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Bachelor Thesis (Step 7)

“European, what else should I identify as?” The TCK Experience in Brussels.

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Summary

The question "Where are you from?" poses a unique challenge for third-culture kids (TCKs). It is defined as children whose parents found employment outside their passport countries and therefore growing up in a third culture. (Useem et al. 1963) These individuals blend cultural identities from their country of residence and country of origin. In today's globalised world being a TCK is not a rarity anymore. Therefore to understand today's society better, this research delves into the identity formation of European TCKs within the context of the European Union and studies their experience. The research is focused on expat children whose parents worked for EU institutions, attended European schools, and navigated the intricacies of Brussels' multicultural landscape. This qualitative study offers an insider's view into the practical workings of the EU and its direct impact on the next generation. The research contributes to the broader discourse on European identity by contextualising the experiences of TCKs within the heart of Europe. Data is collected by in-depth interviews with a cohort of nine individuals aged 16 to 22, who either currently attend or have previously attended European schools in Brussels. The results reveal a common theme among participants in experiencing a disconnect to their passport country, a desire for national attachment, and the significance of the "Brussels Bubble" in shaping their sense of belonging, emphasising the importance of shared backgrounds in fostering comfort when growing up as a TCK. The emotional connection to being European is complex, influenced by individual experiences and broader political and cultural contexts. Recommendations for future research are to have a similar study with an older age range. This research contributes valuable insights to the discourse on European identity and the EU's inner workings and its direct influence on the next generation.

Introduction

In an increasingly globalised world, the seemingly simple question, "Where are you from?" can become tricky to answer. This is particularly true for those who fall into the category of third-culture kids (TCKs). "A person who spends a significant part of his or her first 18 years of life accompanying parent(s) into a country that is different from at least one of the parent's passport countries due to a parent's choice of work" (Pollock et. al. 2017). It is a phenomenon that is becoming more frequent in today's society. These individuals often find themselves in a mix of cultural identities, a mix of their country of residence and their country of origin or passport. This can have a significant influence on one's sense of belonging and place identity. This research holds societal relevance particularly within the context of the European Union and within the prominent discussion of European identity. As it is focused on the Identity formation of TCKs in Brussels giving a new insight into the meaning of the European identity of individuals who grew up in the heart of the European Union. This research wants to shed light on the practical and direct influences the international apparatus of the EU has on the next generation. This research will be conducted with a qualitative approach. It focuses on expat kids whose parents moved to Brussels to work for the EU institutions, and who therefore attended a European school. These individuals have experienced interconnectedness with different nationalities all their formative years, therefore having a unique understanding of what it means to be European. In academic writing, there is a gap in contextualising European identity within a qualitative approach, therefore bringing academic relevance to this research. Personal motivation comes from the researcher being a TCK in Brussels herself.

Research Problem

The central aim for this research is to shed light on the micro-level parts of the political apparatus of the EU. By delving into the experiences and perspectives of individuals who have grown up in the middle of inner works of this international community. This study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of the interpersonal, cultural, and identity implications. The overarching goal for this research is to create an understanding of a part of the EU that has been overlooked and see TCK in the limited European context. To do so, the central research question focuses on the experience of the individual: "How do young European third-culture kids in Brussels experience their identity formation?". The discussion on this question can lead to answering the secondary question: "To what extent do these individuals relate to the European identity compared to a national identity and local identity?"

Context of the Research

This research fills a gap, as it explores identity formation within the context of (former) students of European Schools. This theme has been dissected by previous research on students who attended the International School system. It is important to note that there are severe differences between the systems, which can factor into young people's identity formation. For example, Murphy (2003) studies the impact of English being the main language and how that affects (non-English speaking) students at international schools. The European school system teaches children mainly in their first language, which then translates to their section. Meaning, a student whose passport country is Sweden would be enrolled in the Swedish section. From the age of six, students learn a Second Language, mainly English, German or French. The older the students get, the more they mix between sections, having courses in their second language together with pupils from other sections. Practically this means a French teacher would be teaching (European) history in French to a class of German, Greek, Spanish etc. pupils.

This research focuses solely on students of European Schools in Brussels (EEB¹) of which there are four with a total of 14,200 students, however, there are nine other European Schools in six different countries with about 28,000 pupils (Schola Europaea, 2022).

The European Schools have been existing since 1953, being established with the European Coal and Steel Community, for the children of the people employed there. It is a valuable part of the inner workings of the EU. Students can attend the school free of charge if one of their caregivers is employed by one of the EU Institutions (Schola Europaea, 2023).

The setting in Brussels is also important to mention, as nearly 40% in 2023 of all inhabitants of Brussels have a none-Belgian background. (Statbel, 2023) .

Structure

The structure of this thesis will be the following: first, the theories on which the research is based will be explained. With this, a visual explanation by a conceptual model will be provided. The methodology section in this paper starts by clarifying the utilised methods of data collection and analysis, and ethical

¹ Ecoles Européennes Bruxelles, meaning European School Brussels in French however the acronym is commonly used in conversation in most of the languages

considerations, the data's reliability and the positionality of the researcher are reflected within that as well. The results and discussion section provide the main findings of the data collection that answer the research questions and are divided into multiple sub-parts. Finally, reflecting on the data collection process and its limitations. The conclusion is made of suggestions for future research and a summary of the main finding.

