervasive sense of impermanence. Constant mobility and the lack of a stable home environment can therefore profoundly affect their sense of self and belonging (Rustine, 2018).

Due to frequent cross-country relocations, TCKs' cultural identities and sense of belonging are often multifaceted. Their sense of belonging tends to be closely tied to others who share their experiences. Despite the diversity of countries they have lived in, TCKs face common challenges, such as a pervasive sense of rootlessness. This has contributed to the formation of a unique identity group that transcends conventional cultural and ethnic boundaries (Pollock et al., 2017). However, recent research highlights that expatriate children from minority groups in Western nations or the Majority World often experience deviations from the traditional TCK narrative. These differences are influenced by classism and racism, which significantly shape their upbringing and interactions in various cultural settings (Tanu, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017; Bassey, 2021; as cited in Chiu, 2023).

The identities of TCKs are continuously evolving through interactions within diverse cultural environments. The intricate and fluid nature of home is mirrored in their distinctive understanding of it as an ongoing concept rather than a fixed location. TCKs may see "home" as a blend of the different places they have resided in and formed connections with (Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2017). Consequently, their notions of identity and home are frequently more relational than geographical (Pang & Hutchinson, 2018).

Identity formation for TCKs often diverges significantly from that of children raised in a single culture, owing to the multifaceted influences shaping their development. Fail et al. (2004) emphasised that identity is a central issue for TCKs, as each relocation challenges their sense of self. The presence of multiple cultural influences, rather than a single home culture, can complicate and even impede identity formation (Rustine, 2018).

Erikson's Identity Development Theory offers a useful framework for understanding this process. Erikson (1968) proposed eight stages through which individuals develop their sense of self, with identity development becoming particularly prominent during adolescence. Erikson (1959) suggested that a well-developed identity encompasses the values, beliefs, and goals to which an individual commits. The fifth stage, identity versus confusion, is a period when adolescents explore different possibilities before developing commitments based on their experiences (Erikson, 1959, as cited in Donohue, 2022). Personal and social influences, including caregivers, peer groups, and cultural contexts, contribute to this process and shape an individual's self-image, beliefs, and behaviours (Adams & Marshall, 1996). This framework is particularly relevant to TCKs, as frequent relocations may require them to adapt to new peer groups and cultures during a developmental period when identity is being formed. Such transitions may complicate the development of a consistent sense of self and help explain why identity formation among some TCKs may be postponed or continue into adulthood (Schaetti, 2002; Useem & Cottrell, 1996).

Pollock et al. (2017) outlined four distinct cultural categories that influence TCK identity development, shaped by their visible and invisible ties to the surrounding culture. These categories underscore how a child's physical appearance and worldview affect how they are perceived by the local community. The dynamic relationship between a child and

their host culture plays a pivotal role in shaping their cultural identity and overall sense of belonging.

Belonging is frequently characterised as the sensation of fitting in and being a member of a group, community, or family, which corresponds with a systemic view of identity development (Hagerty et al., 1992). Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that belonging constitutes a fundamental human necessity and that variations in an individual's sense of belonging can significantly impact emotional health. Enhanced feelings of belonging are associated with positive emotions, whereas diminished belonging often leads to negative feelings. For TCKs who grow up in different nations during their formative years, navigating multiple cultures can complicate both their identity development and sense of belonging (De Waal & Born, 2021).

Belonging is therefore a fundamental aspect of cultural identity formation, particularly for TCKs, whose sense of belonging may be challenged by their transitory lifestyles. Shaules (2010) emphasises that developing a sense of where one belongs is integral to defining personal and cultural identity, including the values one upholds, the kind of person one aspires to be, and preferred modes of communication. Transitions may disrupt this sense of belonging, making it harder to establish a stable identity (De Waal & Born, 2021).

The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) offers another framework for understanding the relationship among identity, communication, and social belonging. CTI holds that communication both constructs and expresses identity and identifies four interconnected layers: personal, relational, enactment, and communal (Hecht et al., 2005). These layers represent different dimensions through which identity is formed and expressed, making the framework particularly relevant to multicultural contexts (Pang & Hutchinson, 2018).

