



Improving the Generation Z's Self-Esteem and Decreasing their Mental Issues by Creative Expression Art Therapy

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Abstract

This research focuses on adolescents with mental health issues such as stress and anxiety. Stress is described as general daily pressure that affects daily behavior, while anxiety is defined as excessive worry about future events. Both stress and anxiety are closely associated with low self-esteem, which refers to an individual's perception and evaluation of their ability to face and solve problems. Various interventions can enhance self-esteem, with art therapy being particularly effective for adolescents. In this study, the State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES) was used to measure self-esteem, and the DASS-21 was used to assess stress, anxiety, and depression symptoms. Five female participants completed the intervention, which consisted of eight sessions conducted over five days. This research utilized a quasi-experimental pre- and post-test method. The intervention results showed a significant increase in global self-esteem scores, as well as changes in stress, anxiety, and depression levels.

Keywords: Art therapy, Creative expression, Generation Z, Self-esteem.

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Introduction

Recently, issues concerning Generation Z have become increasingly interesting and popular in social contexts. Generation Z refers to young people born after 1995, often described as realists, skillful, and innovative individuals (Seemiller & Grace, 2015). This generation is also noted for being globally minded (Puiu, 2017), confident, and having high self-esteem (Mládková, 2017). Some studies conclude that few

young people exhibit high internal motivation and a willingness to demonstrate their skills (Holzer et al., 2022). Generally, high school students in Indonesia belong to this group and are predicted to be influential in the nation's development in the future (Kurniyati & Arwen, 2020). Unfortunately, not all young Indonesians, particularly current high school students, display these characteristics.

According to the Indonesia National Adolescent Mental Health Survey (I-NAMHS) on adolescents aged 10 to 17, one in three Indonesian teenagers experiences mental health issues, and one in twenty is diagnosed with a mental illness (UGM, 2022). In 2019, data on mental illness prevalence in Indonesia showed that anxiety was the most common condition at 3.5%, followed by depression at 2.4%. Alcohol and drug use disorders were at 0.5%, while bipolar disorder and schizophrenia were at 0.3%, and eating disorders were the least common at 0.1% (ourworldindata.org, 2019). These statistics illustrate that mental illness is a widespread problem in Indonesia, affecting many young people.

Previous studies have shown that anxiety has a negative relationship with self-esteem (Baldwin & Wesley, 1996; Rosenberg, 1962; Sowislo & Orth, 2013), similar to the relationship between depression and self-esteem (Choi et al., 2019; Roberts & Monroe, 1994). Research on children and youth has also indicated a relationship between self-esteem and both anxiety and depression (Dale et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2019). A study by Torres et al. (1995) found that self-esteem positively relates to personal, mental, social, and safety aspects in adolescents. Overall, self-esteem plays a significant role in the development of mental illness, highlighting its importance in human development, especially during adolescence.

Stress is the physiological and psychological response of the body to external pressures (Lazarus & Cohen, 1977) or demands perceived to exceed an individual's coping abilities. If not managed effectively, it can negatively impact both physical and mental health. Research has shown that chronic stress can increase the risk of heart disease (Vaccarino et al., 2021), sleep disorders (Merrill, 2022), depression (LeMoult, 2020), and anxiety (Phillips et al., 2015). The relationship between stress and self-esteem is complex: high levels of stress can lead to decreased self-esteem (Ganster & Schaubroeck, 2020;

Pruessner et al., 1999), self-doubt (Akbari & Sahibzada, 2020), and feelings of helplessness (Alfianti, 2022). Hence, low self-esteem can make an individual more susceptible to stress due to a lack of confidence in facing challenges. Conversely, high self-esteem can act as a protective factor against the negative impacts of stress (Baumeister et al., 2003).

Generally, self-esteem reflects how individuals evaluate and cope with daily life problems (Branden, 2021). It refers to an individual's perception of themselves, including their thoughts and emotions, either positive or negative (Rosenberg et al., 1995). Adolescents face several issues related to self-esteem, such as academic achievement (Kärchner et al., 2021). A meta-analysis conducted by Harris & Orth (2020) indicates that self-esteem is also associated with the social lives of adolescents. These findings suggest that self-esteem is crucial for adolescent mental health.

