

PAINING A POSITIVE IDENTITY: CREATIVE ARTS AS AN
AFFIRMING INTERVENTION FOR TRANSGENDER ADULTS

by
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Transgender individuals often grapple with significant discrimination and mental health challenges for many reasons including societal stigmas, barriers to gender-affirming medical care and lack of visibility. Although society is gradually becoming more aware of the struggles transgender and nonbinary individuals face, our current support system inadequately addresses their needs, particularly regarding non-conventional interventions like the creative arts. One avenue towards creating a society and a system that leads to better outcomes for transgender individuals is embracing the creative arts as an affirming and healing intervention.

This study delves into transgender individuals' perceptions into the effectiveness of the creative arts on improving their mental health and exploring their gender identity, underlining the positive impacts of gender-affirming care on transgender people's mental health. To glean insights, a questionnaire was administered to transgender and nonbinary adults, probing their perceptions and experiences regarding the use of creative arts for developing and affirming their gender identity, and enhancing their mental health. The questionnaire sought to identify the types of creative arts used, the perceived benefits of arts in fostering a positive identity, and any potential barriers encountered in the process. The findings from the literature review and the survey responses have been synthesized to propose future research directions to better cater to the needs of transgender individuals.

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Introduction

A 2020 report from the Center for American Progress revealed that over a third of LGBTQ Americans had experienced discrimination in the previous year (Gruberg et al., 2020). LGBTQ is an acronym for sexual orientations and gender identity, including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. This figure rose alarmingly for transgender Americans, with more than 60% reporting being victims of discrimination (Gruberg et al., 2020). The term ‘*transgender*’ refers to individuals whose gender expression or identity diverges from the sex they were assigned at birth (*Transgender Persons | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health | CDC*, n.d.). Unfortunately, the discrimination endured by transgender individuals frequently leads to negative mental health outcomes. The Trevor Project 2019 national survey found that transgender youth reported significantly elevated rates of depression, victimization, and suicidality compared to their cisgender peers (*The Trevor Project National Survey 2019*, n.d.). The term cisgender refers to people whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were identified as having at birth (“Definition of Cisgender,” n.d.). An analysis of thousands of peer-reviewed studies, conducted by researchers at Cornell University found that 95% of the studies showed a significantly strong link between anti-LGBTQ discrimination and health harms to the LGBTQ community (*Discrimination Impacts Health of LGBT People, Analysis Finds | Cornell Chronicle*, 2019). Discrimination has far-ranging effects on LGBTQ individuals’ mental health and these effects are compounded for people of color, youth, and transgender Americans (*Discrimination Impacts Health of LGBT People, Analysis Finds | Cornell Chronicle*, 2019). There has also been a disturbing increase in anti-transgender laws, with 19 bills proposed in 2018 surging to 155 in 2022 (Branigin & Kirkpatrick, 2022). And as of 2022, more than half of the U.S. states have passed laws restricting gender-affirming healthcare for transgender youth (Nakajima, 2022). The growth of such restrictive laws and the increase in discrimination faced

by transgender individuals highlights the dire state of support systems and protections that are in place to validate and uphold the identities of transgender people, and the attack on the autonomy of people's bodily autonomy. Consequently, it is essential to develop and apply gender-affirming interventions that can positively impact the mental health of transgender individuals. Yet, access to gender-affirming care (GAC)—a range of medical, legal, and social measures that support people in comfortably expressing their gender identity—is not universally available across the U.S. (Collins, 2022).

This research project aimed to highlight creative arts interventions as a means to affirming the identities of transgender adults positively. Creative arts—spanning art, drama, music, dance—offer unique spaces for individuals to express their genuine identities, emotions, relationships, and experiences. Such primary expression through the creative arts can foster a sense of fulfillment and promote rehabilitation across physical, psychological, emotional, and social domains (*VA.gov | Veterans Affairs*, n.d.).

I was inspired to conduct this research largely because of my own experiences using different creative arts modalities such as drawing, writing, and listening to music to express myself and improve my mental health. I noticed that my continued involvement in the arts since childhood has given me a creative outlet that has allowed me to stay true to myself, and that these activities have also positively impacted my mental health. I used to struggle with debilitating depression and anxiety, and while the arts alone did not help me come to the place I am at today, I assuredly would not be where I am if I was not able to express myself safely and creatively. I also consider myself to be part of the LGBTQ community, so it was important for me to include members of my community into this research.

This research primarily sought to investigate the perceived benefits of engaging in the

creative arts for fostering positive identity and enhancing mental health among transgender individuals. The four key research questions guiding this study were:

1. What are some common forms of creative arts used by transgender individuals?
2. What are the self-perceived ways the use of creative arts has facilitated the exploration of a positive identity?
3. What self-perceived ways have the creative arts have contributed to mental health improvement?
4. What self-perceived obstacles have been encountered in using the arts to explore transgender individuals' gender identity or improve their mental health?

The main hypothesis was that transgender adults who engage in creative arts interventions—whether through dance, music, drawing, painting, or theater—perceive these activities as beneficial to their mental health and positive identity development. To examine this hypothesis, a questionnaire was distributed among a sample group associated with TransPonder, a non-profit aimed at educating, supporting, and providing resources for the trans and gender-diverse community in Eugene, Oregon. The questionnaire was also circulated within the University of Oregon's LGBTQIA club.

The objective of the questionnaire was to garner insights on transgender adults' perspectives towards creative arts interventions, whether they had used them before, and if these interventions had aided in exploring or cultivating a positive identity and enhancing mental health. Qualitative, free-response questions included, "What were some obstacles you have faced in using the arts to explore identity or mental health?" For quantitative data, participants rated statements on a Likert scale from one to five. An example of this is, "To my belief, the arts have beneficially impacted my process in building a positive identity." The

data from the questionnaire was then used to examine the connections between participants' mental well-being and positive gender identity.

The term nonbinary refers to those who don't identify exclusively as either male or female. As per a 2021 report, about 11% of LGBTQIA adults in the U.S., or approximately 1.2 million people, self-identify as nonbinary (Starkman, 2022). According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, most transgender people identify as male or female, and do not consider themselves as nonbinary. However, there is a growing trend towards nonbinary identification among those whose gender identity doesn't align strictly with 'man' or 'woman' (Starkman, 2022). Other important terms that will be used frequently are transgender and gender-diverse (TGD), which is used interchangeably with terms like gender-variant or gender-expansive. These labels encompass gender identities which do not directly align with either man or woman, fall somewhere along the gender spectrum, or simply exist beyond the binary. Bisexuality is the sexual or romantic attraction to members of one's own or other sex ("Definition of Bisexual," 2023). Pansexuality is characterized by sexual or romantic attraction that is not limited to people of a particular gender identity or sexual orientation ("Definition of Pansexual," 2023).

Literature Review

Art has served as a powerful medium of self-expression and communication throughout human history. From ancient cave paintings to intricate wooden figurines, our ancestors have used art to commemorate significant events, individuals, and symbols. Art has evolved into a therapeutic tool, often incorporated into psychotherapeutic processes since the 1940s, as society has acknowledged art as a unique and innovative way of getting insights into the workings of a person's inner mind (Junge, 2016). The saying, "a picture is worth a thousand words," captures the transformative potential of art. Furthermore, transgender individuals have been a part of

societies long before the term “transgender” was coined, with its first print appearance in American English dating back to 1965, and gaining broader use in the 1990s (*Transgender History in the US and the Places That Matter (U.S. National Park Service)*, n.d.).

Gender transition is a personal, private and individualized process that can take anywhere from months to years. According to the University of California San Francisco’s webpage on transgender care, steps to socially and medically transition are not required to validate individuals’ gender identity, nor is there a specific order to transitioning (*Gender Affirming Health Program* |, n.d.). For TGD minors, there are additional considerations, as medical transitions such as hormone therapy can have different effects depending on whether a person has undergone puberty yet (*Transition Roadmap | Gender Affirming Health Program*, n.d.). Additionally, the pressures of belonging to a marginalized group, the contemporary political climate surrounding transgender rights, and the resulting increased risk for bullying, discrimination and mental illness all contribute to the complexities of transgender experiences. A more recent 2022 national survey by the Trevor Project revealed that 71% of transgender and nonbinary youth reported experiencing discrimination based on their gender identity (The Trevor Project, n.d.). Given these challenges, it becomes crucial to explore therapeutic avenues for transgender individuals.

This literature review sets out to examine how various creative interventions are employed and their efficacy in therapy for TGD individuals. I include research on TGD youth even though this specific study focuses on transgender adults because much of the societal and psychological damage has already been done by the time a transgender person has reached full adulthood. Additionally, safely protecting the identities of the transgender community and the time constraints that are inherent while getting IRB approval to work with youth, all reinforced the

need to work with adults. This literature review also delves into the mental health aspects of the transition process, offering a comprehensive understanding of the role that creative arts interventions can play in support and care.

Types of artistic interventions

In her paper, “An Intersectional Framework for Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality in Art Therapy,” Savneet K. Talwar scrutinizes the interconnectedness of different identities from a sociocultural lens within the scope of art therapy (Talwar, 2010). She emphasizes that conventional art therapy often overlooks the individual experiences of marginalized persons (Talwar, 2010). Talwar's intersectional framework considers the diverse and overlapping identities and experiences of both therapists and clients (Talwar, 2010). Moreover, she advocates for cultural humility, sensitivity, and awareness in the practice of art therapy (Talwar, 2010). This paper highlights the need for intersectionality in art therapy, with an aim to dismantle oppressive systems and foster equity and inclusivity within mental health care (Talwar, 2010).