Theoretical Framework

Third Culture Kids (TCKs)

The central concept of this theoretical framework is that of third-culture kids (TCKs). The term "third-culture kids" was first coined by Useem et al. (1963), as cited by Pollock & Van Reken (1999), describing it as children whose parents found employment outside their passport countries and therefore growing up in a third culture—a blend of their parents' passport cultures and the culture of their current living location. The difference between TCKs and immigrant children is; Migrants themselves, “and host nationals would expect immigrants to gradually acculturate and develop new roots of belongingness in the new country.” (Tan et al. 2021). Whereas others see TCKs, their family and host country nationals, as belonging to their passport country, even if they do not feel that themselves. Therefore, they are not expected to root themselves in the host country (Tan et al. 2021). According to Tan et. al. (2021) and their systematic review of TCKs, there is an already existing focus on identity development, however, there is a gap in TCK research limited to the European context. Moreover, in most studies, these TCKs have done multiple moves within their formative years. In this study, the researcher wants to investigate a specific type of TCKs; People who spent most of their formative years in one place, namely Brussels. Moreover, looking at cases of individuals born to expat parents, in many cases the parents themselves have different nationalities. A lot of the past qualitative research has been done on older TCKs, alias TCI; third culture individuals, or TCKA, Third Culture Kids Adults (de Waal & Born, 2021; Moore & Barker, 2012; Fail et. al, 2004). To fill a research gap this research will therefore only focus on young people, with the age range of 16 to 22 years old. TCKs are also commonly researched in the context of international school students (Fail et al. 2004; Lijadi & van Schalkwyk, 2018). This study focuses on (former) students of European schools. This school system is different to the international schools, as it teaches the students primarily in their mother tongue and uses material from their passport countries. However, they both cater to expat families. Fail et al. (2004) mention that attending an international school impacts one’s formation of identity. Based on that, an assumption can be made that European schools have the same effect. This assumption may be proven in this research.

Identity formation

Identity formation is the central task of adolescence. In this process, individuals create their sense of self and figure out who they are (McLean and Breen, 2009). Childhood experiences are the basis of identity formation and distinct experiences with cultural and ethnic groups. Individuals born into a multi-ethnic or multi-national family or setting might have difficulties in identity formation (Hoersting and Jenkins, 2011). It extends beyond nationality to include factors such as occupation, social class, geographic

location, beliefs, language, and more (Jameson, 2007). In terms of defining nationality, it is a cultural concept that connects people to a shared identity (Grundy and Jamieson, 2005). Identity formation is a concept that is widely discussed in the literature in the TCK context. However, existing literature often comes to different conclusions. Some past research points out that TCKs may have multiple (cultural) identities, however, individuals are not personally confused by them (Moore and Barker, 2012). This contradicts the point made by Murphy (2003), who concluded in his research that TCKs often experience confusion in their journey of identity formation, it is to state however, that Murphy studies the effect on children attending an International school. Therefore, these findings may help to point out the differences between the European and International school systems, within the context of Identity formation.

European Identity

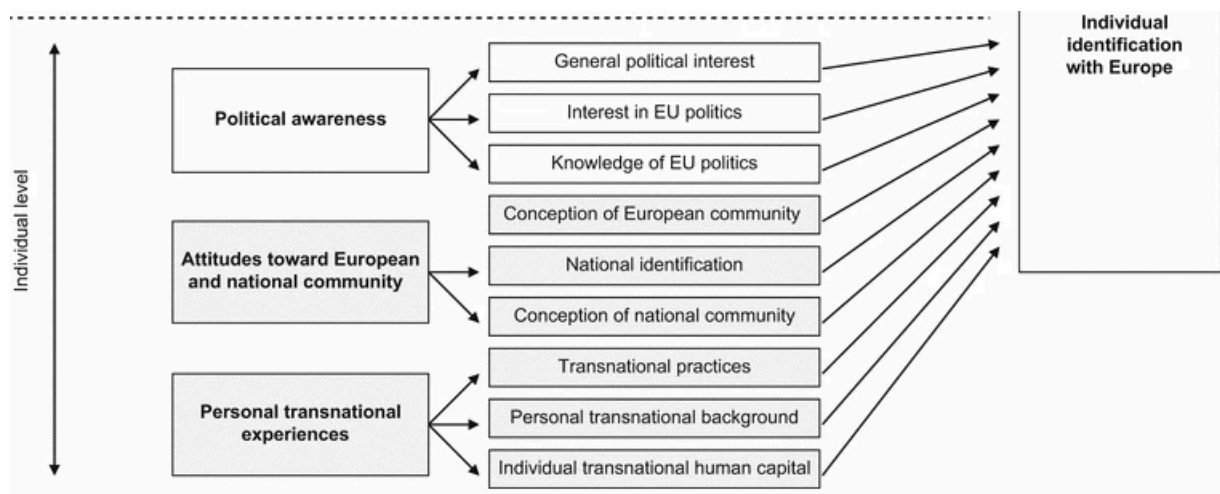


Figure 1: Explanatory model of individual identification with Europe (without interaction effects and country level) (Bergbauer, 2018)

Another layer of this research is looking at identity formation by also contextualising it with the European identity. European identity is approached differently in current literature than, for example, cultural identity. It is mostly seen through a political lens. If European identity is researched, it tends to be done in quantitative ways such as surveys (European Commission, 2021). While these quantitative measures provide valuable insights into the prevalence of European identity, they often lack the depth required to understand the contextualised experiences of individuals. Following the “Explanatory model of Individual identification with Europe” (figure 1) created by Bergbauer (2018), European identification of an individual's level is based on three factors: Firstly, political awareness, followed by citizen's “attitudes towards the European and the national community” and lastly “personal transnational experiences”. For this research, only the individual level is being considered, since the original model has a “Country level” as well. When studies are about the individual and their European identity, it is commonly done in the context of the Erasmus program. The predominant finding in those articles is that participants of the program often have an increased feeling of belonging to Europe after experiencing the multinational

dialogues, which can be translated to a “personal transnational experience” as seen in figure 1, in their Erasmus experience (Jacobone & Moro, 2015). These findings focus on individuals engaging with Europe during a specific period of their lives, which is mostly only for half a year to a year, during their university years. It is essential to extend this probe to a different demographic—namely, TCKs who spent most of their formative years in such a European setting. Looking at the model of Bergbauer (2018), this research will focus mainly on the Individual's “Personal transnational experience”.

