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## Lived art Therapy Experiences Among University Students

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### Abstract

The research was a qualitative study which was designed to investigate the ways that art therapy facilitates expressive behavior and enhances adaptive coping with anxiety, depression, or other psychological difficulty; and whether it can be used as a model for on-campus mental health interventions. The study utilized nine (9) students attending school in two different cities in the Metro Manila and Laguna region of the Philippines. These subjects were all at least 18 years old and ranged in age from 18 to 25. Each subject had attended at least four to six individual art therapy sessions. Interviews were completed using google meet or in person interviews using a structured interview format. All interview data was collected and examined utilizing Colaizzi's (1978) Phenomenological Framework and thematic coding techniques. The results indicated that through art therapy, participants were able to verbalize their emotions/feelings through non-verbal forms of creative expression. Several participants felt as though they could express many of their thoughts, experiences and feelings through creative expression, which is difficult for them to communicate verbally. Additionally, several emergent themes identified in the results indicate that participants experienced positive effects when utilizing art therapy such as regulating their emotions; developing new coping mechanisms; reducing levels of perceived stress; increasing self-awareness/self-discovery; organizing their thoughts cognitively; creating an atmosphere conducive to thinking, reflecting and making meaning without external pressures. Finally, the various forms of artistic materials and creative process utilized during the therapy allowed for a medium through which participants could experience relief emotionally and gain insight into understanding others better.

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### 1. Introduction

Mental health problems among adolescents and young adults continue to increase globally, particularly among college students experiencing anxiety, depression, emotional dysregulation, academic stress, and personal struggles. Educational institutions are recognized as both sources of stress and important settings for mental health interventions. Studies show alarming levels of psychological distress among college students, highlighting the urgent need for stronger school-based mental health services. In the Philippines, Republic Act No. 12080 was enacted to establish comprehensive mental health programs, awareness campaigns, crisis response mechanisms, and support services within schools. Art therapy has emerged as an alternative mental health intervention that uses creative processes such as drawing, painting, and sculpture to help individuals express and process emotions nonverbally. Previous studies found that art therapy improves emotional expression, reduces stress, enhances resilience, and supports psychological well-being among students. Resilience is considered important in helping individuals adapt positively to stressful and traumatic situations.

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Despite its potential benefits, there remains a research gap regarding the impact of art therapy on adolescent mental health in school settings, particularly in the Philippines. This study aims to assess the influence of art therapy on the well-being of university students and contribute to the development of integrated mental health services, policies, and support programs in tertiary education

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Research Design**

Qualitative research is an iterative process that deepens understanding of the scientific community by creating new, meaningful distinctions as one moves closer to the topic under examination (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Qualitative research investigates and provides a deeper understanding of the topic of real-world challenges. Phenomenology will be employed as a research design. This is a philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology that seeks to comprehend human lived experiences, which seeks to understand meaning from the participant's perspective.

This aims to seek explanations and answers using the data gathered from exploring the impact of art therapy on the self-expression and emotional resilience of university students, which will be picked using the purposive sampling technique. This sampling technique involves deliberately selecting participants based on their specific characteristics, inclusion criteria, and experiences that are relevant to the study.

### **2.2. Research Locale**

This investigation will take place at selected universities or organizations located in Metro Manila and Laguna, Philippines. Metro Manila and Laguna have diverse campuses that serve a growing population of higher education students. This locale was chosen deliberately for its growing awareness of student mental health needs and for existing initiatives for art therapy sessions and wellness programs on campus.

The participants in this study (18-25 years of age) are currently enrolled university students within Metro Manila and Laguna. Each participant has attended at least 4-6 art therapy sessions in a formal university or campus-based mental health context. The art therapy sessions typically last not less than 60 minutes per session. Qualified mental health professionals and facilitators lead the art therapy sessions.

The focus on an academic environment suggests that many university students are facing both an academically rigorous curriculum and the pressures of young adulthood. The universities in Metro Manila and Laguna provide an

appropriate and practical setting for this research due to having more resources, facilities, mental health professionals, and access to diverse student populations.

### **2.3. Population and Sampling**

The sampling strategy used in this research is purposive sampling. This method is frequently used in qualitative studies to deliberately identify and select participants who can provide in-depth and meaningful insights into the phenomenon under investigation. Participants will be identified through collaboration with the school or organization. The school will assist in identifying individuals who meet the study's inclusion criteria and who may be willing to share their experiences. The process will be conducted sensitively, with clear information provided about the study's purpose, willingness to participate, confidentiality measures and the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

### **2.4. Research Participants**

The respondents in this study were chosen based on a purposive sampling technique. The inclusion criteria for participants are as follows: participants must be 18-25 years old, must be currently enrolled as a university student in a recognized higher education institution located in Metro Manila or Laguna, an active member of a university-based or external organization (e.g., academic, artistic, psychosocial, advocacy, or student organizations) at the time of data collection and have undergone at least 4-6 art therapy sessions within a university or campus-based mental health setting with a duration of 45-60 minutes per session.