In a participatory action research project, Asakura et al. highlight the importance of literature focusing on participatory action from the perspective of transgender people (Asakura et. al, 2019). They document a project where a transgender artist collaborates with transgender youth, guiding them through a creative endeavor that reshapes the meaning of being a transgender (TGD) youth. The authors posit that art can serve as a transformative research practice for TGD youth. They approach the subject through a queer theoretical lens to suggest, despite the small number of participants (N=5), that art shows immense potential in challenging the traditional narratives of TGD youth and fostering their unique individuality (Asakura et. al, 2019). Queer theory, which asserts the fluidity of gender and sexuality and views heterosexuality

as one among many sexual orientations, serves as a useful tool to understand power dynamics in society and how they oppress marginalized groups (*Queer Theory: A Critical Framework for Understanding and Challenging Power* – Sdlgbtn, 2022).

E. J. Huston conducts a comprehensive review of the past, present, and prospective future of clinical practice with TGD clients (Huston, 2021). Huston argues that narrative and expressive arts therapy are the most potent methods to support the growth of TGD individuals. He presents a distinctive approach to assisting TGD clients through their transitions by incorporating principles of decolonization and cultural humility. This was important to include as Huston found that the ideas of cultural competence and the oppressiveness of power imbalances in counseling psychology too often furthered the power dynamic and promoted non-intersectional thinking. Additionally, Huston also delves into how different therapeutic approaches converge towards the mutual goal of facilitating healing and enhancing the quality of life of the client.

In the book, “*Art Therapy with Transgender and Gender-Expansive Children and Teenagers*,” Darke provides a handbook for art therapists working with TGD youth and their families, outlining objectives, treatment strategies, and coping mechanisms. Each chapter explores specific facets or issues related to the TGD experience, including transitioning, combating bullying, and building a support network. The book also includes case studies and new therapeutic interventions to assist TGD youth at different stages—before, during, and after the transition.

The efficacy of the creative arts on mental health

Barbee’s study, which involved participants photographing their “gender stories” and following up with open-ended interviews, underscores the importance of recognizing individual

transgender experiences rather than generalizing them (Barbee, 2011). The paper encourages a shift away from pathologizing being transgender, as it has historically been treated and indicates a positive outcome for creative intervention as a means for transgender individuals to express themselves (Barbee, 2011).

A recent qualitative study by Bhattacharya et. al explores the perspectives of TGD youth and their caregivers, focusing on the relationships within the family system (Bhattacharya et. al, 2021). The research highlights the interconnectedness between TGD youths' identity development and caregivers' learning, response, and adaptation processes (Bhattacharya et. al, 2021). Although based on a small sample size (20 families), the study underscores the importance of equality between TGD youth and caregivers in family-centered approaches to affirm TGD identity development.

Trussoni's thesis explores how art therapy interventions can impact the lives of LGBTQ and TGD youths, revealing that art therapy can effectively help TGD youth cope with their gender identity issues (Trussoni, 2016). Unresolved gender identity issues may lead to mental health problems like depression and anxiety (Trussoni, 2016).

Huerta's study evaluates expressive art therapies used with LGBTQ individuals, finding that informed creative arts therapies and clinical interventions can positively impact mental health. These therapies address critical therapeutic concerns such as internalized self-hatred due to stigma against the LGBTQ community (Huerta, T. (n.d.)).

Gender-affirming care and mental health

A study by Tordoff et al. finds that receipt of gender-affirming care in TGD and nonbinary youth (TNB) is associated with 60% reduction in moderate to severe depression and a 73%

decrease in suicidality over a year (Tordoff et. al., 2022). This study illustrates the positive effects of affirming care on mental health during the transition for TNB youth.

Ashley's work delves into the ethical issues surrounding care for TGD youths and explores the best strategies for supporting them through the transition process (Ashley, 2019). Furthermore, the author emphasizes the central role of gender exploration in the transition process, arguing that exploration is a process that can be operated through transitioning, rather than a precondition to GAC (Ashley, 2019). Ashley concludes by arguing that a gender-affirming approach towards caring for transgender youth is the best way to foster their journey of healthy exploration.

The work by Chen et al. underscores the importance of support and affirmation in pediatric psychology when working with TGD youth (Chen, 2019). Affirmative practices include reducing parental stress, anticipatory guidance for at-risk youth who are undergoing medical treatments, and providing affirmative training for people starting to practice with TGD youth (Chen, 2019).

The perceived benefits of the creative arts have not been sufficiently explored, particularly among transgender and non-binary people. Further research is needed to verify the benefits of creative arts across different demographic groups. Despite limited studies with small sample sizes, there has been some success with these interventions. Prioritizing the mental health of queer individuals, especially transgender people, is crucial. Given that TGD individuals are more likely to experience mental health issues than non-TGD people, offering support systems such as creative arts interventions is integral to aiding them in forming and reshaping their identity. To foster an environment that embraces and nurtures TGD individuals, researchers, clinicians, therapists, and society at large must acknowledge the current gaps in support and strive for improvements to better care for this population.

Methods

Considerations

When I was conducting my initial research for this project, I noticed there was a gap in knowledge and information about transgender individuals' perspectives on the creative arts despite the numerous studies and realities of the impact on the lives of people from these communities. There were some studies that examined members of the LGBTQIA community and their perceived benefits of the creative arts and artistic interventions tailored for LGBTQIA individuals. However, there was little information about transgender individuals and how the arts were beneficial in exploring their gender identity and improving mental health more specifically. For this reason, I thought it was pertinent to highlight transgender adults' perspectives and opinions on the creative arts. Initially, I wanted to focus on transgender youth, and their perspectives, but issues of consent and confidentiality complicated this. I realized early on that it was much more feasible for this undergraduate project to work with transgender adults. Additionally, because I was collecting information from human subjects that could be potentially sensitive in nature, it was necessary to complete a human subjects research compliance review with the IRB. After review, it was approved as being exempt due to the low-risk nature of this study and under the condition that I do not use identifiable information about the participants. Studying transgender adults, ages 18 to 100, allowed me to examine a much wider range of personalities and perspectives on this topic, and I tailored my research questions to fit this population.

Recruitment Strategy

My successful recruitment of participants for the questionnaire was greatly facilitated by Dr. Walters' association with Ben Lilley, the Director of Programs and Communications at TransPonder, a nonprofit organization in Eugene, Oregon. I sent an email to Lilley outlining my thesis objectives, potential research benefits, and the questionnaire link. Additionally, I displayed the questionnaire's QR code in the Erb Memorial Union's LGBTQIA room and reached out to the university's LGBTQ club via Instagram with the questionnaire link and relevant information. While I presume most respondents were affiliated with TransPonder, given the anonymous nature of the questionnaire, I cannot confirm this definitively.

Privacy of Participants

To ensure participant privacy, the questionnaire was designed to be anonymous, omitting requests for potentially identifiable information like names or workplaces. Participants were informed via the consent form at the outset that despite our best efforts, absolute privacy and confidentiality could not be wholly guaranteed. The only opportunity for collecting identifiable information was if participants voluntarily disclosed such details in the questionnaire's free-response sections. The collected responses, accessible solely to me, were stored on a secure private platform and only shared with my primary thesis advisor. They were also kept on a password-protected computer with exclusive access limited to myself.

Informed Consent Procedures

The informed consent document was presented at the beginning of the questionnaire, ensuring participants read this vital section before responding to any questions. The document

ended with a reminder that participation was entirely voluntary, allowing interested individuals to proceed to the questions, while those who chose not to continue could simply close their browser. Moreover, participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the questionnaire at any point during their participation.

Research Objective and Design

The questionnaire was designed to gather insights from TGD adults regarding their experiences with creative arts interventions, their effectiveness in fostering positive identity and improving mental health, and any barriers encountered. The questionnaire included both qualitative and quantitative measures. Qualitative responses were collected via open-ended questions, while quantitative data were obtained using a Likert scale supplemented with optional elaborative questions. This combination was intended to lend depth and nuanced understanding to the collected data.

The primary data source was the questionnaire incorporating Likert scale responses. After collection, the data were analyzed and visually presented using tables and graphs. Responses from the Likert scale questions were sorted and compared based on the number of similar answers, enabling trend identification. The literature review provided supplementary data and context.

Participants were initially queried for demographic details like age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. This was intended to assess sample diversity and detect any themes or correlations concerning creative arts engagement.

Research Questions

The questionnaire aimed to explore the following areas:

1. **Prevalent Creative Interventions:** Participants were asked about their most frequently used creative arts forms and their motivations. This aimed to identify popular interventions and their motivating factors.
2. **Impact of Arts on Identity:** The questionnaire sought to understand participants' perceptions of how effectively the arts facilitated positive identity formation. Participants were asked whether they had used the arts for this purpose and were invited to elaborate on their experiences. Additional quantitative data was gathered through Likert scale questions probing the perceived beneficial impact of the arts on their identity. Participants were also asked to compare the effectiveness of creative arts with other activities in promoting a positive identity.
3. **Arts and Mental Health:** The questionnaire attempted to understand the perceived efficacy of the arts in improving mental health in relation to gender identity challenges and anti-transgender oppression. Participants were asked if and how they used the arts for mental health improvement. Additionally, participants were asked to quantify on a scale from one to ten the beneficial impact of the arts in coping with anti-transgender oppression.
4. **Obstacles in Using Arts for Identity Exploration or Mental Health:** The questionnaire explored any obstacles participants faced when using the arts for identity exploration or mental health improvement. Participants could choose from a predefined list of obstacles, such as psychological, time, and resources, and elaborate on how they overcome these challenges, with specific examples.

