

Taiwanese University Students' Self-awareness in Mindfulness-based Art Practices

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Abstract—This study describes the impact of mindfulness-based art practices on self-awareness among Taiwanese university students. Five senior students (two males and three females), with an average age of 22, participated in four mindfulness-based art practice sessions and reflected on the resulting physical changes, mental status, and self-awareness. Participants generally found it difficult to sustain attention during the 10-minute mindfulness breathing exercises, which were guided by the pre-recorded audio file. However, they expressed greater engagement with the subsequent art-creating activities. All participants reported that the mindfulness-based art practices improved their self-awareness, facilitated self-healing, and enhanced personal growth. They became more cognizant of self-expectations, societal norms, emotional states, and the effects of anxiety in their daily lives. Additionally, they gained insights into their feelings and attitudes towards future career paths. Overall, the mindfulness-based art practices effectively enhanced self-awareness among the university students.

Keywords—mindfulness-based art practice, university student, self-awareness

I. INTRODUCTION

Taiwanese university students face a variety of pressures, including academic, interpersonal, romantic, financial, and career-related stressors, which contribute to a notable prevalence of psychological symptoms. Chen (2014) surveyed 640 students using the Beck Depression Inventory, finding that 17% experienced mild depression and 15% suffered from moderate to severe depression. Similarly, the John Tung Foundation (2012) reported that 18.7% of Taiwanese university students exhibited significant depressive symptoms. To manage such stress, enhancing self-awareness has been suggested as a critical strategy. Existing research supports the role of self-awareness in recognizing emotional states, thought patterns, and physical conditions to alleviate psychological distress (e.g., Sutton, 2016) and promote mental well-being (e.g., Chen, 2003). In this context, professionals can integrate mindfulness with art practices, which emphasize present-moment awareness, emotional acceptance, and expression, to improve self-awareness and support self-healing. This study developed mindfulness-based art practices tailored to Taiwanese university students and conducted a preliminary exploration of their effects on self-awareness.

II. CHALLENGES FACED BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

University students encounter numerous challenges. Kelly and Torre (2006) identified key stressors, including adapting to new environments, managing intimate relationships, career planning, time management, academic performance, financial pressures, and exam-related anxiety. Ju and Duann (2002) found that emotional, career, and academic problems were particularly severe among Taiwanese university students. Yang and Chang (2015), using the "University Student Mental Health Scale," reported that 10.04% of first-year Taiwanese students exhibited poor mental health. Similarly, Yang and Shiu (2014) found that between 10.9% and 12.0% of first-year students from 2011 to 2013 demonstrated poor mental health, requiring counseling or other forms of assistance. Hsu (2008) identified gender differences in psychological and physiological responses, with female freshmen showing more negative reactions and male freshmen encountering more social issues. The prevalence of psychological symptoms among Taiwanese university students increased from 11.5% in 1990 to 23.8% in 2010 (Fu et al., 2010). These findings highlight the critical need for counseling and educational professionals to help students enhance self-awareness, reduce psychological and physical stress, and better manage the various challenges they face during their university years.

III. MINDFULNESS-BASED ART THERAPY

Mindfulness practices cultivate present-focused awareness, emotional acceptance, and self-exploration, all of which contribute to increased self-awareness. Art therapy provides a medium for individuals to interpret, express, and resolve emotional and cognitive disturbances. Mindfulness-Based Art Therapy (MBAT) integrates these practices, combining mindfulness with art creation to promote health, well-being, and adaptive stress responses (Beerse et al., 2019). This psychosocial intervention merges mindfulness skills training with artistic expression to foster greater self-awareness and understanding (Dahan & Peji, 2024). By incorporating mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) techniques into art-making activities, MBAT reinforces mindfulness practices (Kuo, 2022). This combination helps alleviate emotional distress and enhances psychological stability (Peterson, 2014). Research shows that MBAT reduces negative emotions and stress

(Dahan & Peji, 2024), mitigates symptoms of depression, anxiety, and fatigue (Newland & Bettencourt, 2020), and supports trauma recovery by improving emotional regulation and coping skills (Coholic et al., 2023). Experimental groups practicing MBAT report significant stress reduction compared to control groups (Dahan & Peji, 2024).

IV. SELF-AWARENESS

Trapnell and Campbell (1999) define self-awareness as the conscious recognition of one's internal states and relationships with others. It involves reflecting on and understanding emotions, behaviors, thoughts, interpersonal dynamics, and personal traits, including their conditions, influences, and underlying causes (Chen, 1996). Self-awareness can emerge from physiological sensations, bodily movements, emotional experiences, and thoughts, either spontaneously or in response to external stimuli (Chen, 2003). This ability allows individuals to comprehend their actions, desires, and strengths, evolving from basic self-recognition to the capacity for appropriate self-care (Chen, 1996). Self-aware individuals tend to experience greater well-being and are better equipped to provide timely self-care (Chen, 2003).

V. METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research approach using reflexive thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Reflexive thematic analysis is well-suited for exploring participants' thoughts, feelings, and meanings, while emphasizing both the key features and the similarities or differences within the data.

A. Participants

Five senior students (two males, three females), with an average age of 22, from a private university in northern Taiwan participated in the study. The second author recruited students interested in mindfulness-based art practices. Participants attended four sessions and provided descriptions of their self-awareness and changes following the program.

