



Emotional Expression in Drawing-Based Therapeutic Art by Gender

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Abstract. As a form of emotional expression, therapeutic art plays an essential role in helping individuals manage stress, anxiety, and other emotions. However, the approach and experience gained from the therapeutic art process can be influenced by gender factors. This study was conducted using a Qualitative Case Study Method. Data collection techniques were conducted using interviews and observations, data validity using source triangulation, and inductive data analysis, and the study results emphasized meaning rather than generalization. Data were obtained from both female and male participants. This study found significant differences in technique preferences, emotional channeling, and therapeutic effects resulting from therapeutic art practices in overcoming anxiety in students. The differences between genders reflect the complexity of the relationship between gender, self-expression, and emotional experience in art therapy. These findings show that gender discourse in therapeutic art reflects social constructions that shape how men and women interact with their emotions. Women are often encouraged to be more open and expressive about communicating their feelings and using art as a therapeutic tool. By contrast, men tend to be limited by traditional gender norms and have difficulty expressing themselves, even when they have been given creative space through art.

Keywords: Therapeutic Art, Gender Discourse, Emotional Expression.

1. Introduction

Many social events experienced by humans produce emotion. In principle, emotional expressions are behavioral actions manifested in physical responses, such as sounds, gestures, muscle movements, and other physiological responses. Previous studies found that emotional expressions appear spontaneously and are often difficult to control or hide. Emotional expressions can be observed as physiological changes that arise from reactions to specific events or stimuli that cause emotions. Emotional expressions manifest as physiological appearances, including facial expressions, attitudes, and behavior [1]. In addition to being genetically inherited, emotional expressions are influenced by the experiences of interacting with others. Chaplin (2006) [2] explains

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that emotional expression changes in muscles, deep glands, and behavior are associated with emotions. Emotional expression refers to a person's tendency to express feelings that others feel. Safari & Saputra (2009) [3] suggested that emotional expression is an effort to communicate the status of feelings oriented towards a specific goal. Meanwhile, Ekman (1997) [4] states that emotional expression is a state of readiness for people to respond to urgent events to react or act. This reaction shows that a person responds to something through emotion. Goleman (2005) [5] defined emotional expressions as typical feelings and thoughts. This expression describes the biological and psychological states. Emotional reactions are a series of tendencies for someone to be ready to act. Thus, it can be stated that emotional expression is a form of communication through changes in facial expressions and gestures that accompany emotions, such as an outburst of emotions, expressing and conveying feelings to others, and determining how others feel. A person's emotional expression provides the information needed by the individual to make a decision through communication. Communication can be verbal or non-verbal. High emotional expression reflects a negative attitude that acts as a stressor and can increase vulnerability and relapse in individuals with psychological disorders. Emotional expression is an index of overall emotions, attitudes, and behaviors expressed verbally and nonverbally. Emotional expression can also be a manifestation of human physiological and cognitive states; therefore, emotional expression can also reflect the influence of cultural conditions and social systems. So, it can be stated that individuals learn emotions as cultural values in the social environment around them. Therefore, individuals are surrounded by culture, social systems, and artistic traditions. Individuals who express their emotions are limited to who, when, and where they are. Of course, this condition is maintained by people so that they can express and keep secret the emotions they are feeling and is related to how they express these emotions, both verbally and nonverbally. Nonverbal emotional expression or disclosure is known as therapeutic art. Therapeutic art as a means of channeling emotions can be explained as follows. This study addresses this gap by examining how gender influences emotional expression in therapeutic art practices. Specifically, it investigates (1) technique preferences, (2) emotional processing, and (3) therapeutic outcomes across gender. To answer these questions, this study employs a qualitative case study approach, which allows for an in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences with therapeutic art. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and direct observations focusing on participants' emotional and creative processes. These data were analyzed inductively to uncover patterns and meanings, providing rich contextual insights into the interplay of gender, art, and emotion.

