

## Creation of Expressive Textile Arts with Ex-mentally Ill Persons

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### ABSTRACT

In this study, the two project investigators aimed to create 20 expressive textile arts prototypes with ex-mentally ill persons and undergraduate students after taking a series of interactive workshops of expressive textile arts and fashion creativity from a service learning subject, “Laugh and Walk Together for a Better Future 2017” offered by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University from May to July 2017. The major learning outcome of the subject was to adopt expressive textile arts and fashion creativity as a caring medium. It intended to help the ex-mentally ill persons to enhance their self-confidence and rebuild a satisfactory identity by expressing their creativity through producing the expressive textile artworks with the project investigators and students. During the workshops, the ex-mentally ill persons were provided with an encouraging and nurturing space for growth and personal expression. Theory of expressive textile arts was introduced. Guided discussions with hands-on practices were the key of the creative co-design process. Emphasis was placed on using colours, textures and patterns for creating expressive textile artworks so as to interpret ex-mentally ill persons’ memories and personal narratives to self-discovery and healing. A quantitative research method was adopted to investigate the impact of practicing expressive textile arts as a caring medium on ex-mentally ill persons before attending and during the textile arts workshops was investigated. The research findings suggest that positive impacts are found on the ex-mentally ill persons’ perceptions of “feelings and thoughts before attending the workshops”, “feelings and thoughts during the workshops”, “attitude toward the textile arts materials”, and “attitude toward the expressive textile artworks”. The co-design process could help the ex-mentally ill persons to feel centred and pleased during the creative process as well as finding new interests and skills and this kind of experience could carry out positive changes in their lives and improve their well-being.

**Keywords:** Expressive textile arts, fashion creativity, ex-mentally ill persons, service learning

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a growing body of evidence has been compiled exploring the potential of the arts to impact on health and wellbeing in a variety of social contexts, to counter inequalities and increase engagement. “Participation in the arts and access to a range of arts opportunities can dramatically improve health outcomes and increase wellbeing” (Aylett 3). This study aimed to investigate the impact of expressive textile arts on people with special needs namely, ex-mentally ill persons after taking a series of interactive textile arts and fashion creativity workshops from a service learning subject, “Laugh and Walk Together for a Better Future 2017” offered by the Hong Kong Polytechnic University from May to July 2017. In this service-learning subject, subject lecturers and students co-designed with 20 ex-mentally ill persons to enhance their self-confidence and rebuild a satisfactory identity through practising expressive textile arts. A total of 20 textile arts prototypes were created and presented in a mini fashion show and a static exhibition both at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University in July 2017. A quantitative research method was adopted to evaluate the impact of expressive textile arts on ex-mentally ill persons taking the service-learning subject and the findings suggested that it could carry out positive changes in their lives and improve their well-being. Besides, the static exhibition and fashion show effectively disseminated the expressive textile artworks jointly created by the subject lecturers, students and ex-mentally ill persons were able to draw the social issue of the people with special needs to the attention of the public.

### EXPRESSIVE ARTS, TEXTILE ARTS AND EXPRESSIVE TEXTILE ARTS

“Expressive arts is the practice of using imagery, storytelling, dance, music, drama, poetry, writing, movement, dream work and visual arts in an integrated way to foster human growth,

development and healing” (Atkins 3). This suggests that each human being is inherently creative and infused with the gift of imagination.

The textile arts making process is a multi-dimensional experience and can be used as a healing process for people suffering from mental and/or physical discomforts (Meadow and Beyerle-Rutherford 427). Reynolds first demonstrated findings based on a study of 35 women involved in illness management by using textile arts (“Coping with Chronic Illness and Disability” 352). They were asked to process needlework to distract their attention away from worries or pain, and the results showed that participants agreed the textile arts making process helped them to block out the symptoms by focusing the attention on the textile working process. Textile arts can calm people themselves and feel centred when they become immersed in the sheer pleasure of the creative process.

In this service-learning subject, the ex-mentally ill persons practised textile arts as a form of expressive arts for self-expression and reflection. Textile arts can give people a sense of place and enhance the sense of self with a collective identity (Collier 104). It can also link people to previous traditions and rituals and let them feel release from previous lives and relationships (Reynolds “Coping with Chronic Illness and Disability” 356). Through this creative capacity, everyone can express and shape their experience into creative expression. The ex-mentally ill persons can rebuild their identity and restore the quality of life by stimulating personal development through the process of creating expressive textile arts. Besides, it can enable the ex-mentally ill persons to find new interests and skills. This kind of experience is able to carry out positive change in their lives (Reynold and Prior 785). “Many forms of textile art-making are highly time-consuming, fostering a future orientation, and the creative process is often socially visible within the home, with positive consequences for self-image” (Reynolds “Textile Art Promoting Well-being” 58).

