
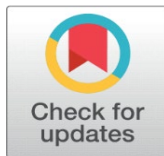


# EXPLORING THE ROLE OF VISUAL ART IN COPING WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Psychological stress among undergraduate students is a growing global mental health concern that negatively affects emotional well-being, academic performance, and quality of life. Recently, visual arts have been recognized as a potential coping strategy that supports emotional expression, psychological relief, and resilience. The research design used was a qualitative phenomenological research design. The study was carried out in a higher education institute in Chennai, India. A purposive sampling method was employed to identify 15 undergraduate students who frequently used drawing, painting, sketching, and/or digital illustration as a coping strategy for stress. In-depth interviews were used as a qualitative data collection technique, and Colaizzi's phenomenological method was employed to analyse the data. The trustworthiness was assured by applying the criteria of Lincoln and Guba. Fifteen undergraduate students aged 18–24 years participated in the study. The participants were chosen based on their experiences of psychological stress and involvement in emotional coping through visual art practices. Data collection consisted of individual, in-depth interviews that were 40-60 minutes long. Interviews were recorded, with consent, with field notes taken to assist in capturing non-verbal communications as well as contextual information. Colaizzi's phenomenological analysis method was employed to identify significant statements, build meanings, cluster themes and create an exhaustive description of the phenomenon to uncover the essential structure of lived experience. The seven main themes are: (1) visual art as expression of feeling, (2) psychological relief through art, (3) creativity and self, discovery, (4) emotional regulation through art, (5) resilience and hope through art, (6) social connectedness through art, and (7) visual art as mindfulness and healing. Participants valued visual art as a viable coping mechanism that helped them to express their emotions, gain insight into themselves, reduce stress and build psychological strength.

**Keywords:** Psychological Stress, Undergraduate Students, Academic Pressure, Visual Arts, Coping Mechanism, Emotional Expression, Resilience, Mental Health



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The mental health problem of psychological stress among undergraduate students has become a major concern worldwide with a significant impact on the emotional state, academic performance and interpersonal relationship and quality of life (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Higher education is a new phase in life, and students are likely to face many stressors at college, such as academic workload, financial concerns, career concerns, peer pressure, and social adaptation stress (Malik & Javed, 2021). Recent studies indicate that there has been a significant rise in psychological distress in university students after the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in anxiety, depression, emotional exhaustion and diminished coping skills (Fancourt & Finn, 2022).

Young adulthood is a stage of development that involves identity exploration, emotional instability, and an increased level of psychosocial vulnerabilities. When it comes to balancing demands of the University with personal and social obligations, undergraduate students often find themselves under emotional pressure and experiencing psychological fatigue (Stuckey & Nobel, 2021). Chronic psychological stress has a negative impact on cognition, focus, motivation, sleep, and school involvement. Thus, there is a growing awareness around the world that holistic mental health interventions are critical for university settings.

Non-pharmacological and creative coping strategies are in the spotlight in recent years due to their accessibility, therapeutic properties and their potential to enhance emotional coping (de Witte et al., 2021). In these methods, one of the most powerful ways to express emotions, reflect as an individual and to reduce stress is visual art. Visual art: activities include painting, sketching, drawing, doodling, mandala creation, digital illustration, which allow symbolic expression of thoughts and emotions. Artistic engagement allows people to detach their internal emotional experiences from themselves that otherwise might not get expressed (Potash et al., 2020).

There are some theories that support the therapeutic value of visual art. There are several theories that support the therapeutic value of visual art. This humanistic theory is that the focus on creativity is a route to achieve self actualization, personal growth and emotion satisfaction. Expressive arts theory proposes that the act of creating art may be used to help people express their emotions to understand their personal experiences symbolically, thereby promoting psychological healing and emotional catharsis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Likewise, mindful approaches suggest that immersing oneself in an artful activity fosters awareness in the present moment and reduces stress-related thinking. In addition, phenomenological approaches have highlighted the significance of subjective lived experiences and the sense given to the emotional coping processes.

