


Materiality in art therapy: A South African group study highlighting regulating, dysregulating and ambiguous art materials used on one canvas

Nicole van Wyk 

Visual Art Department: Art Therapy Programme
University of Johannesburg 
Johannesburg, South Africa
nicole.vanwyk023@gmail.com

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Bio

Nicole van Wyk is currently completing her Master of Art Therapy at the University of Johannesburg. She completed her Bachelor of Arts in 2014, Honours in Counselling Psychology in 2015, and a Master of Theology in Practical Theology (*cum laude*) in 2019. Having always been passionate about art and caring for people, van Wyk pursued art therapy in 2022 after waiting many years for it to be established in South Africa.

Abstract

This article, based on my master's research study, addresses a variety of responses that art materials can elicit in individuals. Focus is placed on how art materials can assist in self-regulation, elicit dysregulation, or evoke more ambiguous responses. Four University of Johannesburg art therapy honours students participated in a four-week online art therapy group, using the one-canvas method to engage with materials drawn from the Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC), including dry/resistant, wet/fluid, and tactile media. Participants reflected on their experiences through group discussions and online surveys. Materials such as pencils and watercolour were described as containing and regulating, while others, such as glue, were experienced

as uncomfortable, dysregulating, or even invasive. These responses were shaped not only by the materials' properties but also by personal history, context, and meaning-making processes. Drawing on social constructivism and the Expressive Therapies Continuum as theoretical frameworks, the study highlights the interplay between materiality, internal experience, and socio-cultural positioning. While limited by a small, relatively privileged sample and the specific use of canvas, the findings nevertheless emphasise the need for art therapists to remain attuned to the emotional and sensory effects of art materials in art therapy.

Keywords: Art therapy, materiality, art materials, Expressive Therapies Continuum (ETC), social constructivism, one canvas method, emotional regulation, emotional dysregulation

Introduction

"The central use of art materials makes what happens in an art therapy session different from all other psychotherapy approaches" (Malchiodi, 2011, p. 27).

Art materials are integral to art therapy. This might seem obvious, but Moon (2010) highlights that art therapists sometimes rely on familiar, more technical materials rather than exploring a broader, more conceptual range. In art therapy, the focus is often not on the final art product, but on the process of making and the use of materials as tools for emotional and psychological processing and insight. I have been curious about how different materials evoke distinct perceptions, emotions, and responses. Rather than relying on traditional or familiar materials, as Moon (2010) suggests some therapists do, I have explored a broader range. My own visceral reactions to certain materials prompted a curiosity about how others, particularly art therapy trainees, experience and respond to various art materials.

To explore this, I facilitated a four-week online art therapy group with four University of Johannesburg art therapy honours students. The group used the one-canvas method (Miller 2020), where each participant worked on a single canvas for four weeks. Each session introduced a different material category based on Kagin and Lusebrink's (1978) Expressive Therapies Continuum theoretical model: dry/resistant, wet/fluid, and tactile. Participants were invited to choose materials within these categories,

creating space for autonomy while allowing a focused exploration of sensory and emotional responses.

Participants shared their experiences during group reflections and through online surveys completed after each session. While my research paper examined the group's engagement with various materials on a single surface over time, this article focuses specifically on participants' experiences of certain materials as dysregulating and evocative, grounding and regulating, or a combination of both, depending on how the art materials were used and when. I also created my own response artwork on a single canvas, reflecting on both the materials and my experience of the sessions. In this study, (emotion) regulation refers to a person's capacity to manage and respond to emotional experiences, while (emotional) dysregulation refers to a person's difficulty in applying (healthy) strategies to manage or reduce negative emotions (Rolston & Lloyd-Richardson, n.d.).

The study aimed to contribute to the limited South African literature on materiality in art therapy by highlighting how art materials can elicit a wide range of embodied and emotional responses. It is important as art therapists to have a broad enough knowledge base of art materials, particularly to offer solutions if clients need adaptive problem-solving while art making (Rubin, 2011). My research study invited further reflection on material preferences, sensory sensitivities, and the therapeutic potential of thoughtfully chosen media. This work is framed by social constructivism and the Expressive Therapies Continuum, which together provide insight into how individual, cultural, and psychological factors influence the art therapy process.

