

## Adult Third Culture Kid's (ATCK's) Journey to Belonging through Blogs and Podcasts

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### ABSTRACT

ATCKs, shaped by high childhood mobility and cross-cultural experience, often struggle with a sense of belonging that can persist throughout adulthood. The aim of this study was to explore the question, "How does the experience of writing blogs and producing podcasts for ATCKs contribute to an ATCK's own sense of belonging?" The objectives were two-fold: 1) to discover how the topic of belonging is covered in blogs and podcasts produced by ATCKs for ATCKs; and 2) to explore how, by writing blogs or producing podcasts for other ATCKs, they contribute to their own sense of belonging. The qualitative method of netnography was used examining blogs and podcasts produced by three authors/producers. The findings were: 1) belonging, as presented in the blogs and podcasts, focused on ATCKs' difficulty in defining home and constructed marginality, that is, being so convinced that you do not belong that you go through life continually looking for confirmation; 2) strategies for cultivating belonging, as presented in the blogs and podcasts, include shifting the focus from oneself to others, and connecting and building relationships with intentionality, authenticity, and healthy curiosity; and 3) by exercising for themselves the strategies for cultivating belonging outlined in the blogs and podcasts, the authors and producers can contribute to their own sense of belonging. As evidenced in this study, one way to journey towards belonging is through writing blogs and producing podcasts for ATCKs. By supporting others through the journey towards belonging and sharing their own stories along the way, ATCKs have the opportunity to connect and build relationships with other likeminded people and thereby mitigate the challenge of belonging for themselves. This research has global impact as not only can ATCKs be found in almost any country in the world, but also blogs and podcasts can reach anyone with internet access.

**Keywords:** Adult Third Culture Kid, ATCK, belonging, netnography.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

“Not belonging is a terrible feeling. It feels awkward and it hurts, as if you were wearing someone else’s shoes.” - Phoebe Stone

Belonging is something for which most people long (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018). However, it is not always easily attained. For Adult Third Culture Kids (ATCKs), their childhood experiences have impacted their ability, due to access and past experience, to build meaningful relationships and create a sense of belonging.

A plethora of non-academic literature exists on ATCKs and their younger counterparts, Third Culture Kids (TCKs), and the academic literature base for both has been broadening in recent years. In addition, the ATCK and TCK community of practitioners has been growing and currently provides information and support in a variety of ways. One way that is widely accessible is through the use of blogs and podcasts. Of those available, many are produced by people who are ATCKs themselves. Consequently, these blogs and podcasts combine retelling of personal experiences and processing of emotions attached to these experiences with providing information and support to their readers and listeners. Drawing from these sources, this study will examine the question, “How does the experience of writing blogs and producing podcasts for ATCKs contribute to an ATCK’s own sense of belonging?”

This study contributes to both theory and practice in understanding the relationship between ATCKs and belonging. Although scholarly literature on ATCKs is growing and the challenge of ATCKs’ sense of belonging has been discussed, research is still needed to discover ways to mitigate this challenge. Additionally, the connection between mitigating the challenge of one’s own sense of belonging and producing materials to help others has not been explored. This study’s contribution to practice will be to draw attention to information and support available through blogs and podcasts, as well as promote development of these tools by ATCKs as proactive ways to alleviate their own challenges.

### 1.1 Who are Adult Third Culture Kids?

ATCKs are adults whose lives have been shaped by mobility and cross-cultural experiences during their childhood (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017; Selmer &Lauring, 2014; Stokke,

2013; Tarique & Weisbord, 2013; Westropp et al., 2016). In order to understand the term ATCK, one must first define TCK. David Pollock, although not the first to coin the term, defined a TCK as:

a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture. The TCK frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures, while not having full ownership in any. Although elements from each culture may be assimilated into the TCK's life experience, the sense of belonging is (often) in relationship to others of similar background (Pollock et al., 2017, pp. 15–16).