Overall, the questionnaire aimed to understand the experiences of TGD and other

LGBTQIA adults with creative arts, their benefits for identity formation and mental health improvement, and potential obstacles encountered. It sought to identify commonalities among participants, while acknowledging individual experiences and opinions of TGD individuals.

Results

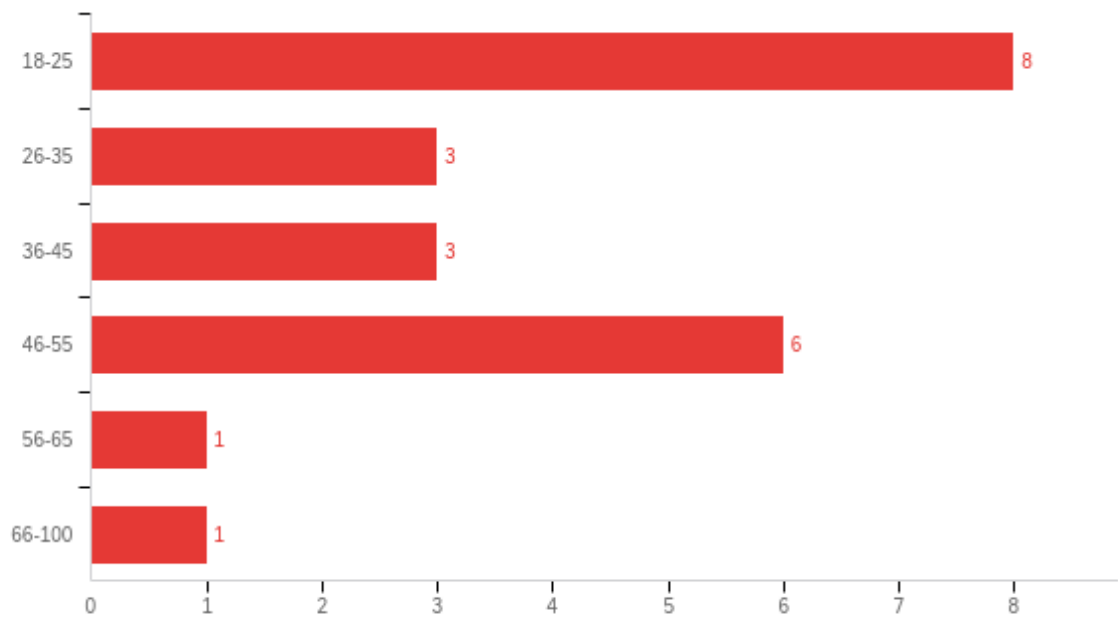
The questionnaire was available from April 21, 2023 to May 20, 2023. By its conclusion, 32 TGD/nonbinary participants had accessed the questionnaire, with 22 participants (69%) completing it in full. The resulting data were organized according to the research questions' structure, thus differing from the original survey order.

Participant Demographics

The majority (91%, or 20 out of 22) of the participants fell within the 18 to 55-year age bracket. A smaller fraction, only 9% (2 out of 22), were aged between 56 and 100 years.

Figure 1

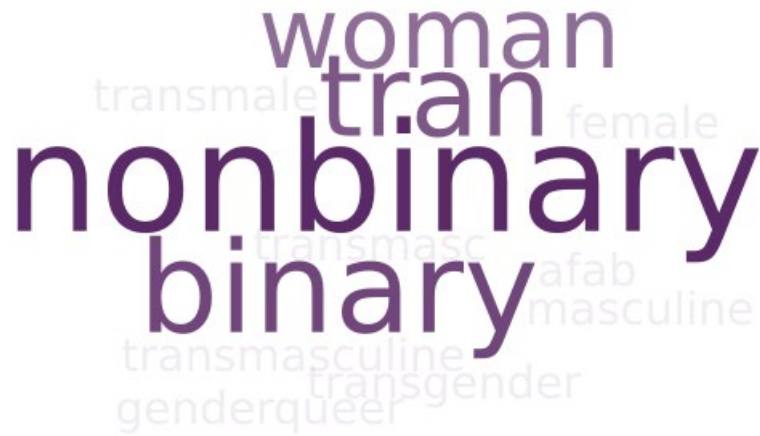
The age of participants



59% (13 out of 22) participants described their gender as nonbinary. As depicted in the word cloud below, the most prevalent gender identities within the participant group are represented by larger, bolder, and darker words. meant that these gender identities were more common among the sample group. Less common identities, while still present in the sample, are denoted by smaller and lighter words.

Figure 2

Word cloud displaying the genders described by the participants



A considerable proportion, 45% (10 out of 22) of participants identified themselves as queer. Other frequently represented sexual orientations included pansexual (23%) and bisexual (14%).

Figure 3

Word cloud showcasing the sexual orientations as described by participants



When it comes to ethnicity, 41% of participants (9 out of 22) self-identified as White. 77% of participants (17 out of 22) reported being of European origins, with White-identifying participants being included in this statistic. A diverse mix of Latinx, Filipino, Native American, and Jewish backgrounds constituted 23% of participants (5 out of 22).

Figure 4

Word cloud illustrating the ethnicities of the participants



1. What are the most common forms of creative arts used by transgender individuals?

The ensuing responses correspond to these research queries from the Qualtrics questionnaire: *“What are your most used creative arts? People use the creative arts for a range of reasons. What are some reasons you use the creative arts? Please rank in order of most often used for this reason to least often.”*

A significant 73.9% (N=17) of participants identified listening to music as their primary means of engaging in the creative arts. This was followed by “other” at 43.5% (N=10).

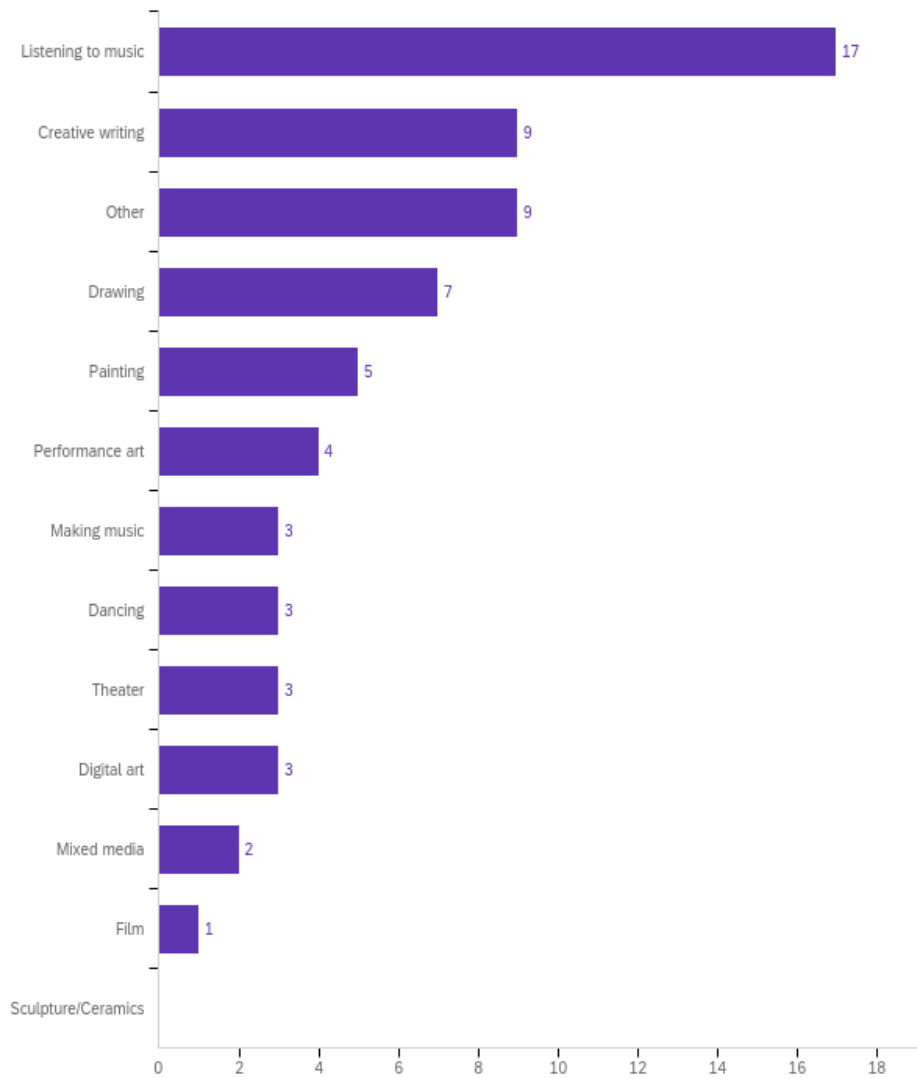
Participants who selected “other” wrote that they engaged with fiber arts, photography, woodworking, drag, insect pinning, and martial arts. Drag is a style of entertainment and performance art where people dress up and perform in highly stylized ways (*Understanding Drag*, 2017). Drag artists present themselves in exaggeratedly feminine or masculine manners and styles as part of the performance, and are distinct from people who identify as transgender. Creative writing (39.1%, N=9), drawing (30.4%, N=7), and painting (26.1%, N=6) were next in

line. Performance art was chosen by 21.7%, (N=5), dancing by 17.4% (N=4), and making music, theater, and digital art by 13.0% (N=3) each. Mixed media was selected by 8.7% (N=2), film by 4.3% (N=1), and sculpture/ceramics by 0% (N=0).

