

**Adjustment Orientations of Expatriate Spouses: A Qualitative Exploration of Coping
Mechanisms and Resource Dynamics**

by

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Abstract

As global mobility expands, the success of international work assignments increasingly depends on the well-being and adjustment of expatriate families, particularly accompanying spouses. While traditional research has focused on expatriate employees and conceptualized adjustment as a linear, stage-based process (e.g., U-curve models), this study conceptualizes spouse adjustment as a complex, context-sensitive process of navigating resources and demands. This qualitative research investigates the question: *How do expatriate spouses adjust and cope during international assignments, and what individual, relational, and contextual factors shape adjustment orientations over time?* Drawing on 17 publicly available blogs, the study uses reflexive thematic analysis to capture lived, longitudinal narratives of adjustment across diverse cultural and family contexts. Eight data-driven coping mechanisms were identified across four domains: Emotional and Psychological (e.g., Cognitive Reframing), Social and Relational (e.g., Network-building), Identity and Career (e.g., Reinvention), and Practical and Digital (e.g., Digital tools). These strategies clustered into three overlapping, dynamic adjustment orientations—Stabilization (defensive resource preservation), Reintegration (selective role and identity recovery), and Transformation (expansive reinvention). The study advances an orientation-based, trigger-driven process model: contextual inputs (sociocultural setting, family structure, employment flexibility) shape resource appraisal; through Iterative Adjustment Learning (IAL), feedback cues and concrete triggers (for example, peer validation, first role success, or acute shocks) prompt either capability building within the current orientation or switches between orientations. This reframing moves beyond linear, stage models and explains why spouses on similar timelines diverge. The model yields actionable implications

for international human resource management and for designing supports for globally mobile families.

Keywords: expatriate spouses, adjustment orientations, trigger-driven process model, Iterative Adjustment Learning, resource appraisal, blog analysis, coping mechanisms, Conservation of Resources theory, identity reinvention, global mobility, qualitative reflexive thematic analysis, digital coping, international HRM.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgment	iii
List of Tables	vii
List of Figures	viii
Chapter I: Introduction	1
Chapter II: Literature Review	5
2.1 Introduction	5
2.2 Conceptualizing Adjustment in Expatriate Contexts.....	5
2.3 Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Expatriate Spouse Adjustment	7
2.4 Summary of Previous Research on Expatriate Spouses	9
2.5 Demands and Resources in the Expatriate Spouse Context	11
2.5.1 Personal Demands and Resources	11
2.5.2 Family Demands and Resources	12
2.5.3 Environmental Demands and Resources	13
2.6 Methodological Gaps and Blog-Based Research	14
2.7 Chapter Summary	16
Chapter III: Methodology.....	17
3.1 Research Context.....	17
3.2 Data Collection.....	18
3.3 Ethical Considerations	19
3.4 Data Analysis.....	20

Stage 1: Familiarization, Open Coding, and Phase Tagging	20
Stage 2: Theme Development.....	22
Stage 3: Thematic Clustering and Refinement—Consolidating Sub-Themes.....	22
3.5 Themes and Sub-Themes.....	23
Emotional and Psychological Coping Mechanisms:.....	23
Social and Relational Coping Mechanisms	27
Identity and Career Coping Mechanisms.....	28
Practical and Digital Coping Mechanisms.....	29
3.6 Temporal Pattern Identification and Interpretive Integration.....	32
3.7 From Coping Strategies to Adjustment Orientations: Interpretive Bundling.....	36
Chapter IV: Findings.....	38
4.1 Adjustment Orientations.....	38
4.2 Contextual Factors Influencing Orientations.....	47
4.2.1 Sociocultural Context: Barriers vs. Bridges.....	48
4.2.2 Family Structure: Constraint or Catalyst	49
4.2.3 Employment Flexibility: Gateways and Roadblocks.....	51
4.2.4 Cross-Orientation Interaction of Contextual Factors	52
4.3 Process Model of Adjustment.....	52
4.3.1 Triggers: What Enters the Feedback Channel and What It Does	54
Chapter V: Discussion.....	58
5.1 Spouses as Active Agents in Global Mobility	58

5.2 Rethinking the Structure of Adjustment	59
5.3 Theoretical Contributions	61
5.4 Practical Implications: Designing Supportive Systems.....	62
5.5 Limitations.....	63
5.6 Future Research	64
5.7 Conclusion: Beyond Linear Models to Dynamic Spousal Adjustment	67
References	68
Appendix A	76
Appendix B1	77
Appendix B2	78
Appendix B3	79
Appendix B4	80
Appendix B5	81
Appendix B6	82
Appendix B7	83
Appendix B8	84

List of Tables

Table 3.1 <i>Examples of Adjustment Phases, Codes, and Rationales</i>	21
Table 3.2 <i>Example Quotes Supporting Theme Construction</i>	31
Table 3.3 <i>Number of Bloggers Using Coping Mechanisms Across Phases</i>	33
Table 4.1 <i>Summary of Expatriate Spouse Adjustment Orientations</i>	47
Table 4.2 <i>Functional Types of Triggers</i>	55

List of Figures

Figure 3.1 Data Structure	24
Figure 4.1 Process Model	53

Chapter I: Introduction

Expatriation plays a critical role in today's global workforce, with millions of individuals temporarily relocating to work in foreign countries. In 2019, an estimated 169 million international migrant workers were recorded worldwide, accounting for approximately 62% of all international migrants (International Labour Organization, 2019). This rising global mobility highlights the strategic importance of expatriation within international business and human resource management. Expatriates typically refer to individuals who reside and work in a host country on a temporary basis, either through corporate assignment or self-initiated relocation (McNulty, 2015).

Following a slowdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, international mobility is now resurging. According to recent global mobility reports, 45% of companies expect long-term international assignments to increase through 2023 and 2024, alongside rising interest in short-term placements and remote work arrangements (Meier, 2023). For these assignments to succeed, organizations must go beyond preparing employees for their professional roles; they also need to consider the broader family context, especially the experiences of spouses, whose careers, identities, and social networks are often deeply disrupted by relocation.

Despite increased attention to global mobility, research in this area has traditionally focused on the expatriate employee, with several qualitative studies examining their motivations and adjustment experiences (Richardson & Mallon, 2005; He et al., 2019; Peltokorpi & Zhang, 2020). In contrast, limited attention to the adjustment experiences of accompanying spouses or family members (Takeuchi, 2010; Dang et al., 2022). This is a notable gap, particularly given that 62% of expatriates are in committed relationships (Cartus, 2016; InterNations, 2019). The family's ability to adapt is widely recognized as a key factor in determining whether an

assignment succeeds or fails (Avril & Magnini, 2007; Cole & Nesbeth, 2014). Spouses often face multiple challenges, including cultural novelty (Takeuchi et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2022), employment disruption (Cole, 2011; Collins & Bertone, 2017; Rosenbaum-Feldbrügge et al., 2022), and navigating parenthood in unfamiliar environments (Takeuchi et al., 2007). These pressures can significantly affect their psychological well-being and ability to adjust.

Beyond these substantive gaps, research on expatriate families has also been critiqued for theoretical fragmentation and a reliance on narrowly framed, often cross-sectional methodologies that overlook dynamic, contextual processes (Dang et al., 2022). While a few longitudinal studies have begun to shed light on how expatriate spouses adapt over time (e.g., Bikos et al., 2007; Collins & Bertone, 2017), the majority of existing research continues to rely on structured surveys or short-term interviews. These approaches often limit insight into how adjustment unfolds as an evolving, lived experience. As a result, there is still much we do not understand about how expatriate spouses actively make sense of, and respond to, the social, emotional, and practical demands of international assignments. This study addresses these concerns through a qualitative, reflexive approach that foregrounds lived experience and contextual meaning-making. By adopting a multi-level perspective, it explores how individual, relational, and contextual factors shape the adjustment process of spouses over time, offering insights that complement existing quantitative and statistical studies.

To address these gaps, this study explores the following research question: “How do expatriate spouses adjust and cope during international assignments, and what individual, relational, and contextual factors influence adjustment orientations over time?”

The study draws on an underutilized but rich data source, publicly available blogs authored by expatriate spouses themselves. These blogs offer reflective, first-person narratives

that span different stages of the expatriation journey. Unlike structured interviews or surveys, blogs are self-initiated and self-framed, allowing spouses to narrate their experiences on their own terms, without prompts or questions from a researcher. They offer deep insight into how spouses reflect on, interpret, and make sense of their adjustment over time. Through these personal narratives, we gain access to both ordinary routines and key emotional turning points, as well as the ongoing identity work involved in navigating shifting roles, relationships, and cultural contexts.

Using an inductive, qualitative approach, the blog content was thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns in coping strategies, identity work, and emotional regulation. Only after these themes were identified was the Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) applied as a post-hoc analytical lens. COR theory offers a framework for understanding how people manage stress by conserving, protecting, and building valued resources. To address the fragmented theoretical approaches observed in prior research, COR theory is used here not as a predetermined coding frame but as an integrative, post hoc interpretive tool, connecting lived narratives to a broader model of resource dynamics. Specifically, it illuminates how expatriate spouses experience the loss, protection, and investment of key resources such as emotional energy, social support, identity continuity, and a sense of stability. Applying it in this way allowed the research to connect individual narratives to broader theoretical insights without pre-emptively constraining the data.

In doing so, this study aims to offer a deeper, more human-centered understanding of expatriate spouse adjustment; one that reflects not just challenges and vulnerabilities, but also resilience, creativity, and transformation. By amplifying the voices of spouses and exploring their coping experiences across time and context, this research contributes to expatriation theory,

enriches the application of COR theory, and provides practical insights for organizations seeking to support globally mobile families.

Chapter II: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of existing literature related to expatriate spouse adjustment. It begins by exploring how adjustment has been conceptualized in cross-cultural and expatriate contexts, followed by a detailed discussion of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory; the theoretical lens used in this study to interpret blog-based findings post hoc. The final major section introduces key empirical findings from previous research on expatriate spouses, identifying what is already known and where significant gaps remain.

By summarizing prior research and theoretical frameworks, this chapter establishes the rationale for using blog narratives to understand the evolving, lived experiences of expatriate spouses. It highlights how this study builds on and extends existing knowledge by incorporating a resource-based interpretive lens and an inductive, narrative-oriented methodology.

2.2 Conceptualizing Adjustment in Expatriate Contexts

Adjustment has been theorized and measured in diverse ways, reflecting a variety of psychological, sociocultural, and relational dimensions. In expatriate studies, cross-cultural adjustment has become a central construct, especially in relation to accompanying spouses. One of the most influential definitions comes from Black and Gregersen (1991, p. 498), who describe cross-cultural adjustment as the “degree of psychological comfort with various aspects of a host country.” This includes comfort in work settings, with local people, and in everyday social environments.

Scholars have conceptualized and measured adjustment through various lenses. For instance, Brislin (1981) explored the relational dimension of adjustment through perceptions of acceptance in the host culture. Yoshikawa (1988) introduced the concept of perceptual maturity,

describing an individual's ability to emotionally and cognitively interpret social cues and navigate cultural dynamics. Health-related factors, such as stress and psychological well-being, have also been used as adjustment indicators (Babiker et al., 1980). Deshpande and Viswesvaran (1992) emphasized the role of interpersonal relationships, particularly with host country nationals, in shaping adjustment outcomes. More recent research has further broadened the lens to consider family structures and roles, such as the adjustment experiences of single-parent expatriates (McNulty, 2015).

In the context of spouses, the focus has increasingly shifted toward non-work-related adjustment domains, such as identity, social integration, and emotional well-being (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). Research has also highlighted how spousal adjustment directly affects the success or failure of the expatriate's assignment (Avril & Magnini, 2007; Cole & Nesbeth, 2014).

However, despite this evolution in focus, the literature still suffers from notable limitations. As Dang et al. (2022) observe in their systematic review, studies on expatriate families remain fragmented, lacking integrative frameworks that address the interaction between individual, organizational, and societal factors. Much of the existing research has relied on structured surveys or single-point interviews that treat adjustment as a fixed outcome rather than a fluid, unfolding process. This approach can obscure how spouses navigate change over time, especially when confronting the cumulative effects of disrupted roles, identities, and social networks.

These limitations point to the need for more dynamic, context-sensitive methodologies, particularly those capable of capturing how expatriate spouses reflect on their adjustment both as an ongoing process and as a self-evaluated outcome. The blog narratives in this study span

substantial periods of time and offer rich, reflective accounts of lived experience. They reveal how self-construal evolves through retrospective meaning-making, as spouses recount both how they navigated challenges and how they interpret their growth, resilience, or transformation over time.

2.3 Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory and Expatriate Spouse Adjustment

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) provides a valuable lens for understanding how individuals respond to stress, particularly in unfamiliar and resource-demanding environments like international relocation. At its core, COR theory posits that people are motivated to acquire, protect, and retain resources, defined broadly as objects, personal characteristics, energies, and conditions that are valued either intrinsically or for their utility in securing other resources. Stress arises when there is a threat of resource loss, actual loss, or a lack of resource gain following investment.

COR theory is especially relevant for understanding the adjustment of expatriate spouses, who often encounter numerous resource threats, such as loss of professional identity, social networks, and familiar routines, while trying to build new sources of support and meaning in the host country. For example, the inability to find employment or meaningful roles may trigger both psychological and relational strain, while the lack of social connections may limit opportunities for resource replenishment.

The updated version of COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) expands the framework in several critical ways, making it particularly suited to the modern, dynamic, and socially embedded nature of global mobility. First, the authors reaffirm that resource loss is more potent and impactful than resource gain, and that loss spirals (where one form of resource depletion leads to others) are especially common under high-stress conditions. For expatriate spouses,

losing access to work, autonomy, or social capital may compound, intensifying their sense of disempowerment.

Second, Hobfoll et al. (2018) introduce the concept of resource caravans, clusters of interrelated resources that tend to travel together. For instance, emotional stability, community belonging, and cultural competence often reinforce each other, increasing the likelihood of adjustment success. Conversely, spouses who lack initial resources may find themselves in downward spirals, where resource loss leads to further vulnerability.

Third, the updated theory outlines resource passageways, or environmental conditions that facilitate or hinder resource movement and access. In the context of expatriate spouses, visa limitations, language barriers, or organizational neglect may function as blocked passageways that exacerbate stress. On the other hand, inclusive HR policies, host country social support, or digital communities can open new passageways for resource gain.

Importantly, the 2018 paper emphasizes the need for contextually grounded, multi-level, and longitudinal research on stress and adjustment. Hobfoll et al. argue that understanding resource dynamics requires looking beyond one-time surveys or artificial lab settings. Instead, researchers should examine how resource transactions evolve over time and within real-life conditions, precisely what blog-based narrative analysis allows.

In this study, COR theory is used not as a predetermined coding frame but as a post hoc interpretive lens, allowing participant voices to emerge organically through inductive thematic analysis. After themes were developed from the data, COR theory was applied to illuminate how spouses described, navigated, and negotiated resource-related challenges across time. This approach respects the complexity of lived experience while connecting it to a robust theoretical model.