It was developed posthumously by Pollock's co-authors, "developmental years" is refined to "first eighteen years of life" (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 27). Another change expands the definition by removing "outside the parents' culture" and instead acknowledges that the country could be that of one of the parents (Pollock et al., 2017). In our increasingly diverse and globalized world, the reality is that one could have parents of different ethnicities and citizenships. One further clarification in this new definition is that the family move could be made because of a parent's choice of work or training. Since the original definition was introduced, many have debated who can be classified as TCK. This expanded definition has opened the door to include children whose parents have many types of jobs and move for many different reasons, instead of limiting to the traditional understanding of only business expatriate children, foreign service kids, military kids, and missionaries' kids.

Another outcome of this expanded definition is the clear division between TCK and ATCK (Pollock et al., 2017). Since TCK identity is shaped by experiences during the first eighteen years of life, the transition to ATCK could be assumed to begin at nineteen. This provides clarity when researching these two groups. However, creating this stark division could be problematic for those TCKs who do not move on to adulthood so quickly. For the purposes of this paper, the definition of ATCK will be based on the new definition and assumed to begin at 19 years of age.

Resulting from their cross-cultural and mobile childhood, ATCKs develop characteristics and skills that can benefit them both personally and professionally. Many ATCKs have an expanded worldview, and cross-cultural appreciation and understanding which is an asset in our increasingly diverse society and workplaces (Abe, 2018; Bonebright, 2010; de Waal et al., 2020; Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Kwon, 2019; Lijad, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017; Selmer &Lauring, 2014; Stokke, 2013; Tarique& Weisbord, 2013; Westropp et al., 2016). Furthermore, some ATCKs develop linguistically and become bilingual or multi-lingual (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Kwon, 2019; Lijad, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017; Westropp et al., 2016). Many employers, particularly multi-national corporations, would find these skills to be valuable assets that could increase cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity in their workplace for employees, customers, and other stakeholders. Stokke (2013) further suggests that ATCKs, with their expanded worldview and cross-cultural skills, could develop into global leaders with global mindsets sorely needed in many organizations in our increasingly globalized world. Adaptability is another characteristic of many ATCKs resulting from their high childhood mobility which can benefit them both personally and professionally (Bonebright, 2010; Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Lijad, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017; Westropp et al., 2016). ATCKs have learned to adapt to many different situations, cultures, and places out of necessity. This is not an exhaustive list of ATCK benefits, but are some of the most common and serve as the springboard for many others.

Unfortunately, ATCKs also experience challenges arising from their unique childhood. One common challenge is rootlessness, grounded in the question of belonging (Pollock et al., 2017). Not surprisingly due to their mobile childhood, 'home' for many ATCKs is rooted in relationships instead of a geographical location. Belonging, as this study's focus, is further discussed in a subsequent section. Restlessness, which is connected to their highly mobile childhood and closely related to rootlessness, is another ATCK challenge. Many ATCKs feel the need for change every few years, which is sometimes referred to as "itchy feet" (Bonebright, 2010; Carroll, 2019; Pollock et al., 2017). This restlessness can perpetuate the childhood mobility into a transient lifestyle, which can be rewarding for the individual and/or unhealthy for their relationships and career (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018).

Adaptability, listed as a valuable characteristic for ATCKs, can also be an obstacle to their identity creation (Pollock et al., 2017). Many ATCKs become so adept at being chameleons in their ever-changing contexts, that they can lose their own sense of identity. “The mobility and cross-culture experiences affect the children’s process of developing who they are, where they belong, and whom to connect with... and may also affect their identity and sense of belonging later in their adult lives” (Kwon, 2019). Another aspect to identity that is challenging for many ATCKs is a phenomenon known as “hidden immigrant” (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). “Hidden immigrants outwardly resemble the people around them, but inwardly do not feel like they belong” (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018, p. 95). The expanded PolVan Cultural Identity Model (Figure 1) highlights the traits of a hidden immigrant in relation to the surrounding culture: 1) look like the surrounding culture; 2) think differently than the surrounding culture; and 3) either speak alike or differently than the surrounding culture (Pollock et al., 2017). The hidden immigrant challenge can be especially daunting when entering their passport culture, which many ATCKs do to attend university or begin their career. Although the hidden immigrant challenge is an identity issue, it also impacts ATCK sense of belonging.

