

**Creative Community Connections: Arts-based  
Research with Newcomer Syrian Refugee Mothers in St. John's, Canada**

by © Haley Toll

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Toll, H. (2023). *Looking at an uncertain road ahead. Lots to do. Lots to accomplish.*

*(Lake Moraine)*. Oil and acrylic on canvas.



## Abstract

This arts-based research explores Syrian refugee mothers' experiences of belonging and well-being in a hybrid online art therapy group in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The intercultural study is informed by the intersubjective aesthetic arts-based research and art therapy paradigm (Chilton et al., 2015). In addition to a thorough literature review and consultation with the Knowledge Holders, fourteen community leaders also informed the study design. Four Knowledge Holders (ages 29-46) who participated were mothers who relocated to Canada within the past seven years. Arts-based and written data were gathered from five art therapy sessions, individual interviews, the researchers' reflexive art, and an arts-based member-checking session. Data was analyzed with arts-based and qualitative methods.

Results indicate that artmaking can help Syrian refugee mothers voice their experiences by eliciting memories and insight through embodiment, enhancing mood, creating a safe space to foster communication, and by becoming a symbolic way to share information. The Knowledge Holders connected their experiences of belonging in NL to the following major themes: hospitality from locals; vocational opportunities; and identity continuity. Experiences of well-being were connected to their family and children's welfare; experiencing awe in their daily lives; feeling safe through peace, justice, and freedom; and a resilient mindset. Finally, the Knowledge Holders created meaningful connections within the group through artmaking by engaging in shared reciprocity through co-creation, increasing empathetic resonance, and by symbolically validating relationships within the group through concretization.

The findings increase understanding on how artmaking in an art therapy group can support refugee Syrian mothers who have relocated to Canada, in addition to providing insight on their unique experiences of well-being and belonging in St. John's. Moreover, the findings also

provide insight on therapeutic mechanisms of change related to artmaking. They highlight how artmaking can expand expression, connection, and discussion of belonging and well-being during a global pandemic through a hybrid online art therapy model that spans across different languages, cultures, and provinces. Since the research involved continual adaptation that balanced changing pandemic policies with the Knowledge Holders' preferences to meet in-person, it also underlines the resiliency of a collaborative model of shared decision making between the community organization, researcher/art therapist from a university, and the Knowledge Holders. Recommendations involve expanding the art therapy group to include mothers who have relocated to different provinces from different countries. Integrating program evaluation, staff interviews, and validated culturally informed pre-post assessments is recommended to ascertain outcomes related to art therapy's effect on the Syrian refugee mothers' experiences of belonging and well-being.

*Keywords:* Art therapy, newcomer women, relocation, St. John's, belonging, well-being, refugee experiences, Knowledge Holders, arts-based research, cultural humility, intersectionality, aesthetic intersubjective paradigm.

## General Language Summary

This study explores the experiences of belonging and well-being among Syrian refugee women who arrived in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada, within the past seven years (2015-2021) that were expressed in an art therapy group. The group occurred at a resettlement organization during the COVID-19 pandemic. I facilitated the group online from Ottawa as an art therapist/researcher/artist from November to December 2021. Art therapy is a form of mental health support that uses art to express emotions and experiences to increase wellness and reduce stress. When I interviewed community members and reviewed the literature on supporting newcomer refugee women to St. John's, I found that pre-verbal ways to communicate could help people communicate their experiences of belonging and wellbeing. Finding new ways to connect and communicate aside from verbal language can be beneficial for refugee women who may be looking for belonging in a new country.

My research explored how artmaking in a safe art therapy group may help refugee women express their experiences of belonging and well-being in St. John's. I also looked at how online art therapy group can promote meaningful connections among refugee women. To explore these questions, I recruited four Syrian refugee mothers (ages 29–46) as Knowledge Holders, recognizing them as agentic experts of their lived experiences. I collected data from interpreted interviews before and after group art therapy sessions, the artwork created during the five sessions, my observational and reflexive artwork, and literature. After identifying initial themes, I hosted an in-person session at the resettlement organization where the Syrian women created reflective art about the themes. I also created six paintings as part of an intuitive arts-based research process to analyze the data.

The findings showed that artmaking helped the refugee mothers express their experiences by symbolically communicating things that are hard to talk about, evoking body-held memories,

increasing positive emotions, and creating a safe way to communicate experiences. The women's sense of belonging was tied to the hospitality of residents of St. John's, opportunities to achieve educational or work goals, and a continued sense of identity across continents. Their well-being was linked to their families' welfare, experiencing awe, feeling safe in a peaceful environment, and maintaining a resilient outlook. Artmaking helped the women create meaningful relationships by inspiring the group members to help each other, increasing understanding by seeing the world through one another's eyes, and by making images of the relationships that happened within the group (therefore validating the images through depiction).

This research demonstrates the ways that group artmaking can help Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's connect and express their experiences, even when facilitated online during a global pandemic. The research offers insights into how these women can experience belonging and well-being in a small Canadian urban centre. Although the Covid-19 pandemic and my concurrent twin-pregnancy influenced the limits of the study, new research can look at different assessments to see if an art therapy group could influence experiences of belonging and wellbeing of the Syrian refugee mothers. Future research could involve a larger cohort of refugee mothers in St. John's, incorporate staff perspectives, and include pre- and post-assessments to gain deeper insights into changes over time.



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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this research to the Syrian refugee Knowledge Holders, Rayya, Amina, Maryam, and Hafseen (pseudonyms), who are truly four phenomenal people. Your courage and kindness fuel the heart of this research.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my three little boys who have surprised me by deciding to enter this world all within two years. Thank you for opening my heart more deeply than I ever knew was possible. You are my greatest blessings.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction



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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: Seeking Refuge

To escape persecution and poverty in Austria at the cusp of the Second World War, a young Jewish orphan's extended family told him that they would meet him at a train station in Montreal, Canada. With the money that he had, he took a boat from Austria to meet his aunt and uncle. His family never arrived and this eleven-year-old was left to make his own way, without ever knowing what happened to them. My great grandfather, as an eleven-year-old boy, began to work on the train that he was stranded on and eventually made enough money to start a life beyond the train. I never met him, but my family continues to tell his story. He made a new family and died never knowing the fate of his family.

The story of how my great aunt escaped Romania before the Second World War is also shrouded in mystery. I was told that she was a beautiful girl with bright red hair. At nineteen years old, she caught the eye of an English officer, and he helped her escape to the United Kingdom before the Second World War. She soon became a model in England and was featured on magazine covers. This helped her pay her way to Montreal. In Canada, she was one of the first women to have received a degree at McGill in Gymnastics and had seven children.

My other great grandfather escaped a Nazi concentration camp in Austria. He survived in the surrounding forest by foraging for mushrooms and somehow made his way to Canada. I have no other details of his story. I must have been fixated on the part about him foraging for mushrooms as a child. My parents recall seeing his number tattoo. I remember that he was a quiet and kind elderly man, with an outspoken and controlling wife, who was my great grandmother.

I was told these stories as a child and they felt like bedtime stories, although they feel murky now and I cannot recall the exact details. Nonetheless, these childhood stories of family members escaping persecution in eastern Europe and finding refuge in Canada has shaped my desire to support others arriving in Canada. As a woman, I am particularly interested in the

intersectional experience of refugee women. The following dissertation outlines an arts-based critical feminist research study with refugees newly arrived in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador.

Within an art therapy and arts-based framework, the following introduction chapter begins by outlining the problem and context, purpose, research questions, and key terms that contextualize the study. The subsequent sections of this research dissertation include the literature review and theoretical framework chapters, which inform the methodological decisions, ethical considerations, study results, and reflexive artmaking chapters. This dissertation concludes with the discussion and conclusion sections.