The personal layer relates to an individual's self-concept, including beliefs, values, self-perceptions, and their internal understanding of who they are. For TCKs, this layer can reflect an identity that is continually negotiated across diverse cultural settings. Their fluid concept of "home," which may encompass several places where they have lived and formed connections, further illustrates this complexity (Lijadi & Schalkwyk, 2017). The relational layer concerns how individuals understand themselves in relation to others and how interpersonal relationships and social contexts contribute to identity. The enactment layer focuses on how identity is expressed through communication, behaviours, and interactions, while the communal layer concerns the collective identities of the cultural, ethnic, and social groups to which individuals belong.

Together, these layers provide a multidimensional understanding of how TCKs may construct and negotiate their identities across diverse cultural and social contexts. The framework is particularly relevant to TCKs because their identities are shaped not only by their self-perceptions but also by their relationships, interactions, and affiliations with different cultural communities (Pang & Hutchinson, 2018).

Children and adults in their alleged home country may perceive TCKs as unusual, and TCKs may find integration more challenging when they are viewed as outsiders. Because of their distinctive experiences, TCKs must cultivate a sense of identity and define "home" within their family dynamics and relationships (Cockburn, 2002).

Research indicates that a mobile lifestyle often poses challenges for TCKs in developing a strong sense of identity and building enduring relationships (Eidse & Sichel, 2004). Many TCKs feel most connected to the “third culture,” which exists separately from both their country of origin and the countries where they have lived. Fail (1995) noted that TCKs often prioritise meaningful personal relationships over ties to a specific country or community. Similarly, Sharp (1987) surveyed 530 TCKs and found that 27% identified as global citizens rather than aligning with any particular nation. Moreover, Hannaford (2016) examined how three TCKs engaged with literacy practices in digital environments, revealing that participation in these spaces can provide a valuable sense of belonging. Digital platforms enable TCKs to connect with other globally mobile children, fostering a shared sense of community and identity despite geographical displacement.

Further research has identified areas that require greater exploration. Sharp (1987), for example, highlighted the need to examine social variables affecting children growing up overseas, including differences between children immersed in host cultures and those living primarily within expatriate communities. The role of religiosity, occupational choices, and “World Mindedness” in the socialisation of overseas-experienced children also requires further investigation.

Childhood experiences significantly shape TCKs' identity and sense of belonging well into adulthood (Hayden & Thompson, 1995; McLachlan, 2007). Despite this, limited research has explored the impact of a mobile upbringing on TCKs' identity, sense of belonging, and relationships as they navigate adulthood. Research on Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs) has therefore begun to examine how individuals reflect on their multifaceted and evolving transnational childhoods and the lasting effects of a mobile upbringing on their adult lives and future trajectories (Kwon, 2018).

THE CURRENT STUDY

Gaps in Previous Studies

Yoshida et al. (2009) explored the re-entry experiences of TCKs returning to Japan and identified varying degrees of adjustment difficulty. Acceptance from others significantly eased the transition, whereas those who faced discrimination encountered greater challenges. Similarly, Bikos et al. (2009) emphasised the importance of friendships during the repatriation of Missionary Kids (MKs), highlighting social connections as a critical factor. TCKs may also cultivate a sense of belonging through connections with fellow TCKs, which can help normalise their shared experiences (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009, as cited in Hartman, 2022). Although these studies offer valuable insights into TCK experiences, a substantial body of research has focused specifically on returning to the passport country, particularly within post-secondary education (Klemens, 2008; Wrobbel, 2005; Sotherden, 1992; Thurston-Gonzalez, 2009; Schulz, 1985). Research has also frequently examined TCK experiences during childhood and adolescence, or the re-entry experiences of young adult TCKs (Cottrell & Downie, 2012). Consequently, less attention has been paid to how experiences associated with a mobile, cross-cultural upbringing may continue to shape TCKs' sense of identity and belonging in adulthood. In particular, further exploration is needed to understand how adult TCKs make sense of “home,” their cultural origins, and their sense of belonging across multiple cultural and geographical contexts. Addressing this gap may

provide a broader understanding of TCK experiences beyond the specific context of repatriation and adjustment to a passport country.

