

University of Groningen  
Bachelor Project

# No Place Like Home

The perception of home and identity for third culture kids

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## **Abstract**

The topic of this research concerns cultural identities and the feeling of belonging for third culture kids (TCKs) who have experienced moving to their passport country. TCKs are defined as individuals who have undergone international mobility during their childhood years, resulting in meaningful or relational involvement with other cultures. The research question guiding this thesis is, 'How do TCKs perceive home and (cultural) identity during international mobility?'. To investigate this, eight semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted and analysed. The results showed that home is generally perceived as somewhere that is comfortable, safe and welcoming. Most participants identified their family and friends giving a sense of home. In terms of cultural identity, all participants said that being exposed to a variety of different cultures has shaped who they are. In regards to feelings of non-belonging, TCKs had difficulty adapting to their passport country. On the other hand, most participants perceived their passport country as a strong base or fallback point. The results of this study contribute to the growing understanding of the formation and retention of cultural identity in the context of international mobility.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

There is a growing body of research in identity and migration studies on the concept of ‘third culture kids’, who are defined as individuals who have undergone multiple mobilities during childhood, in countries other than their passport country (Bonebright, 2010; Colomer, 2020; Moore & Barker, 2012). A lot of literature in this field has focused on the negative impact of a highly mobile lifestyle and the challenge of acquiring a sense of identity and a sense of belonging (Fail et al 2004; Gaw, 2007; Hoersting & Jenkins, 2011; Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). More recently, researchers have investigated the feeling of non-belonging and placelessness (Colomer, 2020; Grote, 2015; Sanfilippo-Schulz, 2018). On the other hand, there has also been research on biculturalism, multiculturalism and transculturalism, that indicate the possibility to hold multiple cultural identities and feel at home in more than one culture (Baker, 2001; Berry, 2008; Karjalainen, 2020; Moore & Barker, 2012). However, there is a lack of empirical evidence, especially in regards to the concept of ‘cultural identity’, ‘multiple migration’ and ‘TCKs’ (Dewaele & Van Oudenhoven, 2009; Ciobanu, 2014; Colomer, 2020; Kim, 2009).

One reason why studies on the concept of cultural identity remain limited is largely due to increased interest in national cultures (Karjalainen, 2020). There has been renewed interest in applying Hofstede's theories regarding national contexts to tackle the issue of nationality (Jameson, 2007). As a result, research on cultural identity has been overshadowed, even though issues regarding cultural identity have grown ever more complex given today's cross-cultural and global contexts (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005; Karjalainen, 2020). According to Hinds et al. (2011), literature on intercultural identity lacks depth in regards to how individuals actually manage cultural differences in different countries.

Furthermore, there seems to be a lack of knowledge on the mobility patterns of TCKs (Ciobanu, 2014). Outside of research in this field, there is a tendency to assume that by asking ‘where are you from?’ it is possible to understand people's multicultural identity and migration life, while this is not necessarily the case. For most TCKs, this is a dreaded question because it is unclear what the question is referring to: their family background, current home, upbringing, passport, ethnic affiliation, or cultural identification (Colomer, 2017). Given that the world is becoming more globalized and the level of mobility is increasing, there is a need for Academic research to further understand cultural identities to form new theories based on multiculturalism perspectives.

## **1.2. Research problem**

The central question for this research is: ‘How do TCKs perceive home and (cultural) identity during international mobility?’. The aim of this research is to contribute to the growing understanding of TCKs and the implication high mobilities can have on identity development and the feeling of home. In doing so, the experiences of TCKs might help foresee what belonging and cultural identity could mean in an increasingly globalised world. Furthermore, this research could concern policies on how businesses, companies or the government could make staying within the passport country more attractive for TCKs, specifically to retain their high human capital and international experience.

To answer the research question, three sub questions are identified in line with the concepts of ‘home’, ‘identity’:

1. To what extent can the concept of ‘home’ be applied to TCKs?
2. How are cultural identities formed during international mobilities?
3. In what way does moving to a passport country challenge or confirm the perception of ‘home’ and ‘identity’ for TCKs?

## **2. Theoretical framework**

The main concepts that will be defined include ‘TCKs’, ‘international mobility’, ‘home’ and ‘identity’. The definition of TCKs according to Colomer (2020) is having undergone multiple mobilities during childhood, which have developed meaningful or relational involvements with other cultures. As a result of the high ‘international mobility’, there are several consequences to their sense of belonging, cultural identity and community attachment (Colomer, 2020). This research will delve into how mobility and interacting with various cultures influences ‘identity’ and the feeling of ‘home’ for TCKs.

