

Keep Grounded in a Flowing World: The Influence of Interpersonal Relationships and Social Networks on Third Culture Kids

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Abstract

This study explored the unique identity formation process of Third Culture Kids (TCKs), children who grow up in cross-cultural settings and face distinct challenges in developing a cohesive sense of self. Unlike peers raised within a single culture, Third Culture Kids navigate a complex blend of shifting cultural influences and lack clear guidance. While previous literature acknowledges the uniqueness of the Third Culture Kids experience, there remains a lack of qualitative research that examines how identity is shaped through everyday social interactions. To address this gap, the study adopted a qualitative approach, conducting in-depth interviews with seven third culture kids who have lived internationally across many different cultures. The finding reveals that interpersonal relationships, particularly family and peers, and digital networks such as social media play a central role in anchoring Third Culture Kids' identities. As their environments change, these social connections help maintain a sense of continuity, fostering resilience and enabling the formation of hybrid or fluid cultural identities. By examining these dynamics, this research contributes to a broader understanding of cross-cultural identity and emphasizes the crucial role of supportive networks in shaping Third Culture Kids' identities.

Keywords: Third Culture Kids, Adolescence identity, Adolescence Social Network

1. Introduction

Globalization is one phenomenon that defines the 21st century. Commerce, cultural exchange and movements across borders have created numerous new knowledge and ways of life. As families move across the globe in search of new opportunities, their children often grow up in cultures different from that of their parents. These children, known as third culture kids (TCKs), face unique and complex challenges in developing a stable sense of identity. While TCKs benefit from rich multicultural experiences, they frequently face a sense of disconnection—not fully belonging to both their local culture and their parents' cultural heritage. Existing academic literature recognizes the uniqueness of TCKs, and the identity struggles they face. However, there remains a notable gap in qualitative research that investigates how identity is shaped through TCKs' lived experiences. The study addresses the gap by interviewing participants who spent their developmental years around the globe for a discussion on self-perception. The study has three objectives: (1) to examine if third culture kids experience difficulties defining their identities; (2) to explore the key factors that contribute to the development of TCKs; and (3) to understand how interpersonal relationships influence the identity formation process of TCKs. The study hopes to generate nuanced and narrative-based recounts of how TCKs experience and negotiate their identities through interactions with their peers, families and teachers. The findings will contribute to both academic knowledge and practical insights for practitioners working with cross-cultural youth.

2. Literature Review

In an increasingly globalized world, cross-border migration and international careers have become a common lifestyle. For children who follow their parents' international voyage from an early age, such as the kids of missionary and military professionals, relocation becomes a continuous pattern in their lives. Usually referred to as Third Culture Kids (TCKs), these children spend most of their childhood and teenage years moving across cultures, but not fully familiarized with any of them. A "third culture" derives from the fact that TCKs live in between their parents' culture, or their home culture, and the host culture of the areas they reside in (Pollock et al., 2009). Living in environments with a variety of cultural traditions and norms, TCKs usually experience a unique but complex upbringing, one that offers both a high level of adaptability and the difficulties in developing a stable understanding of their identities (Limberg & Lambie, 2011). As TCKs become more adept in adopting new cultural practices, they struggle with finding the right word to describe their own identities. Pollock et al. (2009) find that TCKs may adjust their identity to fit into the climates of their schools or the countries they live in. Impossible to pinpoint one specific place or culture they grow up in, TCKs face the challenge of being "outsiders" to whichever social groups they interact with. While identity development is an important psychological task during teenage years, TCKs are more prone to role confusion and low psychological well-being than average teenagers (Cockburn, 2002). The absence of long-term relationships, such as close friendships and extended family makes it difficult for TCKs to trust others (Sears, 2011).

When it comes to seeking support, TCKs find a stronger sense of belonging in those who share a similar live experience of going across countries, rather than those from any familiar culture. This stronger sense of belonging refers to shared emotional and psychological experiences, such as navigating cultural transitions and dealing with identity ambiguity. Among fellow TCKs, there tends to be an unspoken understanding of what it means to constantly adapt, reframe identity, and navigate through conflicting cultural expectations. Relationships with others who have lived similar lives can offer a deeper sense of validation, empathy, and connection than those based merely on shared nationality or heritage (Walters & Auton-Cuff, 2009).

