

# Visual Art Expression Of Neurodivergent Teens Aged 16 To 20: A Case Study

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**Abstract** - This qualitative case study examines how neurodivergent teenagers, aged 16-20, specifically those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), share their identities, feelings, and inner experiences through visual art. Utilizing the Expressive Theory of Art, the study highlights arts-based and participatory methods, including semi-structured interviews, artwork analysis, and observations in collaboration with a psychologist and professional artist. The study examines a small sample of three neurodivergent participants. The results indicate that visual art can serve as an important medium for expression, where each participant was able to articulate complex feelings and convey narratives that extended beyond linguistic forms of communication. The four themes of self-expression, emotional storytelling, symbolic imagining, and hybrid visual language contribute to a richer understanding of the inner worlds of these teens. Each participant's visual expression revealed unique coping strategies, individual personal symbols, and emotional depth that was not shared verbally. The findings of this research study add to a body of knowledge that explores the relationship between Autism and creative expression. Moreover, this study highlights the need for inclusive educational and therapeutic art practices to support neurodivergent adolescents in expressing their inner worlds. It is also recommended that future research continues with a broader range of participants, as each cognitively diverse teen demonstrates distinct and particular traits in their visual Art expressions.

**Keywords:** Neurodivergent Teenagers, Visual Art Expression, Autism Spectrum Disorder

## I. INTRODUCTION

Neurodivergent individuals, especially those with ASD, more commonly known as Autism Spectrum Disorder, are characterized by having challenges when it comes to social interaction, expression of thoughts, feelings, ideas, communication skills, and repetitive patterns throughout their lives. Individuals in this diverse spectrum display a wide range of strengths and difficulties, showing how unique and different this condition is for everyone (Moreno and Tobon 2024). Meanwhile, some autistic people experience sensory processing or social skills challenges, while others exhibit exceptional abilities in attention to detail, pattern recognition, and creative thinking (Happé & Frith, 2009). For Autistic people, expressing themselves through art is useful and sometimes needed for them to communicate. Visual and digital art is a unique way for those on the autism spectrum to overcome traditional communication challenges. Through different creative mediums, including drawing, painting, and digital artwork designs, individuals with autism spectrum can visually share their inner thoughts, feelings, and points of view, without depending on verbal expression. This creative

form of expression plays a huge role in the lives of autistic people, enabling them to communicate in other ways that go beyond the normal conventional barrier (Golden Steps ABA, 2024).

People with autism often display exceptional artistic talents, allowing them to perceive and interpret their environment in ways that challenge conventional viewpoints and offer a distinctive, innovative artistic perspective. Their thought processes frequently differ from those of neurotypical individuals, resulting in fresh and unexpected interpretations that imbue their artwork with originality and profundity, utilizing art as a means of self-expression (Madrid Academy of Art, 2024).

While neurodiversity and its challenges are often studied, the artistic strengths, potential, art process, ideas, and unique approach to art, especially in neurodivergent autistic teens transitioning from children to adults, are frequently overlooked. It is essential to start appreciating and exploring the diverse artistic skills and creative expressions that autistic teenagers have as they make their way through this vital transition from teenager to adulthood. Through close examination and research, it becomes evident that these individuals have an enormous sense of the context of art, and this unique means brings a new level to their creations (Burdick, 2011) This qualitative inquiry consists of arts-based participatory action research and is primarily interested in the visual art expression of neurodivergent (autistic) teens aged 16 to 20. Research seeks to understand the personal, social, and emotional aspects of teens' creative works using a participatory action research inquiry process. The interviews collected in this study will incorporate triangulation to promote a multi-perspective interpretation of the artworks, thereby achieving the study's aim. The focus of this study is to provide a thorough assessment and analysis of artwork created by the participants in the past and present to engage in the specific and focused creation of new artwork.

Using the Expression Theory of Art framework, and in conjunction with the Professional Art interpretation of a Psychologist and Professional Artist, the study will process the participants' artwork in order to identify the elements found within. The aim is to understand how the participants were able to represent their conceptualization, feelings, and connections to the world, through their artwork. The larger frame of research for the study is in the formation of the researchers' involvement as an interview and observation data collection process. The research for study involved interviews with participants, parents, and teachers. The interviews were conducted in order to uncover meanings embedded in their processes of creating, as well as to get their interpretation of their practices in making art. The Psychologist and Professional Artist observations, which were valuable for the interpretation process, produced informed interpretations, resulting in triangulated data collected from differing information sources. In addition to the interviews, informal observations were made to give contextual interpretations of participants' engagement with their artwork, as well as engagement with each other. The artworks themselves were seen beyond their aesthetic qualities and as compositions acting as a personal and social representation based on the participant's

lived experiences, emotional responses, and neurodivergence. By utilizing the Expression Theory of Art to interpret the meaning behind their artworks, the research contributed to understanding how these teens made sense of their environmental contexts, self, and social realities, and expressed them through art creation. The main objective is to demonstrate in what ways autistic teenagers can express and communicate their thoughts and ideas through visual art, thereby uncovering the depth as well as the diversity of their perspectives. This research aims to find out how visual art can be a very unique way of expression for autistic teenagers. By analyzing their art pieces, this research aims to comprehend art as an expression system.

The study explores the unique ways neurodivergent, autistic teens convey their thoughts, emotions, and experiences through visual art. It aims to demonstrate how their creativity takes shape and how visual art acts as a significant medium for self-expression. By investigating this, the following questions help to gain a deeper understanding of how visual art contributes to their self-expression: what emotions do the participants express through their visual art? how do the participants convey their emotions through visual art? how do the participants describe their visual art-making process? what meaning do the participants assign to their artwork?

