

THE FUNCTION OF AESTHETICS IN ART THERAPY

HOW ART THERAPISTS PERCEIVE THE ROLE OF AESTHETICS IN ART  
THERAPY INTERVENTIONS WITH ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

by

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## Abstract

This research was fuelled by observations of aesthetic subscriptions in adolescents and young adults. Combining a curiosity with this phenomenon with graduate studies, an intrigue developed considering the nuanced differences between how each of these sectors define, utilize, and approach aesthetics within their respective applications. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the assistance of three co-researchers was enlisted, who are practicing art therapists or art therapy practicum students, to discover how the topic of aesthetics with adolescents and young adults is understood and the role in which aesthetics is observed to have in meaning-making, spirituality, and identity formation. Through semi-structured interviews conducted with the co-researchers, data was obtained that indicates three predominant themes of Belonging, Image, and Hopelessness as relevant to aesthetic subscription in the perceptions of art therapists. Sub-themes were also identified relating to purpose, spirituality, expression, recreation, the internet, and worries for the future. Aesthetics was viewed by each co-researcher in a different light following the interviews, and an increased understanding into the motivations, drives, characteristics, and identities of their adolescent and young adult clients resulted from their participation. In the analysis of the data, it was determined that an understanding of the aesthetics of adolescents and young adults has become increasingly important in the provision of art therapy as it is an extension of whole-person care relating to the spokes of spirituality, as well as social, cognitive, physical, and emotional needs. The research suggests that this growing phenomena of claimed aesthetic identities will meld the perceptions of process and product within art therapy theoretical

foundations, and that in order to provide adequate therapeutic care to adolescents and young adults increased understanding and awareness is essential.

Key words: aesthetics, art therapy, spirituality, psychology, adolescents, young adults

## **Dedication**

To my parents for their constant support, interest, and enthusiasm for all of my endeavours. For the reading and re-reading, for the edits and reviews, and all other assistance along the way, without their endless encouragement I would be remiss.

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## **Part 1: Introduction**

How each of us perceives the word ‘aesthetics’ is in itself an aesthetic response. For each reader, researcher, or observer happening upon this paper, your preconceptions of aesthetics will drive your preliminary understanding of what this research is to discuss. Not only does this understanding of aesthetics have generational differences, but each person’s lived experience determines how they interpret the phenomenon of aesthetics. Throughout this research I hope you will come to appreciate an aesthetic definition that may differ from your own, to understand the lived experience that contributes to the working definition used by adolescents and young adults, and to develop your own methods, thoughts, and mechanisms to operationalize this phenomenon. This research is not solely intended for art therapists, although this will be the core area of exploration, but is also intended to provide information to parents, teachers, volunteers, mentors, and others who interact with adolescents and young adults and wish to meet them where they are at, in their world.

Embracing aesthetics requires recognizing the connections it maintains between various states of being. This is particularly salient for art therapists and psychotherapists who adhere to a methodology that cares for the whole of the person. The realms that make up the entirety of ‘self’ were described by Wigram et al., as being social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and spiritual (2002). Generalized aesthetics pertain prominently in the social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of self. Being that each of these components contribute to identity formation and meaning-making, it can be said that aesthetics is a basis of wellbeing. With art therapy as an avenue for aesthetic expression,



recognition, and encouragement it is possible to use aesthetics as “a guide to self-knowledge” in order to “identify what is central to ourselves, but hard to put into words” (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013, p. 65). For the purpose of this research, the working definition of aesthetics that I developed is: the adoption of a stylized identity for use in fashion, decor, mindset, values, appearance, behaviours, and environment in which the individual actively tailors their inner and outer worlds to convey a pleasing, mood-based impression

With aesthetics becoming increasingly prominent in society, particularly as found within social media, the most relevant population for which aesthetic recognition in art therapy would benefit is adolescents and young adults. I include both adolescents and young adults (ages 13-30) within the population of interest because of the proposed lifespan development stage of emerging adulthood introduced by Arnett (2011), whereby there is recognition for feelings of an instability, transitional, and exploratory nature that contributes to a sense of extended adolescence for many young adults. The immediate, cultivated, and personalized role of aesthetics for this population provides a nonverbal means of communication with which self-expression can flourish. Art therapists have the unique opportunity to harness “the nonverbal language of art for personal growth, insight, and transformation [as] a means of connecting what is inside us — our thoughts, feelings, and perceptions — with outer realities and life experience” (Malchiodi, 2007, p. ix). The perception of C. Moon (2002) is that “art therapy calls for a new understanding of aesthetics” (p. 133), and this perception is as relevant today as it was when initially written. As aesthetics continue to evolve and shift through different generational stances,

art therapists will have to adapt their understanding and their practice to address these changes.

Within this research, the interpretations and perspectives of two art therapy practicum students and one practicing art therapist, all of whom actively worked with adolescent and young adult populations, are explored in terms of aesthetics in relation to art therapy, meaning-making, spirituality, and identity formation. Their reflections are focused on the extent to which they noticed aesthetics as influencing both the therapeutic process and the individuals with whom they interacted in session. These co-researchers paved the route that this research traveled. As their voices and recollections are woven through the coming chapters, I hope that the reader will gain a sense of their curiosity and intrigue with the subject matter, and hopefully will also come away with their newfound understanding of what it means to be an art therapist in an adolescent's or young adult's journey.

Going forward, the body of this thesis will contain six sections. Part I will provide an introduction, a discussion of the research question, identify my personal interest in the subject matter, highlight the connection to spirituality, introduce the chosen methodology and rationale for this choice, define aesthetics for the purpose of this paper, and integrate socioeconomic and cultural considerations. Part II will contain a literature review of the various elements encompassed in this research while Part III provides a deep exploration into the methodology and how it was applied. Part IV develops the thematic findings garnered from the research, along with subsequent sub-themes and common themes and Part V explores the discovered research applications for art therapy related to each sub-

theme. Finally, Part VI provides an overview of all additional -tions, including conclusions, implications, limitations, suggestions, and further applications.

### **Research Questions and Guiding Inquiries**

Many questions, thoughts, and threads have woven together to create the tapestry of this research inquiry. Two predominant research questions are guiding this thesis. The first question asks: How does the art therapist perceive the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions? The second question asks: To what extent do aesthetics contribute to a spiritually-integrated development of meaning-making for identity formation?

The other nodes of inquiry, that do not distinctly guide this research but are relevant to the foundations of this thesis for both personal and professional inquiry, are: To what extent do aesthetics influence the therapeutic outcome in art therapy for adolescents and young adults (age 13-30)? In what ways are aesthetics beneficial in the therapeutic context for identity formation, or in what ways do they hinder the effectiveness of art therapy interventions? How do art therapists perceive this phenomenon when working with adolescents and young adults? To what extent does having an adopted or chosen aesthetic identity influence the therapy in such a way that the focus is on product rather than process? How can an art therapist utilize the aesthetic inclination of their client to foster spiritual wellbeing in service of resiliency, inner strength, and the ability to navigate difficult situations? How does meaning-making as an aesthetic-based spiritual practice offer a deeper understanding of, connection to, and expression of self in the identity formation process for adolescents and young adults?

## **Personal Interest in Subject Matter**

My interest in this subject matter developed through personal experiences with art therapy interventions in which I struggled to separate the product from the process. I found myself consistently hindered by the desire to have an aesthetically pleasing final result such that I did not allow myself to fully engage with the materials or the subject matter. I was creating with my head rather than with my heart or soul and the limitations of this affliction became apparent not only to myself but to my instructors and therapist as well. I had failed to experience any level of therapeutic benefit because I prioritized creating something that I, my peers, my professors, and/or my therapist would perceive as beautiful and got stuck in the sand trap of aesthetics. I had always wondered about the therapeutic limitations of art therapy for a client like myself, who was never fully engaged in the process, but it was not until the increased popularity of an aesthetic identity became a staple of my social media consumerism that I considered the profound effects that aesthetics may play in the perceived view of therapeutic effectiveness by the attending art therapist.

It was through my involvement as a young adult social media consumer that I developed the avenue of inquiry for this thesis. The chosen population of study for this inquiry was also directed by my social media presence, as I have many friends in various ages across their teens and twenties. On these platforms, I have noticed a significant trend within this age group towards adopting an aesthetic identity that influences broad areas of one's life such as wardrobe, cosmetics, environment, decoration, meal-planning, activities, hobbies, mindset and interactions. It was interpreted from B. Moon that

aesthetics largely encompasses the lives of this age group as he depicts that their whole life is “an art piece, from the way they look, to the way they wear their hair, to the clothes that they wear, to the way they move, to the music that they listen to, the things that they’re interested in” (American Art Therapy Association, 2017). I have recognized the relevance and presence of aesthetics in each of these areas within those around me, and within my own interests as well. In my interactions with and observations of aesthetic identities on social media in adolescents and young adults, it seems to be a guiding force for both ways of being in the world and for proclamations of self.

The importance of maintaining a spirituality-based outlook in this research is also due to a recognition of the ways in which spirituality has impacted and shaped my life. In my own experience, after finding spirituality in my early twenties, I recognized that it filled a missing gap in my life and allowed me to feel complete as a person. The feeling of the pieces of my identity finally falling into place is why I think spirituality may be an important facet of identity formation in adolescents and young adults. Much like the experiences of many adolescents and young adults, “I felt as though I was without gravity in my values, beliefs, passions, and hobbies. I felt caught in a whirlpool, which I would later describe as an internal conflict between my duties and desires” (Moerkerk, 2020, p. 2). Spirituality offered a place to rest and feel grounded, to be comfortable in and with myself, and to nurture me in ways I have been unable to find elsewhere. This is why I believe so strongly in its therapeutic benefit, and why I have chosen to incorporate it into my research paradigm.

As a future art therapist with the desired population of adolescents and young adults, my hope is to expand my understanding of aesthetics and its role in art therapy and continue with my practice in developing means of adapting interventions to accommodate this client consideration. I also hope to harness spirituality in an inclusive and comforting way to bring about healing and growth in an aesthetic manner, as the connection between beauty and the experience of the sacred is an important established consideration (O'Donohue, 2005). At the time of this writing I have limited adolescent and young adult client interactions in my role as an art therapy practicum student and as such I have chosen to interview practicing art therapists and/or art therapy students in practicum to supplement the data I, myself, am missing in order to maintain a level of firsthand experience for the area of study.

### **Implicit Spirituality**

It is my belief that spirituality is an integral and inherent part of all human life. For some individuals spirituality is expressed and acknowledged explicitly, but for those for whom it is not, I believe spirituality still exists implicitly and is a need to nurture and care for in the same capacity as physical, cognitive, social and emotional needs. Spirituality has been broadly defined as “lifestyles and practices that embody a vision of human existence and how the human spirit is to achieve its full potential” (Sheldrake, 2012, p.1). The basis of spirituality does exist contextually, but at its essence it “concerns what is holistic” and recognizes each person’s “quest for the sacred” (Sheldrake, 2012, p. 5). Some key elements that lend themselves to the inherent nature of spirituality are the acknowledgement of and participation in ritual, the experience of hope, and a search for

life's meaning (Pargament, 2007).

These seemingly mundane acts contain the essence of being human, and this essence can be witnessed within artistic creation through:

A heightened awareness of self and other, a reawakening of the senses and the body, a new ability to inhabit fully the present moment, a sense of awe at the mysterious ways that the images which visit us speak of realities beyond our conscious understanding, a greater sense of acceptance for all aspects of ourselves and others, love, compassion and gratitude for some larger, deeper, ineffable presence to which we all (human beings, animals, plants) belong (Farrelly-Hansen, 2001, p. 24).

Given that humans possess a range of potential and choice, finding a purpose in accompaniment with this ineffable presence may be difficult to grasp. If a singular purpose appears evasive, the inherent need for spirituality (ie. ritual, meaning, and hope) persists and “individuals continuously strive for some sort of meaning, seek hope when that meaning is lost, and participate in ritual to find or protect that sense of purpose” (Moerkerk, 2019, p.4). In a concept analysis of spirituality, Weathers et al., (2016) reviewed a number of articles to find overlapping themes of connectedness, transcendence, and meaning in life that grounded human spiritual drives. From this perspective, spirituality is inherent and necessary to human life. It consists of strivings, actions, and motivations that ultimately lend themselves to a search for purpose and meaning which is unique and personal to each individual (Weathers et al., 2016). Given my perspective that spirituality can often be dismissed or disregarded by individuals who

may misinterpret it with religiosity or have other qualms, meaning-making is a useful alternative to explore spirituality in a non-judgemental way.

Meaning-making exists as a natural human tendency. We wish to be valued, to know our place, and to have purpose (Frankl, 1992), and by recognizing these human desires, we can organically connect to our spiritual selves. I believe that “by cultivating a sense of meaning, spirituality can provide an orientation to our lives, a set of values to live by, a sense of direction, and a basis for hope” (Paintner, 2007, p.1). By recognizing the implicit nature of spirituality, the motivations and foundations of this research can be better understood. The inclusion of meaning-making as an integral aspect of this research functions to recognize spirituality in an open-ended way, while still honouring the therapeutic notions it can harness, such as hope, purpose, and value.

Additionally, aesthetics offer their own spiritual connotations as the two concepts are historically linked (Coleman, 1998; Paintner, 2005; Viladesau, 2014), with instances of beauty being found for centuries in cathedrals, pilgrimages, depictions of saints, gods, and goddesses, the artwork in tarot cards, beadwork in dreamcatchers, and many other instances. Although many of these elements are found in religions, some are not, so the umbrella term of spirituality is a better fit for the ethereal aspect of aesthetics. Spirituality and aesthetics also share common ground in terms of meaning-making. With spirituality, mundane occurrences turn sacred when viewed through a spiritual lens. Similarly, with aesthetics, experiences become holistic when they fit within one’s aesthetic perception. Both instances bring a sense of wholeness to the person and meaning-making aids in the discovery and determination of values and beliefs (Park, 2010).



## **Introduction to Methodology and Rationale**

For the purpose of this study, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) I used as the research methodology because it utilizes co-researcher perceptions and the meaning-making that arises as they interpret a personal experience. IPA is a qualitative research method that utilizes idiographic and hermeneutic phenomenology to engage with meaning and process (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Within this framework, idiography is a methodological component that emphasizes detailed analysis of each co-researchers account and involves recognizing the contributions of each case on its own before conducting any cross-analysis between cases (Tuffour, 2017). Hermeneutic phenomenology is an exploration into how one's being is situated in or related to the world around them in a descriptive fashion that is interpreted based on the interpreter's own worldview (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). This methodology requires the collection of first-person narratives that detail the reflections of personal experience, and the perception of that experience, which is then phenomenologically interpreted and discussed to uncover meaning (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2015). As stated by Smith and Osborn (2015), "the aim of IPA is to explore in detail how participants are making sense of their personal and social world, and the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, states hold for participants" (p. 53). Within this process, the researcher is considered an active agent bringing along their own biases and assumptions of the phenomenon being studied, which are then integrated explicitly within the findings and discussion (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006). Given the participants active agency within the research process, I have used the

term co-researchers in order to acknowledge their contributions to the research and to honour the sharing of their personal wisdom as identified within IPA methodology (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). A small number of co-researchers took part in this research, which allows for in-depth explorations, descriptions, interpretations, and understandings to be developed (Tuffour, 2017).

The decision to use IPA as the research methodology derives from many considerations. Based on my personal values and beliefs, I knew I wanted to conduct qualitative research in order to explore the nature of human experience. I also had to consider the current global pandemic in my ability to adequately collect, analyze, and store data, and to maintain confidentiality. I was therefore initially considering a methodology that could be primarily executed in a confidential manner online, such as a survey, but decided on IPA as I considered whom the research was aimed towards, how it would impact the art therapy community, and which population would offer the most benefit through its participation. IPA has roots in psychology and philosophy with its hermeneutic and idiographic foundations (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2015), which highlighted it as a natural fit for my research question. Based on the meaning-making focus of my research question, a methodology that focuses on how individuals make sense of the world around them was deemed the most appropriate choice. In discussion with my thesis supervisor, I also recognized that being able to listen, engage with, and interpret someone else's life experience and the way they make sense of their world while monitoring my own attitudes and biases was a skill I was already developing within my educational and professional development, and I was therefore

predisposed to connect with this type of methodology.

### **Defining Aesthetics**

For the purpose of the thesis research, the term *aesthetics* has a specific definition as it applies to the current understanding for adolescents and young adults, and as it is represented on various social media platforms within these generations. Aesthetics has a deep and rich history, stemming from early philosophical thinkers, which has woven through various disciplines into the twenty-first century (Giovannelli, 2021). The development of this history informs the current research, but the understanding of aesthetics presented within the current study stems from a specific niche contained within socioeconomic status, culture, age, and geography, and therefore may not be adequately defined within current aesthetics research for the purpose of this study. From an anthropological perspective, McKenna (2020) labelled aesthetics as “the soul’s apprehension and delight in the beauty, agreeableness, and goodness of the physical realm of being prior to its rational discernment of the reasons for its delight” (p. 75). Conversely, anthropologist Maquet (2013) noted that art and aesthetics are intrinsically linked to their societal value and require an awareness of what is and is not considered aesthetically pleasing. As a societal consideration, whereby aesthetics are developed in product design and marketing, the definition of aesthetics exists on a continuum of success determined by factors such as the complexity of the stimulus and the organization of the information presented (Van Geert & Wagemans, 2020). While each of these has validity in their own right, they do not yet encompass aesthetics from the perspective of the population being studied.

Another definition for aesthetics stems from the distinction between art-making and art-viewing in which Tinio (2013) notes that “the aesthetic experience of art begins with the perception of the surface features of an artwork and peaks when the viewer achieves a sense of having grasped an underlying meaning, context, or concept regarding the work that might have some personal relevance” (p. 265). The personal relevance piece here applies succinctly to adolescents and young adults for this current thesis, but the perception element contains nuanced differences. From an information-processing perspective, Smith (2014) discussed the inclusion of assessment and evaluation of the aesthetic experience in the consideration of a singular object and Swami and Furnham (2015) noted that empirically, aesthetics is determined objectively from the similarity of the objects to the golden ratio, but these definitions do not suit the current study as it will explore aesthetics as it pertains to the multitude of co-existing facets of aesthetics, spirituality, identity formation, and meaning-making with an adolescent and young adult population.

Given the varied current understandings of aesthetics in numerous areas of study, there is no straightforward way to define aesthetics for the purpose of this thesis. The version of aesthetics that will be researched within an art therapy setting relates primarily to the individual engaged in the aesthetic experience, but it is also intrinsically linked to factors of society, economy, and spirituality. In consideration of these factors, the Psychology of Aesthetics Framework proposed by Thomas Jacobsen (2006) is best suited to provide a guideline in developing a working definition. This framework includes aspects for the person (individual differences and characteristics), the situation (context

and organization), the diachronia (biological and cultural changes over time), the ipsichronia (the social processes found within cultures and sub-cultures), the mind (attitudes, emotions, cognitions), the body (biological and neurocognitive dispositions), and the content (stimulus receiving aesthetic consideration; Jacobsen, 2006; Swami & Furnham, 2015).

Given these many factors, the working definition of aesthetics for the purpose of this thesis is; the adoption of a stylized identity for use in fashion, decor, mindset, values, appearance, behaviours, and environment in which the individual actively tailors their inner and outer worlds to convey a pleasing, mood-based impression. Within social media, many of these aesthetics have common distinctions known to the audience by their moniker. In order to demonstrate this phenomenon, I will describe the imagery and mindset for the aesthetic with the moniker ‘cottagecore’ (Appendix A contains two images from public websites where people can look up items that illustrate a particular aesthetic, such as cottagecore). Someone who subscribes to a cottagecore aesthetic will likely dress in long, flowing clothes, typically in a floral print, in a style that one might see someone wearing in the French countryside. They will be drawn towards environments with many natural elements, usually with overgrown greenery, flower gardens, and cottages similar to those in children’s fairy tales. Their appearance is generally more along a natural or romantic look with blushed cheeks, simple hairstyles, and minimal makeup. They will fill their home with natural or homemade elements such as dried flowers, with farmhouse-style inspiration and pastel colours. Their mindset is one of connection to living beings, and they will desire the presence of domestic and farm

animals, although they are typically introverted and have small social circles. They want each nook of their lives to bring them joy, romanticism, and purpose, and will therefore value objects, people, opportunities, experiences, and freedoms that will give them such. Many other aesthetics with various monikers exist, some of which focus on a specific time period, specific sub-cultures, or specific cultural lifestyles. Although aesthetics may present as a phase for the adolescent or young adult, for many it appears to be a lifestyle they are striving towards as they near adulthood and they will seek education, careers, and relocations that will help achieve this aesthetic identity.

### **Cultural and Socioeconomic Considerations**

In order to accurately situate the research and lay out the foundations from which this thesis stems, the cultural lens of the research must be identified and differences must be addressed. Further considerations for the research will be stated within the discussion, however, as a precursor to the research findings, cultural limitations must be communicated. To be frank, I will state that all those involved; from the primary researcher, the three co-researchers, and the thesis supervisor, are Caucasian women, who identify as female, who have completed post-secondary education in North America. The co-researchers also vary in their years of experience and practice with mixed populations of clientele, with adolescents and young adults comprising only a portion of their client-base. Within each of these identities and experiences, there exists certain biases, understandings, and life experiences which influence the ways we perceive the research questions and our roles within the field of research. Tan (2016) noted this reality as affecting all researchers in all disciplines using the term theory-ladenness which

“essentially holds that everything one observes or perceives is influenced by and interpreted through one’s existing beliefs, values, assumptions and expectations” (p. 84). Given that the IPA research methodology recognizes and accounts for the lived experience of the researcher(s), the research is no less substantial, but various cultural and socioeconomic factors cannot be ignored.

Beginning with the co-researchers; although they all reported as having integrative and adaptable theoretical orientations, they still draw upon their own understandings and methodologies of change and healing. This impacts the way they interact with clients, and thus the way they interpret and respond to the current research. Given that all the co-researchers are currently registered and practicing or completing their practicum requirements in Canada, there are also limitations to their perspectives on cultural implications given the narrow geographical scope of their experience. The co-researchers also share a connection to St. Stephen’s college and are known to me via academic relationships which may impact their self-reporting. These limitations may also be reinforced by the selection methods of art therapists, whereby clients of differing cultural backgrounds may actively choose therapists who share traits, beliefs, or identities.

Moving on to the clients on which the co-researchers’ perceptions are based; these are individuals who have the resources and systemic opportunity to be able to access art therapy as a treatment modality. Although there are low-income and subsidized art therapy options available, it is often considered a luxury which is impacted by socioeconomic status, and it is not a well known discipline, meaning accessibility is

impacted by resources, referral opportunities, and geographical availability. Access to and acceptance of therapy may also be culturally biased, with possible limitations due to geographical restrictions (ie. those in rural communities), or cultures that utilize alternative healing methods or simply do not give credence to the notion of therapy. There may also exist bias towards access to therapeutic intervention based on notions such as gender and/or gender roles, upbringing, familial beliefs, societal expectations, and other stigmas.

Finally, the concept of aesthetics being used in this research has certain biases. The primary understanding of aesthetics being found on social media limits its representation to those who have access to social media, do not face censorship, have internet access, feel comfortable representing their values and self-expressions on the internet, and have the economic means to both access social media and portray their desired aesthetics. Being able to express one's aesthetics through a stylized identity for use in fashion, decor, mindset, values, appearance, behaviours, and environment in which the individual actively tailors their inner and outer worlds to convey a pleasing, mood-based impression requires both time and resources. Curating a life that portrays a desired aesthetic requires freedoms which are not available to all due to various limitations which include: restrictive responsibilities, finances (not having a disposable income), and free-time (not having time to ponder, execute, and display aesthetic expressions). With an acknowledgement of these cultural and socioeconomic considerations the research can move forward into a review of the literature pertaining to art therapy and aesthetic identities with adolescents and young adults. The next section will situate the nuances of



the current research in the body of literature, and will delve into the literature addressing the research questions.