## **Problem, Purpose Statement, and Research Questions**

### ***Problem and Context***

Reporting on global trends, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023) announced that the growing number of displaced people is at its highest level in fifty years and is a current global crisis, amounting to 108.4 million refugees and internally displaced people (Hynie, 2017; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). This unprecedented number is due to many factors such as global conflicts including the civil war in the Syrian Arab Republic that began in 2011 which lasted much longer than expected. The Syrian war resulted in the displacement of over 13.5 million Syrian people, with more than 6.5 million being refugees. Syria's emergency refugee crisis eclipsed other crises in Myanmar, West Papua, Central Africa, and the Western Sahara. Refugees who have relocated to new countries have been found to experience a high prevalence of anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and depression symptoms (Borho et al., 2020; Ibraheem et al., 2017; M'zah et al., 2018; Poole et al., 2018). These symptoms are particularly pronounced among individuals who are deemed more vulnerable due to their intersectional identities, such as women and children (Ahmed et al., 2017; Alpak et al., 2015; Ghumman et al., 2016; Javanbakht et al., 2019).

Studies have found that Syrians in refugee camps and who have resettled in new countries experience high rates of Post-traumatic stress disorder (33.5%-83.4%) and depressive (37.4%-43.9%) symptoms (Hassan et al., 2016; Kazour et al., 2017; Maldari et al., 2016; Peconga & Høgh Thøgersen, 2020; Poole et al., 2018). Moreover, symptoms of PTSD and depression are more likely if the individual is a female, among other intersectional factors like age, ability, and sexual orientation (Acarturk et al., 2017; Alpak et al., 2015; Ghumman et al., 2016; Rizkalla et al., 2020a). Indeed, symptoms of post-traumatic stress and depression can also be a natural grieving response to the substantial loss experienced when leaving a country and uncertainty when arriving to a new unknown country, which can heal with compassionate support and care (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016; Lenette et al., 2012). Diverse authors recommend empowering ways to support newcomer refugee women mental health with evidence-based therapy that is provided with cultural humility (Bal & Kaur, 2018; Hanania, 2018; 2020; Jackson, 2020; 2023).

Furthermore, the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status when relocating to a new country can affect equitable economic opportunities and health of newcomer refugee women, particularly those from low socioeconomic and non-European backgrounds (Ahmed et al., 2017; Crenshaw, 1989; Hyman, 2011; Spitzer, 2011). A University of Manitoba research report, sponsored by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, found that Yazidis, a particular ethnic group who have experienced genocide in Syria, "...are amongst the most traumatized we have ever seen in Canada and the way we identify and refer refugees to mental health services seems not to be working" (Wilkinson et al., 2019, p. 81). Moreover, a recent systematic review indicated a large gap in research on refugee mothers' mental health and well-being (Roger & Daou, 2022). Other groups of refugee women may also need culturally-informed equitable mental health support, such as refugees from Eritrea and Congo (S. Haghghi, Association for New Canadians, Director of Settlement Services, personal communication, February 4, 2020).



Canada has resettled 57,815 Syrian refugees, with approximately 21,876 of them being government sponsored since November 2015 (Government of Canada, 2017). Of those resettled, Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) welcomed 560 Syrians. With the arrival of refugees from diverse countries with unique historical and cultural backgrounds, the demographic and social landscape within culturally homogenous Canadian provinces, such as NL, have diversified (Statistics Canada, 2018). However, the systems and attitudes of residents in NL may not be evolving as quickly to embrace this growing diversity of newcomers. In NL, newcomers may experience challenges due to social and environmental remoteness, language barriers, access to social and economic resources, and discrimination (such as Islamophobia, racism, and xenophobia) (Baker, 2013; Baker et al., 2016; Burnaby et al., 2009; Gien & Law, 2009; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Fang et al., 2018; Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008; Sullivan et al., 2009; Whelan & Rivera, 2009).

Moreover, the isolating impacts of two major events, a snow blizzard that left people housebound in St. John's (called "snowmageddon") in January 2020 in addition to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic during 2020-2022, resulted in closures of community support systems and the inability to leave home (Matti, 2020; Quon, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unprecedented challenges due to increased social isolation, which exacerbated a pre-existing mental health crisis (Halon & Carlisle; 2016; Smetanin et al., 2011; World Health Organization, 2022). The consequences related to loneliness and the increase in mental health issues are due to several factors, including rising social inequalities (social determinants of health), increased concerns about contagion, growing distrust among various social groups, a decline in community support programs, and diminished access to mental health resources, as evidenced by reports authored by Statistics Canada (2021) and Ernst and colleagues (2022).

Women, the elderly, and forcibly displaced individuals, among other vulnerable groups, faced disproportionate challenges during the pandemic and its aftermath, including heightened

health risks, economic instability, social isolation, and limited access to essential resources and support systems (Lin, 2023; Pongou et al., 2022; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022; WHO Region of Europe, 2022). For example, Statistics Canada (2021) has reported elevated rates of discrimination among visible minorities, newcomers, Indigenous populations, and sexual minorities during the pandemic. This underscores the pandemic's impact on social and health disparities. Simultaneously, access to mental healthcare services for newcomer women is “hindered by language barriers, inadequate information about existing healthcare services, and individuals’ perceptions about what and when services should be accessed” (Pandey et al., 2022, p. 394).

In heavily populated Canadian areas, such as the Greater Toronto Area (Guruge et al., 2018; Hanania, 2020) and cities Alberta (Drolet & Moorthi, 2018; Zivot et al., 2022), Syrian refugee newcomers reported feeling disconnected from people in their community and difficulty accessing health services for physical and psychological challenges. This information is troublesome, because positive and welcoming post-migratory experiences and feelings of belonging can mitigate psychological and emotional distress caused by pre-migratory and flight-related trauma for refugees (Carswell et al., 2011; Lustig et al., 2004; Guruge & Butt, 2015; Hanley et al., 2018; Miller & Rasmussen, 2016; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). Furthermore, economic instability, such as rising inflation rates and housing prices, increases economic stress for refugees resettling in Canada. Meanwhile, Canadian media and conservative political platforms have blamed newcomer Canadians for the growing housing shortage resulting in increased prices, which increased xenophobic political sentiment (Rabson, 2023; Singer, 2023).

Psychological and emotional factors greatly influence physical health outcomes. For example, a sense of belonging to a community has a positive health impact (Allen et al., 2021; Spitzer, 2011; Valle Painter, 2013). While research indicates that isolation and lack of social support is a challenge for new female Syrian refugees, Canadian researchers know little about

their unique intersectional experiences of being female, often family caregivers, largely Sunni Muslim, and a refugee in St. John's (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Roger & Daou, 2022).

Compounding this challenge, Western and male-dominant forms of research that emphasize language-heavy questionnaires and interviews may not be appropriate or meaningful for women from traditional cultural backgrounds (De-Vault, 1999; Greenwood, 2012; Spitzer, 2011; Vacchelli, 2018b). Feminist authors who publish about migration in various disciplines recommend more collaborative, empowering, and creative ways to gather information to build nuanced, equitable, and culturally appropriate support (Jones, 2018; Griffin, 2016; Dye, 2017; Huss, 2013; Lenette, 2019; Vacchelli, 2018b). Creating spaces for newcomer refugee women to build support networks in a new country is vital (Rizkalla et al., 2020a).

In 2022, the World Health Organization and the European Union jointly published a report and literature review synthesis highlighting how the arts can enhance the well-being of forcibly displaced individuals. The report emphasized the role of arts in health prevention, treatment, promotion, and management across psychological, social, and behavioral domains. The joint report issued four key calls to action:

1. Support arts, arts therapies, and cultural activities that promote mental health and well-being for all individuals.
2. Incorporate arts and cultural activities as part of an organized mental health and psychosocial support response.
3. Leverage cultural and community assets to support the health and well-being of forcibly displaced individuals.
4. Integrate artistic methods and practices to build skills among professionals involved in humanitarian responses.

Art therapy and expressive arts therapies have been described as a resiliency-building therapeutic approach that can transcend cultural barriers in a safe way with trained professionals

(Henderson & Gladdin, 1998). Art therapy can help people voice experiences in concrete, embodied, and creative ways that are beyond verbal communication while envisioning change with a social justice approach (da Silva, 2023; Huss & Cwikel, 2005; Kalaf & Plante, 2019; 2020; Sajnani, 2012). Art therapy integrates artmaking within the therapeutic process to communicate symbolically (Naumburg, 1966), while also viewing artmaking itself as life-enhancing (Kramer & Gerity, 2000).

