Visual Art Therapy as a Culturally Rooted Mental Health Intervention During the COVID-19 Crisis in India

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic, severely strained mental health infrastructure across India, amplifying the need for innovative therapeutic interventions. Given its vast population and the disparities in healthcare access, the country was in a tough spot. This situation put enormous pressure on the mental health infrastructure already in place, clearly highlighting the need for new therapeutic approaches. Visual Art Therapy emerged as a culturally sensitive approach to support psychological resilience among vulnerable populations, especially children, the elderly, the healthcare workers. This paper explores the theoretical foundations of art therapy, it's neurological and emotional effects, and its adaptability within diverse Indian communities. In addition, it will look at how art therapy can be adapted to fit the cultural nuances of India's varied communities. Through case studies and meta-analytical reviews, the study illustrates the effectiveness of visual art therapy in reducing anxiety, fostering emotional expression, and enhancing well-being. Art therapy is more than just a technique; it's a journey of self-discovery, offering a secure environment for those dealing with trauma and stress. The paper concludes by discussing implementation challenges, ethical considerations, and strategies for expanding access to this therapeutic modality within India's public health framework.*

Keywords: art therapy, mental health, COVID-19, anxiety relief, geriatric care, emotional wellbeing

1. Introduction

Art, in its essence, serves as a liberating medium, offering individuals a space for uninhibited self-expression. It acts as a catalyst, encouraging people to voice their thoughts and feelings. Art therapy, often referred to as expressive therapy, and prioritizes the comprehension of emotions, assisting individuals in acknowledging and navigating their internal conflicts and the emotional hurdles they face. Engaging in art creation can be akin to a personal, almost spiritual, voyage and a route to recovery. Incorporating visual arts into therapeutic practices proves beneficial. Painting, for example, serves as a core modality within art therapy, acting as a valuable instrument for healing. Unlike conventional art therapy, which typically involves verbal communication, visual art therapy leverages creativity to foster self-awareness, promote understanding of behavioural patterns, and enhance self-esteem.This paper aims to examine the therapeutic role of visual art practices during the COVID-19 pandemic in India, evaluating their effectiveness in addressing psychological distress across various vulnerable populations.

This study is significant in highlighting visual art therapy not only as a culturally consonant healing practice but also as a scalable solution to India's mental health challenges during crisis scenarios like pandemics. It's emphasis on accessibility, cultural integration, and non-verbal communication positions it as a powerful adjunct to conventional therapeutic models.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted both public health and mental well-being across India. Stress, anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances became widespread, particularly among children, senior citizens, and healthcare professionals. As existing mental health services grappled with the increased demand, visual arts therapy emerged as an alternative, employing traditional art forms, community-based activities, and digital platforms to support individuals in processing trauma and discovering solace. Visual arts therapy proved indispensable for the processes of healing, emotional development and the maintenance of mental health within India during the pandemic. Its capacity to be all-encompassing, culturally sensitive, and flexible was especially crucial for children, the elderly and underserved populations throughout the country. This research indicates that art therapy is effective in alleviating stress, anxiety, depression, and mental distress, as well as in fostering community connections and resilience.

2. Literature Review

Visual arts therapy integrates creative expression through drawing, painting, dance, craft, and digital media as a therapeutic approach to improve mental health and emotional wellbeing. The pandemic-induced social isolation, fear, and economic stress heightened India's mental health burden, highlighting the urgent need for accessible, culturally sensitive, and non-verbal healing modalities. Visual arts therapy gained traction as an innovative intervention complementing traditional mental healthcare frameworks to address pandemic-related psychological distress.

Volume 14 Issue 9, September 2025
Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal
www.ijsr.net

Paper ID: SR25927130123   DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21275/SR25927130123   1380

Effectiveness in Indian Context: Children and Adolescents

A seminal study on children aged 8 to 13 affected by COVID-19 revealed that arts-based therapy interventions significantly enhanced emotional expression, self-awareness, emotional regulation, empathy, and attention span. The research, conducted through pre-post intervention analysis, used various assessment tools including emotional intelligence scales and self-esteem inventories. Children showed marked improvement in creativity-facilitated coping strategies, which translated to better emotional resilience and mindfulness during pandemic stresses.

Geriatric and Vulnerable Populations

Therapeutic engagement with traditional visual arts like mandala creation and projective storytelling combined with cognitive behavioural techniques substantially improved psychological wellbeing and quality of life among isolated elderly populations. These interventions are cost-effective, non-intrusive, and align well with cultural practices, promoting mind-body harmony-an essential aspect in Indian healing traditions.

