

# Third Culture Kids: Experiences They Face When Reintegrating into Their Home Country

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## ABSTRACT,

*In an increasingly globalized world this paper aims to uncover how Third Culture Kids experience the reintegration process back into their home country. In this qualitative study four Third Culture Kids were interviewed about their experiences with moving back to their home country. Findings show that Communication, cultural competence, social norms, sense of home and identity were the main themes that were uncovered which outline the main incidents when reintegrating. Furthermore, lacking cultural context and exposure is revealed which may help explain how parents could play a pivotal role in bridging the gap in challenges TCKs face when reintegrating into their society.*

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## Keywords

Third Culture Kids (TCKs), Dutch, English, Culture, Reintegration

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The 21<sup>st</sup> century as described by Deng and Gibson (2008) is the era of globalization of the world economy. Due to these advancements the world is becoming more integrated, people move across countries more frequently due to innovative technologies, better transportation systems and job opportunities (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). This in some cases leads to moving with their family, including the children. This may be very influential on the children especially if they are still in the developmental years of their early life, often causing them to develop a unique cultural identity and possess unique patterns of behavior that is neither fully aligned with their parent's culture nor that of the culture of their host country (Gilbert, 2008). Children that experience this phenomenon are known as Third Culture Kids (TCKs) and may face several challenges in their life related to cultural identity, sense of belongingness and cultural adaptation. An estimated 230 million individuals refer to themselves as TCKs (O'Bryan, 2022). With increasing globalization, the future will see a growing number of TCKs emerge and thus it is increasingly important to understand how this group establishes their beliefs and cultural behavior, because they may experience culture shocks when moving back to their home country. Cultural identity refers to an individual's cultural orientation while personal identity refers to the concept of "who am I?", from this cultural identity can be seen as much more of a social construct defined by the environment one develops in (Schwartz et al., 2008). The primary emphasis in this field of research is on human development with a focus on identity and belongingness (De Waal & Born, 2021, Moore & Barker, 2012), emotional development and the relational development in TCKs (Tan et al., 2021). Hence, most research has assessed the influence of being a TCK on their development and has neglected the actual process TCKs go through when reintegrating back into their home country and what general challenges they may have. This gap would be interesting to research as it may shed further light on better understanding the factors influencing a TCKs ability to reintegrate back into their home country. Furthermore, it is also of importance to understand how these individuals' reintegrate because the world is becoming more globalized and thus this population is growing and there is a need to understand how their cross-cultural experiences impact this group of individuals.

TCKs exhibit high mobility patterns that enhance their sensitivity (Lyttle et al., 2011), these characteristics may be crucial in the increasingly globalized world allowing for better cross-cultural contact. The overall objective of the research is to investigate how a TCKs experience the reintegration process into their home countries. Through determining critical incidents TCKs encounter when moving back to their home country, it aims to contribute to a broader understanding of the most notable aspects experienced when moving back, indicating what TCKs can expect when they moving back. This research will assess the Dutch and English TCKs to give a representative understanding for all TCKs.

Given the current gap in literature and the information mentioned above, the following research question has been formulated:

*How do Third Culture Kids (TCKs) experience the process of reintegration into their home country after living in a different culture?*

The research provides insights into the experiences of TCKs outlining the impacts these circumstances may have had on the integration process. Given the gap in knowledge, this thesis may

offer a greater understanding of a TCKs adaptability regarding the environment, and further uncover new findings that may open opportunities for new studies in this field of cultural research. With the increasing population of TCKs it could provide an improved understanding of how this population develops and how they experience reintegration. Additionally, the research also further provides a clearer understanding of the opportunities and challenges TCKs face when growing up in an environment away from their home country, and may help prepare and foster their unique competence's in a different environment.

In the following chapters of this paper, the theoretical background will be introduced focusing on previous research on the topic of third culture kids and the concept of culture in general. Subsequently, this paper will then proceed with the methodology section which include the research design, data collection, research instrument and data analysis. Then the results will be showcased, and a discussion will be formulated outlining the key findings. This research paper will then address the limitations, provide recommendations for future research and a conclusion will be made to conclude the findings.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section the relevant literature regarding the study will be discussed. The literature that has been explored consists of papers that examine third culture kids and what research has been done on the topic thus far. Additionally, there is an exploration of the concept of culture and the role of acculturation in the reintegration process.