Positive relationships have been shown between artistic involvement and psychological health in young adults in the recent published literature. Research has shown that participation in visual art has a positive impact on emotional regulation, stress reduction, improved mood, self-esteem and resilience development (Stuckey & Nobel 2021; Fancourt & Finn, 2022). Anxiety symptom reduction and increased emotional connectedness in University students have also been linked to art-based interventions (de Witte et al., 2021). In addition to this, creative expression has been linked to a psychologically restorative process which helps with coping during emotionally stressful experiences (Potash et al., 2020).

Although the advantages of artistic involvement are growing, the vast body of research so far has concentrated mainly on quantitative results and organized art therapy procedures. Some qualitative research has investigated the experiences of undergraduates' psychological coping through visual art, but very few studies have done this in the natural context of students' lives. Lack of knowledge about the student's perception, experience and meaning making of artistic practice in students' lives.

These lived experiences need to be understood for culturally-relevant and psychologically affirming interventions to be developed within higher education institutions. The capacity to learn about the role of visual art in emotional healing, emotional resilience and self discovery, may give insights into mental health promotion strategies to students.

For this reason, the present study sought to investigate the coping related to psychological stress of undergraduate students using a phenomenological approach through the use of the visual art. The study is relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-being), mental health awareness and emotional resilience, and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), psychologically healthy educational environments.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

### **2.1. RESEARCH APPROACH AND DESIGN**

The study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of undergraduate students who engaged in visual art activities to cope with psychological stress. Phenomenology was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand the essence and meaning of participants' subjective experiences related to emotional coping through artistic expression. The design enabled an in-depth exploration of personal narratives, emotional interpretations, and meaning-making processes associated with visual art practices.

## **2.2. STUDY SETTING**

The study was conducted in a selected higher educational institution in Chennai, India. The setting included undergraduate students from diverse academic disciplines who voluntarily engaged in visual art activities during periods of stress.

## **2.3. PARTICIPANTS AND INCLUSION CRITERIA**

Participants included undergraduate students aged between 18 and 24 years who reported experiencing psychological stress and regularly engaged in visual art forms such as painting, drawing, sketching, mandala art, doodling, or digital illustration as a coping strategy. Students willing to share their lived experiences and provide informed consent were included in the study.

Students diagnosed with severe psychiatric disorders or those unable to participate in in-depth interviews were excluded.

## **2.4. SAMPLING TECHNIQUE AND SAMPLE SIZE**

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants who possessed rich experiential knowledge relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. A total of 15 undergraduate students participated in the study. Sample size was determined based on data saturation, which occurred when no new themes or meaningful insights emerged during interviews.

## **2.5. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee prior to data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose, procedures, confidentiality, voluntary nature, and potential benefits of the study. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by using pseudonyms during transcription and reporting.

## **3. DATA COLLECTION**

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted in a private and comfortable environment. An interview guide was developed based on literature review and expert consultation. Questions focused on participants' experiences of stress, artistic engagement, emotional expression, and perceived psychological changes associated with visual art.

Sample interview questions included:

- "Can you describe how visual art helps you during stressful situations?"
- "What emotions do you experience while creating art?"
- "How has art influenced your understanding of yourself?"

Interviews lasted approximately 40–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with participant permission. Field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual observations were also maintained.

### **1) Pilot Testing**

A pilot interview was conducted with two students to assess clarity, relevance, and flow of interview questions. Minor modifications were made to improve question sequencing and comprehensibility.

### **2) Data Recording and Transcription**

All interviews were transcribed verbatim immediately after data collection. Transcripts were carefully reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and immersion within participants' narratives.

### **3) Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was ensured using Lincoln and Guba's framework.

#### **4) Credibility**

Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement, member checking, and triangulation of interview data with field notes.

#### **5) Dependability**

An audit trail documenting methodological decisions, coding procedures, and analytical reflections was maintained to ensure consistency.

#### **6) Confirmability**

Researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing minimized personal bias during interpretation.

#### **7) Transferability**

Thick descriptions of participants, context, and findings enabled readers to assess applicability to similar educational settings.

