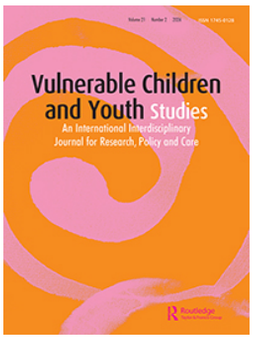

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Canvas to Change: a pilot study exploring experiences of a creative arts programme supporting youth mental Health

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ABSTRACT

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical developmental period, particularly for young people experiencing mental health challenges. Arts-based interventions have shown promise in supporting mental wellbeing through creative engagement and community connection. This pilot study aimed to explore the experiences of participants in the Canvas to Change programme, a community-based creative arts initiative for young people aged 16–25 in Coventry, UK. A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was used. Qualitative data were gathered through focus groups, interviews, and open-ended surveys, and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Quantitative data were collected using mental wellbeing measures and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics 26.0. Qualitative analysis (n = 14) revealed four themes: initial engagement and comfort, mental health benefits, creative expression, and social connection. A total of 32 participants provided quantitative data, with 10 completing both baseline and follow-up measures. While statistical power was limited, trends suggested improvements in wellbeing indicators including feeling close to others, optimism about the future, and reduced loneliness. Recruitment challenges were addressed through relationship-building and using flexible, participant-led data collection approaches. Canvas to Change offers a promising, accessible alternative to traditional mental health services for young people. The programme's holistic, arts-based approach supports emotional resilience, social confidence, and self-awareness. As a pilot study, findings are exploratory and highlight the need for future research with larger samples and validated tools.

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Mental health; creative arts; young adults; community-based programme

1. Background

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a pivotal period marked by biological, cognitive, and psychosocial changes (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). For young people experiencing mental health challenges, this period

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can be particularly difficult. Despite the need for targeted support, there is limited provision, and many young people face a discontinuity when transitioning from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to adult services (Appleton et al., 2022; Boonstra et al., 2024; Campbell et al., 2014; Hendrickx et al., 2020).

While some young people maintain stable mental health after exiting CAMHS, others are at risk of deterioration without appropriate support (Gerritsen et al., 2022). Rosina et al. (2025) emphasise the importance of addressing individual needs during this transition to maximise opportunities in adulthood. To address this, there is a need for innovative solutions that are sufficiently accessible, scalable, and cost-effective (Golden et al., 2024).

Arts-based approaches have shown promise in supporting youth mental health by fostering resilience, self-expression, and social connection (Golden et al., 2024; Kumar et al., 2024). Community-based and participatory approaches can also enhance equity and engagement in mental health interventions particularly through low-threshold activities like arts participation (Rodriguez et al., 2024). According to Macpherson et al. (2015), even short-term visual arts interventions have been shown to have a positive impact on young people's resilience.

Existing evidence suggests that arts-based programmes may influence wellbeing through mechanisms, such as emotional regulation, identity development, and opportunities for mastery and social connection (Cole et al., 2018; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). However, much of this work has focused on adults or clinical settings (Regev & Cohen-Yatziv, 2018; Uttley et al., 2015), with fewer studies exploring arts-based models tailored specifically to young people navigating the transition to adulthood (Smriti et al., 2022). Despite increasing recognition of creative and participatory approaches in public mental health, there remains limited empirical research on how young people engage with non-clinical, arts-based interventions, and which aspects of these programmes best support mental health, belonging, and autonomy.

The Canvas to Change programme, developed by Arty-Folks in Coventry, United Kingdom (UK), is an example of an innovative approach to mental health support through creative arts engagement (Arty-Folks, 2026). The programme's holistic approach combines creative arts workshops with mental health coaching, social activities and career development support for young people aged 16–25.

This pilot study aimed to explore the participants' experiences of the programme and identify the potential benefits in terms of emotional wellbeing, social connection and personal development. Rather than testing specific outcomes, the study sought to generate insights into how young people engage with arts-based mental health support in a community setting.

2. Methods

This pilot study used a convergent parallel mixed-methods design to collect qualitative and quantitative data concurrently, analysing them separately, and integrating findings during interpretation. The design was informed by the Medical Research Council's Framework for Developing and Evaluating Complex Interventions (Skivington et al., 2021) and the Public Health England Arts, Health and Wellbeing Evaluation Framework (Daykin & Joss, 2016), which advocates for pragmatic, context-sensitive approaches suited to community-based arts and health programmes.

The methods were selected to balance rigour with accessibility, recognising the challenges of engaging with young people experiencing mental health difficulties.

2.1. The Canvas to Change programme

The Canvas to Change programme is an initiative developed and delivered by Arty-Folks, a Coventry-based specialist arts and mental health organisation with longstanding experience supporting people through creative, community-based approaches.

The Canvas to Change programme, funded by the Heart of England Community Foundation, was specifically designed to support young people aged 16–25 navigating mental health challenges and the transition into adulthood (Arty-Folks, 2026). Its development was iteratively informed by organisational experience but also through collaboration with participants from Arty-Folks' adult groups. This collaborative approach reflects Arty-Folks' ethos of co-production and meaningful involvement of people with lived experience in service design and delivery (Arty-Folks, 2026).