### 2.1 Overview of TCKs

The term third culture refers to a fusion of two different cultures, wherein the interaction between different individuals creates standards and norms, views, interpersonal behavior, and a new sense of self (Useem et al., 1963). Third Culture Kids (TCKs) and Third Culture Individuals (TCIs) have been used synonymously throughout research in this field thus, they hold the same meaning but throughout this research the term TCKs will only be used to avoid any confusion. Various research has been conducted on a variety of topics, but throughout research no contradiction is made of how long an individual must have lived outside of their home country before being referred to as a TCK. Research conducted distinguished Third Culture Kids (TCKs) from Cross-Culture Kids (CCKs) by clearly defining what their differences are, CCKs are children of cross-cultural marriages, immigrant children, and international adoptees. This is different from TCKs as they are defined as children who have spent a significant part of their first 18 years of life in a country that is different from that of their parents' country-of-origin due to a parent's choice of work (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009, as cited in Tan et al., 2021). From this a clear difference is derived, there is a distinct contrast in mobility patterns as immigrants move to a host country permanently but are still associated to their home country by the features/characteristics they carry with them and thus are clearly recognized as different (Tan et al., 2021). TCKs on the other hand temporarily move abroad and are seen by their host country, families, and themselves as belonging to their home country, but they may not feel that strong sense of belonging to their home country at all. Most research regarding TCKs looks at identity development, TCKs in a social context and their emotional development, literature on these topics will be assessed in further detail.

### 2.1.1 TCKs Identity

Several studies have been complete outlining identity development for children growing up in an international environment away from their country-of-origin. The main themes related to research on identity focus on belongingness, environment, and home. School counseling is of importance as TCKs continue to move across the world, understanding what transitions kids go through both with identity and belongingness when moving across countries (Limberg & Lamberg, 2011). One study outlined the importance of positive and negative effects on cultural identity shift, this was done through reading out poems with empty verses allowing the participants to phrase what they thought was a sense of belonging. The study concluded that individuals who feel positive effects reflect pleasurable engagement with the environment, and that cultural identity shifts can be expressed by the individuals expressing positive affect. The results showed that most TCKs showed a more positive affect towards their host culture than their home culture (De Waal & Born, 2021). The second part of the study by De Waal and Born (2021) focused on how TCKs define their sense of belonging, and from the results it was apparent that TCKs emphasized relationships over geographical area in establishing their sense of belonging. Moore and Barker (2012) performed semi-structured interviews, attempting to study the impact intercultural experiences had on a TCKs sense of identity; the study revealed that individuals growing up in a multicultural environment are likely to possess a multicultural identity. Thus, TCKs can shift between identities based on the environment they are in, their cultural identity is shaped by the cultures they have encountered and have internalized.

### 2.1.2 TCKs Relationship/Social

Studies on relationships were also a key focus in the domain of research on TCKs, focusing on how these individuals build relationships with other people. The literature on TCKs acknowledges that children that grew up in these circumstances relate to people that grew up similarly to themselves. One quantitative study shed light on the fact that kids that grew up in an international environment away from their country-of-origin share their own unique experiences, in which they felt they could relate to other kids that grew up in similar circumstances a lot more than that of people that share the same nationality as them even though they weren't raised in the same regions of the world (Peterson & Plamondon, 2009). Another study focused on the struggles TCKs may have with establishing and maintaining social relationships across borders, outlining those developing relationships weren't necessarily an issue, rather it was hard to form long lasting relationships since many of these TCKs feared being separated at any time through their high mobility related to their parent's jobs (Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2014). One study in the domain of relationships outlined the fact that TCKs can be both ethnocentric and ethno-relative simultaneously. They create an environment that fosters a "minimization orientation" which recognizes the fact that everyone shares fundamental similarities (Greenholtz & Kim, 2009).

### 2.1.3 TCKs Emotional Development

A great deal of research has been done on the topic of emotional development regarding TCKs. This research outlines certain themes especially around emotional sensitivity and topics related to mental wellbeing. TCKs scored higher on open-mindedness and cultural empathy which in essence reveals that the international environment they grew up in did have an impact on these characteristics (Dewaele & Oudenhoven, 2009, Williams, 2023). Quantitative research in the form of a survey was

complete on TCKs interpersonal sensitivity, results of the study indicated that TCKs had significantly higher social sensitivity than that of mono-cultured individuals due to their prolonged exposure to intercultural situations (Lyttle et al., 2011, De Waal et al., 2020). Purnell and Hoban (2014) studied the topic of mental wellbeing in Australian TCKs and how preparations received from school and family could influence their transition. Some of the participants felt they had anxiety and depression due to lack of understanding and support and therefore helps create understanding about the transition period.

## 2.2 Culture

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the experience Third Culture Kids encounter when reintegrating back into their home country, it is essential to first understand what culture actually is. Culture is a very broad field of research which can be defined in many ways, Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 6) defines it as "*the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others.*" Enklaar (2007) defines culture as a value system which an individual or group adheres to. The notion of culture as described by Thomas et al. (2010) is a system of orientation typical to a group passing down certain symbols that define that group. All three categorize culture as being shared by a group of people, and acknowledge that it plays a significant role in shaping our behavior and beliefs. As described by Thomas et al. (2010) culture is a system of orientation typical to a group passing down certain symbols that define that group, these include language, clothing, greeting rituals, etc. This system of orientation provides individuals in that group with a unique sense of identity and further also the ability to function effectively. Everyone goes through what is referred to by Thomas et al. (2010) as the socialization process where one develops socially relevant behavioral patterns that fit with that of the environment they reside in, this process is complete when behavior is aligned with that of others in a group and thus, the individual is accepted. Behavior that does not reflect that of a certain society will result in disapproval. When individuals interact with someone who adheres to a different cultural orientation, it may create a situation called a critical interaction where both or one of them may experience unexpected behavior and cannot be understood.