2.4 Summary of Previous Research on Expatriate Spouses

Historically, the primary concern in global mobility research has been the adjustment, performance, and repatriation of the assigned expatriate employee (Takeuchi, 2010). However, as studies increasingly show, the family system, particularly the spouse, plays a pivotal role in determining the overall success of an international assignment (Avril & Magnini, 2007; Cole & Nesbeth, 2014).

Research suggests that 62% of expatriates are in committed relationships (Cartus, 2016; InterNations, 2019), and many spouses face intense personal and social disruption due to relocation. Commonly reported challenges include: (a) Employment disruption: Employment disruption among expatriate spouses is associated not only with loss of income but also with diminished identity, purpose, and adjustment; particularly when career roles are central to one's self-concept (Cole, 2011; Collins & Bertone, 2017); (b) Cultural novelty: Exposure to unfamiliar cultural norms and expectations can initially hinder adjustment; however, studies suggest a curvilinear relationship, where higher levels of novelty, when coupled with traits like emotional stability, may ultimately enhance adaptation (Takeuchi et al., 2007; Wu et al., 2022); (c) Social support disruption: Relocation often weakens expatriate spouses' emotional and practical support systems, contributing to feelings of loneliness, disconnection, and increased adjustment strain (Kupka & Cathro, 2007; Gudmundsdottir et al., 2019); and (d) Parenting stress: Navigating unfamiliar childcare norms, schooling systems, or managing parenting without extended support can initially increase stress, but may also encourage deeper engagement with local communities, supporting adjustment over time (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Takeuchi et al., 2007).

In terms of adjustment outcomes, studies have identified that spouse dissatisfaction is one of the leading causes of assignment failure or premature repatriation (Cole, 2011). Spousal

adjustment, therefore, is not merely a private issue; it has direct organizational implications. However, existing research remains limited in several keyways: (a) overreliance on structured, cross-sectional surveys: much of the literature captures expatriate adjustment as a static outcome, lacking the depth and contextual richness needed to understand how experiences evolve over time (Dang et al., 2022); (b) underrepresentation of spouse voices: spouses remain underrepresented. For instance, Dang et al.'s (2022) systematic review of 151 studies on expatriate families found that only 36% incorporated spousal viewpoints, and few used longitudinal methods; and (c) theoretical underdevelopment: although some studies mention frameworks such as Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, many do so superficially, with limited empirical integration. The literature remains fragmented and lacks a cohesive theoretical foundation for understanding expatriate family experiences (Dang et al., 2022).

Some studies have explored gender dynamics, highlighting that female spouses are disproportionately affected by international mobility due to persistent gender roles and career discontinuities (Cole, 2011; Rosenbusch & Cseh, 2012). While male spouses are less frequently studied, research suggests they may experience heightened social isolation and ambiguity in role identity, particularly when societal expectations conflict with their experiences abroad (Collins & Bertone, 2017; Kupka & Cathro, 2007).

Given these gaps, this study answers growing calls in the literature for more human-centered, contextualized, and longitudinal approaches to understanding spousal adjustment. It also adds to the limited pool of research that foregrounds spouse-authored narratives and draws attention to their resource-based coping strategies, linking personal accounts to broader theoretical frameworks like COR theory.

2.5 Demands and Resources in the Expatriate Spouse Context

The process of adjusting to international relocation is fundamentally shaped by the ongoing interaction between demands and resources. Conservation of Resources (COR) theory posits that when demands outweigh available resources, individuals experience stress and diminished well-being (Hobfoll, 1989, 2018). Expatriate spouses face an array of such demands (personal, familial, and environmental) that require constant resource investment and reconfiguration.

The following sections outline how these demands and resources manifest in the lives of expatriate spouses, based on the structure rooted in prior literature.

2.5.1 Personal Demands and Resources

Personal demands commonly include identity disruption, career discontinuity, and diminished self-efficacy. Many spouses abandon established careers, face prolonged unemployment, or are unable to pursue professional opportunities due to visa restrictions, language barriers, or host-country licensing requirements (Cole, 2011; Collins & Bertone, 2017; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Kupka & Cathro, 2007). These losses contribute to lowered self-esteem and a sense of purposelessness.

According to COR theory, such professional losses represent significant resource depletion, both material (income, benefits) and psychological (status, identity, self-worth). Additionally, the emotional strain of adapting to a new culture without the structure and distraction of employment can amplify stress.

In contrast, personal resources such as open-mindedness, adaptability, and cultural intelligence are found to buffer against these negative outcomes. Van Erp et al. (2014) highlight open-mindedness as a crucial trait that enables spouses to actively engage with unfamiliar

environments and form new routines. Similarly, language fluency is repeatedly cited as both a coping tool and an enabler of social and professional integration (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001; Takeuchi et al., 2002). In the COR framework, these are foundational resources that shield against loss and support other resource acquisition, such as social support or employment opportunities.

2.5.2 Family Demands and Resources

Family-related demands play a central role in shaping expatriate spouses' adjustment. Parenting in an unfamiliar culture, managing domestic responsibilities without access to extended family, and navigating new educational systems all contribute to emotional and logistical strain (Shaffer & Harrison, 2001). These pressures are often compounded by the number and ages of children, which place additional demands on time, energy, and emotional resources.

From a Conservation of Resources (COR) perspective, these challenges represent a significant drain on both material and emotional resources. Spouses frequently relocate away from their established support systems, experiencing a major disruption in the emotional and practical support typically provided by extended family and close friends (Gudmundsdottir et al., 2019). This disruption undermines their resource reservoir and increases vulnerability during the early stages of adjustment. In contrast, when accessible, support from immediate family members can serve as a key resource in managing the strain of relocation (Copeland & Norell, 2002; Gupta et al., 2012).

Parental responsibilities, though demanding, may also become a source of resource acquisition. For example, interacting with local schools, community centers, or other parents often facilitates cultural immersion and connection with host country nationals, enabling the

formation of new social networks (Takeuchi et al., 2007; Dang et al., 2022). These interactions create opportunities for building resource caravans that buffer stress and promote adjustment (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

Moreover, the quality of the relationship with the employed expatriate partner significantly affects the adjustment process. A supportive partner who acknowledges the accompanying spouse's emotional labor and personal sacrifices contributes positively to resource preservation and emotional well-being. In contrast, relationship strain or emotional neglect from the expatriate partner may heighten feelings of isolation and exacerbate stress (Kupka & Cathro, 2007).

Overall, the dynamic interplay between family-related demands and the availability or absence of supportive resources strongly influences the adjustment orientations of expatriate spouses.

2.5.3 Environmental Demands and Resources

The environmental context into which expatriate families are relocated plays a pivotal role in determining adjustment outcomes. Expatriate spouses often encounter significant environmental demands, including high cultural distance, legal or bureaucratic constraints (e.g., visa limitations), and insufficient institutional support such as employer-led spousal integration programs. These factors can heighten vulnerability and intensify the stress of transition, particularly when spouses underestimate the extent of cultural novelty (Wu et al., 2022). When the differences between home and host cultures are minimized or overlooked, individuals may be unprepared for the emotional and cognitive adaptation required, leading to resource depletion and elevated adjustment strain.

Conversely, environmental resources can substantially aid in coping and adjustment. One of the most influential sources of support comes from host-country nationals (HCNs), who provide both instrumental support (e.g., information on navigating daily life) and emotional support (e.g., empathy, inclusion, and validation). Abdul Malek et al. (2013) highlight that these dual forms of support can be particularly beneficial during the initial phases of relocation, when uncertainty and disorientation are high. The presence of accessible expatriate communities, inclusive policies, and digital networks (e.g., blogs, forums, and social media) further facilitates emotional validation and practical advice in real time, serving as “resource passageways” that promote sustained adaptation (Hobfoll et al., 2018).

However, the availability and accessibility of these environmental resources are not uniform. They are often shaped by contextual factors such as visa type, language proficiency, financial status, and even gender norms, which can influence whether spouses are able to engage with or benefit from local systems of support. As such, a nuanced understanding of these environmental conditions is essential for evaluating how demands and resources interact, and either facilitate or hinder the adjustment process.

2.6 Methodological Gaps and Blog-Based Research

While much has been learned from survey and interview-based studies of expatriate adjustment, these methods often provide only static, cross-sectional views. Adjustment, especially among expatriate spouses, is a dynamic and relational process. Capturing how it unfolds over time requires data sources that reflect longitudinal, contextualized, and meaning-driven perspectives.

Recent research has begun to explore blogs as a tool for studying cultural adjustment. For example, Nardon et al. (2015) analyzed 606 posts from 19 blogs by expatriates in Canada,

identifying how bloggers and their audiences co-create online social support resources. Their “blogging system” framework reveals how expatriates use blogs to express, reflect, and exchange both informational and emotional support. However, their sample included general expatriates, mostly professionals, rather than trailing spouses, limiting the applicability of findings to spousal-specific dynamics such as role identity loss or family-centered demands.

Similarly, Callahan et al. (2020) investigated 37 blogs by U.S. expatriates, demonstrating that most bloggers exhibit non-linear patterns of cultural adaptation, blending host and home cultural elements in hybrid identities. Their work importantly critiques linear acculturation models and incorporates self-presentation theory. Yet, the sample did not focus on spouses or family roles, and adaptation was examined at the individual, not relational or familial, level.

In a different cultural context, Chen (2012) analyzed blogs authored by Taiwanese women married to Japanese men. This study did engage with marital and familial dynamics, particularly around spousal support in intercultural marriages. However, the focus was on permanent migrants within a specific East Asian context, rather than on globally mobile expatriate spouses undergoing temporary relocation. As such, while valuable for understanding adjustment in intimate relationships, the study does not address the broader adjustment experiences of accompanying expatriate spouses.

Taken together, these studies validate the blog as a rich data source for examining expatriate experiences. Yet, none center the unique position of the accompanying spouse, who may face distinct challenges in employment, identity, social support, and family roles. This gap highlights the need for research that leverages blogs not just as expressive platforms, but as windows into the ongoing, resource-sensitive journeys of expatriate spouses.

This study addresses that gap by analyzing spouse-authored blogs through a longitudinal and inductive approach, later interpreted through the lens of Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. It extends prior work by inductively analyzing how accompanying spouses document adjustment and reveals how they negotiate evolving identities, resist systemic barriers, and manage complex emotional and relational demands across time, family, and cultural systems.

2.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed literature related to expatriate spouse adjustment, highlighting key theoretical concepts, empirical findings, and methodological gaps. It outlined the multidimensional nature of adjustment and discussed Conservation of Resources (COR) theory as an interpretive framework to understand resource-based challenges during relocation.

The existing literature emphasizes common spousal challenges such as identity disruption, employment interruption, social isolation, and family pressures. However, prior research frequently employs cross-sectional methods, offering limited insight into the dynamic nature of spousal adjustment. While blog-based studies have emerged as promising alternatives for capturing expatriate experiences in real-time contexts, they seldom focus specifically on spouses.

Addressing these gaps, this study analyzes spouse-authored blogs through a longitudinal, inductive approach, with COR theory applied post hoc.

Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how expatriate spouses deal with the emotional, social, identity, and practical challenges of international mobility. An inductive qualitative method was used, founded on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). The objective was to identify emergent longitudinal patterns of coping and adjustment from rich narratives within 17 open-access English-language blogs (11 first-person narrative postings, 6 interview-type postings). These stories, with various global contexts (Asia, Europe, North America, Middle East, Africa), were examined to identify detailed, resource-based coping themes. This chapter presents an account of the research context, data collection methods, analysis process, and ethics, providing a clear and transparent account of the methodology.

3.1 Research Context

There is a growing body of research on expatriate spouses, highlighting their adaptability, emotional resilience, and the personal compromises they often make during international relocations. When an individual relocates for the primary purpose of supporting a partner on an overseas assignment those relocations can cause significant disruptions to identity, social networks, and professional presence. To address emotional upheaval, to form new friendships, to renegotiate identity, and to meet practical everyday needs, a variety of coping strategies are commonly required to navigate those disruptions. This study adopted a qualitative paradigm that privileges theoretical depth and diversity over statistical generalizability (Patton, 2015). Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) was selected because of its flexibility to inductively generate rich, resource-based coping themes while allowing for the later integration of a sensitizing theoretical lens (Conservation of Resources Theory) to interpret longitudinal adjustment patterns.

The paramount goal was to examine how expatriate spouses cope with the multifaceted challenges of international relocation across a diverse set of regions (Asia, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Africa) to uncover dynamic, context-contingent adjustment processes. An inductive approach was taken so that emerging patterns were firmly grounded in participants' lived experience. The narratives themselves guided the analysis, and participants' voices dictated conceptual development. This context reflects the study's commitment to capturing the complexity of expatriate adjustment, informed by the varied demographic and geographic profiles of the participants, as detailed in the data collection procedures.

3.2 Data Collection.

Eleven first-person narrative reflections and six interview-based posts in 17 open-access English-language blogs served as the source of the data, which offered rich and long-term insights into the adjustment experiences of expatriate spouses. These blogs constituted a heterogeneous sample of heterosexual and same-sex couples, parents and non-parents, and male and female spouses, all residing across Asia, Europe, North America, the Middle East, and Africa (see Table A1 in Appendix A). This purposive heterogeneity ensured a broad representation of perspectives and experiences (Patton, 2015).

Over a four-week period, structured web searches were conducted using targeted keywords (e.g., “expat spouse AND blog,” “trailing spouse NOT travel”) on both multi-author platforms (ExpatriatePartnerSurvival.com, Trailing-Spouse.com) and general search engines. This yielded approximately 30 candidate blogs. We then applied three inclusion criteria, in line with purposive sampling principles (Patton, 2015): first-hand accounts of adjustment experiences; narrative richness with temporal depth ($\geq 1,000$ words); and demographic and geographic heterogeneity.

In addition to these inclusion criteria, we also applied exclusion criteria to ensure the relevance and richness of the data. Blogs were excluded if they: (a) did not focus on the adjustment experiences of the accompanying spouse (e.g., blogs written by expatriate employees themselves); (b) lacked narrative coherence or temporal depth (e.g., scattered or superficial posts); or (c) consisted primarily of practical travel advice or destination reviews with little reflection on emotional, social, or identity-related aspects of adjustment. These exclusions ensured that the selected blogs aligned with the study's focus on lived, reflective, and personally meaningful accounts of spouse adjustment.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the dataset of 17 blogs was examined until thematic saturation (the point at which no new conceptual categories or themes emerged) was reached after the 16th blog (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Patton, 2015). This process ensured that the dataset was sufficiently rich to capture the full range of coping strategies and adjustment experiences. The final dataset comprised approximately 230 single-spaced pages, with individual blogs ranging from 2 to 65 pages in length ($M \approx 11.5$ pages). Key demographic characteristics of the bloggers are summarized in Appendix A (see Table A1). All texts were imported into NVivo and coded line by line to support systematic analysis.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to the University of Manitoba's Policy on the Ethics of Research Involving Humans (2025) and the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (2022). Under Policy Section 2.7(a,b) and TCPS 2 Article 2.2(b), research using only publicly available, anonymized data is exempt from REB review. Although TCPS 2 does not strictly require anonymization for public data, we applied it as best practice, removing direct identifiers and generalizing geographic

details, to uphold respect for persons and concern for welfare. No direct contact was made with blog authors, and all data handling complied with institutional standards and TCPS 2 guidelines.