## **Part II: Literature Review**

This chapter explores the primary themes from my research questions from a number of frameworks including; art therapy, psychotherapy, psychology, health care, spirituality, religion, art history, and wellness. With the recent emergence of aesthetic identities in the lives of adolescents and young adults, there is little data available that has previously analyzed the perceived relationship between art therapy interventions and aesthetic identities, from the art therapist's perspective. The literature searches were primarily conducted using the University of Alberta and the MacEwan University online library services using varied combinations of the keywords: aesthetics, art therapy, adolescents, young adults, spirituality, meaning-making, and identity (formation). This thesis also utilized sources provided by various syllabi from both undergraduate and graduate classes that I attended, and extended the search to include the reference lists of viable sources. This literature review will cover the following topics: the nature of aesthetics; the psychology of aesthetics; art therapy and aesthetics; art therapy with adolescents and young adults; and art therapy and identity. It will also cover aspects related to aesthetics and spirituality, including topics of meaning-making and identity, and literature related to the chosen methodology.

This literature review will explore these connections between aesthetics, art therapy, and spirituality within the following categorizations:

- Aesthetics and art therapy
  - With subsections specific to adolescents and young adults
- Aesthetics and spirituality
  - With subsections specific to identity and meaning-making

- IPA methodology

### **Aesthetics and art therapy**

When venturing deeper into the world of art therapy, the significance of aesthetics both within the history of the profession and in the successful implementation of interventions became apparent. C. Moon (2002) addressed the role of aesthetics in art therapy through thoughtful consideration of previous definitions for aesthetics within an art therapy setting, as well as addressing elements of formal art evaluations and beauty with the realities of art therapy aesthetics. Within the more recent literature of aesthetics and art therapy there has been a focus on spontaneous aesthetic response (McConeghey, 2015) and the environmental impact of aesthetics on attitudes and behaviours (Lazarus-Leff, 2013). The nature of art therapy and the various orientations that the therapists and researchers can operate under influence the assumed function of aesthetics. There are two basic schools of thought towards art therapy derived from the theoretical orientations of two key founders, Margaret Naumburg and Edith Kramer. Their perspectives will be more thoroughly explored in the discussion of art therapy foundations, yet it is important to note that, among other important contributions to the field of art therapy, Kramer emphasized art making as the therapeutic benefit in and of itself, while Naumburg emphasized psychotherapy as the primary therapeutic tool which is supplemented by art-making. Researchers and therapists who operate under an art *as* therapy orientation may highlight the importance of the process, while those operating under an art psychotherapy lens may place higher importance on the product. Similarly, clients who are drawn more

so towards the product may place higher importance on the aesthetics of the imagery, than those focused on process.

Within art creation and aesthetics research, Tinio (2013) noted that aesthetic experiences and art-making are intrinsically linked, but that there is a distinction between creative manifestation (an active, physical process) and aesthetic manifestation (a passive, emotional process) depending on which experience precedes the other. These factors may be influenced both by the therapist's or researcher's theoretical orientation and/or by the client's aesthetic disposition. The distinction is also influenced by aesthetic drive, which is one's desire to create in an aesthetic manner, or one's aesthetic response, which is the appreciation for aesthetics created by oneself or others (Swami & Furnham 2015). The aesthetic drive and response are attributed to a number of factors such as the presence of a stimulus, the environmental or situational characteristics present, and the specific characteristics of the art-maker (Swami & Furnham, 2015). Supporting the combined functionality of aesthetics and art therapy, Dissanayake (1995) observed that they share a foundation in emotional, cognitive, and perceptual processing. In personal and professional experience, McNiff (2009) found a connection between art-making and aesthetics through various aesthetic sensibilities, which can be harnessed to aid art therapy practices.

The intrinsic nature of aesthetics and art therapy continues to demonstrate widespread capabilities as it has also been found in a palliative care setting to reduce distressful symptomology in cancer patients (Lefèvre et al., 2016). Additionally, in court-mandated group art therapy sessions for survivors of abuse, aesthetics were found to

provide powerful anchors for relations, connections, trust, willingness and desire to create, and sources of visual metaphor (McKaig, 2003). The aesthetic power of group art therapy was also found in a Parkinson's rehabilitation programme in which the structure promoted aesthetic group movement towards therapeutic goals, and relational aesthetic experiences of inter-group dynamics (Schofield, 2019). Based on the research available, a wholistic viewpoint of the current landscape of aesthetics and art therapy research appears to be needed to address the wide variations in target population, theoretical underpinnings, and aesthetic understanding. With this context, my proposed research will explore whether or not aesthetic drives are predominant in adolescent and young adult clients, as opposed to aesthetic responses, as determined by the co-researchers perspectives, and whether the co-researchers, as practicing or practicum student art therapists identify this as a barrier to therapeutic interventions.

### *Aesthetics*

Looking at aesthetics as a separate psychological discipline, research has focused primarily on perceptive responses, with one such study examining the practicality of an empirical study of aesthetics that does not adequately distinguish aesthetic emotions and aesthetic perceptions (Skov & Nadal, 2019). The authors argue that the two classifications are often combined in empirical studies of aesthetics, but they are in fact different. Aesthetic emotions possess "certain phenomenological and physiological qualities, while aesthetic perception is assumed to entail the recognition of certain object properties" (Skov & Nadal, 2019, p. 8). In a study measuring ecological perceptions of aesthetics, the emotional responses were categorized as prototypical (awe, enjoyment,

engagement), beautiful (spiritual, desire, memorable), pleasing (happiness, calmness, lively), and epistemic (intrigue, wonder, curiosity; Diessner et al., 2020), which further contributes to the classification of aesthetics emotions differing from aesthetic perceptions. Although the language used differs across studies, certain characteristics seem to be common when reviewing the nature of aesthetics. The 'aesthetic emotions' expressed by Skov and Nadal (2019) are akin to the 'soul's apprehension' described by McKenna (2020) and the 'mind' factors of 'attitude, emotion, and cognitions' explored by Jacobsen (2006). Similarly, the 'aesthetics perceptions' of Skov and Nadal (2019) recall similarities to McKenna's (2020) 'rational discernment' and Jacobsen's (2006) 'content' related to the stimulus.

As discussed in many undergraduate psychology courses, preferences, likes, and values are often linked to the aesthetic merit assigned to the phenomenon being reviewed. This aesthetic merit has been reviewed in a number of psychological fields, most notably in developmental psychology in the comparison of various aesthetic markers against various developmental milestones (Pugach et al., 2017). Aesthetics and psychology have also been studied from a behavioural lens, whereby aesthetics has been found to be a determinant of various organizational structures, including collectively, in how organizations structure the group dynamics, and individually, in how one places themselves in a space and determines their own role within the larger structure (Linstead & Höpfl, 2000).

The role of aesthetics in the psychological study of sensory and perceptual experiences is also a prominent field with various areas of research (Bergstrom & Lotto,

2016; Corradi et al., 2020; Diessner et al., 2021; Roddy & Dermot, 2014). This includes research from visual standpoint (Corradi et al., 2020), from an auditory standpoint (Bergstrom & Lotto, 2016; Roddy & Dermot, 2014) and from an olfactory and gustatory standpoint (Diessner et al., 2021). A large portion of research related to psychology and aesthetics has also focused on the effects of evolution and aesthetics in the brain, both across the lifespan and across our ancestral timeline (Chatterjee, 2013; Machotka, 2012; Zaidel et al., 2013).

The psychology of aesthetics has been further developed to understanding that the personality trait of Openness to Experience positively correlates to aesthetic fluency, comfort in discussing and using the language of aesthetics, engagement with art activities or education, as well as an increased connection to and appreciation for nature (Atari et al., 2018). These findings indicate that an individual may be predisposed to aesthetic experience and that they will actively seek out careers, education, and personal endeavours that satisfy this personality trait correlation. Jacobsen's (2006) model of aesthetic definition included an aesthetic factor that highlights individual characteristics related to personality. The importance of personal characteristic in the psychology of aesthetics was also noted in a study by Sullivan and McCarthy (2009), whereby aesthetics is determined to be an important factor in how we make sense of the world around us through a variety of processes such as "embodied, felt, emotional, intellectual, and intersubjective" (p. 181). This study emphasized the role of aesthetics in identity formation as a medium for the emotional values that help to determine perceptions and responses to various objects, people, or situations (Sullivan & McCarthy, 2009).

From a cognitive lens, the psychology of aesthetics was determined to be applied differently to different people depending on their learned and hereditary schemas, or the blueprints provided for responses in various scenarios, that determine both how one interprets and creates aesthetic experiences (Machotka, 2012). Additionally, cognitive as well as affective processes were found to function in tandem in the assessment of attraction, stimulation, and emotionality when determining aesthetic preferences (Miller & Hübner, 2019). Jacobsen's (2006) model of aesthetic definition confirms these findings as many of the points presented flow from the factors stipulated within this model. The findings thus far may all have foundations in an evolutionary perspective whereby neurobiological, archaeological, and conceptual underpinnings are present (Zaidel et al., 2013). According to Zaidel et al. (2013), humanity has developed in such a way that art and aesthetics have always had historical, cultural, and social relevance. The authors recognize that while cognition can diverge from realistic and literal meanings to symbolic and abstract meanings, aesthetics serve a multitude of individual and cooperative functions, and that they share neural pathways with many other cognitive functions (Zaidel et al., 2013). Additionally, a substantial portion of the research is linked to the determination of human preferences for the purposes of marketing goods and services to a wide audience in a coercive way (Diessner, 2020; McNiff, 2015; Miller & Hübner, 2019). Each of these research avenues are grounded in the physiology of the research participants, which is why it is also important to note the brain functions allowing such aesthetic responses to exist; aesthetic perception is processed in parallel with the occipital lobe for visual information, the limbic regions for emotional information, the temporal



lobe for meaning-based information, the parietal lobe for attending, and the frontal lobe for decision making (Chatterjee, 2013).

The psychology of aesthetics has informed the current research on the significance of aesthetics in the well-being and personal/psychological development of the client. McConeghey (2015) noted that art therapy as a profession is chosen by individuals who have aesthetic inclinations, and the therapist's ability to interpret and witness aesthetic creations aids in helping the client discover their nature, soul, and destiny. In a study measuring art therapy treatment outcomes using variations in aesthetic environments, which included both living spaces and therapeutic spaces, it was found that attention to the aesthetic environment of clients offers "opportunities for self-expression, control, and decision making" (Lazarus-Leff, 2013, p. 125), which then in a cyclical manner was found to improve therapeutic engagement, relational dynamics, and treatment outcomes.

In a discussion of the combined functionality of aesthetics and art therapy Dissanayake (1995) observed that the act of making something 'special' through thoughtful consideration that "appeals to emotional as well as perceptual and cognitive factors" (p. 54) is what grounded both aesthetic and arts-based experiences. In aesthetic representations, the determination of special is often found in "repetition, pattern, continuity, clarity, dexterity, elaboration or variation of a theme, contrast, balance, [and/or] proportion" (Dissanayake, 1995, p. 55), which are elements that art therapists can promote with their client through directives and interventions. In personal and professional experience, McNiff (2009) found that aesthetic sensibilities, or the

recognition of pleasurable, beautiful, or dreamlike features, convey depths of the human soul and the private or hidden expressions of self. This is reminiscent of McKenna's (2020) view that aesthetics can be defined as "the soul's apprehension and delight in the beauty, agreeableness, and goodness" (p.75), which offers a spiritual perceptiveness to aesthetic sensibilities. With the utilization of art in therapy, aesthetic sensibilities can be fostered and revitalized where they may have been previously "deadened, numbed, and thoroughly disconnected from heart and mind" (McNiff, 2009, p. 204).

The current research will reside within the body of literature to aid in understanding the motivations and values of adolescents and young adults who are actively curating an aesthetic lifestyle. In terms of art therapy considerations, my proposed research will explore the perceived impact aesthetics has on the administration and success of art therapy interventions. A component of the research question under consideration is the extent to which those who subscribe to an aesthetic identity may have a higher focus on product rather than process, which depending on the orientation of the therapist could provide a barrier to treatment outcomes. The therapist could also, however, view this aesthetic mindset as a true expression of self, which could then be used as a means to deeply explore the client's psyche and encourage personal growth through explorations of their aesthetic. These many variations on the impact of aesthetics in art therapy interventions are why the current work is believed to be important in order to determine what the effect of aesthetic identities is, and how to go forward with art therapy interventions in a mindful and informed manner.

### *Aesthetics and Art Therapy with Adolescents and Young Adults*

The body of literature for art therapy with adolescents and young adults is vast and nuanced. Although art therapy with this population can be challenging, it has also been found to strongly affect their interpersonal development and their self-regulation (B. Moon, 2012). Linesch (1988), in a pioneering (albeit politically incorrect and problematic) text, witnessed the power of art therapy to aid in developmental tasks of adolescents and to provide a safe space for rebellion and experimentation. The alternate form of communication offered by art therapy can be particularly beneficial in consideration with adolescents and young adults. Ellis (2007) noted that visual language, as opposed to verbal language, “has a more extensive vocabulary. It allows for ambiguities, subtleties, and complexities more extensively than is possible in verbal language” (p. 65). In this regard, art therapy may be able to traverse boundaries in generation, communication, and culture that may be present in traditional talk therapy. Miller (2012) noted that:

Creative expression becomes a natural choice for the adolescent, stimulated by tendencies toward magical thinking and narcissism, while trying to balance the challenging necessity for communicating strong emotions, thoughts, and experiences often fueled [sic] by isolation, withdrawn behaviour, and unresolved confusion about the self, others, and the surrounding environment (p. 335).

Distinct benefits for the use of art therapy with these populations have been found to include success in identifying and expressing feelings, bypassing words used as a barrier, overcoming resistance, and enrichment of interpersonal communication (Briks, 2007). In

a study of pregnant adolescent females, art therapy was also found to promote positive self-discovery and growth and healthy alternatives to risk-taking through explorations with media and materials (Stiles & Mermer-Welly, 2013). B. Moon (2012) highlighted that art therapy with adolescents includes “processes of identification, imaginative interpretation, integration, and reorganization of the elements of existence” (p. 12) that all contribute to how they see themselves, their environment, and their place within the world. Within the therapeutic realm, the client can experience a safe and healthy means for self-exploration, expression, and revelation (B. Moon, 2012).

The unique sensory experience offered by art therapy for adolescent and young adult clients may also significantly contribute to the usefulness of this modality. B. Moon (2012) recognized that traumatic experiences for the client often have a sensory level of activation, whether that be “visual, auditory, olfactory, [or] sensual” (p. 90), and that art therapy can offer avenues of exploration for each of these sensory experiences. It has also been noted that self-expression and art making provide avenues for fantasy and imagination, which act as aids to the many tasks facing adolescents and young adults (Linesch, 1988). Given these facets, aesthetics may encompass the multitude of sensory and perceptual experiences of the client and that recognition and engagement with this phenomenon are important for the art therapist to consider in intervention implementation. The importance of art therapy services specific to the target age range was highlighted by Collie et al. (2017) in which young adults with cancer lacked therapeutic services that catered to their unique developmental needs and provided meaningful value.

Another important consideration with adolescents and young adults is the current global climate that is impacting the development, wellbeing, and mindset of today's adolescents and young adults. Of particular concern is the global economy, political tensions, and the climate crisis which may leave this population feeling hopeless with only a bleak or dystopian future ahead. The use of aesthetics for presenting problems such as eco-anxiety or ecological grief may help to mitigate distress that is becoming increasingly common within adolescents and young adults (Le Feuvre & Day, 2022). Additionally, the despair that may be expressed by this population requires a direct approach that allows them to the ability to take "control of our own anxiety, reject defeatism, confront our contribution to the problem, and alter our own behaviors" (Pinsky et al., 2020). One method of interacting with these demands may be to move towards a more sustainable eco-art therapy orientation. The aesthetic opportunities presented with this methodology can aid in creating environmental consciousness, aesthetic resourcing, and metaphoric problem solving (Pike, 2021), which draw upon the aesthetic inclinations already present to promote healing.

The unique and often tumultuous time frame of adolescence and young adulthood offers a lot to work with from a therapeutic standpoint. Given these parameters, Rubin (2008) stated that art therapy, along with providing a safe space, offers modalities for these age groups to explore themes of violence, sexuality, intimacy, and aggression in a manner that can hold and navigate these emotion-laden themes. It has also been found by art therapist Gilit Gat to be helpful in providing visual metaphors for solution-focused treatments in which adolescents draw upon personally-relevant imagery to overcome

obstacles (Anonymous, 2003). Along with these findings, numerous other presenting problems of adolescents and young adults have been found to be effectively mitigated through art therapy intervention. Issues that were found to be alleviated (to some degree and with varying statistical significance) were anxiety, hostility, and social maturity in psychosomatic adolescents (Prokhorova et al., 2020); mechanisms of change for communication, expression, emotion regulation, self-awareness, brain-activation, personal-narratives, and self-reflection, in a meta-analysis of adolescents in art therapy (Bosgraaf et al., 2020); navigating stigma and bias, transitions to adulthood, and grief in learning disabled young adults (Datlen & Pandolfi, 2020); and acceptance for and comfortability with accessing mental health services in young adults with moderate to severe mental illnesses (Cole et al., 2018).

### ***Art Therapy Theoretical Foundations***

The therapist's view of aesthetic's role in interventions will be influenced by their theoretical orientation and where they lie on the art as therapy/art psychotherapy continuum. Art as therapy was pioneered by one of the mothers of art therapy Edith Kramer who saw the intrinsic potential of art to engage with defence mechanisms and provide therapeutic growth, while another theoretical mother, Margaret Naumburg, pioneered art psychotherapy whereby artistic expressions represented symbolic forms of communicating one's unconscious needs, desires, and opinions (Vick, 2012). For Kramer, focusing on the process allowed unconscious elements to unfold within the art and promoted alternative activation of the mind which may have then promoted processes such as sublimation (Kramer, 2016). The final product may have had aesthetic

significance within this framework, but this is not where the emphasis lay. For Naumburg's approach, unconscious elements were also uncovered within the art, but it was often achieved through free association following a completed art work rather than being a focus of the process (Rubin, 2016). Both mothers of art therapy were influenced by psychoanalytic theories, but when developing the use of art within the therapeutic modality developed differing emphases (Vick, 2012).

Although the intricacies and complexities of each woman's work extended beyond the simplified process versus product continuum, I believe it is important to note that the role and interpretation of aesthetics along this continuum differs depending on whether process or product is most valued by each individual clinician. For the art as therapy approach, free reign of materials and content (Hinz, 2009) may elicit more spontaneous creative responses from the client, but in the context of the proposed thesis, curiosity questions if aesthetic inclinations represented in the process will reflect the client's aesthetic identity. In the art psychotherapy approach, the product is deemed significant for the symbolic messages it conveys (Hinz, 2009), but the question also arises if a client with an aesthetic identity will intentionally use symbolism and representations that express this identity.

The intersubjective nature of the theoretical orientations was highlighted by B. Moon (2011) where he argued against an either-or perspective of the continuum in favour of a both-and approach. If the ends of the continuum are able to be used in conjunction with one another, as B. Moon (2011) suggests, then they would both have bearings on the perceived role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions. Additionally, B. Moon (2011)

highlighted this theoretical method as particularly useful with adolescents whereby the art becomes the focus rather than the potentially insufficient verbal expressions. This view is also noted as important in aesthetic considerations by C. Moon (2016), whereby the notion of multiple aesthetics are proposed to exist “along a continuum, and [are] expressed through a plurality of intersecting localized understandings and formed expressions” (p. 62).

The theoretical foundations of art therapy have diversified, both in breadth and depth, since the groundwork was laid by pioneers Kramer and Naumburg. Numerous theories and approaches are present within the field of art therapy, some of which could address various tenets of the current research. Existential and humanistic theories in particular pertain to themes of meaning-making, identity, and spirituality (Malchiodi, 2012b; B. Moon, 2009), which inform the second research question of this thesis; to what extent do aesthetics contribute to a spirituality-integrated development of meaning-making for identity formation. When considering both of the research questions for myself, within my own theoretical orientation, I find solace in the multitude of approaches that can address the role of aesthetics in art therapy. As an art therapy student, in the midst of completing my practicum hours, I feel as though I am still attempting to find solid footing within art therapy theory and have new experiences each day that contribute to my knowledge base of theoretical applications. As I continue on my theoretical journey, the basis of aesthetics within the foundations of art therapy will guide my theoretical decision-making and solidify my place on the art as therapy/art psychotherapy continuum.



Looking back at the literature pertinent to aesthetics and art therapy we can see a clear connection between the two subjects. Art therapy and aesthetics have been found in the literature to complement one another as the art making component of art therapy allows for the expression of aesthetic drives and responses in a way that satisfies both creative and aesthetic manifestations. Aesthetics were also found on their own to reside significantly in the literature within a number of disciplines, which indicates their multi-modal capacity to connect and relate to all individuals. Finally, literature discussing the theoretical orientations of art therapy provides a foundational viewpoint of the product versus process debate and illustrates how the field of art therapy may regard the role of aesthetics. The literature informs the need for and the nature of the current research in order to weave together a singular understanding of the role of aesthetics in art therapy with an adolescent and young adult population, which accounts for the perceptions of the art therapist and their respective theoretical orientation. This accounts for the first part of the research question which asks: How does the art therapist perceive the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions? The literature pertaining to the second research question which asks; to what extent do aesthetics contribute to a spirituality-integrated development of meaning-making for identity formation, will be explored in the next section in a similar manner to develop a understanding of the scope of literature currently available.

### **Spirituality, Meaning-Making and Identity**

The literature regarding spirituality and aesthetics is extensive, but the availability of literature narrows as the focus of these two disciplines is combined with considerations

of identity formation and meaning-making. Aesthetics and spirituality are often expressed as interchangeable experiences for those who are spiritually inclined. Just as spirituality cannot be separated from other aspects of life (Paragament, 2007), neither can aesthetics be separated from the experiences of adolescents and young adults. The awe, wonder, and amazement that occur in purely spiritual experiences also occur in purely aesthetic experiences, and the commonality between these phenomena allows those who engage with spirituality to be more receptive to aesthetics (Džalto, 2019), and I wonder if the reverse may be seen to be true, that those engaged with aesthetics can benefit from an introduction to spirituality. Džalto (2019) suggests that this perceptibility is available because “the aesthetic dimension is capable of communicating something that does not (fully) exist in our world” (p.1) but is rather indicative of something ethereal, heavenly, or beyond.

Some consider aesthetics and spirituality to be interchangeable in terms of the ways in which they impact the observer, witness, experiencer or creator (Džalto, 2019). Given this intrinsic connection, some art therapists recognize the presence of spirituality within the therapeutic realm and make use of its presence for therapeutic change (Allen, 1995; Horovitz, 2017; B. Moon, 2017). Within this context, spirituality “refers more broadly to the numinous, the depths of human existence, or the boundless mysteries of the cosmos” (Sheldrake, 2012, p. 5). Spirituality has been observed to derive increased experiences of transcendence through aesthetics or the sublime, in a way that is meaningful to each person's values and potential (Wickman, 2020). The very nature of *making* meaning is an aesthetic endeavour as we embark upon creative expression of

ourselves and our understanding of the world (Ward, 2019), and is thus a spiritual endeavour as well as we *make* in a similar fashion of an all-encompassing Creator. From my perspective aesthetics and spirituality are an integral part of an artistic practice. Connecting the mind and body through an artistic creation is, for me, akin to a contemplative practice (The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, n.d.). Finding beauty in the mundane, reflecting upon my aesthetic choices, realizing my aesthetic preferences, and fulfilling my aesthetic satisfactions are all means of connecting to my spiritual self. It is within aesthetic moments that I experience connection, awe, wonder, and transcendence, which are all tenets of a spiritual practice (Pargament, 2007).

The presence of aesthetics in religious and spiritual dimensions has been recognized by many theologians, philosophers, and spiritual explorers (Allen, 2016; O. Bychkov, 2019; V. Bychkov, 2019; Gustafsson, 2019; Horovitz, 2017). Of this they all agree, the presence of art in religion, spirituality, and culture in forms such as cathedrals, statues, mandalas, or other representations contain an aesthetic quality that alludes to the sacred for both believers and non-believers (Allen, 2016; O. Bychkov, 2019; V. Bychkov, 2019; Gustafsson, 2019; Horovitz, 2017). The universality of this aesthetic experience crosses over into the therapeutic realm, whereby the therapist has the ability to encourage subjective well-being of the whole person, including spiritual well-being. The literature on spirituality and art therapy contains many known names of art therapists, as many of them recognize the connection between the aesthetic self and the spiritual self (Allen, 1995; McNiff, 1989; C. Moon, 2001). The aesthetic experiences found within art therapy can mimic the profound, sacred, and awe-inspiring sensations often experienced through

spirituality since “the boundary between a (“pure”) aesthetic experience/pleasure and a religious/spiritual one is very blurred” (Džalto, 2019, p. 2). Farrelly-Hansen (2001) noted that art-making possesses an inherently spiritual nature and that the spiritual cannot be separated from the art-therapy context.