### 2.2.1 Acculturation

Individuals identify with a certain culture on the basis of the common values they share between each other, however these values can shift through the interactions people have with other cultures leading to cultural assimilation (Ward & Geeraert, 2016). Acculturation refers to the cultural and psychological changes that occur when an individual experiences cross-cultural contact (Lee et al., 2022). Ward and Geeraert (2016) found that younger people have stronger orientations towards their settlement culture and weaker orientation towards their heritage culture which could help explain why third culture kids are more likely to carry certain cultural elements with them that reflect that of their settlement culture. Berry (1997) classified four different acculturation strategies: integration, assimilation, separation/segregation, and marginalization, these strategies are categorized by two dimensions, the degree to which individuals maintain their home cultural identity and participation in host culture. Berry's acculturation process is examined on the basis of self-reporting thus, no actual cultural behavior is being examined, thus such a model cannot be used.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

In order to answer the research question it is necessary to collect the data appropriately. For this empirical research following a qualitative research design is most appropriate as the objective is to better understand experiences, events and contexts, this form of research will aid in answering the research question related to the experiences of TCKs (Fossey et al., 2002). Furthermore, qualitative work is suited for a smaller sample size, investigating beliefs and attitudes towards a certain subject are better captured using a qualitative research design (Hammarberg et al., 2016)

#### 3.2 Data Collection

The data is conducted through doing qualitative research in the form of interviews on multiple English and Dutch individuals that grew up in Dubai, where they explain their experiences when moving back to their home country. As discussed earlier in the literature review there is no specifically mentioned amount of time an individual must have lived abroad to be referred to as a TCK, so for this specific investigation someone can be introduced as a TCK if they spent at least six years of their adolescent life aboard and if these cross-national experiences occurred before the age of 18. Interviewees will be contacted through social media by the interviewer's own circle of classmates and if those subjects prefer not to be interviewed snowball sampling could be used. The interviews will be conducted in the language interviewees feel most comfortable with, it can be the case that even these Dutch interviewees prefer to answer in English due to the extensive time they spent abroad during their adolescent life. Microsoft teams will be the platform used to conduct these interviews where responses will be automatically transcribed. A total of four individuals around the age of 20 to 22 are being interviewed, two of them being Dutch and the other two being from the UK. The interviews will be approximately an hour long to fully understand their experiences while living abroad. These interviewees must have spent a minimum of six years living abroad, to avoid too many variables the specified country these candidates would be required to grow up in is the UAE and afterwards must've moved back to their home nation. Figure 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the interviewees, stating their gender, years living in the UAE and nationality.

Interviewee no.	Gender	Duration	Nationality
1	M	14	Dutch
2	M	14	Dutch
3	F	10	English
4	M	10	English

Figure 1. Demographic characteristics of the interviewees

#### 3.3 Research Instrument

Research was gathered using semi-structured interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews means that there is a predetermined set of open-ended questions thus, prompting discussion allowing the interviewee to give concrete examples related to questions. The use of semi-structured is described by Fossey et al. (2002) as enabling a more focused exploration on a specific topic whereas an unstructured interview may be too vague and unrelated leading to lack of valuable information being collected. These semi-structured interviews will be used to find critical incidents. The critical incidents technique (CIT) is a method used to recognize key events as a way of understanding complicated situations (Thomas et al., 2010). When applying CIT to the context of TCKs we can clarify what experiences participants encountered and draw conclusions. Concrete examples are key to comprehending these critical incidents as these will later be used to recognize certain themes among answers provided by the various interviewees. These may include incidents where certain patterns of behavior experienced in the home country may be different from those expressed in a TCKs host country, thus leading to conflicts. As mentioned earlier the interviewees can answer in either Dutch or English, depending on what they feel they are most proficient in. Though the answers are to be automatically transcribed they will be reviewed to ensure that no inaccuracies are present.

Before conducting the interviews, it is important to take ethical considerations into account ensuring that the interviewee consents to their data being used and further guarantee that the information is strictly used for research purposes. Alongside this, confidentiality is ensured to the interviewee's as personal names or anything else that can be used to identify them is to be removed.

#### 3.4 Data Analysis

To analyze the data categories were created based on the data collected from the interviews. The method that was used to analyze the data was a thematic analysis. According to Boyatzis (1998) a thematic analysis is used to encode themes that are present in qualitative data. Themes are recurring patterns found within the information which are either generated from raw information or from the use of theory.