3.4 Data Analysis

Stage 1: Familiarization, Open Coding, and Phase Tagging

Following Braun and Clarke's Phase 1, all 17 blogs were read repeatedly and coded line-by-line for coping behaviors, resource gains, and perceived threats. Each code was tagged with an adjustment phase (early, mid, or late) using three complementary criteria:

Narrative Arc: The primary basis for phase assignment was how bloggers structured their adjustment stories. Early phase narratives emphasized cultural disorientation, emotional turmoil, and logistical overwhelm (e.g., coping with new systems, expressing loneliness). Mid phase entries focused on routine-building, social network development, and initial role experimentation (e.g., volunteering, community engagement). Late phase posts highlighted identity reconstruction, personal growth, and reflective meaning-making (e.g., gratitude, acceptance, transformation). These distinctions were interpreted holistically across multiple posts to capture each blogger's overall adjustment arc.

Timestamps as Contextual Clues: Publication dates provided loose chronological anchors. Early posts generally aligned with early-phase codes, while later, more reflective posts aligned with mid and late-phase dynamics. However, thematic relevance always took precedence over strict calendar sequencing.

Contextual Information: Biographical details, such as time abroad, move history, or family milestones offered additional timeline cues. References to arrival logistics or school setup signaled early-phase adaptation. Mentions of established routines or part-time work suggested

mid-phase adjustment. Reflections on life purpose or career shifts indicated late-phase integration.

To illustrate how adjustment phases were determined, Table 3.1 presents representative data excerpts coded as early-, mid-, or late-phase, along with the rationale used for classification. This temporal tagging was not merely descriptive but served as an interpretive scaffold for later sense-making. Codes were analyzed not only for content but also for when and how they emerged in the adjustment process, allowing the identification of patterns across time. This decision to organize data temporally into early, mid, and late phases was guided by mechanism-based explanation (Bunge, 2004; Hedström & Swedberg, 1996) that emphasizes the importance of tracing how social processes emerge through identifiable mechanisms. Temporal coding enabled the identification of evolving coping strategies as spouses moved through phases of adjustment, allowing for both descriptive richness and explanatory insight.

Stage 1 produced over 700 descriptive codes, each linked to one (or more) of the three phases. This systematic, phase-tagged open coding laid the groundwork for Stage 2, where related codes were grouped into sub-themes.

Table 3.1

Examples of Adjustment Phases, Codes, and Rationales

Phase	Example Excerpt and Code	Rationale
Early	Spouse 6: “Having hard days is not a sign of failure. It’s okay to feel them, acknowledge them and then take action!” → acknowledging emotional struggle	Content focus on raw struggle + early timestamp
Mid	Spouse 11: “Embrace each aspect of this new life as individual stepping stones to your new normal. Don’t look at it as one big giant leap!” → embracing incremental progress	Adaptation focus + mid-blog date
Late	Spouse 6: “Home is a feeling, not a place. It’s where the 5 of us are together” → redefining home	Reflective tone + later timestamp

Stage 2: Theme Development

Following open coding of over 700 data-driven codes, an initial set of 15 sub-themes was generated through constant comparison and memoing. These sub-themes captured the diversity of coping strategies expressed across early, mid, and late phases of adjustment. NVivo software supported the organization of codes, and preliminary definitions were developed to clarify each sub-theme's focus and boundaries. Phase markers were retained to support longitudinal interpretation. This stage emphasized staying close to the data and capturing a wide breadth of coping behaviors before moving toward thematic consolidation.

Stage 3: Thematic Clustering and Refinement—Consolidating Sub-Themes

As the analysis progressed, the 15 initial sub-themes revealed conceptual overlap. Through iterative review, thematic comparison, and code frequency analysis, the sub-themes were refined into a final set of eight, producing a more parsimonious and coherent framework. Several related sub-themes were combined based on shared coping functions. For example: (a) Sub-themes related to digital communication, logistical routines, and pre-move planning merged into Practical and Digital Resource Utilization, unified by their shared goal of creating predictability and control; (b) Themes focused on career reinvention, role adaptation, and personal growth were synthesized into Identity and Career Reinvention, reflecting how spouses reconstructed their sense of purpose; (c) Social adaptation sub-themes (building networks, learning from others and norm acquisition) formed Social Networking and Cultural Learning. These sub-themes naturally converged around relational adaptation and integration through peer connection and informal cultural learning; (d) Emotion-focused behaviors such as routine-building and activity engagement merged into Structured Activities and Distraction, a sub-theme reflecting strategies for emotional regulation, providing rhythm, purpose, or temporary escape

from disorientation; and (e) The Family and Spousal Support theme brought together sub-themes related to leaning on spouses or family, and drawing strength from children's adaptability. Collectively, these stories highlight how the presence, encouragement, and resilience of loved ones helped expatriate spouses manage the upheaval of transition.

This process preserved the richness of the initial codes while enhancing conceptual clarity, resulting in eight final sub-themes that were later organized under four broader coping domains: emotional and psychological, social and relational, identity and career, and practical and digital mechanisms

The four main coping domains and their corresponding sub-themes are explained as follows. Each domain represents a distinct area of adjustment (emotional, social, identity-based, or practical) and the sub-themes illustrate specific strategies expatriate spouses used to manage relocation challenges. These domains and sub-themes are also visually represented in Figure 3.1, which maps the thematic structure developed through analysis.

3.5 Themes and Sub-Themes

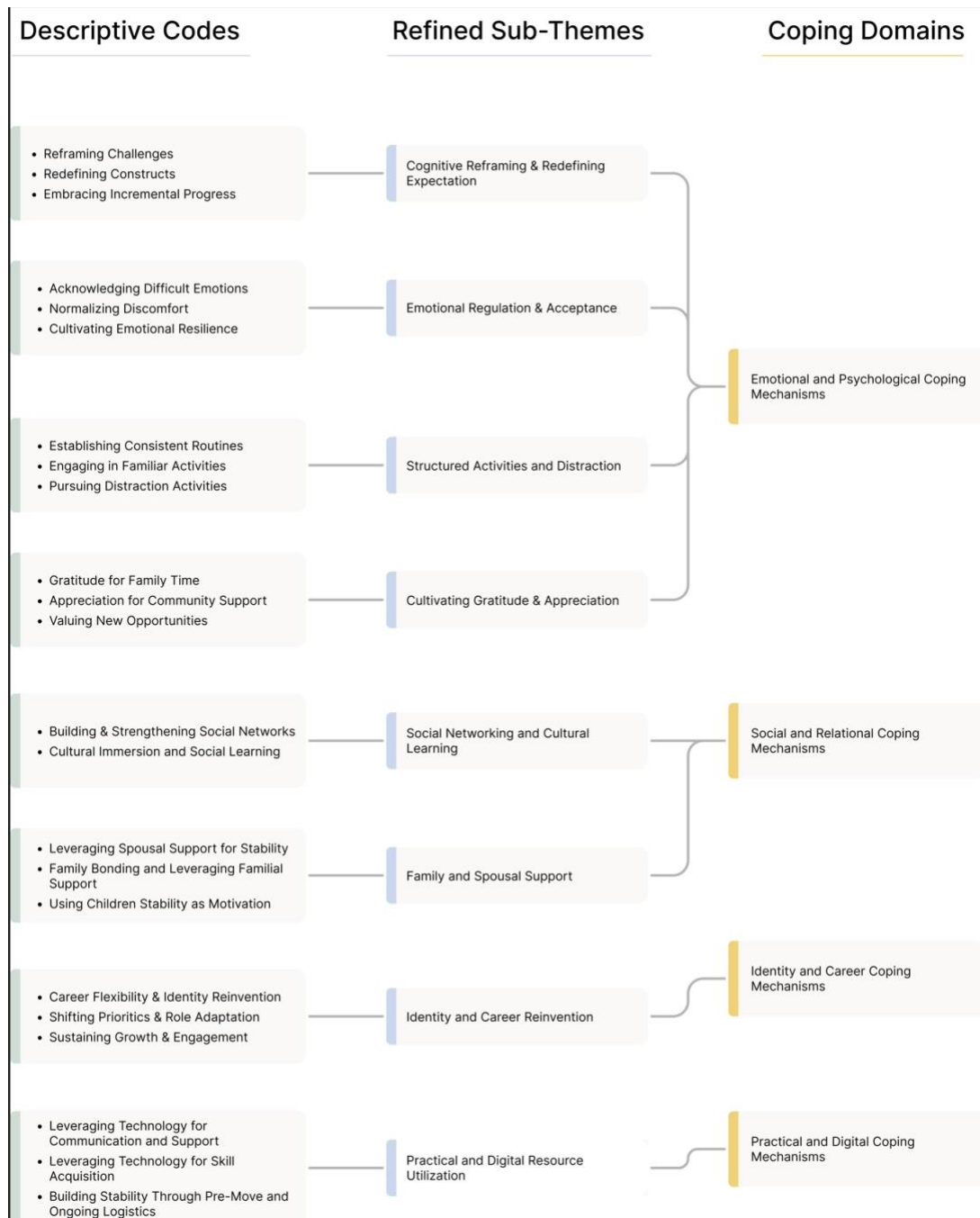
Emotional and Psychological Coping Mechanisms:

Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations. This coping mechanism captures how expatriate spouses cognitively reframed relocation demands to reduce perceived threat and regain control, and how they recalibrated core expectations and definitions, such as what counts as "home" or "success", to sustain resilience. As a cognitive coping mechanism, it enabled the spouses to minimize the distress of cultural disorientation, isolation, or loss of identity by adopting good attitudes or re-defining their experiences. Sub-theme consists of three primary elements: reframing challenges (e.g., viewing cultural differences as enriching), redefining concepts (e.g., conceptualizing home as emotional rather than physical), and embracing

incremental progress. These strategies promoted agency and emotional stability, particularly in mid and late phases.

Figure 3.1

Data Structure



“Home is a feeling, not a place. It’s where the 5 of us are together.” (Spouse 6)

Spouse 6’s late-phase reflection illustrates redefining home as an emotional connection with her family. By shifting her perspective from a physical location to a relational bond, she alleviated the distress of losing a familiar space, fostering a sense of belonging and psychological stability crucial for long-term integration abroad.

Emotional Regulation and Acceptance. This sub-theme captures the way spouses managed negative feelings by acknowledging and legitimizing discomfort as part of the normal process of expatriation and thereby creating emotional stability. As an emotional coping strategy, it allowed spouses to feel emotions like sadness or loneliness without repressing them, contrary to stress and building resilience. The sub-theme entails awareness of emotions (e.g., validating struggles), normalizing discomfort (e.g., accepting challenges as typical), and cultivating emotional resilience, salient in early and mid periods.

“We all have off days... Bottling it up doesn’t help and being Polly Positive about everything gets annoying to everyone – including you! Have a vent but do it and move on.” (Spouse 6)

Spouse 6’s recognition of emotional fluctuations during the mid-phase as a commonplace experience mitigated the risk of stress escalation due to suppression. By embracing and momentarily articulating negative emotions, she preserved her emotional equilibrium, illustrating how this approach fostered resilience throughout the adjustment period, allowing her to manage persistent challenges with increased composure.

Structured Activities and Distraction. This sub-theme captures the way that spouses managed emotions by establishing structured routines (e.g., daily routines, exercise) and used distraction through activity engagement (e.g., hobbies, volunteering), which allowed for predictability and respite from the chaos of relocation. This coping strategy enhanced

psychological well-being by creating control and distraction from stressors like cultural shock.

The sub-theme includes routines that create structure, engaging in familiar activities, and ways of distraction with the aim of emotional relief, especially in the early and mid phases.

“I realised that by yearning, I prevented myself from adjusting to my new circumstances; and only then did I start to implement routines that would help me connect to my new environment and its people.” (Spouse 7)

Spouse 7’s mid-phase shift to routines, such as regular community engagement, created predictability that anchored her emotional well-being. By establishing these patterns, she connected with her new environment, reducing emotional turbulence and facilitating adjustment through a sense of control and belonging.

Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation. This sub-theme reflects how spouses fostered positive emotions by expressing gratitude for relationships (e.g., expat communities) or opportunities (e.g., cultural experiences), counteracting negativity. Interpreted as an emotional coping strategy, it enhanced well-being and cultivated belonging by shifting focus to relocation’s rewards. The sub-theme includes gratitude for relationships (e.g., family and community support) and appreciation for opportunities (e.g., new experiences), prominent in mid and late phases.

“Being a trailing spouse who isn’t working also has given me the gift of time to explore my own interests. I love that I can go to the gym during the day and not feel guilty trying to choose between time with the kids in the evenings and being active. Having all this time has also allowed me to really focus my attention on my travel blog and test the waters about where that might go. I sink endless amounts of hours while the kids are at school into the blog and even though I regularly question the worth of that time, I feel fortunate to be able to have that gift of time.” (Spouse 5)

Spouse 5’s mid-phase gratitude for family bonding reframed relocation as a valuable opportunity. This positive focus reinforced her emotional resilience, fostering a sense of purpose and connection that supported her adjustment by highlighting the unique rewards of life abroad.

Social and Relational Coping Mechanisms

Social Networking and Cultural Learning. This sub-theme captures how spouses addressed social isolation by building social networks (e.g., forming friendships, joining expat groups) and learning cultural norms (e.g., adopting local practices through interactions).

Interpreted as a relational coping mechanism, it facilitated integration by creating support systems and cultural competence. The sub-theme includes network-building for emotional and practical support and cultural learning to reduce misunderstandings, primarily in the mid phase.

“My big chance came at our school, where I met one mum at the parent teacher meeting who was perfect for me, and she lived a street away from us. My now really great Estonian friend was matched with me thanks to my daughter's teacher. She was the best matchmaker I have ever met. This Estonian lady was also the reason why I visited the International Women's Club charity exhibition – she's still a little-known painter with amazing artistic skills, and she needed support. There was no doubt that my wild Russian mum friend and I would come to help promote her work.” (Spouse 9)

Spouse 9's experience of meeting a key contact at her children's school opened doors to a broader community. This network provided emotional reassurance and practical advice, alleviating isolation and anchoring her adjustment through a reliable social support system.

“When we lived in Malaysia, I learned to speak a more simplistic version of English with non-native speakers.” (Spouse 5)

Spouse 5's adaptation of her communication style in Malaysia reduced barriers, enhancing her mid-phase integration. By learning cultural norms through social interactions, she gained confidence and eased misunderstandings, supporting her adjustment.

Family and Spousal Support. This sub-theme reflects how spouses relied on family as a coping resource, drawing emotional support through spousal reassurance (e.g., comfort during stress) and motivational strength from children's stability (e.g., their adaptation inspiring effort). Interpreted as a relational coping mechanism, it provided continuity and purpose, counteracting

relocation's disruptions across all phases. The sub-theme includes spousal and familial emotional support and children's motivational influence, stabilizing adjustment through familial bonds.

"I know Diplowife will be there with me and she'll support me as a stay-at-home cat dad, or whatever I wind up doing." (Spouse 17)

Spouse 17's early-phase reliance on his spouse's reassurance mitigated anxiety about his role change. This emotional support provided a stable anchor, enabling him to face relocation uncertainties with greater confidence, underscoring the family's role as a coping lifeline.