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Neurodivergent

The word neurodiversity first appeared in the 1990s and is part of a wider movement to change negative attitudes towards autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and other learning disabilities. Neurodiversity is the idea that there are many different types of brains. That word just underscores that there isn't any one "right" way that the brain should function. Rather, it accepts that people use a wide range of mental processes to understand and respond to their world. These neurological diversities are considered precious and should be cherished. This idea has grown into a movement for the neurodivergent, people whose brains work differently than what is expected by society, focusing on the cultivation of their talents and gifts (Miller, 2024). Neurodiversity is the term used to describe the range of cognitive differences in all people, but it is often used for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and other neurological or developmental conditions, such as ADHD or learning disabilities. Neurodiversity and Autism Spectrum Disorder Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental disorder characterized by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors. Those with ASD could possess a wide variety of abilities, talents, needs, and problems. Some autistic people can speak and are of average or above intelligence and live fairly independent lives. Other people may not be able to express their wants or feelings, or may exhibit self-harming behaviors, and need total support in every aspect of living life (Baumer & Frueh, 2021).

Neurodivergent is not the same thing as Autistic (the two are not synonymous, but the brains of Autistics are neurodivergent in the sense that they don't develop along the typical path. However, there are so many other forms of neurodivergent

(some naturally within the person and others brought on by certain events), such as learning disabilities, giftedness, ADD, OCD, epilepsy, acquired brain injuries, and PTSD, and they should all be allowed to simply "exist" in the world without judgment. The neurodiversity framework is grounded in the basic idea that neurodiversity, meaning that certain brains are "neurotypical," aligning with a standardized, "normally developing" benchmark, while others are "neurodiverse", distinct from that established, "normally progressing" standard (Topper, 2024).

### **The Language of Visual Art**

Art is frequently described as a form of language. Art critics and researchers studying children's drawings highlight how art shares characteristics with language. This fresh viewpoint looks at how language develops, focusing on aspects like understanding and expression, as well as the structure, meaning, and application of art. Recognizing art as a language suggests that it can play a significant role in enhancing verbal skills (Eubanks, 1997).

Neurodivergent people often struggle with verbal communication due to issues like idioms, sarcasm, and misinterpretations. Traditional language can be restrictive because it forces them to convert their complex thoughts and feelings into words that might not fully express their meaning. Art therapy provides a different way to communicate by letting them express themselves through visuals, which can get around the limitations of spoken language (Gibson, 2024).

### **Art and Emotional Regulation**

Visual art can be a beneficial tool to support emotion regulation and mental health for individuals with ASD. Autistic individuals often have high emotional sensitivity and can struggle when it comes to verbally articulating feelings due to various communication and processing differences. In making art, individuals are given a safe and nonverbal way to externalize, symbolize, and process emotion at a pace that works for them (Gurber and Oepen, 2018). As noted by Schweizer et al., (2014), children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) can orient themselves to express their inner emotional conflicts, while the organized creative processes reduce psychological distress while engaged. The outcomes of art interventions sometimes resulted in participants having improved emotional awareness, reduced anxiety, and improved self-regulation. Evans and Dubowski (2001) similarly observed autistic children who participated in therapeutic art-making show growth in self-concept and communication skills where verbal communication was not expressed. Additionally, research indicates that visual art activities are multisensory, repetitive, tactile, and align with the interests and calming needs of a range of people with autism (Martin, 2009). Art-making's having a routine can provide a predictable and sensory-orderly experience, which may help to ease overstimulation, impacting overall emotional regulation. Furthermore, Malchiodi (2012) argued that art can be a powerful bridge for healing and psychological integration when delivered in a trauma-informed, neurodiversity-affirming manner. This collectively reminds us that art is not merely a channel for creative development; it is a valid therapeutic practice that nurtures emotional growth, facilitates mental health and champions the communicative diversity of every individual who considers themselves neurodivergent.

## Visual Art Therapy for Emotional Expression

Art therapy has various benefits, helping individuals express their emotions, improve their mental health, foster interpersonal relationships, and improve their quality of life. Art therapy applies to people of different ages and psychological conditions and has a wide range of application prospects. Art therapy is flexible and versatile, and can be customized according to the different needs of different patients. Art therapy is a kind of spiritual communication, with mapping and covert; art is like a bridge, which enables doctors to quickly improve their understanding of the patient, know the patient's needs and problems, and take timely measures and methods. Art allows people to let go of their disguises and masks and let the language of their hearts speak .

The main form of art comprises three aspects: artworks, art creation, and art appreciation. Art therapy is a form of art-mediated psychotherapy in which the process of learning, creating, and appreciating art under the guidance of a professional releases the negative emotions accumulated in the patient's deeper consciousness in his or her life, thus achieving the purpose of relaxation. Appreciating artworks not only helps disturbed patients express their inner emotions but also helps individuals express their emotions, solve problems, and promote psychological growth through the creation of artworks. Art therapy believes that the psychological experience in the process of art creation and appreciation can help individuals recognize themselves and achieve the goal of psychotherapy. The process of art creation is a form of healing itself, whereby the artwork responds to the patient's latent conscious emotions, and then through the therapist's interpretation and psychoanalysis, to achieve the therapeutic goal, while the patient's reflection on his/her artwork and the creative process can be guided and analyzed by the therapist so that the purpose of art therapy can be realized together (Wang, 2024).

