

The Helpful Aspects of Digital Creative Arts Therapy during Covid 19 Crisis: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract:- This qualitative studies investigates the helpful aspects of using digital creative arts therapy during the Covid 19 Crisis. Thirty participants: 10 practitioners who employed online creative arts therapy and 20 clients involved for this study. Practitioners attended series of online training to use digital creative arts therapy for psychological supports project, followed by online supervision via Zoom. After conducting four-to-six online psychological therapy using creative arts therapeutic tools with individual client, participants then joined online group supervision through digital technology apps such as Zoom or Webex. In-depth interviews were conducted using qualitative investigation with both practitioners and clients, Data were analyzed using thematic analysis method. The results revealed seven themes as helpful aspects: facilitates remote communication, easy storage of digital art media, develop a variety of digital creative arts tools, managing home-based therapy, improvement in digital technology skills, foster distance psychological supports, and increased global learning. The finding indicates the need for innovative technology for online creative arts therapy to provide long distance practices and clinical supervision that will increase clients to access psychological therapies when they're unable to meet face to face.

Keywords:- Innovative Technology, Creative Therapeutic Tools, Online Training, Practices & Supervision, Psychological Therapy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, using digital technologies is becoming more popular as a medium for Psychological therapy to enhance mental strength and improve the wellbeing of individuals. Digital technology allows therapists to perform therapy sessions, join therapy-related training and obtain remote supervision with the use of computers and mobile phones. Innovative technology includes all activities that use computers or other technological devices to provide psychological support to those who are unable to meet face to face. In addition, the use of variety of creative therapeutic tools with digital technology as platform for online psychological therapy, training, and supervision enables therapists to provide services, enrich knowledge, and skills as well as gaining mentoring support remotely, locally and/or internationally. For the purpose of online creative therapy, Malchiodi (2011) defined digital art therapy as all forms of technology-based media, including digital collage,

illustrations, films, and photography that are used by therapists to assist clients in creating art as part of the process of therapy.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that Covid 19 were worldwide epidemic (WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 crisis required social distancing, isolation, quarantine and stay at home. This situation affects a wide range of services, including the field of psychological therapy. As a result of unforeseen effects and situations, there is an urgent need for online counseling and psychotherapy services (Miller & McDonald, 2020; Gomez Carlier et al., 2020; Datlen dan Pandolfi (2020). They found, various parties have implemented tele-psychological therapies, and increased the provision of creative arts therapy remotely. Consequently, the rapid development in digital technology for psychological therapy shows the importance for counsellors, psychologists and therapists to practice various forms of psychological therapy digitally. The use of digital technology as a medium for creative arts therapy in therapeutic relationships between therapists and clients can enhance the ability to express inner feelings, explore a problem in more depth, and aid in long -distance interactions (Miller & McDonald, 2020). This means that therapists can provide psychological support to individuals or clients who are unable to meet face -to -face, especially in times of crisis. Research shows that creative art therapists have recognized the need to use appropriate digital technology as a medium for therapy when face to face session are not permitted. (Austin, 2010; Carlton, 2014; Hacmun, Regev & Salomon, 2018; Malchiodi, 2011; Ralston, 2018; Gomez Carlier et al., 2020; Datlen dan Pandolfi (2020). In terms of training and supervision, counsellors, psychologist or therapists can enhance the learning process as well as online clinical supervision directly from home.

Digital technology has shown remarkable advances and is used in the entertainment industry, education, research, social networking, healthcare as well as for psychological therapy (Hacmun, Regev & Salomon, 2018). In recent years, with the increasing use of digital technology in training and practices, these became a debate among therapists, practitioners, and researchers, whether the use of remote digital art therapy is comparable from meeting face to face. According to Ralston (2018), for a group of therapists who use digital technology defend that the increasing use of technology in society as strong justification that digital creative tools should be widely used in line with the need of the modern era. However, for therapists who are more likely

to use traditional approaches emphasizing the importance of human's touch, therapeutic relationships and limitations in the aspects of emotional healing. Therefore, they refuse to use digital technology as creative tools for therapy (Ralston, 2018). However, some therapists take the initiative and develop innovations with the use of digital technology in their clinical art therapy practices especially for clients living far from their therapy centers (Alders, Beck, Allen & Mosinski, 2011; Austin, 2010; Malchiodi & Johnson, 2013). According to Orr (2012), most therapeutics practices using creative art therapy are in use of digital medium in line with the movements of technology for the 21st century helping profession. Hsin & Garner (2013) stated that the younger generation is more inclined, interested and comfortable with using technology for learning purposes, exploring and understanding themselves, including involving in therapy sessions. Therefore, more practitioners are using digital technology in their practice, either as creative interactive tools, or for psychological interpretation.

