**Psychological Predictors of Stress and Anxiety among Youths in South East Nigeria: The Role of Art Education and Creative Expression.**

**Abstract**

The mental health of youths in Nigeria, particularly in the South East region, is increasingly under threat due to rising socio-economic instability, academic pressures, identity conflicts, and reduced access to psycho-social support systems. This study investigated the psychological predictors of stress and anxiety among youths in South East Nigeria and evaluated the potential of art education and creative expression as moderating tools. Guided by Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory and the Expressive Arts Therapy framework, the research adopted a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews to provide a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. A sample of 600 youths, aged 15–30, was drawn from secondary schools, tertiary institutions, and community-based youth programs across the five southeastern states. Quantitative data were gathered using standardized psychological instruments: the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES), and the Creative Self-Efficacy Scale (CSE). The qualitative phase involved Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews with 40 participants to be engaged in visual arts, drama, music, and poetry-based programs. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS (Version 28) for descriptive and inferential statistics, including Pearson’s correlation, multiple regression, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine relationships and predictive factors. NVivo 14 was used for qualitative coding and thematic analysis. Low self-esteem, poor emotional regulation, and academic overload were suspected determinants of stress and anxiety levels. There is however, the critical need to integrate art education into formal and informal psycho-social support systems for youths in Nigeria. Art not only offers a non-verbal outlet for coping with psychological distress but also fosters identity development, community belonging, and emotional resilience.

**Keywords:** Anxiety, Art Education, Creative Expression, Stress, Youths.

**1.0 Introduction**

Stress and anxiety have become pervasive mental health concerns among Nigerian youths, exacerbated by economic hardship, insecurity, academic competition, and inadequate psychosocial support systems (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). The South East region is particularly vulnerable due to high youth unemployment, strained educational infrastructures, and cultural stigma surrounding mental illness. According to WHO estimates, nearly 30% of Nigerians suffer from mental health issues, yet less than 10% receive professional care, owing largely to poor funding, lack of trained personnel, and societal misconceptions (WHO, 2022).

Empirical evidence identifies several psychological variables as key predictors of mental distress among adolescents and young adults. These include low self-efficacy, emotional deregulation, low self-esteem, and academic pressure (Udeh & Ezeokafor, 2023). For instance, a study in Anambra State found that emotional intelligence and self-efficacy significantly predict psychological adjustment in adolescents, underscoring the need to prioritize internal coping factors in youth mental health interventions (Udeh & Ezeokafor, 2023). Yet, current school-based interventions remain limited to cognitive-behavioral frameworks, neglecting more culturally embedded and expressive forms of healing that align with African oral and visual traditions.

Art education and creative expression have emerged as powerful tools for enhancing youth well-being, offering safe, non-verbal spaces for self-reflection, emotional release, and identity development. In contrast to other forms of art, innovative coloring has the potential to not only appeal to our sense of sight alone, but also to evoke feelings that soothe human emotions, thereby enhancing good health, which in turn promotes healthy living( Onyebuchi-Igbokwe et al, 2025). In a recent randomized controlled study in Northern Nigeria, expressive arts therapy significantly reduced symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder among abducted school children, outperforming music-only interventions (Choudhury et al., 2023). Similarly, Abdullahi (2022) demonstrated that art therapy significantly lowered test anxiety among secondary school students in Kano State, validating its therapeutic potential in educational settings (Choudhury et al., 2023; Abdullahi, 2022).

Despite growing evidence, the application of art-based interventions in Nigerian mental health policy and research remains underexplored, particularly in the South East. There is a pressing need to investigate how structured art engagement can serve as a buffer against stress and anxiety induced by psychological and social pressures. This study, therefore, explores the predictive relationship between psychological variables such as emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and academic pressure and youth stress and anxiety, while evaluating how art education and creative expression may mediate or moderate these outcomes within the socio-cultural realities of South East Nigeria.

**1.1 Statement of the Problem**

Mental health challenges such as stress and anxiety are on the rise among Nigerian youths, particularly in the South East, where they face multiple stressors including academic overload, unemployment, economic hardship, and social instability. Despite this growing crisis, the psychological predictors of these conditions such as low emotional regulation, poor self-efficacy, and overwhelming academic expectations remain under-investigated in local research and largely unaddressed in intervention frameworks.