Modalities and Cultural Integration

Visual arts therapy in India is uniquely positioned as it draws upon rich traditional dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathak as movement therapies, alongside indigenous art like kolam (rice flour mandalas) and mehndi designs for meditative focus. This fusion of ancestral art with modern therapeutic methods enhances cultural relevance and acceptance, ensuring deeper emotional and spiritual connectivity in therapy sessions. The creative process itself becomes a medium for emotional catharsis and symbolic communication, which is vital in contexts where verbal expression might be limited.

Delivery and Accessibility: Online and Offline Modalities

Lockdowns necessitated a shift to online delivery of art therapy, especially for children and youths, which demonstrated effectiveness in maintaining social connection and emotional support despite isolation. Online platforms hosted workshops and creative assignments, fostering individual agency and shared creativity through remote platforms. Digital art therapy, therefore, emerged as a critical tool for mental health maintenance amid mobility restrictions, with evidence supporting its role in reducing anxiety and depression symptoms.

Meta-Analytical Evidence

A comprehensive review encompassing over 7,000 articles identified 16 rigorous randomized controlled trials examining various art therapies in COVID-19 contexts globally, including meditation, color therapy, music, horticultural, dance, and yoga-based therapies. Arts therapies consistently showed beneficial short- to medium-term impacts on mental health symptoms related to the pandemic, corroborating their inclusion as complementary psychological interventions. Similarly, a meta-analysis with 2,700+ participants documented an 18% improvement in patient outcomes from active visual arts therapies, prominently among children and geriatric cohorts.

Psychological Mechanisms

Visual arts therapy promotes externalization of distress through symbolic creation, adaptive non-verbal communication, empowerment, and collective meaning-making. It transforms trauma into post-traumatic growth by facilitating self-reflection and emotional processing. Particularly for marginalized and isolated groups, these mechanisms open pathways for resilience and agency restoration otherwise blocked by stigma or communication barriers.

Challenges and Barriers

Despite positive findings, literature highlights challenges such as small sample sizes, varied assessment tools, and geographic disparities limiting broader applicability. Stigma about mental health care, absence of culturally competent art therapists, and inadequate infrastructure in rural regions remain significant obstacles to scaling art therapy interventions across India's diverse population.

3. Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future research must emphasize mixed-method validation, longitudinal follow-ups, and culturally adapted frameworks co-designed with communities. Scaling digital platforms with hybrid in-person/online care, training more local therapists versed in indigenous art forms, and integrating arts therapy into national mental health policies are key steps forward.

This literature review highlights that visual arts therapy in India during the global health crisis serves as a culturally resonant, effective, and accessible mental health intervention, especially for vulnerable populations such as children and the elderly. The synergistic blend of tradition and innovation enables healing across social and psychological divides, underscoring the critical role of the arts in global health responses.

4. Methodology

Most studies exploring the effectiveness of visual arts therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic in India use a pre-post intervention design or a qualitative phenomenological approach. This means participants are assessed before and after undergoing art therapy sessions to measure changes in psychological health, emotional expression, self-esteem, or stress levels.

For example, one study involving children aged 8 to 13 affected by pandemic-related social disruptions used individual-based art therapy interventions, assessing participants' emotional and mental well-being both before and after therapy. Another approach involves qualitative interviews and observations to deeply understand participants' personal experiences during therapy sessions, capturing emotions, reflections, and narratives.

Participants: Participants often include vulnerable groups such as children, particularly those facing social isolation due to school closures, and the elderly who may be isolated from family or community support.

Samples vary in size but often involve smaller pilot groups (e.g., 5-30 participants) where detailed observations and qualitative data collection are possible.

Participants may be selected purposively to study specific effects of arts therapy on populations most affected by pandemic stress.

5. Intervention

The arts therapy intervention is typically delivered over several sessions (ranging from 8 to 13 or more).

Sessions include diverse creative modalities such as drawing, painting, crafting, dance and movement (including classical Indian dance), collage work, storytelling, and games promoting emotional exploration.

Therapies are often tailored to individual comfort levels, with room for improvisation and adjustment based on real-time feedback and participants' needs.

Materials and environment are prepared to create a safe, welcoming space where participants feel free to express themselves non-verbally through arts.

Tools and Measures
Psychological and emotional outcomes are measured through a combination of standardized tools and therapist-created assessments:

1) Emotional intelligence tests (e.g., Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale – Indian Version)
2) Self-esteem inventories tailored for children.
3) Mental health scales for subjective well-being reported by participants or guardians.

Observer checklists completed by therapists or independent observers to record behaviours such as attention, emotional regulation, empathy, and expressive capability.