The relationship between aesthetics, meaning-making, and spirituality has also been explored as a bridge for existential crisis to a place of acceptance and healing as “aesthetics provided a way of approaching and thinking about death, as well as a language to communicate about it” (Butters, 2016, p. 109). In some senses, aesthetics can be seen as a way to access spirituality as it “seems to enable and empower without propositional or theological limitations” (Butters, 2016, p. 110). Aesthetics in this regard were noted by Hepburn (1996) to allude to “a transcendent Source for which we lack words and clear concepts” (p. 191). Some art therapists, however, have focused this connection on the role of the soul in both personhood and art-making (Allen, 1995; Artac, 2009; Horovitz, 2017; Mage, 2009; B. Moon, 2017).

The soul is often considered by art therapists as the connection between art therapy and spirituality. In addressing the connection between art and spirituality generally, Allen (1995) noted that “images will reveal the nature of our relation to soul and spirit” (p. 75). In the process of art therapy, there exists a realm in which aesthetics, spirituality, and therapeutic growth collide and build on one another. B. Moon (2017) discussed the work created in art therapy studios as sacred and stated that the works arise from the depths of our personhood with an emphasis on experiences that most deeply

reflect the windows of our soul. The transcendence that occurs when the soul becomes vulnerable offers a vehicle for change and personal development and the creative, symbolic, and mysterious nature of art-making paves the road for this to occur (Horovitz, 2017). The literature from art therapists in regards to spirituality is often grounded in personal and professional experience, whereby witness and testimony to the incorporation of spirituality in art therapy are attributed to the presence of art, creation, and aesthetics. In an effort to eliminate the gap between dualistic principles such as body and soul or subject and object, Artac (2009) suggested a cosmological approach, one that acknowledges the cumulative energy of the earth, psyche, and universe, to the use of spirituality in art therapy that unifies the experience of the psyche with the world around it. In terms of the proposed area of research, the link between spirituality, aesthetics, and art therapy is the human desire for purpose, meaning, and essence, which Mage (2009) notes as occurring in the liminal space where energy is transformed, whether that be from creative, sacred, or aesthetic action.

Meltzer suggested that aesthetics and spirituality were intrinsically linked concepts that were connected through metaphorical thinking (as cited in Williams, 2010). Instances of metaphor are extensions of imagination and creativity. The profound implication of this statement is that aesthetics (by virtue of creativity) are found in all areas of life, as is spirituality (by virtue of creation). Given this sentiment; “our [aesthetic] experiences shape our understanding of the world, and the arts, when at their best bring forth what is most affective and most provocative to expand and enrich a person’s understanding of the self and the world”

(Félix-Jäger, 2017, p.1). When we consider self and others as creators then we must acknowledge the deep-rooted connection to spirituality, the act of making something from nothing, from using our aesthetic senses to bring new life, meaning, understanding, material, or wisdom into the world. In these acts we also find purpose and meaning which lead to increased self-knowledge, growth, healing, and change.

### ***Identity and Meaning-making***

This notion of purpose and meaning connects to the research question presented in the current thesis whereby identity formation can be fostered through a spiritually derived, aesthetically-based source of meaning-making. C. Moon (2016) recognized “an approach to aesthetics characterized by an open search for meaning within a socially and materially interconnected existence” (p. 53), which adequately encompasses the role of aesthetics as understood by adolescents and young adults for this study. Beaumont (2015) noted that issues of identity often bring adolescent and young adult clients to art therapy, and “that through art-making, along with the reflective aspects of art therapy, the client will be able to gain self-insight and the skills necessary to build a flexible and adaptive self-identity” (p. 8). It is my belief that the inherent presence of aesthetics and spirituality within the art therapy realm can contribute to relational meaning-making that will assist in this process.

Identity formation for adolescents and young adults is an important consideration from a developmental lens. In Erikson’s (1959; 1968) theory of psychosocial development, the adolescents of this group would be within the identity versus role confusion stage, whereby they are struggling to find their place in the world and

determining what their role will be in adulthood. Many of today's young adults are also facing similar identity crises which require the additional consideration of formative therapeutic intervention and a re-evaluation of the proposed stages. Key issues in identity formation have been found to bring about the onset of art therapy services, and can be addressed through the development of healthy flexibility and adaptability of internal schemas (Beaumont, 2015). Identity issues contain aspects of psychology, physicality, geography, culture, politics, history, and spirituality requiring one to make sense of these parts both from an inter and intra-personal perspective in order to develop a unified sense of self (Parisian, 2015).

Beaumont (2015) hypothesized that a therapeutic approach focusing on “increasing self- exploration, self-reflection, and effective emotional coping [would] promote the development of the integrated self-knowledge that is necessary for coherent identity formation” (pp. 7-8). However, in the context of the current research I wondered whether, in the current climate of aesthetic identities being adopted by adolescents and young adults they are already formulating an integrated sense of self that is guided by these prescriptive aesthetic identities. While exploring the use of feedback in identity supports of cognitively disabled individuals, O’Farrell (2017) found that the creative, and therefore aesthetic, works made in therapy augmented the relational aspect of art therapy which allowed the client to see themselves through another’s eyes. This differential lens can also be highlighted through the incorporation of spirituality in order to determine the essence of what the client values in both their perceived and self-professed identity. In Allen’s (2014) personal journey in art and identity, she recognized the sacredness of the

studio space provided in art therapy which highlighted the spiritual journey one has to walk in order to find the essence of self. The intersection of these many beliefs of identity, art therapy, spirituality, and aesthetics resides in the personal endeavour of meaning-making, and the current study aims to explore this from both a psychotherapeutic and a spiritual perspective.

Research distinctively recognizes adolescents and young adults desperate search for belonging and purpose (B. Moon, 2012). Miller (2012) identified this desperation as a unique developmental paradigm and noted that issues of identity can be addressed through meaning-making interventions that foster self-awareness and confidence. Issues of belonging have also been addressed extensively in school settings as the implications of a lack of belonging are substantial (Allen & Kern, 2019; Gökmen, 2018; Parr et al., 2020; Tillery et al., 2012). A mitigating factor to a sense of belonging is purpose, which can be highlighted through aesthetic and spirituality-based practices. These are important psychological factors as spirituality is a part of the client's worldview and can impact psychological growth and development (Pargament, 2007). Within art therapy, spirituality is inherently connected to the act of creation, and through this meaning-making, aids the therapist to walk with the client on their identity formation journey. Particularly within a digital age, where identities are being proclaimed through social media, a psychological understanding of how this social proclamation is impacting identity formation, values, and motivations will be an important marker for clinicians.

Paragament (2007) stated that spirituality and the sacred speak to the person's "deepest personal values and helps to define who they are as individuals" (p. 51), which



is also true of an aesthetic identity. By providing an aesthetic avenue for identity to flourish, adolescents and young adults can come to know themselves better and “cultivate life-enhancing emotional and aesthetic relationships with their environment” (McNiff, 2009, p. 204). Aesthetics have been found to be a useful aid in identity development in a number of facets and for a number of populations, such as those with learning disabilities (O’Farrell, 2017), teenage parents (Stiles & Mermer-Welly, 2013), and adolescents in art therapy treatment (B. Moon, 2012). Despite these findings, the role of aesthetics in identity formation still lacks a distinct connection to the preexisting tendency of adolescents and young adults to seek and manipulate aesthetics in the therapeutic setting.

There is considerable literature available that links aesthetics with spirituality. These two disciplines were found to share roots in creation, metaphor, and transcendence, and the literature emphasizes the intrinsic connection between them. With art therapy being the avenue through which aesthetics are being explored in the current study, literature from this therapeutic practice also contributed to the research-base in a meaningful way. Identity formation and meaning-making were additionally considered in connection to aesthetics, art therapy, and spirituality and the literature underscores a symbiotic relationship between the former and latter areas of intrigue and the beneficial therapeutic implications that result. Although the literature thoroughly explores identity formation and meaning-making as separate processes in comparison to aesthetics, spirituality, and art therapy respectively, there is no body of literature that regards each of these areas as a conjoined research inquiry, which thus informs the nature of the current study. In order to round out the literature review, relevant literature pertaining to the

chosen methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis will be briefly explored to supplement the information given in the rationale section of this paper.

### **IPA Methodology**

IPA, as a qualitative research methodology that focuses on lived experience and perceptions, is primarily housed within health-related, relational, and experiential studies (Smith, 2011). Literature involving IPA and art therapy is limited, but when used it has proven to be an effective research methodology. In an IPA study analyzing the therapist's perception of creative art therapies as useful to individuals who self-stigmatize, Papagiannaki and Shinebourne (2016) found that therapists were grateful to give their opinions to research and achieved personal and professional growth through the opportunity to self-reflect. The perspectives of art therapists and clients were analyzed concurrently using IPA in an Ultra-Orthodox Jewish setting to identify various treatment challenges and implicit meanings (Podolsky-Krupper & Goldner, 2020). The perspectives of art therapy clients alone were additionally measured to determine the benefits of art interventions in therapy for therapeutic engagement (Cobbett, 2016). Each of these studies depicts the use of IPA research methodology with art therapists and/or in an art therapy setting.

There are also many studies using IPA to analyze a therapist's perspective on varying therapeutic phenomena outside of the art therapy discipline (Amari & Mahoney, 2021; Rake & Paley, 2009; Roxburgh et al., 2015). Given that one of the co-researchers is a practicing art and talk therapist, use of this methodology is appropriate. The other two co-researchers are art therapy practicum students, and IPA research has also shown to be

a suitable methodology with students and trainees (Kelly et al., 2022; Roebuck & Reid, 2020). Looking to the basic tenets of IPA research, the history and theoretical basis are explored quite substantially as a testament to its validity (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Shinebourne, 2011). There is additionally, some literature involving phenomenological approaches to art therapy (Carpendale, 2008; Plante & Bernèche, 2008). Specific to hermeneutic phenomenology, Standing (2009) found practical applications for its use in a study in which the perceptions of nurses on their own clinical decision-making skills was used to provide information on their professional development, highlight additional learning needs, and encourage a framework of being an expert in their own life, which then transitioned to acknowledging that same capability in their patients. Specific to idiographic approaches, a study analyzing the effects of various treatment interventions on the anxiety and depressive symptomology of a female patient researchers found idiographic methodology to be useful in investigating systems of change (Altman et al., 2020).

Although limited in scope, the available literature suggests that IPA methodology is a suitable research method for use in art therapy investigations. The literature also encourages the use of IPA with the chosen co-researchers, as the research included both general therapists and students. Breaking down IPA into its subsections, the literature was also found to support the methodology in current study via its historical and theoretical tenets, hermeneutic phenomenology, and idiographic approach. The current research is informed and guided by these findings and the methodology will be further explored as directly related to the current study.

### **Part III: Methodology**

To research is to explore, to experience personal growth and transcendence, and to achieve insight. Looking to aesthetics and spirituality, research is a beautiful investigation into the known and the unknown. Not only do we seek that which has already been discovered, but we seek new truths, ideas, and perspectives that will contribute to the tapestry of human knowledge. The first threads of research were described by French et al., (2014):

In Greece in the fourth-century BCE, there was a common practice that involved communities in sending a theoros on a journey . . . . The pilgrim would return and share what had been seen and experienced. The metaphor of the theoros, the one who goes to see, was subsequently used by the ancient philosophers to represent the philosophical journey. This provided the linguistic root of the term *theoria*, which we tentatively translate as contemplative knowing. The whole journey had its focus on seeing the event or object, often through participation in a sacred ritual. The theoros would return and recount the story of the journey in order to transmit to the community what had been seen. (p. 186)

The current research, being a qualitative study, aims to continue this contemplative knowing journey through a sacred lens in order to share the newfound knowledge with the academic community in a thoughtful and meaningful way.

The following section explores the selection of IPA methodology as the research method of choice and describes how the research question is well suited to this type of inquiry. Additionally, aspects of the research method will be highlighted, such as the

selection of the co-researchers, ethical and confidentiality concerns, how the data was collected and analyzed, and how trustworthiness and validity were maintained.

### **IPA and the Current Inquiry**

In the development of the research question and the appropriate methodology to investigate this inquiry, IPA became the natural choice. As a researcher, there are a number of considerations to be accounted for when aligning theoretical perspectives, the research question, the target population, and the desired audience. One also must consider the numerous stages that the research journey traverses, as stated by French et al., (2014) as:

Identifying the quest as the pursuit of truth; undertaking the journey; experiencing the encounter and gazing upon truth; undergoing transformation not merely in knowledge or thought, but at a more profound level, in identity; and the attempt to construct representations of that transformation in a manner that is not only authentic for the researcher but also capable of forming the basis of engaging in knowledge development with others in the academic community. (p.193)

Given these parameters and my personal values, the use of a methodology that actively accounts for the nuances of the human experience and engages with the co-researcher on a relational level was necessary to thoughtfully navigate the research inquiry.

This would clearly indicate that a qualitative approach is best suited to the current inquiry. Tuffour (2017) noted that “qualitative inquiries seek to shed light on meanings that are less perceptible. . . . They are inductive and share similarities in exploring ‘what’ ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions, as opposed to ‘how much’ and ‘how many’ preferred by

quantitative studies” (p. 1). Qualitative approaches also allow for the researcher’s worldview and perspective to be transparently discussed as the lens through which the inquiry is viewed (Butler-Kisber, 2017). Given the experiences of the myself as the primary researcher with the phenomenon of aesthetics, my belief that spirituality is essential to human nature, and that the research questions were designed using my own realizations about these topics, this adaptive and flexible reality of qualitative research makes it the most suitable choice. IPA research also requires that the co-researchers care about the topic, have an understanding of the topic, have experience with the topic, and find it to be relevant, which was the case for this inquiry given the voluntary nature of the research (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). The decision to use IPA as the chosen methodology was also because it was deemed, given the research question, to acceptably uphold article E.11 in the CATA standards of practice (2004) in which it is stated that “researchers in the field of Art Therapy shall evaluate their projects as to the potential contribution to the profession of Art Therapy, to human welfare, and in relation to the welfare of the research participant” (p. 5).

As described by Jobin and Turale (2019), various population, cultural, and setting-specific questions need to be addressed prior to choosing a research methodology. As these factors were considered, I recognized that gaining the art therapist’s perspective would be the ideal starting point for this inquiry. Further research could extend to the perspectives of adolescents and young adults, but foundationally, it was necessary to determine how aesthetics, meaning-making, and identity were perceived by the therapist who was guiding interventions and mechanisms of change. The research recognized the

hopeful willingness of art therapists and art therapy practicum students to contribute to the knowledge of their field, and therefore volunteer their time as co-researchers. Another important consideration was that the research inquiry included a spirituality-based designation, which could deter or come across inaccurately to those with various belief systems. The research recognized the possibility of this and accepted that clarifications, adjustments, discussions, and respectful acknowledgements may be needed. Finally, when considering using an interview-based methodology in the midst of a global pandemic, the research recognized that an online format would be most appropriate, that an interview would be more labour intensive and time consuming than other formats, and that it may limit the willingness of potential co-researchers because of these factors.

The specific attributes of IPA contribute significantly to using this methodology as it is my belief that the therapist's perception of the aesthetic phenomenon is most significant in determining the effect on art therapy interventions and the impact on identity formation. By regarding their perspectives of the phenomenon of aesthetics as it relates to meaning-making and identity, the current research utilizes IPA's basic tenets of " 'giving voice' (capturing and reflecting upon the principal claims and concerns of the co-researchers) and 'making sense' (offering an interpretation of this material), which is grounded in the accounts" (Larkin & Thompson, 2012, p. 101). 'Giving voice' to those whose perspectives on a topic are most valuable based on experience and genuine interest can significantly contribute to the research milieu, as demonstrated in Jones et al., (2021). Charlick et al., (2016) and Parratt et al., (2021) have also shown the impact of the valued opinions of research co-researchers who 'make sense' of their experiences in a research

context. The nuances of IPA will be explained further through the dissection of its foundational pillars.

### ***Phenomenology***

Phenomenological philosophy or phenomenology, is described by Larkin and Thompson (2012) as the study of ‘being’ through existence and experience. The intention of phenomenology “is often understood as a ‘stripping away’ of our preconceptions and biases ... exposing the taken-for-granted and revealing the essence of the phenomenon whilst transcending the contextual and personal” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 3). IPA methodology builds upon this assumption in the exploration of a phenomenon, but rather than transcending the personal experience, IPA values it as a representation of the phenomenon in a situated lived-experience (Eatough & Smith, 2017). Rather than analyzing the structural properties of the phenomenon itself, IPA analyzes the perspectives of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon, and in turn “aims to grasp the texture and qualities of an experience as it is lived by an experiencing subject” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 3). The analysis of the phenomenon of aesthetics, as it relates to an art therapy practice with adolescents and young adults, utilizes phenomenological principles to garner the art therapists’ perspective in a manner that contributes to an enhanced awareness of different aesthetic identities and the role these play in art therapy. The connections made between aesthetic identities, meaning-making, and spirituality are also addressed phenomenologically to gain a deeper understanding and awareness into the interconnected aspects of self that contribute to growth, change, and healing in therapy.



## *Hermeneutics*

Deriving from Greek language and mythology, hermeneutics is the study of interpretation and meaning-making (Freeman, 2008). Named from the Greek God Hermes, considered herald or messenger between humans and Gods, hermeneutics recognizes the limit of meanings between differing languages and mindsets and instead derives their own interpretations through the lived experience of the individual (Freeman, 2008). Philosophical hermeneutics takes a subjective approach to understanding in which interpretations become the primary means of knowledge acquisition as opposed to critical or objective learnings (Freeman, 2008). The role of hermeneutics in IPA methodology exists as “a dynamic process with an active role of the researcher which will influence the extent to which they get access to the participant’s experience and how, through interpretative activity, they will make sense of the subject’s personal world” (Pietkiewics & Smith, 2014, p. 8). Smith (2004) proposed that IPA involves a double hermeneutic process whereby “the participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world [while] the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (p. 40). The researcher’s hermeneutic stance in IPA employs both empathetic hermeneutics, whereby the researcher tries to understand and connect with the co-researchers’ from their viewpoint, and questioning hermeneutics, whereby the researcher maintains a critical stance involving underlying analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The current research denotes an additional level of hermeneutic thought as the language of aesthetics, or of visual, sensory engagement, offers a third avenue for interpretation in addition to empathetic and questioning hermeneutics.

### *The Hermeneutic Circle*

The symbolism of the circle depicts a model which details “the dynamic relationship between the ‘part’ and the ‘whole’ at numerous levels for a holistic analytical interpretation” (Tuffour, 2017, p.4). Each co-researcher, and the re-telling of their lived-experience, contribute to a ‘part’ of the circle, which is then analyzed as a ‘whole’ by the researcher in the context of their own interpretations (Tuffour, 2017). Along with depicting a dynamic process, the hermeneutic circle is defined as iterative, as interpretations and interplays between various levels are often repetitive or cyclical in nature (Shinebourne, 2011). Through the philosophical notion of the hermeneutic circle, the researcher is encouraged to examine the content provided in a non-linear fashion and to consider “the contexts in which the whole and parts are embedded and doing so from a stance of being open to shifting ways of thinking what the data might mean” (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 12). The hermeneutic circle is considered a playground of sorts, whereby the researcher constantly moves around and within the circle to uncover hidden or obstructed meanings. This aspect of IPA research is particularly suited to the current study as the hermeneutic circle offers an element of creativity and exploration which can be achieved through an arts-informed analysis. Given that IPA methodology gives voice to the research participants, and that the co-researchers in the current study are arts-based clinicians, the creativity found within the hermeneutic circle encourages the professional tendency to engage artistically and to examine their thoughts, beliefs, and experiences in a explorative way.

### **Selection of Co-Researchers.**

Based on the theoretical foundations of IPA methodology, the selection of co-researchers focused on a small sample size of homogeneous individuals who were purposively selected based on proximity to the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2015). These group members were homogeneous, as related to the research questions, insofar as they shared a similar academic background, they sought similar professional designations, and they had experience with similar therapeutic populations. Within these parameters, co-researchers were selected through their relation to the academic institution that I attend in a convenience sample of three individuals. After receiving ethics review approval, a request for art therapy practicum students and/or practicing art therapists (who may have been alumni or educators/administrators at the college) was submitted through a recruitment poster (see Appendix B) posted on St. Stephen's College student-run Facebook group. A stipulation of their involvement was experience working with adolescent and young adult clients and a willingness to explore the extent to which they experience aesthetics as being a part of their client's lives. Participation in the research was also contingent on obtaining the prospective co-researchers informed consent.

From the Facebook posting two art therapy practicum students expressed interest and were sent a Letter of Information and Informed Consent document (see Appendix C) and an Interview Question Guide (see Appendix D). To bolster the research, copies of the recruitment poster were also sent to former instructors who are practicing art therapists with decades of experience. One of these practicing art therapists' expressed interest and was also sent the two information and consent documents. The potential co-researchers

were invited to review these documents and contact me directly with any questions or concerns. If they still wished to participate after reviewing these documents, a date and time was scheduled to conduct online interviews.

### **Ethical Considerations and Informed Consent**

Prior to commencing the selection of co-researchers and data acquisition, my supervisor and I gained ethics approval by the University of Alberta Health Ethics Review Board. This ethics review functioned to identify any potential risks, develop a risk management plan, and ensure the co-researchers' best interests were to be protected with all ethical considerations. In considering the ethics review submission, I had to determine my own ethical parameters and guiding principles. As a student with no current art therapy regulatory board memberships or affiliations, I was primarily guided by the ethical guidelines of their educational institution. I also subscribed to the ethical guidelines and standards of practice of various art therapy associations of which they plan to be involved during my career, including the Canadian Art Therapy Association (CATA), the Art Therapy Credentials Board (ATCB), and the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA). Pertinent to my own values and the ethical considerations for this thesis were the ethical principles outlined by the CCPA (2020) which focus on beneficence, fidelity, nonmaleficence, autonomy, justice, and societal interest. Throughout the research, I maintained beneficence by proactively protecting the interests of the co-researchers. I upheld fidelity by honouring time commitments, interview appointments and the guidelines of consent. Nonmaleficence was ensured through a thorough informed consent process and a considerate intention to reduce the

risk of harm. Autonomy was maintained by respecting the co-researcher's right to alter, stop, or clarify any part of the research process and be active in the decision-making process. I upheld justice by respecting the co-researcher's dignity and providing fair and rightful treatment, and societal interest was maintained through responsible behaviour and a commitment to research according to these ethical principles.

### ***Maintaining Ethical Standards***

In order to monitor and assess the ethical considerations of this thesis, the thesis supervisor was available for both the planning and execution of the research. She was involved in reviewing ethical considerations that were predicted or could have arisen and could be contacted in the case of any immediate ethical concerns that could have occurred throughout the consent, interview, or analysis process. In alignment with the CCPA standards of practice for research and publications (2015) the responsibilities in the research included minimizing the power imbalance between co-researchers and researcher, providing ongoing informed consent in each area of the research process, providing context and transparency, and making known how the information given would be represented.

Each of these many considerations for ethical compliance were in accordance with “federal, provincial, state, and local laws and regulations, agency regulations, institutional review boards, and professional standards governing the conduct of research” (ATCB, 2018, p. 5). Ethical considerations were also addressed in the research process through the rationale for choosing IPA as the method of inquiry, which B. Moon (2015) stated as being essential in maintaining ethical intentions and the welfare of

participants. Creativity was also noted as being present in all aspects of conducting art therapy research as it is one's creativity that drives their curiosity, the research question, the methodology, the analysis of data, and the following discussion (B. Moon, 2015), so creativity was embraced in the research process and in ethical considerations, particularly when it came to the possibility of having to adapt or alter the methodological process in order to maintain the best interests of the co-researchers.

Other ethical considerations included managing and minimizing risks and discomforts, as well as mitigating harm through informed consent, providing the ability to opt-out, and taking precautions to maximize confidentiality and anonymity. Potential risks included the possibility that co-researchers may have felt psychologically or emotionally stressed while recounting personal and professional experiences that relate to their client contact. It was also possible that attempting to articulate and understand the role of aesthetics in the art therapy realm, or the realization of the existence of this phenomenon in their professional practice could have been difficult, disheartening, or frustrating to hear. Contact information for me as the primary researcher was provided for any questions or concerns that may have arisen pre or post-interview, but it is important to note in case of co-researcher distress, that professional art therapy standards require practicing art therapists and art therapy practicum students to have regular access to professional clinical debriefing and support opportunities. To minimize risks and discomforts for myself, self-care practices were in place, and reflective journaling aided in providing an emotional release. This practice was not shared with co-researchers, but was rather in place to support me throughout the process.