### **4. DATA ANALYSIS**

Data were analyzed in the following manner: Colaizzi's phenomenological method was used to explore the essence of undergraduates' lived experiences of visual art in coping with psychological stress. This systematic approach guaranteed objective interpretation while maintaining the subjective interpretation of the participants.

Seven steps were used to analyze the data structured. All the interview transcripts were read several times initially, to gain a comprehensive understanding of the data. The immersion enabled the researcher to get acquainted with the stories and feelings of the participants concerning visual art engagement.

Second, all of the relevant statements to the phenomenon were extracted from the transcripts. These were statements of emotional release, stress reduction, creativity and psychological change in the doing of art.

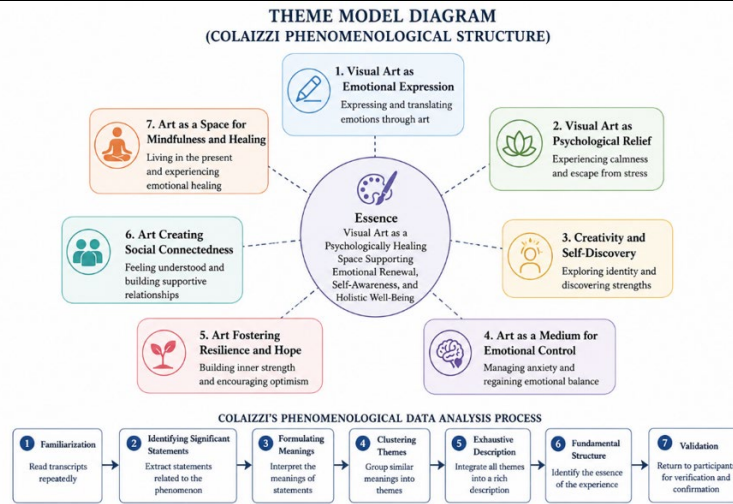
Third, for every major statement formulated meanings were obtained. The meanings were carefully interpreted to preserve the original lived experiences of the participants and their context and intent. The researcher's attention was directed towards identifying the underlying psychological and emotional meanings contained within the engagement of art.

Fourthly, the formulated meanings were grouped as themed clusters. Short phrases that shared the same content were summarised and formed into thematic structures based on shared experiential pattern among participants. In this stage, they found major themes of emotional expression, psychological relief, creativity, resilience and social connectedness. Joshi and Kaslikar (2026)

Fifth, all thematic clusters were woven into a comprehensive description of the phenomenon, which is a rich narrative account. This description shared the comprehensive nature of visual art as a coping tool for psychological stress in an undergrad level student group.

Sixthly, the fundamental structure of the phenomenon was identified by summarizing the extensive description in an essential statement. This was the essence of the lived experience indicating that visual arts were an integral part of coping and a healing mechanism that was instrumental in releasing emotions, giving meaning to them, and balancing the psychological state.

Finally, member checking was used to validate the findings, as in the seventh step. Synthetic descriptions were read to participants and it was found that their interpretation of them was accurate for their lived experiences. The Colaizzi was used in this study to ensure credibility, depth and phenomenological integrity in the study of the essence of the visual art coping strategy among undergraduate students with this rigorous framework. Fig 1 shows the theme model diagram using Colaizzi method.



## 5. RESULTS

Seven major themes and related subthemes emerged from the phenomenological analysis, reflecting the lived experiences of undergraduate students who used visual art to cope with psychological stress.

### Theme 1: Visual Art as Emotional Expression

#### Subtheme 1.1: Releasing Suppressed Emotions

Participants described visual art as a safe medium for expressing emotions that were difficult to communicate verbally. Painting and sketching enabled emotional catharsis and reduced internal emotional burden.

“When I draw, I feel like my emotions come out through the pencil instead of staying trapped inside me.” (Participant 3)

#### Subtheme 1.2: Translating Feelings into Symbols

Students often represented emotions through colors, patterns, and abstract imagery.

“Dark colors usually show my stress, while brighter colors reflect hope and peace.” (Participant 8)

Participants experienced artistic symbolism as a meaningful process of emotional communication and self-understanding.

