Lived Experiences of Malayali Third Culture Children in GCC Nations: Qualitative Study

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Abstract: *Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are becoming increasingly relevant as globalization and cultural mobility increase. The phenomena represents a unique convergence of cultural experiences, yet there is still a lack of information of the specific problems and resilience characteristics connected with these demographics. This study explores the experiences of Malayali TCKs residing in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, providing insights into their cultural adaptation, sense of belonging, and intercultural competence. Using in-depth interviews and thematic analysis and utilizing phenomenological approach, the study delves into the subjective experiences, perspectives, and meanings attached to their cultural identity and affiliations. The findings offer valuable perspectives for counseling psychologists to create culturally sensitive interventions that support TCKs' psychological well-being and cultural competence. Finally, the study contributes to fostering cross-cultural understanding and promoting social cohesion in multicultural societies for Malayali TCKs and other multicultural individuals in GCC societies.*

Keywords: third culture kid, malayali diaspora, cultural mobility, Gulf Cooperation Council, GCC

1. Introduction

Ruth Useem first introduced the term TCK in the 1950s to describe her observations as an American expatriate in India (Tan et al., 2021). Useem noticed that a third culture was emerging from the interactions between Americans working in India and their Indian colleagues. This third culture, while drawing from both the expatriates' home culture (first) and the local Indian culture (second), is not simply a blend of the two. Instead, it is co-constructed in the spaces between the home and host cultures. She defined the term "Third Culture Kid", as those raised by parents working outside their native countries, thus growing up in a third-cultural environment. (Useem & Downie,1976)

Differentiating the TCK and Other Immigrant Populations

TCKs are part of a broader group of cross-cultural individuals that includes immigrant children, refugee and asylum seekers, and children from biracial or multiracial marriages, among others. While TCKs share some aspects of the cross-cultural experience with these groups, such as involuntary migration during childhood, they also have unique experiences. These unique aspects primarily stem from their repeated migration and acculturation processes. What sets TCKs apart from immigrant children are their international mobility and their expectations of belonging.

International mobility distinctly separates TCKs from immigrant children. Immigrant children typically grow up in one culture, move once to a new country, and settle permanently, fostering an innate sense of belonging. In contrast, TCKs experience multiple temporary moves abroad with the expectation of eventually returning to their passport country, even if they have never lived there before (Tan et al.,

2021). This makes the TCK experience inherently dynamic and mobile (Schaetti & Ramsey, 1999).

Immigrant children are often expected to acculturate to the dominant culture over time. However, TCKs, due to the temporary nature of their stays, do not have this expectation. TCKs and their host countries typically do not anticipate a deep-rooted belonging, leading TCKs to view themselves as belonging primarily to their passport country (Meier, 2015).

"Hidden migrant" describes a defining feature of TCKs. The expectation of repatriation to their passport country. During repatriation, TCKs lose the familiar third culture support and return to their "first culture." Research indicates that this return often creates the greatest crises for TCKs (Hervey, 2009; Gaw, 2000; Westwood et al., 1986; Wyse, 2001). Despite appearing and sounding native, TCKs feel foreign after living abroad for an extended period, with their external similarity masking their true sense of foreignness (Tan et al., 2021).

The experiences of TCKs highlight the need for a more comprehensive framework that acknowledges and addresses the unique challenges faced by individuals growing up in cross-cultural environments. Growing up in cross-cultural environments provides TCKs with a unique perspective that fosters adaptability and empathy towards different cultures.

As nations grow more diverse and cultural exchanges intensify, the number of children raised in multicultural environments, such as Malayali TCKs in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is expected to expand. This study explores the unique psychological and cultural contexts shaping Malayali TCKs' identity formation, offering insights into how multicultural environments influence their psychological well-being and sense of self. The Malayali

diaspora's steady growth in the GCC underscores the relevance of understanding the identity challenges, emotional distress, and attachment styles these children develop due to frequent relocations and separations. By examining these dynamics, the study provides valuable insights for counseling psychologists to design tailored approaches addressing the specific emotional and relational needs of TCKs.