1.1 Therapeutic Art as a Means to Channel Emotions

Therapeutic art is a form of contemporary therapy that several previous researchers has been extensively studied. The study found that in therapeutic art activities, specific images and symbols always reappear in paintings created by similar client groups, especially in those with similar symptoms [6]. However, in this study, the researcher did not assume that these symbols reflected specific symptoms or mental conditions in

general, such as people who need emotional outlets. People with such symptoms like this will express their emotions in paintings of similar forms, contents, and color characteristics. In this study, the researcher acknowledged that therapeutic art activities did not involve clinical assessment. However, the decisions stated in the research results were made by considering the entire artwork and how it develops and changes during therapy. Thus, the painting functions as a record and accurate monitor of the changes in the symptoms of the individual who painted it. Other researchers have applied therapeutic art in India. Bajaj and Vohra (2013) [7] conducted a study and found that dance, music, drama, and fine arts benefit people with psychological problems. This study found that the therapeutic arts have three functions: imaginative, communicative, social, commercial, psychological, and political. In therapeutic arts practice, participants receive social benefits through emotional channels. Social benefits were obtained from the experiences of participants in therapeutic arts activities. The benefit obtained is communication, which helps someone engage with the community and meet various groups of people from different backgrounds to overcome their psychological problems. This study also found personal benefits for participants in art activities as a therapeutic tool, especially for those who were shy or lacked self-confidence, which could increase self-confidence. During practice, a person's self-confidence increases with skills, and a person can gain self-confidence. This new experience can be helpful for every aspect of life. This study also identified spiritual and psychological benefits. It is said so because practicing an art form can encourage self-discipline, perseverance, self-expression, calmness, and satisfaction. This study concludes that art as a therapeutic tool brings therapeutic benefits, which helps people channel their emotions to contribute to peace and mental well-being.

1.2 Differences in Gender Roles and Their Influence in Therapeutic Art

Gender is defined as a concept used to identify differences between men and women from a non-biological perspective. The definition of gender focuses on the social, cultural, psychological, and other societal aspects. Gender discourse emerges as discussions that originate from women's critical awareness of differences in their roles in their lives. Showalter (2009:3) [8] explains that gender roles are the basis for determining differences in the contributions of men and women to culture and collective life. Therefore, differences between the roles of men and women have emerged. Furthermore, Showalter defines gender as more than just the differences between men and women from a sociocultural perspective, so the analysis concept related to their roles in various aspects of life is emphasized. Mosse (1996:3) [9] defines gender as a difference in roles that can be likened to costumes and masks at a performance event that aims to allow others to identify that they are feminine or masculine. Furthermore, it is also explained that gender is manifested as a pattern of relations between men and women that is used to show social relations. This pattern of relations is deliberately created to validate and preserve the understanding that the relationship between men and women is a social order recognized by all levels of society. From the definitions above, it can be concluded that gender roles are used to identify the differences between men and women in a sociocultural context. In other

words, gender is used as a benchmark to identify the roles of men and women based on the sociocultural influences of society. This identification affects the application of therapeutic art. It is said that art for therapy is never just an idea; it always needs a form to be present in the real world so that the idea can become an experience that provides therapy for psychological problems. Ideas and forms are two inseparable dimensions of therapeutic art, but they do not always mean that both are in harmony. This disharmony often grows from differences in gender roles that have been believed by society that women are known to be gentle, beautiful, emotional, or motherly. By contrast, men are considered strong, rational, manly, and mighty. These characteristics and traits are interchangeable. The following research questions were formulated based on the following problems: (1) differences in technique preferences between women and men in therapeutic art practices, (2) differences in the process of channeling emotions between women and men in therapeutic art practices, and (3) differences in therapeutic effects produced by women and men in therapeutic art practices.

2. Method

2.1 Research Approach

The research was conducted using a Qualitative Case Study Approach following Yin (2003) [10] who explained that the case study research approach is an empirical study investigating contemporary phenomena or cases related to real life. Real life specifically concerns the boundaries between the context and existing phenomena. In addition, the case study approach follows Hodgetts and Stole (2012) [11], which focuses on individual, group, and community cases. The goal is to help show essential things of concern or focus, and find solutions to these problems. The case study used in this study is an in-depth one. This in-depth case study analyzes and examines cases of emotional expression in therapeutic arts in terms of differences in gender roles, which have distinctive characteristics. This research is similar to narrative research, but the procedures in the study are more detailed, so they are closely related to the context, namely the context of the use of therapeutic art.