Braun and Clarke (2006) introduced a six phase process of analysis which will be used to analyze our data.

##### Phase 1: Familiarization with the data

After completing the interviews it is important to familiarize yourself with the data, through reading and comprehending ideas. Note down initial recurring topics or themes that may be found.

##### Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Data is collected that can be used to create codes, these codes can later be used to develop certain themes within the research.

##### Phase 3: Generating themes

Then it is important to further generalize codes into certain themes which are well described and distinguished from one another, codes with similar meanings are clustered together to create themes.

##### Phase 4: Reviewing potential themes

Then themes are further reviewed ensuring that themes are organized correctly into their corresponding codes. These themes are then showcased by the creation of a thematic map.

##### Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

In this phase it is important to define and further refine themes, for each theme write a thorough analysis of what each theme

means, use sub themes to further describe themes, make sure that themes don't overlap.

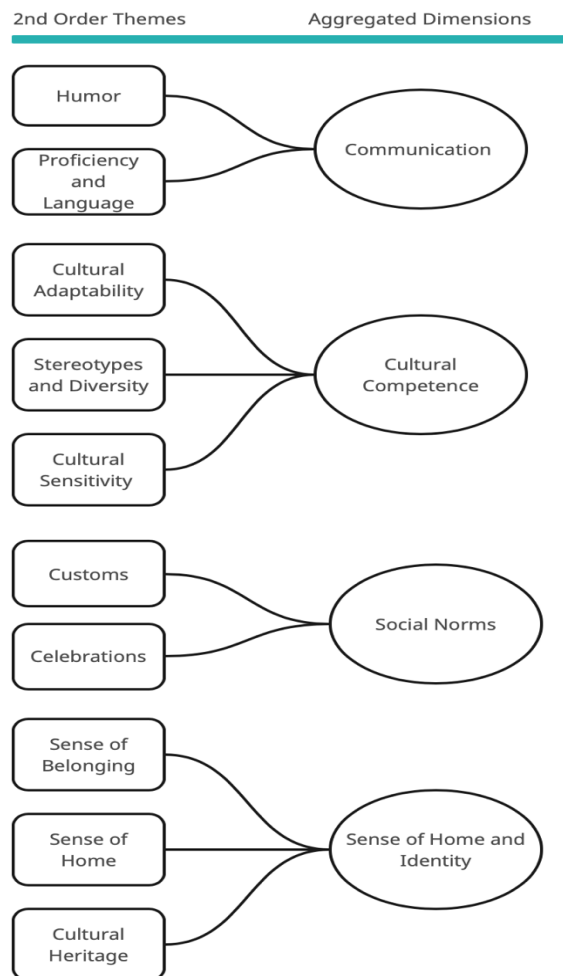
**Phase 6: Producing the report**

In order to produce the final report themes should be consistent and clear throughout the collected data, a coherent narrative should be told about the data illustrating the story about the data.

Alongside using the six phase process introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006), Gioia et al. (2012) proposed a data structure for a thematic analysis which has been used. 1st order concepts were initially produced after conducting the interviews, they describe the initial codes gathered from relevant quotes. Then concepts are organized into 2nd order themes, this is where larger categories are created which consist of similar codes. The last step includes processing the 2nd order themes even further into what is described by Gioia et al. (2012) as "aggregate dimensions" which are broad themes consisting of smaller themes and then codes. The utilization of the data structure introduced by Gioia et al. (2012) offers a visual depiction of the data and illustrates the process of converting the raw data into overarching themes.

**4. RESULTS**

The results of the interviews were transcribed and analyzed to discover themes among the data, these themes represent certain recurring concepts. Insights to address the overarching research goal, which explores the experiences of reintegrating back into a Third Culture Kids home country, were obtained by recognizing themes through the emergence of codes from the data. In this section findings from the data analysis are presented, including some representative quotes which were taken from the transcripts to demonstrate how themes were created. It is important to note that all interviews were conducted in english, even the Dutch interviewees preferred english, one stating "it is easier to express myself in english" (interviewee no. 1). The main four aggregated dimensions that were identified and which can be seen in Figure 2 are *Communication*, *Cultural Competence*, *Social Norms*, and *Sense of Home and Identity*, all of them having several 2nd-order themes that contribute to an insightful perspective about each of the overarching topics. Furthermore, a more extensive data structure including the 1st order concepts can be found in appendix 1 (11.1).



**Figure 2. Critical incidents collected from the interviewees.**

**4.1 Communication**

The first aggregated dimension which was recognized and could be used to answer the research question is *Communication*. The main findings from the thematic analysis concerning this from the perspective of a Third Culture Kid consist of two 2nd order themes which are described as *Humor*, and *Proficiency and Language*.

