



## Research Article

# Mental health outcomes of a creative artmaking community-based support group in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era

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### Abstract

This art-based participatory action research study sought to uncover how creative artmaking enhances young people's mental well-being in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. A community-based artmaking support group was founded to help create a brave space for young people to talk about mental health. Twelve artmaking sessions were conducted, one every month from August 2022 to July 2023. A facilitator provided general guidance and structure to the artmaking activities; however, participants had some flexibility and autonomy. Each meeting lasted about three hours. In addition to observations, debriefings were conducted at the conclusion of each session where participants discussed their artwork with peers. Participants also reflected on their cumulative twelve-month experience at the conclusion of the initiative. Findings revealed that the support group provided a safe space for young people to self-distract and vent. It was also a platform for emotion-processing and self-expression. Lastly, artmaking propelled the youth to develop positive self-perspectives.

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## Introduction

In this exploration, we embarked on a multifaceted journey delving into the intricate intersectionality of creative artmaking and youth mental health. Our primary objective was to elucidate the profound impact that engaging in creative artmaking activities can have on the mental well-being of young individuals. By examining this symbiotic relationship, we aimed to uncover novel insights and strategies that can be instrumental in promoting and nurturing mental wellness among youth populations. The insights gleaned from our study, bolstered by an extensive review of existing literature and empirical research, hold immense potential to significantly contribute to ongoing endeavors aimed at enhancing youth mental health within communities. Moreover, our findings may serve as a catalyst for broader discussions and initiatives focused on integrating creative expression into mental health care practices and community-based support systems.

## Youth and Mental Health

Youth have a unique susceptibility to mental health challenges. Epidemiological studies indicate that lifelong depression typically originates in adolescence, with symptoms escalating after age twelve (Bertha, 2013). Rapid hormonal

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fluctuations are a given physiological factor and are often associated with internal emotional stress (Ramirez, 2003). External stressors, including physical self-dissatisfaction (Cruz-Sáez, 2020), interpersonal conflicts (Flynn & Rudolph, 2011), and academic pressure (Quach et al., 2013) are prevalent during this developmental stage and are also linked to increased rates of depression. Oftentimes, youth struggle to express themselves, let alone locate their own feelings, emotions, and struggles. Positive, high-quality relationships with others and a well-established sense of identity have been associated with improved mental health and psychological well-being of youth (Dumas et al., 2009). Conversely, deficits in strong relationships, frequent social comparisons, and an underdeveloped or dissatisfactory sense of identity can result in adverse mental health outcomes (Dumas et al., 2009).

Youth's heightened susceptibility is manifested in a number of startling statistics. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), suicide was the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 10-34 in the United States in 2019. Additionally, the World Health Organization (2021) notes that globally, about 14% of youth aged 10-19 experience untreated mental health disorders. Similar trends were reported by the US National Institute of Mental Health (2020). These statistics underscore the vulnerability of youth; hence, it is essential to consider the interplay of multiple factors when considering initiatives that impact positively on young people's mental health.

### **Effects of COVID-19 on Youth Mental Health**

Calls to address youth mental health gained renewed urgency in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. From the outset, psychologists and scholars were eager to understand how the pandemic's circumstances impacted adolescents, given their inherent vulnerability. Liang et al. (2020) assessed the pandemic's psychological ramifications on 584 Chinese youth a mere two weeks after the onset of COVID-19 in China. The findings unveiled a sobering reality: roughly 40% of the youth were susceptible to psychological issues, with 14% exhibiting symptoms indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder. The absence of self-care surfaced as a prominent concern, disrupting individuals' regular routines and impeding access to activities known to enhance mental well-being, such as physical exercise and social interaction. These disruptions frequently compelled young people to turn to less healthy coping mechanisms.

Research conducted worldwide has revealed several negative impact themes, including social isolation characterized by reduced social interactions, emotional detachment from loved ones, and a prevailing sense of disconnection from the world (Breed, 2022; Howard, 2022). Additionally, interpersonal tensions have escalated due to prolonged periods spent with family or housemates, resulting in conflicts, increased irritability, emotional distance, and strained relationships. Consequently, emotional symptoms such as depression and anxiety have become more prevalent.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, scholars have continued to analyze the pandemic's impact with greater retrospection and perspective. For example, Bell et al. (2023) conducted a study with a cohort of 593 Australian youth, some with confirmed mental health care needs and others without. Findings showed that approximately 48% of the participants met the criteria for depression, while 51% did so for anxiety. Participants uniformly perceived the impact of COVID-19 as overwhelmingly having far-reaching negative impact across multiple domains, spanning from work, education, personal life, and mental well-being. Moreover, youth receiving care from primary mental health services reported markedly higher levels of loneliness, with those self-reporting mental health conditions experiencing even more profound loneliness.