Self-esteem encompasses various aspects, such as relationships with significant others, self-knowledge, awareness of one's potential, and the ability to appreciate oneself (Guindon, 2009). Individuals with high self-esteem exhibit characteristics such as optimism, well-being, and resilience (Sabouripour et al., 2021). This perspective aligns with Rosenberg & Owens (2006), who suggest that individuals with good self-esteem can express themselves positively, accept negative self-feelings, and strive for self-improvement.

Self-esteem can be enhanced through various means, including group therapy (Rosidi et al., 2018), compassion therapy (Thomason & Moghaddam, 2021), Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) (Dryden, 2023), and art therapy (Ching-Teng et al., 2019; Mousavi & Sohrabi, 2014). Art therapy, particularly creative expression, has been found effective in boosting self-esteem among adolescents (Başlı et al., 2020; Quinlan et al., 2016). One prevalent form of art therapy is creative expression, developed by Landgarten (2013).

Art therapy is considered a suitable therapeutic avenue for adolescents. Moon (2012) suggests that art therapy serves as the teen's language, as adolescents often perceive conventional therapy as

uncomfortable and less engaging. Art therapy is a psychotherapeutic process that emphasizes the creative process and art-making as a means of communication between the client and the therapist (Dalley, 2008). Furthermore, art therapy is viewed as a non-verbal therapy that utilizes objects as a medium to express self-image (Waller & Gilroy, 2000). It is also regarded as a safe process for adolescent clients (Pritchard, 2020), thereby making it easier for them to communicate with therapists through the art media they create.

According to Landgarten (2013), a developer of expressive art therapy, art is a process of healing and self-exploration. Art serves as a non-verbal language used to express emotions, conflicts, and experiences that are difficult to convey verbally. Landgarten believes that through this creative process, clients can access and gain a deeper understanding of their feelings and thoughts, as well as discover new ways to confront life's challenges.

Art therapy perspectives are influenced by several psychological approaches. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, art therapy stems from concepts of free association, symbols, and projective techniques (Kramer, 2001). Meanwhile, humanistic approaches view art therapy as a means to transform negative emotions into more adaptive ones, including through artwork (Malchiodi, 2003). The gestalt perspective on art therapy views it as a means of honest communication, responsibility, and authenticity. This perspective focuses on the lines, pressures, shapes, textures, and colors in the artwork, as well as interpreting the meaning of the resulting pieces (Rhyne, 2016). In contrast, the cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) approach emphasizes art therapy as a tool for clients to recognize their assumptions and perceive their negative thoughts, then communicate these to the therapist (Dalley, 2008; Rosal, 2018).

The connection between art therapy and self-esteem has been a subject of study for quite some time. Franklin (1992) noted a strong correlation between art therapy and self-esteem, with the components of artwork considered crucially linked to individual self-esteem levels. Similar to other widely used psychotherapy approaches like CBT, art therapy also has the potential to enhance self-esteem

(Buchalter, 2014). Several studies have shown that self-esteem can be improved through art therapy (Dow, 2008; Kang et al., 2021; Yoo & Bae, 2019). Consistent with these findings, a study conducted by Gutierrez (2019) demonstrated that art therapy can boost self-esteem in adolescents.

Given the prevalent condition among Indonesian adolescents, where anxiety disorders are widely experienced and closely linked to low self-esteem, intervention studies aimed at enhancing self-esteem become crucial. Previous research on art therapy for improving self-esteem is still limited, so this study will address this gap in knowledge (Dow, 2008; Kang et al., 2021; Yoo & Bae, 2019). Art therapy, suitable for adolescents, can serve as a beneficial intervention for improving their mental health. Nevertheless, art therapy specifically for Generation Z has been under-researched, particularly concerning mental health issues. Therefore, the objective of this study is to examine the effects of art therapy on self-esteem in adolescents and its impact on their stress and anxiety symptoms. This research is expected to contribute to theories about art therapy and mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression. The findings are anticipated to advance our understanding in this field. Beyond theoretical contributions, it is hoped that the research outcomes will benefit the mental well-being of Generation Z.