**4.1.1 Humor**

Participants noted that Humor was a recurring topic suggesting that Third Culture Kids had difficulties adjusting to humor related to language. Both the Dutch and interviewees from the UK commonly struggled with humor related to cultural references, these could relate to jokes people make amongst themselves about places within the country or certain public figures due to the fact that they lack cultural context about that place. Limited familiarity with certain components surrounding slang and public figures were a trend around interviewees from the Netherlands, "they're all laughing. I'm like, I've no idea who that guy is (...). The sort of humor that is also connected to language. I think that was difficult to get into, certain micro Dutch celebrities. If you haven't lived in the Netherlands your whole life, you have no idea who these people are." (Interviewee no. 2). Whilst English interviews lacked references related to politics, all interviewees were also asked how they reacted to this,

wherein three reported that they were hesitant in asking for context to humor they didn't understand.

#### 4.1.2 Proficiency and Language

Proficiency is another important aspect that was repeatedly mentioned throughout the interviews. Throughout the interviews a clear difference was derived between being fluent and proficient in a language. *"I think there's kind of two parts to it. I think you have the way that you just communicate to, you know, just to the most basic form of communication for basic conversation and requesting. Then there's also languages in it"* (Interviewee no. 1). Thus through being proficient in the language one can really connect with the people surrounding them. Through this cultural relatability is created which brings people together and allows people to build relationships amongst each other. Furthermore, they reported that Dutch people knew how to speak English but didn't like to speak in English, emphasizing that learning how to speak and connect with people was very important. Along with this, Dutch interviewees reported having integrated directness into their manner of speaking and not struggling with it, *"I think I've always been a bit of a direct person as well"* (interviewee no. 1).

## 4.2 Cultural Competence

This aggregated dimension describes the way Third Culture Kids recognized a difference in cultural competence when moving back to their home country. This theme can be described through three 2nd order themes which are characterized as *Cultural Adaptability*, *Stereotypes* and *Diversity and Cultural Sensitivity*.

### 4.2.1 Cultural Adaptability

Interviewees mentioned that they felt they were able to adapt to cultural settings to a greater degree than that of their peers. Some of the trends among participants were that they were culturally more flexible, that they also had more knowledge on culture itself and were able to adjust depending on who they were talking to. *"I mean one time I met a Muslim guy. I greeted him in his language and he was shocked a white person knew any kind of words"* (Interviewee no. 4). *"It comes out more depending on who I speak to. So if I'm having even now, if I have a conversation with an American person, like I'll start pronouncing my R more and I'll start mimicking that accent in a subtle way"* (Interviewee no. 3). Along with this there were reports of increased exposure to culture, making various cultures seem more relatable to the person. *"Having been used to being able to just be very direct people and then coming back and then having to readjust if, like you know, not everyone likes to have, you know, the truth said in their face all the time"* (Interviewee no. 1).

### 4.2.2 Stereotypes and Diversity

An aspect which was noticed by Third Culture Kids when moving back to their home country are stereotypes and diversity. There was a noticeable difference in regards to stereotypes associated with people from different nations. Participants in the study mentioned that there was more of a social divide between certain groups of people. It also appeared that interviewees reported seeing lack of diversity in regards to social groups which surprised them. *"So you're not just hanging, hanging around with one ethnic group, whereas in the UK (...) white people generally will hang around with white people and then Muslim people generally hang around with Muslim people"* (Interviewee no. 4). All interviewees reported a lack of diversity, there was an apparent lack in diversity, wherein social circles predominantly consisted of individuals from the same ethnic

background. Alongside this, English participants also reported that there was also a class system surrounding the people from the country itself, *"That said, a big thing I noticed as well. Was kind of like people from the South have the stigma of being wealthier than people from the north, and obviously you have the different accents as well. So if you sound posh. You know, I feel like maybe you might get made fun of (...) we just wouldn't hang around with people that didn't sound posh"* (Interviewee no. 4). *"The class divide in the UK really shook me. I just, I started to learn a lot more about what the reality of that was here"* (Interviewee no. 3).

### 4.2.3 Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural Sensitivity was a recurring theme, throughout all four interviews notions of a gap in cultural awareness and intercultural understanding were expressed. *"I felt I had a lot more creative license with using different cultures just because I'd come across people of different cultures so I didn't feel like it was culturally insensitive whereas other people did. I was a lot more like there's a way of honoring the story without being culturally insensitive. And I think other people because they hadn't exposed themselves to or hadn't been exposed to different cultures in the same way, so they were a lot more skeptical of cultural topic"* (Interviewee no. 3). *"I know a lot better than the average Dutch person to just understand international people (...) I've also brought some of my international friends to meet my Dutch friends. And generally the clicks quite well, but it's not, for example, that. These two friend groups are ever going to mix in the sense that they will also meet up with each other without me connecting them together. So there's a definite there's like a definite barrier"* (Interviewee no. 2).

## 4.3 Social Norms

The third aggregate dimension, social norms describes two 2nd order themes. These themes are known as *Customs and Celebrations* which outlines the shared norms and practices that are upheld within the UK and Netherlands that third culture kids encounter.