### **Creative Artmaking and Its Effects on Mental Health**

While an examination of the prevalence of mental health challenges among youth offers crucial insights, it is even more important to explore avenues that can help alleviate the challenges. Creative artmaking has long been acknowledged as a valuable adjunct treatment of mental health. Grounded in the belief that artistic expression can support recovery journeys and foster a sense of well-being, artmaking encourages youth to share their emotions, viewpoints, and experiences (Apoorva et al., 2022). Youth are often drawn to this form of communication due to its use of symbols and imagery, which can be more comfortable than verbal communication (Howard, 2022). Community-based creative artmaking, in particular, holds significant potential for enhancing mental well-being as it offers opportunities to connect with one another (Hannox, 2022). A previous study by Easwaran et al. (2021), who used a multi-modal art program with a group of 18 youth showed that arts-based initiatives had predominantly positive effects on mental health and

significantly reduced depression and anxiety symptoms. It can, thus, be concluded from these studies that art serves as a liberating form of expression, devoid of societal expectations and pressures.

Despite the extensive research highlighting the susceptibility of youth to mental health challenges, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a noticeable gap in understanding the potential of creative artmaking as an effective program to alleviate these challenges. While existing literature has emphasized the negative impacts and elevated rates of depression and anxiety among youth, there is limited exploration of the positive effects of community-based creative artmaking initiatives on their mental well-being. The current research aims to bridge this gap by delving into the intersection of creative artmaking and youth mental health, examining how artistic expression can serve as a potential avenue for emotional expression, connection, and improved mental health outcomes.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to uncover how creative artmaking enhances the mental well-being of young people who subscribed to a community-based mental health support group. Specifically, we sought to answer the following research questions:

- What are the mental health challenges of youth in this community-based mental health support group?
- How does creative artmaking mitigate the mental health challenges in this community-based mental health support group?
- How does creative artmaking enhance the mental well-being in this community-based mental health support group?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

We employed a qualitative Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) design, which is an extension of Participatory Action Research (PAR). According to Lind (2008), PAR is a transformative qualitative framework aimed at fostering change, benefiting both the participants and wider society. YPAR positions youth as legitimate experts in their own experiences and as agentic decision makers in social transformation on issues that matter to them. YPAR is valuable and emancipatory in that it empowers youth to critically analyze, reflect, co-construct meaning, and identify actionable solutions to their own existing problems. Additionally, YPAR is valuable and emancipatory, as it enables youth to develop coping skills and opportunities for empowerment (Lind, 2008).

We combined YPAR with Art-based Research (ABR) design to create a more comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach and obtain more nuanced perspectives. Nathan et al. (2023) regards ABR as an invaluable approach in the realm of youth mental health research. One advantage of ABR lies in its capacity to provide a non-verbal avenue for self-expression, allowing youth to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and struggles in a manner that may be more comfortable and less intimidating than traditional forms of research. The process fosters a sense of agency and control over one's narrative, thus, empowering youth in their exploration and articulation of mental health issues (Nathan, 2023). Not surprisingly, ABR has, in recent years, received increasing attention in health and social sciences because of its potential to elicit deeper and richer insights from participants. Nonetheless, ABR is not without its challenges. One limitation is its resource-intensiveness. This presents logistical and financial obstacles, which can potentially limit the scalability of the research initiative).

### **The Researchers**

Embracing a participatory approach, qualitative researchers play an integral role in the research process, moving beyond the confines of objective observers. This underscores the significance of openly acknowledging researcher's positionality (Bott, 2010). The first author for this study is a high school student and founder of the community-based mental health support group. The impetus for establishing the youth support group stemmed from her personal struggles with mental health, transforming her investment into both a driving force and a wellspring of empathy. Sharing her mental health story shattered stigmas and fostered an environment where participants felt at ease to share their narratives. The established trust and reciprocity served as a bridge, playing a pivotal role in creating a safe space for open dialogue. The

peer status of the first author also facilitated an immediate and genuine connection between the researcher and the participants, overcoming typical barriers associated with adult-led research.