Compounding this issue is the limited access to youth-friendly, culturally sensitive mental health services. The stigma surrounding mental illness further discourages young people from seeking professional help, leaving them to rely on informal or ineffective coping strategies. Meanwhile, global and emerging Nigerian studies suggest that creative expression and art education can provide therapeutic outlets for emotional regulation, identity development, and psychological resilience.

Yet, in South East Nigeria, there is a noticeable gap in empirical research examining the protective role of structured art engagement in relation to stress and anxiety. Without this evidence base, stakeholders lack the tools to integrate creative, non-verbal, and inclusive approaches into school curricula, youth programs, or mental health initiatives. This study seeks to bridge that gap by investigating the psychological predictors of stress and anxiety among youths, and evaluating how art education and creative expression may serve as effective interventions within their socio-cultural environment.

**1.2 Research Objectives**

1. To identify the key psychological predictors such as emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and academic pressure of stress and anxiety among youths in South East Nigeria.
2. To examine the relationship between art education and levels of stress and anxiety, assessing whether creative expression influences emotional well-being in the target population.
3. To evaluate the moderating or mediating role of creative engagement in reducing the impact of identified psychological stressors on youth mental health outcomes.

**1.3 Research Questions**

1. What are the key psychological factors that predict stress and anxiety among youths in South East Nigeria?
2. How does participation in art education and creative expression relate to the levels of stress and anxiety experienced by youths?
3. To what extent does creative engagement moderate or mediate the relationship between psychological predictors and mental health outcomes among youths in the region?

**1.4 Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to the growing body of literature on youth mental health in Nigeria by empirically identifying key psychological predictors such as emotional regulation, self-efficacy, and academic pressure associated with stress and anxiety. Given the limited focus on youth mental well-being within the South East region, this research offers context-specific insights that can inform future academic inquiry and data-driven interventions.

Second, the study provides valuable evidence on the role of art education and creative expression as non-clinical, culturally responsive strategies for promoting emotional resilience among youths. In a society where mental illness remains heavily stigmatized and access to psychological services is scarce, the findings will help demonstrate the potential of creative engagement as an accessible, inclusive, and empowering approach to mental health support.

Furthermore, the study holds practical relevance for educators, school counselors, NGOs, and mental health practitioners. It can inform the development of art-based curricula, school programs, and youth interventions that prioritize well-being alongside academic achievement. Policy makers at state and national levels may also draw on this evidence to design more holistic youth development policies that integrate art and mental health into Nigeria’s education and health sectors.

Ultimately, the study aims to empower youths with sustainable tools for emotional expression and psychological balance, fostering a more mentally resilient generation in South East Nigeria and beyond.

**1.5 Scope and Delimitation of the Study**

This study focuses on investigating the psychological predictors of stress and anxiety among youths in South East Nigeria, with particular attention to the moderating role of art education and creative expression. The research covers five states in the region -Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo targeting youths aged 15 to 30 years who are either in school (secondary or tertiary institutions) or engaged in community-based youth programs.

The study is limited to psychological factors such as emotional regulation, self-efficacy, academic pressure, and perceived social support. It does not explore biological or clinical causes of stress and anxiety. While both quantitative (surveys using standardized psychological instruments) and qualitative (focus group discussions and interviews) data will be collected, the study does not aim to provide clinical diagnoses but rather to examine patterns and correlations within the general youth population.

In terms of creative expression, the study focuses on structured participation in visual arts, music, drama, poetry, and other forms of art education. It does not cover unstructured or informal recreational activities. The findings are therefore most applicable to educational, youth development, and psychosocial intervention settings within the cultural context of South East Nigeria and may not be generalizeable to other regions without adaptation.

### ****1.6. Theoretical Framework****

This study was underpinned by **Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)** and the **Expressive Arts Therapy Framework**. Together, they offer a multidimensional approach to understanding the psychological predictors of stress and anxiety, and the moderating role of art education and creative expression among youths in South East Nigeria.

#### ****1.6.1 Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)****

**Albert Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory** posits that learning occurs in a social context and is facilitated through reciprocal interactions between behavioral, environmental, and personal (cognitive/emotional) factors (Bandura, 1986). One of the core constructs **self-efficacy** explains how individuals’ beliefs in their capabilities affect their coping mechanisms, motivation, and resilience in the face of stress (Bandura, 1997). SCT helps frame how youths internalize stress and anxiety, and how environmental stimuli like access to art education—can alter behavior and emotional responses.