Interpersonal relationships, including friends, teachers and parents, are also shown to have a deep impact on the well-being and identity development of adolescents (Moore et al., 2018). Eccles (2004) finds that interpersonal support is critical for children graduating from primary schools, who experience many changes in social structure in the organizational settings (Eccles, 2004). When connections to peers and teachers are also subject to change, parents are a stable source of emotional support and remain as role models for children to build their identities (Castro et al., 2015). Social networks are the most important factor for teenagers' well-being, overweighting macro-level factors such as income and other social backgrounds (Kiuru et al., 2019).

More recent research in the field of TCK focuses on individual adjustment and finds that individual, interpersonal and environmental factors all impact the extent to which TCKs adjust to new life (Mireka Caselius & Vesa Suutari, 2025). Among all actors, family and friends are highlighted as crucial players to facilitate the adjustment process (De Sivatte et al., 2019). A 2021 study found that TCKs form a positive and flexible sense of identity shaped more by relationships than by a fixed cultural background (de Waal & Born, 2021). Therefore, interpersonal relationships and social networks remain highly relevant in understanding TCK's identity formation.

3. Methods

A qualitative research method was used to examine how transition between cultures and interpersonal relationships affect TCKs' understanding of who they are. Seven participants with living experiences all over the world were interviewed. Each participant lived in places outside of their parents' culture for more than 3 years during the developmental years. 3 out of 7 participants have lived in the USA during their childhood. Meanwhile, the rest lived in 8 other locations: Japan, the UK, New Zealand, the Philippines, Thailand, Myanmar, Singapore and South Africa. Interview questions were composed of three parts — basic information on the history of moving, understanding of identity and the influence of social networks. Results were interpreted through content analysis of answers from the interviews.

4. Results

Table 1. Interview Result

Participants	Age at Move	Countries Lived In	Reasons for Moving	Primary Identity	Influence of Social Networks
P1	High School	China → USA	Education	Chinese	Family and social media maintained cultural connection
P2	Childhood	Inner Mongolia → Shanghai → USA	Education	Chinese	Strong parental influence, local culture adaptation
P3	High School	China → UK	Education	Chinese + Global Awareness	Felt "Californian" traits due to cultural exposure
P4	Early Teens	China → USA	Parents' Work	Chinese	Close ties with family, influenced by social circles
P5	Various Ages	Southeast Asia (multiple)	Parents' Work	Southeast Asian	Identified with a regional identity rather than national
P6	Childhood	Multiple Countries	Parents' Work	Hybrid Identity	Maintained cultural closeness through social media
P7	Pre-teen	China → Multiple Countries	Education	Chinese	International school helped with integration

4.1 Reasons for Moving

All participants of this study answered that their reason for becoming a TCK was either for better education or due to their parents' work. In both situations, participants had little to no power to make decisions. 3 out of the total participants responded with pursuing better education, moving to a better school, or changing their education system due to various reasons. The rest 4 participants reported it as due to their parents' work. One of the participants mentions,

“I moved to the US when I was 15 for a better education. In China, students have a public education system, which means I can't attend international schools. I knew I wanted to attend University in the US, so I just went to an international school in Boston so that I could leave China's public education system.”

Participants spoke not only about how they wanted a better education in a private school but also how their nationality had limited them in certain ways. Despite the acknowledgement, the participants were not the ones initiating the decision to move. The rest of the participants were forced to move by their parents' decisions, having little to no choice about the destination.

4.2 Identities and Sense of Belonging

In this study, participants mentioned that difficulties did exist moving into a new culture, but most of them denied losing their original identity. In one-on-one interviews with the participants, the question “Please list some of your identities; how would you introduce who you are?” was asked of each independent participant. One participant answered,

“My nationality is Chinese, but I've never lived there before, and I have lived in multiple countries. I personally feel that I do not have a strong connection with any of the following countries. However, I would say I am Chinese. This is because all of my family stays there, and I visit China almost every year. Combining this with studying abroad, I identify as one of those privileged Chinese international students who study abroad to live an easier life than others in China.”