### 4.3.1 Customs

Additionally, to this means of transport, fashion and the level of independence were consistently mentioned throughout all interviews, *"Shock in the Netherlands is how independent you can be here as a person. It's a lot easier to move around than the place where I grew up in Dubai. One time I fell asleep on the train, and you wake up, and then you have no idea where you are. There's no safety net in another room to protect you from these sorts of things"* (Interviewee no. 2). *"I moved to the countryside and there were 4 trains a day or something (...) the way that we dressed was different, different to how we dress in the UK"* (Interviewee no. 3). *"I mean you just wear whatever you want to buy as long as it's modded, right for women especially. But in the UK, if you wear a tracksuit, maybe with a beanie or nice shoes like you, you can't. You're going to draw too much attention to yourself"* (Interviewee no. 4).

### 4.3.2 Celebrations

There were certain Customs that interviewee's mentioned they had so acclimate to, customs related to festivities such as Christmas and summer were often mentioned. *"Everyone celebrates in Dubai or the Christian celebrate in Dubai, it's not a massive thing, in the UK shops will close early or they won't even be open. Decorations are on the streets, there are markets,*

*there are fairs and that kind of thing*" (Interviewee no. 4). *"That I think maybe even a European summer, there's something different because like, it's like a celebration, everyone's in the beer gardens now everyone's in the park and the festivals start, the time of year is more distinct because of the weather and also because of how celebratory people are around Christianity and and that kind of thing, So it's nice to have that build up and it feels really Christmassy"* (Interviewee no. 3).

#### 4.4 Sense of Home and Identity

The last theme is centered around what the interviewees recognized as home and how their identity is formed. This theme identifies challenges associated with cultural assimilation, recognizes recurring fragments of cultural heritage that are present throughout interviewees and to what group interviewees feel they belong. Thus, this aggregate dimension is described by three 2nd order theme's described as *Sense of Belonging*, *Sense of Home* and *Cultural Heritage*.

##### 4.4.1 Sense of Belonging

Many of the participants noted feelings of feeling foreign, difficulty navigating and a sense of being in an inbetween culture, also putting pressure on themselves to reintegrate as there was a feeling that this is supposed to be their home but it didn't feel like it. *"I think Dutch people who knew me saw me more as an international student who could speak Dutch, and international students like in some of the houses that I lived in saw me more as Dutch. So it was like this weird thing where there was no rejection from either groups, but it was like both groups kind of viewed you slightly as an other"* (Interviewee no. 1). Additionally participants reported feeling connected when with people who had similar life experiences as their own. *"It also depends where international students might be from cause you know I might relate to someone more who's an international student but who's grown up in a similar place to me, like in the Middle East"* (Interviewee no. 1). *"There's a girl in my year who grew up a bit in Hong Kong, so she was an expat kid and you know, we understood each other in a different way"* (Interviewee no. 3).

##### 4.4.2 Sense of Home

All interviewees were asked about their perception of home, a common theme around this topic was memories of the past, family, friends, and the notion of multiple homes. *"I see Dubai as my home. It's the place where I've pretty much built up all of my memories. I mean, I only lived in Holland till I was 6 and I have, like if I kind of think back to that time, I have only a couple of memories that stand out"* (Interviewee no. 1). *"Wherever your immediate family are. Obviously growing up in Dubai for the last 10 years. Even though I'm English and I would support England in the World Cup"* (Interviewee no. 4). *"I think this whole sense of where home is. I think that's kind of been blurred throughout these four years"* (Interviewee no. 2).

##### 4.4.3 Cultural Heritage

*Cultural heritage* offers insights into the behavior inclination of third culture kids, it emerged as a common topic among interviewees. They frequently discussed the inclination to exhibit certain behavior patterns which they inherited, certain trends surrounding this include culinary culture, traits, and sports. *"How we go about things, we'd have dinner or I would have breakfast. Usually it's always an English meal, having football on the weekend as well, which is a big cultural thing for English people outside"* (Interviewee no. 4). Traits such as directness

were very apparent among both Dutch interviewees, *"I was a bit more used to it. I think Dutch directness is one of those cultural elements that's not through Holland, but kind of just through my parents were kind of passed down to me"* (Interviewee no. 1).

## 5. DISCUSSION

The study's objective is to investigate how TCKs manage the process of reintegrating back into their home country. By analyzing significant incidents and creating thematic patterns, the study aimed to draw conclusions about the impact of exposure to diverse cultures on Third Culture Kids experiences during the process of resettling in their home country. Hence, the research observed and analyzed Third Culture Kids of English and Dutch origins that grew up in the UAE in an attempt to answer the research question. Throughout the interviews, participants expressed a considerable amount of commonalities amongst each other related to moving back to their home country.