Arty-Folks programmes are specifically designed for individuals experiencing mental health challenges. While the programme is open-access and does not require a formal diagnosis, the majority of participants engage with Arty-Folks due to ongoing struggles with their mental health, including anxiety, depression, and emotional distress. Canvas to Change is not a time-limited intervention; participants can attend for as long as they wish, with encouragement to build a portfolio for progression into education or employment. The Canvas to Change programme offers a holistic, non-clinical approach to wellbeing through weekly two-hour creative workshops, facilitated in small groups of up to 12 participants. These sessions are designed to be inclusive and low-pressure, allowing participants to engage at their own pace. Sessions are facilitated by trained practitioners and peer support workers to explore a wide range of artistic techniques, including painting, digital art, photography, sculpture, filmmaking, textiles, and crafts, alongside reflective practices such as collage-based stream of consciousness, silhouette work on daily routines, glass-paint sculpture on nature and growth, and journalling inspired by self-help texts. These activities build self-awareness, resilience, and personal expression. The programme is further complemented by mental health coaching, social activities (e.g. yoga), and career development support. The programme also includes specialist workshops led by professionals in graphic design, illustration, and community arts.

Canvas to Change is underpinned by a theory of change that positions creative engagement as a mechanism for improving mental health, wellbeing, and life opportunities (Arty-Folks, 2026). The programme aims to reduce social isolation and loneliness through regular attendance, structured group discussion, and art projects designed to encourage reflection and shared dialogue. Mental health stability and self-management are supported through ongoing one-to-one coaching and mentoring, which focuses on identifying barriers, building coping strategies, and addressing patterns such as overthinking or all-or-nothing thinking. Creative practice is used as a tool for self-discovery, emotional expression, and confidence-building, supporting participants to develop a stronger sense of agency and tolerance of imperfection. Together, these elements aim to build resilience and support social, educational, and economic engagement, including progression into further education, training, volunteering, or employment.

2.2. Participants and recruitment

Participants were service users of the Canvas to Change programme and recruited through voluntary sampling (Murairwa, 2015). The study was promoted collaboratively by Arty-Folks staff and Coventry University researchers. Researchers attended several sessions to introduce the study and distribute information sheets. Additionally, Arty-Folks staff shared details about the study and invited service users to participate during workshops and through email communication. Participants provided informed consent either online via JISC Online Surveys or on paper; for participants under 18 years old, consent from a parent or guardian was obtained. Participants were given a debrief form with further guidance and information on support services.

Due to the sensitive nature of the study and the small sample size, participant demographic data collected was intentionally limited to reduce identifiability. Data on participants' mental health status or clinical history, education level, and income were not collected for the qualitative participants to protect participant privacy and minimise burden.

2.3. Qualitative data collection and analysis

Qualitative data was collected through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and open-ended survey questions, either online or in person, between December 2024 and February 2025. Focus groups were held during art sessions, and semi-structured interviews were conducted at times and locations convenient for participants. Interviews and focus groups followed a shared interview guide (Appendix 1) conducted by EL focusing on participants' experiences of the programme, perceived benefits and suggestions for improvement.

Recruitment presented several challenges, particularly in building trust and comfort among potential participants. To address this, the researchers (EL and LW) worked closely with Arty-Folks staff to identify appropriate sessions for researcher attendance to minimise disruption and build rapport developing participant-led approaches. Adaptations to data collection were made to accommodate participants' preferences and comfort levels. For example, the open-ended survey was developed to introduce participants to the types of questions they might be asked and gather data from those who did not feel comfortable attending the focus group but still wanted to participate. Additionally, with the first focus group, some participants expressed they did not feel comfortable with being audio recorded and visibly looked concerned. After some informal discussion, instead participants all verbally expressed they felt comfortable with the automatic transcription function on Microsoft Teams while LW took verbatim notes. Consolidating the automatically transcribed data and handwritten notes was challenging, though formed a comprehensive account of the conversation and points raised. The interviews and other focus group were audio recorded.

This rapport-building, flexible and participant-led approach was reported by participants as helpful in reducing anxiety about participation with 'strangers' while ensuring ethical engagement and data quality.

Qualitative data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2021). Themes were developed using an inductive approach following the six-

step process (by EL): 1) familiarising oneself with the data, 2) reviewing and recoding initial codes as necessary, 3) generating themes from these codes, 4) reviewing and refining themes to ensure consistency with the overall data set, 5) defining and naming themes to clarify the narrative, and 6) writing up. To enhance transparency and demonstrate analytic development, an audit trail of the reflexive thematic analysis is provided (Appendix 2) with worked examples illustrating how raw data extracts from interviews, focus groups, and surveys were coded, interpreted, and iteratively refined into subthemes and final themes.

The analysis was grounded in social constructivism, which assumes that meaning is co-constructed through interaction, context, and language rather than simply discovered within the data (Boyland, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2016). This positioned the researchers as active participants in theme development, attending to the relational, contextual and social processes shaping participants' accounts, for example, how group settings, shared identities, or prior experiences with services influenced how young people narrated their engagement with the programme. This stance also required reflection on how researcher positionality shaped interpretation, consistent with reflexive thematic analysis.