Dynamics of Migration

In the context of migration, Gardner (2011) explores the broader implications of Gulf migration on migrant families and sending countries. Migration to GCC states has led to significant economic changes in regions such as Kerala, with migrants facing dilemmas related to legal status, employment conditions, and emotional stressors associated with separation from home countries. Prakash (1998) highlights the economic impact of Gulf migration, noting increased income levels and asset acquisition among migrant households from Kerala since the 1970s. Historical records indicate Kerala's enduring trade contacts with Arab lands since at least 3000 BC, leading to significant cultural exchanges and the introduction of Islam to the region (Pillai, 1940). Kerala's rich history of trade and cultural interactions has shaped its identity, fostering tolerance towards foreign influences and facilitating the assimilation of diverse religious and cultural practices (Padmanabhan, 2013).

The Research Gap

The lack of diversity and intersectional privilege in research on Third Culture Kids (TCKs) is evident. Although TCKs are a varied group, existing literature does not fully capture this diversity. Most studies have been conducted from a Western viewpoint, focusing mainly on American passport-holding TCKs (e.g., Peterson & Palmondon, 2009; Purnell & Hoban, 2014; Long, 2020; Useem, 1973). Given the wide array of ethnicities, nationalities, languages, and religions within the TCK community, research on a single subgroup cannot be generalized to the entire TCK population. This issue not only affects the external validity of TCK research but also raises concerns about social justice.

The influence of socioeconomic status on the TCK experience is often overlooked in the literature. This is a notable issue because socioeconomic factors play a crucial role in becoming a TCK. For someone to be a TCK, their parent(s) must be employed by or training with a company that is willing to invest in relocating the entire family to a new country. This involves a considerable financial commitment from employers, which typically covers tuition fees, housing, airfare to their home country, and other expenses. Although there might be exceptions, the third culture, by its very nature, tends to be predominantly affluent.

Rationale

The phenomenon of Third Culture Kids (TCKs) presents a unique intersection of cultural experiences, yet there remains a gap in understanding the specific challenges and resilience factors associated with this demographic. While previous research has shed light on the psychological impact of TCK upbringing and their adaptation to various cultural contexts, there remains a need to explore these experiences in diverse cultural settings.

The knowledge gathered, along with the findings from the current literature review, suggests the following points. First, the TCK experience affects identity and belonging, often involving identity negotiation, multiplicity, and feelings of not belonging. Second, the repatriation context influences how TCKs perceive their identity and sense of belonging. Third, previous research on identity shows a strong connection between identity and psychosocial factors. Considering the increasing number of TCKs and the lack of empirical studies on their psychological well-being and interpersonal dynamics, more research is needed. Furthermore, while there is ample research on migration to GCC states and its economic impact, there is a scarcity of studies examining the specific experiences of Malayali TCKs and their cultural identity formation within this context. By addressing these research gaps, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted experiences of TCKs and the broader implications of migration on sending communities, particularly within the Kerala context.

2. Methodology

Research Questions

1) What are the challenges and opportunities faced by Malayali TCKs in the GCC in terms of navigating cultural differences, fostering cross-cultural relationships, and integrating into multicultural communities?
2) What strategies do Malayali TCKs employ to navigate cultural adaptation challenges and maintain a sense of continuity in their cultural identity while living in a culturally diverse environment like the GCC?
3) To what extent do social influences contribute to the identity development and intercultural competence of Malayali TCKs in the GCC?

Objectives

1) To explore the challenges Malayali TCKs encounter in navigating cultural differences, building cross-cultural relationships, and integrating into multicultural communities.
2) To identify the opportunities available for Malayali TCKs for intercultural learning, personal growth, and developing a unique identity.
3) To identify the strategies Malayali TCKs employ to navigate cultural differences and maintain a sense of continuity in their Malayali identity.
4) To investigate how social influences shape Malayali TCKs cultural understanding, sense of self, and ability to interact effectively with diverse cultures.

Sample

The study achieved data saturation with a sample size of 15 participants, deemed sufficient to capture the complexity and depth of the research objectives. Participants were young adults aged 17-25 who spent their formative years in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region. Identifying as Malayali, they maintained a connection to their cultural traditions and language despite growing up in a multicultural environment. Purposive sampling was employed, selecting participants based on criteria such as age, GCC residency, Malayali identification, and language proficiency, ensuring diverse

experiences within the Malayali Third Culture Kid (TCK) population.