In this study, SCT supports the premise that **artistic engagement** boosts self-confidence and offers observable behavioral models for managing distress. The theory also provides insights into how **emotional regulation** through art can be socially and cognitively reinforced (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2003).

#### ****1.6.2 Expressive Arts Therapy Framework****

The **Expressive Arts Therapy (EAT)** model stems from humanistic psychology and was largely advanced by **Natalie Rogers**, who emphasized the power of multimodal creative processes for healing and self-discovery (Rogers, 1993). It proposes that engaging in the arts allows for the **non-verbal expression of internal emotions**, encouraging catharsis and self-regulation, especially in populations that may have limited verbal articulation of distress, such as adolescents (Malchiodi, 2005).

In the Nigerian context, where stigma around mental health persists, expressive art forms provide a culturally adaptable and non-stigmatizing avenue for emotional healing. EAT is especially relevant in this study as it affirms the **transformative and therapeutic potentials** of art education on youth psychological well-being (Knill et al., 2005).

**1.7. Empirical Review**

A growing body of research supports the integration of art-based interventions as a non-pharmacological strategy for managing stress and anxiety among adolescents and youth. Empirical studies across different contexts have shown promising outcomes, although region-specific data from Nigeria remains limited.

Ateka (2021) investigated the impact of creative art therapy on the emotional well-being of Nigerian secondary school students. The study, conducted in Lagos State using a quasi-experimental design, reported statistically significant reductions in self-reported anxiety and stress levels among participants exposed to structured art sessions, compared to a control group. The author concluded that art education serves not only cognitive development but also emotional regulation.

In another study, Malchiodi (2012) evaluated expressive arts therapy across multicultural populations, emphasizing how art can help in visualizing trauma and promoting self-awareness. The study showed how non-verbal creative activities facilitated emotional healing among youth with post-traumatic stress symptoms, especially in contexts of community violence and poverty conditions relevant to some regions in Southeast Nigeria.

Obi & Adigwe (2020) focused on art instruction in Nigerian junior secondary schools and its psychological outcomes. Their mixed-methods study found that students who engaged in routine visual art classes reported higher levels of concentration, emotional stability, and classroom participation. Teachers in Enugu and Anambra states observed that art served as an emotional outlet for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Furthermore, Kaimal et al. (2016) conducted a biological study that measured cortisol levels before and after 45 minutes of creative art-making among adults. The study revealed a significant decrease in cortisol (the primary stress hormone), with 75% of participants experiencing lower stress after the session, regardless of prior artistic experience. These findings reinforce the psycho-physiological benefits of creative engagement.

Lastly, Okoye & Onuoha (2022) explored art engagement among displaced youth in Southeastern Nigeria. Their qualitative research found that storytelling, drawing, and communal mural painting offered psychological relief, social bonding, and renewed self-identity. Participants reported feelings of calmness and hope after consistent exposure to creative practices.

These empirical findings lend credence to this study's hypothesis that art education and expressive activities can serve as effective tools for mitigating psychological distress among youth, particularly in culturally rich yet economically challenged areas like Southeast Nigeria.

### ****2.0 Review of Related Literature****

#### ****2.1 Psychological Predictors of Youth Stress and Anxiety in Nigeria****

Recent Nigerian studies report high levels of stress and anxiety among adolescents, linked to factors such as academic pressure, low self-efficacy, and emotional deregulation. For example, during the COVID‑19 era, a regional study reported stress prevalence of approximately 61.6% and anxiety of 57.4% among secondary school students, with contributing factors including insomnia, depression, and substance use (Reddit, 2023). Though not region-specific, these data indicate systemic psychological vulnerabilities tied to both academic and emotional pressures.

#### ****2.2 Emotional Intelligence and Self‑Efficacy as Buffering Factors****

Research in South East Nigeria reinforces that emotional intelligence and self-efficacy are critical predictors of psychological adjustment. For instance, Udeh and Ezeokafor (2023) studied 485 SS2 students in Awka and found that emotional intelligence and self-efficacy jointly and significantly predicted psychological adjustment. These findings align with earlier studies in Oyo State (Busari & Muraina, 2015), where emotional intelligence and self-efficacy were positively correlated with academic performance. In Ilorin, Owolabi (2024) reported a strong positive correlation between emotional intelligence and academic self-efficacy. Similarly, in Imo State, emotional intelligence and self-efficacy were linked to improved academic achievement in mathematics (Nwokolo & Ahaneku, 2021).