"Learning to ski for the first time in France (at almost 40 years old mind you), hiking two hours along a cliff to catch a glimpse of waterfalls in Rupit or riding a frightening cable car to the top of Montserrat mountain – just a few examples of how we push ourselves for our kids." (Spouse 11)

Spouse 11's mid-phase efforts to engage in new activities for her children's sake drew motivational strength from their stability. Seeing her children adapt inspired her to embrace challenges, reinforcing her commitment to family-driven coping and stabilizing her adjustment.

Identity and Career Coping Mechanisms

Identity and Career Reinvention. This sub-theme encompasses how spouses rebuilt purpose through career flexibility (e.g., freelancing, new professions), role adaptation (e.g., prioritizing family), and sustaining personal growth (e.g., new projects). Interpreted as an identity-focused coping mechanism, it countered disruptions to professional and personal selfhood, fostering agency across phases. The sub-theme includes career shifts, role redefinition, and growth-oriented activities, enabling spouses to reconstruct meaningful identities.

"So I quit that job of more than 12 years and joined the UN to be nearer, and after a year of that, started a consultancy to focus on freelance contracts around the world." (Spouse1)

Spouse 1's launch of a consultancy maintained professional purpose despite relocation's disruption. By creating a portable career, he reclaimed agency, demonstrating how career flexibility supported adjustment by preserving a sense of professional identity.

“In our life overseas, I volunteer at the school and I go to the gym and meet other moms for coffee, but my life completely revolves around my family.” (Spouse 5)

Spouse 5’s mid-phase prioritization of family over her previous career redefined her role, providing a new identity anchor. This adaptation stabilized her adjustment by aligning her purpose with her relocated life, fostering fulfillment through family-centric responsibilities.

“I’ve started this blog which gives me a renewed passion every single day.” (Spouse 11)

Spouse 11’s mid-phase blogging venture channeled her experiences into a creative outlet, sustaining personal growth. This activity rebuilt her identity, fostering a sense of fulfillment that supported her adjustment through renewed purpose and self-expression.

Practical and Digital Coping Mechanisms

Practical and Digital Resource Utilization. This sub-theme captures how spouses ensured stability through digital tools (e.g., online communication), daily logistics management (e.g., organizing routines), and strategic planning (e.g., pre-move research). Interpreted as a practical coping mechanism, it mitigated logistical and social challenges by providing structure and reducing uncertainty, particularly in the Early phase. This sub-theme consists of leveraging technology and digital tools (e.g., communication apps), managing day-to-day logistics, and engaging in strategic planning (e.g., pre-move preparation). Together, these strategies addressed the practical challenges of relocation by promoting stability and reducing uncertainty.

“We’ll drink cups of tea together over FaceTime and give each other Skype hugs (when it works). We will text on WhatsApp and I’ll upload photos over TinyBeans. How people did this before the internet is beyond me.” (Spouse 6)

Spouse 6’s use of FaceTime sustained connections with family back home, alleviating isolation. This digital tool provided a critical lifeline, supporting her emotional stability by maintaining social ties during the initial challenges of relocation.

“We try to keep people in the loop. We try to manage expectations about how much time we have left here...” (Spouse 6)

Spouse 6’s mid-phase coordination of communication and expectations created structured routines. By organizing her family’s interactions, she supported ongoing stability, demonstrating how logistics management maintained clarity and connection in her relocated life.

“When the company offered us the chance to do a recce we jumped at it. I’m so excited to visit our new home and to be able to look around before we move. I can’t imagine moving and not giving the Things the opportunity to look around what will be their new school and to have some input into choosing which institution that will be” (Spouse 6)

Spouse 6’s early-phase reconnaissance trip reduced uncertainty by preparing her for the new environment. This strategic planning enabled a smoother transition, illustrating how proactive preparation stabilized her adjustment by addressing logistical challenges upfront.

In sum, the eight sub-themes identified across the four coping domains describe a set of concrete responses that spouses used to manage relocation demands. The emotional and psychological strategies work to reduce perceived threat and stabilize affect, helping spouses regain emotional equilibrium. The social and relational strategies build connection and everyday cultural know-how, enabling smoother interaction in the host setting. The identity and career strategies restore a sense of purpose and personal agency, allowing spouses to reassert who they are and what they do. Finally, the practical and digital strategies provide structure and reduce uncertainty by organizing daily life and leveraging tools that make routine tasks more predictable.

To illustrate how meaning was generated across the dataset, Table 3.2 presents selected data extracts linked to their corresponding sub-themes and overarching coping domains. For greater transparency and analytic depth, Appendix B includes eight supplementary thematic

tables (one for each sub-theme) demonstrating how data were interpreted, clustered, and refined into conceptually robust themes.

Table 3.2

Example Quotes Supporting Theme Construction within Coping Domains

Quote	Sub-Theme	Theme
“The bottom line is, rather than get swallowed up in the confusion and overwhelming details of moving abroad, I’ve tried to embrace each aspect of it as individual stepping stones” (Spouse 11)	Cognitive Reframing	Emotional and Psychological Coping Mechanism
“I’m now trying to cultivate emotional wealth; to be content with what I have, and not what I don’t. And that includes a career” (Spouse 2)	Emotional Regulation	
“Stay busy – I definitely went through a homesick phase when we first arrived and staying busy is the best way to beat that.” (Spouse 5)	Structured Activities and Distraction	
“The expat community is a super friendly and supportive community on the whole. When I had to go home for a family emergency last summer play dates were arranged in my absence. Meals appeared on my doorstep and my kids got picked up from school...” (Spouse 6)	Gratitude	
“Join every group. I find it is really important to be a ‘joiner”” (Spouse 1) “Working mostly in coffee shops – a great way to at least find some social interaction when you work from home” (Spouse 15)	Social Networking	Social and Relational Coping Mechanism
“But my husband is a very even-keeled kind of person and he constantly reassured me...” (Spouse 11)	Family Support	
“There are severely constrained choices confronting the trailing spouse to develop into a location-independent professional. Freelancing is the most obvious fit for spouses.” (Spouse 1)	Identity and Career Reinvention	Identity and Career Coping Mechanism
“Mutual friends put us in touch. We message back and forth about all sorts of things. Before we arrived I trawled the internet looking for any detail of where we would be living.” (Spouse 6)	Practical and Digital	Practical and Digital Coping Mechanism

3.6 Temporal Pattern Identification and Interpretive Integration

Following the thematic coding outlined in the previous section, this stage of the analysis examined how coping mechanisms evolved over time and how they clustered across the early, mid, and late phases of expatriate spousal adjustment. This temporal lens enabled a deeper interpretive integration, moving beyond thematic categorization to explore patterns of change, adaptation, and strategic recalibration. Rather than treating sub-themes as fixed or uniformly distributed, attention was given to the timing, intensity, and co-occurrence of coping mechanisms across different phases. This included attending to patterns of emphasis (i.e., which strategies were more prominent at certain stages), shifts in coping approaches (i.e., transitions from one type of coping to another), and the emergence of new orientations (i.e., strategies that appeared only in later stages). These interpretive moves aimed to uncover how spouses dynamically responded to evolving challenges and resource contexts over time, rather than applying coping strategies in static or uniform ways.

This temporal sense-making marked a shift from descriptive theme identification toward explanatory analysis. By identifying how and when particular coping strategies were deployed, and how they changed or accumulated, this stage laid the foundation for understanding broader patterns of adjustment.

3.6.1 Temporal Dynamics Across Phases

The adjustment process unfolded across three chronological phases (early, mid, and late) each characterized by distinct coping mechanisms, as quantified in Table 3.3 and reflected in the blog narratives.

Table 3.3*Number of Bloggers Using Coping Mechanisms Across Phases*

Theme/Sub-Theme	Early	Mid	Late
Emotional and Psychological Coping Mechanisms			
Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations	5	10	6
Emotional Regulation and Acceptance	8	7	4
Structured Activities and Distraction for Emotional Coping	10	10	4
Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation	4	9	5
Social and Relational Coping Mechanisms			
Social Networking and Cultural Learning for Coping	9	14	5
Family and Spousal Support for Coping	8	10	4
Identity and Career Coping Mechanisms			
Identity and Career Reinvention for Coping	5	13	7
Practical and Digital Coping Mechanisms			
Practical and Digital Resource Utilization for Coping	10	10	3

Note. Frequencies represent the number of bloggers whose narratives included the corresponding sub-theme during each phase.

Early Phase: Preservation Under Pressure: This phase was marked by acute resource losses, including social networks, professional identities, and cultural fluency, prompting preservation-focused coping to stabilize emotionally and logistically. Practical and Digital Resource Utilization (10 bloggers), Structured Activities and Distraction (10), Emotional Regulation and Acceptance (8), Family and Spousal Support (8), and Social Networking and Cultural Learning (9) were prevalent, with Cognitive Reframing (5), Identity and Career Reinvention (5), and Gratitude (4) less frequent, indicating limited reinvestment. Per COR Theory, this preservation phase focused on preventing resource loss spirals by leveraging

resource caravans (e.g., emotional coping skills, logistical tools) to maintain stability amidst initial stress.

“First, identify and acknowledge how you feel – write it down. 2. Work towards accepting that, right now, things are difficult and that you have a piece of personal development to do.” (Spouse 7)

Spouse 7's Early-phase journaling and acceptance of challenges illustrate Emotional Regulation and Acceptance's role in stabilizing adjustment. By systematically processing emotions, she preserved psychological resources, mitigating the stress of cultural disorientation, a critical mechanism for navigating initial relocation challenges.

Mid Phase: Investment and Reorientation: This phase marked a pivotal shift toward resource investment, as spouses actively rebuilt social connections and redefined roles to reintegrate into their new contexts. Social Networking and Cultural Learning (14 bloggers) and Identity and Career Reinvention (13 bloggers) were the most prevalent coping mechanisms, reflecting concerted efforts to establish community ties and reconstruct professional or personal identities. Cognitive Reframing, Structured Activities, Family and Spousal Support, and Practical and Digital Resource Utilization (each cited by 10 bloggers) also featured prominently, supporting adaptation through reframing, routine-building, familial interdependence, and logistical coordination. In contrast, Emotional Regulation (7 bloggers) was less frequent, suggesting a secondary emphasis on emotional reflection during this more outward-facing phase.

According to Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, this phase reflects a transition from resource preservation to resource accumulation, wherein individuals proactively invest in rebuilding personal and social capital. Spouses in this stage leveraged resource caravans that fueled a positive cycle of recovery and adaptation. For instance, building social connections

often strengthened emotional resilience, which in turn supported identity experimentation and career pursuits.

“Actually 12 months after our move I have created a profound network of friends and business partners. I guess it would be easier for me to find a job in my old industry now as network is really key when it comes to find a job abroad. However, I became impatient in the meantime and my entrepreneurial mind started spinning around other ideas but that is a story for another time.” (Spouse10)

Spouse10’s reflection illustrates how social networking and cultural learning served as a springboard for identity and career reinvention. By cultivating a strong social and professional network, she accumulated resources that opened multiple avenues for Reintegration. Her narrative aligns with COR Theory’s view of resource caravans as foundational to sustained adaptation and opportunity generation.

Late Phase: Expansion and Sustained Engagement: This phase was characterized by long-term meaning-making, as spouses moved beyond coping to thriving through sustained personal and social growth. Identity and Career Reinvention (7 bloggers) was the most prevalent mechanism, as individuals solidified new personal or professional identities. This was followed by Cognitive Reframing (6 bloggers), which supported resilient reinterpretations of their journeys, and Cultivating Gratitude and Social Networking and Cultural Learning (5 bloggers each), reflecting growing appreciation for their host environments and durable social ties. Structured Activities, Family and Spousal Support, and Emotional Regulation (4 bloggers each) and Practical and Digital Resource Utilization (3 bloggers) were less prominent, suggesting a shift away from routine-based coping toward more expansive, self-directed engagement.

According to Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, this phase represents a resource gain spiral, where accumulated social, emotional, and identity-related resources begin to mutually reinforce one another, enabling sustained engagement and a sense of flourishing.

“Fast forward 3 years and things have changed a bit. I’ve no idea if I’ve shared this here so you may or may not know that Mr Wanderlust now travels a lot for work. And I mean a lot... In the meantime, I’ve started this blog, found several volunteering opportunities and am the proud owner of some friendships that I never dared even hope for when we arrived. My days are filled with meetings, blogging dates, time at the gym, coffee mornings, school field trips, errands and several hours a day in the car. I’m busier here (or at least juggling more things) than I ever was at home. (This has come as a massive surprise to me!).” (Spouse6)

Spouse 6’s late-phase engagement in blogging, volunteering, and friendships illustrates identity and career reinvention’s role in expanding identity and social resources. By embracing new roles and connections, she transformed her life, amplifying resources through gain spirals, solidifying integration and thriving.

3.7 From Coping Strategies to Adjustment Orientations: Interpretive Bundling

Following the temporal analysis of coping strategies across early, mid, and late phases, variation emerged that could not be explained by chronology alone. Some participants largely sustained emotional and logistical stability over time through structured routines, emotional regulation, and digital tools; others re-engaged with prior roles and identities; a smaller subset undertook more transformative reinvention. These patterns indicated qualitatively distinct adjustment profiles rather than a single shared arc.

To interrogate these differences, the coded dataset was re-examined with attention to co-occurrence. Iterative cross-case comparisons and analytic memoing were used to identify recurring combinations. While similar strategies appeared across many participants, they were combined, emphasized, and sustained in different ways and toward different ends. For example, Social Networking frequently co-occurred with Identity Reinvention in mid- and late-phase narratives, whereas Emotional Regulation, Structured Activities, and Practical and Digital Tool

Use clustered in early-phase accounts and, in some instances, persisted with little subsequent change.

These constellations revealed recurring logics of adjustment, bundles of strategies that consistently co-occurred across participants and served similar functional purposes (e.g., sustaining stability, rebuilding identity, pursuing growth). When examined in context, these patterned combinations reflected not just what strategies were used, but how individuals approached the adjustment process as a whole. It was through this interpretive synthesis that three higher-order adjustment orientations were inductively derived: (a) Stabilization, defined by efforts to maintain psychological and logistical equilibrium amidst disruption; (b) Reintegration, marked by investments in rebuilding identity and social belonging; and (c) Transformation, characterized by more expansive personal reinvention and growth.

These orientations are conceptualized not as sequential stages or static types but as ideal-typical coping modes, analytic constructs that organize common patterns of action and meaning-making. Although certain orientations appeared more frequently in particular phases (e.g., Transformation later), they were not bound by time; some participants remained within Stabilization across their narratives, whereas others shifted orientation as contexts and resources changed.

This progression, from temporally coded strategies, to co-occurring bundles, to higher-order orientations, moves the analysis beyond thematic description toward conceptual explanation. The next chapter presents each orientation in depth and demonstrates how these orientations manifested across cases.