Conceptual Model

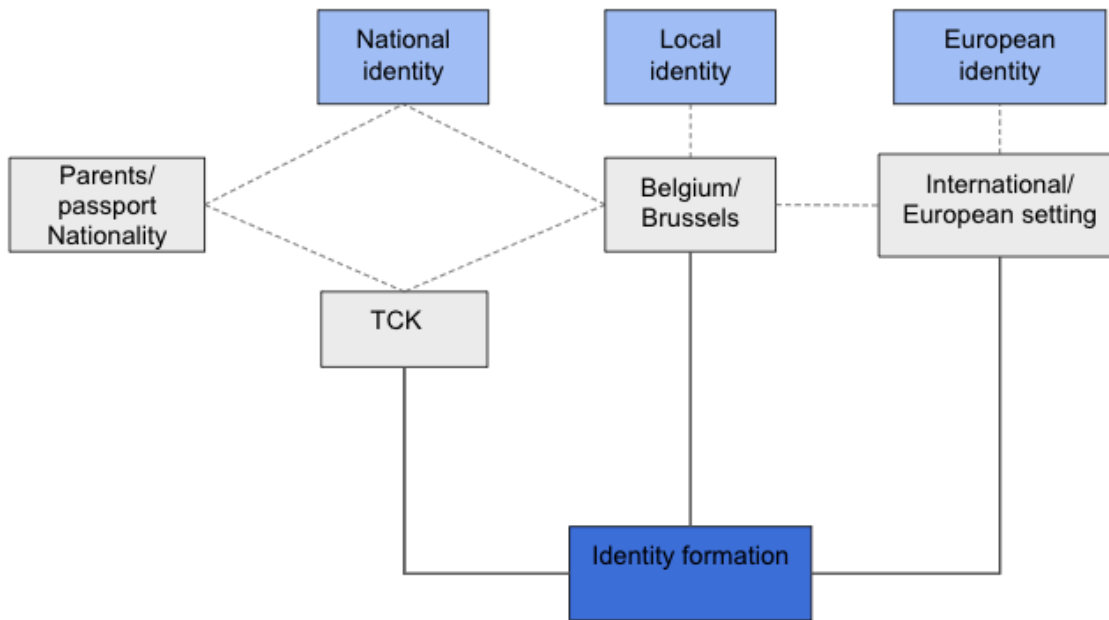


Figure 2: Conceptual model

This conceptual model (figure 2), visualises the formation of what it means to be a TCK. Identity formation is in dark blue, as it is the core of the research and is affected by all the other factors in the model. In light blue are the key terms that are explored in this study. The grey boxes represent the unique parts of this study. As identity formation is a personal matter, the interplay of certain variables can be different among the participants. While this conceptual model provides a simplified representation, it is important to note that identity formation is influenced by a multitude of other factors as well, such as gender, race, religion etc. The purpose of this model is to highlight the central connections of the main concepts of the study.

Expectations

The first expectation for this research is that the participants only have a limited sense of identity connected to their passport country. Individuals who moved after high school graduation to their passport country might have a deeper connection, however still not as prominent as natives. (Fail et al. 2004)

Another expectation is that, individuals who moved to another country, not Belgium nor their passport nation, might identify more with the EU as a whole, contrary to one specific nation, because the experience might have a similar effect as the Erasmus programme has on its participants (Jacobone and Moro, 2015). Additionally, interviewees who still attend school and still live in Brussels might have a distinct attraction to the "European Identity". Moreover, it is unlikely that none of the participants can relate to a European identity. However, what can be expected is that some individuals, as past TCK studies show, do not feel a sense of belonging to any nation, not even Belgium (Hoersting and Jenkins, 2011). The local identity of the city of Brussels may be expected to be prominent, as most participants will have spent most of their lives in Brussels. The personal identity of the young people in question is probably also heavily connected to what traditions are celebrated at home; this might be quite nuanced, especially for those whose parents are of different nationalities (Moore and Barker, 2012).

Methodology

Interview Methods

Data collection will be facilitated through a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, with the intended target number of interviews ranging from 8 to 10 with the duration of 30 minutes to one hour. The topic of identity formation is more fitting with qualitative research methods, as it is based on an individual's personal experience. It is this research's purpose to understand these stories and analyse them. Therefore, the interviews are thoughtfully designed to be open-ended, providing participants with the liberty to candidly share their unique experiences, thoughts, and perspectives. This methodological approach draws inspiration from the "Methods of Academic Research" course, emphasising a comprehensive understanding of the participants' narratives. The data collection phase unfolded during the last weeks of October and the beginning of November of 2023. Interviews were done online due to geographical obstacles, so there was limited possibility for the researcher to take other cues than what has been said and facial expressions. Luckily enough technical issues were very limited, close to no interruptions happened.