2.3.1. Reflexivity

In line with RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the research team engaged in ongoing reflexive practice throughout data collection and analysis. Reflexive notes were kept by both researchers (EL and LW) to document evolving assumptions, emotional responses, and interpretations (see Appendix 3 for excerpts). The team regularly met to discuss how their positionalities, expectations, and relationships with the organisation might shape interactions with participants and subsequent interpretation of the data. One researcher (LW) had prior involvement with the organisation and familiarity with its community context and therefore attended sessions for recruitment and focus groups to support rapport-building, reduce participant anxiety, and facilitate an accessible data collection environment. To minimise any potential influence towards positive opinions, this researcher did not conduct interviews or focus groups, and the initial coding was instead led by (EL) who held an external, non-embedded position relative to Arty-Folks. Both researchers collaboratively refined codes, developed themes, and interrogated how insider-outsider dynamics, power relations, and participant-led adaptations influenced the analytic process. This iterative and interpretive approach aligns with a constructivist epistemology and supports the credibility and transparency of the analytic narrative.

2.4. Quantitative data collection and analysis

Quantitative data were collected by Arty-Folks through their standard course enrolment and follow-up process. Anonymised data shared with researchers for analysis included demographics, mental health measures including the Short Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS), and bespoke scales for anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Appendix 4).

Data were analysed (by RP) using IBM SPSS version 26.0. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) were used to summarise sample characteristics and trends. Visual inspection of the normal Q-Q plot indicated non-normal distribution, so Wilcoxon signed-rank tests were used to assess changes between baseline and

follow-up (Field, 2009). Upon analysis of the Wilcoxon signed-rank test histogram analysis, any data that did not meet the requirements for normal distribution were further analysed by an exact sign test to understand the effect of engagement (Laerd Statistics, 2015). Given the small sample size ($n = 10$), statistical power was limited, and findings are interpreted as indicative trends rather than robust effects. Significance was accepted at $p < 0.05$, but borderline values and null results were critically considered.

2.5. Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted from Coventry University Ethics Committee (P180302, 16/10/2024). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with parental or guardian consent for those under 18 years. Data were anonymised and stored securely. Reporting is presented in aggregate form to protect participants' identities. Although internal anonymity within Arty-Folks could not be fully guaranteed due to the nature of shared experiences, confidentiality was maintained. Protocols were in place for any safeguarding concerns, though none arose during the project.

3. Results

3.1. Participant data and demographics

Arty-Folks provided anonymised baseline data from 32 participants. Participants were aged 22 ± 2.14 years (range 16–25) with 24 identifying as female, 3 male, 3 non-binary and 2 prefer not to say. Most were based in Coventry ($n = 30$) with one each from Warwick and Rugby. Of the 32 participants, 10 participants completed both baseline and follow-up measures. These 10 participants were aged 21.8 ± 2.97 years; with 8 identifying as female, 1 male, 1 prefer not to say; all 10 were based in Coventry.

A total of 14 participants contributed to the qualitative data: seven through interviews and focus groups, and seven through open-ended surveys. One semi-structured face-to-face interview and two face-to-face focus groups were conducted with a total of eight participants: one focus group was conducted at the Arty-Folks studios with six participants and another with two participants at a temporary Arty-Folks location in Coventry. One participant took part in both an interview and a focus group.

Table 1 shows participant demographics for all three data collection points. Due to the anonymised nature of the data, it was not possible to determine overlap between the quantitative and qualitative participants. Additionally, participants ages were anonymised within the qualitative dataset, preventing differentiation of experiences by age group. Given the small sample size and the priority placed on reducing identifiability, further age-based analysis was not feasible. No apparent age-related patterns were observed in the overall qualitative narrative.

Average length of engagement with Arty-Folks was 78 ± 120.99 days. Of the 32 participants enrolled, 10 had exited the programme at the time of data collection. Therefore, the remaining 22 participants were still engaged with the Arty Folks programme and therefore were not assessed at follow-up/exit.

Table 1. Participant demographics

	Interview and Focus Groups (n = 7*)	Qualitative Survey (n = 7)	Quantitative Data (n = 32)
Age, M ± SD (range)	22 ± 2.65 yrs (17–24 yrs)	23 ± 1.68 yrs (20–24 yrs)	22 ± 2.14 yrs (16–25 yrs)
Gender (n)			
Female	6	5	24
Male	–	–	3
Non-binary	1	1	3
Prefer not to say	–	1	2
Ethnicity (n)			
White (English)	5	5	20
Asian, Asian-British/Welsh/Mixed	1	1	1
Afgan[a]	1	–	–
African	–	–	1
Arab	–	–	1
Black African/Mixed White	–	–	1
Chinese	–	–	1
Indian	–	–	2
Pakistani	–	–	2
Any White other	–	–	2
Any other	–	–	1
Prefer not to say	–	1	–
Education [b] **(n)**			
University	–	–	10
GCSE/ OLevel	–	–	6
A-Level/BTEC/HND	–	–	8
None	–	–	8
Employment (n)			
Self-employed	–	–	1
Full-time	–	–	2
Part-time	–	–	3
Student	–	–	5
Unemployed 1 Year	–	–	7
Unemployed 2 Year	–	–	4
Unemployed 5 Year	–	–	3
Never worked	–	–	5
None of the above	–	–	2
Source of Income (n)			
Salary	–	–	4
Sick Pay	–	–	1
Univeral Credit (UC)	–	–	19
Job Seekers Allowance (JSA)	–	–	1
Other	–	–	6
None	–	–	1
Additional benefits (n)			
Disability Living Allowance (DLA)	–	–	2
Personal Independence Payments (PIP)	–	–	11
Employment Support Allowance (ESA)	–	–	1
None	–	–	18
Mental health (n)			
A mental health difficulty, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder	–	–	25
Enduring physical health problems (e.g. mobility, cancer, COPD, etc)	–	–	2
Special educational needs (e.g. brain injury, learning needs)	–	–	1
Autism spectrum; Other difficulties (other than mental health)	–	–	1
None of the above	–	–	3

a.One participant took part in both an interview and focus group.
b.Self-reported.