2.2 Participants and Sampling

The study involved three participants, two females (L and GD) and one male (GL), who actively engaged in therapeutic art practices. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that they represented diverse gender perspectives on therapeutic art. The inclusion criteria required participants to have prior experience with therapeutic art and a willingness to share their emotional and creative processes.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews and nonparticipant observations. The interviews aimed to explore participants' preferences, emotional experiences, and perceived therapeutic effects during art practices. Observation notes

focused on participants' behaviors, expressions, and interactions with artistic media during the sessions. The artworks produced during these sessions were also documented as supplementary data to enrich the analysis.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1992) [12], consisting of three key steps:

1. **Data Reduction:** Filtering and condensing raw data to focus on relevant themes related to gender differences in therapeutic art.
2. **Data Presentation:** Organizing the reduced data into matrices, diagrams, or narratives to identify emerging patterns and relationships.
3. **Conclusion:** Organized data were interpreted to derive meaningful insights and answer the research questions. The inductive approach ensured that themes and patterns emerged organically from the data, emphasizing participants' lived experiences rather than imposing preexisting frameworks.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection to ensure adherence to research ethics. Participants were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, and rights, including confidentiality, and the option to withdraw at any time. Consent forms were signed and all data were anonymized to protect the participants' identities. Potential emotional risks were minimized by providing participants with the opportunity to pause or discontinue the sessions if needed.

3. Result

3.1 Differences in Technique Preferences between Women and Men in Therapeutic Art Practice

Data on the technical preferences of women and men in therapeutic art practice were obtained from interviews. Female informants chose manual or traditional techniques, such as drawing with pencils, watercolors, or crayons. These techniques allow for direct control over the media and create personal and intimate experiences. The following are the statements from female informants L and GD from the interviews.

"Manual techniques are the main choice because, in therapeutic art practice, manual or traditional techniques can provide a sense of relaxation" (Interview Field Notes-003)

"If you use digital, sometimes it makes you feel associated with the impression of working. Therefore, the use of digital techniques can lead to

stress. As if you were doing office work with no time limit' (Interview Field Notes-13).

The statement made by informant L indicates that women who practice therapeutic art tend to choose manual or traditional techniques over digital ones. Statements from other female informants based on interviews with GD were as follows.

"Choosing manual techniques because they can give a more natural, non-artificial feel. An image scratched through a traditional tool will produce an image spontaneously, so we do not need to think much" (Field notes Interview Results-12).

From the interview with male informant GL, statements that showed differences in choosing therapeutic art practice techniques were obtained. The related data are as follows:

"Personal preferences are more toward digital; therefore, I use digital media when practicing therapeutic arts. This consideration is because there is still a need to develop digital skills as a source of livelihood" (Field notes Interview Results-7)

In addition, the male informant stated in the following notes his tendency to choose digital media when practicing therapeutic art.

"When choosing to use digital techniques, the psychological effects that appear is feeling safer because there is an undo feature. However, on the other hand, media preferences are related to the same factor because of the need factor. Realistically, I will continue to sharpen my digital illustration skills' (Field notes Interview Results-9).

From the interview results, the data on the preferences of the techniques chosen in therapeutic art practice between women and men shows that female informants tend to choose manual or traditional techniques. By contrast, male informants tended to choose digital techniques.

3.2 Differences in the Process of Channeling Emotions between Women and Men in Therapeutic Art Practice

The process of channeling emotions in therapeutic art practice revealed differences between the female and male informants. Based on the interview data with informant L, this can be explained as follows:

"The process of channeling emotions in therapeutic art practice using traditional tools, the informant feels calmer. It is said that when 'scribbling,' there are always vibrations in the hand while drawing. In addition, the sound

of the pencil and paper rubbing makes the feeling more comfortable”. (Interview Result Notes-12).