The Participants

The study's selected cohort comprises individuals aged 16 to 22, all of whom either currently attend or have previously attended one of the four EEBs. This age range is used as identity formation is a major part of adolescence. Participants can reflect and share their experiences as they go through this formative time. Because this study also looks at the effect of the school system, it makes sense that interviewees are still at an age where they are attending or have recently attended school. To get multi-faceted answers it is necessary to include at least one participant who is presently attending one of the European schools. The rest of the participants should be a mix of graduates who either decided to move to their passport country, stayed in Belgium or moved to a third country. It is important to interview individuals who made different decisions on their place of residence after graduation, as this is likely to have affected their formation of identity heavily. The aim is also to involve individuals from various nationalities, including those from multinational households, to encompass a wide spectrum of experiences.

Optimally, there should be minimised personal affiliations between the researcher and participants. Nevertheless, should the recruitment of willing participants pose a challenge, the consideration of interviewing acquaintances or former classmates will be contemplated. If the researcher is aware that a willing participant has an interesting viewpoint, for example growing up in a multinational household, they will be preferred over someone who has less of a personal connection to the researcher. Importantly, if this does happen, there will be a critical examination, including exploring its potential biases.

Positionality

In terms of positionality, the author is an insider, as mentioned in the introduction, being a TCK herself growing up in Brussels. This can bring biases such as leading questions, that are heavily based on the personal experience and opinions of the researcher. The positive aspects outweigh the negatives in terms of being an insider. As there is already a mutual understanding between interviewee and interviewer it gives the opportunity to dive into details without the need to explain basic structures. In this particular case, participants can use words that are context specific, such as school activities or places in Brussels. Delving into the personal connections between the researcher and participants, only two participants were previously unfamiliar to the researcher. Five participants went to the same school as the researcher, including two former classmates, nevertheless most had minimal or no contact with the researcher in the past four years. Because seven of the participants know the researcher, there is trust which can foster more honest answers, though potentially also filter answers as participants might know what the researcher expects.

Data Analysis

The data collected through the interviews is subjected to a thorough analysis, guided by a structured coding scheme. This analysis aims to identify the primary factors influencing identity formation, as well as uncover patterns and insights within the interview transcripts. The methodology is informed by the insights learned from the "Methods of Academic Research" course, leveraging tools such as a coding tree (to be seen in the Appendix) and the software Atlas Ti. The codes are divided into 5 code groups, which are predominantly inductive codes. The code groups are the following; TCK Experiences, Brussels Bubble, European Identity, Local Identity and National Identity (passport country).

After coding, the focus shifts to identifying themes and patterns in the data, exploring connections between participant experiences and determining frequency. The crucial interpretation step involves examining the relationships among individuals' backgrounds, their perception of European identity, and the impact of attending European schools in Brussels.

Ethical Considerations

This study will follow the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (KNAW *et al.*, 2018), which is based on five principles: honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence, and responsibility. The guidelines will be followed to ensure the safety and well-being of the interviewees and to avoid any ethical violations. In line with that, participants will be able to withdraw from the research

or skip questions at any time, if it is their wish. Their privacy and confidentiality will be protected by changing names and other definable characteristics. Interviewees were presented with a consent form (Appendix IV) before the start of the interview.

The participants take part in the process voluntarily, and are found via snowball sampling and the researcher sent out digital flyers (Appendix II), explaining the essence of the study to people that fall into the study group.

The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. The interview recordings are stored securely, and password-protected, on a Google Drive (university account) and access is restricted to the researcher alone. Most interviews will be held in English. If the interviewee feels more comfortable to speak in German, then that is also an option.

The Data

In the data collection nine interviews in total were conducted. Eight of the interviewees have graduated, and one is still attending an EEB. Four of the participants come from a multinational family. All participants that have graduated, emigrated from Brussels. To protect the privacy of individuals, their names were changed.

Participants (names changed)	Age	Place of Birth	Country of Passport	Parents Nationality	living in Brussels (age span)	Current place of living	Year of graduation with European Baccalaureate
Max	22	Bonn, DE	Germany	German	1-18	Mannheim, DE	2019
Ioanna	21	Brussels, BE	Ireland / Greece	Greek/ Irish	0-18	Paris, FR	2020
Federico	21	Brussels, BE	Spain / Italy	Spanish / Italian	0-18	Plymouth, UK	2020
Emma	16	Brussels, BE	Germany	German	0-now	Brussels, BE	2025 (expected)
Clara	21	Brussels, BE	Germany	German	0-18	London, UK	2020
Carline	20	Brussels, BE	France / Haiti	French/ Haitian	0-18	Rotterdam, NL	2021
Aurora	20	Italy	Italy	Italian	1-17	Florence, IT	2020
Alina	20	Potsdam, DE	Czech Rep. /Germany	Czech / German	0-5/ 7-18	Vienna, AUT	2021
Adam	22	Slovakia	Slovakia	Slovak	12-18	Lund, SE	2020

Figure 3: table of participants characteristics

Results and Discussion

Third Culture Kid Experience

Belonging as seen by others

The notion mentioned by Tan et al. (2021) is that TCKs are seen by others, such as family and host country nationals, as belonging to their passport country, even if they do not. A couple of the participants expressed exactly this feeling. Alina mentioned *“My dad hasn't lived in Germany for over 25 years (...). And he still gets upset when I'm like, I don't feel German”*. Other participants have experienced quite similar things: *“I remember my physics teacher;(..), she was saying, well, at the end of the day, you're all going to come back to Spain to work and live”* recounts Frederico. Frederico, like many students in European Schools, cannot experience the concept of "returning" to his passport country because he was born and raised in Brussels.