3.2. Qualitative results

Thematic synthesis revealed four key themes: (1) Initial engagement and building comfort, (2) Mental health benefits, (3) Arts activities and creative pursuits, and (4) Social interaction and group setting (Figure 1).

3.2.1. Theme 1: initial engagement and building comfort

Decisions to join the Canvas to Change programme were often driven by a desire for artistic expression, with many participants attracted by the opportunity to engage creative activities. For some, practical considerations, such as access to art materials, played a role in their decision to participate. For others, the attraction was the chance to break out of isolation, to meet new people and to step outside their comfort zone in a safe environment. This idea of seeking discomfort in a safe environment recurred across motivations, initial anxieties, and creative engagement. It was seen as a defining feature of how participants experienced the programme, not just a feature of initial recruitment.

> It's a nice way to push yourself out of your comfort zone while being comfortable.

Expectations varied widely; some had no specific goals, while others sought a balance between social interaction and personal comfort, wanting to meet new people but without excessive pressure to engage. Others saw it as an opportunity to establish a routine, improve their mental health, and take a break from day-to-day worries.

> After that initial stage, you do start to settle in and it becomes part of your weekly routine.

Most participants experienced some initial anxiety and fear when joining. Challenges varied, with some struggling with the registration phone call or anxiety with attending the first session. For many, the group setting was intimidating at first, but as they settled in, the experience became rewarding. Concerns included the prospect of being recognised, having to build new relationships without knowing how they would develop, and fears of being judged by others.

> Hopefully I'll meet some people and make some art and not have a panic attack. It was the sort of goal and I had achieved that.

Participants appreciated the high level of communication, the warm welcome from the facilitators and the benefits of creative engagement. The opportunity to socialise at their own pace in a comfortable environment made the experience particularly meaningful.

> This is the one bit of the week where I leave the house and see people that aren't in my immediate circle. So, it's yeah, I think everyone needs that.

Factors easing this transition included the opportunity to visit the venue beforehand and telephone conversations with the facilitators before attending the first session, which provided reassurance, clarity and details of how the sessions would normally run. Clear and supportive communication from the facilitators played a crucial role in helping participants feel more comfortable. During the initial period of adjustment, some participants expressed concerns about the appropriateness of the programme for their situation, but continued participation often led to reported improvements in self-confidence and a sense of belonging. The presence

Figure 1. Infographic of the four qualitative themes.

of the facilitators was also seen as important in fostering a sense of security, with attendees describing them as warm and non-pressured.

3.2.2. Theme 2: mental health benefits

The experience of participating in artistic activities in a supportive environment was highly valued. The opportunities for social interaction in a setting that was both comfortable and at a pleasant pace were also valued.

> Learn how to think on your feet a bit more because you come in and you don't know what's going to happen and you've learned to be OK with that because it's a safe environment.

A particularly valued aspect of the programme is the way it normalises conversations about mental health. Participants described in contrast to clinical services, where professionals often rely on theoretical knowledge and may struggle to relate to lived experience, this setting provides a space where individuals can speak openly with others who understand their struggles first-hand. The opportunity to share experiences with peers and facilitators who have their own insight into mental health challenges fosters a sense of validation and mutual support.

> There's not as much like stigma attached to it as well, you don't feel as judged as you would going to like your GP or something like that.

A key benefit of the programme is its ability to support mental health in a way that feels engaging and sustainable.

> There's like an ongoing support system that feels consistent, and it feels like there's respect both ways. It's not like you're kind of down here and someone else is up here like you're being spoken to as a patient. You're being spoken to as an equal here.

Unlike clinical interventions, participants described the programme as promoting a sense of agency and equal participation, giving participants control over their wellbeing. Art plays a central role, acting as both a therapeutic tool and a means of self-expression.

> Overall like it's helped a lot with my confidence, I think. And not being afraid to actually talk about your mental health without feeling judged about it like you do from typical mental health services.

The programme impacted on mental health beyond the sessions themselves, with participants describing gains in confidence, coping skills and self-awareness. Some participants noted a reduction in social anxiety and an improvement in general mood. It was reported that having a structured weekly activity to look forward to provided a sense of purpose and helped to alleviate feelings of isolation and stagnation. Participants shared that consistent sessions helped participants establish a routine, providing stability lowering stress levels and increase sense of safety.

> It helps in a sense for kind of getting some independence back and I think from the creative aspect of it as well. You know, you're given a project that you kind of choose what you're doing with it and how it's how it's like, what the outcome is like. So yeah, just kind of giving you more power of your own mental health. And again, like having that voice that you have that most services kind of silence you off.

According to participants the programme created a supportive network where mental health is not a taboo subject but an open and accepted part of the experience and a way to find also novel support networks.