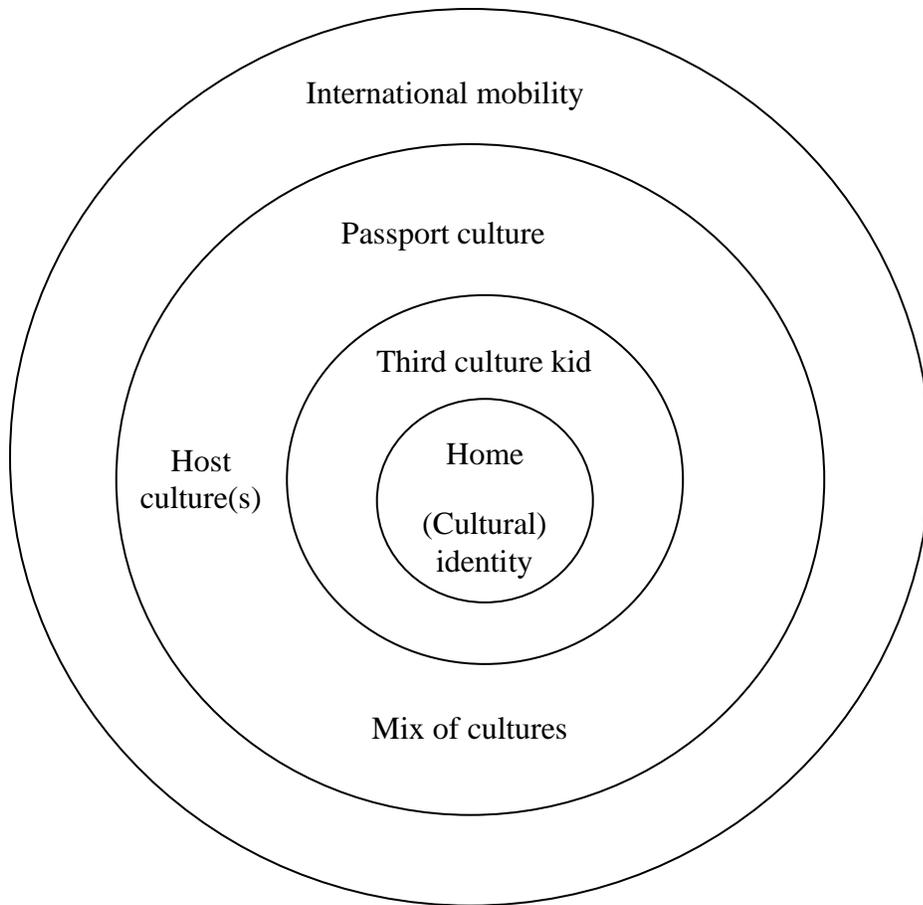
In the research done by Meijering et al (2016), ‘home’ is a place where people perform daily routines, experience control, can decorate, engage with family members and remember past experiences (Meijering et al, 2016). Another characteristic of ‘home’ is that people feel a sense of belonging (Meijering et al, 2016). The article also stressed that ‘homes’ are contested, dynamic, context specific and complex places (Meijering et al, 2016). In relation to TCKs, the concept of ‘home’ is not necessarily tied to a geographical location or place. According to Bonebright (2010), TCKs internalize attitudes and beliefs from their passport culture and the host culture, building a new cultural identity that reflects all their experiences without developing a sense of belonging to any single culture. It was noted by Pollock and Van Recken (2009) that for many TCKs, a sense of belonging is generated in relation to others who have similar backgrounds. These similar backgrounds are characterized by frequent mobility, international schooling and multinational compositions.

Similar to the concept of ‘home’, ‘identity’ is also re-positioned and re-produced over time and context. Meijering et al (2016) defined identity as how we understand ourselves, in relation to others, in everyday places. According to Bronfenbrenner (1989), it was suggested that the life course influences an individual's characteristics, as well as their interaction with their environment. There is a large amount of literature conceptualizing the experience of interacting between multiple cultures, and many notions overlap (Sanfilippo-Schulz, 2018).

Furthermore, globalization has increased intercultural exposure and the diversity of societies, leading to numerous cultural identities (Hong et al, 2016). This has brought about the idea of ‘multiculturalism’, ‘biculturalism’ and ‘transculturalism’. These concepts are based on the idea that an individual can successfully hold two or more cultural identities (Moore & Barker, 2012). However, Adler (1977) defined a multicultural individual as someone whose identity is adaptive, temporary and open to change, rather than based on belonging to a particular culture. Epstein (2009) agrees with this notion that due to the ever-changing identities of transcultural individuals, these individuals cannot be classified based on nation. These individuals find themselves “outside” of any particular culture and reject belonging to one single dominant culture (Epstein, 2009).

### **2.1. Conceptual model**

Since this research is focused on ‘home’ and ‘identity’, it is important to conceptualize how different cultures and contexts may influence these factors for TCKs. To illustrate this, a conceptual model was created shown in figure 1. First described by Useem et al. (1963), the creation of a third culture is a complex combination of an individual's “home” culture, host culture(s) and a culture that is shared by all TCKs, and is reaffirmed in association with each other. This culture is essentially a ‘mix of cultures’ usually created in the school settings where TCKs come into contact with one another on a daily basis. As shown in the conceptual model, these concepts are in a ring surrounded by the context of ‘international mobility’. The concept of international mobility was placed in the outer ring, because mobility processes have enabled the three different cultures to occur and coincide. In the inner ring, the concept of ‘home’ and ‘identity’ can be found. These concepts are influenced by the passport culture, host culture(s) and the mix of cultures, which make up TCKs.



*Figure 1: Conceptualization of TCKs and their perception of home and identity (Author, 2021)*

## **2.2. Expectations**

The following expectations are based on the three sub questions stated in the research problem. For the first sub question, it can be expected that the geographical concept of ‘home’ may not apply to TCKs, the way it does for people with low international mobility. Instead, it is expected that the feeling of ‘home’ is based on interactions and the familiarity between family and friends. In relation to the second sub question, it can be expected that although each individual has varying mobility trajectories, their experience with cultural identity is complex and coalesce around the feeling of belonging to various cultures, or permanently stuck as a cultural outsider. Finally, the last expectation is that having undergone international migration during childhood years highly influences perceptions of ‘home’ and ‘identity’.