Inclusion Criteria
- Young adults 18-25
- Should spend their entire childhood to adolescence years in GCC
- Should identify as a Malayali and must have closely interacted with Malayali culture, traditions, and language, despite being raised in a multicultural environment
- Both parents must be of Kerala origin and identify as Malayalis
- Participants should have proficiency in languages relevant to their cultural background and the GCC context, such as Malayalam, English, and possibly Arabic.

Exclusion Criteria
- Individuals who spend only a few years in the GCC
- Individuals should not be half Malayali, both parents must be of Kerala origin.
- Individuals who are of Kerala origin, but are not able to speak the language.

Procedure
Google forms were sent explaining who are TCKs and inviting the participants to join the study. Once the participants filled the form and provided their contact details, they were reached out to and the consent form were sent. Verbal and written consent were taken and the rapport was built and then the interview was taken. Within two days, the participants were sent the transcription and the interview audio to their email addresses via an encrypted link. Each participant was given a week to amend their transcripts.

Data Collection
In-depth interviews were employed to gather detailed insights into the experiences and perspectives of Malayali Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Probing techniques encouraged participants to elaborate on their responses, and recordings were transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis
Thematic analysis was used post-data collection to analyze the obtained data. Further, the researcher used QDA Miner software for open coding. For the study, Braun and Clarke's model of analysis is employed.

The Braun and Clark model of analysis is a 6-step framework. (Braun & Clarke 2006; Clarke & Braun. 2013) In the context of studying Malayali Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), thematic analysis is applied to the interview transcripts to uncover key themes related to identity development, cultural adaptation, sense of belonging, and intercultural competence.

Ethical Considerations
Throughout the interviews, confidentiality was strictly maintained. The goals, benefits, and potential risks were fully disclosed to participants, who could withdraw at any time. Efforts were made to protect them from physical, social, or psychological harm. Identifying information was stored separately in an encrypted file, and pseudonyms were used in written work and discussions. Participants were informed about data usage and could review and adjust their transcripts. This approach aligns with Saunders and colleagues (2015), who argue that data protection involves balancing data integrity with ensuring maximum protection for participants. Contact information was provided so that participants could clarify any doubts and address any concerns they had regarding the study or the requirements of their participation

3. Results and Discussion

Fifteen interviews spanning around 20 to 40 minutes each were conducted as part of the data collection process. The data was confirmed to be sufficiently saturated with the development of a number of common themes discovered during the open coding process and has now been developed into several themes. The themes that have been found have been categorized into sub-themes as per the codes and those have further been categorized into major themes.

The major themes as well as the respective sub-themes under them have been explained in detail as follows.

Table 1: Thematic Analysis

Global theme	Organizing Theme	Basic Theme
Experience of Malayali TCK in the GCC	1. Challenges of Malayali TCKs in the GCC	1.1 External perceptions and alienation
		1.2 Emotional Coping Mechanism
		1.3 Socioeconomic Privilege
	2. Multicultural Environment of the GCC	2.1 Exposure to Diverse Cultures
		2.2 Cultural Competence
		2.3 Cultural Fluidity
		2.4 Empathy and Cross-Cultural Understanding
	3. Sense of Belonging	3.1 Dual Cultural Representation
		3.2 Nostalgia
	4. Maintaining Connection to Cultural Roots	4.1 Language and Communication
		4.2 Visits to Kerala
		4.3 Art and Media
		4.4 Community Support and Networks
		4.5 Cultural Celebrations and Festivities
		4.6 Family Influence

4.   Challenges of Malayali TCKs in the GCC

In contrast to the broader TCK population previously studied, Malayali Third Culture Kids (TCKs) residing in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries exhibit distinct experiences regarding their sense of belonging and identity formation. Unlike many TCKs, who often grapple with significant identity issues and a pervasive sense of rootlessness, the Malayali TCKs in the GCC do not face major identity crises. Instead, their primary challenges revolve around the stereotypes and alienation they experience from their native communities in Kerala.

4.1 External perceptions and alienation

A common experience among Malayali TCKs who feel a sense of exclusion when interacting with peers and relatives in Kerala. Their long-term residence outside of India often results in them being perceived as outsiders by those who have lived in Kerala continuously. This perception fosters a sense of alienation, as they are not fully accepted as members of the local community despite their cultural and ethnic ties.