Participants ranked their reasons for engaging with the creative arts on a scale of 0-11, with zero denoting most frequent use and 11 being the least. Self-expression topped the list, averaging at 3.10/10. This was closely followed by mental/emotional health at 3.86/10 and personal growth/expression at 4.00/10. Fun and boredom relief was ranked at 4.57/10, while social change/activism averaged at 5.81/10. To express a specific message or tell a story averaged at 6.19/10 and social connection and critical commentary ranked at 6.76/10 and 7.05/10, respectively. Aesthetics/beauty averaged at 7.05 as well, and education was at an average of 7.48. 'Other' was last at 10.14. The participant who selected 'other' did not specify their reasons.

Figure 5

Graph illustrating the most commonly used forms of creative arts among transgender adults



As Fig. 5 illustrates, listening to music was the most preferred way of interacting with the creative arts, followed by creative writing and ‘other’ activities such as “woodworking, landscaping,” “fiber arts” and “photography.”

Figure 6

Graph illustrating the rankings of reasons why participants use the creative arts

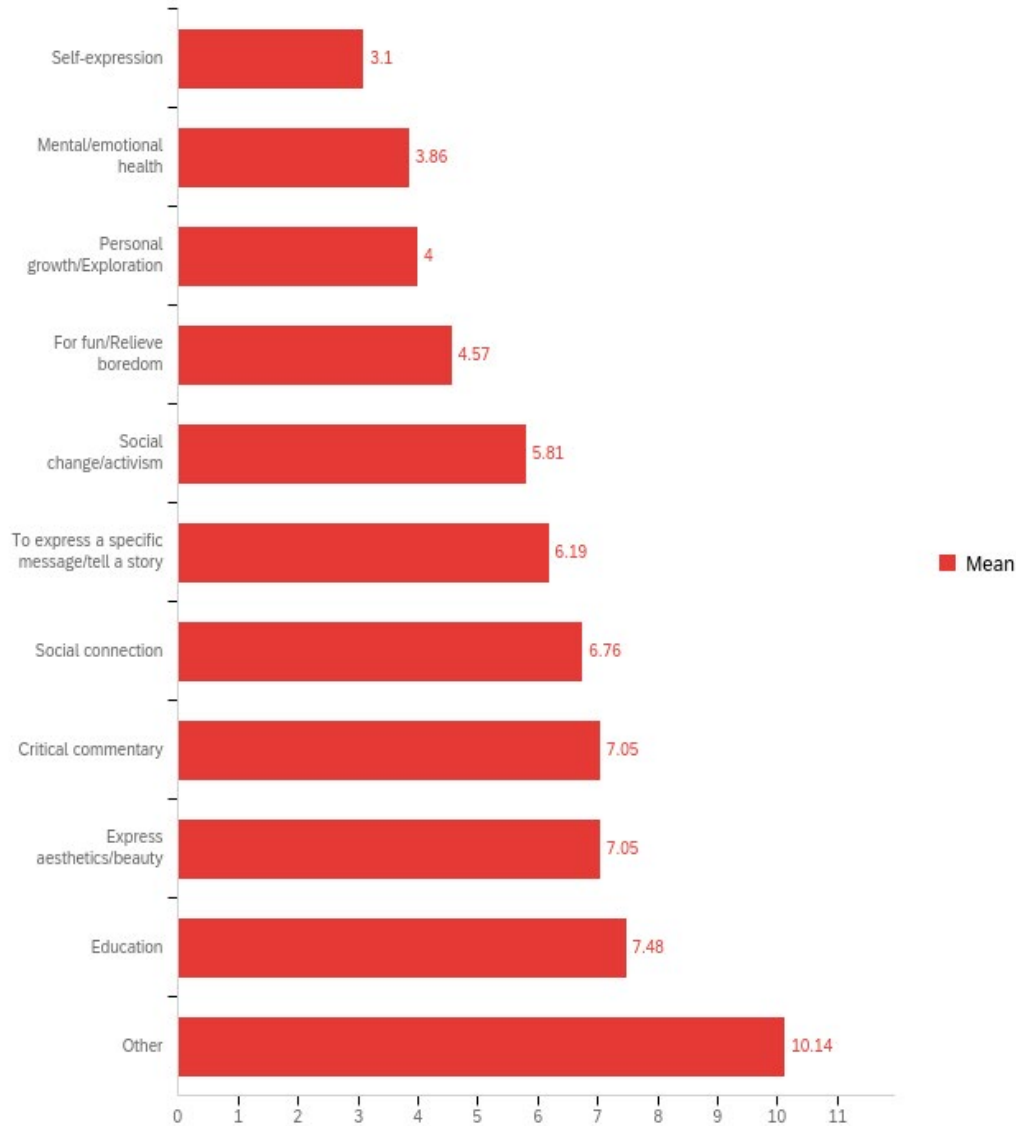


Figure 6 shows the mean scores of how participants ranked their reasons for engaging with the creative arts.

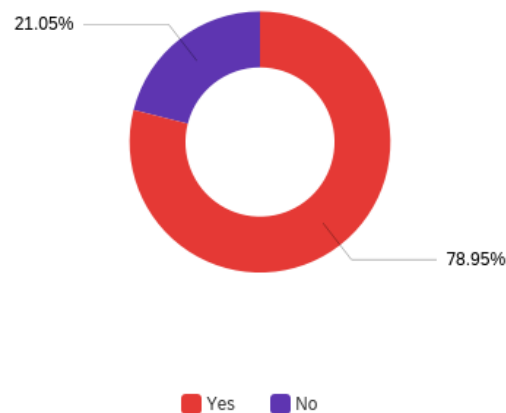
2. What are the self-perceived ways the use of creative arts has facilitated the exploration of a positive identity?

The subsequent questions from the Qualtrics questionnaire relate to this research topic:
“Have you used the creative arts to help you develop an affirming gender identity? If yes, in what ways have you used the creative arts to help you develop an affirming gender identity? To my belief, the arts have beneficially impacted my process in building a positive identity. (0 - Strongly disagree, 5 - Strongly agree) How so? In addition to the creative arts, what are some other activities you have engaged in that have improved your sense of personal identity? Compared to these other activities, is engagement in the creative arts less helpful, the same, or more helpful than these other activities? After reflecting on these questions, is there any other way the creative arts have been beneficial or not beneficial in helping you explore your gender identity and/or improve your mental health around gender identity?”

When asked if they had employed the creative arts helping to develop an affirming gender identity, 78.95% of the respondents answered “yes,” while 21.05% answered “no.”

Figure 7

Graph depicting whether participants have utilized the creative arts to assist in creating a positive identity



As shown in Fig. 6, a significant 79% of participants have used the arts for this purpose. The individuals who answered “yes” described diverse ways they have used the arts to develop an affirming gender identity. For instance, one participant commented on how they use the art form of drag to affirm their identity in a non-judgmental space, stating that “It makes me feel who I am exactly while being outrageous without the judgement.” Another AFAB (assigned female at birth) individual mentioned that singing in more traditionally masculine ways helped affirm the masculine aspects of their identity. Activism was another popular reason for participants to engage with the arts.

“Creating art pieces that stand up for transrights. When I was first coming out, a lot of my art was around exploring my own gender identity. It gave me a space to question and process.”

A particularly noteworthy comment came from a participant who used art to “come out.”

“The way I came out to myself was I decided to clear my mind and draw myself as whoever I believed myself to be after an intense wrestling practice in high school, and I drew myself as a guy. Then it all sort of clicked. And I’ve used it since then to affirm my existence as I put my body in my works of art to help me accept my own beauty.”

The median response to whether the arts positively influenced the process of building a positive identity was 4.11 out of 5, which means that most participants “agree” with this statement. Other activities that improved participants’ sense of personal identity included exercise, socializing with others (particularly within the LGBTQIA community), and spending time in nature. A response that highlights the benefits of interacting with other transgender individuals was:

“Connecting with other trans people! I also enjoy talking to others who are exploring their own gender identities - helping them sift through emotions and thoughts, normalize feelings of uncertainty, and provide language in turn helps me feel like I’m 'trans enough' just as I am.”

When compared to these activities, 23% of participants felt they were more beneficial. 46% found these activities equally beneficial, and 30.8% had mixed feelings, with responses ranging from “hard to say” to “all are necessary.” Other ways participants suggested the creative arts have been beneficial in exploring gender identity and/or improving mental health around gender identity included exploring style and fashion, as well as sharing/comparing creative outlets with other LGBTQIA individuals. For one participant, the arts helped to deter self-harm and suicidal thoughts. Another shared how art provided a sense of purpose through their struggles.

“Even when I struggled in school or interpersonal relationships, everyone thought I was a talented artist. And doing art gave me a sense of purpose and self worth, as well as a tool to work through challenging emotions. Now I work in the music industry and my art is a part of my everyday life and career!”

One participant asserted that creativity, “has always been beneficial. The only time it isn’t is when I don’t make time for it. And that is anti-beneficial.” Conversely, one instance where the creative arts were not beneficial for a participant was when they attempted to join a dance group as a nonbinary person and felt out of place due to gendered costumes and choreography.