### Theme 2: Visual Art as Psychological Relief

#### Subtheme 2.1: Experiencing Calmness and Relaxation

Participants consistently described feelings of calmness during artistic engagement.

“Painting slows down my thoughts and makes me feel mentally relaxed.” (Participant 5)

#### Subtheme 2.2: Temporary Escape from Stress

Art provided a psychological escape from academic and personal pressures.

“While drawing, I forget deadlines and worries for some time.” (Participant 11)

The immersive nature of artistic activity promoted mindfulness and emotional restoration.

### Theme 3: Creativity and Self-Discovery

#### Subtheme 3.1: Understanding Personal Identity

Participants described visual art as a journey of self-exploration and identity formation.

“Art helped me understand who I really am and what I feel deeply.” (Participant 1)

#### Subtheme 3.2: Discovering Hidden Strengths

Creative engagement increased confidence and self-worth.

“Completing artwork gives me confidence that I can handle difficult situations.” (Participant 6)

Artistic expression facilitated meaning-making and personal growth.

#### **Theme 4: Art as a Medium for Emotional Control**

##### **Subtheme 4.1: Managing Anxiety and Overthinking**

Participants explained that art helped reduce intrusive thoughts and emotional instability.

“Whenever I overthink, drawing helps organize my mind.” (Participant 10)

##### **Subtheme 4.2: Regaining Emotional Balance**

Students perceived artistic engagement as restoring emotional control during stressful experiences.

“Art makes me feel emotionally balanced again.” (Participant 4)

Visual art was therefore experienced as an adaptive emotional regulation strategy.

#### **Theme 5: Art Fostering Resilience and Hope**

##### **Subtheme 5.1: Building Inner Strength**

Participants described art as helping them endure emotional challenges.

“Art reminds me that stressful moments are temporary.” (Participant 7)

##### **Subtheme 5.2: Encouraging Positive Thinking**

Creative activities promoted optimism and emotional resilience.

“After painting, I usually feel lighter and more hopeful.” (Participant 12)

Artistic practices strengthened participants’ coping capacity during adversity.

#### **Theme 6: Art Creating Social Connectedness**

##### **Subtheme 6.1: Feeling Understood by Others**

Sharing artwork generated feelings of acceptance and validation.

“When people appreciate my art, I feel emotionally understood.” (Participant 14)

##### **Subtheme 6.2: Developing Supportive Relationships**

Participants described art communities and peer interactions as sources of emotional support.

“Art clubs helped me connect with people who feel similar stress.” (Participant 9)

Visual art fostered interpersonal connectedness and reduced feelings of isolation.

#### **Theme 7: Art as a Space for Mindfulness and Healing**

##### **Subtheme 7.1: Living in the Present Moment**

Participants experienced artistic engagement as deeply immersive and mindful.

“While painting, I focus only on the present moment.” (Participant 2)

##### **Subtheme 7.2: Emotional Healing through Creativity**

Students described art as emotionally restorative and healing.

“Art heals me emotionally when I feel mentally exhausted.” (Participant 13)

The essence of participants’ lived experiences revealed visual art as a psychologically healing space that supported emotional renewal, self-awareness, and holistic well-being.

## **6. DISCUSSION**

This qualitative, phenomenological study examined the experiences of undergraduate students concerning the significance of visual arts as a coping strategy to psychological stress. The findings showed that visual art was a multi-dimensional coping strategy that helped to express emotion, psychologically relax, have self-awareness, be resilient, and connected with others. The study provides much needed qualitative understanding of how meaning-making processes are constructed when young adults engage in art.

The theme visual art as emotional expression showed that the participants were able to externalize emotions which were difficult for them to verbalize through artistic activities. This is in line with expressive arts theories that highlight symbolic representation and catharsis through expression (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Art was reported as a safe expression and outlet for the emotions of sadness, anxiety, frustration, and feelings of loneliness. These results were also noted by

Potash et al. (2020) who reported that creative artistic processes were shown to assist in emotional processing and emotional psychological coping in stress situations. The findings are also in line with previous studies that suggested that visual art offers alternative ways to communicate in cases where verbal expression is difficult because of emotional triggers.