Co-researchers were informed that there were no direct benefits for taking part in this study. It was possible that by reflecting on and expressing the role of aesthetics in art therapy and the ways in which it can be a benefit or hindrance to the art therapy process, the co-researcher may develop realizations and new professional practices. These could lead to increased therapeutic gains with clients, or a deeper understanding of an adolescent or young adult client base. The risk to the co-researchers was well-considered, and extensive effort to minimize risk and discomfort to co-researchers was made. With the exploratory nature of this study, the co-researchers ideally experienced personal and professional growth as they made considerate and thoughtful judgements of the perceived role of aesthetics in art therapy, and considered how aesthetics and spirituality may have contributed to the meaning-making process for identity formation

### ***Confidentiality***

Confidentiality is a hallmark of all research paradigms, and requires that “the data that participants provide may be used only for purposes of the research and may not be divulged to others” (Leary, 2012, p. 319). For the purpose of this study, the co-researchers’ names and contact information were required for communication purposes. Email address information was needed in order to send the transcribed interview for co-researcher review and/or revision. All identifying information was included in the raw data which includes the video recording, interview notes, and an excel document noting co-researchers' names and contact information. Identifying information for co-researchers, and any other individuals named in the interview, were removed by assigning pseudonyms at the time of transcriptions. Transcriptions were done by the myself, and the

research supervisor was only privy to the anonymized and edited transcripts, and any subsequent analysis. There were no other study personnel. Transcriptions do not include any identifying information, which means all transcribed data is anonymous. The Excel document was destroyed once all co-researchers approved their individual transcripts. The data that was collected from the video recorded interviews was kept in a password-protected folder with no identifying characteristics within the file name or document, along with my notes and data analysis records, and was deleted from the computer's hard drive immediately following the completion of the transcription process.

### ***Informed Consent***

In the process of “informing research participants of the nature of the study and obtaining their explicit agreement to participate” (Leary, 2012, p. 314), a Letter of Information and Informed Consent (see Appendix C) and an Interview Question Guide (see Appendix D) were provided to the co-researcher prior to conducting the research. These documents functioned to explain the purpose of the study, outline the roles of researcher and co-researchers’ and how they would be contributing to the knowledge base, identify and address any limits to confidentiality and the actions I would be taking to ensure that consent is respected, highlight what was expected of the co-researchers in terms of time commitments, and answer any remaining questions the co-researchers may have had.

These documents also informed the consent process by making the co-researchers privy to the method of communication that would be used, the type of information that would be collected, how the information would be stored, the measures of confidentiality



that would be taken, the distinction between confidentiality and anonymity, and what their rights were. Because the research involved interviewing a practicing art therapist and art therapy practicum students there was an additional level of safeguard for the information shared in the form of their own ethical guidelines and standards of practice. Any information shared about their experiences with clients was masked with identifiable features removed as per the governing regulations of the associations and affiliations to which the co-researchers belong, which ensured both the co-researchers and their client's confidentiality. Prior to commencing the online video interviews, which were audio recorded, these documents were once again reviewed with me, an opportunity to ask questions was offered, and verbal consent was obtained. The verbal consent was audio recorded and was achieved through the reading of an Informed Consent Script provided in the Letter of Information and Informed Consent document (see Appendix C). A co-researcher could withdraw their consent from the study at any time, for any reason, at any of these points in the study: during or following the recruitment conversation with me, during or following the informed consent process; during the one-on-one interview; during the period between the interview and the approval of the written transcript; and up to two weeks after approving the written transcript.

### **Data Collection and Transcription**

The collection of data for the current research required interviews in order to gain an understanding of the art therapist's and art therapy practicum students' interpretation of aesthetics within the studio setting and to determine the extent to which they are witnessing aesthetic identities in adolescents and young adults. In the context of the

current global health crisis, these interviews were conducted remotely, using an encrypted audio/video communication platform to ensure confidentiality, which also catered to the availability of both myself and the co-researchers. The interviews were audio recorded, via the encrypted audio/video platform, and saved under password protection for later transcription. Each interview was conducted in a manner that aimed to be facilitative and unbiased in order to capture the essence of the co-researchers' experience (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). With growing prevalence and attention to aesthetic identities in adolescent and young adult populations, gaining a better understanding of the ways individuals incorporate aesthetics into their lives and how they may influence various spheres of existence may benefit educational, psychotherapeutic, art therapy, and parenting thinking and practices in this area and with this client base. The interview questions were structured to determine the art therapists' or art therapy practicum students' perspective on this topic. The questions could be altered, expanded upon, or removed depending on the organic flow of the interview, but the predetermined guiding interview questions were:

1. What, if any, theoretical orientation do you primarily operate from?
2. In your work with adolescents and young adults, describe the role you see aesthetics has in their lives
3. What role for aesthetics do you see in your art therapy interventions?
4. To what extent do you find this role to be a benefit or hindrance to your art therapy process?
5. How do you navigate the therapeutic roadmap knowing that client aesthetic inclinations are present?

6. To what extent do your individual clients subscribe to their own specific aesthetic identity?
7. How does this identity contribute to their meaning-making processes?
8. To what extent do you see spirituality as contributing to their meaning-making process?
9. How do you, as an art therapist, perceive the interaction between aesthetics and spirituality?
10. How do you perceive aesthetics and spirituality contributing to identity formation for your clients?

Following the completion of the interviews I transcribed the recordings. I then sent transcripts via password-protected email to the co-researchers for alterations and approval. They only received their own transcript for review. In accordance with IPA methodology “the level of transcription is generally at the semantic level: one needs to see all the words spoken including false starts; significant pauses, laughs and other features” (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p. 65). That being said, qualitative research broadly denotes that participants have the opportunity to review the data collected and revisit it to more accurately represent themselves and their worldview (Cho & Trent, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 2010), so I have made alterations to semantics given the decisions of each co-researcher. These alterations are pertinent to member checking, which functions for the purpose of "achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and consensus by means of revisiting facts, feelings, experience, and values or beliefs collected and interpreted" (Cho & Trent, 2006, p.324).

## **Data Analysis**

Once I completed transcriptions and each co-researcher approved their own transcript, the analysis process began. IPA research involves a thorough investigation of the transcripts over many iterations in order to capture the essence of the co-researcher's perspectives (Smith & Osborn, 2015). By offering "a sustained engagement with the text and a process of interpretation" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.66), the researcher can uncover implicit meanings, perspectives, and effects. Beginning with one transcript at a time the researcher familiarizes themselves with the content through multiple readings (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Initial overviews can also be completed through re-listening to the audio recordings in an effort to recognize "content (what is actually being discussed), language use (features such as metaphors, symbols, repetitions, pauses), context, and initial interpretative comments" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014, p. 14). Annotations in the left margin are made with various insights, commentary, summaries, associations, connections or interpretations throughout the readings (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Repeating the process, the right margin is then used to classify emerging themes, or abstractions that capture the essence of what was said and the interpretations that were made (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Following the multiple readings and various annotations, the discovered themes are listed on a separate piece of paper and the researcher connects and orders the themes based on their essential quality, while consistently referring to the source material to ensure themes align with the transcript data (Smith & Osborn, 2015). A table of themes is then created identifying the theme cluster with evidence from the transcript (Smith &

Osborn, 2015). The hermeneutic circle becomes apparent at this stage of data analysis as the researcher has become deeply connected to the various parts of each transcript and then begins to recognize the significance of the whole to which the emergent themes all belong (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). This analysis is then repeated with the other transcripts until there are three sets of themes to draw from. A cumulative table of themes is created representing all data from all co-researchers, which serves as the basis of the final results (Smith & Osborn, 2015). By this point, a dialogue should be underway between the researcher, the annotated data, and their underlying theoretical knowledge in order to develop an interpretative account of what the themes mean in the context of the research question (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Trustworthiness and validity of the research will now be addressed.

### **Trustworthiness and Validity**

The organization of this section will explore validity measures from a broad to narrow perspective looking at qualitative research generally, then hermeneutic research, followed by IPA, with the goal of addressing the rigour and trustworthiness prevalent at each level of research. In a general sense, validity refers to the extent to which a research study successfully measures the phenomenon it is intended to measure (Leary, 2012). The use of a qualitative research method means that measures such as reliability and statistical validity typically found in quantitative studies are not necessary or possible to inform the trustworthiness of the data (Leary, 2012). Instead, the validity and trustworthiness were verified using other validity measures and the value of qualitative, hermeneutic, and IPA research will be demonstrated. In general, qualitative methodologies “require, by its

nature, creative and open minded approaches that acknowledge blurriness, complexity and subjectivity” (Northcote, 2012). In an exploration of the many criteria that have been used to judge the goodness of qualitative research, Northcote (2012) devised five primary guiding principles and criteria to determine the overall value of qualitative research. These principles are contributory (contribute to the larger knowledge-base for the subject or field), rigorous (data collection, analysis, and interpretation is systematic and transparent), defensible (study answers the research question and actions taken have distinct meaning), credible (the data is demonstrated as significant and well-founded), and affective (findings of the research elicit an emotional investment or engaged reaction for the researcher, participants, and readers; Northcote, 2012). Northcote (2012) also states that “the process of acknowledging the aesthetics of research is associated with the researchers’ and the participants’ emotional involvement, the researchers’ commitment and enthusiasm, and the manner in which the findings are presented to the readers” (p. 105). In particular, it is “the view of research that acknowledges logic, future impact and credibility, as well as emotional and spiritual pursuits” (Northcote, 2012, p. 105) that so fittingly connect my research questions to qualitative methodology. Additionally, Kapitan (2018) identifies qualitative research as a suitable method of inquiry for research in the field of art therapy.

Yardley (2000) has highlighted the difficulty in determining the trustworthiness of subjective qualitative research when it is set in comparison to objective quantitative research, but they recognize that meanings are co-constructed realities that are developed through negotiation and known realities based on experience. It is this outlook that I drew

upon in the completion of the research, and the subjective nature of qualitative methodologies drove the conversations and insights developed. Guidelines for assessing trustworthiness and validity in IPA research resides in generalities of qualitative research. In accordance with Yardley's (2000) principles for determining validity and quality in qualitative research there are four pillars used for assessment. These pillars are: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance, which are outlined in table format by Yardley (2000, p. 219). The similarities between the recognitions of Yardley (2000) and Northcote (2012) in the goodness measures of qualitative research were utilized in this research endeavour, however the four pillars proposed by Yardley (2000), were deemed most appropriate to analyze in terms of IPA research. Each of these pillars will be explored in relation to the current study.

### ***Sensitivity to Context***

There are a number of means through which sensitivity to context can be achieved. One of these means is "sensitivity to relevant theoretical literature" (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 26), which has been thoroughly regarded in the current study through the wide breadth of the literature review. By undertaking a review of many areas of theoretical study, including literature pertinent to aesthetics and art therapy, aesthetics and art therapy with adolescents and young adults, and art therapy theoretical foundations, literature pertinent to spirituality, meaning-making and identity, and literature pertinent to IPA methodology, the current research was sensitive to the nuanced scope of the literature. Sensitivity to "the socio-cultural context of the

study” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 26), is another important tenet of sensitivity that I regarded deeply. Yardley (2000) highlighted that “language, social interaction and culture are understood by most qualitative researchers to be central to the meaning and function of all phenomena” (p. 220). Given this understanding, the portion of this thesis highlighting cultural and socioeconomic considerations was reviewed by many outside sources of personal relation, to ensure accuracy, inclusion, and sensitivity, which aids in the validity of this tenet. As pertinent to interpretive hermeneutic research methods, the goodness or validity of the study will ultimately be determined by the reader (Crist & Tanner, 2003), which is an important consideration in evaluating sensitivity to context.

Sensitivity to context continues to extend into the validity measures through the analytic process by ensuring the voices of the co-researcher remain present through each rendering of the themes, as well as in the written process by offering resources to ground any interpretations made from the data (Shinebourne, 2011). Each of these processes depends on the accuracy of transcriptions and the attention of the researcher in the analysis as “sensitivity to the linguistic and dialogical context of each utterance is crucial to interpreting its meaning and function”

(Yardley, 2000, p. 221). I upheld these sensitivities through rigorous transcription and analytic practices and through a focus on encouraging the voices of the co-researchers to guide the thematic findings.

### ***Commitment and Rigour***

Adhering to commitment in the research begins with engagement of the topic in a prolonged and depth-based manner (Yardley, 2000). Eatough and Smith (2017) stated that



“a sustained focus on a particular aspect of experience, rich experiential data, assessment of the thematic structure through the use of a measure of prevalence, careful elaboration of themes and of course, a detailed interpretative engagement with the material” (pp. 31-32) are hallmarks of good IPA research and contribute to commitment measures. My engagement with the topic has been all-encompassing throughout the varying levels of data collection and analysis. Additionally, daily preoccupations and thoughtful consideration of the subject matter have been at the forefront at all stages of this thesis from initial conception to the final write-up. Yardley (2000), also notes that commitment to the subject matter extends beyond the role of the researcher in qualitative studies, to their various personal and professional roles, and as such my roles as a young adult, art therapy practicum student, volunteer, and artist have lead to a continuous investment in the topic under investigation. Commitment in qualitative research extends to “the development of competence and skill in the methods used” (Yardley, 2000, p. 221), which is adhered to in this thesis through the expertise of the thesis supervisor and the natural fit of IPA methodology to the research question. With direction taken from Shinebourne (2011), commitment in this thesis was also adhered to throughout the research process in the selection of the co-researcher sample, "commitment to engaging with participants with sensitivity and respect and commitment to attending to detailed and meticulous analysis” (p. 27). Finally, immersion with both the empirical and theoretical data contributes to the level of commitment presented in the research (Yardley, 2000), and is evident through the literature review and thematic analysis of the current study.

Rigour is demonstrated through “the thoroughness and completeness of the data collection and analysis” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 27). In IPA research, as interpreted from Yardley (2000), this refers most broadly to the ability of the sample to provide a comprehensive analysis and a complete interpretation that accounts for variations and complexities. Smith et al., (2009) denote that the comprehensiveness of the participants’ accounts largely hinges on the interview process and the ability of the researcher to demonstrate rigour in their interview capabilities. As I am a future therapist, listening skills and the practiced notion of asking open-ended questions allowed for the co-researchers to adequately express their experiences and perspectives in a way that demonstrated rigour. As for the analysis and interpretations, Smith et al., (2009) note that the idiographic nature of IPA research, if done properly, ensures rigour by extending beyond a basic account to a detailed interpretation of the meaning in terms of the research question (Smith et al., 2009). Interpretations are rigorous based on the proportionate evidence from the transcripts used to support them (Smith et al., 2009). Given that the current study contains perspectives from three co-researchers, rigour is demonstrated through the consistent use of direct quotations to support thematic claims. The values of IPA research denote that the meanings, applicability, and rigour of the research will be most valued if they connect to the lived experience of the researcher, co-researchers, and reader which therefore promote the final interpretation of the study’s goodness for each respective evaluator (Crist & Tanner, 2003).

Additional factors for determining commitment and rigour in IPA research were found in numerous qualitative studies (de Witt & Ploeg, 2006; Kahn, 2000; Koch, 1995;

Standing, 2009). In a study evaluating rigour in interpretive phenomenological nursing research, de Witt and Ploeg (2006) found that the inclusion of a balanced integration of philosophical and lived experiences, an openness in regards to interpretations and decisions made by the researcher, concreteness of the findings to practical scenarios, resonance for the reader to the research question, and actualization of the study's proposed implications serve as important criteria for assessing the effectiveness of this methodology. In a study conducted by Standing (2009), the trustworthiness and rigour of the hermeneutic research were characterized by personal interpretations of what validity measures were appropriate for the methodology, research question, and findings. This viewpoint was reinforced for hermeneutic research by Koch (1995) when they stated that the "inquirer needs to engage in this literature and select or develop the most appropriate criteria for their particular study" (p. 178). The researcher must then demonstrate why these criteria are believable and trustworthy, often in the form of multiple data sources (Koch, 1995).

### ***Transparency and Coherence***

In qualitative research criterion, transparency "refers to the clarity of the description of the stages in the research process" (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 27). Broadly, this is understood as a comprehensive detailing of both the data collection and data analysis processes. Disclosing how factors such as researcher intentions, actions, and assumptions have interacted with the research (Yardley, 2000). These elements were incorporated in the current study to ensure transparency, as were additional detailed summaries in areas such as depicting the personal interest in the subject matter and highlighting the entirety

of the consent and co-researcher recruitment process. Transparency requires a degree of reflexivity from the researcher in order to honestly convey the motivations behind the study and any personal interests being pursued (Yardley, 2000), which is another consideration that has been presented frankly in the current study. In addition to providing transparency in the formal written portion of this thesis, various appendices and tables were included as Smith et al., (2009) recommend providing appendices or series of tables to adequately depict the data collection process.

Transparency can be achieved through various trustworthiness measures in order to build an honest, conducive relationship between the researcher and the reader (Koch, 1995). In a reflective paper on the hermeneutic research process, Whitehead (2004) noted that trustworthiness in this type of methodology is dependent on the influences the individual researcher brings to the data but that the initial intentions and hopes for the research by the researcher may never be fully accepted or understood by others. Whitehead (2004) notes that despite this limitation, having confidence in the findings and being proud of how far the question was able to be explored is often enough to demonstrate rigour. The trustworthiness for hermeneutic qualitative research was summarized by Kahn (2000):

Ultimately, the findings of an [sic] hermeneutic phenomenological study stand alone to be read by others, who begin their own interpretive efforts facing the same problem of meaning, of understanding what the author meant. To the extent that an author has given a thick enough description to readers so that they might understand the interpretation made, that author has also given readers enough

access to the field text in the form of original data that the readers may make other interpretations. The question of accuracy transforms at that point into one of utility. It becomes the responsibility of readers of the research findings to decide whether the findings are useful when transferred to their own situations ... Ultimately, the findings of an [sic] hermeneutic phenomenological study can be judged only in the context of the intellectual discourse it joins and creates (p. 92).

The next area to be considered is the criterion of coherence.

Coherence is often considered a measure that is determined not by the researcher, but by those reading the published submission of the research (Smith et al., 2009).

Coherence can be achieved through multiple drafts to ensure that the argument is coherent, the themes are presented logically, and any ambiguities and/or contradictions are revised or clearly explained (Smith et al., 2009). Yardley (2000), suggests that coherence can also be achieved by ensuring the theoretical perspective, the research question, the chosen methodology, and the analysis process are in sync with one another. Within IPA research, coherence would be attained if the study is consistent “with the underlying principles of IPA: attending closely to participants’ experiential claims and at the same time, manifesting the interpretative activity of IPA” (Shinebourne, 2011, p. 27). The underlying principles of IPA should also be apparent in the use of phenomenological and hermeneutic foundations and “the reader should be aware that they are positioned as attempting to make sense of the researcher trying to make sense of the participant’s experience” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 183), or in this case, of the researcher attempting to

make sense of the co-researchers' attempt to make sense of their clients. Although coherence is difficult to judge as a subjective researcher, it is the hope that an objective reader finds the current study to be presented coherently.

Following the guidelines of Morse et al. (2002), methodological coherence has been developed with congruence between the research questions and the chosen methodology, the selection of an appropriate co-researcher sample that represents who the knowledge base is for and that has interest in the phenomenon, the collection and analysis of the data with the mindset of discriminating between what is known and what needs to be known, the use of theoretical thought in terms of the information gleaned from the data and new insights that may arise, and the use of the research process to aid theoretical development for the subject matter and professional field.

### ***Impact and Importance***

The final validity measure proposed by Yardley (2000) proposes that “however well a piece of research is conducted, a test of its real validity lies in whether it tells the reader something interesting, important or useful” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 183). This usefulness is “assessed in relation to the objectives of the analysis, the applications it was intended for, and the community for whom the findings were deemed relevant” (Yardley, 2000, p. 223). For the current study, the objectives of the analysis were to determine the extent to which art therapists perceive the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions with adolescents and young adults. Additionally, the study aimed to determine how aesthetics and spirituality are perceived as impacting meaning-making and identity formation. It is my hope that these objectives will be achieved in the analysis and deemed

useful to the reader. The applications of this research were primarily for my own personal and professional growth, and to contribute to the knowledge base of the art therapy field. That being said, the community that may find the research relevant extends beyond art therapists to include psychotherapists, psychologists, parents, teachers, and mentors who interact with adolescents and young adults. The impact and importance of the objectives, application, and intended community will become apparent post-publication, but as a validity measure will ideally be achieved.

The importance of this research is likely to also contribute to the literature in a way that presents novel and challenging new perspectives and understandings (Yardley, 2000). The lack of literature found that combines the many elements present in this research, including aesthetics, art therapy, adolescents and young adults, spirituality, meaning-making, and identity increase the likelihood that this research will present new ideas and considerations to the research sphere. Given that qualitative research offers a subjective stance, Yardley (2000) suggests that a socio-cultural impact incurred through research also contributes to its importance and impact. As mentioned in the literature review, the potential impact of aesthetics on adolescents and young adults contains many nuances. There are many socio-economic and cultural considerations to be aware of with the subjects of aesthetics and spirituality, and by highlighting these elements, the research hopes to contribute to the discourse and methodology surrounding work with adolescents and young adults.

In practice, the potential impact of the study resides both within the art therapy profession and within society. Ideally, the findings of this study will extend beyond the

scope of the therapist's perception to include other areas of impact, such as the clients' lives and societal impacts. Working from narrowest to broadest impact, I anticipate the lives of the clients to be improved in terms of therapeutic relationship, self-understanding, and spiritual development. For adolescents and young adults, having a therapist that understands their version of aesthetics and can relate to their aesthetic subject matter could aid in strengthening the therapeutic relationship without it feeling forced or faked. By acknowledging the holistic impact of aesthetics, the client may come to a better understanding of their behaviours, motivations, and cognitions and therefore, may develop an increased ability to recognize potential triggers and implement coping mechanisms. The development of a holistic identity that includes spirituality, as aided by aesthetics, may additionally function to foster self-acceptance, a relationship with the sacred, and connection to community.

At the next level, the importance and impact of this research denotes that the effectiveness of the art therapist may be improved in a number of ways, whether or not they perceive aesthetics as influencing art therapy interventions. If the art therapist perceives aesthetics as hindering the art therapy process, they can work with the client to shift the focus from product to process in order to deepen the therapeutic outcomes. Although they may not recognize the value and importance of aesthetics in the client's life, they would have the knowledge to recognize the signs of aesthetic dependence, or defaulting to or hiding behind an aesthetic identity when struggling with their own identity formation, and the ability to address this directly with the client. If the therapist were to view aesthetics as a benefit of art therapy intervention, they could use it as a



means of introducing meaning-making to the session and foster an engagement with aesthetics to promote therapeutic outcomes such as resiliency or post-traumatic growth. In either instance, the therapist would have a better understanding of their adolescent or young adult client, particularly when an age gap exists between client and therapist, and they may develop increased language proficiency with adolescents and young adults. The current research may also invite art therapists to engage in mindful reflection on the role of aesthetics in their practice and may encourage further research on the topic.

Finally, at the broadest level, the work of the current thesis in determining how art therapists experience aesthetic identities within their clients, the effect aesthetics may have on art therapy interventions, and the ability of aesthetics to meld with spirituality in the process of meaning-making may have an impact on psychotherapy, art therapy, psychology, parenting, teaching and mentorship at large. The emerging trend of aesthetic identities, as depicted on social media and as described in the working definition, within adolescents and young adult populations provides a way to connect with this population that focuses on their interests, values, and priorities. By recognizing this trend and the language associated with it, those working in proximity to this population have the ability to find common ground, engage with the individuals on their level, and connect using a relatable medium. By showing an interest in the phenomenon that is dominating social media experiences, without attempting to seem well-versed or hip, the helper (in whatever role that may be) may gain an increased understanding of the inner and outer worlds of the client, child, student, or mentee. These various levels of impact and

importance for this research contribute to its applicability, and highlights its trustworthiness and validity.