Overview of research

This article draws from a qualitative study exploring how a small group of art therapy honours students experienced various art materials over time. While the broader research examined the group process, the use of the one-canvas method and my response art, this article specifically focuses on the emotional, sensory, and regulatory responses elicited by different materials. By narrowing in on this aspect of the study, the aim is to highlight how art materials themselves can support or challenge a participant's emotional state during artmaking through the varying material qualities.

Participants used a range of materials derived from the Expressive Therapies Continuum across four online group sessions, engaging with each

category (dry/resistant, fluid, and tactile), each on their own single canvas. The participants were encouraged to err on the side of a larger surface of canvas – each canvas size is indicated in Table 1. This article foregrounds the nuanced, layered responses that emerged through participants’ direct interaction with the materials. These reflections underscore the importance of intentional material choices by art therapists and the complex, often embodied role that materiality plays in art therapy. This intentionality regarding material choices is also particularly true in South Africa, where limited resources and cultural nuances (among other factors) play a significant role in the consideration of art materials in various South African contexts.

Participant profiles and session experiences

Table 1: Participant profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Geographic location (province)	Approximate size of canvas
Charlie	30	KwaZulu-Natal	A1
Fire	28	Western Cape	A3
Micke	23	Gauteng	1x1m
Sibusiso	23	Gauteng	A1

Table 2: Participant art material experiences

Material category	Materials used by each participant	Survey quotes
Favourite/preferred materials	Charlie – Colouring pencils, watercolour Fire – Oil pastels, wax crayons, hairdryer to melt the wax Micke – Acrylic paint, oil pastels Sibusiso – Chalk pastels	Charlie – <i>Using watercolour felt calming and regulating</i> Fire – <i>Agitated, energetic, curious. Brought up emotions I was not aware I was suppressing</i> Micke – <i>Energising, exciting and joyous</i> Sibusiso – <i>Elated. Flow of the medium is smooth and easy to control</i>

Material category	Materials used by each participant	Survey quotes
<p>Dry/resistant materials</p>	<p>Charlie – Chalk, colouring pencils, markers Fire – Charcoal, pencil/graphite Micke – Chalk, chalk pastels, charcoal, acrylic markers Sibusiso – Pen</p>	<p>Charlie – <i>Energised, at ease and in control. Markers felt like a lesser calibre</i> Fire – <i>Precise, soft, dusty, messy. Smoothing the charcoal was satisfying and relaxing</i> Micke – <i>I felt grounded and calm, with a little bit of frustration</i> Sibusiso – <i>Energised, a release in a way, the sensation of scratching eased tension</i></p>
<p>Fluid/wet materials</p>	<p>Charlie – Acrylic paint, drawing ink, gouache, watercolour Fire – Watercolour, markers Micke – Acrylic paint, oil pastels, watercolour, acrylic markers and glue gun Sibusiso – Watercolour</p>	<p>Charlie – <i>Fluid and evocative of quite intense emotions, I felt quite a lot of self-criticism. Sponge and roller on the canvas. This was a fun way of creating a bit of distance and releasing some control. Sponge dabbing was soothing and helped work through tough feelings</i> Fire – <i>Excited, energised. I like watercolour and how easily it flows</i> Micke – <i>Grounding, energising at the end, hypnotising, calming</i> Sibusiso – <i>Liberating. When it comes to using paint, I get very precious and pedantic, which often stands in the way free and expressive art making</i></p>
<p>Tactile/textural materials</p>	<p>Charlie – Acrylic paint, textured medium, wool/string, craft paint, glue, and thread Fire – Plaster of Paris, moss and glue gun Micke – Acrylic paint, textured medium, glue gun Sibusiso – Foil</p>	<p>Charlie – <i>Tactile mediums help to keep me anchored to the present moment due to the constant contact they have with my hands. But [...] glue left a sticky residue on my hands and evoked quite a lot of uncomfortable feelings. Printmaking calms me. Sewing and repairing</i> Fire – <i>Excited, happy, buzzed. I enjoy making things, so 3D has always allowed me to play and make nonsense</i> Micke – <i>Frustrated, energised, excited, disgusted, curious and happy</i> Sibusiso – <i>Both energised and frustrated</i></p>

Research methods

The participants for my research study were invited from that year's honours cohort of art therapy at the University of Johannesburg (UJ). Four students were able to participate in the online group study. The decision to run the study online was based on the fact that many of the honours students did not live in Johannesburg, though I initially envisioned the study to be in-person. Online was a relatively standard way of conducting art therapy for the participants, due to the remote teaching of the honours course. The opportunity was there to be in one's own space at home if something were to elicit uncomfortable feelings – though the opposite is also true, as home might not always be a safe or private space. Both these perspectives were taken into consideration during this study. This was particularly important regarding materials that the participants chose, based also on feeling safe enough to explore materials that could be evocative.