Chapter IV: Findings

This chapter presents the three adjustment orientations, Stabilization, Reintegration, and Transformation, through which expatriate spouses navigated the psychological, social, and identity-related disruptions of international relocation. Building on the analytic insights introduced in Chapter III, these orientations reflect dominant configurations of coping that emerged across participants' narratives. Rather than progressing through uniform stages, spouses adopted qualitatively distinct approaches to managing emotional demands, reconstructing identity, and sustaining engagement in their new contexts.

Each orientation is examined in depth, drawing on illustrative cases to highlight its core features, variation across time, and relationship to contextual factors such as family structure, sociocultural setting, and employment constraints. Although certain orientations aligned more closely with particular adjustment phases (e.g., Transformation in later periods), they were not determined by chronology. Instead, they reflected participants' broader orientation toward adaptation, whether focused on preserving existing resources, selectively reinvesting in former roles, or embracing expansive personal reinvention.

The following sections detail the defining features of each orientation, how they manifested over time, and the strategic patterns of coping that shaped the adjustment experiences of globally mobile spouses.

4.1 Adjustment Orientations

4.1.1 Stabilization: Anchoring Amidst Constraints

The Stabilization is defined by a preservation-focused coping approach, typically observed in the early and mid phases. Bloggers following this path prioritized emotional

regulation, structured routines, and logistical coordination to maintain emotional and functional stability in high-barrier sociocultural contexts. The primary goal was not growth, but survival.

Quantitatively, this orientation is supported by high early-phase prevalence in Practical and Digital Resource Utilization, Emotional Regulation and Acceptance, and Structured Activities and Distraction. These coping strategies suggest efforts focused on managing daily logistics, establishing routines, and maintaining psychological equilibrium rather than investing in expansive social networks or identity reinvention.

Spouse 1, a freelance consultant and parent based in the Middle East, exemplified this approach. Their narrative emphasized the urgency of establishing environmental and logistical stability, particularly in high-barrier host contexts:

“In difficult places, this is more about acting quickly to create your ‘nest’, and finding any networks for support. It is also about a crash course in taxi-level language, map-reading, shopping guide, eating guide, and finding out what groups, if any, exist for networking and support. And, of course, about settling the child into schooling, with the logistical issues that often brings.”

Spouse 1’s focus on securing housing, managing daily operations, and settling children into school reflects a strong emphasis on Practical and Digital Resource Utilization and Structured Activities. His coping efforts were aimed at buffering against contextual instability rather than engaging in expansive identity or social reinvestment.

Spouse 8, a stay-at-home parent also in the Middle East, similarly employed preservation-focused strategies in response to gendered isolation and lack of community integration:

“Working from home with only the dog for company was tough to begin with. No contact with anyone all day was an odd wrench that I hadn’t expected. Of course, once my colleagues came online in the UK I wasn’t short of instant messages and emails, but even so, sitting at home on your own for long periods can be hard.”

“To be perfectly honest, I have felt very much like an outsider. As far as I know, there are perhaps one or two other stay-at-home dads within the social circles that I am part of and I haven’t actually met them. Before my son started nursery I was very concerned about his social skills development as he had only me for company. Even now, after two and a half years of taking him to classes and play groups, we are yet to be invited to a ‘play date.’ Only with my wife taking him to these activities while on maternity leave have the invites started.”

“Friends, much like dinner, don’t make themselves.”

Spouse 8’s experience reflects how isolation, particularly for male trailing spouses, may inhibit access to social and relational resources. Despite participation in parenting spaces and playgroups, his gendered outsider status limited invitations and support. His quote underscores the psychological labor of acceptance and effortful engagement, even when reciprocity is lacking. In terms of COR Theory, Spouse 8’s coping reflects resource conservation, as he focuses energy on emotional regulation, caregiving, and routine maintenance to prevent further losses.

Together, these cases highlight how spouses in the Stabilization orientation coped through careful management of existing resources rather than actively accumulating new ones. Emotional resilience, logistical acumen, and protective routines enabled participants to maintain stability during periods when integration opportunities were limited. While they may not have experienced transformational identity shifts, their preservation strategies served as a vital foundation for enduring and navigating difficult assignments.

4.1.2 Reintegration: Reclaiming Belonging and Role Identity

While Stabilization was a fortress of preservation, grounded in routine, emotional regulation, and logistical anchoring, Reintegration marks a shift toward self-reclamation. It is an orientation defined by cautious, intentional investments in emotional, social, and identity resources. This orientation, observed predominantly in the mid phase and extending into the late

phase for some, is not about dramatic reinvention. Instead, it is about reengaging with familiar roles and passions under new cultural conditions, representing a continuity of self reshaped through context.

Trailing spouses in the Reintegration orientation did not discard their previous identities but began to reanimate them, often in subtle and gradual ways. This process was catalyzed by a growing sense of emotional readiness, and in some cases, by discomfort or existential questioning. While external conditions remained challenging, there was now space for internal reorientation and selective reinvestment.

Quantitatively, the Reintegration orientation is characterized by high mid-phase prevalence in Social Networking and Cultural Learning, Identity and Career Reinvention, and Emotional Regulation. These coping strategies, coupled with Cognitive Reframing and moderate Family and Spousal Support, reflect a resource gain cycle aimed at rebuilding belonging and recovering roles through community engagement, personal initiative, and identity adaptation. Unlike Stabilization's early-phase preservation, Reintegration emphasizes mid-phase coherence, an intentional re-engagement with the self.

Spouse 2, for instance, slowly reconnected with her identity as a writer after a prolonged period of disconnection and emotional strain. Having experienced career disruption and growing dependence on her partner, she found herself confronting a deep sense of identity loss:

"Years later, I sat in a café with a friend in Nice, chatting over coffee. I was in a very dark, sad, lonely place. My career had come to a grinding halt, and I was growing resentful. I felt dependent on my partner. I had no income of my own. And I was starting to realise I had no idea who I was anymore."

A friend's probing question, "Why do you keep dismissing yourself when I ask you about you?", became a moment of rupture, sparking a slow process of reflection and healing. As Spouse 2 resumed freelance writing and creative work, she articulated a newfound outlook:

"I'm now trying to cultivate emotional wealth; to be content with what I have, and not what I don't. And that includes a career."

Reintegration often involved reconnecting with latent identities and reinterpreting existing limitations as opportunities for redefinition. Spouse 3, who struggled to re-enter the formal workforce in Europe, found social and emotional grounding through homebrewing:

"Here, I have found meeting people due to not having a workplace a bit more challenging. But I am an avid homebrewer and this has been the thing that has allowed me to have a good social life and friends in the community. It is here where I unintentionally made some of my very best friends."

Spouse 3's reflection on the stigma of being a non-working male spouse also illuminates the gendered tensions in this phase. Social belonging, for him, came not through institutional affiliation but through shared interests in informal community settings:

"Be prepared to be asked what you do for a living... If you are a non-working male spouse, have your answer ready. The stigma / reality of giving up one's career to accompany your wife / partner around the globe becomes much more real when someone asks 'what do you do' and you aren't sure what to say."

"All of my friends here, not associated with my wife's company, have come in some regard from this community of people... common interests, etc."

Social reintegration often unfolded through low-barrier, affinity-based spaces, where cultural learning and identity work could occur simultaneously. Spouse 9, for instance, describes how she moved from initial isolation to connection by accepting a simplified version of herself and joining informal, non-judgmental social circles:

"In the end, I accepted becoming a simpler type of expat wife, and over the course of one year I met at least 10 amazing women who felt quite the same. We arranged coffee dates that have no obligation, no admission, no lipstick and good hair and, to my relief, no high heels."

Support from spouses and families also played an anchoring role, providing emotional scaffolding that made reinvestment in identity and community more feasible. Spouse 13's story, as a same-sex spouse navigating legal ambiguity, highlights both systemic exclusion and the resilience fostered through relational support:

“I suffered for nearly a year and a half stuck in limbo and not working. And literally going a bit mad! Our saving grace was that we made a lot of friends and created networks and we fell into place.”

These stories collectively reveal that reintegration is not marked by ambitious self-overhaul but by small, strategic acts of emotional and relational reinvestment. Across the narratives, individuals began reframing their limitations, managing emotional risk, and experimenting with familiar roles in culturally adapted ways. Learning the local language, engaging in low-stakes volunteering or creative pursuits, and finding purpose in caregiving or advocacy became ways of rebuilding identity in manageable increments.

From a theoretical standpoint, Reintegration aligns with Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory’s resource gain cycle. While Stabilization reflected damage control and the prevention of further depletion, Reintegration signified spouses’ willingness to reinvest emotionally, socially, and professionally in order to recover lost roles and meaning. These resource caravans created conditions for sustainable psychological recovery. Rather than resisting loss or rushing toward reinvention, spouses in Reintegration reclaimed a sense of belonging and role continuity, reassembling familiar parts of the self in new, culturally embedded ways.

Ultimately, Reintegration is the pivot point between endurance and engagement. It marks the subtle but crucial shift from surviving to participating, from withholding to investing, and from feeling lost to gradually reclaiming a sense of self. It is an orientation defined by continuity, not rupture, where identity is not reinvented but remembered and reshaped in a new cultural landscape.

4.1.3 Transformation: Expanding Through Reinvention

The Transformation orientation represents the most expansive phase of adjustment, an orientation defined not by preservation or reclamation, but by deep reinvention. In this phase,

trailing spouses moved beyond managing or restoring their pre-relocation identities. Instead, they redefined themselves through new professional roles, creative pursuits, and purpose-driven engagement. Transformation was most prevalent in the mid and late phases, particularly among spouses in opportunity-rich or digitally supported contexts.

Transformation reflected an upward spiral of resource expansion, consistent with COR theory. Bloggers in this orientation accumulated emotional, social, and identity resources in reinforcing cycles, often initiating new careers, leadership roles, or platforms for social contribution. Digital tools, coaching, writing, and entrepreneurship became avenues for growth. Gratitude and meaning-making were not by-products but active ingredients of this transformation.

Quantitatively, the Transformation orientation is characterized by high mid-phase prevalence in Social Networking and Cultural Learning, Identity and Career Reinvention, Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation, and Cognitive Reframing. These coping strategies, coupled with Emotional Regulation and strong Family and Spousal Support, reflect efforts to craft purpose-driven identities through creative and entrepreneurial pursuits, sustained into the late phase with robust career and leadership outcomes. Unlike Stabilization's early-phase preservation or Reintegration's mid-phase role recovery, Transformation drives a mid-phase resource expansion spiral for profound personal and professional growth.

Spouse 4, a North American spouse living in Europe, initially struggled with identity loss. A coaching process helped her reframe her narrative, leading to a reinvention centered on helping others:

“When I completed the writing portion of my book, I made another massive decision... I decided to become a certified life coach to continue this work of helping women realize their potential, up-level their lives and live confidently.”

Her personal transformation manifested externally through the development of her coaching practice and the publication of her memoir. Her story exemplifies Identity and Career Reinvention, supported by Cultivating Gratitude and meaning-making. Her journey reflects sustained growth in an opportunity-rich context.

Spouse 5, a North American spouse based in Oceania, also described her transition in terms of opportunity and purpose:

“Believe me, being an expat accompanying supportive spouse has its perks, but it also has aspects to it that are truly hard to face... The possibilities are endless, plus it’s a chance to reinvent yourself when basically no one knows you.”

Spouse 5 used relocation to launch a creative life centered on blogging and volunteering. Her narrative highlighted how a shift in self-definition allowed for growth beyond traditional roles, as she immersed herself in school networks and community engagement.

Spouse 6, a European spouse living in the Middle East, transformed her initial isolation into leadership by starting a blog that organically grew into a regional women’s network:

“In the meantime, I’ve started this blog, found several volunteering opportunities and am the proud owner of some friendships that I never dared even hope for when we arrived... I might not have a traditional career now but I’ve discovered a whole new bunch of things to keep me busy. For the most part, I’d say I’m happy and fulfilled.”

Her words underscore how resource expansion occurs through new social roles, emotional resilience, and identity realignment. Spouse 6 didn’t just adjust; she transformed.

This pattern of social entrepreneurship and community-building emerged across several transformation narratives. Spouse 10, a European spouse in North America, redefined what it means to be an “expat wife” by launching a coaching platform for globally mobile women. Spouse 11, a North American spouse in Europe, found renewed purpose in blogging and church or school communities. Spouse 14, an Asian spouse, also transitioned from accompanying partner to writer and academic.

These stories were not just about reinvention for its own sake. They were also about reframing disruption as a source of insight and purpose. Across these narratives, bloggers expressed an intentional embrace of change, sometimes catalyzed by hardship, and pursued growth.

From a theoretical lens, Transformation aligns with COR theory's resource expansion spiral. Rather than conserving or modestly investing resources, these individuals compounded their emotional, social, and identity gains were used to generate others in a recursive, upward dynamic. Their new roles as coaches, writers, therapists, bloggers, or leaders became caravans of meaning, providing both internal satisfaction and external impact.

Importantly, the Transformation orientation appeared most commonly in opportunity-rich environments and digitally connected contexts. It often required not only internal readiness but also external conditions that allowed for autonomy, flexibility, and professional expression.

Ultimately, Transformation represents the most generative orientation in the adjustment continuum, a space where disruption catalyzes reinvention, and where identity is not only recovered or remembered, but reshaped into something entirely new. It is the orientation where trailing spouses moved from surviving to thriving, crafting identities that reflected not just who they were, but who they had become.

Table 4.1 presents a consolidated overview of the distinguishing features of the three adjustment orientations identified in this study. For each orientation, the table specifies the central adjustment objective, highlights the hallmark coping strategies most characteristic of that path, indicates the dominant temporal phase in which it tends to appear, links the orientation to its associated resource pattern as interpreted through Conservation of Resources (COR) theory,

and provides illustrative quotations from participants that exemplify how the orientation manifests in practice.

Table 4.1

Summary of Expatriate Spouse Adjustment Orientations

Orientation	Core Objective	Dominant Coping Strategies	Typical Phase	COR Pattern	Illustrative Quotes
Stabilization	Preserve Stability and Function	Structured Routines; Emotional Regulation; Practical and Digital Resource Use	Early	Resource Conservation (Defensive)	“Create your nest.” (Spouse 1) “You get as much out as you put in.” (Spouse 8)
Reintegration	Recover and Reclaim Identity	Social Networking and Cultural Learning; Identity and Career Reinvention; Emotional Regulation	Mid to Late	Selective Resource Investment	“I’m now trying to cultivate emotional wealth.” (Spouse 2) “Homebrewing allowed me to have a social life.” (Spouse 3)
Transformation	Reinvent and Expand Identity	Identity and Career Reinvention; Cultivating Gratitude; Social Networking; Cognitive Reframing	Mid to Late	Resource Expansion Spiral (Generative)	“I became a certified life coach.” (Spouse 4) “It’s a chance to reinvent yourself.” (Spouse 5)

4.2 Contextual Factors Influencing Orientations

The Stabilization, Reintegration, and Transformation orientations, while distinct in their coping patterns, were not shaped in a vacuum. Each emerged from a complex interplay of contextual conditions that constrained or enabled resource management strategies. Analysis of 17 expatriate spouse blogs revealed three pivotal contextual factors (sociocultural environment, family structure, and employment flexibility) that shaped these adaptive adjustment orientations.