B. Mindfulness-based Art Practices

The researchers designed a four-week mindfulness-based art program, with one two-hour session held weekly. The second author as a leader and facilitator conducted individual sessions. Each session began with a ten-minute mindfulness breathing exercise, guided by a pre-recorded audio file. Following this, participants engaged in artistic creation based on weekly themes. Materials provided included sketch pencils, colored pencils, colored paper, washi tape, modeling clay, watercolors, markers, and crayons. The weekly themes were: "Self-Portrait," "Emotions," "Recent Worries and Their Impact," and "Career Path."

C. Data Collection and Analysis

The second author ensured participants' autonomy, and anonymity was guaranteed throughout the study. Before participation, the study's objectives, process, potential benefits, and risks were explained, and participants provided informed consent. Following each session, participants were

interviewed to discuss their experiences and perceived changes. Data included verbatim interview transcripts, participants' artworks, and the second author's observations of the creative processes. Data collection adhered to ethical principles of confidentiality, privacy, and harm prevention. Researchers archived photographs of the artworks and transcribed the interviews. Researchers conducted reflexive thematic analysis which followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, theme construction, refinement, naming of themes, and report writing.

VI. RESULTS

Four out of the five participants (Anne, Beck, Cindy, David and Ellen) found it challenging to maintain focus during the ten-minute mindfulness breathing exercise, citing frequent distractions and a lack of perceived benefit for enhancing self-awareness. Four participants described the mindfulness exercise as tedious and confusing. In contrast, all the five participants reported that the free artistic creation significantly improved their self-awareness. The key themes and insights emerging from the data analysis are presented below.

Anne reported increased self-awareness and self-understanding after the four sessions. In the third session, she became more attuned to her anxiety and helplessness, leading to greater emotional acceptance. Initially focused on aesthetics, Anne's artistic expression shifted toward a more spontaneous style, emphasizing her inner feelings. This process helped her move beyond self-expectations and external social norms, and express her emotions more authentically.

Beck created a colorless artwork in the third session, symbolizing inner emptiness and deficiency. He appreciated the freedom of artistic expression, which led him to recognize his need for rest and introspection, as well as an acceptance of his internal emptiness. During the fourth session, Beck became aware of his anxiety about the future life while working on a career-themed piece, which contributed to his self-awareness.

Cindy gained insight into her work aspirations during the fourth session by creating a career portrait, which helped her recognize her abilities and resources, fostering happiness and affirmation regarding her career path. In the second session, Cindy's focus on her emotions allowed her to acknowledge and understand her mental state, enhancing her self-awareness.

David reported that all four sessions contributed to his self-awareness and self-healing. In the fourth session, he reflected on past work experiences, gaining clarity about his career goals and direction. This reflection helped him develop strategies for career exploration.

Ellen recognized the value of artistic creation for improving self-awareness. She noted that the supportive and open environment fostered exploration of multiple life aspects and deeper connections with her inner emotions. By the fourth session, Ellen became more attuned to her emotions, further enhancing her self-awareness through the mindfulness art practices.

Overall, the participants agreed that the mindfulness-based art practices significantly enhanced their self-awareness. They noted that engaging in artistic creation allowed them to observe physiological sensations, emotions, thoughts, and feelings, both spontaneously and through mindfulness-based art practices. They identified the practice as a useful tool for self-observation, which helped them recognize their needs, detect sensations, and care for their emotional well-being. However, only one participant had a positive experience with the ten-minute audio mindfulness breathing exercise, while others reported distractions and confusion, suggesting that university students may be less familiar with mindfulness practices and may struggle to focus on their internal states.

VII. DISCUSSION

This study on mindfulness-based art practices among university students at a certain level aligns with previous research findings, indicating that mindfulness-based art therapy (MBAT) alleviates stress, negative emotions and symptoms triggered by stress (Dahan & Peji, 2024). MBAT facilitates people's awareness, helping them relieve symptoms of depression, anxiety, and fatigue (Newland & Bettencourt, 2020), reduce comorbid psychological and physical symptoms (Beerse et al., 2019), and promote emotional regulation, adaptation, and trauma healing (Coholic et al., 2023). The results of this study echo Chen's (2003) notion that individuals grow self-awareness through understanding and reflecting on feelings, emotions, behaviors, thoughts, relationships, and personal characteristics.

The findings of this study support the notion that mindfulness-based art practices enhance self-awareness, promoting self-healing and personal growth. This aligns with the concept that self-awareness involves "knowing, understanding, reflecting on, and thinking about" one's "emotions, behaviors, thoughts, interpersonal relationships, and personal characteristics" (Chen, 1996). Self-awareness enables timely self-care and equips individuals to face and overcome challenges, promoting personal growth and self-integration (Chiu, 2002).

Through practicing mindfulness breathing and engaging in art creation, university students became more aware of their internal states, accepted their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, and recognized the impact of mindfulness-based art practices on their well-being. Self-awareness allowed them to regulate emotions, reduce stress, and improve quality of life. However, unlike previous research emphasizing the benefits of mindfulness practice, only one of the five participants reported positive effects from the mindfulness breathing exercises. The findings suggest that facilitators could guide participants in person through mindfulness practices which may be more effective than pre-recorded audio guides. Facilitators should explain the rationale for integrating mindfulness with art creation and the benefits of mindfulness-based art practices. Future research could explore integration of mindfulness elements into art therapy or combine mindfulness interventions with art creation, potentially leading to the design and implementation of mindfulness-based art programs for university students or other populations.

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