Involving young people as researchers challenges conventional research norms by underscoring the importance of the dynamic interplay between the researcher's identity and the research context. Moreover, it elevates young participants from passive roles to active contributors and co-researchers, emphasizing their agency in shaping the research agenda (Kellet, 2011). This enriches research processes with authentic and nuanced insights that may be inaccessible when using traditional research methods.

The second author is an academic with experience in conducting qualitative research. She provided research-focused guidance throughout what would otherwise be a naturally progressing creative artmaking mental health support group. The second author attended some but not all the artmaking sessions as a participant observer. The synergy between a peer and an academic promoted a balanced research perspective. While the academic brought research expertise, the peer ensured that the research remained grounded in the practical realities of youth mental health. This collaborative approach mitigated potential biases and ensured that the research was both academically rigorous and resonant with the lived experiences of the target population.

Indisputably, our positionality would potentially pose some bias, especially given that the first author was the founder of the support group. Reflexivity helps researchers to be attentive to and conscious of own biases (Peddle, 2022). That said, we adopted a phenomenological approach, which recommends bracketing of pre-conceptions (Neubauer et al., 2019). We made deliberate efforts to engage in ongoing self-reflection, actively acknowledging our blind spots, and consciously bracketing our own perceptions, beliefs, and expectations. Our goal was to maintain a high level of openness to the stories and perspectives shared by the participants.

### **Participants and Setting**

The community-based youth support group initiative was part of a larger mental health community network in the county. We obtained permission from the leaders and from individual participants to utilize the artmaking sessions for research purposes. Participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential, and data collected were anonymized to protect privacy. Recruitment of the youth participants was conducted through distribution of flyers on the youth mental health support group's website and on social media platforms. To mitigate barriers to participation, we provided complimentary food during all artmaking sessions. Between ten and twenty youth of ages 12-17 showed up for each session. Some attended constantly, others intermittently. Accompanying adults sometimes participated in the artmaking activities, however, their data were excluded because the study was delimited to youth. All participants were minority youth of color, which represented the predominant ethnicity in the neighborhood.

### **Creative Artmaking Sessions**

We secured space at a local business center for our group meetings, which could comfortably accommodate up to 40 people. We provided all necessary materials for the sessions, including paint, wooden easels, boards, canvas, masks, and cleaning supplies. Over the course of twelve sessions, held on the third Saturday of every month from August 2022 to July 2023, the facilitator, who is also the first author, provided guidance and structure for certain activities. However, participants had the freedom to express themselves through their artwork within a flexible and autonomous framework. Each meeting spanned approximately three hours, allowing ample time for participants to create, process, and reflect on their artwork while engaging with one another. At the end of each session, we conducted debriefing sessions where participants discussed their artwork with the rest of the group. These discussions were often guided by prompts, and all debriefings were recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Table 1 outlines some of the structured activities along with corresponding prompts used during the post-session debriefings.

**Table 1.** Artmaking activities guidelines and end-of-session debriefings prompts

| Artwork Creation Guide  | After-session Debriefing Questions   |
|---|--|
| Make any artwork of your choice   | What did you make? How does it relate to you? Which aspects of your artwork are you most satisfied with? Which ones would you do differently next time?                                    |
| Make an artwork that represents a significant life experience   | What does your artwork have to tell? What were your thought process when making your artwork?  |
| Decorate the outside of the mask to represent how you think the outside world sees you. Decorate the inside of the mask to represent how you see yourself | What does the inside and the outside have to tell? How similar and different are they? How do they relate with each other? What have you learned about yourself through this mask project? |
| Paint an image that represents your envisioned self in 5 years  | Tell us more about the artwork   |
| Draw an image that you would consider a safe space  | Tell us more about the artwork   |

**Data Collection Procedures and Analyses**

While numerous images were produced throughout the initiative, we refrained from interpreting participants' artwork to avoid imposing our own perspectives onto their artwork. Moreover, analyzing visual data poses significant complexities beyond the expertise of many researchers (Wilson, 2015). Therefore, we opted for a collaborative approach where participants discussed their own artwork during end-of-session debriefings. Our primary data, therefore, consisted of transcriptions from these reflective debriefings. Subsequently, additional data were gathered upon the completion of the entire project, with participants reflecting on their twelve-month journey. We also collected data through purposeful observation of participants during the creative artmaking sessions. While the first author participated in and observed all twelve sessions, the second author observed and participated in four sessions. Both authors maintained reflexive journals, documenting personal thoughts, insights, and potential interpretations of the proceedings. Ultimately, triangulating data collection methods served to augment the richness of our data and, consequently, strengthened the corroboration of our findings.

We employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze data collected from all three sources. IPA entails an ongoing exploration of connections within and between themes, with the goal of revealing overarching patterns. The culmination of this process involves crafting a narrative that encapsulated the essence of participants' experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Maintaining reflexivity was paramount throughout this endeavor, necessitating awareness and mitigation of our own biases in interpreting the data. That said, we retained specific phrases to honor the authenticity of participants' experiences, thereby allowing themes to emerge from the comprehensive dataset.

**Results and Discussion**

Three overarching themes emerged from our data analysis showing that the artmaking initiative provided a platform for fostering a sense of community, promoted self-awareness and communication, as well as enhancement of positive self-perspectives. Table 2 summarizes the identified overarching themes and the corresponding subthemes.

**Table 2.** Overarching themes and corresponding subthemes

| Overarching Themes                  | Corresponding Subthemes                                  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Sense of community                  | Full engagement  |
|                                     | Sense of connectedness and belonging                     |
|                                     | A safe space and a positive distraction                  |
|                                     | Peer support and camaraderie                             |
| Self-awareness and communication    | Personal exploration, self-discovery, and self-awareness |
|                                     | Emotional outlet, self-expression, and communication     |
| Positive self-perspectives and hope | Sense of confidence and self-worth                       |
|                                     | Sense of purpose and productivity                        |
|                                     | Sense of control and hope                                |

## Theme 1: Sense of Community

One prominent overarching theme that emerged from the data was the profound development of a sense of community among participants. This was vividly illustrated by what we observed as wholehearted engagement in the activities, deep sense of connectedness, and peer support and camaraderie that blossomed throughout the sessions.

### Subtheme 1: Full Engagement

According to our observations, participants consistently demonstrated a keen interest in both the youth support group and the diverse range of art-making activities offered. Attendance was consistently robust, with between ten and twenty participants attending each session. Moreover, participants eagerly engaged in observing and discussing each other's artwork, demonstrating a curiosity about the meanings and interpretations attributed to them.

### Subtheme 2: A Safe Space and a Positive Distraction

The majority of young individuals in the support group disclosed experiencing various mental health challenges, such as depression, anxiety, heightened fear and uncertainty, feelings of rejection, and social isolation. Particularly impactful individual experiences emerged during a session when a seventeen-year-old female participant shared her profound struggles:

*I definitely wasn't in the best place. My parents were in the middle of a divorce, I felt anxious and on edge every day. My grades went down the drain, 'cause I was battling depression. I lost most of my friends, 'cause I wasn't that cheerful person anymore.*

Previous research concurs with findings disclosed in this study, highlighting a high prevalence of mental health challenges among youth (Breed, 2022; Howard, 2022), which can have profound cognitive and affective impact. According to Bell et al. (2020), mental health challenges can lead to a significant decrease in one's self-esteem and self-worth, poor academic performance, as well as stigmatization and discrimination.

In the backdrop of the mental health challenges shared and the subsequent consequences unearthed in the literature, it was noteworthy that some participants perceived the support group as a 'safe space' where they felt accepted and unjudged when talking about their mental health. The opportunity, a first of its own kind for most participants, helped them overcome feelings of being 'out of place,' as can be depicted from this excerpt:

*I always tried to keep the craziness hidden. I just didn't feel like reaching out to anyone. It felt like my best bet was just making it through each day, and even that was a struggle. Those pieces of canvas, they were like an imaginary somebody, a psychologist or even someone you have, whom I could tell, without thinking about anything. That's what I liked the most much about this (male participant, age 17).*

Helm (2013) defines a 'safe space' as a specific place, whether physical or virtual, where individuals feel comfortable, respected, and free to express themselves openly, share their thoughts and experiences, and engage in dialogue without fear of judgment or reprisal. Prior research has shown how perceived safe spaces foster increased communication, self-expression, full engagement, and reduction of feelings of isolation and stigma (Becker et al. 2022). On the contrary, spaces perceived as unsafe are inhibitory.