3. What self-perceived ways have the creative arts have contributed to mental health improvement?

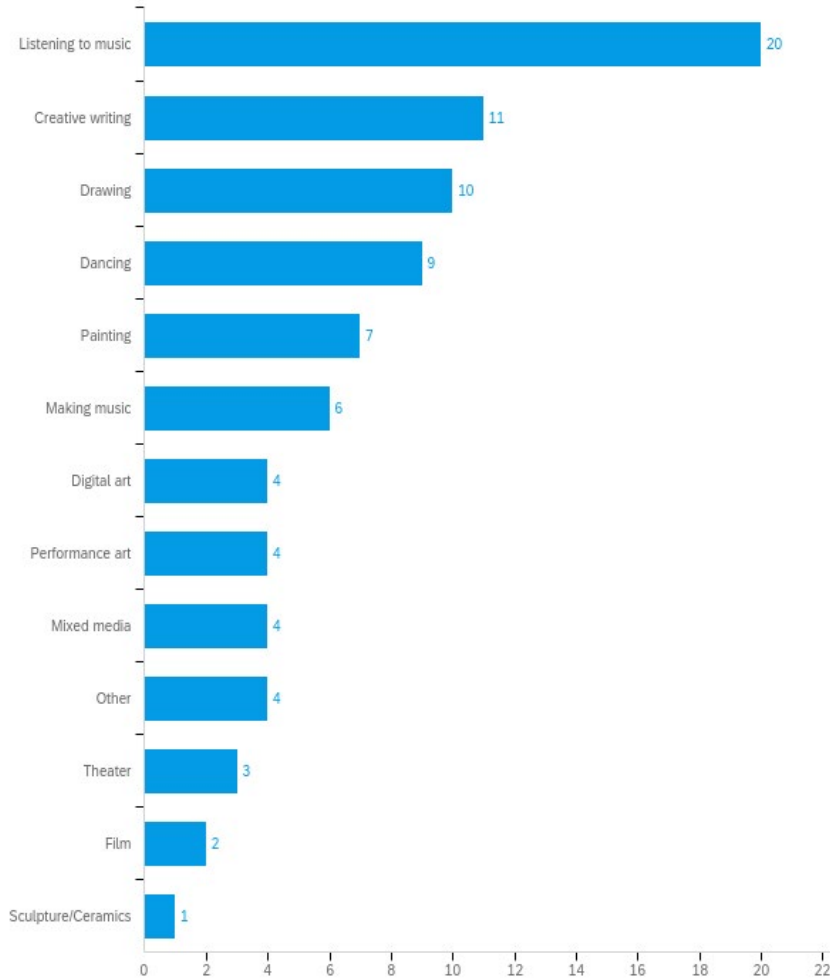
The following the Qualtrics questionnaire inquiries pertain to this research topic: “*What are some types of creative arts that you have used to help improve your mental health specifically? Have you used the creative arts to improve your mental health around any challenges you have faced regarding your gender identity? If yes, in what ways have you used the creative arts to improve your mental health? To my belief, the arts have beneficially impacted my mental health in coping with anti-trans oppression (0 - Strongly disagree, 5 -*

Strongly agree)”

Participants engaged with diverse creative arts mediums for mental health improvement. A significant 87% (N=20) mentioned listening to music, while creative writing at 47.8% (N=11) and drawing at 43.5% (N=10) followed. Dancing was chosen by 39.1% (N=9), painting by 34.8% (N=8), making music and other activities by 26.1% (N=6). Digital art was selected by 21.7% (N=5), and performance art and mixed media were chosen by 17.4% (N=4). Theater was preferred by 13.0% (N=3), and lastly, film by 8.7% (N=2) and sculpture/ceramics were least popular at 4.3% (N=1).

Figure 8

Bar graph of types of creative arts that transgender adults have used previously employed for mental health improvement



The findings resemble the responses to the question of the most used creative arts in general, with listening to music and creative writing appearing in the top three.

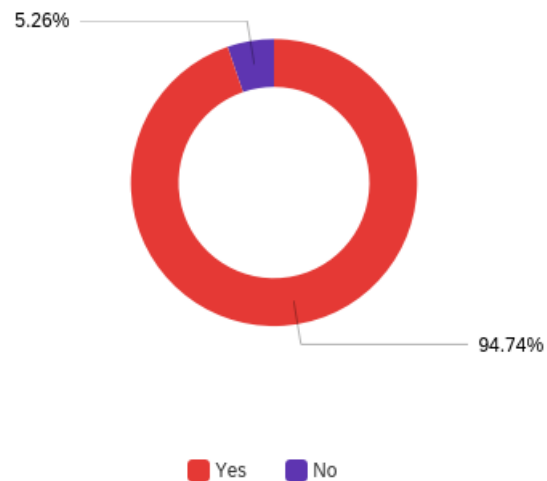
Sculpture/ceramics, while not mentioned in the broader question, proved helpful for at least one participant in improving their mental health.

An overwhelming 94.7% of participants confirmed they have utilized creative arts to enhance

their mental health in relation to challenges they faced regarding their gender identity.

Figure 9

Graphed results of whether participants have employed creative arts for mental health improvement



These findings parallel those of the question regarding the use of creative arts for identity exploration. Participants noted various ways in which they employed the arts for mental health improvement. One individual commented on how they use music for self-soothing:

“Music is my primary self-soothing tool - I listen to music to influence my mood and sing along to regulate myself. I even have a playlist of sad songs for when I need to cry. I will do meditative drawing and painting, where I focus on how the process makes me feel rather than creating something specific - picking colors and shapes I feel drawn to and just filling a page to help me regulate.”

Another participant wrote about how they use the arts to improve their feelings of agency.

“Now, being able to use the arts to create awareness and to empower change improves my own sense of agency. When I was first coming out I used the arts to help me express my emotions - including a lot of grief and anger at not being allowed to transition when I was younger, not being affirmed in my identity.”

Others highlighted expressing emotions and trauma through listening to music, singing, dancing, and writing. These activities were described as stress-relieving and beneficial for exploring self-image. These two quotes from different participants illustrate the therapeutic effects of music, singing, and dancing.

“Music helped me vent a lot of frustrations and sorrows with injustice around my gender not being recognized, healthcare being inaccessible, etc. Kept me from turning those feelings in on myself (shame, depression, etc.) These days i’m fairly isolated. My woodwork gives me hope for ways i might reintegrate into a larger, healthy community.”

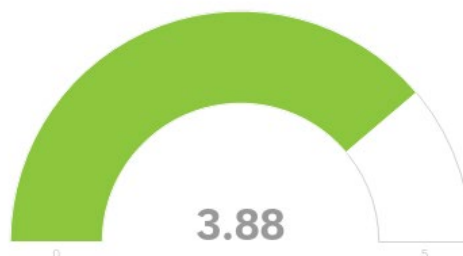
“Singing and dancing are forms of stress relief for me, and they help me process emotions when I don’t have my own words. I also love listening to music made by other trans people, especially about trans identities and transphobia (Against Me!, atlas, boygenius - all wonderful).”

One participant discussed how expressing their feelings of being misgendered through art helped them reconnect with their body, “I am often misgendered, and being about to express that hurt in art helps get it out. Dancing specifically helps me re-connect with my body.”

The average response to whether the creative arts beneficially impacted mental health in coping with anti-trans oppression was 3.88, indicating a tendency towards “agree.”

Figure 10

Gauge chart displaying the average response for whether the creative arts beneficially impacted mental health in coping with anti-trans oppression



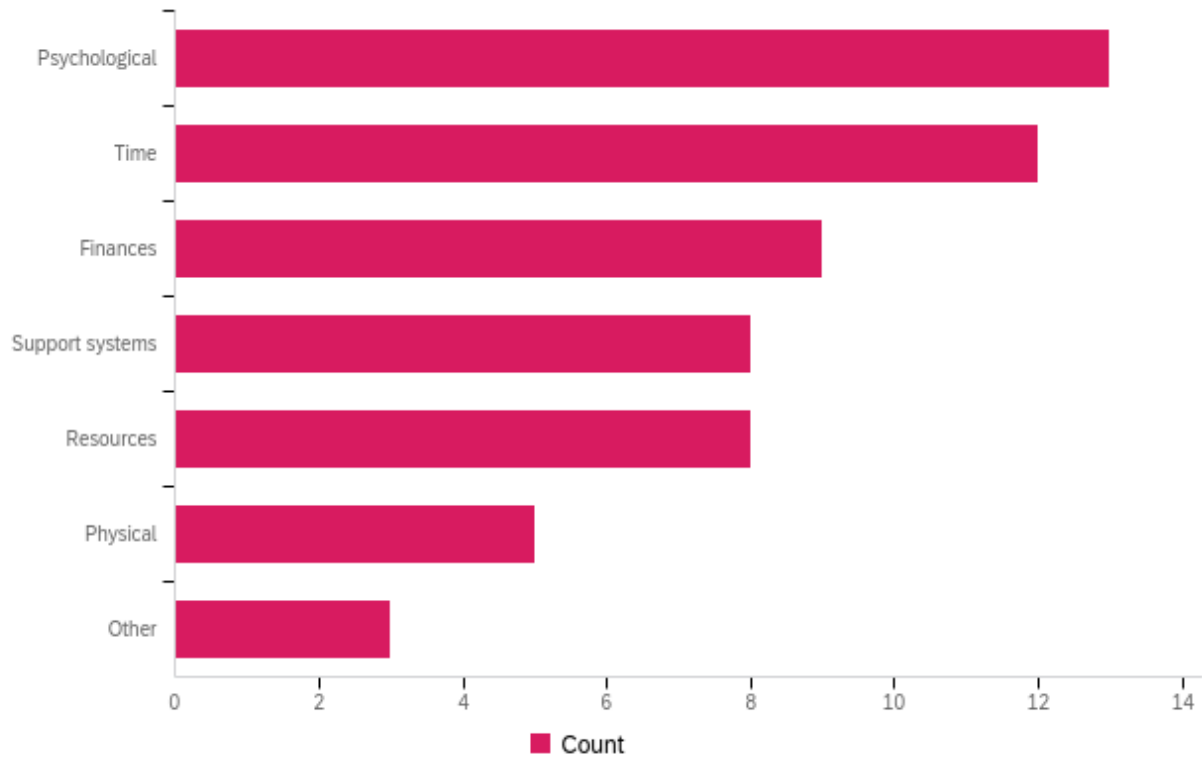
4. What self-perceived obstacles have been encountered in using the arts to explore transgender individuals' gender identity or improve their mental health?