Method

Design

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Ethics Commission of the Faculty of Psychology, Universitas Mercu Buana Yogyakarta (Approval Number: 110/B.07/J/1/2023). This study employed a quasi-experimental pre-and post-study design involving five participants.

Participants

Participants were recruited through advertisements distributed via WhatsApp, specifically targeting high school students aged 15-20 years in the Pundong sub-district, Bantul, Yogyakarta. The criteria for

inclusion required participants to have low self-esteem scores and high stress and anxiety scores. Initially, nine individuals responded to the advertisement, underwent screening, and completed a pretest. Out of these, only five students met the research criteria, and all were female. Each participant provided informed consent before the intervention. This informed consent included agreement to participate in the intervention process, undergo measurements, and consent to the publication of results. Since the participants were over 17 years old, they signed the consent forms themselves. Following the consent process, the intervention commenced.

Procedure

Self-esteem was measured using the State Self-Esteem Scale (SSES) developed by Heatherton & Polivy (1991), adapted into Indonesian with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of 0.92 (Nugroho, 2018). Stress and anxiety were assessed using the DASS-21, developed by Lovibond & Lovibond (1995), which has been adapted into Indonesian. The internal reliability coefficients for the DASS-21 are 0.794 for the depression subscale, 0.785 for the anxiety subscale, and 0.800 for the stress subscale (Onie et al., 2020).

Table I
Participant identity

Participant	Age	Sex
PY	20	Female
JJ	18	Female
NY	18	Female
CY	20	Female
DV	20	Female

During this period, nine individuals registered, but only five met the research criteria, which included having low SSES scores and severe levels of stress and anxiety. All five participants were female. This research employed a quasi-experimental pre- and post-test method. The SSES scale and DASS21 administered before the intervention served as both the pre-test and participant screening. The pre-test

results were compared with the post-test results using the Jamovi 2.3.28 data analysis program to observe the intervention's effects.

Intervention Module

The art therapy utilized creative expression, following the therapy stages outlined by Landgarten (2013). This art therapy, developed by Helen Landgarten, has also been adapted for telehealth or tele-intervention studies, demonstrating benefits in enhancing self-worth (Benjamin et al., 2021). The intervention included five stages: warm-up or introduction, recalling events, emotional expression and issues, restitution, and termination, divided into eight sessions conducted over five days.

The first session was a psychoeducation session aimed at explaining adolescent characteristics, mental health, and the importance of self-esteem. It also served as an introduction to each participant and an explanation of the upcoming art therapy. This session consisted of several activities: an introduction, discussion of the assessment result (pretest score) and its interpretation, and psychoeducation about the variables and art therapy.

The second session involved familiarizing participants with the equipment used and the process to be conducted, as well as emotional catharsis. Activities included drawing and coloring, sharing the results, and discussing insights. Sessions one and two were held on the first day.

Sessions three and four, conducted on the second day, aimed at self-recognition of both potential and negative aspects. These sessions involved utilizing positive memories and their emotional connections, leading participants to gain insight. The third session involved drawing flowers, while the fourth session involved drawing beautiful places.

The third day was solely for the fifth session, which focused on emotional expression and catharsis to enable participants to find ways to solve the problems they faced. This session could be the toughest



because participants had to remember the judgments made by others about them. Sessions six and seven, aimed at identifying life goals for the future and facilitating self-growth and insight into self-love, were conducted on the fourth day.

The final session, held on the fifth day, served as an evaluation of the entire process from the first to the last session. It also included psychoeducation to maintain conditions and concluded with the post-test. The total duration of the implementation was five days.