Our findings pointed out four main aggregated dimensions, which were recognized as *Communication*, *Cultural Competence*, *Social Norms* and *Sense of Home and Identity*. Communication was an important component in establishing connections with others, the manner in which people spoke to one another created relatability which helped in forming bonds. Participants reported struggles related to this which potentially could have acted as a barrier in bonding. The cultural competence's people held also contrasted with that of the participants, people in their home country tended to gravitate towards people of similar backgrounds and were also less likely to understand others cultures due to less exposure. The opposite was seen in TCKs who tended to rather understand people of different cultural backgrounds more and associated themselves more with people from a variety of different places. Concepts surrounding social norms were also reiterated, these commonly surrounded independence and conforming with certain norms. Celebrations were also among the recurring topics, mentioning behavior that was tied with weather, and norms surrounding Christmas which were also a shock, but participants mentioned positive feelings associated with being in their home country for Christmas. Lastly, a sense of home and identity was conveyed frequently, especially confusion regarding which groups they belonged to, participants saw home as more of a social construct, and sometimes mentioned having multiple homes. The socialization process mentioned by Thomas et al. (2010) aids in understanding why there are certain barriers to reintegration. The mentioned aggregated dimensions resemble critical incidents related to certain events that TCKs encountered when moving back to their home country. Thus, when reintegrating TCKs were exposed to socially relevant behavioral patterns that they weren't acclimated to or were surprising to them. Thus, some of these themes form these critical interactions related to these aggregated dimensions.

Communication was a theme that was demonstrated through humor, language, and proficiency. This was a major barrier in orientating TCKs back into their home country, humor related to cultural references was a recurring theme amongst TCKs. Humor predominantly highlighted the absence to cultural context, wherein a lot of jokes which were made referred to certain cultural references, these weren't understood by TCKs. Furthermore, they were rather reluctant to ask about humor they didn't understand thus acting as a further barrier to the process of social integration. Language and proficiency emerged as another important aspect in the communication experiences amongst TCKs. This played a more prominent role in Dutch TCKs



wherein they highlighted a distinction between fluency and proficiency, which was one they struggled with due to lack of exposure to the language, creating barrier in communication. Language is also closely tied to culture, thus through speaking the language effectively cultural norms and values can be internalized allowing the TCK to reintegrate. It was observed that while Dutch people held the proficiencies to speak in English, they displayed a preference towards speaking Dutch. This emphasized the importance of learning and speaking the language in the reintegration process. Moreover, Dutch participants did show directness in their communication style, which aligns with the cultural value of truth as described by Enklaar (2007) which Dutch TCKs mentioned having adopted from their parents.

Cultural competence was exhibited through three key themes portrayed as cultural adaptability, stereotypes and diversity, and cultural sensitivity. The most intriguing concept that was revealed are the similarities among TCKs which emphasize the need to promote positive interactions between individuals. This aspect is further supported by the literature, which indicates that TCKs exhibit significantly greater social sensitivity compared to individuals with a mono-cultural background. This heightened sensitivity is credited to their extensive exposure to intercultural interactions (Lyttle et al., 2011; De Waal et al., 2020). However, through the results it is highlighted that this broader cultural perspective they have developed through extensive exposure to different cultures while living abroad poses as a challenge when reintegrating back into their home country. Previous literature, including studies by Dewaele and Oudenhoven (2009) and Williams (2023), underlined that third culture kids scored high on open-mindedness and cultural empathy which was further supported throughout these results. Considering these aspects mentioned above, these characteristics can explain why their broader cultural perspective may have posed as a challenge. By not being able to navigate social circles properly when reintegrating due to the inclusive attitudes and different social standards TCKs possess.

The experiences related to social norms provide valuable insights into how TCKs experience the reintegration process. Conforming with customs was an element which was experienced by TCKs, especially regarding fashion and transportation. The level of independence was also a shock amongst TCKs, suggesting that their experiences living abroad have formed their expectations and perceptions on autonomy and freedom. This may further suggest that they must readjust to the social norms related to support systems when moving back to their home country as to appropriately navigate their home countries social landscape. Alongside this, another interesting finding from the results refers to celebrations, especially ways in which festivities such as Christmas are celebrated differently in their home country compared to their experiences abroad. This came as a pleasant surprise to TCKs which shows that they did have an appreciation for these celebrations and felt a deeper sense of emersion in their home country when it came to celebrating. This may be aligned with the fact that TCKs celebrated these events in their settlement culture. The traditions and rituals surrounding these events came to be more apparent when moving back to their home country but were already internalized, thus it was easy to orientate towards the behavior that was shown.

Another interesting finding which is closely related to the literature refers to sense of home and identity as a struggle. TCKs viewed home as less of a geographic region and described it as more of a social construct which was also described by De Waal and Born (2021) wherein their sense of home and belonging is

closely tied to relationships. TCKs also mentioned being able to form deeper connections with people that grew up in similar circumstances which also aligned with the literature by Peterson and Plamondon (2009). Pressurizing themselves to feel at home was reported, which signified a sense of displacement and a complex relationship with their own cultural identity, again indicating that a feeling of identity is influence by personal feeling rather than geographical and cultural factors.