However, as Tan et. al (2021) mentioned this view is mostly projected by the family, however, this shows to be true, when talking about parents, as seen by the quote above. On the other hand, if looking at family members who are more removed, who still live in the passport country, the experience is quite different. Adam states: *“I wouldn't go around saying to my family in Slovakia (..) that I feel really Slovak because I think they would disagree.* “This feeling is also reflected in other participants' experiences. This goes hand in hand with what de Waal and Born (2021) state that TCK “perceived themselves as culturally marginal” when returning to their passport country. The perceptions of belonging among TCKs are heavily shaped by family members.

Expressed Identity

Moreover, one common theme is that identity, especially the expressed national identity, is heavily influenced by other people's opinions or views. Most, not all participants, tend to vary their answer to “Where are you from?” depending on the nationality of the person they are talking to or the language of the conversation. Ioanna, who is half Irish and half Greek, is a perfect example of that based on the following: *“If I'm presenting myself, (...) I have a very Greek name, I look very Greek. So if I'm not bothered to explain the whole situation, it's easier to say I'm Greek.”* However, she also said: *“When I meet a Francophone person, and I'm speaking to them in French, (...) the first thing that I'll say is that I'm from Belgium.”* Often the change in answer is connected with the feeling of needing to find “an excuse” for an accent or not wanting to overbear the person one is speaking to. This is also underpinned in Alina's experience: *“I know my German is not the best, it's okay. It's my native tongue. But sometimes I express more the international so I can sort of get by the fact that my German is not excellent.”* In conclusion, the fluidity and adaptability of one's expressed national identity shows the significant impact of external perceptions and linguistic considerations on how individuals navigate and present themselves.

National Identity

Reverse Culture Shock

During the interviews, there was a common theme for most interviewees that they experience a certain disconnect to their passport country. This confirms the notion mentioned by de Waal and Born (2021) that TCKs are culturally marginalised, meaning they feel as if they live between cultures and might not feel fully belonging to either. The findings from the conducted interviews align with the notion of reverse culture shock mentioned by Fail et. al (2004). This means that TCK returning to their passport country struggle to create a sense of belonging and are shocked by this notion. Max experienced exactly this. He holds German nationality, grew up in Belgium, and moved to Germany to attend university. *“I felt very different (...) tried to put it into words for a long time (...). But somehow I was never really able to identify with the attitude to life in Germany. (...) But I was not aware of how not German I would feel when I moved to Mannheim.”* In summary the TCKs from this study tend to struggle to integrate in their passport country seamlessly, as it was shown in past research (Fail et. al., 2004).

Influence of the European School System

To circle back to the differences between international and European schools, interviewees mentioned that they feel that the setting of the school had impacted their national feeling of belonging and identity. This is heavily connected to language. Murphy’s (2003) research reflects the potential disadvantages non-English speaking children experience when attending an international school. These disadvantages are not prominent in European schools as pupils get a large part of their education in their mother tongue/ first language. Here it is going to be reflected on how this affects the individual's identity formation.

Federico for example, carries the Spanish and Italian nationality, and speaks both languages at home, however, he feels much more attached to Spain because he attended the Spanish section. *“...but because I went to the Spanish section, I just engaged with that culture way more, you know. So I am like deeper in Spanish culture than in the Italian.”* Other participants reflect on it as well, that by being in a certain section you project that nationality onto yourself. Carline shared: *“... because I was in the French section (...) I just used to say I was French, there. Now I wouldn't even say that, which is interesting because, at uni I realised that I never had a reason to associate myself with France. (...) I lived in Brussels all my life (...) and my mum raised us in the Haitian culture.”* Concluding from that, the system of having sections and being taught in one’s first language can have an improving impact on a more distinct national identity, however, it is reflected in other interviews as well, that after graduating this association with the nationality (of their section) tends to diminish.

Longing for national attachment

Some participants have expressed that they might appreciate the international setting in which they grew up, which taught them cultural adaptiveness. Nevertheless, they also stated that they have a sense of longing after a (national) attachment. This is a common finding in the literature on TCK. For example, Moore and Barker (2012) found that TCK often articulate “a strong desire to belong somewhere”. Federico shares: *“I want to move to Spain at some point. Because, you know, I want to have that connection of being from there.”* Also other participants share a similar sentiment: *“I wish I had grown up in a city where most people would have stayed in (...) I envy it a lot. (...) it's something I miss. I miss that national attachment.”* As individuals like Federico express a desire to establish a connection with a

specific country, and others voice a sense of envy, these sentiments underscore the aspects that TCKs may miss out on when growing up.

Local identity

Affinity with the City

The interviewees all have the same connection to Brussels as it is the place they grew up in. Yet, most do not have that connection to Belgium as a country. *“I do feel as a local. I feel like, obviously I feel more of a Brusselois, more than like a Belgian. I feel like with being from a city, it doesn't really matter your nationality.”* Therefore it is important to point out that there is a strong place attachment, even if it does not come with a sense of belonging to the country. Local identity is strongly connected to the social environment. This is a point where a lot of the participants struggle. As seen in Figure 3, all of the ones who have graduated moved away. That is not an abnormality. A lot of participants reflected on the fact that most of their social circle, their friends they had in school moved away as well. This affects the sense of belonging heavily. *“I don't have a real social circle there anymore, that's actually when I realise very strongly that I'm not 100 percent Belgian or from Brussels, because all my friends, they all no longer live in Brussels.”* stated Max. To conclude, all participants can relate to Brussels as their local identity. Though the lack of a social circle after graduating diminishes the feeling of belonging to Brussels and increases the already lacking connection to Belgium as a country.