### **3. Methodology**

The main qualitative method that is used for this research is a narrative analysis. A narrative analysis reflects on the nature of the stories told to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). Qualitative research is situated in the interpretive paradigm, meaning that when selecting participants, the aim of the research method is not to be representative, but instead to understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences individuals have (Hennink et al., 2020).

#### **3.1. Participant recruitment**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants. With purposive sampling, participants are deliberately chosen based on the qualities and characteristics they possess. For this research, the inclusion criteria include participants having lived outside of their passport country during their childhood years, and have experienced moving to their passport country as either a teenager or adult. It is expected that moving to their passport country enables TCKs to get a more holistic perception of the meaning of 'home' and 'identity'. By defining the inclusion criteria of this research, transferability is achieved. The participants were contacted through WhatsApp, Facebook or Instagram and were people the researcher previously went to secondary school with or knew from the international community while living abroad.

#### **3.2. Data collection instrument**

To answer the research question, a semi-structured interview guide was created based on the conceptual model, linking to the theoretical framework (Appendix I). To ensure dependability, the same interview guide was used for all participants. The aim of the interview guide was to allow participants to reflect on their experiences and create opportunities to explain what home and identity means for them. Since these concepts are very subjective, the interview questions were designed to be very personal. The interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was held on Google Meet, a video calling platform.

#### **3.3. Data analysis scheme**

To analyse the results, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using oTranscribe. The purpose of the transcript was to produce a word-for-word replica of the interview in order to analyse the content and meaning of what has been said. Once transcribed, the analysis included identifying participant's own interpretation of meanings of events and experiences (Hennink et al., 2020). To do this, codes were formulated using the software, Atlas.ti. When developing codes, a deductive and inductive approach was taken. The deductive codes were based on the literature and theoretical framework, which are linked to the interview guide. As seen in the deductive code tree, the topical questions are connected to a specific code, which is used to answer one or more of the sub-questions defined (Appendix II). Inductive coding occurred during the close reading of the transcript where issues and concepts by the participants are

identified and reflected upon. In line with the consensual qualitative research method by Hill et al (2005), the responses from the interviews were divided into units that consisted of one complete thought, which can be a sentence or paragraph. These thoughts were assigned a code and categorized as shown in the codebook (Appendix III). Finally, the core narratives of the participants were compared to construct themes that give an overarching perspective on how TCKs perceive home and identity.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations**

During the interview, a voice recorder was used for transcriptions. To ensure this was ethically justifiable, permission was asked to record the interview. The recordings were stored on a device under a passcode only accessible by the researcher. After the interview was transcribed, the recordings were deleted immediately. If a participant felt uncomfortable with the use of their data after the interview, they had the right to deny their permission to use the collected data in this research. Furthermore, during the transcribing phase, all names, names of schools and other sensitive data were taken out, ensuring the participants anonymity. When referring to the participants in text, pseudonyms were used.

Since these interviews were acquiring personal information, it was important to be careful and systematic with the data. The main way this was conveyed to the participant was through a consent form (Appendix IV). A consent form was given to the participant through email stating how the data will be handled, what the aim of the research is and the rights of the participant. Furthermore, if a participant was underage, a consent form was emailed to the parents to ask permission to use their child's data (Appendix V). Before the interview was conducted, the consent form was briefly touched upon to make sure that all parties understood how the data was being used. After the interview, the participants signed the consent form and returned it to the researcher giving full consent.

When thinking about positionality, the researcher was part of the research population, being a TCK herself. Therefore, it was important to be conscious not to compare experiences with those of the participants. Being a TCK was an advantage as it was possible to empathize with the participants. Due to the participants being from a personal network, there was already a level of trust and understanding. Having a similar experience as a TCK could reduce potential frustrations if participants felt that the researcher did not understand what they were trying to say. This ensured the research's credibility. On the other hand, due to the level of trust and familiarity, participants may accidentally overshare personal information that they would rather keep to themselves. Furthermore, being part of the research population has its disadvantages as participants may assume that the researcher understands them too easily, which may result in them glossing over important details.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Participant characteristics

For this research, eight participants were interviewed with an age range between 16-26 years. Three males and five females were recruited. The number of countries they lived in ranged from two to ten, with the average being five countries. The countries were very diverse and included the Philippines, Qatar, Dubai, the Netherlands, Singapore, Sweden, Greece, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Cambodia, South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia, France, The United States, Iraq, Germany, Jordan, Oman, Hong Kong, Thailand, Australia, Denmark and Turkey. Their passport countries included Germany, the Netherlands, France, Denmark, Sweden and Australia. All participants lived at least seven years abroad during their childhood years.

### 4.2. Structure of results

From the thematic analysis, the most prominent themes derived were: no place like home; sense of belonging in international communities and environments; sense of non-belonging in passport country; identity crisis based on where you are from; and passport country seen as their base. To illustrate the themes and form a narrative, quotes taken from the interviews were used.

### 4.3. No place like home

For many TCKs, home is a place where they feel comfortable, safe and welcomed. This was summarized by Levi who said home is,

“Somewhere that makes you feel wanted or comforted or safe. And that to me is wherever I am, wherever my friends are, where my family is.”

All participants mentioned family and friends being important factors for feeling at home. For Sophia, home is,

“Where the people are that are important to me, that are close to me. And like whenever I visit my parents, because we have such a close bond, I kind of feel like coming home.”