Data Analysis

The analysis process for the hypothesis test was conducted using a paired sample t-test with Jamovi 2.3.28.

Result

Before the hypothetical test, normality test assumption conducted, and the result is illustrated in [table 2](#).

Table 2
Normality test

			statistic	P
Pre Global	Post_global	Shapiro-Wilk	0.889	0.354
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.265	0.794
Pre-performance	Post_performance	Shapiro-Wilk	0.879	0.305
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.275	0.759
Pre-Social	Post_social	Shapiro-Wilk	0.856	0.215
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.323	0.675
Pre-Appearence	Post_appeareance	Shapiro-Wilk	0.836	0.155
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.240	0.935
Anx_Pre	Anx_post	Shapiro-Wilk	0.914	0.492
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.254	0.949
Stress pre	Stress post	Shapiro-Wilk	0.979	0.928
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.141	1.000
Dep_pre	Dep_post	Shapiro-Wilk	0.884	0.329
		Kolmogorov-Smirnov	0.233	0.949

Based on the [table 2](#), all the data have p score > 0.05, the data show normality test is accepted.

Table 3
Hypothetic test and effect size

Paired Sample t-test		p	Mean Difference	Effect size
Pre Global	Post_global	0.026	-15.20	-1.546
Pre-performance	Post_performance	0.145	-3.20	-0.808
Pre-Social	Post_social	0.010	-7.20	-2.061
Pre-Appearence	Post_appeareance	0.099	-4.80	-0.956
Stress-Pre	Stress-Post	0.008	4.20	2.18
Anx-Pre	Anx-Post	0.002	4.60	3.03
Dep-Pre	Dep-Post	0.009	4.80	2.10

Based on Table 3, the data indicate no significant changes in performance and appearance self-esteem ($p > 0.05$), while social self-esteem and the total score showed significant changes. The mean difference for the global score was 15.20, and for social self-esteem, it was 7.20. Art therapy was also effective in decreasing stress, anxiety, and depression. Table 3 illustrates that symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression decreased significantly ($p < 0.01$). The mean differences were 4.20 for stress, 4.60 for anxiety, and 4.80 for depression.

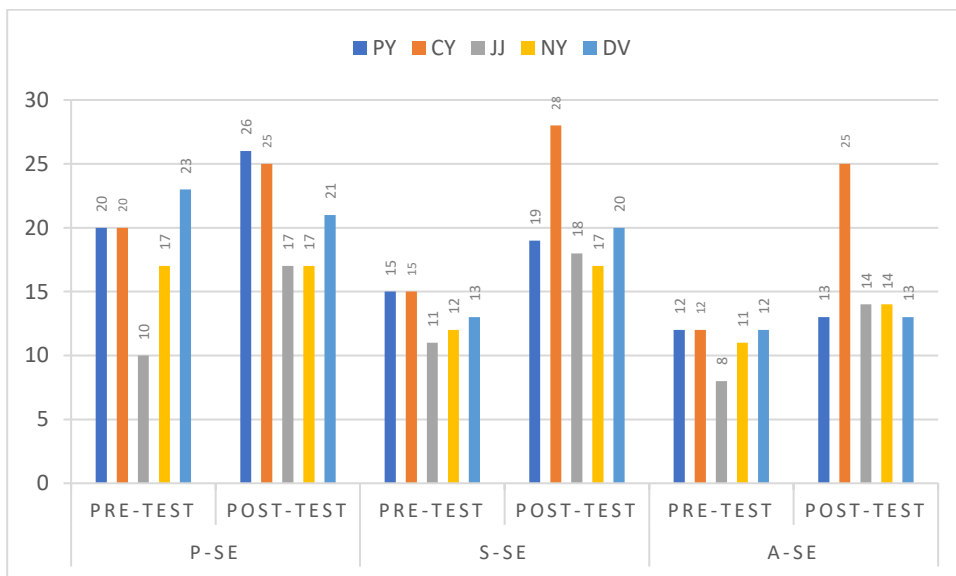


Figure 1. Graphic chart of pre-test and post-test for global self-esteem

The results above indicate that art therapy is effective in enhancing global self-esteem and social self-esteem scores, while it does not significantly increase performance self-esteem and appearance self-esteem.