Aims

This research explored the narrative experiences of TCKs, specifically investigating their notions of "home," their views on origins, and how they form their identities. The study examined how TCKs characterise "home," taking into account their varied cultural and geographical backgrounds, and assessed whether their concept of "home" encompasses multiple places rather than just one. It also analysed TCKs' perceptions of their origins, feelings of belonging, and concerns about residences and cultural heritage. Additionally, this research focused on how TCKs cultivate and articulate their identities, examining how they integrate different cultural influences into a cohesive self-identity. By addressing these elements, the study aimed to shed light on the intricate relationships between identity and belonging among TCKs, thereby enhancing understanding of their distinctive experiences and challenges. The overarching research question was: What are TCKs' experiences in relation to their sense of belonging and social identity?

METHOD

Design

This research was qualitative in nature. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis framework. Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis is a flexible, practical approach to qualitative research, shaped by various philosophical and epistemological factors. At the core of their framework lies a constructionist epistemology, which holds that knowledge and meaning are constructed through social interactions rather than objective truths simply discovered. This viewpoint implies that the themes identified through thematic analysis reflect interpretations of participants' accounts rather than absolute realities. Moreover, knowledge is recognised as being shaped by the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which it exists. Thematic analysis recognises that interpretations of data are affected by these contextual elements, including the social dynamics encountered during data collection and the broader societal contexts that shape individual accounts. Furthermore, the researcher's perspective significantly shapes the analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) emphasised the importance of reflexivity, encouraging researchers to consider how their personal backgrounds and biases might affect their interpretation of the data. This self-awareness is important for ensuring that the analysis respects participants' viewpoints and represents the complexities of their accounts.

Participants

A convenience sample of five participants was recruited via a recruitment flyer posted on Facebook. To be eligible to participate, individuals were required to be at least 18 years old, have no current diagnosis of a mental health condition, and meet the study's definition of a Third Culture Kid (TCK), defined as individuals who had spent significant portions of their growing years in cultures other than their passport cultures. The study received ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Regent's University London and adhered to the BPS (2021) Code of Ethics and Conduct.

Measures and Materials

Demographic information was collected from participants, including age, gender, ethnicity, birthplace, current location, nationality, and the nationalities of both parents. This information was collected to provide relevant contextual information about the participants and their cultural backgrounds. A semi-structured interview schedule was used, comprising open-ended questions on home, identity, and belonging. Four of the five interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, and one was conducted face-to-face at Regent's University London. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to enable accurate transcription and subsequent thematic analysis.

Procedures

Once potential participants contacted the researcher, they were provided with an information sheet and consent form. After receiving their written consent, an interview was scheduled at a mutually convenient time. The first 15 minutes were spent building rapport with the participants, followed by a semi-structured interview. Afterwards, participants were debriefed, and the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis (TA) was employed to identify, examine, and present patterns or themes within the data. This method systematically organises and structures the data to extract meaningful insights (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The following six phases of thematic analysis were followed: Step One: Getting to Know the Data; Step Two: Labelling Key Parts; Step Three: Finding Broader Themes; Step Four: Refining the Themes; Step Five: Describing and Naming Themes; and Step Six: Sharing the Report.

RESULTS

The data analysis highlighted three primary themes, each encompassing a range of sub-themes that further elucidate the key findings. Table 1 presents the themes and sub-themes identified through the data analysis.

Table 1: Themes and Sub-themes of the Data Analysis

Themes	Sub-themes
On the verge of cultural spectrum	Going through the culture shock The linguist in me My past and my present
"I don't belong here!"	Struggling sense of identity Home is where the family is Who the hell I am?
In the eyes of the public	Perception of other individuals Constantly explaining myself

Theme 1: On the Verge of Cultural Spectrum

The significance of utilising culture as an explanatory tool lies in its ability to "unpack" the concept, as noted by Rohner (1984) and Cole and Whiting (1976). This unbundling approach

suggests that culture should not be treated as a single, categorical variable but rather as a complex, multifaceted construct, as Clark (1987) advocates. By examining culture through this multidimensional perspective, we gain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how cultural factors interact with and influence human behaviour and societal dynamics (Schwartz, 1994). This theme encapsulates the participants' experiences concerning the effects of culture. The first sub-theme, "Going Through Culture Shock," expands upon participants' narratives regarding their encounters with cultures different from their own.