Almost the same as the statement, informant GD stated his experience in the interview as follows.

“The process of channeling emotions is experienced when drawing in therapeutic art practice; it feels that the brain is silent when drawing. What was noisy before became quiet, and then the focus was only on the drawing activity and the brush. Because my hand moves, my brain is quiet; this is where emotions are well controlled.” (Interview, Notes-5).

A different statement was conveyed by GL by the male informant, as described below.

"The process of channeling emotions in therapeutic art practice for male informants is varied because when drawing time continues to run, there is a break, and then new ideas will come in and intervene in the drawing practice. This activity makes one's minds busy. However, after the break time has passed, it will become quiet, calm, and peaceful. However, silence, calm, and peace often do not appear, and the mind remains busy, so it cannot channel emotions.” (Field Notes from Interview-3).

3.3. Differences in Therapeutic Effects Produced by Women and Men in Therapeutic Art Practice

The therapeutic effects produced by women and men in drawing work documents differ. The differences in the data can be seen in the following images:

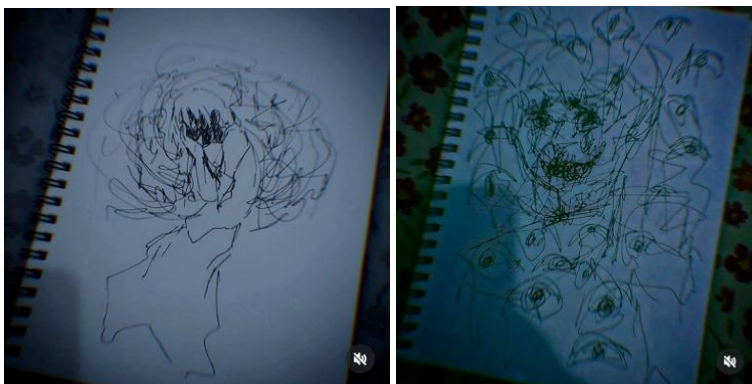


Fig. 1. Results of Participant L Therapeutic Arts Practice

The artwork created by Participant L demonstrates spontaneity and emotional fluidity, as evidenced by its loose flowing lines and curvilinear shapes. These features reflect a

free and intuitive approach to art-making that allows participants to explore their emotions without restraint. The color palette, dominated by soft pastel tones, conveys a sense of calmness and emotional openness, whereas occasional bursts of brighter colors suggest moments of emotional intensity or catharsis. Using manual tools, such as pencils and watercolors, the participants engaged in tactile interactions with the medium, which likely enhanced their sense of relaxation and focus. Overall, the harmonious blending of colors and the organic flow of the composition indicates a high degree of emotional release and a sense of balance achieved through the process.



Fig. 2. Results of Participant GD's Therapeutic Arts Practice

Participant GD's artwork highlights calming organic forms and a soothing color palette, featuring repetitive motifs, such as swirling patterns and leaf-like shapes. These elements create rhythmic and meditative qualities that reflect the participant's ability to process emotions in a structured yet soothing manner. The dominance of green and blue tones in the artwork is particularly notable, as these colors are often associated with tranquility and emotional cooling, aligning with the participants' reported experience of achieving mental calmness through the art-making process. The brushstrokes were controlled yet gentle, indicating focused intent while maintaining a sense of ease and spontaneity. This balance suggests that the participants effectively utilized traditional tools to channel emotions and promote mindfulness, resulting in a stable and introspective piece.



Fig. 3. Results of Informant GL's Therapeutic Arts Practice

In contrast, Participant GL's artwork embodies symbolic representation and controlled design with a structured and geometric composition that emphasizes order and precision. The use of recurring symbolic motifs, such as abstract figures or iconographic elements, suggests an attempt to indirectly communicate specific emotional themes. The color palette is bold and contrasting, with tones such as red and black conveying tension or strong emotions, balanced by neutral colors that stabilize the overall composition. The participants' reliance on digital tools provided the flexibility to refine their work, which reflected a preference for maintaining control and emotional distance during the creative process. The structured layout and symbolic content indicate that while the participants may have struggled with fully releasing emotions, they found a safe and effective outlet in the structured medium of digital art. Both female participants (L and GD) leaned toward intuitive and calming techniques, favoring manual tools. Their artwork reflects their emotional release and introspection. The male participant (GL) exhibited a more restrained and controlled approach using digital media to create symbolic and precise works. This difference highlights the gendered dynamics of emotional processing in art therapy.