Brussels Bubble

Most interviewees mentioned that they see Brussels as their home. The straightforward reason is that most spend their childhood and teenage years there. Moreover, this feeling of belonging can be connected with a term often coined in the interviews: “Brussels Bubble”. It describes this fully fabricated space that exists in Brussels because of the European institutions. It is described by the interviewees within the context of the school: *“ It's (the School) for the kids of people that work at the commission (...) But then when it comes to more meaningful things, (...) it's multicultural, so that I'm very much in touch with other European languages and cultures. And also that it's very much a bubble of privileged people.”* A lot of participants connect this space with comfort: *“I feel completely comfortable in the Brussels bubble, where else do I fit? (...) there's no other place where I completely fit, because there's no other place like the Brussels bubble.”* states Alina. This phenomenon is also shown in past research as Greenholtz and Kim (2009) state that cultural hybrids/TCKs only really feel at home when they are among people who have a similar background. That is strongly shown in the context of the Brussels Bubble which creates that feeling of mutual understanding and belonging. It is a space where being a TCK is a normality. Even though it is a fully constructed space, it was the reality the participants lived in, Clara acknowledges: *“I don't really know how I would separate Brussels from the Bubble.”* The participants' sentiments align with previous research, emphasising that TCKs often find a true sense of home among individuals who share similar backgrounds.

European Identity

In line with the expectation of this study, every participant was able to identify as being European, however, personal definitions and meanings were different. For most, being European is the one constant within their identification. *“I’m European, what else would I identify as at the end of the day?”* reflects Ioanna. When looking at the model of Bergbauer (2018) (figure 1) this emotion can be connected to the personal transnational background of the individuals. This is a large playing factor in the life of these TCK in general. In this particular context most people around you are European and to some extent involved in the actual process of the EU. *“I see myself very much as a European. (...) the fact that all the people I grew up with had different nationalities and what we basically all had in common was this European identity”* says Clara.

Interestingly enough, a lot of the participants said that even though they feel European the most, they would not express that to anyone: *“I do feel very European (...) but you would never actually say like, hey, I’m European. (...) It’s a bit of a strange thing to say.”*

Though, another factor of the model of Bergbauer (2018) was highlighted by the interviews. The politicalness, the shared values and ideas are at the core of the European identity. *“It’s united in diversity based on the fact that we have these shared ideas, and that apart, we are weaker. So it just makes more sense to stand together and to unite our diversity on these common points. So I think that that’s what the European identity [is], that’s how I’d understand my European identity, because I feel very European.”*

Concluding, while participants universally identified as European, it is rarely expressed by them. This ties back into the expressed identity, where there is a common theme of wanting to simplify the answer. Revealing a complex relationship between their diverse identities and the preference for a straightforward response when talking about where they are from.

It is worth considering whether individuals, who primarily associate themselves with their original nationality based on their passport, would find it easier to openly identify as European with the existence of a European passport. It would be a form of validation, providing tangible proof of their European identity.

The emotional connection to being European is intricately linked to the participants' personal transnational backgrounds, as illustrated by Bergbauer's model (2018). The findings emphasise the multifaceted nature of European identity, shaped by both personal experiences and overarching political and cultural contexts.

Limitations

After evaluating the transcripts, the researcher finds that within the conversation, moving to the next theme as in the interview guide was in some cases too abrupt. By maybe directing the interview more naturally, more valuable data could have emerged. Nevertheless, the interviews proved to be insightful, perhaps because there was already an established understanding and some familiarity between interviewer and interviewees. However, it also caused some other interviews to shift more into a conversation. While this approach may have resulted in less pointed responses, it added a nuanced layer. A factor to consider, all interviewees are well educated and attend universities, except one who is still attending school. Some of the participants were aware of the TCK theory beforehand and were able to reflect on their identity from an academic viewpoint.

Seeing as local identity and the relation to Brussels as a city was widely discussed in the interviews, it would have been insightful to interview someone who stayed in Brussels after graduating. None of the volunteers who contacted the researcher fell into that category.

By confining the age range to participants, there is a likelihood that the homogeneity within this specific age bracket can result in less varied and comprehensive answers. It confines the study to a specific demographic, potentially overlooking valuable insights from a broader range of perspectives.

Conclusion

To answer the research question, “How do young European third-culture kids in Brussels experience their identity formation?” It is important to consider the complexity of the identity formation itself. Nevertheless, it can be said that young European TCKs growing up in Brussels generally go through a unique process of finding themselves which is shaped not only by the intersection of nationalities but also by the unique setting of Brussels itself. Growing up in that way brings privileges and life skills but also a set of personal challenges. The individuals in this study face the same phenomenon as other TCK, such as reverse culture shock and longing for national attachment (de Waal and Born, 2021). Even though all interviewees spent most of their lives in Brussels, they were not expected, by parents and others, to fully root themselves in Belgium as locals, just as mentioned by Tan et al. (2021). In past literature, there has been disagreement if TCKs are confused about their identity (Moore and Barker, 2012 & Murphy, 2003). In this particular case most participants have a constant they identify with, ergo being European. However their expressed identity tends to be adapted, this does not necessarily mean they are personally confused. Another point that connects to past research is, what was described by Greenholtz and Kim (2009) that TCKs feel most at home among people with similar background is very clearly proven in this research as it has a context- limited name, the “Brussels Bubble”.

Additionally, one finding solely based on the participants, the European school system can be a key influencer in shaping national identity. Language sections serve not just as classrooms but as influential factors in cultural affinity. Furthermore, European identity, a persistent element in these TCK lives, is rooted not only in political awareness but in their understanding of their own identity and belief system. Shared values and cultural adaptiveness are key components of their experience.