The group met weekly for two hours over a four-week period. The participants were invited to do check-ins at the start of sessions, make art using the mediums according to the categories each week, and then reflect and share as much as they were comfortable with in the group. There was an additional data-capturing opportunity through an online survey after each session. Participants were asked to fill in the survey as a means of collecting any data that may have been missed, excluded from the group, or that they thought about in hindsight.

The material explorations in each session were done on one surface over time. Each participant had a single canvas that they used repeatedly each week, inviting layering and interaction of materials as well as the emotional and mental work of loss of layers, and navigating change in their artworks over the four weeks. I engaged in my own response art after sessions on my own single canvas in response to the materials and the group. In addition to session responses, I used my canvas to respond to transcribing and writing up my research paper after the group sessions were concluded.

Literature and theoretical frameworks

Miller (2020) agrees that art materials are an important consideration within art therapy because of their potential to stimulate emotional responses. Additionally, the tactile experience and awareness while using certain art

materials is also an important part of the experience. Rubin (2011) concurs that art materials have certain qualities to which people respond cognitively and emotionally (for example, clay can be experienced as repulsive and/or pleasurable to work with). The experience of any art material is therefore partly about what the client brings, but also about the qualities and characteristics of the art material. According to Moon (2010), it is an important ethical responsibility of the art therapist to intentionally consider the potential impact that the art materials and tools might have on a client throughout their therapeutic process.

This study is centred on the essential role of art materials and materiality in a therapeutic context. Social constructivism and the Expressive Therapies Continuum were used as a framework for understanding the diverse qualities and potential emotional responses caused by various art materials and media used in art therapy.

The Expressive Therapies Continuum is a theory of materiality developed by Kagin and Lusebrink (1978), consisting of four levels of how the brain processes and organises art materials. These levels range from simpler to more complex functioning. The levels, progressing from the bottom up, are kinaesthetic/sensory, perceptual/affective, and cognitive/symbolic (Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978). Hinz (2020) speaks to the fourth "level" – creativity – existing as an integrative function. Creativity occurs on any or all the levels when there is a synchronicity of theoretically opposite materials. By navigating these levels, therapists can gain deeper insights into their clients' cognitive and emotional states and gauge the level at which the client feels the most comfortable in relation to art materials.

Social constructivism means that our personal experiences (with art materials in this case) are informed by society and our environments. The way we connect with art materials is impacted by social influences, so the meaning we give to materials is influenced by the social world in which we live (Moon, 2010). Moon (2010) outlines various factors that have an impact on how we perceive and experience art materials. These are aesthetic preference, physical or sensual characteristics of the material, personal associations, language associated with the material, the original function of the art material, the connection between the art material and popular culture, and the socio-cultural-historical context and meaning of the art material. This means that even within the South African context, there can be

a vast variety of meanings and implications assigned to certain materials and art media, depending on the setting.

Results

The following findings have been categorised into *dysregulating*, *regulating*, and *ambiguous*, according to how research participants experienced the art materials they used.

Art materials and dysregulation

Some of the frustration and minor distress elicited by material use were due to unexpected or unappealing material interactions, sensory discomfort, and unanticipated problems with a material's application.

Material interactions

Charlie's experience with markers in Session 2 was quite confronting. She described markers as an elementary art material and found their bright colours uncomfortable, feeling as though she was ruining what she had already created on the canvas by adding markers over it. Using marker over chalk also added a sensory layer of discomfort, which she described as feeling like "*when you've rubbed out too much on your paper and the paper's gotten kind of thin and dusty*". Similarly, Fire experienced frustration when using markers, noting that they scraped off the layer underneath. The disappointment arose when they tried to add details on top of other materials, but the marker did not interact well with the previous layers. They eventually stopped using markers out of fear of ruining their existing work.

In the final session, Fire and Micke used plaster of Paris and grout, respectively. Fire mentioned frustration with the white marks the plaster left, its poor adhesion to the canvas, and the slowness of the process. Although Fire generally enjoys working with plaster of Paris, this instance proved more challenging. Micke also found her grout difficult to mix and unpredictable, describing how it was not doing what she wanted it to do.