Creative assessments like body mapping or six-piece story-making to gauge symbolic expression and emotional breakthroughs.

Data Collection
Data is collected both quantitatively (using rating scales and inventories before and after therapy) and qualitatively (through observation notes, interviews, and participant artwork analysis).

Quantitative data from scales are statistically analyzed using paired sample tests to identify significant improvements over the therapy course. Qualitative data are analyzed through thematic or content analysis to extract meaningful patterns related to emotional expression, psychological insights, and coping skill development.
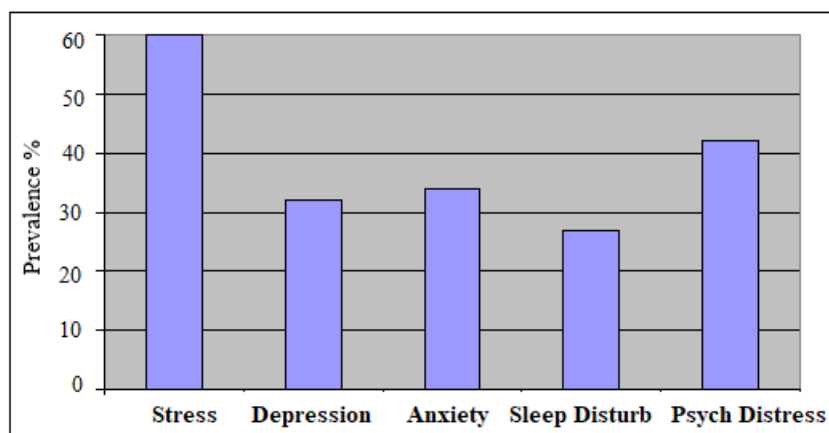
Data Analysis
Mental Health Impact of COVID-19 in India (2020-202Mental Health Indicator

In larger meta-analyses or reviews, data from multiple studies are synthesized using frameworks like PICO(S) or thematic synthesis. These methods systematically evaluate study design, interventions, and outcomes to draw broader conclusions.

Ethical Considerations
Participant consent, especially for children, involves consent from parents or guardians.

Confidentiality and anonymity are maintained throughout the study.

The participatory nature of arts therapy ensures psychological safety and gradual engagement, minimizing stress or discomfort during sessions.

6. Summary

In essence, the methodology in visual arts therapy research during COVID-19 in India combines structured and flexible approaches to capture both measurable improvements and personal healing journeys. By blending quantitative scales and qualitative narratives, these studies provide a rich, nuanced understanding of how art facilitates mental health recovery and resilience in challenging times.

7. Results

Emotional Expression and Self-Image Improvements in Children:
A study on children aged 8-13 showed significant improvements in emotional expression and self-image after receiving arts-based therapy.

1) Measures using the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale indicated better identification, assimilation, understanding, and regulation of emotions post-therapy.
2) Observer assessments reported noticeable improvements increases in attention and emotional regulation.
3) Parents reported stable or improved mental health, indicating a supportive home environment during therapy.
4) Case studies highlighted children becoming more aware of their emotions and exhibiting improved mindfulness and empathy through art exercises and movement-based sessions.
5) Reduction of Anxiety and Stress Symptoms
6) Multiple studies revealed art therapy's effectiveness in reducing anxiety and stress, particularly among children and healthcare workers.
7) Expressive art therapy interventions consistently led to decreased anxiety symptoms in destitute and vulnerable populations.

Quality of Life and Psychological Wellbeing:
Geriatric participants engaged in art therapy demonstrated improved quality of life and psychological wellbeing. Art therapy's accessibility and culturally appropriate methods contributed to enhanced resilience and emotional recovery among isolated elderly populations.

Healthcare Professionals and Burnout Prevention:
Arts therapies, including creative arts and meditation, have been shown useful in building resilience and preventing burnout among frontline healthcare professionals during COVID-19.Such interventions provided emotional support and stress relief amidst sustained workplace pressures.Therapies like meditation, music, color, horticultural, dance, and movement-based therapies all contributed to symptom reduction and improved mental wellbeing.Integrating arts therapies within broader public health strategies for pandemic response and ongoing mental health care.These findings affirm visual arts therapy as an effective mental health intervention in India amid the pandemic, aiding children, elderly, and healthcare workers alike by fostering resilience, emotional regulation, and wellbeing.

8. Discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected mental health across India, with widespread increases in anxiety, depression, stress, and social isolation. Conventional healthcare systems struggled to meet these challenges, especially for vulnerable populations like children, elderly, and frontline workers. Visual arts therapy emerged both as a form of psychotherapy and a culturally harmonious healing practice, proving uniquely effective in this crisis context.