The artmaking initiative was also a valuable mitigatory and positive distraction from ongoing mental health issues and personal daily struggles. This is what one fourteen-year-old male participant said:

*Obviously, with all the crazy stuff going on, everything around seems so crazy. So, when you come here, get some food, grab some paints, talk to some friends, and start [painting], it takes you away from, I mean, it gets you into another world, yes. [When] you come back to your issues, you realize it wasn't actually much big of a deal, yeah.*

Research has found distraction to be positive and effective multidimensional coping mechanism for managing negative thoughts and emotions (Gómez-Restrepo et al. 2022). As Carlos Gómez-Restrepo attests, distraction encompasses multiple psychological aspects ranging from having a more active mind, momentarily 'getting away from reality,' and/or

‘feeling in another world.’ Research has also shown how community-based support groups can pose as a positive distraction that helps keep youth busy and away from criminal activities and drug use (Obuaku-Igwe 2020).

### ***Subtheme 3: Sense of Connectedness and Belonging***

The significance of the artmaking sessions became apparent in nurturing a sense of connection and inclusion, which held particular significance for the youth experiencing isolation and feelings of rejection. Through our observations, it was evident that the youth engaged in laughter, humor, and smiles, especially during the debriefing sessions. This sense of connection and belonging was further reinforced by the sentiments expressed by a sixteen-year-old female participant at the end of the program:

*This was really a great community. There were lots of familiar faces that you would see every month that you would bond with, and then there are also a lot of new faces too you'd meet and get to know. The common thread though was that everyone wanted to just have fun, and maybe learn something from others. We all had our own stories, and we all cared about listening to each other's stories.*

Artmaking has long been recognized as a means of fostering connections among individuals, groups, and communities. In the study by Silverman et al. (2013), individuals from diverse backgrounds came together to create artwork that reflected their unique yet shared experiences with suicide. Through collaborative artmaking, they found the confidence to initiate discussions about the sensitive topic of suicide. Likewise, participants in this research emphasized the development of new connections and heightened social interaction. Many underscored the importance of discovering a supportive community where they felt understood and accepted by peers who shared similar backgrounds and empathized with their challenges. This aspect was particularly significant as the support group exclusively comprised adolescents from racial minority groups, rendering it a uniquely valuable environment for nurturing feelings of connection and belonging.

### ***Subtheme 4: Peer Support and Camaraderie***

As mentioned previously, participants disclosed a range of mental health issues they had faced. The substantial peer support demonstrated during the artmaking sessions proved to be a mitigating factor. For instance, there was a moment when a participant grappling with feelings of rejection became emotional during the debriefings. The outpouring of support she received from her peers was truly heartening. The camaraderie among the youth was further affirmed both during the debriefings and in the concluding reflections at the end of the program. Here is a reflection shared by a twelve-year-old female participant:

*“Listening to people's stories and the stuff they've been through, seeing them put in the effort to make things better was kind of contagious. I felt like, I was not alone in this journey.”*

The peer support witnessed in this initiative was to be expected given the pronounced similarities in the mental health struggles shared by the participants. Through their shared experiences, the youth had forged a strong bond, enabling them to extend a distinct form of support to one another as they empathized with and understood each other's struggles and emotions. As Obuaku-Igwe (2020) argues, validating peers' feelings and challenges positively diminishes feelings of self-stigma. Furthermore, peers who had effectively dealt with mental health challenges served as role models, inspiring others through the sharing of their stories.

## **Theme 2: Self-awareness and Communication**

The second major theme identified in this study revolved around the augmentation of self-awareness and communication skills. Self-awareness forms the bedrock of effective and meaningful communication, as highlighted by Obuaku-Igwe (2020). Through artmaking, many of the youth engaged in personal exploration and self-discovery, thereby facilitating self-expression and improved communication abilities.

### ***Subtheme 1: Personal Exploration, Self-discovery, and Self-awareness***

Some of the artmaking activities were a powerful tool for reminiscing. Reminiscence involves recalling and reflecting on past experiences, memories, and life events. For example, in one session, the facilitator asked participants to make an

artwork that portrayed a significant life experience. This activity triggered this twelve-year-old male participant to reminisce:

*I made a portrait about the day we left our apartment to move in with my mother's boyfriend, I think I was, maybe seven? Or eight, I think. And my younger sister. My mom had lost her job, and I didn't like him, I mean her boyfriend. It felt like my whole life got flipped upside down. The memory of it still hits me hard. It was pretty intense.*

The act of reminiscence, particularly when combined with artmaking, can yield both positive and negative outcomes, contingent upon the circumstances and the nature of the memories being recalled. Positive reminiscence has the capacity to uplift mood, foster the acknowledgment of strengths, and consequently, promote overall well-being (Hallford, 2019). Conversely, negative reminiscence, as observed in this instance, while it may have the potential to evoke or worsen mental health challenges, can also serve as a means to delve into the origins of such struggles and, in turn, facilitate the development of coping mechanisms (Marshall & Reese, 2022).