Sub-theme 1.1: Going Through the Culture Shock

This sub-theme captures the participants' narratives as they reflect on their encounters with cultures distinct from their own. These narratives illuminate their upbringing experiences and the contrasts between their native culture and the one in which they primarily matured. Participants discussed how their behaviours differed from those of their peers raised predominantly in that culture, the effects on their sense of identity and expressed their quest for a sense of roots and stability.

Some participants reflected on feeling disconnected from the cultures in which they were mainly raised. Despite spending much of their lives in their destination countries, they questioned their identity and roots, especially when comparing themselves to peers from the same cultural background. These feelings contributed to ongoing struggles with belonging and cultural identity. Religion was also a key factor in shaping their sense of connection to cultural heritage. Religious education and participation in faith communities helped maintain and reinforce ties to their origins, even if they had not lived in their native countries. Religion also affected how they adapted to different cultural norms and practices. Participants discussed the challenges of adjusting to new cultural environments. For some, this caused culture shock early on, and even after years, differences in cultural knowledge and shared experiences could foster disconnection. For instance, they found it hard to relate to peers raised entirely in a single culture, especially when conversations involved culturally specific references such as TV shows or other aspects of popular culture they didn't know. This theme highlighted the difficulties of comparing oneself to peers and the culture shock faced in host countries. Downie (1976) suggests that TCKs often struggle with identity because only one aspect is usually recognised. This may explain why 90% of TCKs feel "out of sync" with their peers (Cottrell & Useem, 1993).

Sub-theme 1.2: The Linguist in Me

This sub-theme dives into participants' personal stories about speaking multiple languages and how this linguistic diversity influences their social connections. Language is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, often shaping how people communicate and relate. For some individuals, articulating their thoughts and feelings in a language other than their mother tongue can be daunting, leading to frustration or inadequacy. Moreover, the nuances of pronunciation, regional accents, and dialects can sometimes lead to misunderstandings, causing others to misinterpret their intentions. These challenges underscore the complex connection between language and social dynamics, stressing the significant influence of communication on interpersonal relationships (Kwon, 2018).

Participants described several ways in which language differences shaped their everyday interactions and sense of belonging. Differences in vocabulary and language use across cultural contexts occasionally resulted in misunderstandings, even when participants were communicating in the same language. Such experiences highlighted how linguistic differences could extend beyond language proficiency to culturally specific meanings and expressions.

Some participants also described difficulties expressing themselves fully in a non-native language, which could contribute to feelings of isolation. Frequent relocation further affected participants' ability to retain previously learned languages. Limited opportunities to use these languages outside educational settings or the family home, alongside the predominant use of English in everyday life, made language retention particularly challenging.

Multilingualism also influenced the formation and maintenance of social relationships. For some participants, maintaining a heritage language provided opportunities to connect with others who shared similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, fostering meaningful friendships and strengthening ties to their cultural roots. Speaking multiple languages could also facilitate communication with relatives from different countries and broaden participants' social networks.

At the same time, participants described multilingualism as having both positive and challenging effects on their social lives. The ability to communicate across languages enabled interactions with a wider range of people and, in some cases, more effective communication. However, language differences could also create barriers and misunderstandings, particularly when participants felt unable to express themselves fully or to develop deeper connections.

Overall, participants viewed multilingualism as an important influence on their social interactions and personal relationships. While navigating multiple languages could enrich communication and facilitate connections across cultural contexts, it could also introduce challenges relating to self-expression, cultural understanding, and the development of interpersonal relationships.

Sub-theme 1.3: My Past and My Present

This sub-theme explored the upbringing experiences of individuals who identify as ATCKs, emphasising the family's role as a primary social influence in shaping their early lives. Reflecting on these experiences offers a deeper understanding of how family interactions and parenting styles affect ATCKs. Gillibrand et al. (2016) found that participants provided valuable insights into their self-expression and family backgrounds, highlighting that an individual's sense of identity begins in infancy, with childhood a pivotal period for identity formation. During this developmental stage, family, culture, and various contextual factors play a significant role in shaping identity (Siegler et al., 2014).