In regards to home being a locational place, most participants did not identify home in this way. A few participants said, “if you ask where I feel the most at home (...) that’s really no place.” or “as a person who has always moved around, I don't really have a mindset of this is home” . When describing their international mobility, most participants experienced moving every few years during their childhood. It was noted that due to the highly mobile lifestyle, homes have “always been very temporary”. Due to the temporality of homes, one participant stated,

“You can basically be placed anywhere within three years. You know that you’re going to keep on moving. So, you make connections wherever you go but you also develop

them so you can take them with you anywhere. So, you, yourself, will always be your home because yourself is who you travel with and you can basically kind of adapt to anything at that point.”

A lot of participants struggled with the idea that a home is where your roots and origins are. This was explained by Levi who said, “Just one of these things I can never really identify with, that definition of home, being (...) big origins and like both ethnic and racial and cultural entities”. Charlie also tried to explain this by saying,

“You have your roots and you have like where you feel the most at home with. And that's something I guess, like growing up like this, I kind of missed, because there's no place you can really call like, ‘home home’.”

Due to the highly mobile lifestyle that TCKs grow up in, they miss out on the values, roots and ethnic traditions that you would have growing up in your national country. A few participants noted that this was a distinction they had with their friends who grew up in their passport country. According to Sophia,

“When you ask them where home is, they usually can definitely say, oh there and there where I grew up (...) and I would say I don't have a very strong feeling of home.”

Habits and routines have also been noted to provide the feeling of home for TCKs. When asked in what ways they made their new environment a home again, Levi said,

“The best ways my parents made something feel like home was by just doing the same things (...) my mom makes crepes or we celebrate Christmas as a family, that to me kind of feels like home in a way.”

Similarly, Darcy said,

“There was that part of trying to keep the same routines, throughout all the moves (...) we always ate dinner, during the week, together at the dining room table. And we always tried to have a conversation (...) you know, just talking about our day (...) when I was younger, that kind of grounded me in a sense of normality, that even though I'm no longer living in the house that I was before or in the country or even in the same continent, and everything is new, not everything is new, you know.”

As described by the participants, keeping the same routines and habits seemed to allow for a sense of stability in a highly unstable lifestyle. Other participants also mentioned that doing the same hobbies and activities enabled participants to feel at home regardless of where they were.

#### **4.4. Sense of belonging in international communities and environments**

All participants said the international environment in which they grew up greatly influenced their identities. In an interview with Darcy, he said,

“It's just such a big part of me, having moved around, seeing all the different cultures, being able to speak the different languages, and I think I met so many people on my way, that kind of also made me into the person I am today.”

Darcy also mentioned that, “In the UAE, in the school that I graduated from, by the time I graduated, it had 93 different nationalities.”. Levi emphasised the diversity by saying,

“When you live in countries like Jordan, you know, it's like you're surrounded with like an American, someone from Russia or someone from Norway, someone from South Africa. And you're in Jordan.”

A lot of participants emphasized that being exposed to many different cultures caused them to be very open minded. In an interview with Elina, she said,

“We meet so many people from so many nationalities, you have to be open minded, you cannot be that closed off person and say, your traditions are weird”

Other participants have said that the multiculturalism of international schools has resulted in an international mindset.

“Your way of thinking drastically changes because you get such a broad viewpoint on everything, you have all these internationals coming in and having their way of thinking... because, cultures do think very differently.”

The open mindedness of international schools also helped many TCKs with adapting to their new environment.

“I was always quite good at adapting. And I think what really helps are the international schools, just because I think the students are a lot more open minded than like the national schools here.”

Furthermore, since international schools are dynamic institutions with students from all over the world coming and going, being welcoming and accepting towards new cultures and people was important. A few participants mentioned tolerance and respect for another culture was something they learned while growing up abroad.

Participants also indicated being able to make connections more easily with people from similar backgrounds. In an interview with Filip, he mentioned that since his ideas and opinions were heavily influenced by living abroad, he was able to better connect with international people as they share a lot of similarities making it easier to talk to them. For Maryam, when she reflects on her time at university, she said,

“What I find funny is that there are so many international students here and a lot of them we bonded with the International Baccalaureate, because it's so insane to me to meet someone who was in Peru and we did the exact same oral exam. It's absolutely cool to me how I connected with someone in Peru.”

For Darcy, he mentioned that he feels more comfortable the more diverse a room is. According to him,

“That kind of comes from my upbringing and going to different international schools and having friends who are from different countries that have different races and speak different languages.”

He therefore mentioned feeling completely out of place in a room where everyone was white, due to the lack of diversity.

“I've been in rooms before where I'm the only white person and I felt totally fine. But being in a room with nobody who wasn't white, that was so freaking weird.”

Since TCKs have been constantly exposed to new cultures and a diversity of people, many participants felt they are a mix of cultures instead of identifying solely to their passport country. This was described by Elina who said, “I'm like a mix of all the cultures that I've been around and that's just kind of me.” Similarly, Levi said, “each country is kind of a part of me and I part of them.” Therefore, the meaningful relationships with other cultures and the cultural identities formed during international mobilities, allows TCKs to feel a sense of belonging to international communities and environments.

#### **4.5. Sense of non-belonging in passport country**

When moving to their passport country, all participants had initial difficulties with belonging and adjusting. Many described the move as being the worst move or the hardest move. A notable challenge was the perceived language barrier, which made it difficult to connect with people, despite being able to speak the language. In an interview with Olivia she mentioned that she is usually quite capable of adapting and adjusting herself to fit in. However, when she moved to the Netherlands, she felt like she couldn't due to the language.

“It's a lot more taxing for me to speak Dutch. It just takes a lot more out of me to kind of...even try. When I speak English, my jokes just come a lot more naturally, but in Dutch I feel either too awkward or I know it won't translate well. The language barrier really holds me back when it comes to the Netherlands.”