These factors, interwoven like threads in a tapestry, interacted with each other and the spouses' agency, determining whether resources were conserved, modestly invested, or expansively multiplied. Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory, these contexts influenced the formation of resource caravans that anchored stability, fostered recovery, or propelled growth.

4.2.1 Sociocultural Context: Barriers vs. Bridges

The sociocultural fabric of host environments profoundly shaped adjustment, acting as either barriers or bridges to resource availability and mobilization. In high-barrier contexts, characterized by limited language access, rigid social norms, and exclusionary gender roles, external engagement was significantly limited, reinforcing Stabilization mechanisms focused on emotional and logistical preservation. Spouse 1 reflected on how cultural and logistical challenges in strict environments made social connection rare.

“Being a male trailing spouse makes more difference in difficult posts, or strict Islamic posts, In both of which there are fewer male spouses and fewer contacts with other expatriates and the local population as well. In other difficult postings I have been less of a rare species, and sometimes been able to eke out strong friendships with one or two other male spouses. But being a working spouse, which often demanded travel and long periods away from the post, militated somewhat against forming friendships. In easy postings, it is less necessary to establish a network with other male spouses; friends can be found in many other places.”

Spouse 8, a stay-at-home father, faced gendered exclusion.

“To be perfectly honest, I have felt very much like an outsider. As far as I know, there are perhaps one or two other stay at home Dads within the social circles that I am part of and I haven't actually met them. Before my son started nursery I was very concerned about his social skills development as he had only me for company. Even now, after two and a half years of taking him to classes and play groups, we are yet to be invited to a “Play Date”. Only with my wife taking him to these activities while on maternity leave have the invites started.”

These environments, with minimal Social Networking and Cultural Learning, drove reliance on Practical and Digital Resource Utilization and Emotional Regulation and Acceptance, fostering family-centered coping aligned with COR's resource preservation phase.

Moderately supportive contexts, with navigable systems and inclusive networks, enabled Reintegration. Spouse 3 built hobby-based ties and used homebrewing to build a good social life, and Spouse 2 found reassurance in expat circles.

“I know I’m not alone in feeling this way, and that helps combat the loneliness.”

Spouse 9 built inclusive grassroots networks through casual gatherings, “Coffee dates, no high heels”, that countered exclusion. Spouse 13 leveraged community ties to combat the feeling of getting “stuck in limbo and not working”. These contexts supported Social Networking and Identity and Career Reinvention, fostering role recovery through resource gain cycles.

Opportunity-rich or digitally mitigated contexts propelled Transformation. Spouse 4 launched coaching.

“I decided to become a certified life coach to continue this work of helping women realize their potential, up-level their lives and live confidently. My life’s experiences are what drove me to become a coach and mentor for expat women today.”

Similarly, Spouse 10 created a coaching platform.

“I got triggered by the idea to empower other women being in a similar situation and blogging about my experience abroad – this was something that felt right and reasonable.”

Spouse 11’s blogging flourished giving her a “renewed passion every single day”. These contexts, rich in Identity and Career Reinvention and Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation, enabled expansive growth via resource expansion spirals.

4.2.2 Family Structure: Constraint or Catalyst

Family composition, particularly parenting status, shaped the energy and autonomy available for adaptation. Spouses with young children, like Spouse 1 and Spouse 8 prioritized structure and predictability, often aligning with Stabilization or modest Reintegration. Spouse 1’s

focus on his daughter and Spouse 8's caregiving routines reflected Structured Activities and Distraction.

Family could also be a catalyst. In Transformation, Spouse 4 used family stability as a springboard. Her reinvention into a life coach and author was not in spite of motherhood, but partly inspired by it. Reflecting on the experience, she shared:

“My kids thought it was pretty cool to see their mom's name on the cover of an actual book — maybe she was more than just a mom after all. I felt so proud of what I'd done — showing my daughters that it's never too late to take a chance on yourself to create something special and unique.”

Here, family became a springboard, not a barrier, fueling identity expansion and reinforcing Spouse 4's sense of purpose and agency. Spouse 6 demonstrated how family can serve as a springboard for transformation rather than a constraint. Grounded by routines and emotional regulation early on, she later transitioned into blogging and community leadership. As she reflected:

“I'll continue to work on the me part... and I'll be teaching my kids about all the different ways grown ups can have a fulfilling place in society...”

Her narrative suggests that parenting responsibilities not only coexisted with identity reinvention but actively motivated it. In line with COR Theory, Spouse 6 leveraged family stability as a resource base from which to pursue personal growth and meaning-making.

Child-free spouses, such as Spouse 3 and Spouse 13, often had greater autonomy, which facilitated deeper engagement with the host context. This flexibility enabled Reintegration or even Transformation through expanded social and identity-related pursuits. Spouse 3, for example, cultivated a homebrewing network that supported Social Networking, while Spouse 13 used his autonomy to engage in advocacy work, reinforcing Identity and Career Reinvention.

Both cases highlight how the absence of immediate caregiving responsibilities allowed for a more proactive investment in resource gain cycles in line with COR Theory.

4.2.3 Employment Flexibility: Gateways and Roadblocks

Employment opportunities, or their absence, significantly shaped spouses' coping orientations. In contexts where visa restrictions, legal barriers, or caregiving demands limited access to paid work, participants often aligned with Stabilization strategies. Rather than pursuing professional goals, they focused on maintaining emotional balance and logistical stability. Spouse 1, unable to work formally in the host country, centered his energy on home life and routines. Spouse 8, a full-time caregiver, expressed quiet acceptance of stalled career prospects, adopting a Stabilization path to cope with isolation and identity suspension.

Other spouses pursued Reintegration by embracing flexible roles, community involvement, or digital tools to rebuild purpose. Spouse 3 turned homebrewing into a vehicle for Social Networking showing how hobbies can become platforms for identity recovery. Spouse2 navigated unemployment through reflective blogging blending Emotional Regulation with early steps toward Career Reinvention. Spouse 13, after months of legal and cultural uncertainty in the host country, reengaged through advocacy and part-time roles highlighting an adaptive blend of community contribution and role recovery.

Transformation occurred when participants fully reimagined professional identities by building mobile, self-directed careers unconstrained by local labor markets. Spouse 4 established a virtual coaching practice channeling previous life experience into a new, values-aligned vocation. Spouse 6 transitioned from logistical coping to leadership, building a women's network around her blog demonstrating how digital platforms can enable identity expansion. Spouse 10 and Spouse 11 likewise transformed career disruption into creative opportunity, launching online

platforms for coaching and storytelling. These orientations show how constraint, when met with agency and innovation, can catalyze professional reinvention and personal growth.

4.2.4 Cross-Orientation Interaction of Contextual Factors

The interplay of these factors created distinct coping configurations. Parents in high-barrier contexts with restricted employment opportunities (e.g., Spouse 1 and Spouse 8) were more likely to follow a Stabilization orientation, conserving resources through Practical and Digital Utilization and Structured Activities. In contrast, non-parents or parents in moderately supportive contexts with access to flexible roles (e.g., Spouse 2, Spouse 3, Spouse 9, Spouse 13) tended to pursue Reintegration, investing in Social Networking and Identity Reinvention. Finally, opportunity-rich or digitally enabled contexts (e.g., Spouse 4, Spouse 6, Spouse 10, Spouse 11) facilitated Transformation, characterized by expanded Identity and Career Reinvention and Gratitude. Here, digital platforms acted as resource multipliers, lowering contextual barriers and aligning with COR's resource gain and expansion spirals.

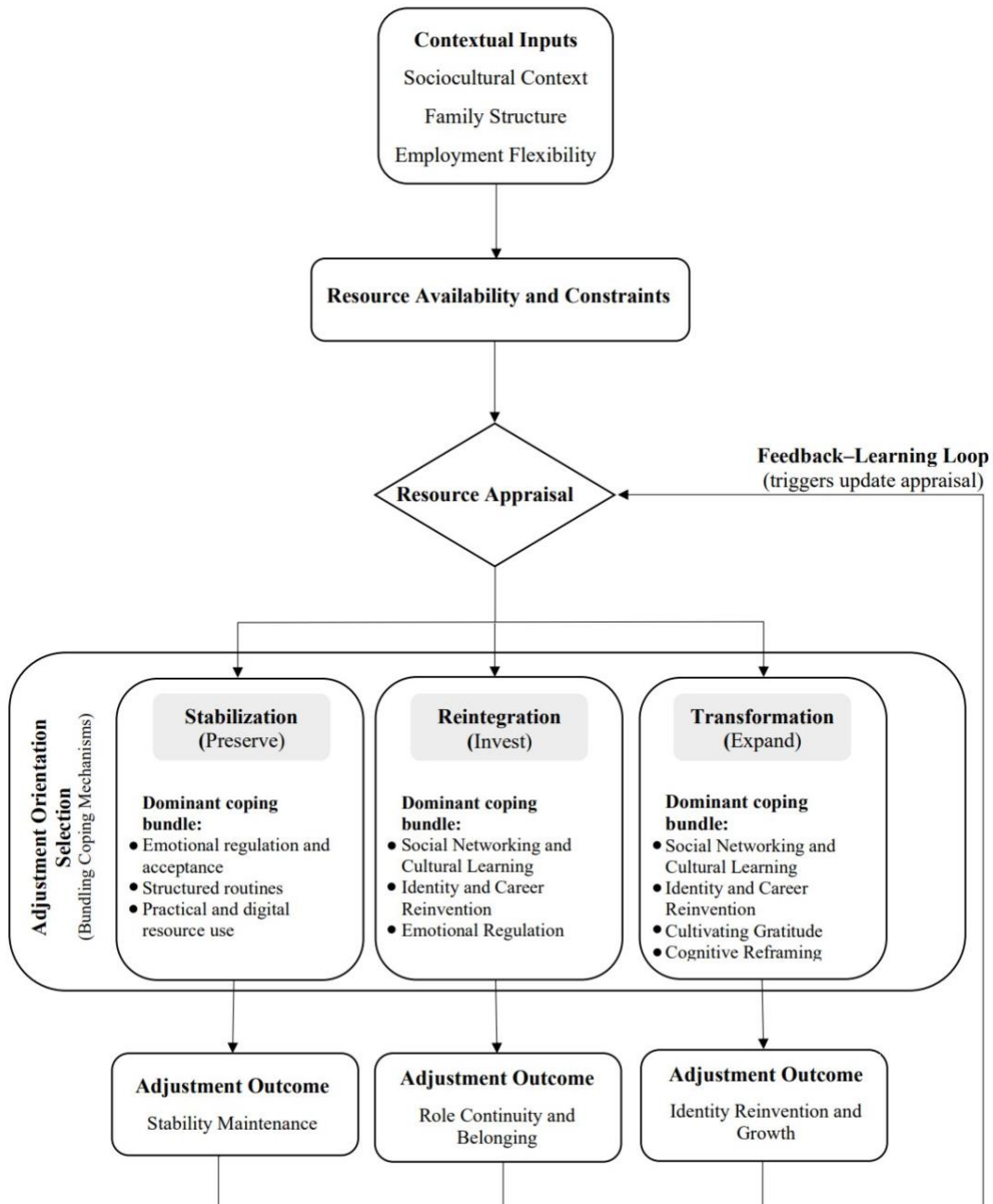
4.3 Process Model of Adjustment

Figure 4.1 integrates the chapter's patterns into a process model. Contextual inputs configure perceived resource availability and constraints. These conditions are appraised in terms of expected losses, potential gains, and risk tolerance. On that basis, spouses enact a bundled coping orientation: Stabilization (resource conservation), Reintegration (selective investment), or Transformation (resource expansion), drawing on strategies from the Emotional and Psychological, Social and Relational, Identity and Career, and Practical and Digital coping domains. Each orientation produces distinctive adjustment outcomes, from stability maintenance to role continuity to identity reinvention. Outcomes and contextual cues then cycle back through a Feedback loop, termed Iterative Adjustment Learning (IAL), which supports either capability

building within the current orientation or a switch to another orientation. The process is therefore non-linear and revisable rather than stage-bound.

Figure 4.1.

Process model of expatriate-spouse adjustment



4.3.1 Triggers: What Enters the Feedback Channel and What It Does

Within Iterative Adjustment Learning, triggers are concrete events or signals that enter the feedback channel and shift appraisal. A trigger alters how spouses read their resource position, either by reducing perceived threat or by expanding perceived affordances, and thereby prompts one of two choices: (a) a stay or capability-building loop within the current orientation (for example, stronger routines within Stabilization or deeper networking within Reintegration), or (b) a switch to another orientation, forward or backward when resources contract.

Table 4.2 names recurring triggers and specifies their mechanisms, typical switches, and illustrative cases from the corpus. Substantively, these triggers cluster into five functional types: (a) affordance releases (for example, children entering school, place or language easing, cumulative routine mastery), which free time and attention, raise perceived capacity, and commonly prompt a switch from Stabilization to Reintegration; (b) relational validations (for example, a peer invitation, a mentor or coach conversation), which increase belonging and agency through social learning and often enable switches from Stabilization to Reintegration or from Reintegration to Transformation; (c) role and status confirmations (for example, a first client or post, public recognition), which deliver positive performance feedback and platform effects that consolidate identity and propel a switch from Reintegration to Transformation; (d) digital multipliers (for example, adoption of blogs or online groups), which lower participation barriers and widen networks, supporting switches from Stabilization to Reintegration and, in some cases, to Transformation as visibility compounds; and (e) resource contractions (for example, acute shocks or sustained exclusion and gendered barriers), which elevate perceived loss or threat and either block switching or trigger temporary regressions to Stabilization while containment routines and acceptance are rebuilt.

Table 4.2*Functional Types of Triggers: Mechanisms, Switches, and Illustrative Cases*

Functional type	Trigger examples	Mechanism (what does the work)	Typical switch	Illustrative Cases
Affordance releases	Children start school; language gains; place becomes navigable; cumulative routine mastery	Capacity and bandwidth increase; friction drops; outward engagement becomes feasible	S→R	Spouse 1, Spouse 5, Spouse 16
Relational validations	Peer invitation; mentor or coach conversation	Social learning and belonging increase; threat decreases and agency increases	S→R or R→T	Spouse 3, Spouse 4
Role and status confirmations	First client/post/volunteer success; publication or leadership invite	Positive feedback consolidates identity; status and platform expand resources	R→T	Spouse 4, Spouse 6, Spouse 10
Digital multipliers	Blog, online groups, video calls	Low-barrier network access and visibility; partial decoupling from local labor markets	S→R (sometimes →T)	Spouse 6, Spouse 14
Resource contractions	Lockdown/divorce/health crisis; job or visa rejection; sustained exclusion or gendered barriers	Threat increases; short-term stabilization via routines and acceptance; movement blocked or reversed	Any → S (temporary); blocks forward moves	Spouse 6, Spouse 7, Spouse 8

Note. S = Stabilization; R = Reintegration; T = Transformation; “→” denotes a switch between orientations.

The mapping from trigger to outcome is contingent: the same event can yield different moves depending on starting resources, concurrent constraints, and the spouse’s appraisal.