In essence, the TCK journey within European schools highlights the intricate interplay of local, national, and European identities. It contextualises the practical and direct influences the EU has as an employer to the next generation. These findings contribute to a deeper comprehension of identity formation, adding critical insights for future research, such as the discussion of a common European passport as well as the contemporary meaning of (national) identity in general.

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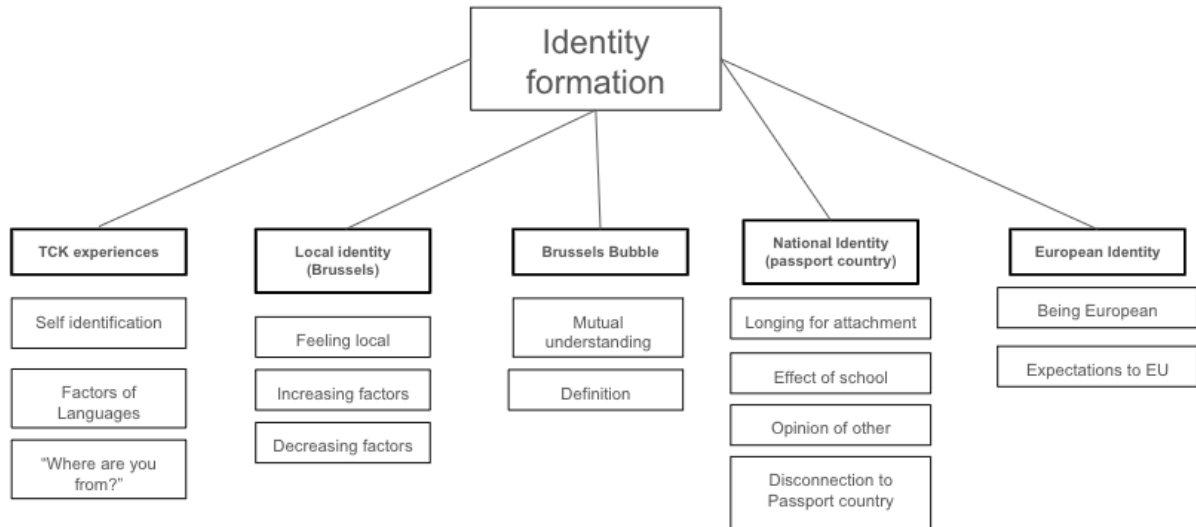
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APPENDIX

I. Coding tree



II. Interview Guide

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Nora. I am 22 years old, and was born in Vienna, but grew up mostly in Brussels, attending EEB3. I study Human Geography and Planning at the University of Groningen. I am currently working on my Bachelor's thesis.

Through this research, I aim to explore the experiences and factors that influence the identity formation of European third-culture kids in Brussels. This investigation can shed light on the development of European identity in a multicultural context and contribute to a better understanding of how we relate to European identity. And how the European Institutions, as a workplace, influence the lives of the next generation. Growing up in Brussels myself, I think us "Brussels-kids" have a very unique way of growing up and experiencing "Europe". And that is what I am trying to explore.

Before we proceed with the interview, it might take up to about one hour. I want to remind you that your participation is entirely voluntary. You can pause or end the interview at any point if you wish. Your privacy is a priority, any personal information shared during this interview will be kept confidential. The information you provide will only be used for academic and research purposes.

If you feel comfortable with it, I will voice-record this interview so that my analysis can be as exact as possible. Do I have your consent?

→ Ask participants if they need an explanation of what a third-culture kid means.

Explanation:

Being a TCK, means that you grew up most of your childhood/teenage years outside your parents' passport country. Meaning your parents' culture is culture number one, the host country's is second, and the mix that you create yourself out of these two is your own individual "third culture".

Meaning you might not feel 100% *Spanish or 100% Belgian*, but you kind of form something yourself.

Do you have any questions or concerns before we begin, or is there anything that you would like me to clarify?

May I have your consent to use the data collected in this interview for the purposes of this research?"

Section 1: Opening Questions- Personal Background

Does it resonate with the description of being a TCK?

What is your most used answer to the question "Where are you from?"?

- Has this answer changed since leaving school? And why do you think that is?

Can you briefly describe your background, including where you were born, and where do you currently live?

Which national passport do you have?

What languages do you speak? What languages do you speak at home?

How old are you?

Section 2: Connection to Belgium

How would you describe growing up in Brussels as a TCK/ foreigner?

- Would you say you feel like a foreigner?
- How present was/is it for you growing up that you are a "TCK"?

Do you identify with Belgium?

If yes/ no, why is that?

Growing up in Brussels did you spend time with "locals"?

Section 3: Identity Formation and school

Do you think your answer to "Where are you from?" would be different if you did not attend an EEB, but instead attended a local school?

- Why do think that is?

How would you describe the setting of an EEB?

Have you experienced a feeling of living in a "European/ Brussels bubble" attending that school?

If yes, how would you describe it to someone from the outside?

There is this clear trend of studying abroad, in our school, why do you think that is?

Do you feel there is an expectation to go into the type of work “our parents” do? Eg. Work for EU institutions

Section 4: European Identity

What does "European identity", or being European mean to you personally? How do you define it?

To what extent do you feel European?

If not, why?

If yes, has it changed since you left school?

In what ways have your family and the international environment in Brussels influenced your understanding of being European?

Section 5: National Identity vs. European Identity

How would you compare your European identity to your national identity (if applicable)? Do you feel a stronger connection to one over the other?

Does this change depending on the context or situation you find yourself in?