The next set of questions from the Qualtrics questionnaire relate to this research topic: *“What were some obstacles you have faced in using the arts to explore your gender identity or improve mental health, as a child or adult? If you did, how did you overcome these obstacles? (provide an example if possible)”*

For most participants (22.41%), psychological barriers were identified as the most significant obstacle in using the arts to explore their gender identity or improve their mental health, with 13 participants choosing this option. Time constraints were identified by 20.69% (N=12) of participants, and financial restrictions were indicated by 15.52% (N=9). Inadequate support systems and resources were selected by 13.79% (N=8), and physical obstacles were indicated by 8.62% (N=5). The ‘other’ was selected by 5.17% (N=3).

Figure 11

Bar graph showing perceived obstacles faced by participants when using the creative arts to explore a positive identity and/or improve mental health



Responses to “other” included a lack of confidence in one’s own abilities, disability requiring assistance, and open rejection of a participant’s pronouns. Participants overcame these obstacles in various ways, such as consciously making time for creative arts activities that they enjoyed and finding understanding support networks. One participant wrote about how they would work within their limitations, saying, “Working within my limits; any tangible step - is a step, even if only a baby step. "One day at a time.”” Another participant made an interesting comment about the gender binary in martial arts and the importance of finding community saying:

“Finding the right people that understand. In martial arts specifically, it’s “yes ma’am, yes sir”, I had to create my own title to be addressed by. I have not met any other non-binary traditional martial arts. There was no one to talk to about it.”

Several participants wrote about making time to engage with the arts, with one individual saying:

“Sometimes it is difficult to make the time and emotional space to engage with art, especially since I am still fighting against the perfectionist in my head. I try to intentionally make time, and will carve out bits of the day to engage with art. When I travel, I always bring my art supplies with me. If I'm feeling psychologically stuck, I push through by doing the most fun option (like playing an upbeat song or doing a silly doodle) or by working myself through it with a meditative art project (like knitting, coloring, etc). Whenever I am low on art resources, I go to the MECCA for cheap secondhand supplies!”

This comment is significant due to the many ways this individual has managed to consistently engage with art despite psychological and physical barriers. It is important to note how participants ensured they could continue their creative expression in the face of life’s challenges and barriers.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the role of creative arts as an affirming intervention to aid in mental health improvement and the exploration of a positive identity for transgender adults, despite potential obstacles.

Demographic Overview

The typical participant in this study was White, young-to-middle-aged, nonbinary, and queer. The overrepresentation of White individuals could be attributable to the demographic makeup of Eugene, Oregon, where the participants were sourced. According to the 2022 U.S. Census, the city’s population is comprised of 81.1% “White alone” individuals, which closely

matches the demographic makeup of the participants in this study (United States Census Bureau QuickFacts, n.d.).

Popular Creative Arts Modalities

Most participants, about 73.9% (N=17), indicated listening to music as their most frequent engagement with the creative arts. This finding aligns with the widely accessible nature of music, readily available through the radio or music streaming platforms such as Spotify or Pandora. Interestingly, creative writing emerged as the second most popular form of artistic expression. Although articulating complex emotions and experiences related to gender identity can be challenging, creative writing offers an accessible outlet. Minimal requirements include a writing implement and a surface or even a smartphone with a note-taking app. Sculpture and ceramics, on the other hand, were the least popular, likely due to the need for specific skills, studio space, and harder-to-source materials. The study found that the majority of participants used arts primarily for self-expression. These results underscore the importance of the arts as a vehicle for self-expression among TGD and nonbinary individuals, irrespective of the specific form of creative art employed. Self-expression is crucial for fostering a positive identity, especially for individuals marginalized or discriminated against due to not conforming to societal “norms.” Remarkably, the arts were also frequently used as a tool for mental and emotional health, scoring an average of 4.13/10. This rating is below a 5 out of 10, which leans more towards the arts being important for benefiting individuals’ mental health. If it was above a 5 rating, I would interpret this as not being very significant. This finding illustrates that **for most TGD/nonbinary participants, the arts have served as a positive coping mechanism to address mental health concerns, thereby supporting the hypothesis that the arts have been**

beneficial in exploring TGD individuals' gender identity and improving their mental health.

How the arts have been effective in fostering a positive identity among transgender adults

The responses showed a significant majority of participants using the creative arts to develop an affirming gender identity, highlighting the arts' importance as an avenue for identity building. Participants used diverse forms of the creative arts, with performance art and creating self-portraits emerging as common themes. Performance art allowed participants to play with different aspects of gender presentation, such as clothes and makeup. In contrast, drawing or painting self-portraits enabled individuals to visualize themselves beyond physical realities and societal judgements. One participant emphasized the importance of their art in allowing them to "discover reality, not build or develop a gender identity, whether affirming or not. The question of whether it's "affirming" a gender identity or not seems irrelevant." For this individual and likely many other TGD and nonbinary people, the goal is not necessarily to build a positive identity but to align with their true selves. This perspective brings valuable nuance to the discussion: being genuine in one's self-expression can inherently be affirming and positively impacts one's identity.

78.95% of participants agreed that the arts had a beneficial impact on their identity, offering an outlet for self-expression and self-image exploration. However, the degree of this positive impact compared to other activities was varied. Some participants found other activities equally helpful in improving their sense of personal identity, while others found the arts more beneficial. Context also seemed to be a significant factor, with some participants experiencing the arts differently in different situations. One participant, for instance, found gender-affirming

care—specifically top-surgery—essential for their identity, but also noted the positive impact of writing about their experiences. 33.33% of participants declared that the arts were more helpful than other activities to express themselves and affirm their identity. As such, it is unclear whether the arts are effective in fostering a positive identity on their own, or whether a combination of the arts with other activities—such as physical exercise or socializing with the LGBTQIA community— might be more effective. Additional research would be needed to investigate the relationship between creative arts interventions and positive identity-building.

One questionnaire comment highlighted that not all art forms exist beyond binary illusions. For instance, one nonbinary participant mentioned that some dance forms perpetuate gender roles, with distinct costumes and choreography for women and men. Such practices can alienate individuals who don't identify within the gender binary, potentially negatively impacting their sense of gender identity. This finding underscores the importance of awareness within the arts community of the unique challenges faced by transgender and nonbinary individuals and the potential for art forms to either reinforce or dismantle harmful boundaries and binary norms.

How the arts have been effective in improving mental health

The research provides insights into how creative arts have been beneficial for improving mental health among transgender adults. Interestingly, the forms of art that participants used to improve their mental health, such as listening to music and writing, mirror those most frequently used for generic engagement with the arts.

Almost all participants had used creative arts to improve their mental health surrounding challenges related to their gender identity. The arts provided an outlet for venting frustrations and self-soothing, offering individuals a tangible or external method for releasing sorrows,

stresses, and traumas. This cathartic effect underlines the potential benefits of the arts on mental health, supporting the hypothesis.

Participants, on average, responded neutrally or agreed that the creative arts beneficially impacted their mental health in the face of anti-trans oppression. While this result indicates that the arts may be beneficial, it does not conclusively demonstrate a strong impact. Other factors, including culture and environment, might also contribute to improved mental health, necessitating further research to understand the interaction between the arts, discrimination, and mental health. One study by researchers Kevin Tomita et.al., examined how gender-affirming medical interventions (GAMI) impacted transgender adults' mental health. The authors found that GAMIs were associated with lower scores on measures of depression and generalized anxiety, and that among those who desire GAMIs, the completion of GAMIs are associated with better behavioral health for transgender adults (Tomita et al., 2019).

Overcoming obstacles in using the arts to explore identity or improve mental health

Psychological barriers, such as shyness, perfectionism, and lack of confidence, were the most significant obstacles participants faced to explore their gender identity or improve mental health. Time was another major obstacle for participants, reflecting societal pressure around productivity and the de-emphasis on arts in a well-rounded life. Despite these challenges, participants found ways to persist in their engagement with the arts. They undertook activities that were enjoyable or meditative, such as playing uplifting music or knitting, and published anonymous written works online to build confidence. Taking small, manageable steps also helped them overcome psychological obstacles. These strategies highlight the resilience of participants in continuing to engage with the arts, even in the face of adversity.

Limitations of the study

In this study, limitations arose due to the specific context and constraints of the project. The questionnaire, primarily circulated among a small sample of transgender individuals from Eugene, Oregon, does not necessarily reflect the diverse perspectives of transgender adults across the U.S. As an undergraduate researcher without direct personal experience of being transgender, I had to navigate inherent limitations in comprehending and portraying the nuances of transgender lived experiences. This prompted my choice to directly incorporate participant quotes to let their voices shine through authentically, although their selection was inevitably shaped by my own perceptions and interpretations.