Filip experienced being marginalized from the Dutch community as a result of the language barrier. According to him,

“I don't connect with Dutch kids very easily, because they always see me as an outsider, because my Dutch is not very fluent and they just realize that I am foreign so it kinda puts me out of their community.”

Being recognized as a foreigner in their passport country was something other participants had experienced as well. When Sophia moved to Germany, her accent was often commented on.

“In the beginning I really had an accent. You could really hear it (...) so many people would ask me, oh, are you really from Germany?”

A few participants mentioned they experienced bullying, which resulted in them dissociating themselves from their passport country. This was the case for Elina when she moved to Germany at the age of 12 for the first time.

“I got bullied in school and at swimming there and it's just...Germany did not have very good memories for me at that point. It was just not the place I wanted to be. I wanted to get away as quickly as possible. So, like, it's hard to say I'm German.”

In an interview with Filip, he tried to explain the bullying or unfriendliness by saying,

“You obviously know the expression to be put in somebody else's shoes, if you don't know what that feels like, you obviously do not know what that feels like. You can treat someone badly and everything, until you've experienced that yourself, you'll really notice the damage that you've done. For Dutch kids to treat me the way they have, it's normal for them, they just see me as an outsider, they don't think twice about it. Meanwhile if they were to move to a different country, they want what I wanted when I moved here. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to be welcomed. I wanted to be treated with respect...they would want that as well. But if they didn't get that, they would have the exact same ideas as I have like, ‘why do they not treat me nicely?’”

Feeling like a foreigner was also described as a result of people from their passport country not understanding their international experiences. In the interview with Elina, she explained that living in a small community in Germany with a population of 5,000 people made her feel like a bit of a sensation, because, “nobody's ever left this place” and “nobody probably ever will”, which results in having little understanding for the way she grew up.

“I'm the girl from Dubai. Sometimes I feel like that's a barrier, though, because, like, that's all they ask me about and then it's hard for them to understand (...) I guess it feels sort of like alienation. Like I'm always the foreign girl, even though I am originally from here.”

Finally, a few participants mentioned the lack of childhood similarities with people who had grown up in their national country. This was especially the case for pop culture references to TV shows or music. “I feel like it's mostly when they talk about childhood experiences and stuff...then it's like oh right, I haven't grown up here”. Elina described a similar experience when she said,

“Just like sitting together with my boyfriend and all of his German small-town friends, and just talking about their childhood pop culture references and how everyone has the same bowls of cereal. Apparently, that's a thing in Germany. Everyone has these glass leaf bowls. So, I just kind of sat there like, okay, if that's what it is to be German, then what am I? Because I'm not that.”

As a result of the language barrier, bullying, feeling like a foreigner and missing out on childhood experiences, many participants have felt a weak sense of belonging to their passport country.

#### **4.6. Identity crisis based on where you are from**

When TCKs are asked the question ‘where are you from?’, all participants first respond with their passport country. The reason for this ranged from wanting to keep it simple, people not being interested or not being bothered to give a long-detailed explanation. However, for all participants, the question of where they are from is more than just the nationality on their passport.

The complexity of cultural identity was particularly expressed in an interview with Levi. Levi was born in Cambodia and was adopted by a French family. Due to his father’s job, Levi was brought up in 10 different countries and moved around 15 times. When asked, “where are you from?”, he replied,

“Well, my initial answer is just France. But I think...the thing is, because...so I don't know if I'm allowed to say this, maybe I am...I look Asian...because I am Asian. But since...since I'm adopted, I'm not. Since I'm adopted, everything I guess, kind of gets wishy washy.”

In the interview, Levi explained that although he is Asian, he was not brought up with the Asian culture to be able to identify himself as Asian. Instead he was brought up with more of a French culture, as a result of his parents being French. However, due to his international mobility, he was exposed to many different cultures, which greatly shaped who he is. Unfortunately, for people to ask ‘where are you from?’ and expect a straightforward answer, it does not allow for some TCKs to express how they identify themselves. For Levi, he even said, “sometimes people don't even get to know where you're from and they're just like you're from China, you're from Japan, you're from South Korea or whatever, which I don't know...it's a tough thing to say.”.

For Filip, he experienced feeling more American, despite never having lived in the United States.

“If someone were to ask me ‘oh where are you from?’ I’d say ‘oh I’m from the Netherlands but I grew up in an American school and that's why I have an American accent’, because the first thing that everybody says once I say that I’m Dutch is ‘oh I thought you were American’, which kind of makes me believe in my mind that ‘oh yeah because I am an American’ but obviously I can’t say that because I’m not officially from America.”

During the interview, some participants indicated feeling sad they don’t have roots or have doubts about whether their passport country should be where they identify from. For Elina, “there's these doubts that come up like, does my birthplace mean that that's really my identity or where I'm from, even if that's like my parents' culture where I was born.”. Levi tried to explain why this might be the case and said it could be,

“Because of the way society is founded. Where it's like, everybody has roots so you therefore should feel bad if you don't have any. But nowadays a lot more people, whether they are international or not international, are beginning to shed roots. And lose them. And so, the way I feel about my origins, or a place I connect to spiritually or culturally...does not exist for me...the fact that I don't have that, might not be a bad thing.”