Art therapy has been reported to be beneficial for the understanding and expression of emotions and feelings in teenagers and adolescents with neurodivergent brains. This technique encourages and focuses on drawing or painting as a means of communication to depict thoughts and emotions that might prove hard to describe in words. As a consequence of doing art, teenagers can cope with their feelings, handle stress, and boost their self-worth, which nurtures their psychosomatic growth as well. It is also important to note that due to the abstractness of art therapy, it is particularly useful for those who anticipate communicative difficulties in availing any other modus operandi of interaction, giving them opportunities to develop in a non-judgmental space (Pauker, 2024).

## Expression

A large number of philosophers still hold the traditional view that emotions are mental phenomena that bear a subjective or introspective quality. But there is a debate about the nature of this subjectivity and how much awareness people must have of their emotional state. But many philosophers, influenced by developments in the social sciences, are increasingly approaching emotions in ways that make use of observable factors: expressive behavior, physiological responses, as well as the social and linguistic context connecting emotions to observable codified behavior.

Nonetheless, there remains a widely shared position that emotions are experiences of feeling. at their most basic level. (Solomon, nd.) Though opinions will vary, there is a generally accepted view: emotions are primarily experiences of feeling. The representation of self in art is simply the manifestation, in a particular medium, of the emotions, thoughts, and experiences of the artist. This idea is part of expression theory, which states a work of art is the form of transmitting the emotional experiences of the artist (Encyclopedia.com, n.d.). Berettoni (2017) on Collingwood whose work on emotion in art falls under the umbrella of expression theory emphasizing that true expression leads to a deeper understanding and alleviation of emotional oppression.

### **Emotional Expression on Artistic Expression**

Expression is essential in helping individuals with autism build empathy. Expression involves establishing a space in which the individual is able to express and discuss their emotions openly and safely. They must first understand and acknowledge their own feelings in order to construct the processes necessary to recognize and empathize with the feelings of others (Golden Steps ABA, 2024). Emotional expression in autism is an essential part of artistic expression. Autistic people develop valuable perspectives and express a unique breadth of emotion in their art which is often stunning or remarkable. This type of expression is often cathartic for the artist, and hopefully raises the right type of awareness and understanding of autism within the broader community. (HeyASD, n.d.) Individuals with autism also communicate a variety of emotions and perspectives through the experiential forms of art and art-making, which can show us a glimpse of their complicated worlds. Art therapy affords individuals with ASD and ability to communicate effectively by stimulating reflexive communication and emotions, and facilitate expression of children in ways they could not do excluding in art therapy. A nonverbal manner of expressiveness for demonstrative purposes can help individuals who struggle to verbalize their feelings and experiences (Verywell Health, 2021). Drawing and painting, some examples of creative activity that promote emotional emergence and processing, enhance social interactions and self-awareness and assists in developing empathy (Golden Steps ABA, 2024).

### **Creativity in ASD**

The links established between creativity and autism have been studied extensively, especially concerning originality. Studies have reported a creative advantage in adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in terms of linguistic originality and metaphor making - both of which indicate an ability to think in unorthodox ways. Although originality was found to be a strength, some studies reported that those with ASD experienced difficulties with creative fluency and flexibility in terms of divergent thinking (Best et al, 2015).

Drake et al. (2010) showed relationships between childhood artistic ability and strong local processing skills - specifically attention to detail. This local processing advantage is often seen in people with autism as well, and plays a key role in the unique visual style of people with autism. Interestingly, the bias towards local processing is seen in typically developing individuals with strong realistic drawing

abilities, and these authors suggest that local visual processing, as evidenced in the studies above, may be an indicator of visual-spatial creativity (Drake & Winner, 2011).

## **Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

### **Expressive Theory of Art**

The Expressive Theory of Art (18th, as cited in Bourne, n.d.) comes from the Romantic movement, which rebelled against the 18th-century classicism and put the individual at the focus of art. This theory states that art is the expression of individual feelings and emotions unique to the artist. If it were really good art, it would convey those feelings and emotions that the artist wanted to express. This theory emphasizes the emotional experience generated by artworks, suggesting that art serves as a medium through which emotions can be communicated and understood. Expression theory, which emphasizes emotional sincerity, is a major contributor to the creation and enjoyment of artistic works. The expression theory of Collingwood (Berettoni, 2017) shares two fundamental notions: that art essentially involves expression, and that this expression corresponds to the mental state of the artist. Expression theories persistently state that art is a representation of feelings (or thoughts) that come from the artist in a way that is not able to imitate or represent as representational and mimetic theories would (Wiltsher, nd.). Tolstoy (1897, as cited in leo-tolstoy.com, 2022) proposed that art is very personal and subjective. In this light, the artist expresses personal experiences or feelings that an audience can relate to. For 16-20-year-old neurodivergent teens, visual art becomes a unique form of expression, a non-verbal language in which they can express complex emotional and mental states that they may not be able to put into words. This research is about how neurodivergent people use art as a medium through which they express their emotions, who they are, and what they perceive. Art, from this theoretical standpoint, is seen as an essential means of bridging communication barriers between neurodivergent teens and their social environments.

## **III. MATERIALS AND METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study adopted an art-based participatory case study research design to investigate visual expression with neurodivergent teenagers from ages 16 to 20. A qualitative approach was taken to ensure depth and complexity in the understanding of participants' personal experiences, perspectives, and artistic expressions of what they were communicating in their visual art. The case study approach allowed the researcher to explore participants individually, and more deeply in terms of process, style, and personal insight, while conveying the ways that neurodivergent individuals express themselves visually.

### **Participants/Data Sources**

The participants in this study consisted of a specific group of neurodivergent teenagers that were selected by age range of 16 to 20, considering specific criteria of age range, neurodivergence ASD diagnosis, participation in visual arts, and ability to communicate lived experiences, based on the research purpose. Focusing on this

group of artists that are neurodivergent autistic teens, allowed the research to examine the ways the neurodivergent autistic teens made visual representation in order to communicate ideas and feelings through art while providing self-reflection, by how they uniquely traverse and articulate their realities into art. The students were confirmed by the parents' professional diagnosis to assure trustworthiness.