Objectives of the Studies

The objective of the studies is to investigate the helpful aspects of using digital creative arts therapy during Covid 19 crisis to enhances well-being and quality of life.

Significance of the Studies

Since the Covid 19 crisis, community life has changed drastically, the need for social distancing, staying at home for a long period of time, isolation, job and family members losses as well as financial constraints for survival. This phenomenon increases psychological stress and affects well-being, quality of life, as well as increasing the relationship conflict. Society urgently needs psychological therapy to overcome various changing and life challenges. The limitations to obtain face-to-face psychological supports require alternative methods online. Counselors, psychologists and therapists need to be more creative to ensure the online psychological support provided is more effective. Therefore, it is important to explore the helpful aspects when providing creative arts therapy services using digital technology.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design with phenomenological framework, to identify participants' actual experiences and perceptions about the use of digital creative arts therapy for training, therapy and supervision (McLeod 2011). Data collection procedures are based on the phenomenological tradition with qualitative interviews as the primary data collection (Polkinghorne, 2005; Opdenakker, 2006). These qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted individually and focus groups aimed at investigating in depth and obtaining detailed information on specific issues or experiences; to discover aspects of unexpected experiences shared by respondents (Ponterotto, 2005; 2006). According to Creswell (2013), in-depth interviews allow researchers to examine respondents' experiences and perceptions based on systematically interview protocol. The respondents for this study are ten practitioners who work in various settings of helping relationships, and twenty clients in Malaysia. Ten practitioners involved, have undergone series of online training and supervision covering aspects of procedures,

ethical, advantages and limitations of online creative therapy services. They provided online therapy for twenty clients agreed to participate in this study. The online services for this study use Zoom or Webex as digital technology applications. Data analysts adapted the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2013). Thematic analysis involves six steps namely familiarizing the data, generating the initial code, finding themes, studying themes, naming themes, and writing themes.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Online psychological therapy is defined as providing psychological services using telecommunications technology (American Psychology Association, 2013). According to the Canadian Counseling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA, 2019), as professionals in a helping relationship, we need to know how to apply counselling skills with a wide variety of technologies and adhere to professional training ethics. Barak & Grohol (2011) define online counselling and therapy as "mental health interventions between one or more patients and therapists, using technology as a communication modality". A study by Levy, Spooner, Lee, Sonke, Myers, & Snow, (2018) found that the benefits of telehealth creative arts therapy for military veterans are reduced traumatic memory and improved psychological well-being. Most international organizations providing counselling and psychological therapy have changed from face-to-face formats to online services since the covid 19 pandemic. For instance, The International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA, 2020) provides supports group for members since Covid 19 hit the world. A study by Penelope Orr (2012) showed that the benefits of digital creative arts therapy include comfort, mastery, creativity, and adaptation. In her studies, comfort refers to the client's willingness to engage in therapy, where technology increases comfort because society is more adaptable in using technology. Technology can also contribute to mastery, creativity and adaptation by providing easy to use pathways for clients to express their inner feelings from their home, improving technology skills, and without having to go out to a therapy center (Penelope Orr, 2012).

Historically, humans have experienced non-verbal images and symbols as allowing them to express themselves in more meaningful ways and at a deeper level than through verbal language (Gladding, 2016). American Art Therapy Association (AATA, 2017), defines art therapy as an integrative mental health and human services profession that enriches the lives of individuals, families, and communities through active art-making, creative process, applied psychological theory, and human experience within a psychotherapeutic relationship. Malchiodi (2006) defines art therapy within two contexts: firstly, 'Art as therapy' refers to the process of making art in a therapeutic context that seems to be an opportunity to express oneself imaginatively, authentically, and spontaneously, an experience that, over time, can lead to personal fulfilment, emotional reparation, and transformation. Secondly, 'art in therapy' or 'art psychotherapy' is defined based on the idea that art is a means of communication, art images become significant in enhancing verbal exchange between the therapist and the

client in achieving insight that leads to positive change, growth and healing.

According to Prever (2010), creative interventions can decrease difficulties in expressing feelings verbally, particularly for children and young people; this type of intervention may benefit these groups as a means of communication. Experts in art therapy emphasize that the benefit of creative intervention is in the therapeutic process between the therapist and the client, not on the final art products (Kapitan, 2012; Gladding, 2016). Therefore, the use of digital technology, and creative techniques, to provide psychological support online, will enable clients who are not interested in traditional art therapy, to access digital methods, and to seek the therapeutic services (Ralston, 2018).