The participants must have the ability and willingness to articulate their experiences, thoughts, and perceptions relevant to the study during interviews. Conversely, the exclusion criteria include college students who are below 18 years old; not residing or enrolled within Metro Manila and Laguna, and those who attended less than four sessions. Students experiencing serious mental health challenges, as identified by the program facilitators, and those who exhibit communication difficulties, are not included in the study.

A total of nine (9) respondents will be interviewed and asked for information about their current experiences. These respondents are considered qualified to answer the questions in the study. They answer the interview questions provided by the researcher, which gives the information the researcher needs. In addition, any students who voluntarily withdraw before completing the study are excluded from the research.

**Table 1:** Profile of the Respondents

Profile of the Respondents			
Code	Age	Gender Identity	Sessions Attended
Participant 1	25 yrs old	Female	8
Participant 2	25 yrs old	Female	5
Participant 3	23 yrs old	Female	5
Participant 4	24 yrs old	Female	4
Participant 5	21 yrs old	Female	5
Participant 6	20 yrs old	Female	4
Participant 7	19 yrs old	Female	4
Participant 8	20 yrs old	Male	4
Participant 9	25 yrs old	Male	7

### 2.5. Research Instrumentation

In 2005, according to Blumberg *et al.*, the extent to which an instrument measures what it claims to measure is commonly characterized as validity. As stated by Robson (2011), the validity of a research instrument determines how well it measures what it was supposed to measure. It's the degree to which the outcomes are accurate. Guide questions serve as a study tool for data collection from the respondents, which consists of a series of questions and another prompt used to gather information.

In this case, the researcher conducts a personal interview with the university students who are between 18 and 25 years old who participate in at least 4-6 art therapy sessions. To assess the quality of the guide questions and verify them as a suitable measuring instrument, a Research Expert, a Qualitative Researcher, a Clinical Psychologist, a Psychology Professor, and a researcher validated the questions to ensure their validity.

### 2.6. Data Gathering Procedure

The researchers will gather the data after the consent form is signed by both the Research Adviser and the participants. The participants will sign the consent form, indicating that there is a written agreement that all the selected students will participate in answering questions through semi-structured interviews.

This data-collecting method allows the researchers to gather a piece of more in-depth information about the participants' understanding of a certain topic by asking the participants a set of open-ended questions and having the ability to follow up with new questions to further explore the participants' insights and experiences towards the topic.

The data collection of this study will be conducted both online and in person. Regarding the online setup, the researcher will use Google Meet to gather data from the participants. The researcher will interview one participant at a time, and the researcher will finish the meeting in less

than 30 minutes. The whole session will be recorded for further analysis. Furthermore, the researchers will create a copy of all the recorded interview meetings and will analyze the repeated patterns in all the participants' answers. From then on, the researchers will be able to derive themes that emerge from the participants' personal experiences about their experiences of their participation in art therapy sessions.

### 2.7. Ethical Consideration

This study will adhere to the highest ethical standards to ensure the protection and security of the participants. Ethical approval will be sought from Pamantasan ng Cabuyao Ethics Committee before the actual data gathering. The following ethical principles will guide the study:

This study adhered to ethical standards in research and complied with the provisions of Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Informed consent was obtained before data collection. All personal and sensitive information gathered was treated with utmost confidentiality. Identifiers such as names were excluded from the data set, and codes were used instead to ensure anonymity. Data collected were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher and were used solely for academic purposes. Upon completion of the study, all data will be properly disposed of in accordance with data privacy guidelines.

Furthermore, the researcher consulted with a Qualified Data Analysis (QDA) expert throughout the data and thematic analysis process to enhance the methodological rigor, credibility, and trustworthiness of the study. The researcher also acknowledges the responsible use of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-assisted tools during selected stages of the research process, particularly for language

refinement, grammar checking, paragraph organization, and enhancing academic writing clarity. These AI tools were used solely as supplementary writing aids and were not utilized to generate, manipulate, fabricate, or alter research data, participant responses, findings, interpretations, or conclusions.

**3. Results**

This chapter presents the findings of the study, focusing on the lived experiences of the participants as analyzed

through the Colaizzi phenomenological framework. By using qualitative, in-depth interviews, and through Colaizzi's systematic methodology, the researcher has obtained essential themes and sub-themes as to what the participant's lived experiences with art therapy. The study presented the results in a theme- and sub-theme-based framework with supporting verbatim quotes from participants to accurately represent the voices of each of the participants.