For the purpose of this study, the researchers selected three participants into the study, maintaining a small sample size through purposive sampling, (as two-three participants typically damp at this sample size), to provide considerable and thorough data collection and focused attention on each participant's story while providing a manageable comparison for patterns across cases (Marrelli, 2007). The three participants included in the study had distinct perspectives based on their lived experiences as neurodivergent individuals, their artistry, and their particular life narratives. This form of diversity, afforded to the researchers as a result of selecting participants, was important for understanding both the breadth of visual expressions in the neurodivergent community and the breadth of stories that existed across individuals. The researchers recruited participants in order to find similarities, but the goal was to recognize and cultivate different patterns of expression that neurodivergent adolescents use through visual expression to make meaning that creates the meaningfulness of lived experience for the artist. This research responds to a critical gap in understanding autism through the lens of art and neurodiversity.

Table 1  
 Profiles of the Neurodivergent Teen Aged 16-20

No .	Participants	College	Course	Age	Gender	Condition
1	Participant A	1 <sup>st</sup> Year College	Tradigital Fine Arts	18	Female	ASD, ADHD, Anxiety
2	Participant B	1 <sup>st</sup> Year College	Tradigital Fine Arts	20	Male	ASD
3	Participant C	—	—	20	Male	ASD, ADHD, Anxiety

### Participant Profiles

The participants were selected via purposive sampling with a focus on neurodivergent adolescents between 16 to 20 years of age, particularly those with autism. They were selected for their abilities to create art and their willingness to communicate their ideas and experiences through the visual arts. Participants were instructed to obtain parental or guardian consent prior to participating, which was in

accordance with the ethical protocols that could be held at the institutional level and for the participants to be clear of the study they were involved in. **Participant A.** 18 years old, female, first year verbal-autistic, ADHD and anxiety student in Tradigital Fine Arts. She indicated that she felt emotionally connected to her art when creating, specifically driven by anime and cartoons. **Participant B.** 20 years old, male, also a first year Verbal- Autistic Tradigital Fine Arts student. His perspective of art was more design based and he indicated that he enjoyed exploring art for his own personal engagement. **Participant C.** 20 years old, male, young artist, currently living in Toronto with autism, ADHD, and as well as anxiety. He began his creative practice in early childhood using painting as a means of communicating even before he could use words. Participant C, was studied through a publicly available YouTube interview (Lee, 2023).

Participants A and B's parents confirmed that they had ASD. Participant C confirmed it via his media channel. All of the individuals did not have dyslexia (neurodevelopmental) disorder.

### **Tools, Instruments, and Procedure**

Both reviewed by experts, semi-structured interviews and visual documentation were used in a mixed-methods approach to collect data from participants. Semi-structured interviews were employed as a means of data collection to direct conversations concerning core areas including personal provocation, expression of emotion, and participants' understanding of value for their artwork in a landscape where emotions and experiences may have previously dictated action. Semi-structured interviews were designed to generate qualitatively open-ended responses, giving participants an informal venue to reflect upon, offer lived experience (insights), and personalize the story of their practice. The semi-structured interviews included prompts and specific questions to elaborate participants' unique perspectives and were organized in a design where they adjusted evolving with participant interviews and emergent boundaries for data collection (Given, n.d).

A field journal was recorded to document observations that took place at the time and place of each session to strengthen the trustworthiness and transparency of data collection, and to document in real time the events and behaviors. The observational checklist was also based on standardized formats that psychologists developed to observe, and assess, emotional, and behavioral indicators of art therapy (Malchiodi, 2012).

In the data collection process, the researchers informed participants about the study's aims, methods, and confidentiality. Informed consent were obtained from both the participants and their guardians using the ethical board review approval. Semi-structured interviews were scheduled and conducted at times that suit the respondents. All of the interviews were audio-recorded so that the data could be captured effectively and later transcribed in order to inform the writing of the findings.

## **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings are organized by research questions, and the themes that emerged

holistic account of the visual art expression of neurodivergent teens aged 16 to 20.

The data of this study were obtained from one-on-one interviews and YouTube sources. Two Tradigital Fine Arts first-year students were interviewed to share their lived experiences on art expression, and a recorded YouTube presentation of a neurodivergent autistic teen. Both sources were analyzed to identify recurring themes, emotional patterns, and artistic choices relevant to research objectives.

To answer the research questions, seven themes emerged, each of these themes will be presented and discussed as follows.

## Emotions Expressed Through Visual Art

### *Mixed Views on Emotional Expression*

Table 2

Participant A ASD, ADHD, Anxiety	Participant B ASD	Participant C ASD, ADHD, Anxiety
-Happy and sad	-Not to do emotional art anymore	-Experiencing emotion (such as anger) is so important
-Absorbed in emotions	-Likes to show parts of things that make the participant think	-Letting out emotions is important
-Relaxation distracts, forgets to finish her art		

Participant A and C are in touch with their emotions, whereas Participant C no longer enjoys emotional art and prefers to show aspects that “make him think”. Participant C has unique insights among the two participants, which APA (2013) states that, part of the ASD individuals show hyper-or-hypo-reactivity to sensory input in which individuals may either overreact (hyper-reactivity) or underreact (hypo-reactivity) to sensory inputs.