### **Identity in Relationship to Surrounding Culture**

<p><b>Foreigner</b>                  Look <i>different</i>                  Think <i>differently</i>                  Speak <i>differently</i></p>	<p><b>Hidden Immigrant</b>                  Look alike                  Think <i>differently</i>                  Speak alike/<i>differently</i></p>
<p><b>Adopted</b>                  Look <i>different</i>                  Think alike                  Speak alike</p>	<p><b>Mirror</b>                  Look alike                  Think alike                  Speak alike</p>

Figure 1 (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 76)

## **1.2 Where do I belong?**

Most people yearn for a place to belong, to call home (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018). The question ‘Where is home?’ can create confusion or angst for many ATCKs due to their high childhood mobility (Cranston, 2017; Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). They either have no answer or many answers to this question, which cannot be summed up succinctly. Sometimes the asker does not understand or appreciate the answer given by the ATCK. As mentioned in the previous section, ATCKs’ sense of belonging is often rooted in relationships instead of a physical location

(Pollock et al., 2017). Some ATCKs will identify home wherever their family or friends are. The moniker Third Culture Kid is reflective of this idea of belonging being rooted in relationships. As shown in Figure 2, a TCK's first culture is their home or passport culture, second culture is their host culture(s), and third culture is

a way of life that is neither like the lives of those living back in the home culture nor like the lives of those in the local community, but is a lifestyle with many common experiences shared by others living in a similar way (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 17).

This third culture is not a geographic location, but a "culture between cultures" (Cranston, 2017, p. 27). This space is a gathering place for TCKs and ATCKs who have lived in many different countries and provides a place of belonging where no physical space can be found (Pollock et al., 2017).

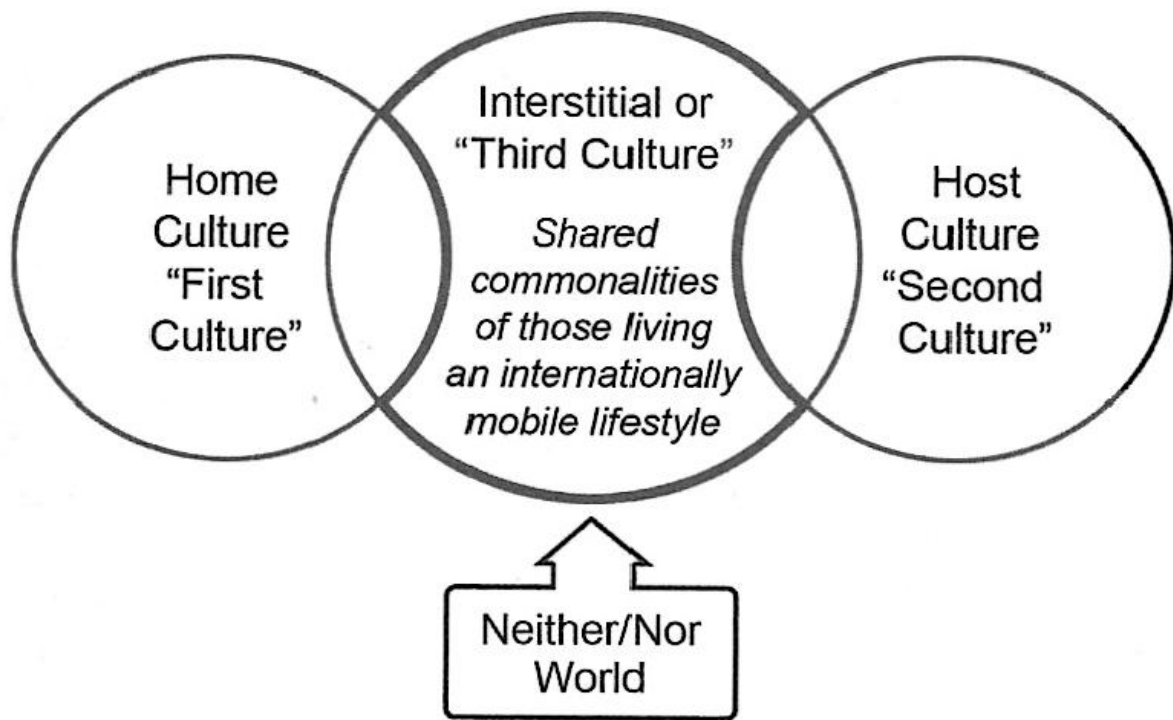


Figure 2 (Pollock et al., 2017, p. 17)