Yeah, because I grew up outside. Yeah, they always see us as visitors or intruders into the group. (Participant 2)

The stereotypes faced by Malayali TCKs are deeply rooted in their prolonged absence from their native culture. These individuals often find themselves navigating two worlds: the host country in the GCC, where they have grown up and formed primary social bonds, and Kerala, which is their cultural homeland. The duality of their existence can lead to a complex interplay of identity, where they are neither fully integrated into the GCC community nor completely accepted by the native community in Kerala.

Participants reported that their Kerala counterparts often harbor preconceived notions about their lifestyle, values, and behaviors, primarily influenced by media portrayals and second-hand accounts. These stereotypes can manifest in various ways, from casual comments to more overt forms of exclusion, reinforcing the feeling of being an outsider.

4.2 Emotional Coping Mechanism

In the context of Malayali Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, "numbing out" emerges as a significant emotional coping mechanism. This phenomenon involves the deliberate or subconscious suppression of emotional responses to cope with the challenges and stresses associated with their unique cultural and social circumstances. Participants reported various manifestations of numbing out, ranging from emotional detachment to reduced sensitivity to both positive and negative stimuli. This coping strategy was often employed in response to the stereotypes and alienation they faced, as discussed earlier. By numbing their emotions, these individuals could avoid the distress caused by feeling like outsiders in both their host country and their native land.

...it has its disadvantages but making sure that …that disadvantages doesn't act as a way to affect you and bring you down but it's a learning that you go through?(Participant 3)

This statement underscores the protective aspect of numbing out, where emotional detachment serves as a shield against the discomfort and pain of social rejection and identity conflict.

4.3 Socioeconomic Privilege

Malayali Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries often grow up in environments characterized by significant socioeconomic privilege. The glitz and glamour of the Middle East, with its luxurious lifestyle and advanced infrastructure, profoundly impact their upbringing and worldview.

The participants universally acknowledged the privilege associated with their upbringing in the GCC. They recognized the advantages of living in affluent neighborhoods, attending prestigious schools, and having access to high-quality recreational facilities. This acknowledgment was often coupled with a sense of gratitude for the opportunities and comforts that their socioeconomic status afforded them.

I'm going to say I also liked the comfort of living in the Gulf countries just because when I went back to my hometown in India for summer vacations, there was so much more value for the smallest things, even using tissue paper was sort of like a luxury back in Kerala, but then there is this sort of luxury that comes in and the fact that you're staying in a very nice AC room and you've got these big malls and these huge infrastructures to see so I also really like the luxury of it. I'm not gonna lie. (Participant 5)

…So I think those are the greatest experiences that I ever had in Oman and I think after 8th std I never been to school that much cause I was traveling all around for my other co curricular things. So I think all those opportunities are only because I stayed in Oman. if I were in India, I don't think those opportunities will be there for me and within my grab. I think it's only because of Oman that I got all those opportunity to explore the world and my Co Curricular aspects.(Participant 2)

This statement highlights the awareness and appreciation of their privileged status, as well as the contrasting experiences they encounter when they return to Kerala, where the socioeconomic conditions are markedly different.Growing up amidst wealth and modern amenities, they develop a unique cultural identity that blends elements of their Malayali heritage with the cosmopolitan influences of their host country.

5.   Multicultural Environment of the GCC

The multicultural environment of the GCC profoundly influences Malayali TCKs, providing them with unparalleled exposure to diverse cultures, enhancing their cultural competence, and fostering cultural fluidity. This environment nurtures empathy and cross-cultural understanding, making them adept at navigating and integrating multiple cultural identities. These skills and attributes are invaluable in today's globalized world, positioning Malayali TCKs as culturally competent and empathetic individuals capable of thriving in diverse environments.

5.1 Exposure to Diverse Cultures

The multicultural environment of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries provides Malayali Third Culture Kids (TCKs) with significant exposure to diverse cultures. Growing up in the GCC, these individuals are immersed in a melting pot of nationalities, languages, and traditions. This exposure plays a crucial role in shaping their worldview and social skills.

