

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HERITAGE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY, CULTURAL IDENTITY, AND SELF-ESTEEM IN THIRD CULTURE KIDS

AUTHOR

Avantika Sibikumar

AFFILIATIONS

Faculty of Psychology
University of Warsaw



INTRODUCTION

Third Culture Kids (TCKs) are individuals raised outside their parents' country of origin during key developmental years. Due to globalization and high mobility, TCKs—particularly those raised in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries—often navigate multiple languages and cultures. Heritage language proficiency has been linked to cultural identity and psychological well-being, yet limited research has examined these relationships among South Asian Indian TCKs.

OBJECTIVE

- Examine the relationship between heritage language proficiency, cultural identity, and self-esteem
- Investigate whether cultural engagement mediates these relationships
- Explore whether age moderates the relationship between cultural identity and cultural engagement

RELATED LITERATURE

- Kim, S. Y., & Chao, R. K. (2009). Heritage language fluency, ethnic identity, and school effort of immigrant Chinese and Mexican adolescents. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 15(1), 27–37.
- Mu, G. M. (2014). A meta-analysis of the correlation between heritage language and ethnic identity. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 36(3), 239–254.
- De Waal, M. F., & Born, M. P. (2021). Where I'm from? Third Culture Kids about their cultural identity shifts and belonging. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 83, 67–83.
- Tan, E. C., Wang, K. T., & Cottrell, A. B. (2021). A systematic review of third culture kids empirical research. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 82, 81–98.

METHODOLOGY

Design:
Cross-sectional quantitative study

Participants:

- 132 adult South Asian Indian TCKs
- Raised in GCC countries

Measures:

- Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q)
- Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM)
- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE)
- Custom Cultural Engagement Scale

Analysis:

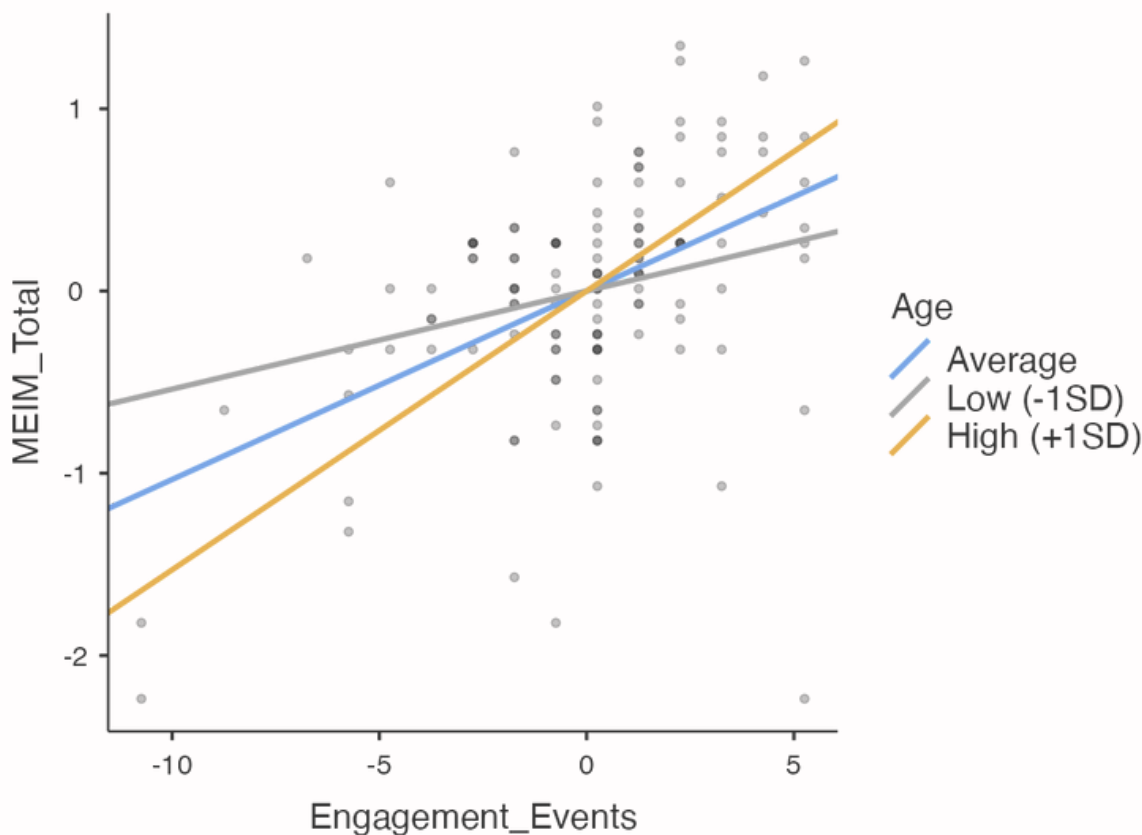
- Correlation & Regression analyses
- Mediation & Moderation analyses

RESULTS/FINDINGS

- Heritage language proficiency did not directly predict cultural identity or self-esteem
- Cultural engagement significantly mediated this relationship
- Strongest mediation effects found for:
 - Food-related engagement
 - Cultural and religious events
- Age moderated the relationship between cultural identity and cultural engagement
- Stronger effects observed among older TCKs

ANALYSIS

- Cultural engagement plays a central psychological role beyond language proficiency alone, highlighting its importance in identity development among TCKs.



Simple slope analysis demonstrated a significant moderation effect of age on cultural identity and engagement

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the importance of cultural engagement in understanding cultural identity and self-esteem among South Asian Indian TCKs. While heritage language proficiency alone was not a direct predictor, engagement in cultural practices—particularly food and religious events—played a significant mediating role. These findings emphasize the need for further research on cultural engagement as a key mechanism in TCK identity development.