**Participant A** *“It’s happy, sad—it’s all over my head.” “Even when I’m not drawing, I’m thinking about it.”* However she also said being fully absorbed in the emotions could get in the way of her process: *“Relaxation could distract me more... makes you forget the art that I need to finish.”*

**Participant B** said, plainly: *“I’ve seen other people do emotional art, but I don’t do that anymore.” “It’s not my thing. I like showing parts of things that make me think, not emotions.”*

**Participant C** is quite direct about the role of emotion in his work and believes it is necessary: *“Experiencing emotion is so important because ... I had so much anger.” “Letting your emotions out is important.”*

Ogundele (2018) states that strong emotions such as frustration, excitement, or anxiety can emerge unexpectedly and dramatically, or they may develop gradually, lingering for

extended periods. These emotional responses are natural manifestations of a child's distinct inner world, rather than signs of issues that need to be resolved. Rather than perceiving these emotional expressions as problematic, it is beneficial to recognize them as essential elements of each child's experience. This viewpoint fosters an appreciation for the sensory and emotional experiences of children and emphasizes the importance of providing support through safe and adaptive methods, such as art therapy.

### Conveying Emotion Through Visual Language

#### *Ways in Expression Through Storytelling*

Participant A ASD, ADHD, Anxiety	Participant B ASD	Participant C ASD, ADHD, Anxiety
-Imagination before drawing	-Likes to show works with no explanation	-Picturing everybody in colour, and emotions, and just what is felt inside
-Expression of feeling and what is imagined with the words from the book	-Lets the piece speak	
-Stopping to reconstruct the project because of the designs		

**Participant A**, *"I can still imagine before I draw... still not yet draw as I am still thinking about imagining."* She connects her drawings to story writing when she states: *"Yeah, it is both - the expression, the feeling of what I imagine, and the words from the book."* *"Sometimes I stop it, and make it under reconstruction because of the character designs."* through images: *"I like to show my works. I don't explain much; I let the piece speak."*

**Participant B** told stories through images, but did not verbally elaborate. Through observations the researchers notice he rarely initiated any discussion about his work.

**Participant C**: *"I just pictured everybody was colour, and emotions, and just the feeling they feel inside."*

ASD exists on a spectrum, meaning that traits and abilities can differ significantly from one individual to another. The varying ways that participants used storytelling, using fictive narratives, visuals to represent symbolism, and metaphor for emotional connections, emphasized the degree to which narrative is a mechanism for processing internal lived experiences. This supports the National Institutes of Health's research, which indicates that storytelling through art therapy allows adolescents, especially those with communication difficulties, to project emotions, re-frame personal stories, and explore identity in a safe visual representation (Miller, 2017)

**Artistic Identity and Style**  
*Anime, Cartoons, and Hybrid Styles as Creative Identity*

Participant A ASD, ADHD, Anxiety	Participant B ASD	Participant C ASD, ADHD, Anxiety
-Anime and cartoons becoming friends together is a big adventure	- Just wanted to show something personally done	
-Feeling of making and a whole lot more of drawings in hybrid, 2D, with 3D		

**Participant A** influenced by anime and cartoons said, *“My idea of anime and cartoons becoming friends together is about the big adventure... The value of why they mean anything to us.” “I think it gives us a whole lot more drawings and feelings of making.” “I want it to be hybrid, 2D with 3D... big but small.”*

**Participant B** is also inspired by the same genres but from a slightly different and more personal style perspective: *“I just want to show something that I have wanted to create... and I know it’s not going to be perfect.”*

**Participants A and B** have been influenced a lot with cartoons and anime, while **Participant C** is not.

The theme is indicative of how anime and cartoon styles are markers of identity and creative language for neurodivergent teens, providing accessible and familiar symbolic tools for narrative and personal construction (Baxter, 2017). Anime doesn’t seem to be the cause of teens’ aggressive actions but it does have a possibility of affecting one’s perception of the world around them, just like any other form of media. Anime’s “highly expressive visual language,” emotionally saturated narratives, and predictable emotional cues help children with ASD regulate emotions and better interpret social signals (Tzila et al., 2025).

**Art-Making Processes and Creative Strategies**

*Use of References and Imagination*

Participant A	Participant B	Participant C

ASD, ADHD, Anxiety	ASD	ASD, ADHD, Anxiety
-Use reference every single time	- Use visual references	-Use online reference
-Use of visualization, and anime interacting, but sticks on what has been imagined	-Predictability on creative flow	-Identified the medium use
-Starts with inspiration - -Sketch, then use digital, though no set steps specified		-Inspired by modern art visual masters

**Participant A** characterized her art-making process as largely driven by imagination and visual research:

*"I reference every single time."*

*"I visualize a cartoon and an anime interacting, but it stays the way I've already imagined it."*

Additionally, she explained that inspiration comes from the scenes she views in anime or cartoons and ultimately works itself into a visual idea.

**Participant A** merged creative ideas and specific references from anime. The observation verified this by observing the way she purposely selected materials and referenced characters she recognized, revealing a meaning-seeking yet hesitant engagement with imagined content. **Participant B** instead relies on a visual stimulus: *"I always sketch first, then go digital. No set steps, maybe I'll have steps."* *"I just start from inspiration - inspiration just comes from something I've seen and liked"*

**Participant B** relied on visual references, but also, demonstrated predictability in his creative flow. The artistic process of **Participant C** is influenced by both self-exploration and external reference. He taught himself using internet sources and had expressive figures to reference, such as: *"I went online, and I discovered encaustic... then I did watercolours... and I learned about Bob Ross, Rothko, Picasso."* He described how once he'd discovered art, he didn't stop: *"As soon as I had discovered it, I just didn't stop."*

Multiple elements affect imagination in autistic individuals, such as cognitive processing styles, sensory sensitivities, and individual interests. For certain individuals, an enhanced capacity to concentrate on specifics can result in elaborate and vividly creative works, while others might shine in abstract reasoning and modern (conceptual) art (NeuroLaunch, 2024).