Despite having this third space providing a sense of belonging, many ATCKs still struggle with finding a home in which to belong and people with whom to build relationships (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). To know and be known contributes to meaning in one's life (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018). For ATCKs, they may find people with whom to spend time, but may not develop close relationships of knowing. This situation can be caused either by another person's perception of ATCKs (ie. hidden immigrants), or by ATCKs' lack of understanding of the cultural norms used to develop relationships, or because of ATCKs' inability to form relationships as a result of accumulated past trauma and grief from saying goodbye too many times (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). If a sense of belonging cannot be cultivated, the consequences could be devastating to ATCKs, resulting in isolation, fractured or underdeveloped relationships, unhealthy restlessness perpetuating potentially negative transient lifestyles, and mental health issues.

## **2 METHODOLOGY**

This study sought to answer the question “How does the experience of writing blogs and producing podcasts for ATCKs contribute to an ATCK’s own sense of belonging?” The method used was netnography through examination of three different blogs and podcasts. The blogs and podcasts were chosen through purposive sampling. Findings were discovered through thematic data analysis.

### **2.1 Research Methods and Design**

The objectives of this study were two-fold: 1) discover how the topic of belonging is covered in blogs and podcasts produced by ATCKs for ATCKs; and 2) explore how, by writing blogs and producing podcasts for other ATCKs, they contribute to their own sense of belonging. In order to fulfil these objectives, three blogs and podcasts were chosen by purposive sampling. The selection criteria included blogs and podcasts that: 1) were written or produced by ATCKs with information for ATCKs; 2) have existed for approximately two years with at least monthly postings; 3) include discussions on the topic of belonging; and 4) discuss the author’s own personal experiences and reflections. An extensive search of the internet and recommendations gleaned from various ATCK practitioners resulted in a compilation of approximately 50 blogs and podcasts. Each author’s biography was read and topics reviewed, refining the list to five, using the selection criteria. Of the remaining five, three were chosen for this study which represented a variety of author ages, genders, and styles. Each of the three blogs and podcasts chosen were then examined in order to record each discussion of belonging, in preparation for analysis.

### **2.2 Data Analysis**

After all discussions of belonging were recorded, four key categories were identified in which to organize the data: 1) ATCK symptoms of the lack of a sense of belonging; 2) ATCK values and needs from relationships; 3) strategies offered by the writers and producers of the blogs and podcasts to mitigate the challenge of belonging; and 4) personal challenges with belonging of the writers, producers, and guests of the blogs and podcasts. The categories were then examined to determine themes within each category and connections across categories. The first three categories informed the findings for the first objective by determining common themes in the blogs and podcasts that offered information and support on the topic of belonging for their audiences. By comparing the fourth category to the findings for the first objective, the findings for the second objective was determined.



### 2.3 Overview of Blogs and Podcasts Used

Three blogs and podcasts were chosen by purposive sampling. All three have components of both blog and podcast to varying degrees. All three are written or produced by ATCKs who are also ATCK/TCK practitioners. All three authors are well known for their expertise, speaking, and writing in the ATCK/TCK field.

Michèle Phoenix is a writer, speaker, teacher, and mentor of ATCKs and TCKs (Phoenix, n.d.-b). She was raised in France as a missionaries' kid and carries both American and Canadian passports. Her first blog post was June 20, 2005, and she continues to post entries up to the present time. Her posts are a mixture of personal reflections, humourous thoughts, and topics relevant to ATCKs and TCKs. She writes with vulnerability and openness and no topic is taboo. Her worldview is Christian and is reflected in her writing. On March 30, 2020, she began her podcast, *Pondering Purple*. Episodes are drawn from her articles and blog posts and are focussed on providing information and support to ATCKs, TCKs, and people who care for them.