…from the very first year onwards you're used to seeing people of different cultures, not just your friends and let's say not just like if I had to grow up and grow up in Kerala, I would only be with people who are Mallus and depending upon the place….And even the religion- religious density would be different, even in the current place where I am in Kerala. I would mostly be going to schools with the majority of a Christian population not Hindus and Muslims, but back there throughout the years. I've met so many kids from different parts of India, even outside India. I've been classmates with Pakistanis, Egyptian, and Sudanese. So you get it like you've already been in that Global State of Affairs. I would say it's a small stimulation of how you have to deal with people and that they don't think the way you do, you have a better understanding of that. for my friend's example, like some people I talk to, I'm so baffled at how much they don't know about certain things. (Participant 7)

This diverse exposure fosters an open-minded attitude and enhances their ability to navigate and appreciate various cultural norms and practices.

5.2 Cultural Competence

The constant interaction with peers from diverse backgrounds enhances the cultural competence of Malayali TCKs. Cultural competence refers to the ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures. Malayali TCKs often develop sophisticated skills in cultural navigation, such as adapting communication styles and understanding different cultural cues. Few participants had also shared their personal thoughts on improving the cultural competency of native Keralites.

Yeah, I think that was important for me because being kind and being nice and being open to other people living in your land… That is also important. I think that was really important for me ,just the fact that you're surrounded by people who might not think the same way might not identify or live the same way, but you still meet eye to eye and you still function every day in a very nice happy. I know.(Participant 3)

This ability to adapt and integrate various cultural elements into their daily lives is a testament to their high cultural competence.

Improving Cultural Competency in Kerala. Participants were also asked how they think cultural competency can be improved in Kerala. They provided various suggestions:

Traveling Within or Outside the Country. Exposure to different cultures through travel can significantly enhance cultural understanding and appreciation.

Traveling would be a great option. And it doesn't have to be outside the country. Even to the neighboring states.(Participant 1)

Watching Movies and Exploring Art from Different Regions. Engaging with diverse forms of media and art can broaden one's cultural horizons.Participant 13 agrees that movies tend to show stereotypical content and are not always the true representation, yet realizing that there are people out there who think different and share different perspectives in life.

Communicating with People Outside. Actively engaging in conversations with people from different backgrounds can break down cultural barriers.

Government Initiatives. There is a need for governmental policies that promote cultural diversity and inclusivity in Kerala.
Economically… look at projects that we could bring forth for maybe more job opportunities. Maybe more colleges and more courses are just more for the city to be able to be a whole or younger young people who want to see growth in their education in their corporate would go to a place like Kerala and this is a place that I could grow. This is a place that welcomes people who are also from other states or yeah, so I think that is something that maybe the state can do...Yeah more projects more.(Participant 12)

5.3 Cultural Fluidity

Cultural fluidity is another significant outcome of growing up in the multicultural environment of the GCC. Malayali TCKs exhibit a seamless integration of multiple cultural identities, allowing them to move fluidly between different cultural contexts. This fluidity is characterized by a flexible and dynamic approach to cultural identity, where individuals can comfortably blend elements from their host culture and their native culture.

So, what I think is your sense of belongingness keeps changing sort of like you do have your roots and it's not going to change but depending upon where you are , you tend to form bonds with that place as well like, right now. I'm very much bonded with Bangalore and I am Bangalore sick when I go to Qatar or Kerala. So right now my sense of belongingness is here ... So for me, I think sense of belongingness is dynamic. (Participant 7)

This cultural fluidity enables Malayali TCKs to feel at home in multiple cultural settings and contributes to their unique identity.

5.4 Empathy and Cross-Cultural Understanding

The multicultural environment of the GCC also fosters a deep sense of empathy and cross-cultural understanding among Malayali TCKs. Regular interaction with diverse cultures promotes an appreciation of different perspectives and experiences. This empathy extends beyond mere tolerance to a genuine understanding and respect for the cultural backgrounds of others.

Compared to somebody who was brought up in Kerala, I feel like growing up in the Gulf will make you understand that you know different cultures, different ways of communicating, that maybe people aren't offensive in what they say. Compared to someone who grew up in Kerala, something that might be out of their culture, it might come up as offensive or destructive and you know might even threaten them, which you know causes, what do i say, which makes them self doubtful and questions you know believing in things like that. But being Mallu raised in the Gulf you know that you know, there are different kinds of people with different sets of personalities, varying cultures so not really everything that they say affect you in ways it should have affected you, being brought up just in Kerala.(Participant 10)

This heightened sense of awareness and acceptance not only enhances their interpersonal relationships but also equips them with essential skills for global citizenship.