Participants described how growing up in diverse cultural environments and moving frequently shaped their need for stability later in life. After repeatedly adapting to new places, cultures, and relationships, some participants developed a stronger desire for permanence and a sense of belonging.

Participants also reflected on the challenges of explaining their cultural backgrounds to others. Those with parents from different nationalities, or who had grown up across different cultures, sometimes found that others struggled to understand the complexity of their identity.

Several participants discussed how growing up in different cultural environments had influenced their personality development. They felt that their cultural backgrounds had shaped their values, beliefs, behaviours, and the way they interacted with others.

Frequent relocation also affected how some participants formed emotional connections. Repeatedly having to leave friends and familiar environments led some to avoid becoming too emotionally attached to others, as they expected they would eventually have to say goodbye again.

Participants also discussed how their family backgrounds and dynamics continued to shape their adult experiences. Their upbringing affected their relationships, emotional well-being, and social interactions, including how they formed and maintained friendships in adulthood.

Theme 2: I Don't Belong Here!

The quest to articulate the concept of identity has spanned numerous centuries. Many philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists have dedicated substantial time and energy to investigating and debating identity (Cockburn, 2002). Furthermore, belonging pertains to an individual's association with a particular group, place, or social standing (Effects et al., 1974), whereas "social location" refers to a person's position within the societal framework. This theme focuses on the participants' sense of belonging and where they consider themselves to belong. By delving deeper into the concept of belonging, three sub-themes were identified: Struggling Sense of Identity, Home is Where Family Is, and Who the Hell I Am. Each sub-theme is explained separately below:

Sub-theme 2.1: Struggling Sense of Identity

This sub-theme delves into the rich narratives and diverse visions of participants as they explore their identities. It highlights their struggles to define who they are while navigating the complexities of fitting into a specific culture. Through their stories, we gain insight into their challenges, the emotions they grapple with, and the transformative moments that shape their understanding of self within their cultural landscape. The ongoing transitions and relocations experienced by Third Culture Kids (TCKs) significantly shape their identity formation. For TCKs, frequent travel and moving are commonplace, making it unusual for them to form enduring connections in any single place. Even those who remain in one location for an extended time are often surrounded by peers who also move frequently, contributing to a pervasive sense of impermanence. This unique experience raises many questions about TCKs' identities, as their constant mobility and lack of a stable home environment can profoundly influence their sense of self and belonging (Rustine, 2018).

Participants articulated diverse experiences of cultural affiliation and explored how these shaped their sense of identity. A subset reported a pronounced connection to specific national or cultural groups, often rooted in familial and upbringing backgrounds, regardless

of their intentions to reside permanently within those contexts. This perceived affiliation contributed to their cultural identity and facilitated a deeper understanding of their self-concept.

In contrast, some participants described struggling for many years to develop a clear sense of identity or to understand where they belonged. Growing up across different countries and cultural environments sometimes made it difficult to identify with a single place or culture. Participants described this as a gradual process, with their understanding of their identity developing over time and through their life experiences.

Participants also reflected on their desire to find a place where they could finally feel settled. After frequent moves throughout their lives, some developed a strong desire for stability and permanence. Living in one place for an extended period allowed them to become familiar with the local community and gradually develop a stronger sense of belonging.

For some participants, however, belonging remained complex. They described feeling connected to more than one cultural background without fully belonging to either. This sometimes created uncertainty about their identity and made it difficult to define where they considered home.

Relationships and marriage were also discussed in relation to belonging and stability. For some participants, forming a relationship with someone who had strong roots in a particular place contributed to their own sense of stability. Over time, living within the same community and developing personal connections helped to strengthen their sense of belonging.

Sub-theme 2.2: Home is Where Family is

This sub-theme explores participants' perceptions of home, particularly their responses to the fourth interview question on their definitions of home. Many participants conveyed that their concept of home is fundamentally intertwined with their family. They highlighted the profound emotional connections and memories forged within these familial bonds, emphasising how these relationships influence their sense of belonging and security in their living spaces. This perspective underscores families' pivotal role in shaping their residential experiences, with many asserting that home is more than a physical space; it is a sanctuary filled with love and shared moments.

Participants described different ways of understanding what home means. For some, home was connected to a particular place where they had spent a significant part of their lives and had developed a sense of familiarity. However, they also described home as flexible, changing over time and through different life experiences.