Christopher O'Shaughnessy is a speaker, comedian, and author (O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a). He was raised in the United Kingdom as a military kid of American parents. His first blog post was January 8, 2020, and was posted in written and video format. His style is both humourous and personal, but always enthusiastic and upbeat. On October 16, 2020, he teamed up with Jerry Jones to produce a podcast, *Diesel & Clooney Unpack the World*. Jerry Jones is a cross-cultural trainer and coach, as well as an expatriate (Jones, n.d.). This podcast explores many subjects, but focuses mainly on ATCK, TCK, and expatriate experiences (O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a). They also have had a myriad of guests on the podcast, including Megan Norton and Michael V. Pollock, both ATCKs and ATCK/TCK practitioners themselves.

Megan Norton is a TCK mentor and advocate, intercultural communication trainer/consultant, teacher, and writer (Norton, n.d.-i). She was a diplomat's kid and has lived in ten countries as a child and adult. Her first blog post was August 22, 2017 and she continues to post entries up to the present time. Her writing has expanded since the first posting both in length and content. She began her podcast on November 8, 2020, *A Culture Story*, in which she asks guests to share a culture story from their own life and then answer five quick fire questions. One question asks guests to complete the statement "home is...", which is pertinent to this study.

### 3 RESULTS

Findings will be discussed in two sections related to the objectives: 1) how belonging was covered in the blogs and podcasts; and 2) how writing blogs and producing podcasts for ATCKs contributed to their own sense of belonging.

#### 3.1 Support and Strategies to Cultivate a Sense of Belonging

When assessing the support and strategies offered by these authors, three categories were used: 1) ATCK symptoms of the lack of a sense of belonging; 2) ATCK values and needs from relationships; and 3) strategies offered by the writers and producers of the blogs and podcasts to mitigate the challenge of belonging. One common theme was ATCKs' difficulty to define home (Norton, n.d.-a; O'Shaughnessy & Jones, n.d.-a; Phoenix, n.d.-a, n.d.-e). In one podcast by Megan C. Norton, she asked every guest to complete the sentence "home is..." The answers given by guests who were ATCKs were reflective of this phenomenon: home is where you are (Norton, n.d.-c); home is everywhere and nowhere, it is where you love and are loved back (Norton, n.d.-a); home is where you hang your heart (Norton, n.d.-f); home is where people accept your flaws and accept you (Norton, n.d.-b); home is with those you love (Norton, n.d.-d); and home is where family is (Norton, n.d.-e). All of these answers resonate with the idea that humans need to be known, loved, and touched (Phoenix, n.d.-c). A life lived without these basic needs results in feelings of loneliness, isolation, and being unheard and misunderstood (O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-b; Phoenix, n.d.-a).

Another challenge connected to belonging, which also crosses over into identity, is constructed marginality (O'Shaughnessy & Jones, n.d.-c). ATCKs and TCKs can become so convinced that they do not belong that they move through the world always looking for confirmation of this fact. This view is confirmed to them by their status as a hidden immigrant (Fanoë & Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). They feel as if they have no one to listen to their story and they feel unseen (O'Shaughnessy & Jones, n.d.-c). Their TCK identity proves to them that they are different and unique, but can also have the negative reaction of causing them to believe that no one can understand them, resulting in terminal uniqueness. They need to discover a balance between being unique and being human like everyone else. They also need to recognize that being a TCK may not be an identity so much as it is a description of an experience they can choose to attach to themselves or not (O'Shaughnessy & Jones, n.d.-b).

Most of the strategies offered to cultivate a sense of belonging center on shifting the focus from oneself to others. Empathy was a common theme throughout the blogs and podcasts (Norton, n.d.-k; O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-b; O'Shaughnessy & Jones, n.d.-a). Understanding that loneliness is not unique to them as ATCKs and showing empathy for others and their struggles can increase connection and build the relationships that are needed for their sense of belonging (O'Shaughnessy & Jones, n.d.-a). In addition to showing empathy, doing acts of kindness can further build relationships and also serve to shift the focus from themselves to others (Phoenix, n.d.-d). Being

willing to share your story honestly and authentically, as well as allowing space for others to share their stories, establishes greater connection which, in turn, helps to solidify relationships (Norton, n.d.-j). Regardless of which strategies are employed, connecting with others and building relationships require intentionality, authenticity, and a healthy curiosity about the lives of those around them (Norton, n.d.-h).