In addition to significantly increasing global and social self-esteem scores, art therapy demonstrates a large effect size, with values of 1.546 for global self-esteem and 2.06 for social self-esteem. Similar

results are shown for stress, anxiety, and depression, with large effect sizes of 2.10 for depression, 2.18 for stress, and 3.03 for anxiety.

Discussion

Art therapy has emerged as an effective and efficient intervention for addressing mental health issues among adolescents, particularly in terms of self-esteem (Bosgraaf et al., 2020), stress (Fitria & Putri, 2022), anxiety (Visnola et al., 2010), and depression (Newland & Bettencourt, 2020). These studies aim to explore the effectiveness of art therapy in increasing self-esteem and its implications on mental disorder symptoms.

When examining adolescent mental health, it becomes evident that adolescents are in a critical period characterized by significant change and development (Reh et al., 2020). In Indonesia, like many other countries, adolescents face issues such as academic tasks (Wigfield & Tonks, 2002), social comparison (Scully et al., 2023), and cultural expectations (Sarigiani et al., 2014), which are relevant to low self-esteem and mental health issues.

Art therapy interventions have been shown to enhance global self-esteem scores in adolescents. These findings align with Gutierrez's (2019) assertion that art therapy is highly suited to the needs of adolescents, providing flexibility and versatility. Additionally, these results are consistent with previous studies that have demonstrated the ability of art therapy to increase self-esteem (Ching-Teng et al., 2019; Devidas & Mendonca, 2017; Mousavi & Sohrabi, 2014; Sarwili et al., 2021).

Contrasting results are demonstrated in the study by Hartz & Thick (2005), which indicated that art therapy did not significantly increase self-esteem in adolescent girls but did improve friendship relationships, self-esteem, and positive behavior. Apart from this study, most art therapy research has shown significant effects in enhancing self-esteem across various participant groups, such as individuals

with mental retardation (Aminjafari & Bagherilori, 2019), children with glaucoma (Darewych, 2009), elderly adults (Ching-Teng et al., 2019), and children with high levels of aggression (Mousavi & Sohrabi, 2014).

Furthermore, art therapy exhibits even stronger effects when combined with other interventions. For instance, in stroke patients, art therapy combined with conventional physical therapy has been shown to improve physical functions, quality of life, and reduce depressive symptoms (Kongkasuwan et al., 2016). Another study combining Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (REBT) and art therapy also demonstrated an improvement in self-esteem (Roghanchi et al., 2013).

Several mechanisms may underpin the effectiveness of art therapy in improving adolescent self-esteem. Firstly, the process of creating art enables adolescents to externalize their internal struggles, facilitating self-awareness and emotional regulation (Brillantes-Evangelista, 2013). By visually representing their experiences, adolescents can gain insight into their thoughts and feelings (Malchiodi, 2011), fostering a sense of empowerment, resilience, and self-efficacy (Vise, 2012).

Moreover, the therapeutic relationship between the adolescent and the art therapist plays a crucial role in the effectiveness of art therapy (Dalley, 2008). The supportive and non-judgmental environment created during art therapy sessions allows adolescents to explore their identity and develop a sense of self-acceptance (Williams, 2018). Through empathic understanding and encouragement, art therapists help adolescents navigate their emotional challenges and build resilience (Stepney, 2017).

The findings from this research have significant implications for the clinical context of adolescent mental health. Incorporating art therapy into other interventions can enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of programs, especially those targeting self-esteem improvement. Mental health professionals should receive training in art therapy techniques to effectively integrate creative modalities into their practice.

Furthermore, collaborative efforts between mental health providers, educators, and community stakeholders are essential for promoting the accessibility and acceptance of art therapy services for adolescents. School-based art therapy programs and community art initiatives can serve as valuable resources for adolescents seeking support for their mental health concerns.