Engaging in creative artmaking stimulated intuition and spontaneity among participants, enabling them to tap into subconscious thoughts and emotions they were not consciously aware of. This phenomenon became particularly pronounced when the youth were given the freedom to create artwork of their choosing without any specific guidance:

*I just dived in, no plan in mind, not even sure. It almost always ends up being related to something that's been going on in my life. Yeah, you don't always have to be extra imaginative, you can just draw or paint, that's what I usually do (male participant, age 13).*

Artmaking serves as a pathway to self-discovery, as highlighted by Jones et al. (2017). The example provided illustrates how the youth inadvertently delved into his inner world, uncovering unexpected insights about himself. This aligns with the perspective of Knill et al. (2005), who suggest that engaging in art stimulates imaginative thinking, leading to the expression of emotions and self-discovery. The end-of-session debriefings, where participants engaged in dialogues with their own artwork facilitated further exploration of their inner selves. Ultimately, this process of personal exploration and self-discovery contributed to heightened self-awareness, which, as emphasized by Corin (2023), is a crucial component of mental well-being.

### ***Subtheme 2: Emotional Outlet and Self-expression***

Several participants found that engaging in creative artmaking offered them a means to express and release their worries, fears, struggles, traumas, frustrations, adverse experiences, and negative thoughts. Artmaking served as a cathartic outlet, allowing them to unload stress and tension, as observed in numerous debriefing sessions. For instance, a fifteen-year-old female participant articulated her experience:

*I am a very quiet person, sometimes [I get into] a lot of trouble. But then, from that, you can vent on a piece of canvas. So, this has helped me a lot with that, you know what I mean? To vent. I mean, it's my life, the way I feel and make sense of it all, on a canvas, you've just got to let your mind paint.*

Gómez-Restrepo et al. (2022) emphasize that engaging in artmaking can serve as a therapeutic outlet for expressing negative emotions, particularly when verbal expression proves challenging. While venting may offer temporary relief, research indicates that it can be a beneficial coping mechanism for managing stress and emotional distress. This is especially crucial for youth who feel marginalized and constrained by their own mental health challenges and societal stigma (Smolarski, 2015). Venting suggests that these youth were able to identify and address their stressors, a crucial initial step in seeking solutions, as highlighted by Gómez-Restrepo et al. (2022).

It's worth noting that some youth did not just vent; they also exhibited signs of emotional regulation and management through artmaking. This was evident when a thirteen-year-old male participant explained what appeared to be an incomprehensible piece of artwork to most of us:



*At first, I wanted to paint things as dark as I sometimes feel. Like, I feel angry with myself, sometimes sad, then that's how I react. At that moment, I start painting, a few minutes. After that moment, ...I don't know how to explain this... as if I've let go the tension, taken off the pressure, you know what I mean?*

The interpretation given to the painting not only conveyed the participant's negative emotional state but also reflected the process of reconstructing and transforming the situation. Studies have highlighted artmaking as a valuable tool for coping with negatively perceived emotions like stress, anxiety, depression, and sadness (Gómez-Restrepo et al., 2022). Managing these emotions can take various forms, including transforming them, venting them, expressing them, or distracting oneself, as previously discussed.

Consistent with previous research findings, artmaking offered a non-verbal visual platform for not only venting but also for self-expression. This insight comes from a thirteen-year-old male participant:

*Yeah, I mean you've just got to let your mind paint freely. Just paint. The first image that comes to mind, that's your true thought, how you truly feel even if the exact words don't come to mind.*

The artmaking initiative offered youth a chance to express their inner world using color, texture, form, and composition. Creative artmaking prioritizes non-verbal communication, fostering a connection that relies less on words (Hartley, 2023). This approach allows for varied interpretations and connections, making it a nuanced form of communication.

### **Theme 3: Positive Self-perspectives and Hope**

The last overarching theme that emerged in this study was the cultivation of positive self-perspectives and hope among participants. These positive self-perspectives encompassed individuals' perceptions of themselves, their capabilities, and their potential for growth and resilience. Furthermore, the presence of hope fostered a sense of optimism, belief in future possibilities, and an outlook that transcended current challenges.