Maryam explained that while she had experienced an identity crisis in the past, studying Media and Culture allowed her to come to terms with her identity. For her, the fact that communities are imagined and not geographically determined anymore, made her feel more at ease. She said,

“Theoretically, it makes sense to me why I feel like this because before, I knew it was normal, I knew we were all going through it, but it was so nice to find, like history and theory based on it. The fact that (...) it's imagined and this is my imagination, helps a lot as well (...) I felt comfortable, because I was also reading about authors that probably went through the same thing like Stuart Hall.”

#### **4.7. Passport country seen as their base**

Although all participants seemed to have a weak sense of belonging to their passport country, all participants identified their passport country as being a base for them. When asked about how they view their future, their passport country played an important role for them. In an interview with Filip, he said,

“I think I'd have to start off in the Netherlands, because it's a safe fallback point...I am able to speak the language, I can write in the language, I am very familiar with the country, so the Netherlands is a good anchor point.”

One participant described this connection by saying,

“I can't really say the sentence that I'm proud to be German (...) I am happy to be German, like I'm very thankful. I think that's something else maybe that you learn when you're in countries that sometimes don't work as well. You know, in Germany, everything works (...) So I am very thankful to be German.”

With the experience of living abroad and meeting people from different backgrounds, participants seemed to feel grateful for their passport country. In the interviews, they recognized how well off they were, and how well their passport country is doing in comparison to other countries. As a result, all participants felt that their passport country was a strong base or fallback point.

## **5. Discussion**

When applying the definition of ‘home’ by Meijering et al (2016) to the experiences of TCKs, routines seemed to be an integral part of home making. In a highly mobile lifestyle, homes are temporary places, with most TCKs experiencing a lack of control in where they will be relocated next. Therefore, keeping the same habits and routines allowed for a sense of stability and normality in each new environment. Furthermore, engaging with family members was a strong factor for feeling a sense of belonging. Most TCKs identified places where their family were as ‘home’. Additionally, TCKs had a strong connection with others who have similar backgrounds, or in international contexts as described by Pollock and Van Recken (2009).

In terms of identity, the international environment in which TCKs grew up had a lasting impact on their identity. This relates to what Bronfenbrenner (1989) suggested about how interactions with the environment influences an individual's characteristic. All participants confirmed that living abroad, interacting with a diversity of people and experiencing different cultures resulted in them identifying with a mix of cultures. The identities of TCKs are very adaptive, open and not based on a particular culture as Adler (1977) described. Therefore, when people ask them where they are from, most participants include having grown up overseas as part of their answer.

According to Epstein (2009), TCKs find themselves “outside” of any particular culture and reject belonging to a single nation. During the interviews it was found that all participants had a weak sense of belonging to their passport country. Unfortunately, for all participants, moving to their passport country was difficult and resulted in being the hardest move. On the other hand, most participants described their passport country as a strong base or fallback point. A few participants compared their passport country to other countries or the countries they lived in and expressed their gratitude for how well off their passport country in comparison is. Since the passport countries of all participants are from Western countries, there might have been some differences in experiences if the third culture kid had a passport from a Non-Western country.

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to gain an understanding of the experiences TCKs have during international mobility and what that means for their sense of belonging and identity. When analysing the eight semi-structured in-depth interviews, it was found that home is generally perceived as somewhere that is comfortable, safe and welcoming. Most participants identified home as where their family and friends are. Therefore, home for TCKs is not necessarily a geographical location or their house in which they currently reside in. In terms of cultural identity, all participants said that being exposed to a variety of different cultures really shaped who they are. As a result, the question, ‘where are you from?’, generates complex and not straightforward answers. International schools were also identified as having a key role in exposing TCKs to different cultures, resulting in meaningful relations and intercultural

awareness. In regards to feelings of non-belonging, TCKs had difficulty adapting to their passport country. This resulted from having a language barrier, bullying, feeling like a foreigner and missing out on childhood experiences. On the other hand, most participants perceived their passport country as a strong base or fallback point, with many experiencing gratitude. Linking to the conceptual model, it can be stated that the expectations of the research have been met, making the model suitable for the concepts researched.

### **6.1. Policy recommendation**

As mentioned previously, all participants had experienced difficulty moving to their passport country. In a highly globalized world with more people having international experiences and frequent mobilities, it is important to understand the specific identity struggles that may arise from these experiences. Furthermore, intercultural skills should further be promoted to ensure that people are open and welcoming to different cultures. A policy recommendation is for national schools to integrate values into their school system relating to respecting cultural differences and being open-minded towards different cultures, opinions and ideas. Schools can help with generating intercultural skills by providing opportunities for kids to interact with different cultures, by for example interacting with kids from international schools.

### **6.2. Future research**

In a world that is increasingly more interdependent, nationalistic perspectives on global issues tend to become more outdated. Therefore, internationally orientated mindsets are vital to keep up with a globalizing world. Throughout the research process it was found that there is a lack of concepts when referring to TCKs moving to their passport countries. The process was often referred to as ‘return migration’ or ‘repatriation’ in literature. However, in this research most participants did not live in their passport country previously or did not experience the move as returning to their country of origin, making these terms unsuitable. Therefore, it is suggested that future research should focus on new theories, language and concepts to better understand the experiences of TCKs and cultural identities.

### **6.3. Reflection**

Before the interviews were conducted, it was expected that participants may feel uncomfortable talking about personal experiences online rather than in person. However, since TCKs are familiar with keeping in touch with people from all over the world, through social media and video calls, this was a misplaced concern. The in-depth interviews were very honest, open, and rich. Due to the interviews yielding such a rich dataset, interpreting the data was sometimes overwhelming. This was especially the case when generating themes and choosing quotes. When making decisions on what to include, topics specifically linked to the research question were chosen, even if other topics mentioned by the participants were important and valuable.