6.   Sense of Belonging

Unlike findings from other studies on Third Culture Kids (TCKs), Malayali TCKs in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries exhibit a unique sense of belongingness. While TCKs often struggle with feelings of rootlessness and displacement, the Malayali TCKs in the GCC generally do not feel astray. Instead, they sometimes experience confusion but also take pride in their dual cultural identity. This distinctive experience is largely attributed to the substantial Malayali population in the Gulf, which creates a "home away from home" environment.

6.1 Dual Cultural Representation

Many participants expressed pride in their ability to represent both their native Malayali culture and the cosmopolitan culture of the GCC. This dual representation allows them to navigate multiple cultural contexts with ease and confidence. They see their bicultural identity as an asset rather than a source of conflict.

6.2 Nostalgia

Despite their strong sense of belonging in the GCC, Malayali TCKs do experience moments of nostalgia. While Malayali TCKs generally feel a strong sense of belonging, they do occasionally experience confusion, particularly during transitions between the GCC and Kerala. Adapting to different social norms, educational systems, and cultural expectations can be challenging. However, this confusion is often temporary and is mitigated by their ability to adapt and their supportive community. Participants claim to miss "home". This "home" can be Kerala when they are in GCC, and the GCC when they are in Kerala.While they experience moments of confusion and nostalgia, these feelings are balanced by their pride in their dual cultural identity and the strong sense of community in the Gulf. This unique experience sets Malayali TCKs apart from other TCK populations and underscores the importance of community and cultural representation in fostering a sense of belonging. How do you say it's we feel as always somebody who belongs in Qatar as well as in Kerala, when it comes to a certain time in a year, we start missing Kerala, when you're in Qatar and when it comes to that when we are in Kerala after a while we start missing cutter, so it's like I belong in both places. (Participant 7)

7.   Maintaining Connection to Cultural Roots

For Malayali Third Culture Kids (TCKs) in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, maintaining a connection to their cultural roots is an integral aspect of their identity and sense of belonging. Despite living away from Kerala, these individuals actively seek ways to preserve and celebrate their heritage, which plays a significant role in their overall well-being and cultural competence.

7.1 Language and Communication

Language plays a crucial role in maintaining cultural connections. Many Malayali TCKs prioritize learning and speaking Malayalam, both at home and within their community. Parents often emphasize the importance of preserving their native language, which helps TCKs communicate with relatives in Kerala and understand cultural nuances better.

By speaking my language I speak Malayalam on a daily basis. I have friends here who speak Malayalam as well. I try and Keep in touch. (Participant 8)

This emphasis on language preservation ensures that Malayali TCKs retain a key aspect of their cultural identity, facilitating deeper connections with their heritage.

7.2 Visits to Kerala

Regular visits to Kerala are another significant way Malayali TCKs stay connected to their roots. These visits provide firsthand experiences of their cultural homeland, allowing them to immerse themselves in the lifestyle, traditions, and social fabric of Kerala. Such visits often strengthen family bonds and reinforce their cultural identity.

As I said the language definitely. Then we would go every year to Kerala for our summer breaks. So, I'm in touch with most of my relatives because we would go to my dad's house, go see my dad's side of the relatives who are settled in Kerala. My mom's side of the relatives who are settled in Kerala and I for some reason had an interest in interacting with all of these people. (Participant 11)

These visits are often nostalgic and reinforcing, providing Malayali TCKs with a tangible link to their heritage.

7.3 Art and Media

Malayali TCKs also connect to their roots through engagement with Malayalam art, literature, cinema, and media. Watching Malayalam movies, reading Malayalam books, and following Malayalam news channels help them stay updated and connected to the cultural and social developments in Kerala.

This engagement with cultural media keeps Malayali TCKs informed and connected to their roots, fostering a sense of pride and continuity.

7.4 Community Support and Networks

The strong presence of Malayali communities in the GCC provides a support network that facilitates cultural connection. These communities organize events, educational programs, and social gatherings that promote cultural exchange and learning. These activities help TCKs develop a deeper understanding of their heritage and foster a sense of community.

This community support is vital in maintaining cultural connections and providing a sense of belonging for Malayali TCKs.