Supported by the World Health Organization and the European Union (2022), this distinctive mental health discipline fosters connections in intercultural contexts by empowering individuals through active artmaking, ultimately promoting personal transformation and driving social change (Dye, 2017; Hughes et al., 2021; Liebmann, 2022; Rose et al., 2018; Rowe et al., 2017; Rubin et al., 2021). Research indicates that art therapy can reduce traumatic, depressive, and anxiety symptoms of diverse individuals, while increasing quality of life (Boehm et al., 2014; Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Urgulu et al., 2016). Furthermore, active artmaking in art therapy can increase subjective well-being, while increasing the body's ability to relax (Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Kaimal et al., 2016; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). For example, Urgulu and co-researchers (2016) found that art therapy can decrease post-traumatic stress, depression, and trait symptoms of anxiety with Syrian refugee children. In addition, Rubin and co-authors (2021) concluded, from a mixed methods interview with community members, that engaging in artmaking could foster a sense of belonging and social cohesion, which could mediate the stress of acculturation for immigrants.

Various authors have also highlighted the growing global recognition of individual and community engagement in the creative arts as a significant contributor to improving health, fostering social cohesion, and enhancing well-being across community, academic, and policy levels (Clift & Camic, 2016; Fancourt et al., 2023; Hanlon & Carlisle, 2016; World Health

Organization [WHO], 2019; WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2021; WHO European Region, 2022). For example, a WHO scoping review of over 900 research studies concluded that:

... the arts can help people experiencing mental illness, support care for people with acute conditions; help to support people with neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders; assist with the management of noncommunicable diseases; and support end-of-life care (Fancourt & Finn, 2019, p. viii).

To date, however, most art therapy research and programs in Canada have been developed to support children and youth refugees (Annous et al., 2022; Kalaf & Plante, 2019; 2020; Hanania, 2017; 2020; Rousseau et al., 2003). Virtual art therapy, which enables safe connections during a pandemic, particularly for refugee children (Arslanbek, 2022), has emerged as an important approach to provide equitable, accessible, and adaptable mental health support, although it requires further research on ethical implications, efficacy, programming, and participant experience (Malchiodi, 2018b; Potash et al., 2020; Walls, 2018). More research is needed on how strengths-based virtual hybrid art therapy can support government-assisted refugee women with cultural humility during intercultural encounters, particularly in small and geographically isolated urban centers like St. John's, NL.

### ***Purpose***

The purpose of this arts-based research was to explore how an open and strengths-based virtual art therapy group can support newcomer women refugees from Syria, Eritrea, and Congo in exploring their experiences of belonging and well-being. These women resettled in NL between 2014 and 2021. The study focused on exploring their experiences of belonging (Valle Painter, 2013) and well-being (Deiner & Ryan, 2009) through artmaking in a virtual art therapy group that took place across NL and Ontario. Within a critical feminist framework, ABR invites this unique group of Knowledge Holders to co-create artwork alongside the artist-researcher-art therapist (Huss, 2015; Vachelli, 2018). Moreover, the art therapy group process was informed by

Art Hives and open art studio principles (Escobedo et al., 2020; Lewis et al., 2018a; 2018b; Timm-Bottos & Chainey, n.d.)

Knowledge Holders refers to the refugee women who participated in this study and highlights their agency, power, and expertise in their lived experience within a critical feminist framework (Lenette, 2019). Despite collaborative efforts with the community organization to recruit refugee women who had relocated to Canada from Syria, Eritrea, and Congo, only Syrian refugee mothers participated in the study. Recruitment challenges included safety restrictions related to research and policy during the COVID-19 pandemic, time constraints, and the need to ensure systemic support within the community organization, which limited the ability to recruit a more diverse group of Knowledge Holders.

*Belonging* in this study is defined by feeling a part of a trusting community and space (Allen et al., 2021; Pearce, 2008). *Well-being* involves a subjective positive evaluation of one's own values and perspective regarding the components that contribute to a high quality of life (Deiner & Ryan, 2009; WHO, 2021). Stemming from an intersubjective aesthetic paradigm (Chilton et al., 2015) and critical feminist framework (Sajnani, 2012), this arts-based research invited refugee Syrian, Eritrean, and Congolese women, ages 20-65, to participate in a safe hybrid online art therapy support group and create therapeutic artwork that explores their unique lived experiences of belonging and well-being.

In the hybrid online art therapy group, I facilitated sessions virtually from Ottawa, while the Knowledge Holders participated in-person at the collaborating community organization. Their sessions were supported by social workers, an interpreter, and child caregivers who were physically present with the Knowledge Holders. This hybrid model was designed in response to COVID-19 restrictions aimed at reducing transmission, the Knowledge Holders' preferences, and the need to prioritize health and safety. The group's dynamics, along with the model's limitations and delimitations, are explored in the methodology, conclusion, and discussion sections.

### ***Research Questions***

Knowledge Holders were recruited in partnership with the Association for New Canadians (ANC, 2019) with the support of the organization's Director of Settlement Services, special projects manager, and social work department. Moreover, the Knowledge Holders were chosen based on the ANC's current client load of recently arrived newcomers, which included Syrian, Congolese, and Eritrean refugee women. Thus, the research plan was created in consultation with individuals working in communities and organizations that support newcomers, such as the ANC, the Internationalization Office at Memorial University of Newfoundland, among other stakeholders.

Arts-based research (ABR) was the methodology used within an *aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of ABR and art therapy* (Chilton et al., 2015) along with a critical feminist intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989) that emphasized cultural humility (Talwar, 2017; Jackson, 2020; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). The study focused on embodied, affective, supportive, strength-based, and creative art making experience and expression (Spitzer, 2011; Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b). Furthermore, a critical feminist lens to art therapy that prioritized cultural humility was paramount to this research, while integrating intersectional and anti-oppressive art therapy (Collier & Eastwood, 2022; Eastwood et al., 2023; Jackson, 2020; 2023).

This study is among the first to implement a hybrid virtual art therapy group using participatory arts-based research (ABR) methods for Syrian refugee women in the uniquely geographically isolated urban center of St. John's, Canada. Its distinctiveness lies in the continuous adaptation and evolution of methods in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a period marked by heightened contagion safety concerns and the need to address accessibility challenges. This arts-based reflexive process (Leavy, 2022), presented in chapter seven, captures the research evolution, my critical reflections and analysis, as well as my emotional experiences throughout the study. For a holistic perspective, the arts-based research study synergized and triangulated

data from: visual artwork created in the session, oral reflections from the Knowledge Holders, pre-and post-focus groups regarding belonging and well-being, and creative reflexive art from the researcher. Through the holistic creative data collected (Leavy, 2017b) the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do recently arrived Syrian, Congolese, and Eritrean refugee women to Newfoundland and Labrador voice their lived experiences through online art therapy?
2. How can artmaking in a safe group setting help this population express their experiences of belonging and well-being in an online art therapy group?
3. How can artmaking in an online art therapy group help create meaningful connections between these Knowledge Holders?

Only Syrian refugee mothers participated in the recruitment session, despite efforts to recruit Congolese and Eritrean women. The limited pool of Knowledge Holders was likely due to several factors:

1. The current Knowledge Holders were recruited from an existing program that had already assessed their psychological and emotional readiness to participate in an art therapy group. Individuals needed to be part of the current ANC programming to ensure that social workers could follow up with them if any trauma or emotional challenges emerged during the five art therapy sessions. Therefore, due to the sensitive nature of the group format and Knowledge Holders, a purposeful sampling method was conducted within a small pool of individuals during a limited amount of time after the university's ethical board approval, before the researcher's maternity leave, and while the staff members were available to support the program.
2. The limitations and personal comfort related to attending groups or recruitment sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### ***Definition of Terms***



**Arts-based research:** Arts-based research (ABR) is a transdisciplinary approach to research influenced by the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of arts-based research and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015). In line with Leavy (2017a) and McNiff (2008, 2011; 2013, 2017), ABR is actively creating and perceiving art within an evolving and creative framework, while emphasizing the artistic process in research. In this research, ABR aims to be inclusive of various terms describing artistic inquiry, such as aesthetically based research, artistic inquiry, arts-informed research, and critical arts-based research (Chilton & Leavy, 2015; Leavy, 2017a; Finley, 2018). Like Leavy (2017a), I share the concern that excessive differentiation and labeling of these terms can lead to confusion among scholars and disrupt the synthesis of valuable research in the field. ABR also includes all art modalities such as drama, music, and dance as valid “ways of knowing” (Allen, 1995, p. 172).