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# Appendices

## Appendix I. Interview Guide

### Introduction

1. How are you doing?
2. Can you introduce yourself?  
Probe: Age, occupation, study, nationality (passport country)
3. Which country do you currently reside in?
4. Which country were you born in?
5. Which countries have you lived in?
6. How long have you lived in these countries?

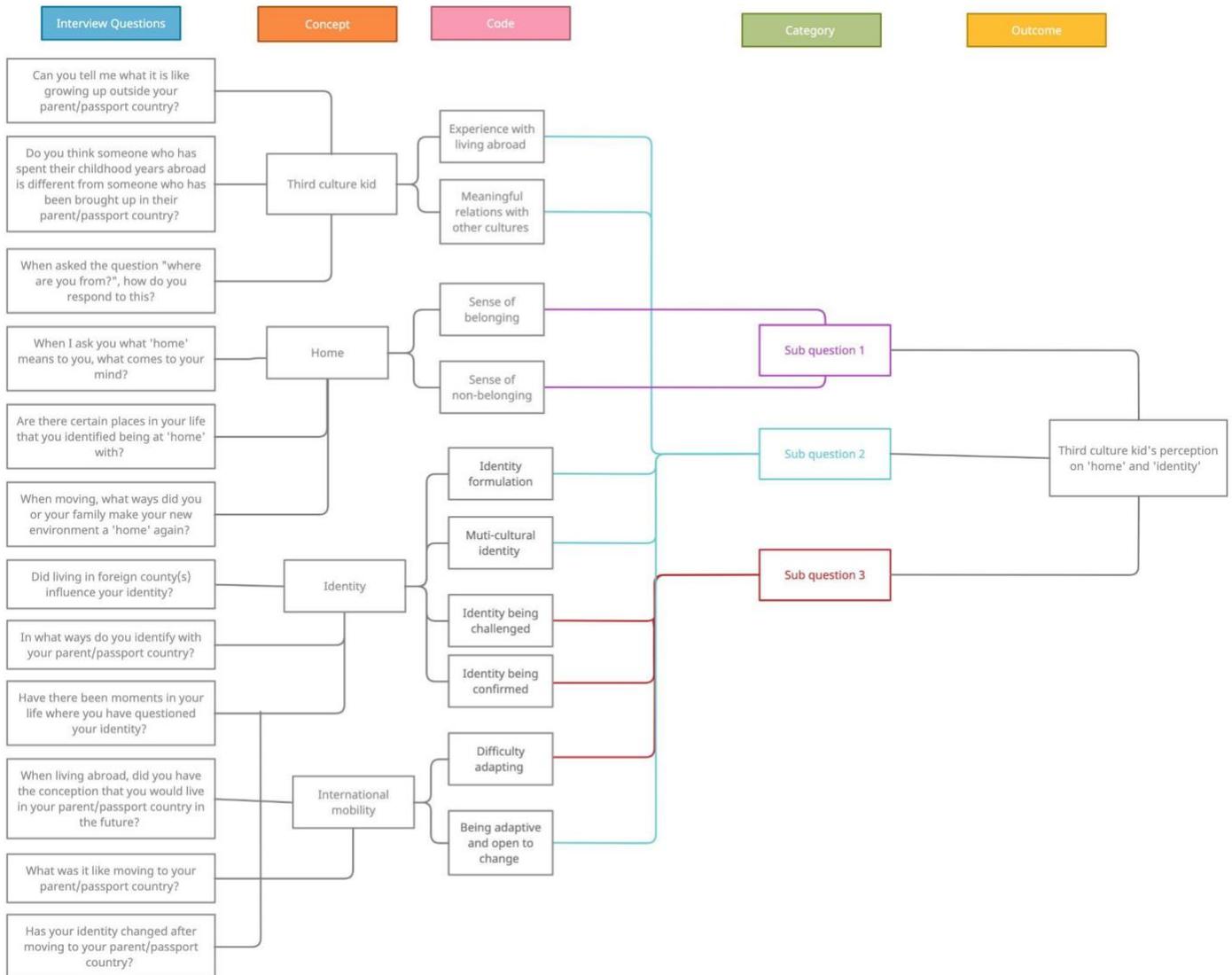
### Topical questions

1. Can you tell me what it is like growing up outside of your parent/passport country?
2. Do you think someone who has spent their childhood years abroad is different from someone who has been brought up in their parent/passport country?  
Probe: If yes, how so?
3. When asked the question “where are you from?”, how do you respond to this?
4. When I ask you what “home” means to you, what comes to your mind?
5. Are there certain places in your life that you identify with being at “home”?  
Probe: Why or why not? What are these places? Why does it make you feel at home?
6. When moving, what ways did you or your family make your new environment a “home” again?
7. Did living in foreign country(s) influence your identity?  
Probe: If yes, how so? If not, why not?
8. In what ways do you identify with your parent/passport country?
9. Have there been moments in your life where you have questioned your identity?  
Probe: Can you explain when and why?
10. When living abroad, did you have the conception that you would live in your passport/parent country in the future?  
Probe: How did this make you feel?
11. What was it like moving to your parent/passport country?  
Probe: Did you feel like you were finally coming ‘home’?
12. Has your identity changed after moving to your parent/passport country?  
Probe: Why or why not?

### Closing questions

1. Is there a country you would like to go back to?
2. If you could choose a favorite aspect of each country you have lived in, what would it be, and why?
3. Where do you see yourself living in the future?
4. Is there still anything you would like to say in regards to what we have discussed?