> From Arty-Folks I've kind of gone on to reach out to other support networks as well. And I wouldn't have been able to do that solely by myself before.

3.2.3. Theme 3: art activities and creative pursuits

The first sessions were well received and helped individuals to settle into the group. Those who attended the introductory class enjoyed nostalgic activities such as finger painting and expressed interest in future techniques such as acrylic pouring and clay sculpting. The sessions were described to provide a relaxed, engaging space for mindfulness.

> You're always subconsciously getting something out when you create.

Beyond the physical act of creating, the art activities provided a low-pressure and engaging space for mindfulness and self-expression. Some participants found the experiences to be relaxing, allowing them to stay present in the moment. Many participants noted engaging in creative activities allowed them to 'switch off' and focus on the process of making something, providing a form of relief from intrusive thoughts and external pressures.

Having autonomy over projects encouraged personal investment and many found they were unconsciously expressing emotions through their artwork. The process encouraged persistence, adaptability and problem solving, with participants valuing the journey as much as the final piece.

> Being patient as well and kind of just accepting like this is the process like it will turn out to be something regardless of whether it's something I'm expecting or not.

Each project, whether enjoyable or challenging, provided an opportunity to learn something new about oneself. The ability to show up, experiment and push through uncertainty was valued by the participants as an important personal and artistic lesson. Ultimately, the creative process was seen as rewarding, not just for the result, but for the journey of exploration, self-acceptance and growth.

More introspective projects were seen as challenging and evoking vulnerability, especially in a group setting. Expressing emotions through art could feel exposing, and unfamiliar materials sometimes caused discomfort. While these activities were recognised as valuable, they also evoked feelings of vulnerability, particularly in a group setting. The process of externalising personal feelings through art could feel revealing, making these projects more emotionally challenging.

> The ones where you actually have to think and actually get in touch with, like your emotions and the difficulties is very difficult because you feel like exposed, especially like when you're in a group. I mean, it's a good thing to do, it's just a challenging project.

Difficulties arose when struggling with ideas or facing poor mental health, but participants described facilitators playing a key role in overcoming creative blocks. Their guidance helped participants to deal with uncertainty and reinforced the idea that art is an evolving process rather than about perfection. Overthinking often hindered creativity and required a more flexible, patient approach. While not every project turned out as expected, each provided a sense of achievement and self-discovery.

3.2.4. Theme 4: social interaction and group setting

A key social benefit is the ease of connecting with others. Art serves as a natural conversation starter, helping participants to engage with family and friends beyond the

programme. Over time, many felt less awkward in social situations, making anxiety in unfamiliar environments more manageable. Some also reported increased confidence in expressing themselves and asserting their opinions in personal relationships.

> I know for me, when my anxiety was really bad, like a group setting was like the worst thing I could ever imagine. But when you start to like, come every week again like it's routine, you kind, you do start to kind of get used to it and it doesn't feel as overwhelming and claustrophobic.

The programme balances personal creativity with social engagement by allowing both quiet, focused artistic expression and moments of shared discussion, helping individuals to build confidence in group and wider social settings. Its structured yet flexible environment allows for both focused artistic expression and shared discussion, creating a safe and stimulating space.

> Everyone is equal. I think that's very much like that. You come in here and you just feel like you're on an equal footing with everybody.

While group settings can be challenging, routine attendance helps to ease initial discomfort. Although dominant voices can sometimes make participation difficult, the overall atmosphere remains friendly and supportive. The group dynamic changes as new members join, which can feel overwhelming at first, but also encourages empathy and social growth.

> You start to feel a bit more yourself, a bit more confident in your ability as well.

> It becomes part of your week. It's something that's structured, and especially with anxiety when you're thinking everything at once and everything's unpredictable, you know that this is somewhat in control.

The size of the group is another important factor in the social dynamic. When new members join, the increase in numbers can sometimes feel daunting, not only to the newcomers but also to existing participants:

> You get used to a certain like group size. You get used to seeing familiar faces, and then when somebody new comes in as much as it's scary for them, it's kind of overwhelming for you as well.

It can be hard getting used to new people and situations, but it can also be a good chance to get better at social situations.

3.3. Quantitative results

Given the small sample size, statistical power was limited, and findings should be interpreted as exploratory trends.

The results shown in Table 2 suggest potential improvements in social connection, optimism, and decision-making, but no consistent effects on anxiety, relaxation, or problem-solving. Given the small sample and lack of control group (see Figures 2 and 3 for bar graphs).

Table 2. Trends in quantitative analysis

	Improved	No Change	Reduced	*z*	*p*
Feeling Useful[a]	6	3	1	1.93	0.053
Feeling Close to Others[a]	7	2	1	2.11	0.035*
Being Able to Make up My Mind[a]	4	4	2	1	0.032*
Feeling Optimistic about the Future[b]	6	4	0	2.04	0.031*
Feeling Relaxed[b]	4	2	4	0.00	1
Dealing with Problems Well[b]	4	3	3	0.00	1
Thinking Clearly[b]	5	5	0	1.79	0.062
Loneliness[b]	6	4	0	2.04	0.031*
Anxiety[b]	4	5	1	0.894	0.375

[a]Wilcoxon signed-rank tests.
[b]exact sign tests.
*$p < 0.05$.