**Belonging:** In this study, belonging demarcates the feeling of being a part of a group, fostering a sense of connection and inclusion, which can be in relationship with other beings, places, and self (Allen et al., 2021). According to Allen and co-authors (2021), belonging is a "core part of what makes one human," which can lead to positive life outcomes (p. 14). Reduced perceptions of belonging are associated with isolation, potentially diminishing motivation, purpose, and longevity, and contribute to negative mental and physical health. The significance of studying belonging is important when supporting newcomers to Canada, because this phenomenon influences their personal and societal functioning (Pearce, 2008; Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2009; Valle Painter, 2013).

**Knowledge Holders:** The term "Knowledge Holders" is used in this research to describe the female refugee research participants. This term extends the definition of participants by emphasizing the power and wisdom of the unique group of individuals who chose to participate in the study within a dialectical pluralist and subjectivist ontology (Chilton et al., 2025), as well as a critical feminist anti-oppressive framework with cultural humility (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023;

Lenette, 2019; Sajnani, 2012). This term celebrates their power, choice, and agency to share their unique experiences. Lenette (2019) adopted this terminology and integrated it into the field of refugee studies from research conducted among Indigenous and First Nations communities in Canada.

**Interpreter:** Interpreters are professionals who are tasked with summarizing information in both the researcher and Knowledge Holders' first languages in an immediate way, while conveying the intention between two languages. Compared to interpreters, translators are typically asked to provide verbatim translations of responses from one language to another. Alternatively, when interpreters summarize communication, they may include their own perspectives and voices to contribute to the research process. Therefore, interpreters were preferred and trained at the host organization.

**Refugee:** In this study, refugees are defined as individuals who have been compelled to leave their home country due to violence, war, persecution, and are often unable to or have a well-founded fear of return to their country of origin (Fuentes, 2019; USA for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), n.d.) The experience of persecution in their home country can be attributed to various factors, such as religious, ethnic, tribal, gender, sexual identity, national, or specific group affiliations, as well as political beliefs, among other factors (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.) There are numerous groups of refugees in Canada, who have different pathways to resettlement compared to other classes of immigrants. These refugee groups include Resettled Refugees, Refugee Claimants (asylum seekers), Government-Assisted Refugees, Privately-Sponsored Refugees, and Blended-Visa Office-Referred Refugees (Government of Canada, 2024; University of Calgary, 2024). Moreover, there are also two distinct classes of refugees. The Convention Refugee Abroad class can be sponsored by the Government of Canada, or a private group. The Country of Asylum class can be privately sponsored, a referral organization, or sponsored by the UNHCR.

**Well-being:** In this study, well-being is defined as an individual's comprehensive evaluation of their quality of life based on their subjective values, which is in-line with an empowerment-focused, pluralist, and subjectivist ontology (Chilton et al., 2015). The definition assumes the term subjective well-being, which reflects feelings of happiness, contentment, and comfort, coupled with a sense of personal agency and control over one's life. Therefore, this definition of well-being includes the eudaimonic approach, which encompasses personal meaning-making, self-realization, and a holistic perspective, as opposed to a hedonic perspective (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) connects well-being to health, resiliency, a sense of purpose, and the “capacity for action” (p. 10). WHO (2021) defines the term, well-being, as:

...a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic, and environmental conditions. (p. 10)

In the field of arts in health, well-being extends beyond the mere absence of physical and mental health issues and focuses on whether individuals are living meaningful lives characterized by happiness and autonomy, according to their unique standards of well-being (Clift & Camic, 2016). Deiner and Ryan (2009) proposed that well-being consists of three core components: life satisfaction, positive emotional experiences, and reduced negative moods. This conception of well-being is culturally influenced and rooted in an individual's value system, making it relevant in intercultural studies.

**Virtual Art Therapy:** Virtual art therapy describes the delivering of art therapy through synchronous online platforms like videoconferencing. According to the Canadian Art Therapy Association (n.d.) “Art therapy combines the creative process and psychotherapy, facilitating self-exploration and understanding. Using imagery, colour, and shape as part of this creative therapeutic process, thoughts and feelings can be expressed that would otherwise be difficult to articulate” (para. 1). This health practice integrates the artistic and creative process of artmaking

into therapeutic sessions through tailored interventions, drawing from both the sciences in healthcare and artistic elements (Buccharelli, 2016; Kapitan, 2015; Malchiodi, 2003; 2011). The therapeutic relationship, central to art therapy, facilitates non-verbal communication to explore emotions, reduce stress, encourage introspection and self-discovery, and allow cathartic expression to enhance the overall quality of life of diverse individuals. Art therapy is provided by qualified art therapists with post-graduate training that is credentialed in the field by professional national organizations (Canadian Art Therapy Association, n.d.)

The definition of virtual corresponds with Winkel's (2022) description, which is outlined as follows:

‘Virtual’ is the term used...for synchronous online videoconferencing, in which the therapist and the client can see each other simultaneously through webcam, and hear each other through the computer microphones or telephone. This is a generic term that does not distinguish between web conferencing platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Jane, Doxy, SharePoint, and others. (p. 2)

### **Introduction Summary**

In the introduction chapter, I recounted my family’s history of escape and refuge during times of persecution and war, setting the backdrop for my passion and interest in supporting newcomers to Canada, particularly refugee women. I highlighted the current context and problem of the global refugee crisis, emphasizing the mental health challenges faced by displaced individuals, particularly the intersectional challenges and strengths of women who experienced trauma, loss, and relocation. The problem section provided context and some of the specific challenges faced by refugee women in NL, while examining the impact of social connections, environmental factors, language barriers, and discrimination. Furthermore, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic when Canadians and global citizens reported increased feelings of loneliness and isolation (Lin, 2023). Therefore, innovative, creative,

strengths-based, and culturally meaningful mental health supports are necessary to increase belonging and well-being for refugees who have experienced loss and are resettling in new countries during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Informed by critical feminist theory (Sajjani, 2012) and the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm that integrates ABR and art therapy ways of knowing (Chilton et al., 2015), the purpose of the research was to explore how artmaking within a hybrid model of virtual art therapy could help refugee women from Syria, Eritrea, and Congo express their experiences of well-being and belonging in St. John's, NL, Canada. Newcomer refugee women from the three countries were chosen because they were the majority groups that were being supported by the collaborative community organization at the time who resettled in Canada within the past seven years. The three arts-based research questions presented emphasized the need for a culturally humble and empowering approach that focuses on how artmaking can help the Knowledge Holders express, explore belonging and well-being, and build connections within an intercultural context and a hybrid online art therapy group. Only Syrian refugee women participated in the recruitment session, despite efforts to include Congolese and Eritrean women, and extending the invitation to Iraqi refugee women. The specified group of Knowledge Holders was likely due to the recruitment being limited to those already in an ANC program, the sensitive nature of the study requiring purposeful sampling from a small pool, and challenges related to attending during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter concluded by defining key terms used in this study, including arts-based research, belonging, interpreters, intersectionality, Knowledge Holders, refugees, well-being, and virtual art therapy.

CHAPTER 2  
Literature Review



Rayya (Pseudonym). (2021). *In G\*d we trust*. Acrylic on canvas.