For others, home was less tied to a specific geographical location and more associated with a sense of comfort and belonging. Some participants felt more at home in the countries where they currently lived than in their countries of origin, yet still found it difficult to identify a single physical place as their true home.

Family also played an important role in participants' understanding of home. Rather than viewing home merely as a physical or geographical location, participants associated it with familiarity, acceptance, comfort, emotional connection, and a sense of being rooted.

This aligns with previous research suggesting that home can represent both a physical space and a source of social and emotional connection (Lijadi & Van Schalkwyk, 2017; Spencer, 2005, as cited in Carroll, 2019). Participants' accounts indicated that family relationships, shared experiences, and a sense of familiarity contributed to their understanding of home and shaped their broader sense of identity and belonging.

Sub-theme 2.3: Who the Hell I Am?

This sub-theme explores the diverse and enriching experiences of individuals who identify as TCKs. It examines how their unique backgrounds and the interplay of multiple cultures shape their identities, relationships, and perspectives. The focus is on understanding the challenges and opportunities they face while navigating diverse cultural landscapes, emphasising the emotional and social complexities that arise from their upbringing and lifestyle. Through personal narratives and reflections, this sub-theme seeks to provide deeper insights into what it means to be a TCK and the lasting impact these experiences have on their lives.

The Personal Layer pertains to an individual's self-concept and identity, encompassing their beliefs, values, self-perceptions, and internal sense of self. It reflects how individuals perceive themselves and their inner narrative about their identity (Pang & Hutchinson, 2018).

Participants described difficulties adapting to unfamiliar cultural environments, particularly during adolescence. Limited familiarity with local cultural norms and expectations sometimes hindered their ability to form friendships and navigate social relationships. Some also perceived differences in the social environment, such as greater competitiveness, which compounded the challenges of adjusting to a new culture.

Growing up across different cultures also contributed to feelings of being an outsider. Some participants described uncertainty about where they belonged and felt that they were not fully accepted within any particular cultural group. These experiences led them to question their cultural roots and to reflect on where they truly belonged.

More broadly, participants described growing up across cultures as an ongoing process of navigating differences between their own cultural identities and the expectations of the societies around them. Feeling different, misunderstood, or disconnected from others sometimes contributed to feelings of alienation and influenced how participants developed relationships and understood their identities.

At the same time, multicultural experiences could positively influence participants' social relationships. Some participants formed friendships with others from multicultural or immigrant backgrounds, and shared experiences fostered a sense of connection and understanding. Family backgrounds and connections across different countries also created opportunities to form friendships, suggesting that multicultural experiences could both complicate and broaden participants' social networks.

Theme 3: In the Eyes of the Public

This theme explores others' perspectives on the participants, highlighting the subtleties of their observations, judgments, and perceptions. It emphasises how individuals are viewed

by their peers and the wider community, illuminating how these external perceptions shape the participants' identities and experiences. This theme is divided into two sub-themes: Perception of Other Individuals and Constantly Explaining Myself.

Sub-theme 3.1: Perception of Other Individuals

This sub-theme encapsulates participants' insights regarding the interview schedule's final question, which explored their perceptions of how individuals in their social circles perceive them. Participants offered a range of responses, reflecting on their relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. These reflections revealed their self-image and the varying opinions and attitudes others may hold about them, highlighting the complexities of social interactions and the importance of external perceptions in shaping their identities.

Participants reflected on how they were perceived by others and how these perceptions could shift with the social and cultural context. Different aspects of their identities became more salient in different settings, including their professional roles, cultural backgrounds, interests, and personal characteristics. This meant that participants could be viewed differently depending on what others knew about their experiences and backgrounds.

Cultural background also shaped how some participants were perceived within their social circles. Some described being seen as more Westernised or less connected to their cultural roots because of their experiences of living across different countries and cultures. These perceptions sometimes prompted participants to reflect on the differences between how they understood their own identities and how others interpreted them.

Participants also described how their life experiences influenced perceptions of their personalities. For example, qualities such as independence, resilience, and self-reliance were recognised by others and shaped how participants were approached in their relationships. These accounts suggest that participants' identities were understood by others through a combination of their cultural backgrounds, life experiences, social roles, and individual characteristics.