4. Discussion

This pilot study aimed to explore the experiences of young people participating in the Canvas to Change programme and to identify potential benefits of arts-based mental health support in a community setting. Rather than testing specific outcomes, the study sought to understand how participants engaged with the programme and what aspects they found meaningful or impactful.

As the first published study of Arty-Folks' programmes, this research contributes new insights into the role of creative arts in supporting young people's wellbeing. The findings suggest that Canvas to Change offers a promising, accessible alternative to traditional mental health services, particularly for individuals who may feel excluded or overwhelmed by clinical environments.

Qualitative data revealed that participants valued the programme's flexibility, inclusivity, and emphasis on creative expression. The group setting fostered social connection and routine, while the art activities provided a space for mindfulness, emotional exploration, and personal growth. Participants described increased confidence, reduced isolation, and a greater sense of agency in managing their mental health. Creative engagement in a supportive, non-clinical environment was found to foster emotional resilience, social connection, and self-awareness among young people navigating the transition to adulthood.

Quantitative findings, though limited by sample size, indicated trends toward improvement in key wellbeing indicators, such as optimism, feeling close to others, and reduced loneliness. These outcomes are consistent with national-level studies linking frequent arts participation to enhanced life satisfaction and mental functioning (Keyes et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2020). However, no consistent effects were observed for anxiety, relaxation, or problem-solving. These mixed results highlight the need for further research with more robust quantitative data to draw conclusions, and the importance of combining qualitative and quantitative approaches.

The Canvas to Change programme's structure balanced routine with flexibility, and individual expression with group interaction reflecting key principles of effective participatory arts-based interventions (Macpherson et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2023). Participants described the sessions as safe, inclusive, and empowering, echoing research highlighting the therapeutic potential of creative practices in reducing stigma and enhancing agency (Cole et al., 2018; Fancourt & Finn, 2019). The structure and support

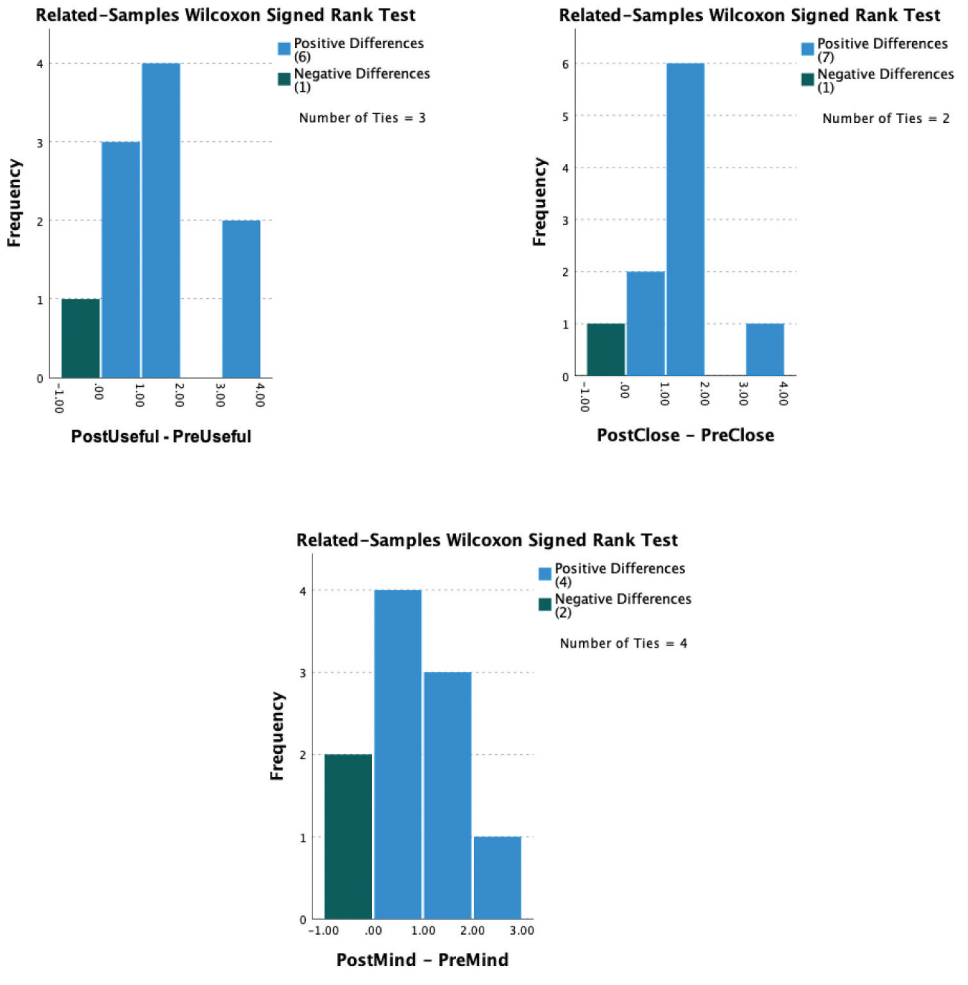

Figure 2. Bar graphs demonstrating data distribution for Feeling Useful, Feeling close to others, and being able to make up my mind Wilcoxon signed rank test results.

provided within the programme played a crucial role in fostering a comfortable and inclusive environment where participants feel encouraged rather than pressured. The non-clinical, non-hierarchical, low-pressure environment, which feels more accessible than traditional services, enabled participants to engage at their own pace contributing to a sense of safety and belonging.