In future research, collaborating more closely with individuals that identify as transgender could reduce these limitations and provide a richer, more inclusive portrayal of transgender experiences with the creative arts. Involving transgender youth in such a study would also be advantageous, but ethical considerations and time constraints made this impractical.

The participant selection process might also have biased the sample towards individuals with the time and interest to respond to a survey on this topic.

Summary of Findings

Despite these limitations, the study yielded noteworthy findings about the role of creative arts in the lives of transgender and nonbinary adults. The arts have played a significant role in helping transgender and nonbinary individuals affirm their identity and navigate the mental health challenges that can often accompany the process of gender exploration. From the data collected, music, creative writing, drawing, and painting were common forms of artistic

expression utilized by the participants. Performance art and self-portraiture also emerged as specific methods used to foster a more affirming gender identity. Simultaneously, the study reveals the importance of other activities, such as sharing experiences with the LGBTQIA community and spending time in nature, in promoting a positive sense of personal identity. These activities were generally perceived to be as beneficial as the arts, indicating that a multifaceted approach may be most effective in supporting identity exploration and mental health among transgender and nonbinary individuals. Common ways in which transgender individuals used the arts to improve their mental health were to use these interventions as a self-soothing tool and externalizing internal stresses and traumas. Obstacles that transgender adults faced in using the arts to explore their gender identity or improve their mental health were mainly psychological, such as feelings of shyness or perfectionism, and practical, such as lack of time. Many participants were able to overcome these obstacles by setting aside dedicated time for art and taking small, manageable steps in their artistic journey. Art is not necessarily all for entertainment, but rather is a unique tool for self-expression, born from the need for transgender people to **create one's own self in defiance of societal constructs of the gender binary.**

Implications and Future Use

The implications of this study are manifold. By conducting studies on this subject, the field of psychology and LGBTQIA studies can advance its grasp on the specific ways the creative arts positively influence the affirmation of varied gender identities and improve individuals' mental health. This research provides empirical and qualitative evidence to support the use of creative arts interventions in tandem with other evidence-based practices. The findings from studies such as this can also help the general understanding of what the specific

mechanisms are in creative arts that positively impact people's gender identity and their mental health. Knowing this, mental health professionals may be able to incorporate more creative arts modalities into their treatments, offering additional approaches to the process of healing and self-exploration, tailored to fit the unique needs of LGTBQIA individuals. The field can also use this research on the benefits of the creative arts to make headway with the mental health disparities within the LGBTQIA community and be applied towards developing art-specific support programs for this community.

Future research should include conducting longitudinal studies that will provide more information on the durability and sustainability of the perceived benefits of the creative arts on gender identity affirmation and positive mental health outcomes. Larger sample size, comparing two similar demographics, or comparing LGBTQIA individuals with 'straight'/cisgender or non-LGBTQIA people would be interesting to study and test the effects of the creative arts among different sexual orientations and gender identities. Additionally, more variables of the intersectionality of gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity should be considered to develop more inclusive interventions. Finally, to advance advocacy and support programs for LGBTQ communities, the creative arts can be incorporated into more workshops, providing safe spaces for individuals to work on fostering connections and self-expressive activities.

Appendix A



What happens to the information collected for this research?

Information collected for this research will be used as data for an undergraduate thesis project. Your name will not be used in any published reports or conference presentations about this study. We may publish/present the results of this research. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information confidential.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

We will take measures to protect your privacy. Measures we will take include using the security parameters of online survey platforms. Despite taking steps to protect your privacy, we can never fully guarantee your privacy will be protected. The pool of subjects will be from TransPonder. You may know of other individuals who are participating in the study, but no names will be collected, and information will remain confidential.

We will take measures to protect the security of all your personal information, but we can never fully guarantee confidentiality of all study information. Measures we will take include: storing the data in a secure site, and only the two researchers involved will have access to this data. If any information is provided that may directly identify you, those responses will be de-identified immediately, and transferred securely.

Individuals and organization that conduct or monitor this research may be permitted access to and inspect the research records. This may include access to your private information. These individuals and organizations include: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) that reviewed this research

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

Taking part in this research study is your decision. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you can stop at any time. You have the right to choose not to participate in any study activity or completely withdraw from continued participation at any point in this study without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Oregon.

Will I be paid for participating in this research?

You will not be paid for taking part in this research.

If you have questions, concerns, or have experienced a research related injury, contact the research team at:

Maia Lagna

mlagna@uoregon.edu

Karrie Walters

kwalters@uoregon.edu

An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies to ensure the rights and welfare

of participants are protected. UO Research Compliance Services is the office that supports the UO IRB. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Research Compliance Services
5237 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5237
(541) 346-2510
Research Compliance@uoregon.edu

Participation in this research is voluntary. If you would like to participate, please continue with the questions. If you do not want to participate, please close your browser.

What is your age?

18-25
26-35
36-45
46-55
56-65
66-100

How would you describe your gender?

How would you describe your sexual orientation?

How would you describe your ethnicity?

What are your most used creative arts?

Listening to music
Making music
Dancing
Drawing
Painting
Theater
Film
Creative writing
Sculpture/Ceramics
Digital art
Performance art
Mixed media
Other
<input type="text"/>

People use the creative arts for a range of reasons. What are some of reasons you use the creative arts? Please rank in order of most often used for this reason to least often

- For fun/Relieve boredom
- Self-expression
- Personal growth/Exploration
- Social connection
- Education
- Mental/emotional health
- Social change/activism
- To express a specific message/tell a story
- Critical commentary
- Express aesthetics/beauty
- Other

What are some of the types of creative arts that you have used in the past to help improve your mental health specifically?

Listening to music

Making music

Dancing

Drawing

Painting

Theater

Film

Creative writing

Sculpture/Ceramics

Digital art

Performance art

Mixed media

Other

Have you used the creative arts to help you develop an affirming gender identity?

Yes

No

If yes, in what ways have you used the creative arts to help you develop an affirming gender identity?

Have you used the creative arts to improve your mental health around any challenges you have faced regarding your gender identity?

Yes

No

If yes, in what ways have used the creative arts to improve your mental health?

What were some obstacles you have faced in using the arts to explore your gender identity or improve mental health, as a child or adult?

Finances

Time

Support systems

Resources

Psychological

Physical

Other

If you did, how did you overcome these obstacles? (provide an example if possible)

To my belief, the arts have beneficially impacted my process in building a positive identity. (0 - Strongly disagree, 5 - Strongly agree)

0 1 2 3 4 5



How so? (provide an example if possible)

On a scale from 1-10, how much has the anti-trans legislation related to policies and social messages negatively impacted your mental health? (0 - not at all, 10 - an overwhelming amount)



To my belief, the arts have beneficially impacted my mental health in coping with anti-trans oppression (0 - Strongly disagree, 5 - Strongly agree)





In addition to the creative arts, what are some other activities you have engaged in that have improved your sense of personal identity?

Compared to these other activities, is engagement in the creative arts less helpful, the same, or more helpful than these other activities?

Less helpful, same, more helpful?

Optional: explain further



After reflecting on these questions, is there any other way the creative arts have been beneficial or not beneficial in helping you explore your gender identity and/or improve your mental health around gender identity?

Appendix B



EXEMPT DETERMINATION

March 29, 2023

Maia Lagna
mlagna@uoregon.edu

Dear Maia Lagna:

The following research was reviewed and determined to qualify for exemption.

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Study Title:	Painting a Positive Identity: Creative Arts as an Affirming Intervention for Transgender Adults
Principal Investigator:	Maia Lagna
Parent Study ID:	STUDY00000836
Transaction ID:	STUDY00000836
Funding Source:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Informed consent.pdf, Category: Consent Form;• IRB, Category: IRB Protocol;• rap_worksheet_-_exempt_category_2.pdf, Category: IRB Protocol;• Research Plan, Category: IRB Protocol;
Approval Date:	3/27/2023
Effective Date:	3/29/2023
Expiration Date:	3/26/2024

For this research, the following determinations have been made:

- This study has been reviewed under **the 2018 Common Rule** and determined to qualify for exemption under Title 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(i) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (non-identifiable).

The research is approved to be conducted as described in the approved protocol using the approved materials. Approved materials can be accessed in the protocol workspace in the IRB module of the research administration portal (RAP).

All changes to this research must be assessed to ensure the study continues to qualify for exemption. Research Compliance Services has developed [specific guidance](#) to help you understand when a modification is required before a change can be implemented. It is your responsibility to ensure modifications are submitted when required and approval secured before implementing changes to the protocol

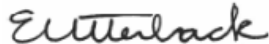
Continuing Review is not required for this study. **An institutional approval period has been established based on your application materials.** If you anticipate the research will continue beyond the approval period, you must submit a **Continuing Review Application** at least 45 days prior to the expiration date. A closure report must be submitted once human subject research activities are complete. Failure to maintain current approval or properly close the protocol constitutes non-compliance.

With the submission of your request, you agreed to uphold the responsibilities of the Principal Investigator and have agreed to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB module of the RAP.

If you have any questions regarding your protocol or the review process, please contact Research Compliance Services at ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu or (541)346-2510. The University of Oregon and Research Compliance Services appreciate your commitment to the ethical and responsible conduct of research with human subjects.