Interestingly, Micke grounded herself from the frustration of working with grout by using a glue gun, while Fire mentioned wanting to use a glue gun to attach the plaster once dry, as it was not adhering while wet.

Discomfort with glue

Two participants were negatively affected by the glue they used, describing it as uncomfortable and even repulsive. Charlie shared that sticking the collage onto the canvas involved large amounts of sticky glue, which left a residue on her hands and evoked considerable discomfort. Similarly, Sibusiso described a strong aversion to the glue while using it to paste foil, calling it disgusting and invasive. He noted its sticky and oddly wet texture and mentioned repeatedly wiping his hands after each application. In contrast, using a glue gun was grounding for Micke. She enjoyed the dripping and textures it created.



Figure 1: Micke, Session 3 artwork, 2024, acrylic, watercolour, and glue on canvas (photographed by artist, used with permission)

Art materials and self-regulation

Some materials supported participants' self-regulation, including watercolours, dry or resistant media such as pen and colouring pencils, and tools like sponges and paintbrushes, which created both distance and a sense of control. Repetitive movements during the process also assisted several participants in processing and regulating their emotions.

Watercolour

In Session 1, Charlie was able to regulate her anxiety about the largeness of her canvas by using watercolour and colouring pencils, which helped decrease her feelings of anxiety. Micke also had a calming experience with watercolour, describing how dripping it onto her canvas and watching the colour flow was quite hypnotising.

Repetitive movements

Several participants found that repetitive movements emerged naturally during their artmaking. Micke found calm in the repetition of dripping watercolour and glue gun strands. Fire experienced gratification in the repeated smoothing of charcoal across the surface, while Sibusiso described how the repeated scratching of his pen on the canvas helped ease some of his tension.



Figure 2: Charlie, Session 1 artwork, 2024, watercolour, pencil, and drawing ink on canvas (photographed by artist, used with permission)

In Session 3, Charlie described using spiral movements while painting, which, along with the rhythmic action of sponge dabbing, helped her regulate and externalise difficult thoughts and feelings. She also used pencils to draw repeated scale shapes on her canvas.



Figure 3: Charlie, Session 3 artwork, 2024, watercolour, pencil, and drawing ink on canvas (photographed by artist, used with permission)

Dry/resistant materials

Micke mentioned not wanting to use graphite pencils during this session because she always feels the need to sketch something recognisable with them. Fire described the charcoal they used as relaxing and satisfying, although they found the residue left on their hands uncomfortable. In Session 2, although Sibusiso's chalk pastel kept smudging, he found that using a pen eased his tension. The pen provided an auditory and tactile

sensory experience and gave him a sense of mastery and competence amidst uncertainty. Micke noted that the noises made by dry materials on everyone's canvases created a pleasant, cohesive, and meditative atmosphere.

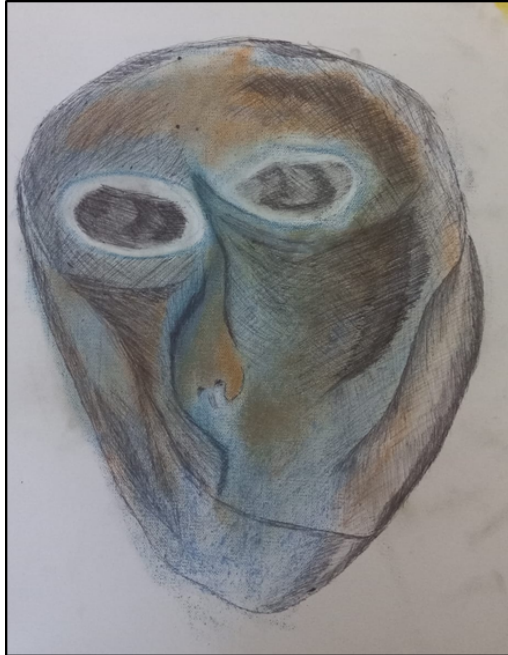


Figure 4: Sibusiso, Session 2 artwork section, 2024, chalk, pastel, and pen on canvas (photographed by artist, used with permission)

Tools/barriers

Two participants described notable experiences when using tools that created a barrier between themselves and the material. Micke found she was more engaged when painting directly with her hands, noting that using a tool elicited more cognitive engagement and less embodiment. Charlie found that rollers and sponges helped regulate her emotions by creating a sense of distance from the medium, allowing her to process her inner critic.