#### **Subtheme 1: Sense of Confidence and Productivity**

The artmaking initiative served as a platform for certain youth to push their boundaries and explore unfamiliar territory. For these individuals, completing their artworks symbolized a profound sense of achievement and creativity, instilling in them a deep sense of pride and satisfaction:

*I think my favorite, in this whole thing, is how everyone would hype up your pieces. Like, maybe you thought it didn't look that great or wasn't what you were going for, but everyone is like 'hey, look at that, wow, nice' (female participant, age 18).*

*There's something weirdly so fun about being able to put your all in this. Take some energy and put it on the canvas, huh? In front of you. Yeah 'cause like you obviously feel proud, doing like this one. It's like prove to yourself that you can do it (male participant, age 16).*

As illustrated by the excerpts above, participants clearly experienced a profound sense of accomplishment as they actively contributed at both personal and community levels through their deep engagement and involvement. Witnessing their own skills in artmaking flourish, participants gained confidence, a factor that, as highlighted by Johnson et al. (2022), significantly boosts self-esteem.

#### **Subtheme 2: Sense of Control and Hope**

The artmaking initiative cultivated a heightened sense of hope by offering participants a reason to "get out of bed," a sentiment far more uplifting than experiencing a lack of motivation and having little to anticipate:

*It's definitely something I really looked forward to. It's nice having something that gets me excited for the weekend and to see certain people. There's not much else I'd get out of bed early for, but there is definitely something to look forward to (male participant, age 17).*

Participants not only demonstrated short-term hope by anticipating something in the present, but they also projected future-oriented hope through the artworks they created. For instance, during one activity, the facilitator instructed the

youth to create an image depicting their envisioned selves five years from now. One seventeen-year-old female participant expressed her thoughts with sincerity and optimism evident on her face:

*I drew a picture of my mom with me at my graduation, I don't mean high school. College graduation. I want to hand over my graduation cap and gown to my mom. She never had the chance to go to college herself, but she is always like 'I want you to go to college.' She says that every day.*

The image and its associated meaning encapsulated the youths' dreams, aspirations, and visions for a brighter future. It represented a pure expression of hope, optimism, and positivity, serving as a tangible symbol of attainable goals. As Brockes (2019) suggests, this futuristic hope can be infectious, spreading from one youth to another. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that artmaking enhances levels of empowerment among youth by bolstering feelings of control over their lives and fostering strategic thinking (Gentle, Linsley, & Hurley, 2020).

### Reflections and Challenges

Upon reflecting on the yearlong initiative, several noteworthy hurdles and limitations emerged. The initiative demanded considerable intensity, requiring meticulous planning and facilitation to ensure that the artmaking activities remained meaningful and engaging for the youth involved. Additionally, funding presented a significant challenge, as the initiative relied primarily on self-funding. However, this challenge was somewhat alleviated when the broader mental health network in the county assisted with rental fees for the meeting space. Despite the challenges and intensity, the initiative proved to be not only visibly beneficial to the participants but also emancipatory for the youth founder and first author. Like her peers, she also required a safe space to process and express her mental health struggles.

Another significant challenge that emerged as we delved into the art-making sessions: the profound nature of the mental health issues disclosed by participants. Recognizing the gravity of this issue, I proactively collaborated with leaders from the wider mental health community within the county. Through collective efforts, we established a framework for volunteer counseling services to provide one-on-one meetings with counselors, offering individualized assistance and guidance to those in need. This collaborative approach ensured that participants received the necessary support to navigate their mental health challenges effectively.

### Conclusion

In addressing the mental health challenges faced by youth within the community-based mental health support group, it is evident that creative artmaking serves as a powerful and multifaceted tool for mitigation and enhancement of mental well-being. Identified challenges, including a lack of connectedness, struggles with self-expression, and a need for positive outlets, found meaningful resolution through the overarching themes that emerged from the creative artmaking process. This study, therefore, underscores the transformative potential of creative artmaking as an empowering invitation for youth grappling with mental health challenges in a community setting. The partnership between a peer and an academic fostered a holistic research perspective. Amalgamating the academic's expertise in research methods and data analysis, along with the peer's dedication to practical aspects of youth mental health, ensured that the research maintained both academic rigor and relevance to the lived experiences of the target population.

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