The influence of parents on adapting certain elements which assists in coping with the integration process should be mentioned. Cultural heritage was described as one of the 2nd order themes which assessed the patterns TCKs inherited from their parents. This suggests that TCKs often absorb characteristics from their parents that may reflect that of their home country. Thus, playing a crucial role in developing a sense of connection to a TCKs home country. Ward and Geeraert (2016) mention that younger people have stronger orientations towards their settlement culture. Additionally, Hofstede et al. (2010) mentioned that western countries score higher on individualism, thus people tend to be more self-autonomous, TCKs from Dutch and English descent may have been given more freedom and absorbed more attributes from their settlement culture. It is possible that in culture's where people tend to be more reserved, reintegration may pose as being less of a challenge for TCKs because their parents have been more influential on them. In this case they are more likely to act in accordance with their heritage culture. Through this TCKs from more reserved cultural backgrounds will not struggle as much with the aggregated dimensions which were identified.

The findings of this qualitative study contribute to narrowing the existing gap in the literature on the topic of Third Culture Kids and more specifically on the experiences with reintegrating into their home country. The main experiences TCKs encountered were mentioned as communication, cultural competence, social norms and their experiences with home and identity. The issues with these experiences were found to be due to the fact that TCKs seemed to not harmonize with the existing manners present in their home country. The lacking cultural context TCKs expressed also generated a further gap in their ability to intergrate into their home society. Furthermore, parents play a pivotal role in bridging the gap in these experiences by shaping the extent to which certain elements of cultural heritage are internalized into a TCKs identity.

## 5.2 Practical Implications

There are numerous practical implications of this research. It provides a comprehensive understanding of experiences TCKs encounter. The research topic may provide clarity to TCKs on why they feel lost in their home country, emphasizing that besides identity related issues there are also other factors. Furthermore, this information can grant parents the ability to appropriately support their children and further provide them with the necessary resources to help cope with these challenges, a better support structure could also be introduced. With the globalizing world this research may give rise to a need for more education on cross-cultural topics, with this a growing interest in different cultures can emerge fostering inclusivity. Organizations could also potentially value certain characteristics this population may hold by leveraging their unique competencies in cross-cultural communications and versatility in a culturally diverse environment.



## 6. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

As in most research, there are some limitations to the findings presented above. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small (four people) which reduces the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, it is important to note that the term "third culture kids" typically encompasses all children who have grown up abroad and share a common culture. However, due to the sample size only including individuals that grew up in the UAE it may be that third culture kids that grew up somewhere else convey significantly different cultural behavior. To minimize the limitation, participants from two different nationalities were interviewed to come to a non-biased higher quality conclusion. Future research should look to analyze a wider range of Third Culture Kids, thus including individuals who have grown up in diverse locations to obtain better insights into the experiences of this growing population. This research gathered data from participants of two western countries which have a distinct culture, in different cultures parents may play a very different role in respect to internalizing heritage culture, thus it would be interesting to see how experiences differ in this respect.

Secondly, it is worth noting that it was a challenge to distinct certain cultural elements from the natural progression into adulthood. For instance, the level of independence a third culture kid may portray may have initially been a struggle due to the fact that they were reaching adulthood and were required to take on more responsibility for themselves.

Lastly, due to the condensed time frame in which the thesis had to be complete it limited the number of interviewees that could be asked to participate in the survey. To expand the research in this field, a longer time frame is recommended, through this more interviews can be conducted allowing more data to be collected and analyzed.

There are a lot of possibilities for future research in this domain. Most literature looks at the influence of living abroad on cultural behavior, thus the effect isn't taken into consideration. It would be interesting to further discover the extent to which heritage culture and settlement culture play a role in defining the culture behavior Third Culture Kids portray, this could be done by looking at the combination of parental and environmental influence on a TCKs behavior.

## 7. CONCLUSION

The research investigates the experiences TCKs encounter when reintegrating into their home country. Through recognizing the primary critical incidents third culture kids encounter, experiences can be identified. Four big themes were identified when analyzing the data that were gathered. These findings mainly referred to communication, cultural competence, social norms, identity, and sense of home, wherein the lacking cultural context TCKs have about their home country reiterate the importance of culture in the orientation process. The study also highlights the implications of parents in shaping TCKs experiences when moving back to their home country, particularly through the transfer of cultural heritage. These findings contribute to existing literature on TCKs and break down the expected experiences a TCK encounters when reintegrating into their home country. They emphasize the importance of understanding and supporting TCKs when readjusting to their home country while also acknowledging the role parents play in experiences and preparations.

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## 10. APPENDIX

### 10.1 Thematic Analysis Representation