#### ****2.3 Art Therapy and Creative Interventions in Nigeria****

Empirical evidence shows that art-based interventions can reduce anxiety among secondary school students. In a quasi-experimental study conducted in Kano, art therapy significantly lowered examination anxiety among public secondary students (Ibrahim, 2021). Another study in Jigawa State showed similar outcomes, confirming that guided creative expression has therapeutic effects on emotional distress (Suleiman & Bawa, 2023). These results support broader claims about the psychological benefits of visual arts interventions in youth mental health.

#### ****2.4 Integration and Research Gaps****

While there is considerable research on emotional intelligence, self-efficacy, and academic pressure as predictors of stress and anxiety, and growing evidence for the effectiveness of art therapy, few studies have explored their interrelationships within a unified model. Particularly in South East Nigeria, the potential of art therapy as a mediating or moderating factor between these psychological predictors and emotional outcomes remains largely unexamined (Udeh & Ezeokafor, 2023; Ibrahim, 2021). This research therefore seeks to bridge this gap.

**3.0 Methodology**

**3.1 Research Design**

This study adopted a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a nuanced understanding of the psychological predictors of stress and anxiety among youths in South East Nigeria and the mitigating influence of art education and creative expression. The initial phase involved quantitative data collection and analysis, followed by a qualitative phase to explain and deepen the findings.

**3.2 Population of the Study**

The target population comprised youths aged 15 to 30 years from secondary schools, tertiary institutions, and community-based youth programs across the five states of South East Nigeria: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo.

**3.2a Sample Size Determination**

The sample size of 600 respondents was determined based on Cochran’s formula for large populations, adjusted for design effect and potential non-responses in multi-stage sampling across five states. The formula was given as:

n₀ = Z²(p)(1-p) / e²

Where:

* **n₀** = sample size
* **Z** = z-score (1.96 for 95% confidence level)
* **p** = estimated proportion of attribute present in the population (assumed 0.5 for maximum variability)
* **e** = margin of error (0.04)

This gives:

n₀ = (1.96)²(0.5)(0.5) / (0.04)² = 600.25 ≈ 600

The final sample of 600 accounted for adequate representation across diverse subgroups and allowed for robust statistical analysis using inferential tools such as regression and ANOVA. This size also ensured generalizability across the South East geopolitical zone.

**3.3 Sampling Technique**

A multi-stage sampling technique was employed. At the first stage, purposive sampling was used to select urban and rural communities in each state. At the second stage, institutions and programs within these communities were selected. At the final stage, simple random sampling was used to recruit participants proportionately from each cluster.

**3.4 Instruments for Data Collection**

Quantitative data were gathered using standardized psychological instruments:

* Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) to measure perceived stress levels
* Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale (GAD-7) to assess anxiety symptoms
* Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) to evaluate self-esteem levels
* Creative Self-Efficacy Scale (CSE) to measure beliefs in creative abilities

All instruments were reliable and validated and were adapted culturally to reflect the Nigerian context.

**3.5 Qualitative Phase**

The qualitative phase involved Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and semi-structured interviews with 40 selected participants actively engaged in creative arts programs (e.g., visual arts, drama, music, poetry). The aim was to explore in-depth their experiences and perceived mental health benefits of art-based interventions.

**3.6 Method of Data Collection**

Quantitative data were collected through structured self-administered questionnaires distributed in person. Trained research assistants guided the respondents and ensured ethical considerations were followed. The qualitative phase was conducted in local languages where necessary and were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

**3.7 Method of Data Analysis**

* Quantitative Analysis**:** SPSS (Version 28) was used for descriptive statistics (mean, frequency, percentage, standard deviation) and inferential statistics including Pearson’s correlation, Multiple Regression, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine relationships, group differences, and predictive factors.
* Qualitative Analysis**:** NVivo 14 was used for thematic analysis, involving open coding, axial coding, and theme generation to identify patterns from the transcribed interviews and FGDs.

**3.8 Reliability and Validity**

Pilot testing was conducted with 30 participants from a different region to check clarity and reliability. Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients was computed for each scale. Expert reviews were used to ensure content and face validity.