**Table 2:** Summary of Annotated Exemplars Related to Lived Art Therapy Experiences Among University Students

<i>If it's very flowy, it means I was relaxed. If very rugged and dark, very straight lines – my inner frustration. (P1)</i>	Symbolic Expression Through Artistic Elements	<b>Art as a Symbolic and Reflective Medium for Emotional Processing and Self-Understanding</b>
<i>More on concepts and emotions... junk journaling prompt made me nag-think deep at nag-reflect sa di ko masyado nakikita sa labas. (P2)</i>	Reflective Processing Through Art	
<i>I see myself in certain characters... yung kulay na yun gives me this feeling... depende din sa mood mo sa araw na yun. (P3)</i>  <i>I drew a character who was sleeping – that related to me; I was tired emotionally. I drew an anime character who struggles with perfectionism like I do. (P7)</i>	Emotional and Personal Identification Through Characters	
<i>Parang nag-organize yung thoughts ko nung araw na yun... in a way nag-organize yung nangyayari sa isip ko. (P4)</i> <i>It becomes clear on what I want to do. I'm able to put my ideas together on the paper and it really helps. (P5)</i>	Cognitive Organization and Mental Processing	
<i>I enjoy the process more than the outcome. It helps me pay more attention on what needs to be done. (P6)</i>	Mindful Engagement in the Creative Process	

Participants utilized art as a symbolic and reflective medium for understanding, processing, and expressing their internal emotional experiences. Through art-therapy, participants were able to externalize their emotions, organize thoughts, reflect on personal experiences, and better understand themselves in ways that verbal communication alone couldn't reach. Participants experienced art therapy as a process of symbolically, reflectively and emotionally expressing themselves, which

resulted in enhanced emotional awareness, increased clarity of thought and greater self-awareness. Artistic media such as strokes, colors, symbols, characters and abstract forms became meaningful representations of the participants' inner experiences, and provided them with an opportunity to process feelings, organise thoughts, project their struggles and communicate aspects of themselves in a safe, creative way.

**Table 3:** Summary of Annotated Exemplars Related to Art Therapy Participation Influence on Day-to-Day Emotional Well-Being

PARTICIPANT RESPONSES	SUBTHEMES	SUPERORDINATE THEME
"Para syang nagiging will to live... I have to/get through the days to get to that [art therapy] day." (P1)	Source of Hope and Motivation	<b>Therapeutic Influence of Art Therapy on Emotional and Psychological Well-Being</b>
"Nawala yung anxiety ko. Kasi mas naka-focus ako sa ginagawa kong art – colors lang shapes. Natatahimik ako." (P2)	Anxiety Reduction Through Focused Creative Engagement	
"After the session mas light yung feelings, mas magaan sa pakiramdam. On those days I sleep better." (P3)	Emotional Relaxation and Improved Rest	
"Before art therapy I was often sad or easy to irritate. But doing art therapy made me less lazy. I want to get up and do things." (P5)	Positive Mood Changes and Increased Daily Functioning	
"Art has become my way of coping on my daily life. Finally got to draw again after months of being limited by workload." (P6)	Integration of Art as Everyday Coping Strategy	
"Art therapy helped me be more calm, know when to take breaks, not be really hard on myself." (P7)	Development of Self-Compassion and Emotional Regulation	
"It's an enjoyable experience... it's my form of expression and another way for people to understand me deeper." (P8)	Art as Meaningful Emotional Communication	
"Na-boost yung confidence ko, self-appreciation ko. I could do art din pala, meron pa palang bala." (P9)	Enhanced Self-Esteem and Personal Empowerment	

Participation in art therapy positively influenced the participants' day-to-day emotional well-being and mental health by promoting emotional calmness, stress reduction, motivation, self-expression, emotional regulation, and improved self-esteem. The analysis emphasizes how artistic engagement became a meaningful source of emotional support, psychological relief, and adaptive daily coping. Additionally, this also reported a positive impact on their

emotional and mental health. By engaging creatively, many participants achieved emotional relief and received psychological support and personal development opportunities that assisted them in developing healthier ways to adjust emotionally and operate at an improved level daily. This indicates that art therapy fostered emotional awareness and compassionate self-management, helping participants regulate emotions more gently and constructively.