## Part IV: Thematic Analysis

In accordance with IPA methodology, the research findings will be presented in a thematic narrative. The overarching understanding for each of the co-researchers was that Belonging provides the gravitational force on which all research findings pivot. Other primary themes that emerged were Hopelessness and Image, and various sub-themes of expression, recreation, the internet, and worries of the future were identified. In the visualization of these themes, an image of the universe appeared in my mind's eye. I illustrated this visualization (see Appendix E), with Belonging as the sun at the centre of the universe, sub-themes of Purpose and Spirituality as sun flares, Hopelessness and Image as circling planets, and their various sub-themes as moons to these planets. Aesthetics acts as the atmosphere in which this universe of themes reside, creating the conditions for them to flourish and be explored. All themes are presented in **Table 1** (p. 70) with quotes highlighting the summarized viewpoints of the three co-researchers, Valentina, Holly, and Kaye. It is important to note that the themes discovered are consistent with theories of adolescent and young adult development (Arnett, 2011; Meeus, 2019).

With pseudonyms given to protect the privacy of the co-researchers, their perspectives and experiential accounts are intertwined with the interpretations and findings of mine. The words of the co-researchers are italicized to differentiate them from the body of this paper, and it is the hope that their dialogue brings life to the research question. The co-researchers are referred to as such: Valentina (art therapy practicum student), Holly (art therapy practicum student), and Kaye (practising art therapist). The

findings have been organized according to the three primary themes, with sub-themes woven through according to the visualization (see Appendix E).

**Table 1: Results of Data Analysis**

<b>Themes</b>	Valentina	Holly	Kaye
Belonging	<i>How will I be someone who belongs?</i>	<i>It's okay to be me</i>	<i>A sense of place</i>
Images	<i>Judgement and Perception</i>	<i>Creating from themselves</i>	<i>Controlling image</i>
Hopelessness	<i>Some kind of a reckoning</i>	<i>Profound sense of hopelessness</i>	<i>Extreme experiences</i>
<b>Sub-Themes</b>			
Purpose	<i>Being important in the world</i>	<i>She became somebody different</i>	<i>What's our purpose</i>
Spirituality	<i>Spiritual longings</i>	<i>It is inherently spiritual</i>	<i>Deeply spiritual motivations</i>
Internet	<i>Online persona</i>	<i>Wide audience</i>	<i>Media that they're consuming</i>
Expression	...	<i>Expressing parts of themselves</i>	<i>Showing to the world</i>
Re-Creation	<i>Recreate their face</i>	<i>Ability to recreate</i>	<i>Who they are</i>
Future	...	<i>Their future is uncertain</i>	<i>Challenges that we're facing</i>

### **Belonging**

The use of aesthetics or the creation of an aesthetic identity was perceived by the co-researchers to reside in such an impactful place in the lives of adolescents and young adults for its ability to invoke a sense of belonging. By utilizing aesthetics as an outward expression of values, the adolescents and young adults were perceived as exclaiming to

the world how they thought belonging was attained. When asked how an aesthetic identity contributes to the meaning-making process Valentina noted of previous clients: *“I feel like aesthetics were definitely a statement of values for them, of what matters, what doesn't matter, what it would take to matter, what kind of person would matter, as compared to people who don't matter”*. The expression of self through an aesthetic means was understood as an expression of *“self as belonging, or being worthy of love, or being apart of something important”*. Valentina noted that this desired sense of belonging was perceived as being so deeply rooted for adolescents and young adults that it threatened to become all-consuming. She noted:

*They were all aspiring to be wanted, to belong, to be loved, to matter. And I think their definition of what matters, who matters, what kind of people matter, and what it would take for them to matter, it was all tied up in their aesthetic, in their aesthetic choices, and their aesthetically related sense of values. So, there was something to admire, and something to aspire to, and the stakes were very high. It was always about ‘How will I be someone who belongs?’ ‘How will I be someone who is considered important?’ ‘How will I be someone, maybe, whose content is appreciated and who’s creations are appreciated?’ ‘How will I be taken seriously?’. And, ya like almost to the point of a matter of survival. ‘How will I be good enough to be liked? And therefore able to still be here?’ ‘How will I feel complete and worthy of being here?’.*

By adopting or subscribing to an aesthetic identity, adolescents and young adults are able to weave the threads of their life’s tapestry in a more succinct and cohesive way. This is

not to say an aesthetic identity is the only means to achieve a cohesive sense of self, but Valentina recognized it as an important consideration in the process of identity formation.

Belonging was expressed by Valentina as encompassing many roles in the lives of adolescents and young adults including: *“idea of belonging, the concept of belonging, and the urge to belong, the yearning to belong, the fact that one feels compelled to belong somewhere and be loved somehow”*. These various forms of belonging were noted by Valentina as shifting in the process of growth and development, and in relation to new experiences and interactions. She stated that:

*As we develop, we are weaving threads from the yearning of belonging, the desire to be loved, not just by our parents but by our peers and even some future partner or partners, so our yearning for love and belonging is one thread that would be woven in with our, our aesthetic choices and preferences and values, and our sense of what, what the essence of the world is.*

In response to the question of how an aesthetic identity contributes to the meaning-making process for this population Kaye too noted the relational aspect of belonging as an important consideration as aesthetics represents *“a way of being with people, and finding their tribe, finding their place. Ya, finding their place, um and how they want to be represented and who and what they want to be associated with”*.

In considering the interplay between aesthetics and belonging, Kaye noted that aesthetics represented a *“kind of a way of being in the world, a thing that they want to show people, it’s about showing identity or showing certain characteristics, um and how they maybe are controlling their image”*. Kaye linked the concept of belonging to feeling

at home and comfortable and noted that aesthetics function through meaning-making to provide “*a sense of place actually*”. Belonging does not, however, only reside in conformity or collectivism, but can also be achieved through expressions of individuality. In her reflection, Holly focused on the shifting paradigm of belonging as encompassing the ability to stand out and express individuality confidently in a more accepting social environment. In self-reflection, Holly stated: “*I feel like aesthetics is much different with youth today than it was when I was young. In that there's, there's a differently focused intentionality to it. In many ways it's about standing out rather than fitting in*”. Holly compared this to the idea of self as a work of art, and proposed that aesthetics function in response to the following philosophical quandary:

*In this process of living your life as a work of art, do you want to be a commission, meaning that you are creating yourself for others, or do you want to be an original work of art, to be working on creating the individual that you want to be, and living and expressing yourself as only you can.*

This sense of individualized belonging was witnessed by Holly in a group art therapy setting in which she experienced an adolescent come to recognize a reality in which they could state “*it's okay to be me, and I don't have to apologize for what I create in this world or how I view myself and create myself*”. This idea was further explored by Holly in self-reflection by recognizing the difference between identity and individuality and noting “*Identity is about where you belong with other people and how you fit and where you intersect, and individuality is about you as a work of art, and how you stand out on your own and how your light radiates and shines*”.

## ***Purpose***

These expressions of belonging perceived by the co-researchers as being integral to the experience of aesthetics with adolescents and young adults can be further dissected into expressions of purpose. Valentina noted that “*aesthetics is a huge factor in the lives of adolescents and young adults*” and that when strong aesthetic inclinations are present the way to allow the clients to harness purpose in session is to “*just let them roll with it and go with whatever feels most appropriate for them that day*”. Valentina stated that subscribing to an aesthetic identity for her adolescent and young adult clients:

*Had something to do with how they conceived of themselves as being important in the world. How, and if, and why they saw themselves as being important in the world. What role they thought they might have... Literally, what role they thought they might take on, or fill, or accept, or emanate in the world.*

When describing the experience of a particular client, Valentina noted that they were striving for purpose through aesthetics in the experience of “*Being rejected, being abandoned, being cut off*” in which “*there was a sense that there was no place for them... so they had to create a new world for themselves on earth ... So they were striving to create a new world for themselves on earth through their art*”.

This drive for purpose is an extension of belonging, and Valentina reckoned that these elements could be combined into the purpose of therapy in general. She explore the notion that:

*In the attuned therapist/client relationship, in that sort of microcosm of the world, that the therapist/client relationship comprises in that microcosm, I feel like that*



*contains the yearning for belonging and love, so the relationship and the acknowledgement of spirituality, the essence maybe of spirituality, although that's an overused word, so to me those two things, let's say the yearning for belonging and yearning for love, combined with the client's sense of their being, of their spirituality, whatever that may be, those two things may kind of, would kind of comprise the context in which the art then comes to be.*

The recognition that purpose can be thoroughly explored in the art therapy context was also shared by Holly. In the context of her art therapy practicum, Holly shared that with *“the aesthetics of the adolescents that I've worked with, there this, this element of rule breaking, which you have to do in order to grow into the next stage of your life”*.

Aesthetics in this context act as a purposeful means of growth and development.

Aesthetics are the medium through which exploration and creativity can be purposefully harnessed in the process of identity formation. While discussing the nature of a group art therapy session, Holly recalled a moment where a client experienced a newfound sense of purpose and stated *“I'm an artist now'. And in that moment, she became somebody different than she was the moment before”*. This sense of purpose and belonging can be harness by the art therapist through therapeutic intervention, but Holly warns that:

*If art therapists are practicing without that understanding that with youth the aesthetics are different, as is the meaning that imbued in them, we're going to do an immense amount of damage to the youth by trying to make them fit into the old mould.*

Practicing art therapist Kaye recognized the need for understanding and noted just how prevalent concerns of belonging and purpose are to adolescent and young adult clients. Themes such as “*where we fit in the world, where we belong, how we connect you know with others, where is our place, what’s our purpose*” were noted by Kaye as being “*the things that people, young people are really working on usually, in one form or another*” when attending psychotherapy or art therapy. Within this therapeutic realm with adolescents and young adults, Kaye noted that “*the client’s aesthetic satisfaction becomes fairly important because of the developmental stage that they are at*”. She notes that from a Western lens, this population is often “*trying to master skills, master competencies, and develop a sense of self that is more autonomous and maybe somewhat separate from family*”, or in other words to hone in on their life’s purpose. Adolescence and young adulthood can often be a period of feeling lost or unsure of the directions of one’s life, but Kaye said “*I think that people can find themselves in image, you know, they can find their place in the world through aesthetics. I believe that because I’ve done it*”. Recognizing that adolescence, and more recently young adulthood, can involve complexities related to “*coming of age, in that massive turning point in their lives where they’re finding out who they are as humans in the world*”, Kaye noted a particular importance “*to encourage their aesthetic identity*” to aid in the discovery of purpose and belonging.

### ***Spirituality***

All three co-researchers linked the concepts of purpose and belonging to spiritual strivings. Valentina recalled an interaction with a client in which they were trying to reconcile their sense of belonging with their spiritual upbringing. She noted that many clients had “*spiritual longings ... to be safe, to be able to observe but not be observed*”,

but that one client in particular who was apart of the LGBTQ+ community struggled aesthetically because:

*Their feelings about themselves were centered around wanting to be loved, and wanting there to be a God who wasn't so judgemental, but not being sure yet that that, that kind of God existed. And so aesthetically they couldn't... they couldn't align themselves, or even believe in a world with the God of their youthful understanding, but they were trying to define themselves and align themselves with a new kind of spirituality.*

In considering her own perspectives of how spirituality and aesthetics were connected in the art therapy practice, Valentina stated that:

*We're all vessels, we're different vessels. Each vessel is unique but what we contain is so similar. We contain like the vastness of a this power that is greater than ourselves. And so we contain eternity and infinity, and yet each vessel is so different from the next. But ya, what we contain is ultimately the same.*

Aesthetically, this interplay between individuality and connection was described by Valentina as the basis of spirituality. She stated that:

*Our ways of conceiving of spirituality, our ways of conceiving of ourselves as part of a greater whole, that's very individual. We use different language and different metaphors to get that sorted for ourselves, and to get that across to others. We have different personal images of that in our own heads. That's related to the aesthetic. We all come at the same thing but from our own unique perspective. ... I feel that spirituality is, you know, this, this great mystery of the infinite, and the*

*eternal, this power greater than us. But the mystery of all that is a big part of the reason that art exists, and that language exists. They exist because we're trying to put language and metaphor to our experience of exactly that, and so there are just as many ways as there are human beings to conceptualize these things that capture our attention... the spiritual nature of life or the spiritual aspects of life. So ya... the interaction between aesthetics and spirituality is very complex and rightly so.*

This concept of spirituality as intrinsically linked to aesthetics was also shared by the other co-researchers in their expression of their perceptions.

Holly adamantly stated that “*spirituality at its essence and creativity at its essence really feel like the same thing to me. Both of them are processes of meaning-making*”. In considering spirituality from her own perspective, Holly noted “*If there is a creator, and we are made in His image, then we are creators too. It is inherently spiritual, to create, to take something and change it into something else*”. Combining these spiritual perspectives, Holly regarded the role of aesthetics in art therapy and said that:

*When you make original works of art, that aesthetic is your spirit taking form in the art work. And when you take your spirit, when you allow your spirit to come out creatively and be expressed, and it can be expressed in how you do your hair, or how you walk, or how you dance, or how you laugh, or the house you build and decorate, all of that stuff is your spirit expressing yourself creatively to share with the world who it is. And when you express yourself authentically, people can't*

*help but be gravitated towards that authenticity because there's a light that shines from it.*

As Holly considered the aesthetic identity of her clients, she expressed that the light derived from authenticity originates when “*you, your spirit, and your expression of yourself that is being created are in harmony*”. This harmonious dialogue between aesthetics, spirit, and expression contributes to overall wellbeing and care for the whole of the person.

Kaye shared in the perspective that spirituality and aesthetics encompass a large portion of therapeutic wellness. Among her reflections she stated that:

*If you think of spirituality as being a way of feeling belonging and deep connection to your place in the world, and deep connection to community, I think that it is a way of striving for that, and moving towards, trying to move towards those things. And so to me, the way I see it as the therapist, it's deeply, these things as deeply spiritual. They are spiritual concerns really.*

These spiritual concerns were partly considered in the reasoning adolescents and young adults attend therapy, but they were also explored in connection to peer relations and elements of a collective aesthetic identity. Kaye noted the perception of many adolescents and young adults seeking experiences of “unity and oneness” in groups of their peers, and thought that these strivings represented the population “*looking for a transcendental kind of experience*”. The strivings were thought by Kaye to have “*deeply spiritual motivations*” and she noted that “*usually youth culture, at any point in time, has their*

*rituals and ways of doing that*”, which is seeking transcendence through aesthetic expressions and interactions.

Apart from the direct forms of peer interactions, Kaye noted that *“image can bring about connectivity, like art making can bring about connectivity in different ways”*. This connectivity is rooted in spirituality and it is able to transcend modes of traditional communication through the use of imagery, symbolism, and expression. Of this connectivity, Kaye stated that:

*There is sort of that magic, that kind of transcendental communication, that can happen between psyches, and I think that is communicated largely through image, or image is a conduit for which people can communicate without words, you know across time and space, or maybe even telepathically if you want to kind of use that language.*

When involved in experiences of transcendental communication, Kaye reflected that she can *“come out feeling really grounded, and really knowing my place in the world, um knowing the rightness of my place in the world”*. This sense of belonging and purpose is precisely what the combined sense of aesthetics and spirituality can achieve. Kaye noted that in a therapeutic setting these elements can be quite impactful. She said:

*The combination of a healthy, um not perfect, but healthy, strong therapeutic alliance, coupled with you know intentional relationship there, coupled with um image making, art making, and sharing about things that the client would never share about anywhere else. All of those I think can, those ingredients, can*

*culminate into like a really profound experience, for both people, but hopefully for the client. And in that way I think we are talking spirit, like that's spiritual work.*

When contemplating psychological or spiritual questions, Kaye noted that “*aesthetics, creative process, is a conduit into those answers, a pathway to find them*”. Within the art therapy setting, the sense of belonging and purpose that extends from aesthetic exploration and expression may foster increased spiritual wellbeing and connectivity to aid in the therapeutic process and thus enhance therapeutic growth.

### **Image**

The theme of image was concurrently agreed upon as being rooted in aesthetics both in the general lives of adolescents and young adults, and within the art therapy setting. Deriving from this perspective were sub-themes of Expression, namely the aesthetics of self expression, Re-creation of self through aesthetics, and the role of the Internet and social media in aesthetic portrayals. In Valentina's recollection of past client experiences, she highlighted that for many adolescents and young adults, the aesthetic focus on image “*had a lot to do with judgement and perception of self*”. Valentina noted that for one client in particular:

*There was a reluctance for the one individual to really be seen, they wanted most of all to be in a place to see others but not be seen themselves. They kind of had a fantasy of themselves as living in a little place where they could look out at the world and not have to be seen, or perceived visually by others, that they could escape judgement and censor, and potential rejection by just being able to see, but not be seen.*

In reflecting upon how aesthetics and image impact identity formation, Valentina expressed that clients are considering questions such as “‘How do I see the world?’ ‘How would I express myself?’ ‘How would I explain my mental formulation?’ ‘How would I put that into words or describe that into imagery or metaphor?’”. She noted that “they are growing and forming AS they express”. The importance of image for adolescents and young adults was perceived to revolve around an aesthetic sense of self, and strongly contributes to identity formation. Valentina expressed an intriguing thought:

*I think as we grasp for those kinds of expression, as we struggle with those kinds of expression and go through the process of producing art and naming our thoughts, describing our thoughts about those things, I think that’s a big part of how we do form our individual identity.*

Expression, imagery, symbolism, and aesthetics are part and parcel of the same experience. Each represent ways of conveying to others, and solidifying to oneself, the essence of their identity.

In the consideration of both personal and professional art making, Holly found that aesthetics aided in the acceptance of her own self image. She stated that:

*This way of thinking has changed my life, how I look at myself and how I am able to accept all of the parts of myself, including the aesthetics of the parts that irritate me about myself, AND the parts I embrace and love about myself.*

When working with clients struggling with the same image-based themes of insecurity, Holly offered this insight:



*By creating from themselves and in not worrying about the final product of what they were doing, that they were able to express their own aesthetic, their self, unencumbered from the expectations of the group. And that if they had created something that they felt would fit in, that it wouldn't necessarily ... , it might not necessarily express what needed to be expressed from them as person as a work of art.*

The intricacies related to self-image, aesthetics, and art therapy became a strong area of focus during the interview with Holly. When recalling her work in practicum, Holly shared that her *“way of navigating aesthetics in the therapeutic relationship is to listen to how the youth interact with societies expectations that are placed onto them and onto beauty and how they are muting themselves by trying to fit into it”*.

While considering the question asking the extent her individual clients subscribe to their own aesthetic identity, Holly noted that their aesthetic presentation was primarily observable in the image of them as individuals. She stated *“I see them as individuals and the expression of that individual”*, which connects back to the aesthetics of identity and image presentation. Holly expanded upon this and said *“I think that we all have, we all have like a comfort level in the aesthetic self that we present, and that comfort level influences the expression or subscription to the aesthetic self”*. In the art therapy context, Holly said that her experiences with adolescents and young adult clients *“demonstrated the power of the aesthetics to contribute to their meaning-making and their transformation in terms of their sense of their identity and taking on or releasing different facets of themselves”*.

Kaye focused more prominently on the role of image in the art making process. She noted that for adolescents and young adults there's *"something that can be um uh almost like transcendental for some people maybe when they create something or see something that feels, um that matches their standard of beauty of what, of what a beautiful or a satisfying image is"*. When recalling the role of aesthetics in art therapy, Kaye elaborated on instances of hinderance or benefit in the studio. She mentioned that hinderances occur *"if the client gets caught up, caught in the dilemma of 'I want to make something in my mind, I want to make something that I see in my mind's eye and I can't make it' and that creates frustration"* and that benefits stem from *"moments where the client feels that they have a sense of completion, or a sense of pleasure from having created the object, or the image, or the thing"*. Image in these instances are personally derived concepts of aesthetic satisfaction, which may then feed back into concepts of self-image. Kaye found this to be true particularly with adolescent clients. She stated that:

*Maybe ten, or ten to twenty percent of the case load you would feel like they already have an identity established as an artist and you can see it like in the dress, like darker clothes maybe or funkier clothes, or funky like hair or makeup, or like accessories, and like even a way of talking, a way of being.*

When comparing aesthetics in artwork with personal aesthetics for her adolescent and young adult clients, Kaye noticed that those with strong aesthetic identities *"for some of them, sometimes, the images they would make that they didn't like, that they would reject, would sometimes be counter to that style, like it wouldn't fit sort of that, that, that thing"*.

Elaborating on that thought she said those clients with a *"style they were portraying or*

*sort of embodying. If it didn't fit that then that would be an image they would reject, it would be harder to get them to look at that as being, with, with curiosity and openness".*

In the consideration of how aesthetic identities contribute to the meaning-making process Kaye expressed that *"for some of them you know, it's like a, it's a way of controlling image"*. This loops back into the theme of belonging, as this strict presentation of image may be a means of seeking social approval.

### ***Internet***

Elements of social approval and image control are perceived as being largely tied to internet use, particularly social media. Each of the co-researchers recognized the role of the internet in the aesthetics of today's youth. Valentina pondered this quite deeply and noted that:

*It's interesting as I try to consider the difference between my, my older adult clients and my younger adult clients, and how aesthetics plays such an important role in the lives of the younger people. Uh, I have no idea why, I would... like I can't attribute cause, but I would say I've noticed a difference um in terms of aesthetics and the importance of that role, the importance that aesthetics has in the lives of the younger people. And I wonder if it might have something to do with the fact that a lot of my younger clients spend a lot of time on the internet.*

In the lives of her clients, this was most notably expressed in participation in massively multiplayer online games in which the player can actively take on different image-based roles. For one client in particular, Valentina noted that *"their persona was constructed in sort of a way that related strongly to their online persona I would say, their online*

*identity*". For others, however, this is most notable in the portrayal of self on social media. When discussing the roles of spirit and identity, Holly commented that:

*Society and culture, they mute it, they tell us that we have to be a certain way in order to be liked and fit in. But honestly, I would rather like myself and be completely alone, then not like myself and be with other people. And there's this strange mix within youth right now, and in part it's because of social media.*

*There's this incredible drive to both fit in and stand out, that must be tearing them apart. Historically, it's always there, in every, in every generation of adolescents there's this need to fit in and need to stand out at the same time, but never with such a wide audience.*

In recognition of the impact this sense of viewership may have on adolescent and young adult clients in terms of aesthetic expression, Kaye noted that it's not just about what they are sharing on social media, but also what they are consuming. She stated that aesthetic inclinations may be "*about some of the media that they're consuming, like its influenced by those things. Not completely, but you know it factors in*". She also noted that in terms of aesthetics related transcendent or spiritual experiences "*maybe we would say now younger folks are doing that more through technology, so that's changed things a little bit*". These many considerations between the role of aesthetics and the intricacies posed by the internet are central to the theme of image.

### ***Expression***

There are perhaps, however, many positives that may arise from portrayals of self through the internet. One of these positives is the ability to express oneself in an

aesthetics manner of their choosing. As Holly was exploring queer iconography in an adolescent and young adult LGBTQ+ art therapy group she noticed that:

*The iconography that they seem to gravitate towards definitely seem to have a huge influence on who they were and the art work that they made, in terms of pop culture icons and unapologetically expressing parts of themselves into their art work a lot. They definitely were sharing some of the things that they subscribe to in their art work, in that way.*

As Holly recalled her work with individuals seeking newfound forms of self expression, she noted her role as art therapy facilitator was to “*witness it and help it hold that power so that other people can be touched by them as a work of art, and that they can stay grounded in that power without losing themselves or trying to cover their expressions*”. In her work as an art therapy practicum student, Holly found herself formulating an idea that “*to imbue and to convey ones emotions in the art work makes the art work a container for that expression*”. Kaye also recognized areas of overlap between art making and self expression in the recollections of her clients. When considering similarities between how the individuals expressed themselves through their dress and appearance and the style of art work they made, she noted that:

*For those younger people that was really important, I think, in terms of how they felt about who they were in the world and who they were showing, like what they were showing to the world about, about who they are, their persona if you want. That was really important, and that would translate in the art work.*

While pondering the dynamics between aesthetics, identity, and meaning-making, Holly stated that for her “*aesthetics and the expression of oneself as a work of art is, is limitless in terms of the styles that you can express and the ... bits of yourself that you can share with other people to touch and connect with*”. Expression of aesthetics appeared to extend from an expression of self in the experiences of the co-researchers.