Micke reflected: *“When [I’m using] something [...] [where] I can’t eliminate the space between my body and material (i.e., tool/barrier) [...] I tend to get stuck in my head a lot”.*

Charlie shared: *“Leaning on utensils like rollers, brushes, and pencil crayons was especially helpful in creating distance and separation from the mediums I was using. It provided an opportunity for distance and self-regulation”.*

Fire was also able to counter their frustration with wax crayons on canvas by using a hairdryer as a tool to melt and smooth out the crayon marks.

Art material ambiguities

Use of canvas

Two participants had never used canvas before and embraced the unfamiliarity of the surface. Initially, the large size of the canvas caused anxiety for some, such as Charlie, who used familiar materials to help regulate her emotions in response to the scale. Fire described the canvas as feeling *“too professional”* and used childlike techniques such as wax crayons and scribbling to counter this. Sibusiso, initially cautious, was pleasantly surprised by how some materials worked on canvas, while Micke enjoyed the larger surface, which allowed for more embodied artmaking, including hand painting and the use of grout.

Some materials made interesting, repetitive sounds on the canvas, which resulted in Charlie and Sibusiso worrying that others might find the noises irritating. Micke, however, said she enjoyed the sounds because they reassured her that she was not alone. Because the group sessions took place online, the experience of sound was somewhat limited and less immersive. The background noise suppression of the videoconferencing application often blocked out the sound of artmaking, though some sounds still occasionally came through.

Smudging and the messiness of materials

Working with materials like chalk and charcoal inevitably caused mess and smudging. Participants often navigated the tension between preserving their artwork and allowing the materials to move freely across the canvas somewhat haphazardly.

Sibusiso used a pen over soft pastels and expressed discomfort with the powder smudging unintentionally. He described needing to *“keep negotiating letting go and being comfortable with what’s coming up”* as smudges altered his

image. He referred to this process as one of “*deconstruction and destruction*”, yet ultimately felt satisfied with the outcome. Fire also experienced tension with smudging, describing frustration with “*very dirty hands*”, but also finding the act of smoothing charcoal onto the canvas relaxing and satisfying.



Figure 5: Fire, Session 3 artwork, 2024. Wax crayon, oil pastel, and charcoal on canvas (photographed by artist, used with permission)

Charlie and Fire, on other occasions, experienced smudging as fun and playful. When using chalk and oil pastels, they both described the smoother tactile feeling as pleasant and were surprised by the results.

Discussion

An advantage of working with a group of trainee art therapists is that they are taught and encouraged to practice self-regulation, self-reflection, and ongoing self-awareness. This was evident in several sessions where certain materials or circumstances caused frustration or dysregulation, yet participants were able to recognise and manage these experiences consciously.

The interactions between art materials and their application on canvas did not always produce the desired results for participants. This highlights the unpredictable nature of artmaking and the importance of flexibility and awareness when engaging with materials that may challenge one's expectations or sense of control.

Fluid materials have been found to be more affective in that they often elicit stronger emotional reactions, whereas resistive materials such as pencils may evoke more cognitive responses (Malchiodi, 2011). This distinction was also evident among my research participants, who frequently reflected this in their experiences.

Micke's grounding experience with the glue gun may have been related to the buffer it provided between her and the glue, allowing for both physical and psychological distance and an increased sense of control over the medium. In contrast, participants who used glue directly without such a buffer reported discomfort and even repulsion. The glue gun, in this sense, transformed the same material into a more satisfying and regulating experience.

Gruber (2018) confirms that there is ample research supporting the link between emotional regulation and artmaking, showing that creative processes can help modulate emotions. Similarly, Fancourt et al. (2019) found that engaging in creative arts and art therapy can access emotions, sensations, and physiological signals that enhance emotional regulation. This process has been associated with reduced stress and cortisol levels, as well as increased self-awareness.

The present findings reflect that the use of fluid media such as watercolour appeared to align with the affective level of the Expressive Therapies Continuum, which theorises that such media enhances emotional expression. In this study, the affective nature of watercolour tended to be calming rather than activating.

Similarly, repetitive movement and flow seemed to support participants, such as Charlie, in soothing her inner critic. This aligns with the Expressive Therapies Continuum's kinaesthetic element, which suggests that rhythmic, embodied processes facilitate affective regulation and integration.