The process of helping using creative techniques through digital technology can help clients who have difficulty in verbal communication, also can facilitate clients who live far away from therapists (Avramova-Todorova G & Todorov M, 2019). These are more essential to focus, instead of the final art-making product. Furthermore, apart from factors involving long distances, other factors such as less cost, and time constraints, make digital creative arts therapy more reasonable choice (Opdenakker, 2006; Musselwhite, Cuff, McGregor & King, 2006). In addition, in the field of healthcare, digital creative arts therapy can be used as a diagnostic tool, to access clients psychological state prior psychological therapy. (Avramova-Todorova et. Al. 2019). Another advantage of digital creative arts therapy is that they are also appropriate to deal with issues such as sensitive topics, which the client may prefer to keep as more anonymous, or not comfortable with face-to-face therapy, thus enabling the participants to feel more secure, less threatening, or the need to avoid sharing issues that might touch them emotionally (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

In a Covid 19 crisis situation, long -term isolation at home can cause boredom and psychological stress that will affect a person's mood and emotions. For some relatively extreme situations where there is conflict between family members, too many people in a confined home, poor emotional control, lack of resilience and skills to manage stress, abuse, domestic violence, tendency to self-harm themselves, job loss and so on, desperately need psychological intervention and online creative therapy (Datlen dan Pandolfi (2020 ; Gomez Carlier et al., 2020; Miller & McDonald, 2020). Many organizations around the world have also provided online psychological support using various types of creative interventions to help communities adjust to the newly changing lifestyles. For example, the European Federation of Art Therapy (EFAT) provides a platform for online art therapy sessions conducted by volunteers in europe (EFAT, 2021). Meanwhile, the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA) and the International Creative Arts for Education and Therapy (ICAET), also organize a series of online events using a variety of different art modalities for the benefit of members around the world (IEATA, 2021, IACAET, 2021).

The common nature of helpful aspect when utilizing creative art therapy centers around assisting in verbal and non-verbal communication, facilitating emotional expression, encouraging self-disclosure, enhancing therapeutic relationship and managing the therapeutic process (N. Rogers, 1993; Landreth, 2002). These authors believed that the range of materials offered can provide an immediate, spontaneous, and the here and now engagement for the clients in the therapeutic process, or with the therapist. In other words, the presence of various kinds of materials will stimulate an immediate reaction within the client to engage in the process. Another way that creative art therapy can foster the therapeutic engagement is that the materials can attract the clients, and they can freely get attached to it (Azizah, 2015).

In addition, the materials function as a bridge to connect beyond the relationship between the therapist and the client (N. Roger, 1993; Herron, 2005). Therefore, using creative arts materials is perceived as helpful as a bridge to: i) the constructive communication between the therapist and the client, ii) facilitate verbal and non-verbal processes, iii) facilitate emotional expression from the unconscious to a certain level of awareness, iv) narrow the gap in order to move the client from abstract to a concrete meaning, v) bypass cognitive and intellectual level through unfolding feelings and emotions, and vi) awake the unknown self (N. Rogers, 1993; Landreth, 2002; Rubin, 2010). Furthermore, N. Rogers (1993) views that images created from the unconscious have assisted the individual to understand about their inner world and to discover the unknown message. Estenson (2012) discovered that the use of creative arts activity had increasing students' creativity, self-reflection, self-understanding, self-awareness, introspection, and developmental growth.

III. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The results of the studies show seven themes related to the aspects that help in the digital use of creative arts therapy remotely: i) facilitates remote communication, ii) easy storage of digital art media, iii) develop a variety of digital creative arts tools, iv) managing home-based therapy, v) improvement in digital technology skills, vi) foster distance psychological supports, and vii) increase global learning.

i) *Facilitates remote communication*

All respondents involved stated that online creative arts therapy facilitate remote communication. This theme includes five sub-themes, namely: i) Save time, ii) Save cost for travel, iii) easy connection, iv) Dont need to rush to meet a therapist, and v) Comfort long-distance interaction.

ii) *Easy storage of digital art media*

A key aspect of digital creative arts therapy that helpful are easier storage of digital arts media, can be save in document files. Most participants involved in this study stated that creative arts therapy using digital technology facilitates the storage for creative art works. The thematic analysis shows five sub-themes as follows: i) Does not require physical storage, ii) Provides digital space for creative products, iii)

Can be stored at any time as a digital product, iv) Can be accessed anytime from any location, and v) Wider storage space capacity.

iii) *Develop a variety of digital creative arts tools*

Almost two third of participants agreed that online creative arts therapy provide opportunities for various digital methods or apps. These themes include; i) Option to use a smart phone or laptop, ii) Freedom to choose audio or video communication, iii) Private different way of conversation remotely, iv) Enable for different writing, texts on apps or email.

iv) *Managing home-based therapy*

Participants highlighted that they could attend trainings, supervisions and therapy sessions directly from home. These sub-themes include: i) Personal comfort at home, ii) Dress simple at home, iii) Easy to manage from home, iv) Can do multitask at home, and v) A more relaxed atmosphere.