Art activities were central to participants' experience, not only as a means of creative expression, but also as a therapeutic and mindful practice. Participatory arts-based programmes for young people can equip them with effective coping mechanisms for managing challenging emotions (Macpherson et al., 2015; Williams et al., 2023). Participants reported developing greater self-awareness and responsibility in managing their mental health, including recognising early signs of distress. Sessions supported mindfulness, emotion regulation and self-discovery, consistent with findings from Coholic et al. (2019) and Cole et al. (2018).

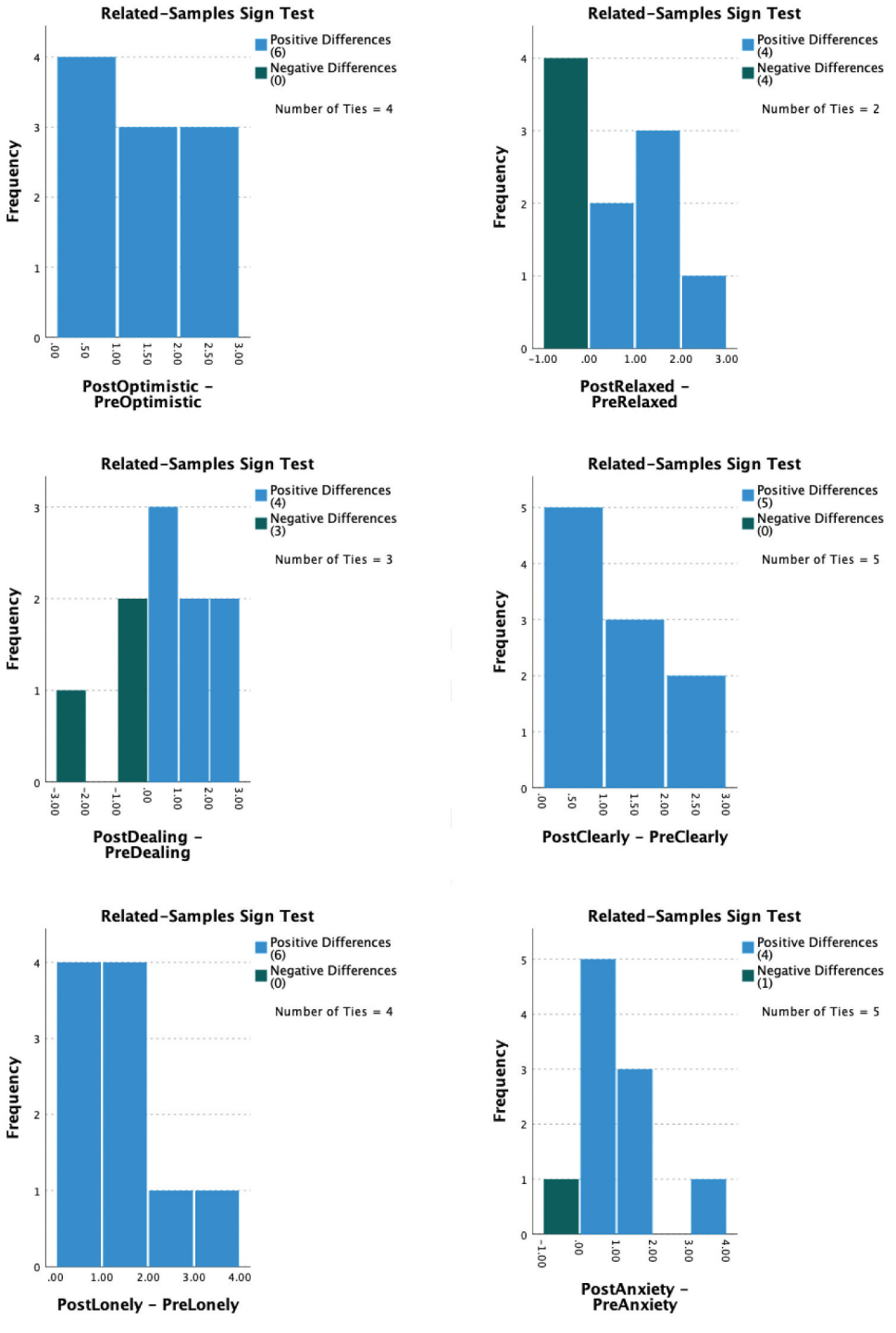

Figure 3. Bar graphs demonstrating data distribution for Feeling optimistic about the future Feeling relaxed, dealing with problems well, thinking clearly, loneliness, and anxiety sign test results.

Community-based art groups have been shown to improve well-being, increase connectedness and offer opportunities for self-expression and skill development (Archambault et al., 2020; Goodman-Casanova et al., 2024). The arts-based group setting supported improvements in communication skills and social confidence, particularly for those who experience social anxiety (Fancourt & Finn, 2019) and help connect with others in the group and express oneself (Coholic et al., 2019). Participants reported increased confidence, stronger relationships and greater readiness to face challenges. The predictability of sessions and the inclusive atmosphere helped participants feel at ease, providing a sense of structure and routine, while the peer interaction fostered a sense of shared experience and community. Although challenges were noted, many participants described personal growth through overcoming initial anxieties.