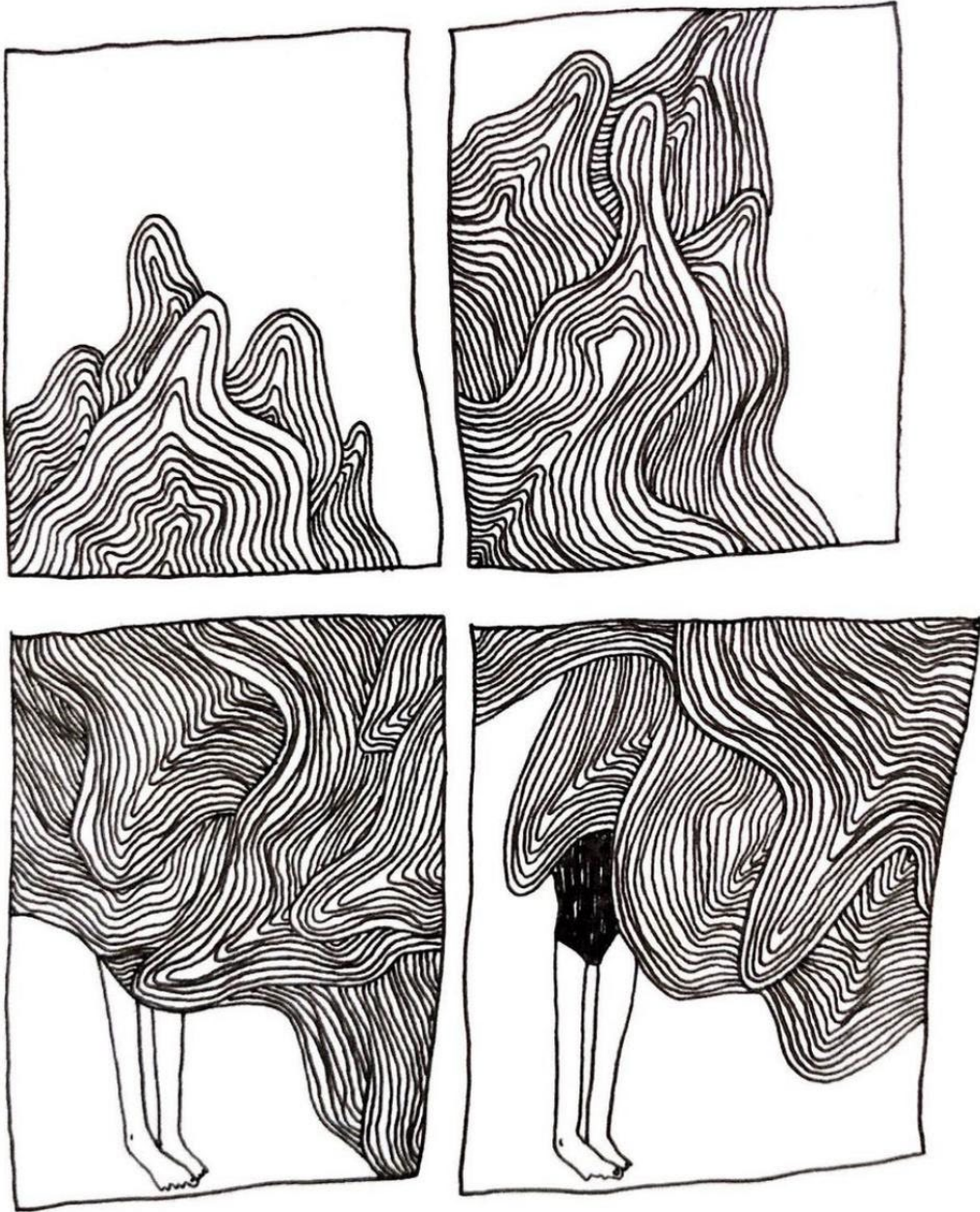
Please consider completing our [user satisfaction survey](#). It only takes a few minutes, and we would like to hear about your experience working with our office!

Sincerely,



Lizzy Utterback
Research Compliance Administrator
on behalf of the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects

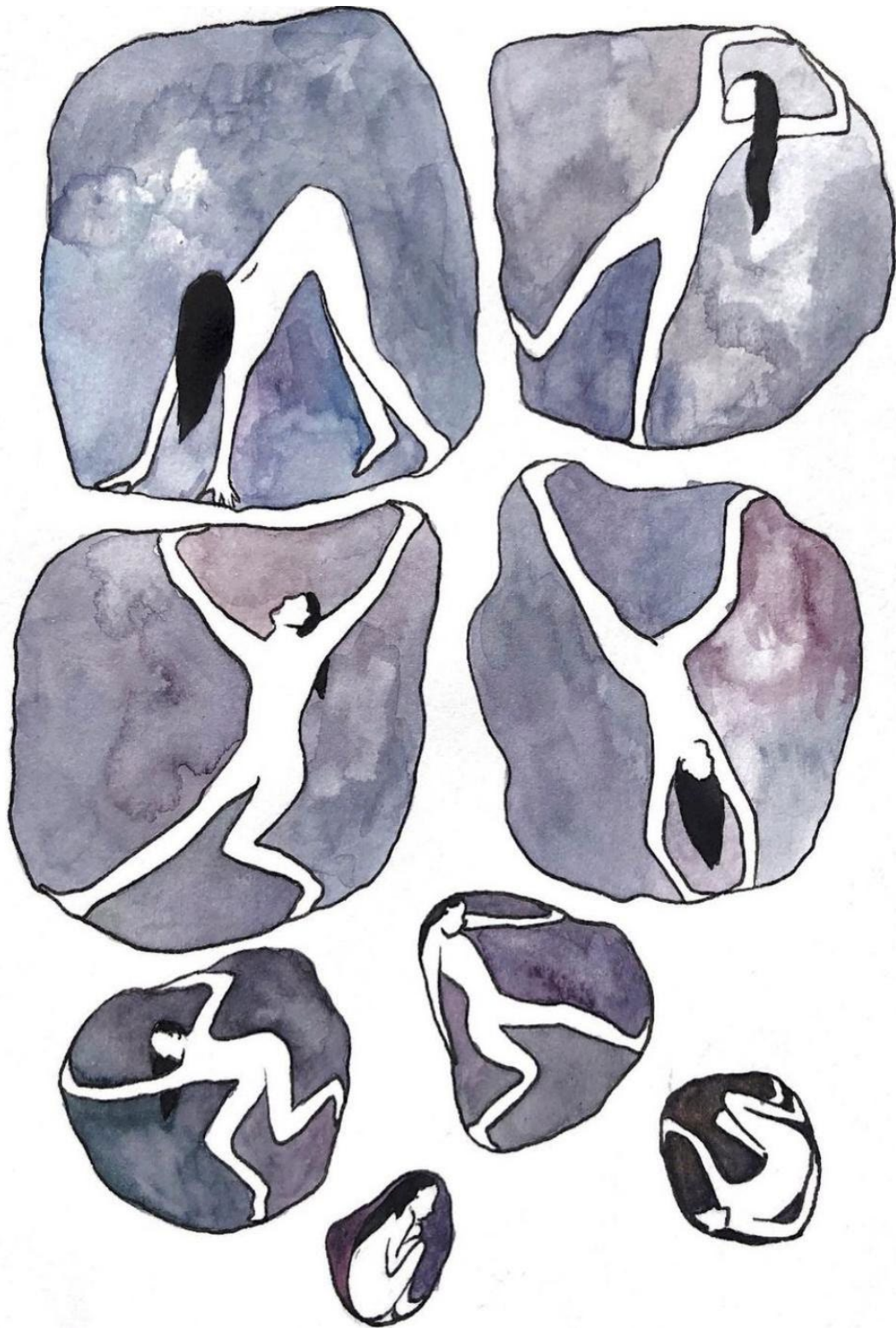
Appendix C

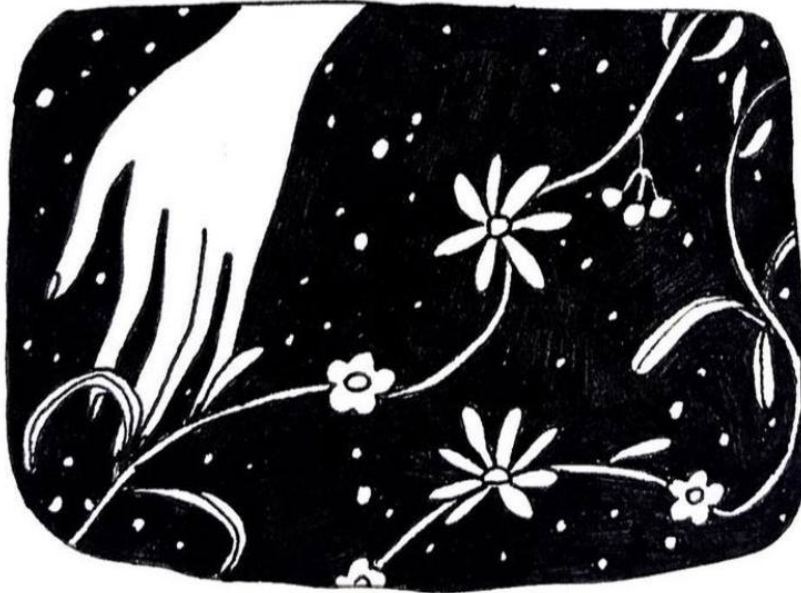












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