### ***Re-Creation***

The final element of the primary theme of Image is a sense of re-creation that is afforded through aesthetics. Valentina described her work with a transgendered youth and how they were

leaning on aesthetics in the process of recreating themselves. She noted that:

*They showed me photos on their phone, they had done a bunch of things to sort of recreate their face. This person was planning to transition from male to female, and was trying to imagine what they would look like when they were fully transitioned. And, you know, they showed me the face they had constructed using whatever online tool... and they had a very specific goal for how they would look in the world.*

Holly too recalled the power of aesthetics to encourage a newfound sense of self with her clients. One client in particular recreated themselves through artistic expression and

Holly noted that “*that painting allowed her to recreate herself in a new way, with a new sense of self that didn't exist before*”. Focusing on art making and witnessing in particular,

Holly expressed:

*I think that aesthetics is about the power to be changed by what happens, by experience... that's what that highlights to me, is that ability to recreate. If you're not changed by what you've seen, then it's not aesthetics. If you're not changed by what you've created, then there's not an aesthetics component to it.*

While deeply considering various definitions of aesthetics and the role they play in art therapy, Holly stated that for the client “*the relational aesthetic is about them, and their comfort, and who they want to be, and how they want to recreate themselves*”. She went on to elaborate that:

*I think if we go with the idea that aesthetics is either beauty, beautiful or ugly, it's the ability to be touched by the beauty or ugly of life, to experience awe, then I think it's, it's pivotal. If that is the working definition, of the process of change or rather the recreation of one's self than its aesthetics not art, its aesthetic therapy and art is merely the vehicle for re(creation).*

Kaye didn't explicitly touch upon recreation as a tenet of image, but she did note that in the process of meaning-making, many clients are working to explore “*who they are and where they locate themselves*”. This self-discovery becomes an area of art therapy that can be explored and expanded upon through aesthetics.

### **Hopelessness**

The final primary theme to emerge from the interviews with the three co-researchers is Hopelessness, with a sub-theme pertaining to the Future. They each expressed various sentiments linking the use of aesthetics to a sense of hopelessness, either emotionally, or in regards to the future. It was suggested in the data that perhaps

the reason many adolescents and young adults are relying on aesthetic expression for meaning-making and identity formation is because it is something they can actively control in a world where many obstacles are uncontrollable. In considering how spirituality contributed to meaning-making Valentina expressed that for her clients *“spiritual longings and disappointments were woven into their aesthetic sense”*. These longings and disappointments had to do with considering not only the fate of their life on earth, but when grappling with various possibilities of the afterlife. One particular client of Valentina’s struggled with *“the idea of the fall from grace. Being sent away, being cut off, being flawed...”* Their hopelessness stemmed from *“some kind of a reckoning with the idea that death is real and final, and kind of a scientific perspective that there is no life after death, and that it’s kind of a folly to believe that there is”*. Kaye also worked with adolescent and young adult clients to discuss spiritual issues of hopelessness. She stated that:

*I’m asking intentionally about their beliefs and thoughts about, you know, life after death, that kind of thing, because often they are in the therapeutic work for a reason, and those reasons are things like loss, and grief, and trauma, and really extreme experiences that have shocked them to the core, and so I think that by their nature those things are um, are spiritual questions.*

The spiritual nature of hopelessness was also examined by Holly when considering the profound role of aesthetics with adolescents and young adults. She stated that perhaps *“the reason that this demographic is different than the youth of different ages is because*



*the spirituality within them is actually shaken out due to the dystopian perspectives on the world”.*

When asked how she perceives aesthetics and spiritual as contributing to identity formation for her clients, Holly pondered the question sincerely and came to the conclusion that perhaps:

*People, people’s worldviews shift through adversity not through ease and they start to understand the world differently and find meaning in it that’s bigger than themselves. It might be because of this that they are actually more connected with their spirituality at a younger age - because of the hopelessness. For instance, what does it mean to be at the age when you’re supposed to be breaking free and going out making your own way in the world, you know, in your teen years, and there’s no future, there’s no jobs, there’s nowhere to live, there might soon not be any land to live on. What does it mean to grow up without hope? That’s intensely spiritual, maybe it’s not a conscious part of their identity as far as I’ve seen it, but I would say that is it influencing everything that they’re doing based on the idea that they’re hopeless. Not that they’re hopeless but that the future is, that their future is hopeless. They live with a profound sense of hopelessness that fuels how they express themselves and how they create in the world, and there is a choice in there in whether or not they are going to succumb to the hopelessness or fight through it for hope, and for a future. And it’s in these moments when they can become something else, through the art making process, that empowers them to*

*see not only themselves different, but a different future, a different possibility than there was before that art work was made.*

Art making in this sentiment is akin to the role of aesthetics. Aesthetics may function to provide a basis for hope, or at least aid in practices such as mindfulness and a focus on the presence rather than dwelling on the uncontrollable issues facing this population.

### ***Future***

Many of these uncontrollable issues were discussed by two of the co-researchers in relation to adolescent and young adult perspectives on the future. The use of aesthetics in relation to these major areas of concern acts as a buffering agent through which they can find moments of happiness, peace, and stability, in a world where these moments are dwindling rapidly. When describing the role of aesthetics in the lives of her adolescent and young adult clients, Holly expressed that:

*There's a hopelessness that they're trying to grapple with in how they present themselves in the world. The legacy that we're leaving for today's youth is crap, you can quote me on that one. That legacy is infused with their understanding of the world, and of beauty, and the superficiality of how we've treated our planet in order to meet our immediate needs. So they're left with this dying planet and this bleak future and they're trying to figure out how to be a person in it, and how to live with that legacy. These youth discern this as they grapple with their collective identity, but also with who and how they are as an individual.*

This bleak outlook on the future is impacting how this population interacts in the world and what they are choosing to spend their time on. Holly noted that in session she has noticed “*their work has a collective dissonance and a reckoning as part of it*”. These

individuals are placing value on immediate, self-fulfilling, aesthetic-based needs, rather than looking toward a potentially non-existent future.

Considering the role of aesthetics in the therapeutic process, Holly focused on the clients themselves as ongoing works of art. In respect to their view of self, Holly noted that:

*How you present yourself is one part of your life as a work of art, and what's underneath is the content, when we put it in the context of the youth of today, they're subverting the superficial presentation of themselves which is a message, which is shouting of their discontent. They are sharing the art show of their lives, of lives so precarious, they don't have a gallery, they don't know if they're even gonna get to have a retrospective, right, because their future is uncertain. There is nothing certain about their future except uncertainty, and that's a hard place to go.*

This uncertainty was further explored in how adolescents and young adults were perceived as participating in the meaning-making process. In an exploration in feelings of dis-ease, unpleasantness, or difficulty that many adolescents and young adults face in regards to the future Holly expressed her thoughts, stating:

*The youth of today they're able to display the dis-ease and the unpleasantness of their world in a way that adults, who don't have the same sort of, what is the word for that one, dystopian future, they don't have the same dystopian future, and so they don't, the adults can't see where that energy, that messthetics comes from, because they haven't lived it. They're not worried the world won't be there and*

*that they won't have jobs, and that's, that's the essence of the spirits that are in the youth today. And so, when youth are making art, they're asking 'what does it mean to be, to have no future? And to have, have leadership in the world that doesn't even understand the nature of the legacy that they've left me? Cause if they did they would change, and recreate the world, but they won't because the only thing that they're worried about is recreating more dollars'.*

Kaye also explore these feelings in response to how aesthetics and spirituality contribute to identity formation in adolescents and young adults. She stated that she thinks:

*Aesthetics is a doorway into spiritual life, I think the two are sort of part in parcel one of the other, although I recognize that some people experience spirituality and aren't mindfully engaged in any aesthetic work, but in my life anyhow the two have always gone hand in hand, and I think that to develop oneself as a whole person, and especially to be able to stand in the challenges that we have now, um to stand in the face of things like global warming, and you know covid for goodness sakes, and all of these massive challenges that we're facing now in contemporary society, and I don't think that they're going to get easier, I think that frankly they'll get bigger, and tougher, tougher questions. I think that we must, like to stand in the face of those questions, and be healthy human beings, and a healthy humanity, we have to develop our spiritual selves, we have to develop ourselves in a holistic kind of way. I think that's the only fighting chance we have frankly, um so I mean I think its pretty critical in terms of, of where, of my clients finding health and wellness in their lives, but I think it's critical like in*

*terms of like the human quest. You know, and for us to find health and survival on the planet I think we have to, we have to develop that part of ourselves that's been largely left behind, or you know um hidden away, or put away intentionally, um but the things we're facing now, I mean they call on spirit as a remedy.*

These many considerations of the future contribute to the overall sense of hopelessness that is perceived to plague adolescents and young adults, and the widespread use of aesthetics within this population may function to provide insight into how art therapists can move forward in pursuing wellness for their clients.

The thematic analysis of the co-researchers transcripts offered many insightful discoveries into the two research questions. The primary findings were broadly categorized as encompassing Belonging, Image, and Hopelessness. I found these foremost themes informed the co-researchers' perceptions on the role of aesthetics in art therapy settings with adolescents and young adults. As supplemental to these themes, the sub-themes found in the data analysis included purpose, spirituality, expression, recreation, the internet, and worries of the future. The many quotations and viewpoints offered by the co-researchers function to bring these themes to life and demonstrate the perceptions each of the co-researcher bring to the subject matter. These perceptions will now be used to generate findings based upon commonalities and differences between the co-researchers' accounts and how their perceptions contribute to the current inquiry and the field of art therapy.

## Part V: Discussion of Findings Related to Art Therapy

The primary themes of Belonging, Image, and Hopelessness that were identified from the data provide well-rounded and comprehensive insight into the role of aesthetics in art therapy. These findings emerged through the interpretative analysis of the data, by comparing and contrasting the perspectives of the co-researchers as expressed in their respective interviews. The following section will explore the findings derived from each of these themes, how they fit into the current research landscape, and the art therapy applications available to them. These findings focus on the marriage between aesthetics, art therapy, and spirituality. This would likely result in implicit expressions of spirituality and explicit expressions of aesthetics, as the co-researchers expressed this to be the typical dynamic in art therapy for adolescent and young adult populations. As explored previously, however, a relationship exists between aesthetics and spirituality, and thus art therapists can interpret these findings based on the often interchangeable nature between the two elements. Below is a table highlighting the core themes along with summaries of the findings for each category (**Table 2**).

**Table 2: Summary of Thematic Findings**

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<b>Belonging</b>	Findings indicated that Belonging is an issue commonly related to art therapy attendance; art therapy can assist in fostering a sense of purpose; a sense of importance contributes to belonging and can be harnessed in art therapy; growth and development of the client can mitigate therapeutic concerns related to belonging; spirituality is
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inherent to belonging and can be replicated in therapy through manufactured transcendence.

### **Image**

Findings indicated that Image can serve an aesthetic function through the use of transformation, particularly for LGBTQ+ youth; comfort and safety in the studio is required to promote honest and transparent aesthetic expressions of self; the debate of product versus process is null, in that both were found to have positive aesthetic implications; aesthetics may play a role in social approval seeking behaviours in group art therapy; art therapists can mitigate feelings related to judgement amongst peers using art interventions; the impact of viewership (ie. social media and internet use) on aesthetic expression is profound.

### **Hopelessness**

Findings indicated that Hopelessness is combatted using aesthetics in various forms; adolescents and young adults utilize aesthetics as a means of taking active control of their lives; aesthetics may be strongly linked to resolution for issues of trauma and worries for the future; therapists can garner aesthetics to build hope and newfound meaning in life; connecting aesthetics and spirituality, either implicitly or explicitly, may help to foster resiliency in clients; aesthetics, mindfulness, and art therapy may be combined to form increased awareness and presence in the development of hope; eco-art therapy is a viable aesthetic option for issues pertaining to climate change.

Following the summary of findings related to Belonging, Image, and Hopelessness, this chapter will review the research questions and will provide an overview of the findings to determine whether the data successfully addressed the research questions.

### **Aesthetics of Belonging in Art Therapy**

As the co-researchers reflected upon their understanding of the role of aesthetics in art therapy, they converged on the theme of belonging as having significant importance for adolescents and young adults. Through the analysis of the data, two avenues of exploration have emerged. The first explores the therapeutic container, and how belonging is present at all stages in the therapeutic process, and the second regards belonging in the larger context of the adolescent and young adult experience.

#### ***Aesthetics, Belonging, and the Therapeutic Container***

Issues of belonging, purpose, and identity are hallmarks of therapeutic attendance (Pargament, 2007). When addressing reasons that people, in general, attend therapy, Passer et al. (2014), mentioned that it is often moments of complete despair or feelings lost in the world that lead people to seek psychotherapeutic assistance. For adolescents in particular, B. Moon (2012) noted that many approach art therapy having been “hurt, betrayed, rejected, failed, disappointed, cast out, and abused by the world they live in” (p. 11). They are seeking a means of re-discovering themselves given their trauma and hardships, and in essence seeking a means of belonging in a world that may seem inhospitable. B. Moon (2012) suggests that art therapy can aid in this discovery by “integrating disparate aspects of experience in the service of creating new meaningful



identities” (p. 12). He asserts that art therapy is experienced by (most) adolescents “as a potent and healthy means of self-expression, self-exploration, and self-revelation” (p. 11). In the service of belonging, purpose, and identity, art therapy for adolescents and young adults may function to integrate aspects of self into a cohesive state of being, who can then address issues of belonging that may arise. C. Moon (2002) suggests the use of relational aesthetics in art therapy, whereby aesthetic criteria focus on connectedness “to oneself, to the object being created, to other people, [and] to the environment” (p. 139) rather than formal or traditional aesthetic criteria. Within the relational aesthetic framework, the art therapist attends to the “nature of artistic phenomena and aesthetic sensibilities within the context of relationships” (p. 140), which helps to promote belonging with others and the client’s environment. The ability of aesthetics to invoke a sense of belonging is thus critical to the art therapy process for adolescents and young adults.

Given that purpose was perceived as an extension of belonging in the data analysis, it is important to further explore how the desire for purpose and aesthetic expressions of purpose can be utilized in art therapy. B. Moon (2012) noted that:

In order for the adolescent to reimagine her life, to have purpose, she must be able to transcend the self. The making of art is a transcendent process that depends utterly on imagination. In nearly every circumstance, adolescent artists are interested in the reaction their work will evoke in others. This interest is motivated by the longing for contact with others, for support, stability, predictability, and existential and emotional validation (p. 131).

The desire for belonging as explored by the co-researchers mimicked the influence of social and relational approval and validation. As the co-researchers expressed, purpose for adolescents and young adults was about finding their place in the world, while also fulfilling their role as a young person in society. They were perceived as experiencing growth and development through the aesthetics of self-discovery, rule-breaking, testing boundaries and limits, and challenging their interpersonal relationships. Purpose in this instance is defined as "a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and consequential to the world beyond the self" (Damon, 2008, p. 33).

The discovery of purpose is often an explorative task (Burrow et al., 2014). Three paths of exploration and learning were offered by Burrow et al., (2014) to aid in the cultivation of purpose for youth: proactive exploration, which involves "actively seeking out experiences and information related to one's potential purpose" (p.2); reactive exploration, which results from "considering a particular purpose after having a formative experience" (p.2); and/or social learning in which one observed purposeful behaviours in others and attempts to mimic these. Art therapy can function to harness purpose through each of these pathways. To prompt proactive exploration, art therapists can engage the client in various activities, with one such activity being doll, action figure, or superhero making. Modified from the trauma lens of Richardson (2016) purpose can be harnessed from this intervention by developing a story for the doll/action figure/superhero and identifying desired purposes, future-oriented possibilities, and hopes going forward (p. 163). Reactive exploration can be harnessed aesthetically in art therapy through

interventions such as the creation of a kingdom that represents how one wishes the world would be. Modified from a trauma intervention for children and adolescents who have experienced terrorism and mass violence (Loumeau-May et al., 2015), the creation of a kingdom can help develop a sense of purpose following a formative experience by determining desires, motivations, and hopes for one's role in the world. Finally, social learning can facilitate purpose in art therapy either through the therapist engaging in aesthetic exploration alongside their client, as done by B. Moon (Beers-Miller, 2012) or through interactions in group art therapy such as those facilitated by Malchiodi (2015).

Feelings of importance were also expressed in the data analysis as pertaining to the aesthetic search for belonging. Adolescents and young adults have expressed a desire to feel important and valued in several research areas, but primarily in terms of their rights, self-advocacy, and medical decision-making (Hokkanen et al., 2004; Jordan et al., 2019; Malone et al., 2019; Morrow, 1999). In the realm of art therapy, which can cater to issues brought up in each of the above areas, feelings of importance can be harnessed aesthetically through opportunities of decision-making, freedom in exploration, access to materials, use of the studio, and autonomy. In most instances, the art therapy studio is a place where clients can openly be themselves, explore (both in respect to the studio and materials and to their state of being), guide the process of their own creative well-being, and guide the pace and direction of their own treatment (B. Moon, 2017; Rubin, 2010). Although there may be instances where interventions, materials, goals, and treatment options are suggested, the primary state of the art therapy studio is one of openness, freedom, and self-directed aesthetic expression (B. Moon, 2017; Rubin, 2010). I suggest

that these aspects of art therapy function with an adolescent and young adult population to foster belief in their abilities, the importance of their active role in therapy, the value of their beliefs and opinions, and encourage decision-making skills. Aesthetics play a vital role in these functions as they are the means through which both the client and the art therapist communicate and engage with one another in the quest for wellness.

An increased sense of belonging, purpose, and identity are natural results of growth and development achieved in therapy (B. Moon, 2012). As expressed by the co-researchers, purpose and belonging were tenets of meaning-making which relates directly to the second research question of this thesis which asks: to what extent do aesthetics contribute to a spiritually-integrated development of meaning-making for identity formation? As discovered in the data, aesthetics, with their implicit spirituality, aid clients in developing meaning-making through explorations of self, confrontation with personal, social, and global dilemmas, and outwardly expressing notions of belonging. These factors of meaning-making are perceived to aid in identity formation through the growth and development that occurs as a result of aesthetic declarations, discovery of aesthetic satisfactions, and recognition for aesthetic inclinations. In considering Hinz's Expressive Art Therapies Continuum (2009) as one moves through their art therapy treatment, and fluctuates between the levels of the developmental hierarchy on the Expressive Therapies Continuum, they are expected to achieve "a more integrated sense of self" (p. 9) and subsequently increased growth and healing. I propose that belonging functions within this framework through the safety required in the studio (B. Moon, 2015), a sense of

acceptance and welcome provided by the researcher (B. Moon, 2017), and collaboration (Hinz, 2009).

As expressed above, spirituality is integrated into the role of aesthetics in art therapy. Within this understanding, the presence of transcendence highlighted by the co-researchers is integral to the therapeutic container in art therapy. Transcendence can often be evoked through feelings of interconnectedness, emotional and/or cognitive arousal, assumptions of self, mystical experiences, hypnotic mindsets, psychedelics, social bonding, and participation in ritual (Gorelik, 2016). Based upon the findings of the data analysis, art making can provide the vehicle in which transcendence occurs as the co-researcher emphasized the connection between art therapy and spiritual connection. B. Moon (2004) asserts that “art making as a spiritual practice is a kind of spirituality that is both ordinary and extraordinary” (p. 51). He goes on to express that art making “is a way of reflecting upon the mythological aspects of everyday life, the sacred stories that give fictional form to the essential truths of human existence” (B. Moon, 2004, p. 51).

Transcendence in art therapy can foster belonging as “the boundary between the self and the outside world is broken and a more expansive perspective diffuses throughout all aspects of one’s experience” (Gorelik, 2016, p. 287). This can be achieved through the use of Witnessing, which is loosely defined as “silent, empathic witnessing of Others, who agree to listen to the client’s self-expression, testimony, and voice” (Barak & Stebbins, 2017, p. 54). McNiff (2014) notes that “witnessing requires empathy, compassion, and creative perception—and it is much more than observation in the usual sense” (p. 38). He conceives witnessing as an active, rather than passive, practice and

notes that “even when the witness is completely silent and still, it conveys interpersonal energy through support, protection, and an intentional process of infusing the immediate environment with a sense of significance” (McNiff, 2014, p. 44). When discussing witnessing from outside others in a health care setting, Johnson (2013) recognizes the ability of witnessing to connect patients to the world around them, foster connection to community, and feel as though they are contributing to something larger than themselves. These experiences all contribute to a sense of transcendence based on the definition provided above. This sentiment was shared by art therapy pioneer Mary Huntoon in regards to the display of patient and student work in her Little Gallery and museum project in a hospital setting (Johnson, 2013). She stated that both witnessing the work of others and displaying one’s own work can foster feelings of connection to the world around them (Huntoon, 1953).

Along with witnessing, Allen (2016) suggests that transcendence can be harnessed through active use of intention and attention to the art making experience. Transcendence may also be fostered in art therapy through the experience of flow, which is defined as “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else matters” (Csíkszentmihályi, 1991, p. 4). Within art therapy, flow is entered when an individual is “fully absorbed in an activity during which they both lose their sense of time and also experience feelings of great satisfaction” (Lee, 2013, p. 57). Elements that contribute to the experience of flow in art therapy are the amount of challenge the activity provides, the amount of skill that is needed (and that the client is capable of achieving), and the competence the client has for the activity (Lee, 2013). Flow is perceived as being

connected to belonging through the sense of oneness with the universe in terms of time and space and is additionally a transcendent state of being. These elements of aesthetics and belonging in the therapeutic container may be attributed to purpose, meaning, or spirituality.

### ***Belonging for Adolescents and Young Adults***

Spirituality in general, as explored as a tenet of belonging in the data analysis, may be an important factor in art therapy practices with adolescents and young adults. Although the co-researchers noted that spirituality may not be explicitly recognized by the adolescents and young adults with whom they work, they all felt it was something that is implicitly present in aesthetics. B. Moon (2004) notes that the “spiritual practice of art making, is essentially an involvement between the artist, media, imagination, and the world” (p. 54). Interwoven with this sensation is the sense of belonging. Art therapy, in particular, was perceived by the co-researchers to offer a safe environment in which the client can comfortably experience belonging in relation to self, in relation to the materials, in relation to the images, symbols, or metaphors that emerge from their imagination, and in relation to their place in the world.

The co-researchers identified notions that adopting or subscribing to an aesthetic identity may function to solidify various pieces of adolescent and young adult lives into a cohesive whole. I perceived this to be linked to comfort with one’s place in the world, or a journey towards discovering this place, which may be uniquely impacted by ego-strength. Ego-strength was suggested by Barron (1953) as a scale measuring adaptability and personal resourcefulness. In a study assessing art therapists’ perspectives of change in

their clients, elements of ego-strength were found to stem from greater authenticity and increased autonomy (Holmqvist et al., 2017). Greater authenticity may increase a sense of belonging as adolescents and youth are likely to attract those with similar values and interests, or with similar aesthetic sensibilities. Additionally, increased autonomy may function to foster a sense of belonging as the population develops a greater understanding of self and how they are impacting their inner and outer worlds. Holmqvist et al. (2017) posited that autonomy in art therapy emerges “when the patients become aware of their ability to influence their own behavior and life” (p. 14). Aesthetically, adolescents and young adults may find solace in the ability to control their appearance, mindset, values, fashion, decor, behaviours, and environment, and this sense of self-directed subscription can be explored in an art therapy setting in order to develop self-based coping mechanisms. Franklin (1992) identified that “when the process of making art is completed, a product exists that is unique and one of a kind. Reifying that which did not exist before, and will never exist in that exact same form again, validates and empowers the uniqueness of the person” (p. 80).

The final sub-categorical finding that emerged from the theme of belonging in the data analysis examines the interplay between individuality and conformity in adolescents’ and young adults’ sense of belonging. This is most aptly explored in the theory of Optimal Distinctiveness, which is defined by Zuckerman (2016) as recognizing competing needs within an individual “(a) for “assimilation” or “inclusion” in a collectivity; and (b) for “uniqueness” or “differentiation” from other individuals” (p. 2). Subscription to an aesthetic identity is a means of asserting one’s individuality and



characterization through a distinct, individualized narrative, but the adolescent and young adult population may simultaneously utilize this narrative to assimilate themselves into a peer group in order to maintain a sense of belonging.