ATCKs are often known to be bridges of connection (Norton, n.d.-g; O'Shaughnessy & Jones, n.d.-b; Phoenix, n.d.-f). ATCKs live in this space of 'mostly belonging' which makes them feel like they do not belong anywhere, but it also allows them to straddle multiple groups of people and be bridges between them (Phoenix, n.d.-f). This skill is one that builds connection and relationships between people who would otherwise struggle, especially between different cultural groups (Norton, n.d.-g). However, one ATCK highlighted the downside of this valuable skill: ATCKs act as bridges to connect people, but people do not stay on bridges (O'Shaughnessy & Jones, n.d.-b). Despite the purpose of bridges to connect, often the bridges themselves remain lonely.

### **3.2 Cultivating Belonging for Oneself**

Recognizing whether the authors and producers of the blogs and podcasts examined had cultivated their own sense of belonging through their endeavours was not blatantly visible. The only mention was by one of the podcast guests who also produced a podcast of his own (Norton, n.d.-a). He called producing his podcast that explored being an ATCK 'therapy'. Despite this, two themes gleaned from their suggested strategies for others also pointed toward the development of their own journey.

Showing empathy and kindness to others as a strategy for increasing connection and building relationships in order to increase one's sense of belonging is shown very clearly in all three blogs and podcasts (Norton, n.d.-i; O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a; Phoenix, n.d.-b). Although their styles of delivery vary and, as a result, so may their audiences, their goals converge: to support, mentor, and advise ATCKs, TCKs, and those who love them. Because of their public personas, they are all well known in the ATCK/TCK world, which increases their connection with other likeminded people. Both O'Shaughnessy and Norton invited other ATCKs as guests to their podcasts (Norton, n.d.-i; O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a). In their introductions of these guests, it was clear both had personal relationships with their guests, which showed the close connection between members of both ATCK and ATCK practitioner communities.

Another indicator of this journey is the willingness to share their own stories (Norton, n.d.-i; O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a; Phoenix, n.d.-b). While Phoenix shares almost every aspect of her life and struggles openly in her blog, Norton and O'Shaughnessy only share portions related to the topic explored. In addition, Norton and O'Shaughnessy invite guests on their podcast to share their stories which opens a space for further connection (Norton, n.d.-j, n.d.-i; O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a). Whether little or much is shared about their own stories, the key to their increasing connection and building relationships with others is their openness and authenticity.

## 4 CONCLUSIONS

Findings from this netnography show that through the experience of writing and producing blogs and podcasts about ATCK belonging and its challenges, strategies to mitigate the challenges and increase connection with others, and sharing their own story in the process, can contribute to the author's own sense of belonging. The definition of home for ATCKs tends to require thought and reflection, but is generally answered in terms of relationship (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). This truth was confirmed both by the authors of the blogs and podcasts, as well as by their guests (Norton, n.d.-i; O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a; Phoenix, n.d.-b). Being fully known, heard, and seen by others is important for all humans, but at times can prove challenging for ATCKs who straddle more than one culture but may not fully belong to any (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). Often it is within the 'third culture', unique to ATCKs and TCKs, that they find their place of full belonging, as evidenced in relationships between O'Shaughnessy and Norton and many of their guests (Norton, n.d.-i; O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a).

The willingness of Phoenix, Norton, and O'Shaughnessy to be open and authentic in telling their own stories exhibits courage that can be difficult for ATCKs (Norton, n.d.-i; O'Shaughnessy, n.d.-a; Phoenix, n.d.-b). Accumulation of past trauma and grief from many experiences of saying goodbye can result in ATCKs holding back from investing time and energy in connecting and building relationships (Fanoë& Marsico, 2018; Pollock et al., 2017). Finding courage to open themselves up in a public forum like the internet is a notable achievement and reveals a commitment to their journey towards belonging.

Most people yearn to belong, whether it be to a place or a group of people. For ATCKs, belonging to a place is less likely due to their high childhood mobility, but belonging through relationships is an achievable reality. As evidenced in this study, one way to journey towards belonging is through writing blogs and producing podcasts for ATCKs and/or TCKs. By supporting others through the journey towards belonging and sharing their own stories along the way, ATCKs have the opportunity to connect and build relationships with other likeminded people and thereby mitigate the challenge of belonging for themselves.

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