## **SERVICE-LEARNING SUBJECT**

The service site mainly focused on the three districts in Hong Kong including Yaumatei, Tsimshatsui and Mongkok. The agency was “The New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association” and the service recipients were 20 ex-mental ill patients. There were 74 undergraduate students joining this service-learning subject. The objectives of the service-learning subject are to:

- a) Introduce the concept, theories, and practice of expressive arts, textiles arts, and expressive textile arts;
- b) Develop students’ practical skills of developing expressive textile artworks, and its application for contemporary fashion;
- c) Enable students to use expressive textile arts making process as a healing medium to help needy people in a wider community;
- d) Enhance students’ skills of problem solving, communication and teamwork in the context of art and design;
- e) Introduce the concept and practice of service-learning for needy people locally and overseas; and
- f) Nurture students’ sense of social awareness, responsibility and engagement.

The service-learning subject was taught using a combination of lectures and interactive workshops and aimed at developing students’ practical skills of creating expressive textile arts. The students gained basic skills and techniques of creating expressive textile arts and its applications for contemporary fashion. The students co-designed and co-developed expressive textile artworks with the service recipients and subject lecturers.

The local community partner was invited to deliver a seminar about its background and the skills required in communicating and working with the service recipients before the commencement of the service rendering sessions. During the service rendering sessions, a mutual learning experience between students and service recipients was promoted. Students were team up with service recipients to discuss and co-design expressive textile artworks under subject instructors’ supervisions. Emphasis was placed on using colours, textures and patterns for creating expressive textile artworks so as to interpret recipients’ memories and personal narratives to self-discovery and healing.

The final expressive textile artworks were showcased in a styling presentation, a static exhibition, and a mini fashion show within the university. A professional hair and makeup sponsor was sourced and a professional show production house was appointed for the fashion show. During the styling presentation and mini fashion show, the service recipients presented their expressive textile artworks by modelling their creations themselves and their personal expressions and inner confidences were further encouraged. The fashion show held in the university served as a social platform where the

results of the service-learning project were disseminated to a wide public audience effectively. In addition, the expressive textile artworks were also presented in static exhibition in the university in order to further raise the academic and public awareness about the expressive textile arts created by the people with special needs in Hong Kong.

### **IMPACT ON EX-MENTALLY ILL PERSONS**

A quantitative research method was adopted in this study. A questionnaire survey was conducted before and during the expressive textile arts making workshops for the service recipients. The design of the questionnaire was based on the 'Art-based Intervention (ABI) Questionnaire' (Snir and Regey 338). Variables regarding 'feelings and thoughts before attending the workshops', 'feelings and thoughts during the workshops', 'attitude toward the textile arts materials', and 'attitude toward the expressive textile artworks' were obtained through a self-administered questionnaire survey, subjects being 20 service recipients who were ex-mentally ill persons from a community partner, "The New Life Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association". A 7-point Likert scaling was adopted for various items of the surveys for service recipients. The ranking scales were: the scale of 1 for 'entirely disagree', 4 for 'neither agree nor disagree' and 7 for 'entirely agree'. Respondents took an average of 45 minutes to complete a questionnaire. The software package SPSS 22.0 was employed to facilitate the quantitative data analysis.

The research findings suggest that positive impacts were found on the service recipients' perceptions of "feelings and thoughts before attending the workshops", "feelings and thoughts during the workshops", "attitude toward the textile arts materials", and "attitude toward the expressive textile artworks". In response to service recipients' perceptions of "feelings and thoughts before the workshops", 95% of the service recipients claimed that they felt "much excited" to participate in the textile art creative workshops. 70% of the respondents were "much confident" in their ability to perform well in the expressive textile arts workshops. Only 10% of the respondents were "much reluctant" to get involved in the workshops and all respondents felt "much peaceful and pleased" to participate the workshops. Regarding respondents' perceptions of "feelings and thoughts during the workshops", positive results were obtained from the service recipients. 85% of respondents felt "much pleased" and, "much relaxed and concentrated" to create the textile artwork during the creating process. 95% of the respondents "enjoyed" working on the expressive textile artworks and only 10% of them claimed that they could not "overcome the failure" of their creative process. Positive "attitude toward the expressive textile artworks and the textile arts materials" are presented from the service recipients. 95% of the respondents felt "much satisfied" with their created textile artworks. 95% of respondents were "much interested" in working with the textile arts materials.

### **CONCLUSION**

In this study, positive impacts were found on the ex-mentally ill persons' perceptions of "feelings and thoughts before attending the workshops", "feelings and thoughts during the workshops", "attitude toward the textile arts materials, and the expressive textile artworks". The ex-mentally ill persons could regain positive well-being through creative design interaction with the subject lecturers and students during the practise of expressive textile arts. They were able to build confidence through their participation in both the exhibition and catwalk performance. By expressing their feelings through their unleashed talents in expressive textiles arts and fashion styling, the ex-mentally ill persons were also able to rebuild their individual capital, expand their social networks and enhance mutual trust and cohesion. Finally, the most important impact was to raise the public awareness and eliminate the misunderstanding of general public about the people in need in order to facilitate social cohesion and acceptance.

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