**Table 4:** Summary of Annotated Exemplars Related to Most Meaningful and Impactful Aspects of Art Therapy Session

Participant Responses	Subthemes	Superordinate Theme
"Post-processing – <u>narinig mo yung thought process ng others. Sometimes thoughts ng iba naigiging applicable din sa akin.</u> " (P1)	Learning Through Shared Reflection and Processing	<b>Meaningful Interpersonal and Reflective Experiences in Art Therapy Sessions</b>
"Nakita ko <u>yung perspective ng ibang participants. Natutunan ako. Nafeel ko – hindi ako nag-isa sa mga pinaagdaanan ko.</u> " (P2)		
"Yung sharing of art and sharing by group... meron din kasi <u>silang kausapin na one-on-one.</u> " (P4)		
"I like the reflection – <u>bakit mo ginawa yung art? Parang napapa-reflect din ako personally. It helped me uncover deeper layers.</u> " (P3)		
"Painting was touching because you're exploring a new medium. It was fun to watch colors spread across the paper." (P5)	Exploration Through Creative Activities	
"I finally got to apply the things I learned – I can actually do it <u>without any doubt.</u> " (P7)	Growth in Confidence and Personal Capability	
"It's like being transported back to kindergarten, making friends. Problems didn't really matter as much." (P8)	Reconnection with Positive and Carefree Experiences	
"I drew an anime character because of his optimistic mindset – I try to resonate with that character's persistence." (P9)	Internalization of Positive Traits	

Participants perceived the most meaningful and impactful aspects of the art therapy sessions as those involving shared reflection, emotional connection, self-discovery, creativity, and interpersonal support highlighting how the sessions fostered emotional validation, social connectedness, personal insight, confidence, and emotional growth through both creative and interpersonal experiences.

The findings emphasized shared experiences and engaging in reflective activities, participants gained better understanding of themselves and each other emotionally, improved their sense of community with others, became more self-aware of their emotions, and built up their emotional strength, making the sessions both enriching for mental health and meaningful to the participants on an emotional level.

Research shows that using expressive art or Art Therapy provides emotional expression, encourages self-reflection, and creates social connections due to creative engagement. Studies indicate that through the act of creating, one can reflect on one's own emotions and experiences, providing an opportunity for greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence through understanding one's own feelings.

#### 4. Discussions

The findings revealed the effects of involvement in Art Therapy of the University Students. Depending on the experiences posted by the participants, conclusions were made based on the qualitative evidence gathered. The inferences made are as follows:

Students participating in art therapy were able to express some feelings and experiences that could hardly be described. It gave participants a safe, non-verbal, and creative way to release emotions, allowing them to relieve emotional tension, find a sense of clarity and work through internal conflict, which is a contributor to emotional resilience. Art therapy is a good way of making university students express feelings and ideas that are hard to say in words, which improves their emotional resilience through giving them an organized, non-verbal solution to expressing themselves.

The students said that art therapy gave them an opportunity to express complicated feelings using creative materials like drawing, painting, and journaling. This process assisted participants in expressing those feelings that they were not able to express with words, minimizing emotional repression and promoted introspection, leading to better self-understanding and emotional expression.

In line with the support of emotional Regulation, the art-making process facilitated the regulation of emotions in students undergoing stressful situations. The practice of artmaking taught participants to be mindful, patient, and reflective to deal with stress, anxiety, and coping healthily rather than engaging in maladaptive behaviors.

Additionally, students reported how they managed to become more resilient to emotional difficulties and how they recovered after unpleasant events. Art therapy also formed a culture of persistence, problem-solving gradually, and growth attitude, which enabled the participants to deal with adversity more efficiently and transfer these qualities to academic and personal life. The

participants had self-insight and personal realizations through art therapy regarding their emotional patterns, personal strengths and identity.

This reflective practice enhanced self-understanding, self-acceptance, and comprehension of their own emotions, which only made them more emotionally resilient and gave them the strength to confront future issues.

Resilience Theory explains how individuals adapt, recover, and grow when faced with emotional stress, adversity, or challenging life experiences. In relation to the impact of art therapy on students' emotional processing, the theory helps explain how creative expression can strengthen students' ability to cope with emotional difficulties while developing healthier emotional responses and psychological adjustment.

The findings of the study reflect the core principles of resilience theory by showing that students were able to transform emotional struggles into opportunities for self-understanding, emotional release, and personal growth through artistic engagement.

Art therapy served as a protective and supportive mechanism that allowed students to process difficult emotions in a safe and non-threatening manner. Through drawing, painting, journaling, and other creative activities, students were able to externalize emotions that were often difficult to express verbally. This process reduced emotional suppression and enabled students to confront stress, sadness, confusion, and emotional burdens more effectively. The findings also demonstrate that resilience is not simply the absence of emotional struggles, but the ability to recover, reorganize thoughts, and continue functioning despite emotional challenges.

Overall, the relationship between resilience theory and art therapy highlights how creative therapeutic interventions can help students process emotions, develop adaptive coping strategies, strengthen emotional regulation, and build psychological resilience. Through artistic expression, emotional reflection, and supportive social interaction, students were able to transform emotional difficulties into meaningful opportunities for growth, self-discovery, and emotional healing.

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