The current findings align with broader evidence that participatory arts-based programmes in community settings offer accessible, non-clinical avenues for supporting youth mental health (Williams et al., 2023). They also support Golden et al.'s (2024) call for integrating culturally relevant community practices into healthcare, education, and policy to improve access and equity.

Future research should explore the long-term impacts of arts-based mental health programmes through longitudinal follow-up, assessing whether improvements in well-being, confidence, and social engagement are sustained over time. The recruitment and data collection process highlighted the importance of relationship-building and flexibility when conducting research with young people experiencing mental health challenges. Future studies should consider embedding researchers within programmes over time to build trust and familiarity. Additionally, offering multiple modes of participation (e.g. written, verbal, creative) and being responsive to participants' comfort with recording or sharing can enhance engagement and data richness. Additionally, incorporating arts-based data collection methods, such as visual journaling, photovoice, or participant-created artwork, could offer more inclusive and expressive ways for young people to share their experiences. These methods may also reduce barriers to participation and enhance engagement, recruitment and retention, particularly among individuals who find traditional interviews or surveys challenging or among marginalised or hard-to-reach youth populations. Embedding creative methods into the research process not only improve ethical practice but may also increase inclusivity and participation among individuals who might otherwise experience barriers to participation or be hesitant to engage in research fostering an empowering and collaborative evaluation culture.

4.1. Strengths and limitations

A key strength of this pilot study is its mixed-methods design, which enabled a nuanced exploration of young people's experience in a community-based arts programme. The combination of qualitative insights with quantitative wellbeing measures, provided complementary insights, with the depth from the qualitative findings to offer context to the observed trends in wellbeing. The study also benefited from its community-based, real-world setting to evaluate a programme delivered by local arts and mental health charity. This enhances the ecological validity and ensures that the findings are relevant to similar service settings. Moreover, the inclusive, non-clinical approach prioritised participant safety, comfort, and autonomy, which is particularly important when working

with young people facing mental health challenges. Efforts were made to ensure the rigour and trustworthiness, following Lincoln's (1985) key criteria: for example, credibility was established through methodological triangulation, comparing data from individual interviews and focus group discussions, and participants were allowed ample time to share their experiences, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the data collected.

Despite these promising results, the study has limitations. The small sample size and high attrition rate limits statistical power and generalisability. While some trends were observed, the findings should be interpreted cautiously. In future research, a power calculation is needed to determine the appropriate sample size needed to determine a statistically significant effect and reduce Type I and Type II errors (Columb & Atkinson, 2016). Additionally, the organisations use of a bespoke survey measures restricts comparability with other studies. Future evaluations should consider using validated tools, such as the full Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) and Patient Health Questionnaire Anxiety-Depression Scale (PHQ-ADS), to strengthen methodological rigour. Furthermore, use of the UCLA Loneliness Scale would bring the study in line with the UK Government's Loneliness Strategy (Office for National Statistics, 2018; Russell, 1996).

To improve the understanding of the impact and allow for comparison to similar studies, care should be taken when designing the questionnaires (Data Quality Hub, 2023; Jenn, 2006). Another limitation is the absence of a comparison group, which restricts the ability to attribute observed changes directly to the programme. Under ideal conditions, a matched control group or waitlist design would strengthen causal inference. However, this was not feasible within the operational model of Arty-Folks, which does not maintain waiting lists and offers open-access, rolling participation. As such, all service users are actively engaged in the programme, and withholding access for research purposes would have been ethically and practically inappropriate. Given these constraints, this study was designed as an exploratory pilot to generate insights into participant experiences and identify areas for future investigation.

5. Conclusion

This pilot study explored the experiences of young people participating in the Canvas to Change programme, a community-based arts initiative supporting mental health and wellbeing. The findings suggest that the programme offers a valuable alternative to clinical services, particularly for individuals who may feel excluded or overwhelmed by traditional approaches. Participants described the programme as safe, inclusive, and empowering. The combination of creative activities, peer support, and flexible engagement fostered a sense of routine, autonomy, and emotional expression. While quantitative data indicated trends toward improved wellbeing, especially in optimism, social connection, and reduced loneliness, these findings are preliminary and limited due to the small sample size. As the first published study of Arty-Folks' programme, this research provides a foundation for future evaluation and development. It highlights the potential of arts-based approaches to engage young people meaningfully and ethically in mental health support. Further research is needed to explore long-term outcomes, refine

measurement tools, and strengthen the evidence base for participatory arts in youth mental health.

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We are deeply appreciative of the young people who participated in this study. Your openness, creativity, and willingness to share your experiences have been invaluable. This research would not have been possible without your voices, and we hope it contributes meaningfully to the development of inclusive, supportive mental health services for young people.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Elina Leiviska:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Ruth D. Postlethwaite:** Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Laura J. Wilde:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

At the time of the research project, Dr Laura Wilde was also vice-chair of the board of trustees for Arty-Folks. In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and my ethical obligation as a researcher, I am reporting that I, Laura Wilde had business interests in (at the time of the research) Arty-Folks, a charity that may be affected by the research reported in the enclosed paper. I have disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis, and I have in place an approved plan for managing any potential conflicts arising from that involvement. The other authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, LW, upon reasonable request.

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