7.5 Cultural Celebrations and Festivities

Traditional cuisine plays a central role in cultural celebrations and festivities. During festivals like Onam, Vishu, and Christmas, Malayali families in the GCC prepare elaborate feasts featuring dishes that are integral to these celebrations. These culinary traditions not only reinforce cultural identity but also bring families and communities together, fostering a sense of belonging and shared heritage.

Community events and gatherings often feature traditional Malayali cuisine, providing opportunities for TCKs to connect with their cultural heritage and community members. These events serve as platforms for cultural exchange, where food becomes a medium for sharing and celebrating cultural identity. During festivals like Onam, Vishu, and Christmas, Malayali families in the GCC prepare elaborate feasts featuring dishes that are integral to these celebrations.

So in Qatar there are so many associations celebrating Onam. So as an NRI in the Gulf we would be celebrating Onam for a whole month. Even after the actual Onam is over and we would all dress up in our traditional clothes and have Sadya and that would be a community, communal gathering of sorts. So it's a strong event that takes you to the roots. I've sung and danced for this occasion several times. So yes, the most popular songs associated with your festival, the most traditional forms of art forms associated with the festival and so on. But I feel like the NRIs are far more enthusiastic in celebrating these festivals as opposed to people in Kerala because for them this is the normal part of their life. There was this one Onam that was there during my summer vacation in Kerala and I felt like the enthusiasm to celebrate was not as much and people were not as excited to put a pookalam, which is a floral carpet or maybe and there are not as many Onam gatherings that happened after the event is over. There's probably events happening during the day and maybe during those days of the festival but unlike the Gulf, it does not extend to an entire month as it does outside. I think it's also because everyone misses especially the first generation…our parents generation miss being home for a festival. So they organize such events and hence the Third Culture Kids get to become part of and become well versed with the culture. (Participant 4)

This connection through cuisine not only reinforces their cultural identity but also provides comfort, familiarity, and a sense of belonging, enhancing their overall well-being and resilience in a multicultural environment.

7.6 Family Influence

Family influence is a pivotal factor in helping Malayali TCKs in the GCC connect to their cultural roots. Through the active involvement of parents and extended family members, regular visits to Kerala, and an emphasis on cultural education, these individuals develop a strong sense of cultural identity and pride. This connection to their roots not only reinforces their cultural heritage but also provides a stable foundation for navigating their multicultural environment. The supportive role of family in cultural transmission ensures that Malayali TCKs maintain a deep and meaningful connection to their cultural origins, contributing to their overall well-being and sense of belonging.

I mentioned before even though we are in Oman, we always celebrate the festivals… and it is a must in our family that we have to speak Malayalam at our home. So all those things and we used to take Malayalam newspapers at home to buy. All those things and I'm well versed in Malayalam reading and writing because of grandma, those things …like… help me connect back to my malayali roots.(Participant 12)

All the participants maintain that parents are the primary facilitators of cultural transmission for Malayali TCKs. They often emphasize the importance of maintaining cultural traditions, language, and values. Through daily practices, celebrations, and storytelling, parents instill a sense of cultural pride and continuity in their children.

8. Discussion

Figure 1: Themes

Unlike many TCKs who often grapple with significant identity crises and feelings of rootlessness, the Malayali TCKs in the GCC generally do not experience major identity conflicts. Instead, they exhibit a unique sense of belonging, attributed to the substantial Malayali community present in the GCC. This finding contrasts with Baumeister and Leary's (1995) assertion that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation, suggesting that while TCKs may struggle with belonging in other contexts, the supportive environment of the GCC allows Malayali TCKs to maintain a strong cultural identity. The dual cultural representation they experience—navigating both their Malayali heritage and the cosmopolitan influences of the GCC—enables them to feel at home in multiple cultural settings, a phenomenon not extensively covered in prior research.

The study identified "numbing out" as a significant emotional coping mechanism among Malayali TCKs, which aligns with findings in the literature regarding emotional detachment as a response to social rejection (Jones et al., 2022). This coping strategy, while protective, raises concerns about the long-term emotional well-being of TCKs. The literature emphasizes the importance of emotional resilience in TCKs, and the findings suggest that while Malayali TCKs may develop resilience through their privileged socioeconomic status in the GCC, the reliance on numbing out could hinder their ability to process emotions fully (Cottell, 2006; Lieu et al., 2023).