Multifaceted Mental Health Benefits:
Visual arts therapy operated through multiple interconnected pathways that supported psychological wellbeing:

- Emotional Expression and Processing: Through symbolic creation and non-verbal expression, participants could externalize complex, often overwhelming emotions such as fear, grief, loneliness, and uncertainty. This externalization provided cognitive clarity and emotional relief, facilitating regulated expression in a safe space.
- Nonverbal Communication and Connection: For marginalized groups facing communication barriers—disabled persons, isolated elderly, low-income communities—arts offered an alternative language to voice internal experiences, sustain relational ties, and feel heard beyond words.
- Community and Collective Meaning-Making: Group-based or communal artistic projects enabled individuals to reframe personal trauma as part of a shared narrative, fostering social belonging and resilience. This collective experience nurtured solidarity, reduced stigma, and empowered participants through social support.
- Agency and Empowerment: Art therapy rituals helped participants regain a sense of control and autonomy. Structured creative tasks transformed chaotic pandemic realities into manageable routines, helping rebuild confidence and foster post-traumatic growth.

These multidimensional mechanisms suggest why art therapy was not merely a distraction or pastime, but a vital process supporting mental health during a period of profound social restriction and uncertainty.

Cultural Relevance and Accessibility
India's rich heritage of traditional arts, including dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak, and indigenous practices such as kolam and mehndi, uniquely positioned visual arts therapy for cultural resonance and accessibility. By incorporating these familiar media, therapy could honour participants' identities and spiritual frameworks, reinforcing openness to healing.

Moreover, these culturally grounded practices facilitated intergenerational engagement, enabling both younger and older participants to connect through shared traditions in new therapeutic contexts. This cultural integration enhanced acceptance and the efficacy of interventions across diverse communities.

The Role of Digital and Hybrid Delivery
Lockdowns accelerated the adoption of digital platforms for art therapy delivery. Virtual workshops, digital art, and online group activities bridged geographical and social distance, maintaining emotional support and creative engagement amid isolation. The hybrid approach- merging digital and in-person methods emerged as a practical model that expands reach while respecting individual preferences and local constraints.

However, digital delivery also highlighted challenges including internet accessibility, digital literacy, and the need for more localized content tailored to India's linguistic and regional diversity.

9. Limitations and Future Directions

While existing studies affirm the benefits of visual arts therapy, several constraints remain. Small sample sizes, lack of long-term follow-ups, and methodological heterogeneity reduce generalizability. The mental health impact of COVID-19 spans multiple social determinants including poverty, disability, gender, and rural-urban divides; research and practice must increasingly account for these intersecting factors.

Scaling access requires training more culturally competent therapists familiar with local arts and languages. Furthermore, integration with mainstream health infrastructure and educational systems is crucial to sustain and expand reach.

Emerging research calls for mixed-methods designs combining quantitative rigor with narrative richness, community-led participatory models, and innovative uses of technology including artificial intelligence to personalize and amplify therapeutic impact.

According to emerging research, a community-led participatory model, mixed-methods design that combine quantitative rigor and narrative richness, and creative technological applications—such as artificial intelligence—to enhance and personalize therapeutic impact.

10. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented mental health challenges to India, touching people from every generation and background. In the face of such uncertainty, isolation, and loss, visual arts therapy emerged as more than a means of self-expression; it evolved into a powerful, culturally sensitive healing approach. This method offered an avenue for people—especially children, the elderly and healthcare workers—to process trauma, alleviate anxiety, and rebuild their emotional resilience, all without relying on words.

Studies have consistently demonstrated that art-based therapies play a significant role in improving emotional expression, self-awareness, stress reduction, and overall mental well-being during this global health crisis. The fusion of traditional Indian art forms with modern therapeutic techniques created interventions that were accessible, engaging, and beneficial. These interventions were also tailored to the cultural identities and social contexts of the participants.

The adaptability of visual arts therapy, including its successful implementation online during lockdowns, highlights its potential as an equitable mental health resource. This means it can reach vulnerable populations and those in remote areas. Despite challenges like therapist availability and social stigma, the evidence supports a growing role for art therapy within India's mental health infrastructure.

Looking ahead, integrating visual arts therapy as a supplementary tool alongside conventional mental healthcare can help foster community resilience and promote sustained healing. This is vital not only during future crises but also as a regular component of comprehensive public health initiatives.

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Volume 14 Issue 9, September 2025
Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal
www.ijsr.net

Paper ID: SR25927130123   DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21275/SR25927130123   1384