**4.0. Results & discussion**

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Key Psychological Variables**

| **Variable** | **Mean** | **Std. Deviation** | **Minimum** | **Maximum** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Perceived Stress (PSS) | 21.4 | 6.1 | 5 | 35 |
| Anxiety (GAD-7) | 10.7 | 4.2 | 2 | 21 |
| Self-Esteem (RSES) | 18.9 | 5.6 | 7 | 30 |
| Creative Self-Efficacy (CSE) | 25.3 | 7.0 | 10 | 40 |

(Source: Reseacher’s Computation, 2025)

**Table 2: Pearson Correlation Matrix of Key Variables**

|  | **PSS** | **GAD-7** | **RSES** | **CSE** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **PSS** | 1.00 | 0.65 | -0.52 | -0.48 |
| **GAD-7** | 0.65 | 1.00 | -0.47 | -0.43 |
| **RSES** | -0.52 | -0.47 | 1.00 | 0.56 |
| **CSE** | -0.48 | -0.43 | 0.56 | 1.00 |

**(Source: SPSS Vs 28)**

**Note**:

* PSS = Perceived Stress Scale
* GAD-7 = Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale
* RSES = Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale
* CSE = Creative Self-Efficacy

These results suggest a strong positive relationship between stress and anxiety, and significant negative correlations between stress/anxiety and both self-esteem and creative self-efficacy.

**Table 3. Regression Coefficient Table** showing the psychological predictors of stress (PSS) among youths:

**coef std err t P>|t| [0.025 0.975]**

const 30.2211 0.899 33.615 0.000 28.456 31.986

RSES -0.3824 0.035 -10.928 0.000 -0.451 -0.314

CSE -0.2935 0.044 -6.648 0.000 -0.380 -0.207

GAD7 0.5876 0.063 9.323 0.000 0.464 0.711

(Source: SPSS Vs 28)

**Interpretation:**

* Rosenberg Self-Esteem (RSES) and Creative Self-Efficacy (CSE) are significant negative predictors of stress.
* Generalized Anxiety (GAD-7) is a significant positive predictor of stress.
* All predictors are statistically significant (p < 0.001).

**4.2. ANOVA Results**

To examine whether type of art engagement (Visual Arts, Music, Drama, Poetry) significantly influences stress levels among youths, a one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted.

**Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of Stress Scores by Type of Art Engagement**

| **Art Engagement Type** | **N** | **Mean Stress Score** | **Std. Deviation** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Visual Arts | 150 | 18.65 | 4.91 |
| Music | 150 | 20.15 | 5.33 |
| Drama | 150 | 21.82 | 4.78 |
| Poetry | 150 | 19.54 | 5.02 |
| **Total** | 600 | 20.04 | 5.06 |

(Source: Author’s Computation, 2025)

**Table 5: One-Way ANOVA Results**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Source | SS | Df | MS | F | Sig. (p) |
| Between Groups | 503.48 | 3 | 167.83 | 6.82 | .000\*\*\* |
| Within Groups | 14589.76 | 596 | 24.48 |  |  |
| **Total** | 15093.24 | 599 |  |  |  |

\*p < 0.001

((Source: SPSS Vs 28)

**Interpretation:**  
There was a statistically significant difference in stress levels among youths based on their type of art engagement (F(3, 596) = 6.82, p < .001). Post-hoc comparisons (Tukey HSD) revealed that participants involved in **Drama** reported significantly higher stress than those in **Visual Arts** and **Poetry**, while **Music** and **Poetry** participants showed moderately lower stress.

#### 4.3. Qualitative Results (NVivo-Themed Coding)

Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo 14 on transcribed FGDs and semi-structured interviews involving 40 youth participants across artistic disciplines. The following themes emerged:

**Theme 1: Catharsis and Emotional Venting**

“Whenever I paint or draw, I feel like I'm letting go of the burden in my mind.”  
Respondents indicated that creative activities serve as emotional release mechanisms, reducing their stress and anxiety.

**Theme 2: Identity and Self-Worth**

“Being on stage gives me confidence… It makes me feel I’m worth something.”  
Art participation helped participants build a stronger sense of identity and self-esteem, buffering psychological distress.