The study also revealed that the visual arts were sources of psychological relief and emotional calmness. People reported feeling relaxed, mindful, and temporarily removed from academic stress through the use of art. These results would support mindfulness-based theories, which argue that engaging with the present moment through creativity improves present-moment awareness and the avoidance of stress-related rumination (Fancourt & Finn, 2022). Similar to the current study, other studies have also recorded a decrease in anxiety and emotional distress after engaging in visual art activities among university students (de Witte et al., 2021). While formal therapeutic practices explored in previous literature were studied, participants in the current study were self-motivated to integrate art into their daily coping strategies, thereby depicting the naturalistic therapeutic potential and accessibility of visual art.

The theme of creativity and self-discovery brought to light that the engagement in art helped to increase self-awareness, self-discovery and confidence. The participants found art to be a reflective process that helped them to understand their emotions, strengths, and personal experiences. Theories in a humanistic framework postulate that creativity is related to personal growth and self-actualization, especially at developmental periods of identity formation (Stuckey & Nobel, 2021). Hence, the result shows that visual art not only reduced the level of stress but also facilitated emotional development and psychological growth of the undergraduate students.

One other important result was the importance of visual arts for promoting resilience and social connection. Art sharing with peers generated experiences of being validated, accepted and feeling a sense of belongingness. The literature also indicates that emotional support and social relationships are enhanced within the art through social support networks for young adults (Fancourt & Finn, 2022). Participants also felt that art helped them to “cope” with difficulties and feelings. This is in line with the principles of resilience theory, which focuses on coping and emotional resilience following stressful experiences.

The present study adds to the interdisciplinary body of knowledge by creating a phenomenological perspective on the subjective experiences that underlie visual art engagement and coping with stress. The results of this study further our understanding of the emotional meanings, symbolic experiences, and transformative processes of art expression, and this is the first quantitative evidence of psychological benefits of art-based interventions.

The results are significant in terms of mental health promotion in schools. Psychological support and cultural adaptability are considered as some of the coping mechanisms that can be supported by universities through artistic engagement. The incorporation of art-based wellness programs, creative workshops and expressive interventions into counseling services could play a role in emotionally healthier learning environments that are also student-centered mental health care.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS

- Art-based supportive interventions for stress management and expression of emotions can be used by mental health nurses among students.
- Psychologists can employ the creative approaches in order to support emotional regulation and resilience building approaches.
- Universities need to create art spaces, creative clubs and wellness programs focused on emotional wellness.
- Visual art activities can be incorporated into student mental health programs and stress reduction activities.
- The results are helpful for the design of structured expressive art interventions for young adults who are stressed.
- Whole person mental health promotion with education and creativity should be included in educational policies.

## 8. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The phenomenological approach used in the study was a major strength that allowed for a rich exploration of students' lived experiences and in their meaning making processes. The use of in-depth interviews enhanced depth and authenticity of findings.

The study was conducted in one school context in one relatively small sample, however, and the findings cannot be generalized. Participants were also self-selected individuals who were interested in visual art, which may affect attitudes toward the therapeutic use of visual art.

## 9. CONCLUSION

The present phenomenological study found that visual art is an important coping mechanism for psychological stress among the undergraduate students. Artistic engagement allowed emotional expression, psychological relaxation, self-awareness, resilience and interpersonal connectedness. Visual art was presented as a safe and healing space for meaning making and emotional healing during stressful moments by participants. The results highlight the importance of visual art and its role as a psychologically restorative practice for overall well-being, rather than as a mere leisure activity. Incorporating mental health promotion, using the arts, in educational settings could contribute to building emotional strength and resilience, decreasing stress levels, and improving supportive learning environments for young adults.

The current study provides valuable qualitative information on the therapeutic value of visual arts and highlights the importance of creative approaches in fostering students' mental health in line with Sustainable Development Goals 3 and 4.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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