## Appendix II. Deductive coding tree



### Appendix III. Inductive Codebook

Example quote	Comment (if not clear)	Code	Category	Theme
“I don’t connect with Dutch kids very easily because they always see me as an outsider, because my Dutch is not very fluent and they just realize that I am foreign so it kinda puts me out of their community.”		Language being a barrier	Sub-question 3	Sense of non-belonging in passport country
“I find that international schools make that a little easier because most people move around and are used to new people.”	Participant was responding to how international schools make it very easy to adapt to new environments	International schools	Sub-question 2	Sense of belonging in international communities and environments
“I just really noticed that I barely understand any German pop culture references, so they come at me with these childhood TV shows that I'm just like, what?”		Disconnected with passport country	Sub-question 3	Sense of non-belonging in passport country
“It is a sense of like base camp, I guess, like a place that we always come back to.”	Participant was referring to her perception of her passport country	Base	Sub-question 3	Passport country seen as their base
“I think people have habits and like my parents' habits never stopped, so it's like home to me.”		Habits and routines	Sub-question 1	No place like home

## **Appendix IV. Information letter and consent form for participants**

### Purpose of study

Hello, my name is Ysabella Goedhart and I am a student from the University of Groningen studying Human Geography and Urban and Regional Planning. For my Bachelor Thesis I am conducting research on the perception of ‘home’ and ‘identity’ for third culture kids. The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the experiences people have during international mobility and what that means for their sense of belonging and identity. Since you fit the criteria for this research, you are being asked to take part in this study. Before you decide to participate, it is important that you understand how your data will be used and what it means to take part in this interview. Please read the following information carefully. If you have any questions or need more information, do not hesitate in contacting me.

### Interview procedure

The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. During the interview, a voice recorder will be used in order for transcriptions to be made. The recorded interview will be protected on a device under lock and code, which is only accessible by the researcher. Once the interview has been transcribed, all raw data will be deleted immediately. The data will be used for educational purposes only and will not be shared with third parties.

### Voluntary participation

Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that it is completely up to you to decide whether or not you want to take part in this research. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This consent form is to make sure that all parties understand how the data will be used and that the research is done ethically. Once you have signed the consent form, you are still free to withdraw from the research at any time, without having to give a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not have any consequences on our relationship. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your data will be destroyed, no questions asked.

### Anonymity

Your responses to the interview will be kept confidential. During the transcription of the interview, your name and any other sensitive information will be removed. When mentioned in the thesis, you will be given a pseudonym to ensure that you are not traceable.

### Contact information

If you have questions, doubts or concerns at any time about this study, you may contact me at this email address: (email stated).

## Consent

I have carefully read and understood the provided information. I have been given enough time to think about my participation. I have had the opportunity to ask questions. I agree that the interview will be recorded. I understand that I am free to withdraw at any time, without needing to give a reason. I give my permission that the interview data will only be used for educational purposes. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

Participant's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I declare that I have sufficiently informed the participant about the research. I will notify the participant about matters that could influence their participation in the research. I will ensure that the data will be handled ethically and confidentially.

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix V. Information letter and consent form for parents**

### **Purpose of study**

Hello, my name is Ysabella Goedhart and I am a student from the University of Groningen studying Human Geography and Urban and Regional Planning. For my Bachelor Thesis I am conducting research on the perception of 'home' and 'identity' for third culture kids. The purpose of this research is to gain an understanding of the experiences people have during international mobility and what that means for their sense of belonging and identity. Since your daughter fits the criteria for this research, she has been asked to take part in this study. In regards to ethical considerations, since your daughter is underage, I need permission from you that I am able to use the interview for my thesis. With this consent form, I will provide some information on how your daughter's data will be used and what it means to take part in this interview. Please read the following information carefully. If you have any questions or need more information, do not hesitate in contacting me.

### **Interview procedure**

The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes. During the interview, a voice recorder will be used in order for transcriptions to be made. The recorded interview will be protected on a device under lock and code, which is only accessible by the researcher. Once the interview has been transcribed, all raw data will be deleted immediately. The data will be used for educational purposes only and will not be shared with third parties.

### **Voluntary participation**

Your daughter's participation in this study is voluntary. This means that it is completely up to her to decide whether or not she wants to take part in this research. If she decides to participate, she will be asked to sign a consent form. This consent form is to make sure that all parties understand how the data will be used and that the research is done ethically. Once she has signed the consent form, she is still free to withdraw from the research at any time, without having to give a reason. Withdrawing from this study will not have any consequences on our relationship. If she withdraws from the study before data collection is completed, her data will be destroyed, no questions asked.

### **Anonymity**

Your daughter's response to the interview will be kept confidential. During the transcription of the interview, her name and any other sensitive information will be removed. When mentioned in the thesis, she will be given a pseudonym to ensure that she is not traceable.

### **Contact information**

If you have questions, doubts or concerns at any time about this study, you may contact me at this email address: (email stated)

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### **Consent**

I have carefully read and understood the provided information. I have been given enough time to think about my daughter's participation. I have had the opportunity to ask questions. I agree that the interview will be recorded. I understand that my daughter is free to withdraw at any time, without needing to give a reason. I give my permission that the interview data will only be used for educational purposes.

Parent's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

I declare that I have sufficiently informed the participant's parents about the research. I will notify the parents about matters that could influence their daughter's participation in the research. I will ensure that the data will be handled ethically and confidentially.

Researcher's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_