Sub-theme 3.2: Constantly Explaining Myself

The final sub-theme explores the participants' reflections and insights gained from discussions with individuals who may not fully comprehend or appreciate their diverse backgrounds. This examination highlights the challenges and misunderstandings in such interactions, as well as the participants' efforts to bridge these gaps through dialogue. Their reflections illuminate the emotional and cognitive processes in navigating these conversations, ultimately revealing how these exchanges contribute to their personal growth and understanding of identity. Throughout the conversations, many participants noted difficulties caused by others' lack of understanding of their cultural backgrounds. They shared instances in which they repeatedly had to explain and justify their identities.

Participants described having their cultural backgrounds questioned or misunderstood by others. Growing up across different countries and cultures sometimes made their identities difficult for others to understand, particularly when their family

backgrounds involved multiple nationalities. These misunderstandings could contribute to feelings of isolation and make it more difficult for participants to develop a complete sense of belonging.

Participants also described having to explain their cultural identities to others, particularly because many people were unfamiliar with the concept of a Third Culture Kid (TCK). This sometimes led to hesitation when discussing their backgrounds, as participants were aware that their experiences could be misunderstood or affect how others perceived them. People with similar multicultural experiences were often more likely to understand their backgrounds without further explanation.

However, participants differed in how they related to the TCK label. While the concept helped explain experiences of growing up across cultures and navigating questions of belonging, some participants did not necessarily use the term to define themselves. Instead, they preferred to describe their individual experiences without relying on a particular label.

DISCUSSION

The current qualitative study explored the accounts of five ATCKs, focusing on their sense of identity and belonging, their understanding of home, and the factors that influenced how they perceived themselves and how they were perceived by others. Three key themes were identified: On the Verge of Cultural Spectrum, I Don't Belong Here, and In the Eyes of the Public. Overall, the findings suggest that identity and belonging among ATCKs are complex and may be shaped by cultural transitions, family relationships, social interactions, and others' perceptions.

A key finding was that growing up across different cultural environments could create uncertainty about cultural identity and belonging. Some participants described feeling disconnected from the cultures in which they had been raised and questioned where they belonged, while others developed meaningful connections with people from multicultural or immigrant backgrounds. Frequent relocation also appeared to have lasting effects, with some participants describing a stronger desire for stability in adulthood and difficulties forming emotional attachments due to repeated experiences of leaving friends and familiar environments. These findings support Pollock et al. (2017), who suggested that TCKs may experience difficulties establishing roots and may develop a stronger sense of connection with individuals who share similar cross-cultural backgrounds. However, the findings also demonstrate that a multicultural upbringing was not experienced solely as a difficulty, as shared cross-cultural backgrounds could facilitate social connection and broaden participants' relationships.

Another important finding concerned participants' understanding of home. Rather than consistently identifying home as a single geographical location, participants associated it with familiarity, acceptance, comfort, emotional connection, and, in particular, family. Some participants felt more at home in their current country than in their country of origin, yet still found it difficult to identify a single physical location as their true home. This suggests that, for ATCKs, home may function as a relational and emotional concept rather than simply a geographical one. This finding aligns with Meijering et al. (2016), who

emphasised the role of stability and routines in TCKs' sense of home, and with Pollock & Van Recken (2009), who highlighted the importance of relationships and shared experiences.

The findings further suggest that ATCK identity is shaped not only by how individuals understand themselves but also by how others perceive them. Participants described being perceived differently depending on their cultural background, social context, professional roles, and personal characteristics. Some were viewed as more Westernised or less connected to their cultural roots, creating a gap between their own understanding of their identity and how others interpreted it. Participants also described repeatedly having to explain complex cultural backgrounds to people who found them difficult to understand. This indicates that ATCK identity may be continually negotiated through social interactions rather than being determined solely by nationality or country of origin.