## CHAPTER 2

### Literature Review

#### Context and History of Female Refugee Experiences

##### *A Growing Global Crisis and Refugee Migrants to Canada*

The number of international refugees amounts to one percent of the world's population (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, [UNHCR], 2020). This comparison compelled the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2020; 2023) to announce in 2018 that the world is experiencing the most recorded numbers of refugees and displaced people in recent history, with over 106.4 million people being forced to relocate globally. This crisis is largely due to long-standing geopolitical conflicts and environmental crises, such as the Syrian Civil War, which resulted in over half of the Syrian population being displaced or forced to flee (Ibraheem et al., 2017).

In a global effort to support nations in crisis and refugee populations, the Government of Canada made a commitment in 2015 to welcome Syrian refugee newcomers relocating to Canada with the Welcome Refugees Program. As of October 31, 2020, 44,620 Syrian refugees have resettled in Canada with 21,745 people being government-assisted refugees (Government of Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020). Many authors who have studied the impacts of war, loss, and relocation concluded that the experiences of war and resettlement deeply impact the physical, social, and mental health of refugees (Pacione et al., 2013; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017). With increasing arrivals of refugees from war-torn countries, there is a need to provide support programs that address refugees' health needs, including their psychosocial and emotional well-being.

The Syrian war began in March 2011 when civilians began demanding the resignation of the president after pro-democracy protesters were tortured by the government (Rodgers et al., 2016). Subsequently, rebel groups collaboratively fought against the authority, leading to over

250,000 deaths in the following four years. The rise of the group Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in this area complicated civil and religious disputes and integrated more extreme acts of warfare with chemical warfare, bombing highly populated civilian urban areas, and engaging in mass killings. This further expanded the death toll to approximately 60,000 people in Syria, leaving many civilians to flee the country for their safety and leading to a massive relocation of 6.6 million registered internally and externally displaced Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2020).

### ***Complexity of Refugees' Mental Health Prevalence***

Mental illness and distress, such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety symptoms, can be high among refugees resettling from war-torn countries (Bogic et al., 2015; Guruge et al., 2018; Im et al., 2020; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017; Pacione et al., 2013). This is particularly the case of refugees from diverse countries who resettle in Western countries and have witnessed violence (Schlaudt et al., 2020). Accounts of distressing events during the Syrian conflict have been documented, encompassing exposure to airstrikes, enduring involuntary confinement, incarceration, and torture. These encounters were exacerbated by the deprivation of fundamental necessities, "other stressors and losses during wartime that challenge pre-war beliefs and disrupt social bonds," and the experiences of seeking refuge and relocating to a new country (Ben Farhat et al., 2018; Matos et al., p. 2). Borho and colleagues' (2020) follow-up longitudinal study found that a shorter period of residence in Germany, higher perceived discrimination, and traumatic experiences were predictors of heightened psychological stress (measured as prevalence of depression, anxiety, and PTSD). The authors concluded that, "... the psychological burden on this refugee population remains consistently high over time, despite partly improved living conditions, and confirms the importance of therapeutic interventions" (p. 2).

In the general population, approximately 40% of people are predicted to experience a traumatic event in their life, while 8% of these individuals are likely to experience clinical symptoms of Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of these traumatic experiences.



PTSD is a clinical mental health diagnosis that describes the experience of intrusive symptoms and hypervigilance after experiencing a traumatic and overwhelming event (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Authors found closer to 35-45% of Syrian refugees in refugee camps and in post-migration countries experience symptoms of PTSD, with depression rates being similar, which may likely be due to lack of support and diverse traumatic experiences (Alpak et al., 2015; Annous et al., 2022; Im et al., 2020; M'zah et al., 2018; Naja et al., 2016). Tinghog and co-researchers (2017) found that, when 1,215 Syrians in Sweden were asked about their experiences of war, 85% shared that they experienced the war intimately and another 79% revealed that they had experienced life-threatening situations. In an examination of 8,149 refugees from different nationalities, Schlaudt and colleagues (2020) found that refugees from Sudan, Iraq and Syria reported the highest rates of experiencing violence, while refugees from Iraq, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo recounted higher rates of witnessing violence. The authors found that refugees, and particularly women, from Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan were most likely to report mental health symptoms when screened.

Psychological experiences are also linked to physical pain. In a cross-sectional study in Turkey, McGrath and colleagues (2020) reported that 41% of the 1,678 Syrian refugee participants in their study experienced somatic pain and distress. Higher pain rates were associated with identifying as female, as well as high levels of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Moreover, in their systematic review that included 8,176 adult Syrian refugees, Peconga and Høgh Thøgersen (2020) found that rates of PTSD ranged from between 23% to 83% and were often comorbid with anxiety and depression. The need to support these individuals' basic physical needs, in addition to providing mental health support for spiritual, emotional, and psychological healing, is vital when welcoming refugee newcomers from war-torn countries into a new country (Matos et al., 2021; McGrath et al., 2020; Miller & Rasmussen, 2016; Rizkalla et al., 2020a; 2020b).

**A Call for Culturally Informed Psychosocial Support.** Diverse authors recommend culturally humble, gender sensitive, empowering, respectful, trusting, and collaborative psychosocial support for Syrian refugees in refugee camps and who have resettled in new countries (Guruge et al., 2018; Hanania, 2018; 2020; Hassan et al., 2016). Many authors also note that Syrian refugees, among other refugees, often do not seek out mental health support due to taboos about mental illness, language barriers with practitioners, and feeling like they may be misunderstood, among other barriers (Ghumman et al., 2016; Guruge et al., 2018; Hassan et al., 2016; M'zah et al., 2018; Rizkalla et al., 2020a). In their review article, Ghumman and colleagues (2016) recommend community-based peer support groups for women, providing the example of a learning circle for women from the African Great Lakes. One support group for refugee women was facilitated by authors Goodkind and colleagues (2013), which increased quality of life and reduced psychological distress among participants. Finally, Sajnani (2012) recommends that creative arts therapists incorporate a critical race feminist theoretical approach to psychosocial support and research, which involves community-based (Talwar, 2016) anti-oppressive and social justice tenants, along with a deep understanding of the impacts of intersectionality to foster inclusive, empowered, and creative transformational healing.

Nonetheless, positive psychology studies related to post-traumatic growth, meaning making, and resiliency are less common and merit more research (Kalaf & Plante, 2019; 2020; Matos et al., 2021; Peconga & Høgh Thøgersen, 2020; Tribe et al., 2017). It is important to note that anxiety, depression, PTSD, and bereavement symptoms can be natural responses to loss, trauma, and experiences of human suffering (Kalmanowitz & Ho, 2016). These symptoms do not necessarily merit a clinical diagnosis. Yet, many mental health professionals working with refugees frame their practice within trauma-informed frameworks because of the client-centered nature of this framework, and the types of behaviours and needs of those seeking support (Hanania, 2018; Rizkalla et al., 2020a). Both refugees who have a clinical diagnosis, and those

who do not, may benefit in different ways from therapeutic and empowerment-focused artmaking that explores well-being and belonging.

### ***Post-Migratory Experiences of Refugees***

In addition to pre-migration experiences, post-migration stress can significantly impact the mental and physical health outcomes of newcomers, prompting the development of holistic ecological models that capture the complexity of refugee and migratory experiences (Bogic et al., 2015; Miller & Rasmussen, 2016). Although the process of migration may be linked to various stresses and adaptations, newcomers moving to Canada tend to have lower mental health incidences than the general Canadian population upon arrival to Canada, apart from PTSD (Ng, 2011). Nonetheless, after 10 years of living in Canada, newcomers are 10 times less healthy than the average population (Ng, 2011). Post migration rates of depression, PTSD, chronic pain, and somatic symptoms become 10% higher than the overall Canadian population for adults and adolescents. This increase in health problems for newcomers who have arrived in Canada in a healthy state is called the *healthy immigrant effect*, which is more severe for women from low socioeconomic and non-European backgrounds (Guruge et al., 2010; Hyman, 2011; Ng, 2011; Stewart et al., 2008; Spitzer, 2011).