Incorporating triggers clarifies the mechanism of change within IAL; orientation shifts follow identifiable events that alter spouses’ appraisals of their resources, thereby changing whether they conserve, selectively invest, or expand those resources. Triggers shed light on moments of

decision and learning visible in the cases. This linkage explains why spouses on similar timelines diverge, why upward shifts often follow small but validating wins, and why regressions to Stabilization function as adaptive resets when shocks occur.

4.4 Propositions Derived from the Process Model

This section states propositions derived directly from Figure 4.1 and Table 4.2, translating the model's linkages into testable claims.

Proposition 1 (Context → Appraisal → Orientation). Higher sociocultural barriers, intensive caregiving demands, and restricted employment flexibility decrease perceived resource availability and increase the likelihood of Stabilization; conversely, supportive or digitally mitigated contexts expand perceived affordances and increase the likelihood of Reintegration and Transformation by shaping appraisal.

Proposition 2 (Forward switches from Stabilization to Reintegration). Triggers that release capacity or reduce threat raise the likelihood of switching from Stabilization to Reintegration, specifically: (a) affordance releases such as children entering school, language gains, or cumulative routine mastery; (b) relational validations such as peer invitations or mentor or coach conversations that increase belonging and agency; and (c) digital multipliers that lower participation barriers and widen networks.

Proposition 3 (Forward switches from Reintegration to Transformation). Triggers that consolidate identity and expand status raise the likelihood of switching from Reintegration to Transformation, namely: (a) first role success (for example, first client, volunteer outcome, or post) that provides positive feedback; (b) public recognition (for example, leadership invitations or publication) that adds external resources and platform effects; and (c) meaning breakthroughs (for example, gratitude or values clarity) that deepen commitment to a revised identity.

Proposition 4 (Resource contractions and temporary regressions). Acute or chronic contractions in perceived resources increase temporary regressions to Stabilization or block forward switches, including: (a) acute shocks such as lockdowns, bereavement, health crises, or hostile policy, that increase the likelihood of Stabilization via routine structure and acceptance; and (b) sustained exclusion and gendered barriers, which keep appraisals flat or negative and can prompt a switch from Reintegration to Stabilization in hostile contexts.

Taken together, these propositions restate the process model as empirically testable claims, linking contextual inputs, appraisal, coping orientations, and trigger-induced movement.

Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter interprets the study's key findings in light of existing expatriate adjustment theories and introduces a reframing of how expatriate spouses experience and navigate global mobility. While much of the traditional literature has centered on assignees and framed adjustment as a linear, individual process, the blog narratives analyzed in this study reveal a more complex, fluid reality. Grounded in lived, digital storytelling, this chapter explores how spouses actively cope with and shape their adjustment journeys. It highlights their emotional labor, resource management, and identity reconstruction across three coping orientations of Stabilization, Reintegration, and Transformation. By positioning spouses as co-architects of global assignments, this discussion contributes to a more inclusive and context-sensitive understanding of expatriate adjustment.

5.1 Spouses as Active Agents in Global Mobility

Despite the long-standing emphasis on expatriate employees, research increasingly recognizes that accompanying spouses play a pivotal role in global assignments. Takeuchi's (2010) multi-stakeholder review and Cole's (2011) empirical findings demonstrate that spousal well-being significantly influences assignment success. Yet, as Andreason (2008) and Lauring and Selmer (2010) note, much of this labor (emotional, logistical, and identity-related) remains invisible. Our blog narratives confirm this, showing spouses navigating unseen emotional and practical challenges to support family stability and assignment outcomes.

Our study reinforces this shift by showcasing spouses as active narrators and meaning-makers in their own right. The dataset comprised both self-authored blogs and blog-style narratives based on interview transcripts, providing a blended yet rich portrait of spousal adjustment. Through both formats, spouses articulated coping strategies, identity reconstruction,

and everyday transitions that challenge the assumptions of linear adjustment models. Unlike retrospective interviews alone, these digital and narrative texts offered emotionally textured, temporally layered insights, capturing moments of disorientation, creativity, and resilience as they unfolded. In doing so, these narratives foreground spouses as dynamic participants in global mobility, rather than passive dependents

5.2 Rethinking the Structure of Adjustment

Traditional expatriate adjustment models, such as the U-curve (Lysgaard, 1955) and stage-based frameworks (Black & Mendenhall, 1991; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001) conceptualize adjustment as a linear, sequential process. Typically, they suggest individuals pass through a honeymoon phase, enter a period of crisis or disillusionment, recover, and eventually adapt or master their environment. However, our findings suggest a more nuanced reality. The three coping orientations identified in this study—Stabilization, Reintegration, and Transformation—are best understood as intersecting and overlapping modes of coping rather than universal stages. Spouses did not move predictably from one orientation to the next; many revisited earlier strategies or engaged with multiple coping patterns at once. Assigning a dominant orientation per blogger served analytical clarity, but their lived experiences reflected a dynamic, context-sensitive interplay of coping logics. The visual separation of orientations in our model highlights different resource strategies (preservation, reinvestment, and expansion) but these should not be mistaken for rigid phases. Instead, the orientations reflect how spouses actively adapted to evolving demands through flexible, layered strategies.

These orientations emerged as (a) fluid, (b) simultaneous, and (c) context-sensitive modes of coping. Regarding fluidity, spouses did not proceed in a clear linear order; many shifted between orientations or returned to earlier strategies as new challenges arose. For example, Spouse

1 initially stabilized life through routines and freelance work characteristic of Stabilization, yet later returned to these tools when faced with setbacks and limited social inclusion, an adaptive, not regressive, pattern that illustrates the continuing relevance of stabilization strategies in mid- or late-phase adjustment. Regarding simultaneity, some bloggers exhibited characteristics of multiple orientations at once; for instance, Spouse 6 blended Reintegration strategies (such as volunteering and forming community ties) with Transformation by using blogging to establish a women's network and expand identity beyond caregiving. Regarding context sensitivity, adjustment outcomes varied across life domains depending on both internal resources and external constraints; for example, Spouse 4 who ultimately achieved professional Transformation as a coach and author nonetheless described earlier periods of social disconnection and isolation, reflecting Reintegration challenges during adjustment.

Notably, even participants who remained within a single dominant orientation, such as Spouse 1 in persistent Stabilization, did not follow a stage-based progression. Rather, their coping reflected a consistent, contextually appropriate response to environmental constraints. Continued use of practical routines and workarounds was not a sign of stagnation but an active adaptation to limitations in social inclusion and professional opportunities.

This more complex picture supports critiques of linear adjustment models. Scholars such as Haslberger, Brewster, and Hippler (2014) argue that adjustment should be conceptualized as domain-specific and individually patterned. The evidence here affirms this position: spouses often adjusted in one life area while remaining unsettled in others. Additionally, Conservation of Resources (COR) theory helps explain these patterns, as coping depends on navigating spirals of resource gain and loss. Adjustment, in this framework, is not a fixed progression, but a dynamic balancing act between internal strategies and contextual affordances.

In sum, Stabilization, Reintegration, and Transformation are best understood as coping orientations, not stages. They reflect dominant patterns of adaptation that may overlap, recur, or coexist. This reconceptualization better captures the lived complexity of expatriate spouse adjustment and highlights the need for flexible, resource-based frameworks in future research and support design.

5.3 Theoretical Contributions

This study advances a theory of orientation-based, trigger-driven adjustment for expatriate spouses. First, it names and specifies Iterative Adjustment Learning (IAL) as the mechanism that links contextual inputs, resource appraisal, coping orientations, and outcomes. In IAL, feedback cues from outcomes and context are interpreted as signals that recalibrate perceived resource sufficiency and prompt either (a) capability building within the current orientation of coping or (b) a switch among Stabilization, Reintegration, and Transformation. Movement is therefore appraisal- and trigger-driven rather than calendar-driven.

Second, it reconceptualises adjustment as orientations of coping rather than stages. The three orientations, Stabilization (preservation), Reintegration (selective reinvestment), and Transformation (expansion), are distinguished by bundles of strategies spanning four domains (Emotional and Psychological, Social and Relational, Identity and Career, Practical and Digital). This clarifies why spouses may display multiple orientations simultaneously, revisit earlier orientations, or diverge from peers at the same time point.

Third, it specifies the micro-to-macro linkage between concrete events and macro movement across orientations. Triggers such as validating social encounters, first role successes, public recognition, childcare or language access, or acute shocks enter the feedback channel, alter perceived capacity or threat, and precede observable staying or switching across orientations.

Fourth, it identifies digital passageways as resource multipliers. Blogs, online groups, and video calls lower participation barriers, widen networks, and partially decouple spouses from local labor markets; under IAL, these passageways increase the likelihood of forward switches (Stabilization to Reintegration, Reintegration to Transformation) especially in high-barrier contexts.

Fifth, it formalizes nonlinearity and conditional time effects. Time per se does not determine movement; upward shifts occur when specific triggers and supportive conditions enable appraisal change. Temporary regressions to Stabilization after shocks are interpreted as adaptive resets rather than failures. Together, these contributions explain why spouses on similar timelines diverge and provide a vocabulary and mechanism for analyzing stays and switches.

5.4 Practical Implications: Designing Supportive Systems

Organizations engaged in global mobility can translate the process model into targeted supports that move spouses from Stabilization toward Reintegration and, where feasible, Transformation. The emphasis is on engineering triggers that shift appraisal and lower participation costs.

First, involve accompanying spouses early in the relocation cycle. Proactive inclusion through orientation sessions, logistical planning, and career consultations signals belonging and preserves agency during transition. Early involvement increases the likelihood of affordance releases (for example, clarity about childcare, language access, transport) that raise perceived capacity and support Stabilization to Transformation movement.

Second, cultivate digital belonging. Employers and relocation partners should fund or host moderated online communities where spouses can connect, exchange information, and access peer support. Such digital passageways lower entry costs, widen networks beyond the local labor

market, and can enable switches from Stabilization to Reintegration and, as visibility compounds, from Reintegration to Transformation, especially in high-barrier contexts.

Third, promote career continuity and resilience. Facilitate credential recognition, remote or flexible roles, and tailored career services (for example, portfolio translation, local labor briefings). These interventions generate role and status confirmations (first client, volunteer success, public recognition) that consolidate identity and increase the likelihood of switching from Reintegration to Transformation.

Fourth, invest in low-barrier social integration channels. Regular coffee meetups, language clubs, cultural excursions, and community activities create relational validations that reduce perceived threat and increase agency, supporting Stabilization to Reintegration switches and deepening engagement within Reintegration.

Fifth, prepare for shocks. Provide rapid-access counseling, structured routine aids, and clear escalation pathways so that resource contractions (for example, lockdowns, health crises, hostile policy shifts) can be contained. Temporary returns to Stabilization can then function as adaptive resets rather than derailments.

5.5 Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings.

First, sample bias is likely. The dataset of 17 publicly accessible, English-language blogs reflects a self-selecting group of literate, expressive spouses; those experiencing severe maladjustment may be less likely to write publicly, which may underrepresent acute or marginalized experiences. Future research should purposively recruit less visible spouses (for example, via NGOs or relocation services).

Second, there is an absence of dyadic data. Assignees' perspectives are inferred rather than directly analyzed, limiting insight into couple-level dynamics that shape adjustment.

Dyadic, longitudinal designs would clarify cross-partner influence.

Third, visa and work barriers are only partially documented. Bloggers reported legal and employment constraints inconsistently, constraining generalization about how policy structures affect adjustment. Where feasible, linking narratives to administrative or policy data would improve validity.

Fourth, bias primarily affects the six interview-derived narratives, where memory and reflective storytelling can reshape or simplify past emotions. By contrast, contemporaneous, time-stamped blog posts reduce recall error but remain subject to curation and self-presentation (for example, selective disclosure). Mixed designs that combine real-time diaries with follow-up interviews can mitigate both risks.

Fifth, Anglophone and cultural representation is limited. Despite geographic diversity, English fluency likely skews representation, privileging certain cultural narratives and excluding non-English-speaking spouses. Multilingual sampling and translation would broaden transferability.

5.6 Future Research

In sum, future research that quantitatively tests orientation patterns, compares diverse cultural-policy contexts, incorporates family-system perspectives, and pilots spouse-centered digital interventions can significantly advance theory and inform more inclusive, responsive practices. By doing so, scholars and practitioners will be better equipped to support the complex and often overlooked experiences of globally mobile families.

This exploratory study lays a foundation for advancing spousal adjustment research by identifying digital, contextual, and resource-related dynamics that remain underexplored. Building directly on propositions, future work should test the model quantitatively, compare contexts, bring the household into view, evaluate digital supports, and map nonlinearity over time.

First, quantitatively test the four developed propositions. Larger, more diverse samples should examine how sociocultural barriers, caregiving demands, and employment flexibility shape appraisal and orientation likelihoods (P1); how blogging and public self-reflection accelerate Reintegration (P2); how social and digital resource caravans predict Transformation (P3); and how shocks or chronic exclusion impede forward switching (P4). Longitudinal designs are particularly needed to capture the dynamic, non-linear nature of adjustment and to establish causal relationships among key variables.

Second, conduct comparative, policy-aware studies across contexts to test P1 and P4. Multi-site or cross-country designs that vary visa regimes, language access, and cultural openness can identify whether supportive or digitally mitigated settings raise Reintegration and Transformation probabilities. Policy changes create natural experiments that allow comparison of affected and unaffected groups over time to isolate effects on appraisal, adjustment orientation, and coping.

Third, employ dyadic and family-level designs to capture crossover and spillover mechanisms underlying Iterative Adjustment Learning. Existing dyadic studies (e.g., Takeuchi et al., 2002; Van der Zee et al., 2005) highlight crossover effects between expatriates and their spouses, but overlook the role of digital coping and identity reconstruction. Reiche et al. (2023) further demonstrate how family dynamics influence expatriate work engagement through

crossover and spillover mechanisms, shaped by moderators like self-efficacy. Future research should integrate both assignee and spouse narratives to capture the reciprocal and emotionally interdependent nature of adjustment, illuminating the flow of psychological and practical resources within expatriate households.

Fourth, pilot and evaluate spouse-focused digital interventions aligned with P2 and P3. While prior research emphasizes the importance of organizational and social support in spousal adjustment (e.g., Abdul Malek et al., 2013), digital support mechanisms remain underexplored. Moderated online communities, peer-led content circles, and virtual career-resilience hubs can be evaluated using rigorous pilot trials with staged implementation and appropriate comparison groups. Outcomes should include time to first trusted tie, first role success, well-being and identity continuity, and observed switches (Stabilization to Reintegration, Reintegration to Transformation) across the assignment timeline.

Fifth, map non-linear and simultaneous orientations using longitudinal quantitative techniques (for example, sequence or event-history analysis) alongside longitudinal qualitative analysis to capture fluid, context-sensitive adjustment.

Sixth, specify temporal horizons and repatriation. Although movement is appraisal- and trigger-driven rather than calendar-driven, assignment length and return uncertainty may condition learning opportunities. Comparative designs that track short-term, fixed-term, and open-ended postings, and follow spouses through repatriation, can test whether Iterative Adjustment Learning generalizes to return transitions or differs when spouses relearn prior contexts.