Finally, these findings extend a literature that has frequently concentrated on TCKs returning to their home or passport countries, particularly during adjustment to higher education (Wrobbel, 2005; Sotherden, 1992; Thurston-Gonzalez, 2009; Schulz, 1985; Klemens, 2008). Rather than focusing solely on repatriation, the present study demonstrates how the effects of a cross-cultural upbringing may remain relevant to identity, belonging, relationships, and understandings of home in adulthood. This is particularly important because previous research has more commonly examined TCKs during childhood and adolescence, or ATCKs during transitions to their countries of citizenship (Cottrell & Downie, 2012).

LIMITATIONS

The findings of the present study should be interpreted in light of several limitations specific to the research design and sample. First, the study involved only five participants, limiting the range of ATCK backgrounds represented in the data. Although the study was designed to provide an in-depth qualitative exploration, the small sample means that the findings cannot reflect the full diversity of ATCKs, whose experiences may differ according to cultural background, migration history, family circumstances, and the countries in which they have lived.

Second, participants were recruited via a Facebook-advertised flyer. This strategy may have produced a self-selecting sample, as individuals particularly interested in their TCK identity or strongly concerned about belonging may have been more likely to volunteer. Consequently, the perspectives represented in the study may differ from those of ATCKs who do not strongly identify with the TCK label or are less likely to participate in research on identity and belonging.

A further limitation concerns the interview format. Four interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams, while one was conducted face-to-face. Although the same semi-structured interview approach was used, differences between online and face-to-face interaction may have affected rapport, communication, and the level of detail participants felt comfortable sharing. Future research could use a consistent interview format across participants or examine whether the interview setting influences how ATCKs discuss personal and cultural identity.

Finally, the study focused specifically on identity, belonging, and understandings of home. Other aspects of ATCK life, including occupational experiences, intimate

relationships, mental well-being, discrimination, and long-term adjustment, were not explored in depth. Future research could therefore investigate how these areas interact with identity and belonging across different stages of adulthood.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The findings have implications for both future research and professional practice. The study suggests that ATCK identity should not be understood solely in relation to nationality or country of origin. Participants' accounts indicated that identity may be shaped by multiple cultural influences, relationships, and external perceptions. Professionals working with internationally mobile individuals, including counsellors, psychologists, educators, and university support services, may therefore benefit from recognising that ATCKs can experience belonging across multiple cultural and relational contexts rather than identifying with a single fixed cultural background.

The findings also highlight the importance of family and emotional connection in understandings of home. For some participants, home was associated more strongly with familiarity, acceptance, and the presence of family than with a particular geographical location. This suggests that support for ATCKs should avoid assuming that returning to a passport country necessarily represents a return "home". Exploring what home means to the individual may provide a more accurate understanding of their sense of belonging and emotional security.

Another important implication concerns the role of external perceptions. Participants described situations in which others interpreted their identities differently from how they understood themselves, and some reported repeatedly having to explain their cultural backgrounds. This suggests that greater awareness of complex and multicultural identities may reduce misunderstandings and pressure on ATCKs to fit into simplified cultural categories. In counselling and educational settings, allowing individuals to define their own cultural identities, rather than assigning identities based on nationality or appearance, may foster a stronger sense of recognition and belonging.

Future research should build on these findings by including a wider range of ATCKs from different cultural, geographical, and family backgrounds. Further studies could also examine whether experiences of identity and belonging differ according to age, gender, cultural background, number of relocations, or stage of adulthood. Longitudinal research may be particularly useful for understanding how identity, relationships, and perceptions of home change over time. Research could also explore the role of social support, multicultural communities, and professional or educational environments in promoting belonging among ATCKs.

CONCLUSION

Scholarly research on TCKs has primarily focused on the challenges they face in adjusting to and reintegrating into their home countries, particularly regarding higher education (Wrobbel, 2005; Thurston-Gonzalez, 2009; Schulz, 1985; Sotherden, 1992; Klemens, 2008). This body of work underscores the importance of "home" and its influence on the experiences of global nomads, offering valuable contributions to fields such as cultural studies, psychology, and sociology. Additionally, the study aimed to explore the complex dynamics

of identity and belonging for TCKs. Three key themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews: *(On the Verge of Cultural Spectrum, I Don't Belong Here, and In the Eyes of Public)*. The primary research question— “What are the experiences of TCKs regarding their sense of belonging and social identity?”—guided this investigation, and despite the study’s limitations, it successfully captured participants’ unique experiences as TCKs.

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