According to Canadian researchers, Kirmayer and co-researchers (2011), the process of migration includes three major transitions: 1. Changes in socioeconomic systems; 2. Changes in personal ties to rebuild social networks; and 3. Changes in cultural systems. These adaptations may elicit feelings of anxiety and loss of identity with significant changes, leading to distress (Beiser & Hyman, 1997; Bogic et al., 2015; Murray et al., 2010; Schweitzer et al., 2011; Vissandjée et al., 2005). Refugees are unique because they do not make the conscious decision to immigrate. The history and current definition of the term *refugee* reflect tensions within international law (Fuentes, 2019). The 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as:

a person who is under well-founded fear of being persecuted for one or more of the five grounds listed in Article 1A(2) (race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion and is forced to look for protection outside his/her country...other consistent reasons to seek asylum include all fears of being subject to cruel or degrading torture or human rights violations according to the UN Convention Against Torture (UNCAT). (Fuentes, 2019, pp. 100-101)

Individuals may have left their country quickly under extreme conditions, often without their entire family or personal possessions. They may also have experienced significant trauma in their country of origin, such as living in war zones or refugee camps (Ben Farhat et al., 2018). For example, gender-based violence is common in refugee camps and during wartime, disproportionately affecting women and children (Rizkalla et al., 2020a; 2020b; Tastsoglou, 2019).

Numerous studies have shown that post-migration challenges mediate negative mental health outcomes and distress for newcomers (Carswell et al., 2011; Lustig et al., 2004; Guruge & Butt, 2015; Miller & Rasmussen, 2016; Siriwardhana et al., 2014; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). Despite these challenges, newcomers (immigrants) to Canada reported a stronger sense of belonging compared to the Canadian-born population, according to the Government of Canada's 2020 Social Survey (Stick et al., 2023). Therefore, it is essential for welcoming nations to support refugee integration and address pre-migration, post-migration, and fleeing experiences through a holistic and ecological model (Miller & Rasmussen, 2016; Silove et al., 2017).

### ***Intersectional Experiences of Refugee Women***

Women, children, and LGBTQ2A+ communities are more likely to present mental health and PTSD symptoms due to intersectional factors, including discrimination and being more likely to be sexually victimized during war (Ghumman et al., 2016; Hassan et al., 2016; Rizkallah et al.,

2020a; Schlaudt et al., 2020). Female refugees have unique needs, strengths, and challenges when they move to a new country. Tastsoglou writes (2019) that:

Gender plays a major role in every step of the migration process, from making the decision to leave and planning for departure, to modalities of travel, risks along the way, and settlement and integration opportunities, practices, and outcomes. (p. 55)

The intersectional experience of gender, class, ethnicity, religion, etc., create complex social positions, strengths, and vulnerabilities, which affect the health of displaced women (Bauer, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; Hankivsky, 2014; Hyman, 2011; Rubesin, 2018; Tatsoglou, 2019). Social determinants of health describe how health is impacted by “social, economic, environmental and political conditions in which people live” (Allen & Allen, 2016, p. 27; UCL Institute of Health Inequity and World Health Organization Office for Europe, 2014). For example, the matriarch role in a family and community has a profound effect on family culture and the health of communities (Guruge et al., 2010). Although newcomer minority women are undergoing changes and possible stress in their adaptation to a different cultural context, they also take on the role of shaping the mental health of their families, while participating in community organizations to improve the well-being of their society (Lenette, 2019. Spitzer, 2011). Meanwhile, the experience of being a mother may also influence the well-being of refugee women (Roger & Daou, 2022).

The unique intersectional experience of being a refugee, minority, female, and mother is unique. More research is needed on how to support this population’s health needs from their unique perspective. A recent systematic review conducted at McGill University found that refugee mothers are at increased risk for depression, suicidality, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress (Roger & Daou, 2022). The review also indicated gaps in research aiding the mental health of refugee mothers, such as lack of social support, language barriers, isolation, and discrimination can exacerbate psychological distress (Kohli & Fineran, 2020). Moreover, the authors found that the interventions that included refugee mothers often focused on their children, youth, or the

family, but “seldom assess and address the mothers’ needs appropriately and include little consideration for the mother’s psychological needs and well-being” (Kohli & Fineran, 2020, p. 344). Thus, working with and supporting recent female refugees, and particularly mothers, *LGBTQ2A+* in Canada is important for the health of family structures and growing communities.

Spitzer (2011) attributed the increased health inequities for newcomer women to Canada to the embodied experience of stress. The author summarizes the increased health effects that newcomer non-European women experience to the *work, worry, and weariness* model (Spitzer, 2011). *Work* describes both inequities and social barriers for newcomer women related to both paid and unpaid labor. *Worry* refers to the centrality of matriarchal roles determining the health of their families and the challenges of experiencing marginalization. Finally, *weariness* describes the discrepancies between expectations of building a life in Canada versus the reality. These three facets are explained in more detail below:

**Work.** Regarding work challenges, diverse Canadian employers still do not recognize international employment history and education. This often leads to newcomers being employed in lower paying jobs often unrelated to previous careers that results in a “downward socioeconomic spiral” (Pottie at al., 2008; as cited in Spitzer, 2011, p. 25). Consequently, the probability of being in poverty is increased by over 50% for newcomers, particularly from non-European backgrounds, despite researchers controlling for age, education, and language skills (Spitzer, 2011).

**Worry.** Health issues can “be the result of embodiment of marginalization” (Spitzer, 2011, p. 35). Worry challenges relate to the experience of chronic stress. Consistent high cortisol levels can decrease lifespan and increase health problems, like Type 2 diabetes and cardiac disease (Allen & Allen, 2016; Spitzer, 2011). In Canada, Spitzer states that “abundant biomedical evidence lends explanatory power to the relationship between deteriorating and poor health status, migration, gender, and downward social mobility” (2011, p. 35). For example, Borho and co-

authors (2020) found that for newcomer Syrian refugees, a higher level of perceived discrimination was a major predictor of psychological stress for participants over time, along with pre-migration traumatic experiences and a short duration of residence. Further, studies have found that refugee women are less likely to seek medical or psychological support due to multiple factors, including systemic barriers, access, and taboos with being labelled with a mental illness (Ahmed et al., 2017; Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008; Rizkalla et al., 2020a).

Cross-cultural challenges can destabilize the family structure and cultural norms when resettling in a new cultural environment. For example, Western standards for women's rights and responsibilities may lead to conflict in a family with strictly defined and culturally informed gender roles (Guruge et al., 2010). Difficulty navigating and negotiating between the behavioural norms and obligations of binary cultural norms and scripts may incite emotional distress (Vissandjée et al., 1999). In addition, clashes in traditional female gender expectations can be linked to domestic violence (Meleis & Pollara, 1995). Adding to this experience of cultural isolation and family tension, gender-based violence has seen an increase due to people staying at home during the COVID-19 global pandemic (Emezue, 2020; Mlambo-Ngcuka, 2020; Ryan, 2020).

**Weariness.** Weariness can emerge when expectations about Canadian opportunities are not met, especially if newcomers made sacrifices to migrate (Mullings & Anderson, 2012; Spitzer, 2011). Weariness can surface due to experiences of low employment, poverty, discrimination, and racism. Furthermore, particularly for collectivist societies, large and embedded social networks and connections may not be present in the new society. Authors, Vissandjée and colleagues (2011) believe that social support accounts for the intersectional connection between gender, migration, and health. Social capital is an important factor for newcomer integration and health, as it leads to support networks, job opportunities, and well-being (Hanley et al., 2018; Vissandjée et al., 2011). In Montreal, Hanley and co-authors (2018)

found that Syrian refugees of all ages with fewer friends were more likely to report poor mental health. This is in-line with research that shows that low social contact can decrease lifespan and depression (Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England post-2010 [SRHIE], 2010).

### **Experiences of Newcomers to Newfoundland and Labrador (NL)**

Canada has a long and colourful history of welcoming refugees and newcomers, influenced by both utilitarian and economic ideologies and policies (Burnstein, 2017; Tatsoglou et al., 2014). According to Statistics Canada reporting on the 2021 Census, “Immigrants make up the largest share of the population in over 150 years and continue to shape who we are as Canadians” (Statistics Canada, 2022, p. 1). In addition, the number of newcomers to arrive in Canada is projected to reach 29.1% to 34.0% by 2041. More than one in four Canadians are foreign-born, which represents 23.0% of the Canadian population, according to the Statistics Canada 2021 Census (Statistics Canada, 2022). Newcomers often prefer to relocate to larger cities and jurisdictions which may offer a greater number of economic opportunities and established cultural communities.