In this answer, the participant stated multiple times that he had only one identity, being a Chinese. Although he did mention that there was no strong connection between any of the countries he had lived in, interpretations can be made that he was mostly attached to China due to his parents. Studying abroad did not stop him from losing his Chinese identity, but he even strengthened it by visiting China almost every year with his parents.

A few other participants elaborated on this statement that becoming a TCK didn't change how they are as a person. “I am ethnically inter-Mongolian, born in Shanxi, but I call Shanghai my home. I always feel like I am Chinese, although I went to the US during high school. I definitely feel like I am more attached to China than any other country,” or “I never really question my identity; I also thought I was Chinese and always will be even though I go to school in a different country.”

Meanwhile, some identities seemed less important or relevant. Participants admitted that new identities came along with entering a new environment. One particular response was, “I have always identified myself as Chinese and Asian. At the same time, I know I am somewhat different from my friends who stayed in China for the whole time. Yes. After I came to the UK, I realized I have many traits people will consider as “Californian. I guess that is a part of the new identity. I would say I am still very Chinese. But my accent is totally Californian, and my way of dressing is definitely Californian style” In conclusion, while past identities continue to influence self-perception, participants see new elements of identities emerge and impact how they define themselves.

4.3 Global Awareness

Global awareness is knowledge of the interrelations of local, global, international, and intercultural issues, trends, and systems. As TCKs are more exposed to different cultures during their developmental years, they tend to have more global awareness. In response to the point, participants mentioned, “I would still consider myself a TCK because I am aware of the cultures around me.” and “I wouldn’t consider changing my identities, but I am just being more aware of the different cultures around me.” In both answers, they have sensed the cultural differences in their environment. Becoming a TCK helped them develop the skills of being globally aware; one participant even refused to state herself as any specific country because she believed that she had accepted cultures from more than one place. “I feel I will just have more identity as a Southeast Asian, not specifically a country.”

One of the common conditions found across the participants were international schools. All of the TCKs have attended international school while they have become TCKs. As international students come from all over the world, it is easy for TCKs to interact with people across different cultures.

4.4 Interpersonal Relationships

As mentioned earlier, TCKs are forced to move to a new country due to their parents’ decision. One of the participants mentioned, “I would talk to my parents about finding it hard to live in a new environment. Yes, my parents supported me.” It shows that family relationships are essential to TCKs when coming to a new culture. Most participants claimed to have inherited their cultural traditions from their family. One of the TCKs highlighted that she shared identities with her brother, and “He taught me that everyone has a unique identity, and I think he definitely imprinted that on me. He didn’t decide my identity, but I shared his.” After her brother graduated from high school, he still supported her remotely.

Interpersonal relationships are not limited to physical interaction. TCKs are able to connect with people worldwide by using technology and social media platforms. During COVID-19, while people are asked to stay indoors, one TCK living apart from her family shared her experience with online connections. “Keeping contact with my family and friends gave me a lot of support during the remote time.” An interviewee also mentioned the role of social media platforms in helping her maintain cultural closeness to her home-country. Although growing up in many different countries, the interviewee continued using XiaoHongShu, one of the most popular platforms for mandarin speakers all over the world. Since she could always learn about what is trending in mainland China, the interviewee felt a stronger ownership of Chinese culture.

5. Discussion

The result of the research confirms the hypothesis that TCKs are influenced by their cross-cultural experience and face challenges in forming concrete sense of cultural identities. The results indicate a few main factors that contribute towards a TCK’s identity: families, peers, social media and education. In addition, the role of nationality, despite the removal of borders under globalization, still plays a defining role in how TCKs view themselves.

Interpersonal relationships have the greatest influence on TCK’s identity. An interpersonal relationship is defined as a strong, deep, or close association or acquaintance between two or more people that may range from fleeting to enduring. These relationships are formed through various forms of interaction such as communication, emotional connection, shared experiences, and mutual support. They can exist between family members, friends, colleagues, or

romantic partners, and are influenced by cultural, social, and individual factors (Ye & Ye, 2020). Interpersonal relationships can be categorized by the level of closeness. For our interviewees, family and friends were highlighted as main social networks, with family having a greater influence than friends. This finding conforms to current literature that teenagers tend to have an emphasis on family and friends as primary social networks (Hill & Wang, 2015). Most interviewees identify with the same nationality as their parents, even though they have not lived in their parents' country for an extended period of time. Siblings are also highlighted from the interview as a source for support, which confirms earlier research by Doherty et al. (2023), that having siblings was associated with greater resilience. Some interviewees claim that friends do not contribute to their narratives of self, but they do recognize that lifestyles such as ways of dressing and internet slang are mostly learned through friends. Overall, it is demonstrated that a high level of closeness would lead to larger influence on identity forming for TCKs.