Individuals with ASD commonly base their creative work on external references, such as images, movies, animals, or characters. These references have numerous functions: reducing ambiguity in open-ended creative projects, offering visual templates or inspiration, allowing hyper-focus and mastery of specific subjects or ideas. Some ASD artists have exceptional visual detail memory (Motttron et al., 2006), allowing them to recreate references with remarkable accuracy or creatively change them.

***Struggles with Pressure and Overthinking***

Participant A ASD, ADHD, Anxiety	Participant B ASD	Participant C ASD, ADHD, Anxiety
-Suffered a lot of anxiety, stress due to school assignments, quizzes, and exams. -Its just too much	-Do not do venting on art, keeping it to self	-Initiates to help self when consumed with anger and upset feelings, through working on art to calm down
-Difficulty in understanding	-Initiates to help self	
-Can not relax		

**Participant A** characterized academic stress, deadlines, and expectations from instructors as an emotional tension that impacted her art.

*"I suffered a lot of... anxiety and stress because of my assignments, quizzes, and exams"*

*"Over-designing, to be precise, is just... It's just too much for me."*

*"My brain is beginning to harden up to understand... I try to relax, but I can't."*

**Participant B**, on the other hand, prefers not to interfere with emotional distress with his expressive work:

*"I don't do venting art... that's private stuff"*

*"When I'm not feeling okay, I usually step away from drawing instead."*

**Participant B** calmly disengaged and paused, showing some level of emotional self-monitoring.

**Participant C** openly explained that before discovering art, he had trouble dealing with stress and his internal frustration:

*"I had so much anger and I was so upset... but when I did it [art], I could calm myself down."*

He went further to relate how he reckoned he had been delayed in his speech

because he had too much emotional stress, and how art helped him feel an opportunity to be in control and have clarity: *"The next year after painting, I started to speak because I didn't have too much stress on my hands."*

Participant B appeared to have some level of emotional regulation and, by not using art to vent. These descriptions illustrate two methods of navigating emotional stress: one in which pressure troubles the creative act (Participant A), and one in which the creative act acts as a process of emotional exploration and transformation (Participant C).

Overthinking and pressure frequently reinforce one another in autistic people. For example, high-pressure instances can cause excessive analysis or self-doubt, overthinking can cause delays in decision-making or actions, raising perceived pressure. Participant A experience

a lot of struggles with overthinking and pressure, such rumination on past failures may create concern about future performance. Autistic persons frequently absorb social norms, resulting in pressure to "mask" or blend in, which can exacerbate overthinking and emotional tiredness (Cage et al., 2018).

## Personal Meaning and Identity in Artwork

### *Art as a Personal Outlet and Safe Space*

Participant A ASD, ADHD, Anxiety	Participant B ASD	Participant C ASD, ADHD, Anxiety
-Prefer to create art at home to avoid pressure	-Art feels more like escapism	-Art was a way to express
-Hyperactive feeling after drawing like having ADHD	-Art allows freedom	-Prefer emotions to be expressed on canvas rather than people
	-Create something to be able to see it exist	-Art is a way to calm down

All Participants view art as an individual outlet. They see art as a personal outlet and as a space where they are themselves.

**Participant A** elaborates when she says that she is more comfortable making art at home rather than in the classroom because she says:

*"I like it in my home... at least I don't feel pressure."*

When she makes art, she will at times feel a surge of energy: *"After I draw, I just feel like I was being hyperactive... like I'm having ADHD after I draw."*

What this suggests is that drawing allows a release of sensory and emotional stimuli.

**Participant A** stated that art helps her to feel safe and have control. However observations proved that in the classroom is the opposite.

**Participant B** expressed feeling a similar way by defining art as his escape: *"Feels more like escapism... I always wanted to experience more."*

*"Art allows me the freedom just to make something that I want to see exist."*

**Participant B** stated that he would prefer to use art as an escape.

**Participant C** *"When I first started to paint, I couldn't speak... painting was a way to express myself." "...most people throw their emotions on each other, but I thought, why not throw it on a canvas?"*

*"Then after I did that, I could just throw it onto the canvas, and I calmed myself down."*

**Participant C** conceptualized art as being emotionally grounded. Observation also supported this, she used expressive gestures, had verbal clarity, and was comfortable for the entire session.

Autistic adolescents generally struggle with interacting with others, handling emotions, and processing of sensory information (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These difficulties might result in feelings of fear, isolation, and dissatisfaction. Art provides a nonverbal medium for teens with ASD to express emotions, explore identity, and feel in control in a world that can be overwhelming. Autistic people frequently internalize societal

expectations, leading to pressure to "mask" or fit in, which can fuel overthinking and emotional exhaustion. The participants are finding their personal outlet and safe space through their art expressions.

Art as a method and intervention has become widespread in various healthcare and therapeutic environments, especially in mental health, and is utilized to enhance intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, abilities and operational effectiveness and to enhance individual development. An entire spectrum of literature shows the significance of art for both personal and communal purposes: from offering a feeling of accomplishment in health restoration to fostering a feeling of community through collective involvement (Karabanow and Naylor, 2015).

***Art as Identity and Personal Vision***

Participant A ASD, ADHD, Anxiety	Participant B ASD	Participant C ASD, ADHD, Anxiety
-Want to entertain people who love anime with story	-Continue to keep doing art	-Dreams to teach art everywhere
-Prefer small things but big	-Avoid comparing self to others	-Does not sell own artwork, Would rather create a painting based on personality and
		-Art is a way to express self

The three participant have varied identities with respect to their art and personal vision. Each expressed their personal goals and objectives through their individual visions. Their artistic practice illuminates how they see themselves, their values, and where they hope to develop.