While more than half of Canada’s newcomers settle in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montréal, the Province of NL historically attracted less than 1% of the total newcomer population (Statistics Canada, 2017). However, the number of newcomers relocating to Atlantic Canada increased in the last 15 years, from 1.2% in 2006 to 3.5% in 2021 (Statistics Canada, 2022). Furthermore, within the last 10 years, NL has welcomed more than triple the number of newcomers to NL, increasing from 742 in 2011-2012 to 2,843 in 2021-2022 (Statistica, 2023). In addition, there continues to be a heightened increase in newcomers, with 5,666 reported arriving since 2021 (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2022). The Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (2022) stated that, “This historic immigration milestone comes on the heels of Statistics Canada reporting that Newfoundland and Labrador is experiencing the



fastest population growth in 50 years. Immigration is the primary driver of this growth...” (para. 6), resulting in a “watershed moment” (para. 7).

The demographics of newcomers have also changed in NL, with more government-sponsored refugees relocating to the small urban center of St. John’s, as opposed to economic, family-sponsored, and other categories of immigrants (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2022). Between 2010 and 2014, refugees from areas such as Syria and Iraq have constituted 20% of the newcomer population in NL, compared to the national average of nine percent (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2015). Despite the importance of providing post-migratory support for newcomers, research in NL has found that the health and educational infrastructure, and first line responders, are often unprepared to support the unique needs of diverse individuals, including Muslim refugee women and their families (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Li et al., 2016). In fact, NL has the lowest newcomer retention rate in Canada (Nolan, 2007; Okonny-Myers, 2010). This may be due to the province being more geographically isolated and the island of Newfoundland being one of the most culturally, ethnically, and linguistically homogeneous jurisdictions in Canada (Government of Canada, 2015; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2015). Statistics Canada (2018) demographics indicate that 98% of Newfoundland citizens are of European Caucasian descent, with their mother-tongue being English, and religion Christianity. Meanwhile, only 2% of the population in NL are visible minorities (Statistics Canada, 2018).

Since the province’s publication of *Diversity, opportunity and growth: An immigration strategy for Newfoundland and Labrador* (NL Office of Immigration and Multiculturalism, 2007), research on immigrant retention, support, and receptivity conducted in subsequent years found that newcomers experienced multiple challenges related to discrimination (such as Islamophobia), lack of employment opportunities, and lack of understanding of cultural differences from locals (Baker, 2013; Baker et al., 2016; Baker, 2017; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Li et al., 2016; Li &

Grineva, 2016; Li & Que, 2015). Tastsoglou and co-authors (2014) interviewed refugee assistance program service providers in the Atlantic provinces. The providers described inequitable access to services and navigating these supports, in addition to low cultural sensitivity in both social and health divisions. Subsequent provincial policies and strategies have been implemented to address these inequities and increase newcomer retention and support (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2008; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2017).

Newcomers in St. John's reported that they experience discriminatory and cultural stereotyping behaviours from locals, which deepen their sense of isolation in the community (Li et al., 2016). The researchers attribute educational and integration challenges to misunderstandings or miscommunication from professionals. Participants interviewed by El-Bialy and Mulay (2016) discussed how they continuously felt *othered* and singled out, by continuously being asked, "Where are you from?". These difficult experiences are important to highlight because research shows that poor post-migration experiences and incidents of discrimination are linked to negative mental health effects and post-migration trauma (Guruge & Butt, 2015; Hyman & Guruge, 2006; Guruge et al., 2018; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Miller & Rasmussen, 2016; Rowe et al., 2017). Miller & Rasmussen (2016) wrote that, "the post-migration environment plays a critical role in either fostering or impeding recovery from war-related trauma and grief" (p. 7).

Despite the challenges, many newcomers remain in St. John's for various reasons. The environment can offer resilience-building experiences through the beautiful landscape and supportive programming. New migrants indicated that they enjoy St. John's because it has a rugged and therapeutic landscape (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016). They also found that being a small population within a small urban center felt safe. Supportive programming, such as the Association for New Canadians (ANC) language classes adapt to the changing needs of newcomers and offer helpful resources (Mulcahy, 2015). Other immigrant and refugee support organizations also exist, although some have also closed, such as the Refugee and Immigrant Advisory Council (RIAC,

2018). Before their closing, RIAC's executive director and volunteers supported individuals and families with their immigration paperwork and provided unique support, including creative workshops that enhanced and taught entrepreneurial skills, such as sewing ateliers (J. Rivera, personal communication, February 20, 2018).

Similar to Roger and Daou's (2022) recommendation for a safe space when providing psychosocial support to refugee women and mothers, Li & Grineva (2016) call for a "mediated space," where locals and newcomers could facilitate cultural differences in a safe manner and without losing their connections to their home culture. In response, Lewis and colleagues (2018a) created an open and supportive art studio for a group of newcomer adolescents at a local high school in St. John's, to create a safe space that fosters experiences of belonging, resiliency, hope, and empowerment. The authors found that the creative open studio provided a social place that felt like *home* for the participants and facilitated English language learning in a non-evaluative way. It also fostered a sense of belonging among the newcomer adolescents by building their confidence to host local peers at the final exhibition (open house), where they taught art-making skills (Lewis et al., 2018a).

### **Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Health and Isolation**

In 2020, Statistics Canada conducted a study to assess the mental health impacts of COVID-19 on Canadians by asking 46,000 individuals about their experiences between April 24 and May 22, 2020. More than half of the participants (52%) reported that their mental health worsened since the onset of the physical distancing measures. Additionally, most of the participants reported at least one symptom of anxiety (88%). "Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge" (71%) was the most common reported symptom, while 69% reported that they are "becoming easily annoyed" and 64% reported that they are "having trouble relaxing" (p. 3). Nonetheless, the data was not collected using probability-based sampling due to time restrictions and the nature of the online questionnaire. Consequently, conclusions could not be made

regarding generalization to the wider Canadian population, however the data could be interpreted loosely as an indicator of some of the mental health challenges that were experienced during the pandemic.

The unprecedented public health challenges brought about by COVID-19 have exacerbated pre-existing modern issues. Factors such as rising social inequalities, increased concerns about contagion, intergroup suspicions, diminished community support programs, and reduced access to mental health resources have all contributed to the amplification of anxiety and depression on a national and global scale (Ernst et al., 2022; O'Neill & Wittnebel, 2020).

Vulnerable populations, including women and the elderly, have been disproportionately affected during, and in the aftermath, of the pandemic (Lin, 2023; Pongou et al., 2022; WHO, 2022). An underlying impact of the coronavirus measures was a global increase of domestic violence incidents towards women and girls (Bradbury-Jones & Isham, 2020; Emezue, 2020). Therefore, women were also more at risk and isolated during the pandemic and were less likely to seek support.

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) projected in 2011 that anxiety and depression would become significant global contributors to disability and ill health (Hanlon & Carlisle, 2016; Santomauro et al., 2021). This increase in mental illness was considered in the context of contemporary health challenges which are intricately influenced by intersectional social determinants of health, such as socioeconomic status, gender, age, and minority status. The term "dis-ease" highlights the sense of malaise associated with the stresses of modern living influencing mental health distress and decreasing well-being (Hanlon & Carlisle, 2016, p. 21). In Canada, it was reported by Statistics Canada that approximately one in five individuals experience mental distress or illness annually (O'Neill & Wittnebel, 2020).