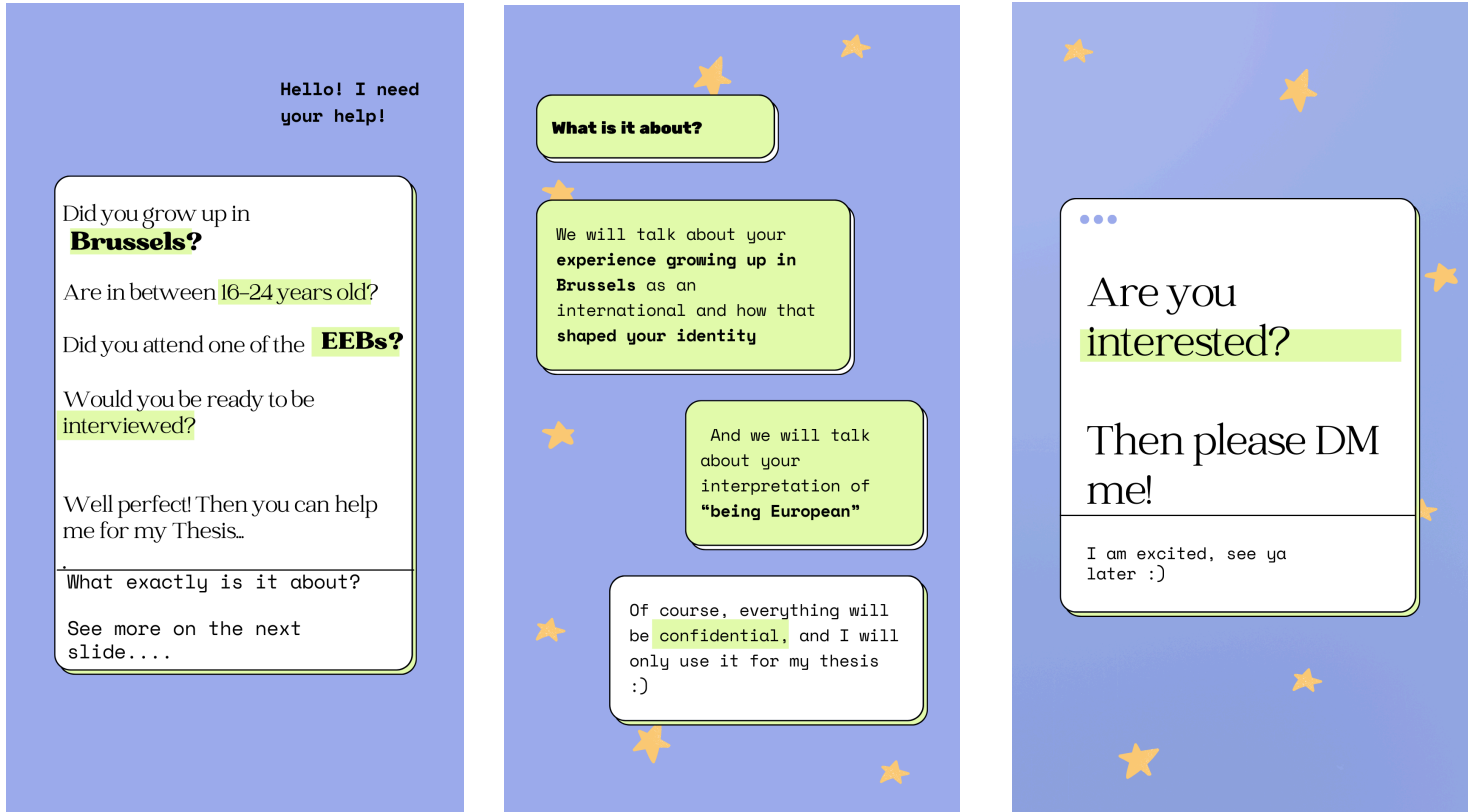
- Can you discuss any instances where you had to navigate between these identities?

Conclusion:

Is there anything else you would like to add to this interview, that you feel hasn't been touched upon?

What did you think of the interview? What did you like, or dislike?

III. Digital flyer for recruitment



IV. Consent form

Identity Formation of Third Culture Kids in Brussels

Researcher Information:

Researcher Name: Nora Hohenauer

Academic Affiliation: University of Groningen, Spatial Sciences

Study Overview:

This research aims to explore the experiences of individuals aged 16-24 who grew up as Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in Brussels, attending one of the European Schools. The focus is on understanding how this unique upbringing has influenced their identity formation and their interpretation of what it means to be European.

Participant Information:

Target Participants: Individuals aged 16-24 who attended the European School in Brussels.

Procedures:

Participants will be invited for a 30-minute to 1-hour online interview where they will share personal information regarding their experiences growing up in Brussels as an international student.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences. Your decision will not affect your relationship with the researcher, the University of Groningen, or any other entity associated with this study.

Confidentiality:

All information shared during the interview will be treated with strict confidentiality. Your name and any identifying information will be kept confidential, and data will be anonymized in the final research report.

Recording of Interviews:

The interviews will be audio-recorded for the purpose of accurate data collection and analysis. The recordings will be stored securely and will only be accessible to the researcher and authorised personnel. Recordings will be destroyed after the completion of the study.

Benefits and Risks:

Participation in this study may contribute to a better understanding of the experiences of Third Culture Kids. There are no known risks associated with participating in this research.

Informed Consent:

I, the undersigned, have been informed about the nature and purpose of the study titled "Identity Formation of Third Culture Kids in Brussels." I understand that my participation involves sharing personal information in an interview setting. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers.

Contact Information:

If you have any questions or concerns interview about the study, you may contact:

Nora Hohenauer: n.d.hohenauer@student.rug.nl