The participants' acknowledgment of their socioeconomic privilege in the GCC is an important finding that reflects the broader context of Gulf migration and its impact on families (Gardner, 2011). This privilege provides Malayali TCKs with access to quality education and resources, enhancing their cultural competence and ability to navigate diverse environments. The multicultural exposure they experience in the GCC fosters empathy and cross-cultural understanding, aligning with Deardorff's (2011) emphasis on intercultural competence as a critical skill in the 21st century. However, the study suggests that this privilege can also create a disconnect with their peers in Kerala, where socioeconomic conditions differ significantly, highlighting the duality of their experiences.

The study underscores the importance of maintaining cultural connections among Malayali TCKs, particularly through language, community support, and cultural celebrations. These findings resonate with Pollock and Van Reken's (2009) work on the significance of cultural heritage in the lives of TCKs. Participants reported actively engaging with their cultural roots through language preservation and participation in traditional festivals, which serve as vital links to their heritage. This engagement not only fosters a sense of belonging but also reinforces their cultural identity, contrasting with the experiences of TCKs who may feel disconnected from their cultural backgrounds (Cottrell, 2006).

While Malayali TCKs generally express a strong sense of belonging, they do experience moments of nostalgia and confusion during transitions between the GCC and Kerala. This complexity aligns with the findings of Lieu et al. (2023), who noted that TCKs often navigate a landscape of dual identities. The supportive role of the Malayali community in the GCC is crucial in mitigating feelings of nostalgia and providing a sense of belonging, as highlighted by the participants' experiences of community gatherings and cultural celebrations. This community support is essential for fostering resilience and reinforcing cultural identity in a multicultural environment.

9. Implications

Understanding the unique experiences of Malayali TCKs can inform the development of culturally sensitive interventions that address their specific needs. Counselors should recognize the emotional challenges these individuals face, particularly the use of numbing out as a coping mechanism, and help them develop healthier emotional processing strategies. Additionally, fostering a strong sense of cultural identity and belonging is essential for their psychological well-being. Counselors can support Malayali TCKs in navigating their dual cultural identities and addressing feelings of alienation or exclusion from both their host and native cultures.

Moreover, the recognition of socioeconomic privilege among Malayali TCKs suggests that counselors should be aware of the varying experiences within the TCK population. Tailoring interventions to account for these differences can enhance the effectiveness of support provided. By understanding the role of community and family influence in maintaining cultural connections, counselors can also facilitate the development of supportive networks that promote resilience and well-being among Malayali TCKs in the GCC. Overall, these findings

underscore the importance of a nuanced approach in counseling psychology, addressing the complexities of identity, belonging, and emotional well-being for TCKs in multicultural settings.

10. Limitations

One of the primary limitations is the study focuses solely on the GCC countries, which have their own distinct cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Expanding the research to include Malayali TCKs living in other parts of the world could yield additional insights and allow for cross-cultural comparisons.

Furthermore, the study is based on cross-sectional data collected at a single point in time, which may not capture the evolution of experiences and identity formation as Malayali TCKs transition into adulthood. Longitudinal research that follows these individuals over an extended period could shed light on how their experiences and perspectives change throughout different life stages.

11. Future Recommendations

- Include perspectives of parents, educators, and community leaders who work closely with Malayali TCKs.
- Conduct longitudinal studies to follow Malayali TCKs over time.
- Conduct comparative studies between Malayali TCKs in the GCC and those in other regions.
- Compare Malayali TCKs with TCKs from different cultural backgrounds.

12. Conclusion

In conclusion, the experiences of Malayali TCKs in the GCC reveal a unique interplay of belonging, identity, and cultural connections that both align with and expand upon existing literature on TCKs. While they benefit from a supportive community and socioeconomic privilege, they also face challenges related to emotional coping and cultural disconnection. These findings underscore the importance of understanding the specific contexts and experiences of TCKs, particularly in multicultural settings like the GCC, to inform interventions and support systems that promote their well-being and cultural competence.

Statements and Declarations

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study.

Conflict of interest: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statements: The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

Contribution

Ms. Pratheeksha Satheesh- Conceptualization, Data curation, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft,

Dr. Kamathenu U.K.- Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing

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