**Participant A** expressed her art as a route to purposeful narrative and future desires. Maybe even work that may entertain her and other enthusiasts of anime and cartoons: *"I want to entertain people who love anime and cartoons with my story."* *"Even if there are big things, I prefer small things. Big but small."*

**Participant A** said her characters portray her identity. This is consistent with what was observed in that she drew these figures consistently and had an investment in her art making even at casual sessions.

**Participant B** *"Even if my art isn't perfect, I want to keep going."* *"I just try not to compare myself too much. That ruins the fun."*

**Participant C** *"My dream is just to teach art everywhere."* *"I don't sell my work... I'd rather create a painting for you, based on your personality and feelings."* *"Not accepting yourself brings about lots of problems... but when I found my passion, I found a way of expressing myself."*

The participants show their recollections, awareness of art as an isolated act of

self-definition, woven into a social connection of the emotional. Whether the purpose is to tell stories, foster peace, or seek growth, the experiences of their creative process illustrate that visual art matters when making their identity. Visual art or artistic expression enables neurodivergent teens to explore and affirm their self-worth, values, and purpose through personal vision (Sahai, 2024). Art allows teens to project internal experiences outwardly. For ASD teens, this can support self-recognition and identity exploration. It provides them a vehicle for self-expression. A normal child gains the capacity to make images that are both communicat and imaginative. In the children with autism develop language but use it in an idiosyncratic and inappropriate way. These children often learn how to make representational images. (Evans and Dubowski, 2020).

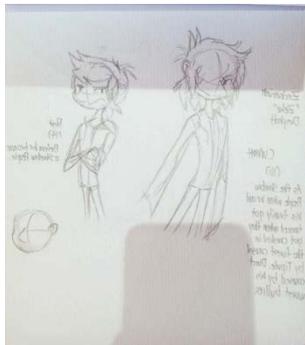
### Art Analysis

These three cases of individual teens with their art samples show triangulation with themes generated from the transcribes data. Participants' Artworks Interpretation (Informed by the observations of - A Professional Artist and Faculty member of the Adventist University of the Philippines, A Registered Psychologist at the Adventist University of the Philippines - and guided by the Expressive Theory of Art):

Figures 1 to 3 illustrate described artworks of Participant A showcasing her style which is innovative while rich in emotion.

**Figure 1**

*Participant A - Artwork 1*



**Figure 2**

*Participant A - Artwork 2*



**Figure 3**

*Participant A - Artwork*



### Participant A

Participant A's art demonstrates highly emotive content and content structured with narrative. The Artist observed that a few of her drawings have text or emerging language, for example 'dark souls', text which relates to themes of trauma or emotional transformation. He remarked that her characters might be representations of the participant, as someone who is either bullied or identifies with those who bear significant pain.

Expressive Art Theory describes this kind of symbolism, as the artist's way to externalize their internal struggle and negotiate meaning through embodying a metaphor. Although she was taught specific new techniques in class, Participant A remains focused on familiar expressive ways, returning to the same specific imagery or characters. The artist also saw that she demonstrated pre-occupational anxiety and the need to emotionally redirect her engagement, which implies that the art-making practice, although therapeutic, enhances her sensitivity. The combination of animal and character emergence, means her art is therefore serving some purpose beyond emotional processing, or as a development of resilience - it is a narrative of resilience, engaged in a process of understanding who she is and understanding how she sees herself in the world.

Participant A's work also caught the psychologist's eye, with its exaggerated character designs, and expressive facial expressions that have high emotional stakes. In particular, the instances of anger, suspicion, and mental fatigue, represent their interpretation of this participant's emotional struggles. Additionally, the characters show imagined strife which may stand in for inner turmoil and unresolved mental tension, through the confrontational stare or wide, intense looking eyes. From the psychologist's perspective, this participant likely engaged with fictional characters as mediums to express emotions that might be more difficult for her to release or verbalize directly. This possibility corresponds with the Expressive Theory of Art, which prioritizes art as an emotional release and a form of symbolic communication. Additionally, the presence of opposing figures and surreal detailing in character design supports the participant's subconscious and intentional desire to examine identity, emotional boundaries, and inner conflict, all within a visualized and contained activity. Thus, Participant A's work served as emotional release and a reflection of the participant's internal state, revealing layers of tension, imaginative play, and self-processing.

Proceeding with figures 4 and 5 depict the two artworks of participant B, demonstrating their apparent inclination towards symmetry, structure, and precision.

### ***Participant B***

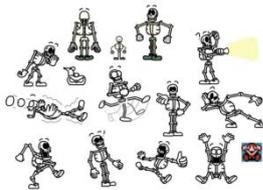
Participant B openly acknowledged that he does not like to express emotion in his artwork. He explained that he does not create what he called "ranting art." In describing his work, The Artist described the participant's art as childlike, innocent, and playful. This leads The Artist to interpret this style of work as a conscious form of emotional self-defense. While the participant does not illustrate sadness or anger, discussions between the participant and The Artist illustrated emotional concerns related to deeper questions surrounding self value and family relationships. The Artist recognized that Participant B sees art as a way to escape, a place to build a new world of safety and control. It is easy to see that even avoidance is expressive if one considers Expressive Art Theory. The absence of identifiable emotion in his artwork is evidence of his need for safety, simplicity and predictability. The Artist also noted the participant's reliance on clear instructions, especially painting and using a colour palette, which demonstrates the desire for external guidance and support throughout the creative process.