v) *Improvement in digital technology skills*

Almost all participants highlighted the improvement of skills in the use of digital technology through online creative therapy either through training, supervision or therapy sessions. This theme shows five sub-themes as follows: i) Improving the engagements process, ii) Additional knowledge using various digital devices, iii) Increasing knowledge of technical aspects, iv) Enhances information through digital technology, and v) Assisting problem solving in a crisis situation.

vi) *Foster distance psychological supports*

Participants stressed about the various benefits of online psychological therapy from a distance. Sub-themes for this category are: i) Fostering interactive learning and therapy, ii) Providing space for emotional expression during crisis, iii) Enabling remote psychological support, iv) Reducing distraction when social distance occurs, and v) Treating emotional stress emotional and mental health through a variety of digital tools.

vii) *Increase online global learning.*

Most participants revealed the increasing of online global learning related to creative arts therapy for personal and professional career development. Sub-themes for this category include: i) Learning from around the world, ii) Learning opportunities from international experts, iii) Building a wider networking, iv) Learning creative techniques from various cultures globally.

IV. DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate the essential need of digital technology as a medium for remote training, therapy and supervision that can reach a wider audience. The findings showed helpful aspect of digital technology with seven main themes that consistent with previous studies where digital technology plays an important role as a platform for communication and interaction for long distances (Orr, 2012; Levi et al, 2018; Hacmun et al, 2018; Miller & McDonald, 2020). Moreover, the findings of this study are in line with

previous studies that show the need of digital technology in providing counseling and therapy services, when face-to-face meetings are limited (Hacmun et al, 2018). The findings of Penelope Orr (2012), where digital technology offers comfort, mastery, creativity and adaptation in helpful relationships between counselors/therapists and clients parallel this study.

The themes of helpful aspects emerged from this study are consistent with the views of experts and previous studies related to the benefits and advantages of digital creative arts therapy. (Orr, 2012; Malchiondi, 2017; Levi et al, 2018; Hacmun et al, 2018; Miller & McDonald, 2020). The results of this study are in line with the views of Hacmun et. al (2018), where creative therapy services through digital technology offer a real therapeutic environment of space and material virtually, where therapists can interact with clients face to face from a distance, through a variety of creative methods. A study by Natalia Gomez Carlier et al., related to the use of online creative therapy in the Middle East showed a decrease in negative perceptions of individuals seeking psychological help through creative therapy methods, as well as an increase in openness to online helpful contact services since the covid 19 crisis hit the world. (Gomez Carlier et al., 2020). The studies of Gomez Carlier et al, (2020) supports the findings of this study related to the positive perception of respondents' experience after attending online training sessions, conducting therapy and supervision. Meanwhile, Datlen and Pandolfi (2020) emphasize the importance of creating a digital creative therapy platform that can be accessed by groups with disabilities, from a distance, as the respondents from this study also highlight the ability to increase access to psychological therapy widely.

The findings of this study also show the use of creative therapy through various apps such as Zoom, Webex, Telegram and WhatsApp provide different forms of communication and increase digital technology skills, in line with related studies (Datlen & Pandolfi, 2020; Miller & McDonald, 2020). The experiences and views of practitioners and clients involved in online creative therapy services have shown various advantages, strengths, importance and benefits of digital technology for psychological therapy. The use of online creative arts therapy can bring two distant individuals closer, expand aspects of one's imagination and creativity, save various related costs, provide comfort and improve skills in various aspects (Orr, 2012; Malchiondi, 2017; Levi et al, 2018). Miller & McDonald, (2020), highlight the need to empower the use of various types of online therapies. Hacmun et al., (2018) proposed digital creative therapy empowerment that allows therapists and clients to create a therapeutic environment appropriate to their specific need's situation. In addition, this approach is also well suited to treat the younger generation who are indeed well versed in digital technology (Orr, 2012; Hacmun et al., (2018).

V. CONCLUSION

A large number of the global community have adapted to the use of creative arts therapy through digital technology as a key and important platform for providing psychological support and addressing mental health issues since the COVID-

19 crisis. Most studies related to online creative arts therapy interventions have shown various benefits and advantages to various parties including people with disabilities, especially over long distances and there are limitations to face-to-face meetings. Yet the emphasis on a deep understanding of the limitations, challenges, ethics, procedures and protocols of conducting creative therapy online is crucial in protecting clients' privacy and confidentiality as well as the issues they raise as highlighted by Alders, Beck, Allen., & Mosinski, (2011). Practitioners or therapists need systematic long-term training from experts and other practitioners who actually implement therapy online, not based on theory and concept alone. It is necessary to avoid negative effects or leave unresolved issues on the part of the client, due to lack of knowledge and skills to conduct online sessions. In addition, clinical supervision sessions are also very important to help ensure the effectiveness, as well as referral needs on the part of practitioners, therapists and counselors, in order to improve their services, and increase the number of clients accessing psychological therapy.

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