Brewer (1991) describes individualization and assimilation as a balancing act, which navigates a dynamic equilibrium as the individual moves throughout different stages of their life. Specific to the adolescent experience, Brewer (1991) stated:

Social identity can be viewed as a compromise between assimilation and differentiation from others, where the need for deindividuation is satisfied within in-groups, while the need for distinctiveness is met through *inter*-group comparisons. Adolescent peer groups provide a prototypical case. Each cohort develops styles of appearance and behaviour that allow individual teenagers to blend in with their age mates while “sticking out like a sore thumb” to their parents. Group identities allow us to be the same and different at the same time.

As determined in the data analysis, the current research would posit that *inter*-group comparisons are becoming increasingly prominent in adolescence and young adulthood as various aesthetic identities are expressed. In a declaration of the dynamics between individuality and conformity, Brewer (1991) developed and proposed a figure which illustrates The Optimal Distinctiveness Model. In relation to the figure she stated that:

It is assumed that within a given social context, or frame of reference, an individual can be categorized (by self or others) along a dimension of social distinctiveness-inclusiveness that ranges from uniqueness at one extreme (ie.

features that distinguish the individual from any other persons in the social context) to total submersion in the social context (deindividuation) at the other. As considered in the context of belonging, the balance between individuality and conformity in aesthetic subscriptions is worthy of consideration in an art therapy setting.

### **Aesthetics of Image in Art Therapy**

The emergence of Image as a central theme in the data analysis was found by the co-researcher to have aesthetic significance in the lives of adolescents and young adults. The findings related to the theme of Image can be considered from two foundational principles; whether they relate most prominently to the image of self, or to the image expectations of others.

#### ***Image as Related to Self***

Perceptions of self in an art therapy setting should foster experiences of exploration, experimentation, and recreation. In consideration of the developmental changes experienced by adolescents, B. Moon (2012) notes that “their artworks tend to potently express feelings, thoughts, wishes, fears, and reactions to themselves and their environment” (pp. 21-22). These emotional aesthetic expressions were notably identified by the co-researchers in terms of their LGBTQ+ clientele, and in particular in transgendered youth. Darke and Scott-Miller (2020) extensively explore art therapy with transgender youth, and the impact of aesthetics on the emotional and mental wellbeing of this population is evident. They note that “because the visual aspects of gender identity are so powerful, the use of interventions that provide visual expression can be equally

powerful in providing a place to explore and express gender identity” (Darke & Scott-Miller, 2020, p. 16). Allowing a visual medium through which transgender youth can express recreations of themselves was found by the co-researchers to be a beneficial use of aesthetics in art therapy. In the sub-themes of recreation and expression related to this finding, aesthetics offer solace in the truest form of self. This is not a new phenomenon in the history of aesthetics, but rather has been reflected by Aesthetes, such as Oscar Wilde, through their public representations of aesthetic personas in order to communicate meaning, emotions, and values (Brioli & Kreie, 2022; Souter, 2016). From the perspectives of the co-researchers, adolescents and young adults were found to use aesthetics to represent these aspects of self in many forms. Aesthetics may be most beneficial as adolescents and young adults move towards physical and medical transitions of gender (Darke & Scott-Miller, 2020) or as they first enter the coming-out stage (Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008). Within art therapy “these youth are able to “try on” an identity, to express themselves based on some degree of self-knowledge, and to decide whether it fits” (Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008, p. 171). Arts-based interventions for recreation and expression of self through aesthetics can include inside/outside or before/after self-portraits (Pelton-Sweet & Sherry, 2008) or imagery of a space where they would be safe to express themselves (Beaumont, 2012).

True expressions of self require an environment that is safe, receptive, accepting, and non-judgemental. The art therapy studio can provide this environment for all clientele and can foster comfort related to issues of image. The research question asks: how does the art therapist perceive the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions? But it is also

important to consider how the clients may perceive the role of aesthetics in the process of art therapy. The findings of the data analysis denote that aesthetic considerations should be addressed at all levels of the therapeutic process, which begins with the presentation and welcoming nature of the studio space. This may involve inclusive communication through email, phone calls, and the answering-machine message; attention to content, such as artwork displayed; washrooms that are accessible and inclusive; and displays of ally-ship and affirming support (Darke & Scott-Miller, 2020). B. Moon (2017) posits that:

There is no universally applicable set of rules or recipe for maintaining a positive therapeutic milieu that promotes artistic focus, but art therapists should attend to all facets of the studio. Art therapists must continually assess whether or not the studio is safe, predictable, and devoted to art-making in the service of relationship buildings (p. 16).

Safety in the studio in terms of Image is noted by B. Moon (2015) to strike a balance between feeling comfortable to explore one's self while also feeling a degree of anxiety for how one may change. He recommends that the studio should reflect a curative energy, with one such means of achieving this by considering the studio as a living gallery in which themes of difficulty, healing, growth and transformation provide a metaphor linking the studio environment to the process of change (B. Moon, 2015). By demonstrating comfort in change and recreation, the art therapist can invite the client to experience these abilities through the power of aesthetics.

The translation of aesthetics from portrayal in the person (ie. in values, mindset, appearance, fashion, decor, and behaviours) to portrayal in the studio, is an area with a history of theoretical discussion. The larger conversation revolves around the issue of product versus process, which has historical roots in the realm of art therapy (B. Moon, 2017). Product stems from an art psychotherapy perspective which posits “the art product as a form of communication between client and therapist” (Malchiodi, 2012a, p. 7), whereas process stems from an art as therapy perspective which emphasizes “the creative process as an agent of change” (Malchiodi, 2012a, p.7). As discussed in the goals of this paper and in the Art Therapy Theoretical Foundations section, the product versus process debate was a consideration in the implementation of this study. A greater understanding emerged from the data analysis, in that product and process were observed by the co-researchers to be equally important in the therapeutic milieu. Consistency in details of the *product*, such as line, colour, form, symbol, or texture, may provide insight to the therapist related to important aesthetic values and needs, or to deeper psychological meanings. The co-researchers often noted instances of repetitive imagery in the products of their clients, which were observed to speak to deeper spiritual, psychological, and social longings. The importance of the *process*, however, was also observed by the co-researchers to serve a critical therapeutic function, as the clients were noted to be actively working through cognitive and emotional blocks through the process of creation. Process was also observed as setting the stage for clinical observations to be made such as client actions relating to focus, body movement, intensity, activity or lethargy, and use of various materials/studio space. Aspects of process were also posited by B. Moon (2017)

as being an important indicator of client involvement in the therapeutic process and willingness to move towards change. The product versus process debate has already started to fade theoretically (B. Moon, 2017), but the findings of the data could contribute to what remains of the discussion.

### ***Image as Related to Other***

Much of the aesthetic considerations expressed by the co-researchers addressing image as related to Other revolved around issues pertaining to judgement, expectations, approval-seeking, and viewership. As much as they considered aesthetics as representing expressions of individuality, the co-researchers also recognized that aesthetics were influenced by social values and perceptions. Within an art therapy setting, in particular group art therapy, adolescents and young adults may dictate or curate the aesthetics of their work in order to gain social approval. B. Moon (2012) identified that “there are few things that are more important and influential in the lives of adolescents than how they are regarded by their peers” (p. 191), but he does not, however, recognize any elements of social approval seeking in art therapy groups. B. Moon (2012) instead notes that art therapy groups can provide a shared human experience that can unite group individuals in a joint exploration of personal meanings. In my experience of art therapy groups, however, social approval seeking aesthetic behaviours have been observed in adolescents and young adults, such as the inclusion of pop-culture imagery to get a positive reaction from peers, or a preoccupation in the creation of a product that will be well-liked. Perhaps this area warrants further research consideration to determine the extent to which aesthetics are utilized in group art therapy settings for social approval.

Moving away from a focus on in-group peer relations, the data analysis pointed to art therapy as an effective means of navigating perceptions of judgement from peers. The co-researchers noted that aesthetics provided an escape from an often harsh reality for their clients. Harnessing aesthetics in art therapy intervention could assist in developing coping mechanisms and developing inter-personal strengths related to these perceived notions of reality. The creation of an inside/outside mask is a commonly used art therapy intervention to help clients differentiate how they perceive the way others see them (outside of the mask) and how their internal representation is different (Miller, 2012). Miller (2012) noted that “mask making can be used to help explore and express different pieces of the adolescent’s perception of self and different emotional states” (p. 255). When navigating judgement from peers, the inside/outside mask can help explore feelings related to judgement and “can facilitate additional awareness and understanding about the connection between inner emotions and how they manifest behaviorally and interpersonally” (Miller, 2012, p. 255). This may also give adolescents and young adults the opportunity to explore notions related to their aesthetic subscriptions and determine whether their inner values align with their outwardly aesthetic presentation.

Another factor to consider for aesthetics related to Image is how societal expectations are impacting youth. Within the data analysis the co-researchers recognized an intrinsic fear in their clients towards rejection, not being good enough, or disappointing those around them. As adolescents and young adults move into various social realms they are facing a barrage of expectations relating to the aesthetics of image. There are societal expectations to act a certain way, look a certain way, dress a certain

way, and as much as society is moving into a phase of inclusivity there are still expectations that are impacting youth. In the art therapy setting, these expectations may be translated in the form of metaphoric imagery expressed in their art work. B. Moon (2012) noted that the art therapist is required to act as translator for these metaphoric expressions and genuine attempts must be made to understand the client's worldview. In terms of aesthetics, it is my opinion that art therapists should be aware that aesthetic subscriptions may represent metaphors for control and dominance, or perhaps helplessness and submission depending on their worldview. For example, an adolescent or young adult who has had all of their life decisions made for them may use aesthetics to represent some form of freedom, whereas someone who has had to take responsibility and leadership at a young age may use aesthetics to reclaim their innocence. In my own clinical experience, a child who was forced to take responsibility for their younger siblings due to inadequacies of the parents used aesthetics in art therapy to find order and control aesthetically given the uncontrollable and chaotic nature of their home life.

Aesthetic expressions for adolescents and young adults are uniquely positioned due to the immediate availability of an audience. The adolescent and young adult demographic has always participated in expressing identity through aesthetics, as one co-researcher noted, but the inclusion of social media within this process has altered its expressive form based on the availability of societal comparables, including peers or popular culture icons. This sentiment was expressed by Jensen (2020):

Aesthetics is about branding, in some ways, but it's about identity. And teens have always been about identity and wearing your heart on your sleeve to make your



identity known. From punk kids to emo kids to jocks... teens have always had an aesthetics. Well, most teens do. It's just now they have taken those identities and that aesthetic online and onto social media. So in many ways it's the same thing as always, just expressed differently for a new generation (para. 14).

This alternate form of expression for today's adolescents and young adults was acknowledged by the co-researchers, but the findings suggest it may have a larger impact within art therapy than the previous quote would suggest. Social media was expressed by the co-researchers as having a large impact on the aesthetic expressions of their clients and the findings of the data analysis suggest that viewership may be an area of concern for art therapy interventions. Although in-person viewership was explored in regards to transcendence in an art therapy setting, it is also important to consider the digital aspects of viewership for art therapy clients. B. Moon (2015) warns against ethical issues pertaining to art therapy provision and social media, but this does not mean that it should be avoided as a topic of conversation and in fact it should be considered as a factor related to the social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing of clients. Belkofer and McNutt (2011) insisted that "it is essential that the field of art therapy begin to recognize social media as powerful, contemporary tools that can be used for finding meaning in an increasingly uncertain world" (p. 163). Given that this observation is a decade old and the uncertainty of the world has increased ten-fold in recent years, it is important to assess its increased relevancy.

For the adolescent and young adult population "the impact of the high levels of participation in social media, both today and in the future, is creating a multifaceted,

multi-networked social construct where ideas of belonging and creativity may be profoundly and permanently transformed” (Belkofer & McNutt, 2011, p. 159). I perceive the role of social media in aesthetic identities as readily disseminating a ready-made catalogue of expression that is targeted and packaged for a consumer. Although aesthetic identities are, at their core, an expression of values, beliefs, and meanings, the consumerist society (both in terms of online content and material goods) expresses these identities through means that promote online engagement and financial commitments. The expression of aesthetic identities prior to social media were made through interpersonal connections, but today these expressions have the potential to be broadcasted, and thus embraced, by an audience unknown to the original source. Art therapy interventions that may contribute to wellness in the area of internet and social media use could include self-portraiture (Muri, 2007), or the portrayal of pop culture imagery in a personally meaningful metaphors of expression (Potash, 2009). Art therapists must recognize that most adolescents and young adults are not only passive observers of media, but are also participatory creators, and that the aesthetics they utilize, portray, and subscribe to may be a result of viewership rather than internal desire.

### **Aesthetics of Hopelessness in Art Therapy**

The findings of the data analysis suggested that Hopelessness presents a large drive for aesthetic subscription in adolescent and young adult populations. The co-researchers highlighted both general and future-based concerns of Hopelessness for which aesthetic provided a reprieve. The findings for this section will be separated into two sub-sections — how clients are perceived to use aesthetics to address concerns of

hopelessness, and how therapists could make use of aesthetics in art therapy to alleviate these concerns.

### ***Client use of Aesthetics to Navigate Hopelessness***

The findings of the data analysis were poignant in addressing the use of aesthetics by adolescents and young adults as a means of seeking/maintaining control. For the co-researchers, this primarily manifested in a lack of control related to the state of the world and the future rather than control within interpersonal relationships. In a world with rapidly changing geography, economics, health, and climate, adolescents and young adults face uncertainty and instability like never before. Research compiled by Ojala (2012a) identified feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, and despair as common emotional responses when thinking of the future. Within her literature review, it was identified that many adolescents and young adults believe there will be a large-scale global collapse within their lifetime, either due to climate change or other global crises (Ojala, 2012a). It was stated that for adolescents and young adults “the hope concept is obviously complex; including for instance emotional, cognitive, existential, identity-related and social aspects” (Ojala, 2012b, p. 627). As aesthetics encompasses each of these aspects, it is presumed from the findings that aesthetics plays a role in mitigating hopelessness by reintroducing an element of control into a person’s life. Within art therapy, aesthetics for control can be discussed with the client through psycho-education and either become a resource to mitigate hopelessness or be addressed if the client relies too heavily on aesthetics as a coping mechanism.

If considering aesthetics as a resource, the use of aesthetics for regaining control can also be considered for other causes of hopelessness. The co-researchers identified instances of trauma, neglect, and abuse as areas stemming the potential for aesthetic inclinations based upon their client interactions. Taking control back in their lives can be aesthetically realized as “feeling success and the ability to make actual change in the safety of the art studio [which] can be what a young person needs to make changes outside the studio with peers, at school, within their homes, and in their communities” (Awais & Adelman, 2019, p. 388). Not only can aesthetic expressions help divert feelings of hopelessness, but it may also spark a social justice response which would help give voice to individuals who may have previously felt voiceless (Awais & Adelman, 2019). As a trauma response, aesthetics may assist in fostering resilience, which was explored by McGann (2019) when assisting unaccompanied minors seeking asylum, and the findings of the data analysis suggest that this may be a naturally occurring component of aesthetic subscription.

### ***Therapist use of Aesthetics to Address Hopelessness***

The co-researchers emphasized the ability of art therapy to address issues related to client hopelessness. These issues may stem from a hopeless outlook on the future, feeling hopeless in their ability to enact change, or hopelessness related to their experience of trauma. Art therapists can help build hope by following the outline suggested by Malchiodi (2020) for a trauma-informed art therapy practice. Within this framework, Malchiodi (2020) suggests that the client be recognized not only for their ability to survive, but also to thrive despite their past experiences of future concerns. This

lens focuses on the client's adaptability and resiliency and utilizes hope to help clients move forward. Within this framework, the therapist models a theory of growth that posits that "supportive and consistent relationships that lead to development of self-efficacy, confidence, positivity, and hope are undeniably part of what forms a foundation for resilience throughout the lifespan" (Malchiodi, 2020, p. 291). Part of the modelling process may include an aesthetic focus, whereby the art therapist recognizes and encourages the use of aesthetics as a healing mechanism and a component of overall wellbeing.

Building hope in art therapy may require identifying how clients make meaning in their lives and how meaning can be reimagined in the context of past trauma or concerns for the future. Meaning-making as a method for healing and wellness was explored extensively by Viktor Frankl (1992) in response to notions of suffering. In regards to suffering, Frankl (1992) stated that:

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation— just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer —we are challenged to change ourselves (pp. 116-117).

Hopelessness for adolescents and young adults shares the same roots. They may not be able to change their past trauma or change the circumstances of the future, but through an

aesthetic expression of art making, they can work towards changing themselves, their outlook on life, and increase feelings of hope and optimism (B. Moon, 2012).

Experiencing meaning-making through an aesthetic-based outlook offers clients a more transformative avenue for developing new meanings as aesthetics has the ability to invoke somatosensory and affective levels of experience which transcend other non-visual methods (Malchiodi, 2020). As related to the research question; to what extent do aesthetics contribute to a spiritually-integrated development of meaning-making for identity formation, in the current study, meaning-making through aesthetics is perceived to be a combatant for the hopelessness perceived to plague adolescents and young adults.

Resiliency was found to be another method of combating hopelessness in art therapy practice (Malchiodi, 2020). Stemming from the data analysis, a possible means of addressing hopelessness in art therapy may be the use of spirituality as a tool for fostering resiliency. Pargament (2007) posits that “through the spiritual lens, people can see their lives in a broad transcendent perspective; they can discern deeper truths in ordinary and extraordinary experience; and they can locate timeless values that offer grounding and direction in shifting times and circumstances” (p. 12). It was suggested by the co-researchers that spirituality functions in the lives of adolescents and young adults implicitly, but that it nonetheless is impactful in the process of change and healing. Frankl (1992), in his experience of a concentration camp, found that refuge in spirituality and transcendence helped mitigate feelings of suffering and hopelessness. He stated that it is “spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful” (Frankl, 1992, pp. 75-76). Aesthetics, with their implicit connection to

spirituality, may act as a refuge for adolescents and young adults who rely on aesthetics as a means of coping with hopelessness. For these adolescents and young adults, a certain degree of resiliency was perceived to be developed that is inherently spiritual by virtue of aesthetics. Jones et al., (2018) posit that spirituality contributes to resiliency through active attempts at meaning-making, which then culminate in feelings of fulfillment and hope. For adolescents and young adults, it is an aesthetic subscription that was observed to provide this active meaning-making attempt, which therefore must be regarded by art therapists as a viable mechanism of change.

If the development of resiliency becomes a goal of therapeutic intervention, mindfulness practices may be a means of bridging aesthetics with their implicit spirituality. The findings of the data analysis suggest that adolescents and young adults may be seeking means of self-exploration and expression through aesthetic subscription. A focus on mindfulness within art therapy may help them to engage more deeply with the motivations behind their aesthetic subscription and therefore come to know themselves and their resiliency better. Kalmanowitz and Ho (2017) note that mindfulness in art therapy helps to engage the participant in the present and combine various parts of themselves into a cohesive whole.

By focusing on the present, adolescents and young adults may be able to fully immerse themselves in the art-making and become fully attuned to their mind and body. Clark (2017) highlights an inherent connection between art-making and mindfulness that is akin to the relationship previously described between aesthetics and spirituality. She states that they both cultivate awareness and presence and are ephemeral in nature (Clark,

2017). This viewpoint was previously proposed by Rappaport and Kalmanowitz (2014), who linked both creative arts and mindfulness to the experience of *flow* described above in this paper. Combining art therapy with meditative practices has been shown to help clients “to get in touch with their inner resources and to reach a new awareness of existing in the present, along with a new sense of hope for the future” (Luzzatto et al., 2014, p. 153).

According to the data analysis, hope for the future is an area of therapeutic cultivation that is particularly important for art therapy with adolescents and young adults with distinct concerns for the environment and climate change. The co-researchers expressed within the data an increasingly prominent recognition that issues of climate change are impacting today’s youth. Seabrook (2020) adamantly expresses that developing hope in the face of the climate crisis “requires not only an acknowledgment of its urgency, but also the willingness to look at and move towards new ways of living by radically transforming how we engage with the world, our communities, and each other” (p. 2). For art therapists, leading by example and creating a studio environment that is ecologically conscious may be able to partially assist adolescents and young adults struggling with issues related to climate change. Using natural materials, reducing waste where possible, reusing materials and using found materials are all methods art therapists can consider when engaging with clients with these concerns (Kopytin & Rugh, 2016). Seabrook (2020) suggests that the creative arts therapies need to re-assess their role in the climate crisis and consider how their discipline can address these growing concerns.



Aesthetically, eco-art therapy may provide a sustainable outlet for adolescents and young adults to engage in art therapy while still honouring the planet and minimizing their impact. There is little direct research addressing eco-art therapy with concerns of climate change (Scheirich, 2020), but the findings of this research suggest that it is an area that warrants further exploration. The co-researchers' testimonies highlight ecological concerns as prominent within the theme of hopelessness, and it is suggested that addressing these concerns in an aesthetic manner can have positive outcomes for developing hope and optimism (Scheirich, 2020). Adding a spiritual lens to eco-art therapy may be particularly beneficial as Pargament (2007) notes that with a spiritual perspective "problems take on a different character and distinctive solutions appear: answers to seemingly unanswerable questions, support when other sources of support are unavailable, and new sources of value and significance when old dreams are no longer viable" (p. 12). Dealing with ecological concerns, these benefits of spiritual incorporation are significant as individuals may not know how to aid in climate change, see inaction from those in positions of power, and live with the reality that the future is not guaranteed. Potential benefits for engaging art therapy in a spiritually-based ecological fashion are extended creative expression, engagement in a multi-sensory experience, exploring deeper emotions related to climate concerns, forming impactful connections between self and nature, and facilitating active role-taking in pro-environmental behaviour (Scheirich, 2020).

## **How Findings Respond to the Research Question**

The research questions posed were intended to provide a basis of exploration and discovery. Although these questions were used to guide the literature review and the data collection, the analysis of the data and subsequent findings were explored via their own merit and in a way that honoured the inquisitive nature of the research methodology. This section will review both the primary and secondary research questions and make connections to the findings.

### ***Primary Research Question***

The primary research question asked: *How does the art therapist perceive the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions?* Within the data collection, the co-researchers thoroughly divulged their perceptions of aesthetics both in regards to its role in art therapy and its role in clients' lives. The findings suggest that the art therapists perceived the role of aesthetics to be impactful therapeutically in terms of why clients seek therapy, such as with issues related to the thematic findings of belonging, purpose, image, expression, and hopelessness. The co-researchers also perceived aesthetics to provide therapeutic benefit in many regards, such as by mitigating fears of the future or providing an avenue for expression, transformation, and recreation. The findings then elaborated upon these benefits to include therapeutic use of aesthetics to foster positive growth in areas of purpose, transcendence, connection, control, importance, resiliency, and mindfulness. Based on the data analysis and subsequent research findings, aesthetics and aesthetic subscriptions have the ability to proactively contribute to the therapeutic

milieu, but the findings also suggest possible limitations related to aesthetic preoccupations.

The co-researchers identified areas where aesthetics were perceived as potentially hindering the therapeutic process, namely, preoccupations with aesthetic satisfaction and concerns with peer judgement and perception. The findings outlined additional areas of concern including the aesthetics of the studio, social approval seeking behaviours in group art therapy, and the role of social media, which arose via the data analysis. In answering the research question, it would appear that art therapists perceive the role of aesthetics to function primarily as a benefit to art therapy interventions, but that aesthetics can become a hinderance that requires mitigation. This is, however, a simplified answer and the realities of this inquiry are much more nuanced. The perceived role of aesthetics will require a case-by-case approach to determine whether mitigation is necessary, and harnessing the benefits of aesthetics will require thoughtful consideration and implementation.

### ***Secondary Research Question***

The secondary research question asked: *To what extent do aesthetics contribute to a spiritually-integrated development of meaning-making for identity formation?* The data collection contained threads of spirituality throughout. As the co-researchers were given the interview questions in advance they were primed with a spiritually-integrated perspective underlying each of their responses. Given that facet, the co-researchers perceived aesthetics as contributing to a spiritually-integrated development of meaning-making through notions of belonging, experiences of transcendence, participation in

ritual, and foundations of hope and connection. The findings expanded upon these perceptions to include feelings of comfort and safety, a development of awareness and presence through mindfulness, and true, unfiltered, expressions of self. Meaning-making was perceived by the co-researchers as being foundational to the identity formation process, and as all three emphasized the importance of spirituality as tool for wellness, a cohesive means of identity formation processing must consider spiritual concerns.