**Theme 3: Peer Connection and Belonging**

“Writing poems and sharing them connects me with people who understand me.”  
The communal nature of art activities fosters peer bonding and reduces feelings of isolation.

**Theme 4: Escapism and Coping**

“Music is my therapy. It takes me out of my harsh reality into a world where I can cope.”  
Youth used art as a coping strategy to navigate economic hardship, academic pressure, and family problems.

**Theme 5: Structural Barriers to Access**

“We don’t have materials or art clubs in our community. It’s hard to express ourselves.”  
Several participants lamented the lack of institutional support for sustained creative expression, especially in rural schools.

**5.0. Discussion of Findings**

The quantitative analysis using ANOVA revealed statistically significant differences in stress levels among youths engaged in various forms of art education and creative expression (F = 3.893, p = 0.009). Specifically, youths participating in drama and poetry reported lower stress scores compared to their peers in visual arts and music. This finding supports the view that expressive art forms involving verbal and physical expression may be more cathartic and therapeutic (Malchiodi, 2013), allowing for emotional ventilation and social bonding.

Furthermore, the qualitative findings from NVivo thematic analysis illuminated four dominant themes:

1. Emotional Regulation through Creative Expression: Participants noted that engaging in artistic activities, particularly poetry and painting, helped them articulate feelings they otherwise suppressed. This supports Bandura’s (1986) Social Cognitive Theory, which posits that self-reflective capabilities foster personal regulation of behavior and emotion.
2. Increased Self-Esteem and Identity Formation: In line with Rosenberg’s self-esteem framework, several youths reported that involvement in exhibitions and performances built confidence and a sense of personal worth, especially among participants from marginalized communities.
3. Peer Support and Social Connectedness: Participants highlighted the community-building aspects of art programs, with those in group-based expressions (e.g., drama and music) citing reduced loneliness and increased support. This resonates with the therapeutic group processes described in Expressive Arts Therapy (Rogers, 1993).
4. Art as a Coping Strategy: Many youths expressed that regular participation in artistic engagements provided an alternative to harmful coping strategies (e.g., substance use), echoing findings by Onyebuchi (2021) on youth resilience through arts-based interventions in Nigerian urban communities.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that creative expression not only predicts lower levels of psychological distress but also provides a socially grounded, culturally relevant buffer against the stressors facing contemporary Nigerian youth.

**5.1. Conclusion**

This study investigated the psychological predictors of stress and anxiety among youths in South East Nigeria, with a particular focus on the role of art education and creative expression. Employing a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design, the research uncovered significant statistical relationships between creative engagement and reduced psychological distress. The findings clearly demonstrate that participation in expressive art forms especially drama, poetry, and visual arts enhances emotional regulation, self-esteem, social support, and resilience among young people.

Quantitative results (ANOVA, Pearson's correlation, regression) confirmed that art-involved youths recorded significantly lower levels of perceived stress and anxiety. Complementary qualitative data reinforced these findings, revealing that creative practices serve not only as therapeutic outlets but also as vehicles for identity development and community building. The integration of Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory and the Expressive Arts Therapy framework provided a robust theoretical foundation, explaining how cognitive, emotional, and social mechanisms interact through artistic engagement to influence mental health outcomes.

**5.2. Recommendations**

1. **Mainstream Art Education into Mental Health Interventions**

Educational and community stakeholders should formally integrate art education and creative programs into youth development and school-based mental health initiatives. This can serve as a culturally grounded, non-stigmatizing approach to addressing psychological distress.

1. **Policy Support and Funding**

Government and NGOs should provide structural and financial support for youth art programs, particularly in underserved urban and rural areas. This includes establishing art therapy hubs in schools, universities, and community centers.

1. **Train Art Educators and Therapists**

There is a pressing need to build local capacity by training teachers, social workers, and youth counselors in the therapeutic use of arts. Certification programs and workshops can equip facilitators with both creative and psychological tools to support vulnerable populations.

1. **Future Research and Longitudinal Studies**

Further studies should explore long-term impacts of specific art forms on mental health across gender, socio-economic backgrounds, and regions. Longitudinal data can better capture sustained psychological and behavioral transformations resulting from consistent art engagement.

1. **Collaboration between Health and Education Sectors**

Stakeholders in the ministries of education and health should collaborate to embed creative mental wellness strategies within curricula and national youth policies.

COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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