Social media is another paramount factor of influence that emerged during the interview. Social media refers to online platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, which allow users to share content and communicate with people of similar interests. For the interviewees, social media is important because it helps maintain long-term social relationships, especially friendships, despite the physical distances between individuals. As adolescents have a heightened desire to integrate into social groups, online interactions help TCKs to maintain old friends and socialize with new friends, reducing the loneliness and depression they may feel as newcomers. While previous literature focuses on the constraints of physical relocation on TCKs (Pollock et al., 2009), the interview results reflect the change in teenagers' lifestyle in the past decade and echo recent research on the positive effect of social media use in facilitating identity exploration (Weinstein & James, 2022). Online communication and virtual communities provide consistent opportunities for TCKs to build friendships and to gain social and cultural awareness. However, there has also been research on potential threats to wellbeing associated with adolescent social media use, such as cyberbullying, symptoms of anxiety and addiction to screen scrolling (O'Reilly et al., 2018). Higher levels of social media use may also reduce in-person interactions and lead to internalizing of difficulties (Khalaf et al., 2023). As TCKs rely on social media for connections and validations from peers online, they are more vulnerable to psychological distress and feelings of isolation.

Educational settings should also be taken into consideration on the topic, as all interviewees in the research attended international schools. Throughout the world, international schools have standardized education systems and curated student life focusing on sports, art and cultural diversity. International schools create an environment which TCKs are already familiar with, allowing them to seamlessly integrate into the community and gain a sense of belonging. This would mitigate some of the difficulties TCKs face and even turn their experience into a form of social and cultural capital that helps prove their class status. Most international schools emphasize the need to engage with local cultures and communities but provide students with a filter that would allow students to observe from the outside rather than directly experiencing culture shocks.

6. Limitations and Considerations

During the investigation process of this study, several limitations and considerations were present. Primarily, due to the limited resources and access to public data, only 7 participants were involved in the one-on-one interview. This can be a limitation as 7 participants are comparatively small scale of analysis; they cannot represent all possible results on the cultural impact of becoming a TCK. Admittedly, this study excludes and does not apply to TCKs that had gained this identity by forced migration, for example, refugees and asylum seekers. Additionally, it is important to note that there is no way to confirm the credibility of the information interviewers provide as the concept of self-enhancement comes to play; a person deliberately presents themselves positively. This can sometimes involve lying or exaggeration to make others see them as more competent, likable, or morally good.

The definition commonly used today is defined by Pollock and Van Reken in 2009. 15 years later, along with technologies developing exponentially and diverse ways of living, the term TCK itself may be too unilateral to define a group of people that live outside their parents' culture. As the research demonstrates the importance of social network and interpersonal relationships, the paper proposes a new way to define third culture kids: not by the occupation and class of their parents, but rather by personal experiences of complexity and uniqueness.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the unique identity formation process of third culture kids (TCKs), who navigate a complex landscape of shifting cultural environments. Rather than aligning with specific local cultures, TCKs primarily draw upon interpersonal relationships and social networks to construct their sense of self. As their living circumstances evolve, the reliance on family, friends, and social media becomes crucial in anchoring their identities. This adaptive strategy underscores the importance of community and connection in fostering resilience and continuity amid change. Understanding the dynamics of TCK identity not only enriches our comprehension of cross-cultural experiences but also emphasizes the significance of supportive networks in shaping who they are. Parents should be aware of the potential confusion and isolation their children face and actively discuss the topic to express support. School counselors should develop understanding of the topic, pay extra attention to third culture kids to help them better integrate into new environments. While the TCK population may continue to increase, measures should be taken to address the challenge.

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