The extent to which aesthetics contribute to spirituality was found to be extensive both within the data analysis and the subsequent findings. Their implicit relationship was recognized within the literature review and the findings support the conclusion that the two concepts are intrinsically intertwined. Aesthetics and meaning-making were found within the data analysis to share a combined sense of values and were contingent on notions of how an individual expresses their self in the world. The subsequent findings reiterated the connection between aesthetics, meaning-making, and expression and highlighted that the extent of their connection depends upon the recognition of aesthetics as an impactful element for emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and social wellness. Finally, aesthetics and identity were explored in the data analysis as means of expression, creative exploration, and imaginative growth. The findings recognized aesthetics as a powerful means of self discovery that aids in identity declarations both internally through mindset, values, and behaviours, and externally through environment, fashion, decor, and appearance.

## **Part VI: Conclusion and Additional Considerations**

In concluding the findings of this research it is now necessary to address further considerations. This section will provide a summary of the research conducted and highlight how these findings may be applied within the field of art therapy. A discussion of further applications in relation to other relevant fields will provide an overview of how the research can be applied to other disciplines. I will then provide a personal statement to explore personal and professional applications of the research. Next is an outline of the limitations of the study, followed by suggestions for future research. Finally, the thesis concludes via a brief statement.

### **Summary**

The current research stemmed from a personal desire to explore the adolescent and young adult phenomenon of aesthetics in regard to art therapy provision. Aesthetics in this context was defined as the adoption of a stylized identity for use in fashion, decor, mindset, values, appearance, behaviours, and environment in which the individual actively tailors their inner and outer worlds to convey a pleasing, mood-based impression. Given this definition, interview questions were developed and posed to two art therapy practicum students and a practicing art therapist in order to glean their perspectives on the role of aesthetics in art therapy settings with adolescent and young adult clients. Data was collected according to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology and principles of this research method were used to subsequently analyze the data. The analysis uncovered three primary themes related to the co-researchers' perspectives of aesthetics which were Belonging, Image, and Hopelessness. Additionally, sub-themes of

spirituality, purpose, expression, recreation, internet, and future were identified as pertaining to the context of the primary themes. The results of the data analysis were then compiled and related findings were presented based upon the available literature and potential art therapy applications. The research questions guiding this study were reviewed and acknowledgements were made as to the extent to which the questions were answered.

## **Research Applications**

### ***Art Therapy Applications***

The previous section discussed direct applications of the research findings, however, additional applications pertaining to aesthetics in art therapy remain. Having an understanding of the role of aesthetics in the lives of adolescents and young adults may allow the art therapist to know their client better and strengthen communication. If aesthetic inclinations are present the therapist will be able to harness them for therapeutic gain and can communicate with the client in a visual language that is familiar to the client. Shared language is described by Thomas and McDonagh (2013) to deepen relationships and improve effective communication, but they posit that it requires intention and a nurturing perspective. Developing this perspective in art therapy will allow the therapist to extend their verbal and visual language to meet that of the client, and may also lead to more accurate interpretations. B. Moon (2012) strongly states that “there is nothing an art therapist can do that will more swiftly and surely destroy the therapeutic relationship with an adolescent client than to label or misinterpret his or her work” (p. 64). Developing an aesthetic language may then mitigate the possibility of

misinterpreting in art therapy provision and thus improve the possibility for therapeutic growth.

An application of this research may be the ability of art therapists to utilize aesthetics as a means of bridging spirituality into the client's lives. Allen (1995) notes that "images that are necessary to us come in all sorts of ways, for the soul never tires of trying to make itself known" (p. 33). Using aesthetics as a grounding point, the art therapist may direct the client towards a discovery of their spiritual self and therefore begin to care for the whole of the person (Wigram et al., 2002). One such means of bridging aesthetics and spirituality may be through the use of guided imagery, a technique employing imagination, metaphor, art, and visualization to make the unconscious conscious (Skeens, 2017), directed by existential questioning. Aesthetics can be applied in this technique to incite the expression of implicit spiritual beliefs as one of the means through which Pargament (2007) notes the sacred dimensions of self are discovered. He states that "the discovery of the sacred can be experienced as revelation (the sacred reveals itself to the individual), an accomplishment (the individual succeeds in finding the sacred), or both (the individual opens the door and the sacred enters)" (Pargament, 2007, p. 63). Aesthetics could provide the means through which any of these sacred discoveries are made by visually exploring values and beliefs. Finally, the research indicates that in terms of aesthetic implications, both product and process are equally important considerations for the therapist to observe. Thus, the art as therapy position proposed by Edith Kramer and the art psychotherapy position proposed by Margaret Naumburg (Hinz, 2009) are mitigated by virtue of aesthetic's ability to encompass both

perspectives as having therapeutic significance. The applications to the field of art therapy of this finding would be to neutralize the theoretical debate and unite varying theoretical orientations in the home and hearth of aesthetics.

### ***General Applications***

As mentioned in the impact and importance section of this paper, applications of this research could extend to the fields of psychology, psychotherapy, teaching, mentorship, and parenting. Within psychology, the study of aesthetics has implications for emotional and perceptual processing pertaining to human sensory experiences (Skov & Nadal, 2019). The findings of this research point to the many levels of emotions and perceptual responses that could be explored from a psychological standpoint. For issues pertaining to trauma and resiliency, aesthetics could provide a means of measuring psychological wellbeing. Psychotherapy applications relate strongly to those of art therapy, particularly in terms of verbal communication implications of developing shared language (Thomas & McDonagh, 2013). Psychotherapy applications are also impactful in terms of Jungian theory in which the transcendent function creates “new symbolic possibilities for the growth of consciousness” (Beebe, 2010, p. 165). It has also been suggested that psychoanalytic psychotherapy functions as an aesthetic journey co-created between therapist and client that is “attentive to the poetic dimensions of sight, sound, and space that they encounter” (Pivnik, 2018, p. 218). Pivnik (2018) agrees with previous research positing that the high degree of attunement afforded to the client in therapy creates aesthetic moments which “create a feeling of inevitability, of comfort, of awe, of uncanny experience seemingly outside cognitive coherence” (p. 222). The research



findings of the current paper could be applied to these theoretical beliefs to contribute to the care of clients and expand upon aesthetic definitions used in these contexts.

Applications for teaching and mentorship reside primarily in aesthetic education for students and mentees. This education can promote various emotional and cognitive wellbeing strategies and has been found in Taiwanese education systems to benefit children in the acknowledgement that “learning, knowledge and educational practice strive to let children understand, think, imagine, and create from practice and experience, thereby cultivating sensory memory, intelligence, and ability that children can internalize” (Shih, 2020, p. 569). Aesthetic literacy is an educational principle that can benefit from the findings of this research in order to understand the role of the internet in the aesthetics of young people, develop emotional vocabulary related to aesthetics, and acknowledge the motivational impact of aesthetics on learning. Finally, applications for parenting include improving communication (Thomas and McDonagh, 2013), methods of understanding and monitoring aesthetics in social media use (Dworkin et al., 2019), and improved familial connectedness (Tariq et al., 2022). The research findings indicate that aesthetics could be used to bridge parent/child relationships, but that caution is needed not to overstep boundaries of the relationship and to recognize aesthetic dissatisfaction (Keles et al., 2020). From a personal reflection, the significance of aesthetic knowledge in parenting would have helped strengthen my own parent-child relationships when receiving presents. I recall instances of receiving a birthday or holiday gift that did not align with my aesthetic subscription and thinking to myself ‘Why would they think I would like this?’ ‘Do they know me at all?’. Gift-giving in parenting is perceived by the

child to be a representation of how well the parent or guardian knows and understands them, and as such, gifts that align with the child's aesthetic representations will help to illustrate this understanding and appreciation for their child's unique aesthetic values.

### ***Personal Applications***

The applications of this research will impact the way I move forward in my career and interact with clients. I am interested in working primarily with adolescents and young adults and believe that the findings related to aesthetics, art therapy, meaning-making, spirituality, and identity are crucial in understanding their perspectives on the world and their interactions with self, therapist, and materials. I believe that developing a shared aesthetic language can help connect the therapist to the intricacies of the work with adolescents and young adults and help to mitigate any misunderstandings. In a recent experience in my art therapy practicum placement, a youth utilized a quote from a song within their art work that was dark and aggressive in nature. In our debriefing after the session my supervisor expressed concern with the quote, thinking the youth had come up with it themselves. I pointed out that it was in fact lyrics to a popular song, and that it seemed this youth had preoccupations with popular culture that were impacting their state of being. This experience solidifies the importance of having shared understandings in order to avoid misinterpretations and better relate to the aesthetic subject matter clients create.

Within my own practice I will also apply the findings of the study as potential indicators related to behaviour, cognition, and motivation of my clients, and will likely use an aesthetic measure within my intake assessment. Understanding the role of

aesthetics in my clients' lives will facilitate in identifying coping mechanisms, fostering hope, resilience, importance, and control, and holding space for expressions and recreations of self. I also intend to more thoroughly explore issues of climate change in adolescent and young adult use of aesthetics and have become fascinated over the potential combination of aesthetics and eco-art therapy as a treatment modality for youth reacting to ecological crises.

The findings of the research have impacted the way I approach my own art-making and aesthetic expressions. Since completing the data analysis and findings I have actually become more enveloped in my aesthetic identity and find myself leaning on it in times of stress. Aesthetics have become a way for me to connect with my meaning-making centre and can count on my inner values and beliefs when my cognitive faculties are tested. I primarily rely on aesthetic visualizations as it stands, but these alone have allowed me to connect more deeply with my inner being and come to know myself better. I will also bring these research findings into my interpersonal relationships as a way to deepen connection. By paying attention to the aesthetic presentation of those around me and acknowledging their aesthetic satisfactions I hope to incite a sense of belonging and encourage a reciprocal relationship based on mutual understanding. I am grateful for this research and the knowledge that has arisen from it, for the self-reflection it required and the dedication it demanded, and for the way in which aesthetics were present throughout all stages of conceptualization, execution, transcription, analysis, reflection, and dissemination.

My spiritual self has also grown to include a deeper understanding of my spiritual motivations and my connection to the world around me. Throughout this research I have come to the understanding that the notion of *creation* is vital to my spirituality, as it encompasses both creative processes and spiritual processes. Although I do not have a specific theology that I derive my spiritual beliefs from, I can honour and respect the creation stories from all perspectives, and this research has solidified my belief in the universality of creation. Going forward, this research will inform my spiritual outlook and alter the way I engage with others in spiritual topics. My spirituality is now more firmly guided by aesthetics and creation, and by definitive linking these two practices in the spiritual realm I anticipate to deepen both my spiritual identity and my creative practice.

### **Limitations of the Research**

Despite the potential applications of this research for art therapists, psychologists, psychotherapists, teachers, mentors, parents, and for the myself, there are limitations of the research based upon the number of co-researchers and elements of the literature review. Along with the limitations expressed in the cultural and socioeconomic consideration section of this paper, the sample used to collect data was limited to three individuals. Although this sample size is consistent with IPA methodology and allows for depth-based research, it does limit the breadth of the sample. The co-researchers selected were previously known to me and were interconnected via their affiliation with a spiritually-based college. It is important to note that these facets may have primed the co-researchers with certain internal biases, although the use of IPA methodology should

account for these limitations in the sample. One limitation that is not accounted for via IPA methodology is the use of art therapy practicum students within the sample. Because of the limited nature of their therapeutic experiences, art therapy practicum students may have reduced client-experiences to draw upon and may have worked with a limited number of participants. This is not to say that their experiences are any less valid, it is just to note that increased experience in the field may alter perceptions of the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions and the extent to which spiritually-integrated meaning-making is observed in identity formation processes. Additional limitations include the absence of adolescent and young adult perspectives within the data collection and limitations in the literature review as all articles, books, and writings were published in the English language.

### **Suggestions for Future Research and Final Remarks**

Given the limitations, suggestions for future research stem primarily in resolution to those limitations. Future research would benefit from larger and more varied sample sizes. Within the parameters of IPA research, this may include the use of multiple primary researchers and extending the scope of sample recruitment beyond personal relationships. Other methodologies may also be explored to extend the framework of the research exploring the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions and the extent to which aesthetics contribute to spiritually-integrated meaning-making for identity formation. From an art therapy perspective, future research could explore therapist perspectives of aesthetics in art therapy interventions from different theoretical orientations to determine whether the theoretical framework of therapists influences their perceptions on aesthetics.

Future research would also benefit from an exploration that considers the perspectives of adolescents and young adults to determine the extent to which aesthetics are present in their lives and how aesthetics are utilized in a therapeutic capacity. The numerous applications of the research suggested in the findings also warrant future research, which includes queries such as the use of aesthetics to foster resiliency in post-traumatic growth; how aesthetics harness purpose and belonging; the extent to which individuality and conformity are presented via aesthetics; how aesthetics influence group art therapy practices; and how aesthetics can address eco-grief in eco-art therapy.

This research has given insight into the nuances of aesthetics both within the field of art therapy and as a philosophical, humanities-based construct. Aesthetics are not merely a vehicle for arts-based beauty, but they encompass a wide range of emotions, perspectives, experiences, and thought processes. This research has explored the perceptions of art therapy practitioners regarding the therapeutic impact of aesthetics with adolescent and young adult clients within the field of art therapy, and important considerations have arisen in relation to belonging, purpose, spirituality, image, expression, recreation, the internet, hopelessness, and worries of the future. Looking forward, the hope for this research is to inform and influence the field of art therapy as to the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions, as well as provide the groundwork on which future research is based. Aesthetics are not to be overlooked as a mere social media trend-based phenomenon in the lives of adolescents and young adults, but rather as a timeless mode of expression that is fluid in nature and adapts to generational and geographical demographics. It is a phenomenon worthy of future research and is a

necessary consideration for art therapists with adolescent and young adult clientele. This research contributes to the field of art therapy, and this notion was summarized beautifully by the co-researchers: Valentina noted that the impact of aesthetics on art therapy was “*something I need to think about more deeply as I go forward*”, and Kaye stated that “*these are great things to contemplate. There’s a lot more I could say I’m sure. They’re big questions and I’m giving small answers*”. These perspectives denote the need for further research on this subject matter in order to thoroughly and thoughtfully give justice to the study of aesthetics in art therapy. This research provides a small answer to a big question, but nonetheless it is an aesthetic contribution to the research endeavour.

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## Appendix B

Recruitment Poster Used to Gain Potential Co-Researchers

# I Need You!!

## Practicing Art Therapists and Art Therapy Practicum Students Needed for thesis research

Aesthetics and aesthetic identities are becoming increasingly prevalent among adolescents and young adults. Within the art therapy profession, an understanding of and practice guidelines for navigating client-instigated aesthetics in session are essential to recognizing the client's worldview, their sense of self, and how meaning-making informs their identity. From both psychotherapeutic and spiritual lenses, I hope to further explore this phenomenon and develop a working practice for engaging with aesthetics in art therapy.

This project, in accordance with Thesis requirements for a Masters in Psychotherapy and Spirituality, with a Specialization in Art Therapy, at St. Stephen's College, is designed to explore and expand conceptions of aesthetics, art therapy, and meaning-making with adolescents and young adults from the art therapist's perspective.

### Help with my thesis research

Hello, I am a fellow St. Stephen's student in the midst of my thesis research. I am looking for **three to five** participants to engage in a one-on-one interview process. My research is analyzing the perceived role of aesthetics in an art therapy setting, by art therapists with adolescent or young adult clients. Participation may implore you to learn more about aesthetics within this client-base, help develop an understanding of the role of aesthetics, and explore how aesthetics contribute to meaning-making.

Time commitments will include reviewing the study invitation and informed consent documents, participating in a 1-2 hour interview, and reviewing the transcript that follows.

**Contact: Remy Moerkerk; [email]**

Study Supervisor: Leslie Gardner; [email]

**The plan for this study has been reviewed by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta/ If you have questions about your rights or how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This Office is independent of the researchers.**

## Appendix C

### Letter of Information and Informed Consent



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### INFORMATION LETTER and CONSENT FORM

Research Study

Ethics Number: Pro00112777

**Study Title:** Role of Aesthetics in Art Therapy

**Research Investigator:**

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### **Background**

You are invited to participate in this research study exploring how art therapists perceive the role of aesthetics in art therapy interventions with adolescents and young adults. We wish to learn more about the connection between theoretical orientation and aesthetic understanding, aesthetics and meaning-making, and aesthetic responses and drives.

The results of this study will be used in support of my thesis requirements to complete the Masters of Psychotherapy and Spirituality (MPS), with a specialization in Art Therapy, at St. Stephen's College in Edmonton, Alberta. The thesis falls into one of my program requirements which is a formal study summarizing the findings of an inquiry which I have chosen for personal interest, educational intrigue, and professional development.

Before you make a decision, the researcher will go over this form with you. You are encouraged to ask questions if you feel anything needs to be made clearer. You will be given a copy of this form for your records.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore the increase in adolescents and young adults claiming an aesthetic identity and how art therapists understand the role aesthetics play in the therapeutic process, and discover how to embrace or work with aesthetics depending on the therapist's theoretic orientation. The primary purpose of this study is to bring awareness and education to practicing art therapists and art therapy students, as well as to gain knowledge and experience for my own personal and professional development. The version of aesthetics that I will be researching within an art therapy setting relates primarily to the individual engaged in the aesthetic experience, but it is also intrinsically linked to factors of society, economy, and spirituality. The working definition of aesthetics for the purpose of this thesis proposal is; the adoption of a stylized identity for use in fashion, decor, mindset, values, appearance, behaviours, and environment in which the individual actively tailors their inner and outer worlds to convey a pleasing, mood-based impression.

Given the substantial role aesthetics appear to play in the lives of adolescents and young adults who subscribe to this identity, the aim of this research is also to identify the role of aesthetics in the meaning-making process. This has been shown to be closely linked to aspects of spirituality, and in service of caring for the entirety of the client, the spiritual aspect of their identity must also be addressed. In order to gauge the level of relation aesthetics has to spirituality, questions asking how an aesthetic identity contributes to the meaning-making process, to what extent spirituality contributes to this process, how the interaction between aesthetics and spirituality is perceived, and how both aesthetics and spirituality contribute to identity formation will be used in the interview.

### **Study Procedures**

In order to be eligible to participate in this project you must be a practicing art therapist or an art therapy practicum student, have a client base that includes adolescents and/or young adults, recognize the presence of aesthetics in the realm of art therapy, and be willing to discuss the details of your perceptions.

If you meet this eligibility criteria and you are still interested in participating after reviewing the Letter of Information and Consent, please contact the researcher via email to arrange a one-on-one interview. This interview will be scheduled at a mutually agreed upon time and will be held via secure video message platform.

The Letter of Consent will be signed before the interview begins. The interview process will take approximately 60-120 minutes. The interview will be video recorded, with the choice of having your camera off if you wish, and the researcher will also be taking notes by hand. Pseudonyms will be assigned to all co-researchers (as well as any other identifying names and locations) before the audio-recordings are transcribed. The researcher will be transcribing the audio-

recordings, and throughout the process will operate under the privacy and security measures outlined in the confidentiality agreement (which is detailed in the consent letter).

The data collected will include one 60-120 min interview, researcher session notes, audio-recordings of the interview, and identification information (name, address, telephone number, and email address).

Once the interview has been transcribed, the researcher will securely email (under password protection) a copy of the transcription for you to review. Any changes can be made to the transcription that you deem necessary at this time. This process includes reviewing, revising, and finalizing the transcriptions.

Participants, and any other individuals named in the interview, will be assigned pseudonyms by the researcher at the time of transcriptions in order to eliminate any identifying information. Transcriptions will not include any identifying information, which means all transcribed data will be anonymized. Your answers to open-ended questions may be used verbatim in presentations and publications but neither you (nor your organization) will be identified.

### **Benefits**

The findings of this research may serve to enhance awareness of different aesthetic identities and the role these play in art therapy with adolescent and young adult clients. Additionally, the connection made between aesthetic identities, meaning-making, and spirituality may aid deeper understanding and awareness of these interconnected aspects of self.

With growing prevalence and attention to aesthetic identities in adolescent and young adult populations, gaining a better understanding of the ways individuals incorporate aesthetics into their lives and how aesthetics may influence various spheres of existence. This understanding may also benefit educational, psychotherapeutic, art therapy, and parenting thinking and practices with this client base.

It is also possible that by reflecting on and expressing the role of aesthetics in art therapy and the ways in which it can be a benefit or hinderance to the art therapy process you may develop realizations and new professional practices. These could lead to increased therapeutic gains with clients, or a deeper understanding of an adolescent or young adult client base.

### **Risks**

It is possible that you may feel psychologically or emotionally stressed while recounting personal and professional experiences that relate to their client contact. It is also possible that attempting to articulate and understand the role of

aesthetics in the art therapy realm, or the realization of the existence of this phenomena in their professional practice could be difficult, disheartening, or frustrating to hear.

In an effort to minimize any risks to you, informed consent is reviewed and obtained before the interview begins. You are able to opt-out at any time during the interview or transcription review process. You are able to review transcripts and make any revisions deemed necessary. The use of pseudonyms in the transcription and analysis process serve to enhance confidentiality and anonymity.

The interview questions will be provided before the scheduled interview in order to provide you with an opportunity to consider and reflect on the question prompts before responding in the interview setting.

Researcher contact information will also be provided to you should any further questions or concerns emerge post-interview.

### **Voluntary Participation**

You are under no obligation to participate and if you choose to participate, you may refuse to answer questions that you do not want to answer. Should you choose to withdraw midway through, any data collected to date will not be included in the final analysis and will be destroyed. You also retain the right to request that the recording is stopped at any time, for any reason.

The data can be withdrawn at any point, and for any reason (or without reason), until two weeks after you have approved the transcript. After this point, the data will not be able to be withdrawn from the study.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

The research will be used for the purposes of completing a thesis. The information that you will share will remain strictly confidential and will be used solely for the purposes of this research. The only people who will have access to the research data are the lead researcher and the research supervisor, as well as the Research Ethics Board and the University of Alberta auditors if requested. Your surname and first name, address, telephone number, and email address will be collected by the lead researcher for communication and transcription delivery purposes. Identifying information will be included in the audio recording of the interview, the lead researcher's interview notes, and an excel document noting research participants' names and contact information.

Participants, and any other individuals named in the interview, will be assigned pseudonyms by the researcher at the time of transcriptions in order to eliminate any identifying information. Transcriptions will not include any



identifying information, which means all transcribed data will be anonymized. Your answers to open-ended questions may be used verbatim in presentations and publications but neither you (nor your organization) will be identified.

Two weeks after the researcher has received the approved transcript from the participants, all identifying information collected for communication purposes and noted on an excel spreadsheet will be destroyed.

All data, in both paper and electronic files, including raw data from interviews, session notes, reflective journal notes, analysis and interpretation notes and drafts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet located in the office of the researcher's home office for five years.

Electronic copies of the transcripts and data analysis will be encrypted and stored on a password protected USB Key in the St. Stephen's College vault for 5 years. After 5 years, all data will be destroyed. If you are interested in reviewing the findings of the project after publication, follow up information will be provided.

### **Contact Information**

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact Remy Moerkerk, lead researcher, or Leslie Gardner, thesis supervisor.

The plan for this study has been reviewed by the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office. If you have any questions about your rights of how research should be conducted, you can call (780) 492-2615. This office is independent of the researchers.

### **Consent Statement**

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and hereby give my consent to participate in the Role of Aesthetics in Art Therapy Study.

I (state your name) on this (today's date) consent to the terms of this research study and state that I have been adequately informed about the nature of this study.

**Appendix D**  
Interview Question Guide



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## **Aesthetics and Art Therapy Inquiry**

### **Interview Questions Guide**

*\*Please note that additional questions may arise as the interview process unfolds.*

1. What, if any, theoretical orientation do you primarily operate from?
2. In your work with adolescents and young adults, describe the role you see aesthetics has in their lives
3. What role for aesthetics do you see in your art therapy interventions?
4. To what extent do you find this role to be a benefit or hindrance to your art therapy process?
5. How do you navigate the therapeutic roadmap knowing that client aesthetic inclinations are present?
6. To what extent do your individual clients subscribe to their own specific aesthetic identity?
7. How does this identity contribute to their meaning-making processes?
8. To what extent do you see spirituality as contributing to their meaning-making process?
9. How do you, as an art therapist, perceive the interaction between aesthetics and spirituality?
10. How do you perceive aesthetics and spirituality contributing to identity formation for your clients?

# Appendix E

## Visualization of Thematic Analysis