Despite the promising findings, this study has limitations. Firstly, the generalizability of the results may be limited due to the specific population sampled and the cultural context in which the study was conducted. Future research should aim to replicate these findings across diverse populations to ensure the robustness of the results.

Moreover, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term effects of art therapy on adolescent self-esteem. By examining the sustainability of therapeutic gains over time, researchers can provide insights into the enduring impact of art therapy interventions on adolescent mental health outcomes.

Conclusion

Art therapy through creative expression can significantly enhance self-esteem, which is negatively related to several mental disorders such as stress, anxiety, and depression. This suggests that art therapy may also reduce symptoms of these conditions. This research was conducted with a single group of 5 participants, which serves as a limitation. Future research would benefit from including at least two randomly divided groups to strengthen the study's validity.

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare that this paper has no conflicts of interest.

Author Contribution

All authors have contributed equally to the study's conceptualization, interpreting data, reviewing, and editing the manuscript.

Data Availability

Data can be provided upon request to the author.

Declarations Ethical Statement

The study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all persons involved in the study.

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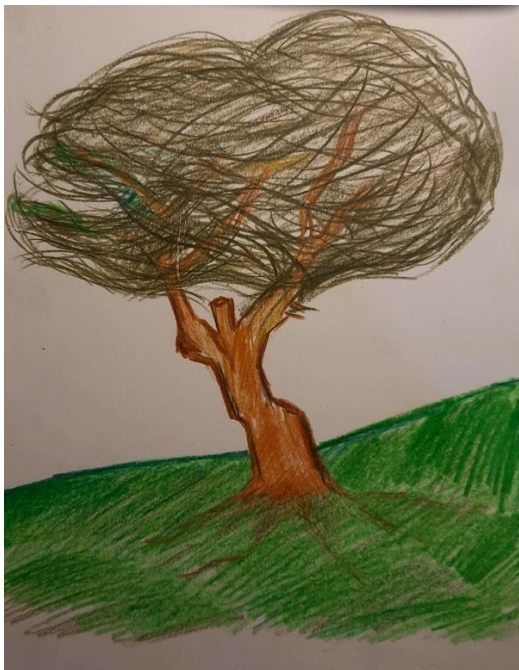
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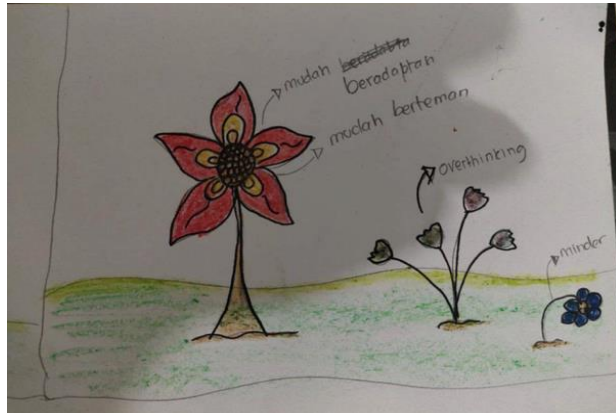
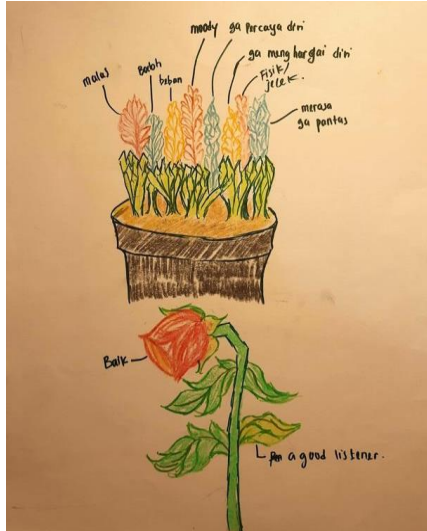
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Appendix I

1. Artworks in the warm-up session.



2. Artworks in the third session.



3. Artworks in the fourth session.