4. Discussion

4.1 Gender Discourse Analysis in Therapeutic Art

The findings of this study highlight the profound influence of gender on therapeutic art practice. Female participants displayed a strong preference for traditional manual techniques, aligning with societal norms that encourage women to openly engage with their emotions. These techniques provide direct tactile connection to the medium, facilitating a sense of relaxation and emotional release. This is consistent with prior research indicating that women are generally more comfortable expressing emotions verbally and nonverbally [5, 6]. By contrast, male participants gravitated toward digital techniques, emphasizing practicality and skill development. The use of digital media provides a sense of control and safety, as described by the undo feature, reflecting the

masculine stereotype of maintaining emotional distance. This aligns with studies suggesting that men often suppress their emotions to conform to societal expectations of strength and rationality [13]. These preferences underscore how societal constructs of femininity and masculinity shape how individuals engage in therapeutic art. Thus, therapeutic art practices have become a lens through which gender norms can be observed and challenged.

4.2 Emotional Processing and Gender Dynamics

The study further revealed significant differences in how emotions are processed during therapeutic art. Female participants reported experiencing moments of calmness and focus, attributing them to the meditative nature of manual techniques. This aligns with theories suggesting that women are more likely to use emotional coping strategies such as introspection and self-expression to manage stress [6, 14]. Male participants, however, experienced more fragmented emotional processing with interruptions from external stimuli or emerging ideas. This suggests that men may require additional contextual or external catalysts such as music or structured prompts to fully engage in emotional processing during art therapy. Gender norms that discourage emotional vulnerability in men likely contribute to these differences, creating barriers to achieving optimal therapeutic outcomes [15].

4.3 Implications for Art Therapy Practice

These findings have several implications in therapeutic art. First, art therapists should consider incorporating both traditional and digital tools to cater to diverse gender preferences. Providing a range of options may help bridge the gap in emotional accessibility and effectiveness among male participants. Second, therapists must recognize and address societal constraints that limit men's ability to freely express emotions. This could involve creating an environment that normalizes emotional vulnerability and offers structured activities to ease men into the creative process. Finally, this study highlights the importance of integrating gender-sensitive approaches into therapeutic art practices. By understanding the nuanced interplay between gender and emotional expressions, therapists can design interventions that are more inclusive and effective for individuals of all genders.

4.4 Study Limitations and Recommendations

This study was limited by its small sample size and focus on a specific context, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research should expand on this by including a more diverse participant pool and exploring other therapeutic art forms, such as sculptures or mixed media. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how gendered experiences in therapeutic art evolve over time and contribute to long-term emotional wellbeing. Exploring the intersectionality of gender with other factors such as age or cultural background may also yield richer insights.

5. Conclusion

The findings revealed significant differences between the female and male participants in how they approached and experienced art therapy. Women tended to prefer traditional manual techniques, which allowed greater emotional release and calmness. In contrast, men favored digital tools, reflecting a preference for controlled and skill-oriented methods. These distinctions underscore the complexity of the relationship between gender, self-expression, and emotional experience in art therapy. Therapeutic art practices provide valuable insights into how gender norms shape emotional interactions. Women were more open and intuitive in their artistic expressions, whereas men often required external stimuli and structured activities to fully engage with the therapeutic process. This highlights the need for gender-sensitive approaches to art therapy to accommodate diverse emotional needs and preferences. By understanding the nuanced interplay between gender and therapeutic art, practitioners can design more inclusive interventions that challenge traditional norms and promote emotional well-being for individuals of all genders. Future research should expand these findings by exploring diverse populations, additional art forms, and long-term impacts to enhance the scope and effectiveness of therapeutic art practices.

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