5.7 Conclusion: Beyond Linear Models to Dynamic Spousal Adjustment

This study challenges traditional stage-based models of expatriate adjustment (e.g., the U-curve; Black & Mendenhall, 1991), offering instead a dynamic, context-sensitive understanding of how trailing spouses adapt. The three adjustment orientations identified in this study unfolded fluidly. Adjustment was not a straight line, some spouses experienced Reintegration and Stabilization concurrently or returned to earlier coping modes in response to new challenges.

Rather than passive dependents, spouses emerged as active agents, reconstructing identity and resilience through emotional labor and digital storytelling. Blogs functioned not only as data but as real-time coping mechanisms, enhancing both the ecological validity and methodological contribution of the study.

The process model introduced here specifies Iterative Adjustment Learning (IAL) as the mechanism linking context, appraisal, coping bundles, and outcomes. Triggers illustrate how concrete events shift appraisals and precipitate staying or switching across orientations. From this model, four mid-range propositions (P1–P4) offer testable hypotheses and practical guidance for spouse-centered supports and digital interventions.

While the study is limited by its sample and lack of dyadic data, it lays a foundation for future research into digital coping, spousal adjustment orientations, and targeted support programs. Ultimately, successful expatriation depends not only on the assignee, but also on the adaptive efforts of those who accompany them, rebuild identity amid disruption, and forge new pathways in unfamiliar environments.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Demographic Overview of Blog Sample (Pseudonymized)

Pseudonym	Gender	Origin Region	Host Region	Children	Total Assignment Duration	Current Placement Duration	Approx. Page Count
Spouse 1	Male	Oceania	Middle East	1	12 years	—	~2–3
Spouse 2	Female	Oceania	Europe	—	—	—	~2
Spouse 3	Male	North America	Europe	0	4.5 years	2.5 years	~3–4
Spouse 4	Female	North America	Europe	2	14 years	—	~3
Spouse 5	Female	North America	Oceania	—	—	2 years	~9–10
Spouse 6	Female	Europe	Middle East	2	—	2.5 years	~60–65
Spouse 7	Female	Europe	Europe	3	—	—	~8–9
Spouse 8	Male	Europe	Middle East	2	4 years	4 years	~1–2
Spouse 9	Female	Europe	Europe	—	—	—	~5–6
Spouse 10	Female	Europe	North America	—	—	1 year	~2–3
Spouse 11	Female	North America	Europe	3	—	2.5 years	~25–28
Spouse 12	Female	Europe	Asia	1	4 years	4 years	~13–15
Spouse 13	Male	North America	Asia	—	3 years	—	~4–5
Spouse 14	Female	Asia	Multiple	2	18 years	—	~4–5
Spouse 15	Male	North America	Africa	—	—	—	~2–3
Spouse 16	Male	Europe	Asia	—	—	3 years	~4–5
Spouse 17	Male	North America	Asia	0	—	—	~35–40

Note: Pseudonyms are used; regions are generalized; “—” indicates unavailable data.

Appendix B1

Coding and Theme Development for Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations

Data Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Interpretive Sub-Theme	Theme
“The bottom line is, rather than get swallowed up in the confusion and overwhelming details of moving abroad, I’ve tried to embrace each aspect of it as individual stepping stones” (Spouse 11)	Viewing each challenge as a stepping stone	Embracing Incremental Progress	Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations
“Back then, while many lamented the goalposts being moved time and time again, we plodded on. Heading to the next milestone. And then the next. And then the next.” (Spouse 6)	Taking challenges step by step	Embracing Incremental Progress	Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations
“Living abroad opens your eyes to different ways of doing things. Sometimes it can be hard to drop our ethnocentric tendencies to really open ourselves to new cultures.” (Spouse 5)	Broadened perspective	Reframing Challenges as Opportunities	Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations
“The possibilities are endless, plus it’s a chance to reinvent yourself when basically no one knows you...” (Spouse 4)	New beginnings	Reframing Challenges as Opportunities	Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations
“The best thing though was how it made me realise that home isn’t bricks and mortar, it’s where the people you love are and stability doesn’t have to be geographical.” (Spouse 6)	Redefining Home and Stability	Redefining Constructs	Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations
“After long months of contemplation, I think I’ve arrived at my answer: reinvention. Reinvention, and redefining what success looks like.” (Spouse 2)	Redefining success	Redefining Constructs	Cognitive Reframing and Redefining Expectations

Appendix B2

Coding and Theme Development for Emotional Regulation and Acceptance

Data Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Interpretive Sub-Theme	Theme
“Not only did I feel inadequate, I also felt ashamed of being envious of their seemingly perfect lives whilst beginning to doubt my own.” (Spouse 7)	Acknowledging emotional struggle	Awareness of emotions	Emotional Regulation and Acceptance
“Goodbyes SUCK! I hate them, I’m bad at them. I avoid them. I go into complete denial about the whole thing. I cry the whole way through them.” (Spouse 6)	Expressing emotional overwhelm and avoidance	Awareness of emotions	Emotional Regulation and Acceptance
“I’m now trying to cultivate emotional wealth; to be content with what I have, and not what I don’t. And that includes a career. “ (Spouse 2)	Sitting with emotions	Cultivating Emotional Resilience	Emotional Regulation and Acceptance
“I know I’m not alone in feeling this way, and that helps combat the loneliness” (Spouse 2)	Normalizing emotional experience and finding validation	Cultivating Emotional Resilience	Emotional Regulation and Acceptance
“Having hard days in life is normal and having them as expats is even more normal! But when they go on to be more than just hard days we need to take action! We need to look after ourselves and our fellow expats.” (Spouse 6)	Normalizing hardship and encouraging proactive mental health care	Normalizing Discomfort (primary)	Emotional Regulation and Acceptance
“Are my Spanish language skills as far along as I want? Nope! Do I take advantage of every opportunity to learn more about the city...? Not exactly.” (Spouse 11)	Acknowledging personal limitations without self-criticism	Normalizing Discomfort	Emotional Regulation and Acceptance

Appendix B3

Coding and Theme Development for Structured Activities and Distraction

Data Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Interpretive Sub-Theme	Theme
"I volunteer at the school and I go to the gym and meet other moms for coffee." (Spouse 5)	Creating structured routines through daily activities	Establishing Consistent Routines	Structured Activities and Distraction
"Now we leave every day for the school run and often I don't come home again before I pick the Things up from school. Afternoons where I don't have to leave the house are a welcome relief!" (Spouse 6)	Creating daily structure and evolution of routines	Establishing Consistent Routines	Structured Activities and Distraction
"Everybody has their own way to make a new place feel like a home, and my way is baking. I suggest that if you're moving someplace far away, research the heck out of it, and figure out how to make yourself happy there." (Spouse 17)	Creating emotional comfort through familiar activities	Engaging in Familiar Activities	Structured Activities and Distraction
"Hope endures, and besides, being an unemployed EFM isn't all that bad, compared to a lot of other lifestyles. I've gotten a lot of painting done during this tour, baked a lot of bread, spent quality time with Diplocat." (Spouse 17)	Using creative and domestic activities to create emotional balance	Engaging in Familiar Activities	Structured Activities and Distraction
"Stay busy – I definitely went through a homesick phase when we first arrived and staying busy is the best way to beat that." (Spouse 5)	Using busyness as distraction from emotional distress	Pursuing Distraction Activities	Structured Activities and Distraction
"Plus, this all happened while we had Thanksgiving preparations, a trip to Hong Kong and mailing our Christmas presents home to distract us, so it could have been a lot worse. We survived the process, and so will you." (Spouse 17)	Using seasonal tasks and travel as emotional distraction	Pursuing Distraction Activities	Structured Activities and Distraction

Appendix B4

Coding and Theme Development for Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation

Data Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Interpretive Sub-Theme	Theme
“I sink endless amounts of hours while the kids are at school into the blog and even though I regularly question the worth of that time, I feel fortunate to be able to have that gift of time.” (Spouse 5)	Gratitude for quality family time	Gratitude for Relationships	Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation
“I am so thankful for the time that being a trailing spouse allows me with the kids.” (Spouse 5)	Gratitude for time with children	Gratitude for Relationships	Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation
“The expat community is a super friendly and supportive community on the whole. When I had to go home for a family emergency last summer play dates were arranged my absence. Meals appeared on my doorstep and my kids got picked up from school...” (Spouse 6)	Appreciation for social support	Gratitude for Relationships	Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation
“The strong community of women friends I had made also helped me through tough days; we are all still in regular touch.” (Spouse 14)	Gratitude for community support	Gratitude for Relationships	Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation
“We had days at the beaches where the water was warmer than a bath and the colours of the sea and the sand could genuinely fool you into thinking you were on a paradise island” (Spouse 6)	Cherishing new experiences	Appreciation for Opportunities	Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation
“This time off for me has allowed us to travel extensively and explore.” (Spouse 5)	Appreciating freedom to explore through relocation	Appreciation for Opportunities	Cultivating Gratitude and Appreciation

Appendix B5

Coding and Theme Development for Social Networking and Cultural Learning

Data Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Interpretive Sub-Theme	Theme
“being sporty types we quickly managed to replicate much of our UK social life.” (Spouse 8)	Re-creating familiar social patterns	Building and strengthening social networks	Social Networking and Cultural Learning
“We created a community of like-minded folks and went on weekly beach and desert adventures with our young children.” (Spouse 14)	Creating peer communities through shared activities	Building and strengthening social networks	Social Networking and Cultural Learning
“working mostly in coffee shops – a great way to at least find some social interaction when you work from home” (Spouse 15)	Finding informal social contact in daily routines	Building and strengthening social networks	Social Networking and Cultural Learning
“ There we relied heavily on our fellow expats for advice. The ones who had been there longer become a resource for expats who have recently arrived. I would spot a new expat family in the grocery store and go up and introduce myself.” (Spouse 5)	Engaging in mutual support and knowledge-sharing within the expat network	Building and strengthening social networks (primary)	Social Networking and Cultural Learning
“We took two weeks of “Area Studies” courses: basic knowledge about East Asia’s history, culture and current political/military situation. One week on the big picture, then a second one focusing on [country].” (Spouse 17)	Learning and adjusting to local cultural expectations	Cultural learning	Social Networking and Cultural Learning
“The idea is not to change who you are but rather to fully embrace the attitude and style of your new cultural surroundings.” (Spouse 11)	Behavioral adaptation to local norms	Cultural learning and adapting	Social Networking and Cultural Learning

Appendix B6

Coding and Theme Development for Family and Spousal Support

Data Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Interpretive Sub-Theme	Theme
“My spouse always said he would give up his career and try something else if we decided to go back to the [home country] for my career which definitely softens the blow of working at a reduced capacity abroad!” (Spouse 13)	Feeling emotionally supported through partner’s career flexibility	Spousal Emotional Support	Family and Spousal Support for Coping
“Diplowife and I talked this over, and I felt a lot better afterwards.” (Spouse 17)	Gaining emotional clarity through partner communication	Spousal Emotional Support	Family and Spousal Support for Coping
“We are so lucky that our friends and families understand and support our decision to live away.” (Spouse 6)	Emotional reassurance from extended family and friends	Family Support	Family and Spousal Support for Coping
“We’ll drink cups of tea together over FaceTime and give each other Skype hugs (when it works).” (Spouse 6)	Staying emotionally connected with family through digital tools	Family Support and Bonding	Family and Spousal Support for Coping
“showing my daughters that it’s never too late to take a chance on yourself to create something special and unique” (Spouse 4)	Modeling resilience and self-growth for children	Children as Motivation	Family and Spousal Support for Coping
““But we want our little ones to overcome challenges, conquer fears and live a life of excitement. As parents, we have to practice what we preach!” (Spouse 11)	Parenting as a motivator for modeling courage and adaptability	Children as Motivation	Family and Spousal Support for Coping

Appendix B7

Coding and Theme Development for Identity and Career Reinvention

Data Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Interpretive Sub-Theme	Theme
“Freelancing is the most obvious fit for spouses.” (Spouse 1)	Adapting career through flexible work	Career Flexibility and Professional Reinvention	Identity and Career Reinvention
“Some of us have turned to blogging and writing or found other ways of working and are now considered to be digital nomads – where you can be anywhere to be doing what you’re doing.” (Spouse 6)	Embracing location-independent career paths	Career Flexibility and Professional Reinvention	Identity and Career Reinvention
“Let’s get back to the time I did not figure out yet what I was planning to do with my career and started to get familiar with my new surrounding. In my mind this is one of the most important phases of the life of an Expat Partner.” (Spouse 10)	Pausing career plans to engage with new life context	Role and Priority Adaptation	Identity and Career Reinvention
“Becoming a trailing spouse has made me realise that it takes strength to let go of everything that you thought made you who you are, but it makes you stronger.” (Spouse 12)	Letting go of prior identity to adapt to new role	Role and Priority Adaptation	Identity and Career Reinvention
“Someday you will wake up and there will be a new purpose in your life. Whether that is indulging yourself fully in the new culture, learning languages, writing, photography or even a new job position.” (Spouse 10)	Rebuilding identity through long-term personal exploration	Sustained Personal Growth and Engagement	Identity and Career Reinvention
“I’ve started this blog which gives me a renewed passion every single day.” (Spouse 11)	Sustaining personal identity through creative routine	Sustained Personal Growth and Engagement	Identity and Career Reinvention

Appendix B8

Coding and Theme Development for Practical and Digital Resource Utilization

Data Excerpts	Descriptive Codes	Interpretive Sub-Theme	Theme
“When I get ‘home’ I will Google Asian fruits and vegetables and discover that I have selected a papaya – I even find a You Tube video explaining exactly how to prepare it. Eventually I will find out from a novel that a sprinkling of lime juice will transform it into a delicacy.” (Spouse 12)	Using digital resources for learning and adaptation	Leveraging Technology and Digital Tools	Practical and Digital Resource Utilization
“Frankly, jobs that are all about working from home are by far the best for all trailing spouses, as long as communications by phone and computer work well.” (Spouse 1)	Reliance on digital connectivity for work	Leveraging Technology and Digital Tools	Practical and Digital Resource Utilization
“It’s really very simple! Hop onto their website, check out the vast inventory of snacks and treats from the states and fill your cart. Our shipment arrived within one week and we were so thrilled to spoil the kids with some favorites.... (Spouse 11)	Using online shopping to access familiar cultural goods	Managing Day-to-Day Logistics	Practical and Digital Resource Utilization
“Order the stuff you want and ship it to post. It’ll make you feel better, it helps you get over your homesickness and makes your new house into a home. We were cautious at first about ordering stuff, and people gave me a hard time at the consulate about too many boxes coming, but to hell with that.” (Spouse 17)	Using online shopping to create emotional comfort and familiarity	Managing Day-to-Day Logistics	Practical and Digital Resource Utilization
“Before we arrived I trawled the internet looking for any detail of where we would be living. I was desperate to know what the future looked like for us but of course, I had no idea.” (Spouse 6)	Researching relocation details	Engaging in Strategic Planning	Practical and Digital Resource Utilization
“Before we even had a signed contract for our relo, I had already found answers to tons of questions in groups like International Expats of [host city], Expat Moms, [host city] Moms, Moms with Babies in [host city].” (Spouse 11)	Pre-decision information seeking through online forums	Engaging in Strategic Planning	Practical and Digital Resource Utilization