Materials such as a pen, which fall on the resistive end of the Expressive Therapies Continuum, are believed to support cognitive processes (Moon, 2010). Social constructivism supports the idea that materials are sometimes

chosen for their sensory characteristics. In this study, Sibusiso used the tactile and auditory qualities of his pen to regulate the frustration caused by chalk pastel, demonstrating this interplay.

Pénzes et al. (2014, p. 488) note that “The combination of art material properties and the tool chosen determined the amount of control the client has”. This is evident in both Micke and Charlie’s experiences, where tools either created distance and cognitive engagement or facilitated affective processing and regulation. Charlie’s use of wet wipes to clean up and self-regulate after discomfort with certain materials further underscores the intricate connection between physical sensation and emotional response in the creative process, shaping both material choice and the overall experience of artmaking.

The online format of the group also introduced a sensory limitation. Because the noise suppression feature on the videoconferencing application often blocked background sounds, participants could not always hear one another’s artmaking processes. As the researcher and observer, I wonder what responses to art material sounds might have emerged had the sessions taken place in person, and whether this might have influenced participants’ material choices or experiences. Sometimes the noises from others’ materials could cause dysregulation or overstimulation for some.

Finally, the ambiguity of mess and smudging appeared significant in participants’ artmaking experiences. As I also noted in my own response to art processes, the experience of mess could be both uncomfortable and liberating. The presence of mess and smudging seemed to reflect participants’ emotional states: when feeling fragile or out of control, the mess could feel disturbing, yet when the need was to express or externalise chaotic emotions, it became cathartic and even necessary for emotional processing.

Limitations and recommendations

The small sample size of four participants allowed for a more intimate engagement with the study. However, it is too small to be representative of the South African population. The participants were all postgraduate students, which speaks to privilege, access, and a specific frame of reference regarding their education. Therefore, further research would be beneficial in settings where this may not be the case, as there might be a more holistic

representation of the South African perspective. Additionally, canvas is not necessarily an affordable option for therapists or clients, so other considerations might need to be made. In this study, as a group, we discussed the option of using alternative surfaces, but participants were content to work with canvas. Perhaps cardboard boxes, fabric, or wood might be alternative options as they are more easily accessible and either affordable or do not incur any costs.

Although online sessions can be helpful and inclusive, it has disadvantages, including affordability, internet disruptions, and the inability to respond to the sounds, materials created, and experiences of one another in a group setting more fully. I would recommend a study of in-person materiality exploration with a focus on the abovementioned sensory influences.

Materials interact differently on different surfaces, and particularly on canvas, which has a textured surface—for example, materials may have elicited different reactions on paper. It might be worth exploring media on various surfaces to adapt this study's methods to also suit socio-economic access in South Africa.

Conclusion

This study highlights the integral role of art materials in art therapy, emphasising how the materials can evoke diverse emotional and sensory responses. Through the exploration of the one-canvas method with four art therapy honours students, the research showed how different materials can be regulating, dysregulating, or ambiguous, depending on their various characteristics and the participants' personal experiences and associations with the art materials. Fluid materials like watercolour were often calming and regulating, while resistive materials like pens and pencils elicited more cognitive engagement. On the other hand, certain materials, such as glue, caused discomfort and dysregulation, highlighting the importance of material selection in art therapy, considering that clients may respond differently to different materials. Ambiguous materials are those that fall into a grey area and can be experienced positively or negatively, depending on the person and their potential state of mind that day.

The findings of this study align with social constructivism and the Expressive Therapies Continuum, which emphasise the interplay between

material properties, individual experiences, and socio-cultural influences. Participants' reflections revealed the therapeutic potential of thoughtfully and intentionally chosen art materials, as well as the challenges posed by material interactions, messiness, and sensory discomfort.

While the study provided valuable insights, its limitations include a small sample size, the educated and thus privileged background of participants, and the exclusive use of canvas as a surface. Future research should explore materiality in diverse socio-economic settings, alternative surfaces, and in-person group dynamics to deepen understanding and accessibility in art therapy practices.

Ultimately, this research underscores the ethical responsibility of art therapists to consider the emotional and sensory impact of materials, fostering self-regulation and emotional processing in clients. The findings invite exploration of material preferences and their therapeutic implications, contributing to the literature on materiality in art therapy in South Africa.

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