As the psychologist, observed, Participant B's works are of an embodiment

that has structure and symbol as the form of expression. Although the drawings (e.g., crocodiles and skeletons and evolving characters) are less emotionally expressive, they represent a playful yet reflective process. They noted that this participant does not seem to use art to express feelings or vent emotions, but rather he engages in design, character development, and staying authentic to personal style in a non-emotional or organized way.

The skeleton shapes recur throughout the drawings were seen as symbols of communication and transformation by the psychologist. Although it is a vague representation suggested by humor and abstract expression, the skeleton imagery seems to represent some internal deliberation about self and about others identity constructions and perceptions. Even when considering the work through the scope of Expressive Theory, this participant's work seems to show that the creative process itself, not any emotional content, still seems to represent his means of personalized exploration and quiet self-defining. The gradual evolution of characters as demonstrated throughout suggests a developing self-awareness of self and wondering about perceptions of the world and identity constructions.

**Figure 4**  
*Participant B - Artwork 1*



**Figure 5**  
*Participant B - Artwork 2*



The artist additionally noted that when the participant used yellow as a color, even when it was surrounded by darker colors like blue or black, it suggested a certain level of resilience, positivity, and emotional breadth. From a perspective of Expressive Art Theory, this work could be viewed as an illustration of how color, composition, and form become transport systems for expressing internal stories. The Artist also indicated that the environment and culture of the participant influence the emotional levels in the piece. In summary, the works of Participant C were an expression of a visual language: embodying an imaginative yet hopeful quality that made it a rich mode of communication and identity.

**Participant C**

**Figure 7** (*left to right*)  
*Participant C - Artwork 1*

**Figure 8**  
*Participant C - Artwork 2*

**Figure 9**  
*Participant C - Artwork 3*



Figures 6 to 8 highlight Participant C's vivid use of color, abstract forms, and symbols, showing their emotional expression and social ideas.

The work of Participant C captured The Artist's attention through the use of bold colors, abstract forms, and the ambiguity of layered emotional tone. The Artist could see a balance in the use of bright and dark color palettes, which he viewed symbolically to mean that the participant could acknowledge pain, while also choosing to represent an overall positive expression. The Artist saw joy, community, and identity reflected in the colors and subject matter of the artistic works, in particular the colors, the rendering of 'people' and relational symbols.

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The psychologist described Participant C's artwork as emotionally textured, energetic, and symbolically layered art. They recognized the participant's use of bright color choice like orange, blue, and red, as they referred to strong emotional experiences and sensory experiences. They also spoke about the inclusion of walking female silhouettes and illusionary organic compositions as they related to concerns of memory, identity, and belonging. They indicated this participant's work contained a tension between emotional chaos, and formal structure, unifying internal turmoil towards a beautiful and harmonious visual articulation. Via the Expressive Theory of Art, his paintings are a vehicle to nurture catharsis and self-affirmation--where the colour, movement, and symbols all comprise language. Participant C's artwork represented a personal, internal exploration involving emotional experiences, but it also represented a desire to make other people's plight a part of a narrative through the work of art as a form of connection. The artwork expresses some level of confidence through its gestural marks, and the chaotic, layered wallpaper textures hint to a level of resilience and empathy, and ultimately offer a voice through a pathway for hopefulness.

## V. CONCLUSION

The participants' artworks express and communicate their internal experiences, personal battles and struggles, and creative identities as neurodivergent people. The findings are organized thematically, including supporting examples from the interviews, visual analyses of artwork and field notes. Overall, these findings demonstrate the lived experience of neurodivergent youth, and which illuminate their artistic voices and emotional worlds, and value of visual art as a communicative medium and an avenue for self-expression.

The purpose of this research was to examine how neurodivergent adolescents aged 16 to 20 years-old, could express their emotions, identity, and life experience through visual art. This research examined the forms of emotional, identity, and lived experience both through and the creation of visual art. In the context of this study of Expressive Theory of Art, it demonstrated how visual art can be an expressive form of communication for neurodivergent individuals who may not be able to communicate as clearly or directly through language.

Participants had varying emotional relationships to art; with some using art as a way of encouraging emotional release and self reflection, while others felt emotional expression should be kept out of the artistic process. Despite these differences, all participants engaged in types of storytelling through their own symbolism, individual imagination, and style; which illustrated how art represents the self and is a risk-free possibility for exploring possible avenues of emotional expression.

This research also illustrated that the creative process is related to a wide variety of internal (i.e. feelings of academic stress, overthinking) and external (i.e. need for emotional regulation) factors. For all of the participants, art was not solely a product, but rather a process in which they were able to engage in identity-building, resilience, and communicative properties of art. pieces designed by each participant, through the mandate of Expressive Theory, can be viewed as pure extensions of their inner experience, allowing audiences to see some perspectives through the lens of neurodivergence.

This research supports the need to affirm the value of supporting neurodivergent teens within inclusive ethical art practice in educational or therapeutic realms. By acknowledging these teens' visual languages and creative needs, it helps to foster spaces where all learners can be seen, heard, and understood, without relying on verbal language. Due to the wide range of neurodivergent conditions, ongoing expressions and stories through their art, research is suggested to record and investigate the diverse experiences.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The primary authors of this research study are Joanie Cruz and Darla Monica Balisnomo as visual artists they have explored the artistic expressions of the neurodivergents, and made it a research study following research methods, with methodology, investigation, data analysis, writing the original draft and revisions. The study was supervised by the thesis adviser, Ann Galeon Anolin, MFA. The research was finally presented to the panel of Jurors with Dr.

Michael S. Naidas as the head panelist, Dr. Jolly S. Balila, university research director, panel member and Dr. Rowena A. Ramos, methodologist.

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