An increased "loneliness epidemic," termed by Lin (2023, p. 7) captures the phenomena of the increase of loneliness amongst diverse populations and its impact on mental health. A

population-based study of 3,772 individuals identified an increase in depression and isolation rates, reaching a staggering 34.7% (Lin, 2023; The U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). The surge in the felt experience of isolation and loneliness was linked to both poor physical and mental health consequences (Cacioppo et al., 2015; Health Commons Solution Lab, 2021). For instance, a meta-analysis examining 70 research studies revealed that health risks associated with isolation, including depression, weakened immunity, low sleep quality, cardiovascular issues, and cognitive decline, are comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day (Hawkley & Capitanio, 2015; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015;). In addition, the result of social rejection and a decreased sense of belonging include a reduced lifespan, decreased immune system functioning, and increased mental health distress and physical illnesses (Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Cacioppo et al., 2011; Choearom et al., 2005; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Holt-Lunstad, 2018; Slavich et al., 2010).

The mental and physical health effects of loneliness and isolation impacts various societal structures, including families, communities, and the economy (McClelland et al., 2020; Steptoe et al., 2013; Wilson, 2023; WHO, 2022). Prioritizing this important public health epidemic, the United States Surgeon General (2023) created a framework for addressing *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation* by building programs that increase community and social connections. This framework includes increasing participation in the arts for health reasons, thereby increasing creativity, active participation in community, and a sense of belonging.

To address the increased health consequences of isolation and loneliness amongst Canadian and international populations, the WHO regional office for Europe described arts for/in health programs as “often low-risk, highly cost-effective, integrated and holistic treatment options for complex health challenges to which there are no current solutions” (p. 1). This statement was made as a response to increased research on the positive mental health impacts of arts engagement for diverse individuals across the lifespan (from infancy to older adulthood) (Dow et al., 2023; Fancourt et al., 2023; Finn & Fancourt, 2019; O’Donnell et al., 2022). Moreover, WHO and the

European Union (2022) recommended that arts-based and cultural enrichment programs be integrated with psychosocial support for forcibly displaced people to increase belonging, well-being, and improve overall health.

In Canada, the Department of Canadian Heritage, Canada Council for the Arts, and Ontario Arts Council, funded a report to assess the correlations between health, well-being, and arts and cultural participation (such as making art, attending art galleries, and visiting theatres). The study was conducted with 9,844 Canadians who were older than 15 years of age. The report, titled, *Canadians' Arts Participation, Health, and Well-Being* (Hill, 2021) found “solid evidence” for a strong connection between arts and cultural participation and mental health (p. 2). Meanwhile, they found a moderate correlation between arts and culture participation and life satisfaction.

The Canadian study aligns with the findings of Perkins and colleagues (2021) from the United Kingdom, who found that arts participation can increase feelings of social connectedness and reduce isolation among 5,892 adults. As a result of growing supportive research on the mental health benefits of arts participation, the WHO European Region published a literature review titled *Arts and Health: Supporting the Mental Well-being of Forcibly Displaced People* in 2022. As an outcome of this report, WHO European Region shared that:

Engagement in arts activities can positively impact forcibly displaced people, as well as their host community, by promoting social inclusion, social cohesion, social acceptance, and belonging. (p. 2)

Therefore, in line with the research and WHO recommendations (2021; WHO European Region, 2022) engaging in artmaking and arts engagement within a safe group to increase experiences of well-being and belonging may be helpful for newcomer women who may be experiencing isolation and loneliness during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Art Therapy and Arts-based Research (ABR)**

### ***Defining Art Therapy***

Expressive arts therapist and research psychologist, Cathy Malchiodi (2011), describes art therapy as the evidence-based use of the artistic process to improve and help maintain social, emotional, and mental well-being for all types of people and ages. Art therapy helps people express experiences beyond words and can transcend language and cultural barriers in various settings to create an empowering and creative space for self-expression, healing, connection, and to ultimately generate insights (Allan, 1995; Kapitan, 2015). This process integrates active artmaking into therapy sessions. Artmaking is considered inherently therapeutic for all individuals (see Finn and Fancourt, 2019; Kramer, 1986; Kramer & Gerity, 2000), while art therapists intentionally introduce art materials and goal-oriented interventions (Hinz, 2009) to enhance the therapeutic potential and foster safe expression within the therapeutic space. This therapeutic modality is practiced by a credentialed art therapist with a background that skillfully and ethically intermixes the creative arts and psychology (Canadian Art Therapy Association, 2020).

In a transdisciplinary model of art therapy, Buccharelli (2016) describes how art therapist practitioners "... pull from the quantitative science of biology, medicine, and psychology while also integrating the qualitative experiences of the artistic process, sociocultural influences, and subjective emotional responses" (p. 154). Art therapy is practiced within a therapeutic relationship to allow for healing through non-verbal communication to explore emotions, reduce stress and negative psychological symptoms, to engage in introspection and self-discovery, and allow for healthy cathartic expression to increase quality of life (Boehm et al., 2014; Hussain, 2010; Kaimal et al., 2016; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010; Walsh, et al., 2007) through the *triangular relationship* between the client, art therapist, and the created artwork (Schaverien, 2000).

Historically, qualitative research was the prevalent form of research in the field of art therapy, with a focus on case studies and program descriptions. Within the past fifteen years and with emergent technologies, neurobiological findings support the notion that creating images and

engaging in somatosensory experiences of artmaking helps individuals heal from trauma and reduce stress (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Kaimal et al. 2016; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Kapitan, 2014). Furthermore, a recent critical literature review by Shukla and colleagues (2022) indicated that “the use of art therapy as an adjunct treatment showed improved mental health in patients” (p. 1).

As a modality that interlinks creative processes with psychology, research in art therapy has expanded to include neurodevelopmental models to treatment (Czamanski-Cohen & Wiehs, 2015; Hinz, 2009; Kagin & Lusebrink, 1978) and social justice approaches and frameworks (Kaimal et al., 2017; Kapitan, 2015; Karcher, 2017; Talwar, 2016; 2018; Timm-Bottos & Reilly, 2015). Group work with refugees that focuses on community-building can decrease long-term negative consequences related to past loss and trauma (Mitschke et al., 2013). Other therapeutic modalities exist and are more widely used with refugees to address mental and emotional distress, such as Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET), Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), and rapid eye movement desensitization in a recent systematic review (Tribe et al., 2017). This current study does not discount other important existing therapies, but hopes to extend diverse multicultural, critical feminist, creative, strengths-based, and resilience-focused supportive therapy knowledge in group settings geared mainly to refugee women and mothers.

### ***Art Therapy Research and Supporting Refugees***

Emerging evidence indicates that art therapy, arts engagement, and expressive arts therapies may reduce trauma, depression, and anxiety symptoms in Syrian refugee children (Annous et al., 2022; de Mott et al., 2017; Feen-Calligan et al., 2020; 2023; Quinlan et al., 2016; Roussau, et al., 2003; Rowe et al., 2017; Urgulu et al., 2016). Rowe and co-researchers’ (2017) art therapy study found that the majority of the Burmese youth refugee participants (n=30) experienced pre-migration trauma and higher symptoms of depression and anxiety than the national adolescent rates during pre-treatment assessments. Quantitative results from the Piers-



Harris Self-Concept Scale (PHSCS; Piers & Herzberg, 2009), the Hopkins Symptoms Checklist (HSC; Derogatis et al., 1974), and the Harvard Trauma Questionnaire (HTQ; Mollica et al., 1992) indicated that art therapy reduced anxiety and increased self-concept (i.e., self-esteem). However, the qualitative findings indicated that the quantitative assessment tools that focused on symptoms did not capture the extent of how art therapy impacted personal growth. Rowe and co-authors (2017) recommended arts-based post-traumatic growth research in future treatment program studies. Feen-Calligan and colleagues (2020) offered a 12-week art therapy group to 12 Syrian refugee youth through a virtual platform. The authors found "...a large statistically significant effect of art therapy on posttraumatic stress and separation anxiety ( $p = .05$ ;  $d > .8$ ) and moderate effects of art therapy on anxiety, panic disorder, and GAD ( $d > .5$ )" (p. 1) compared to the control group that did not receive treatment. Furthermore, Annous and colleagues' (2022) systematic review on the use of art therapy to reduce PTSD levels with refugee youth and children indicated that, although art therapy is a "promising research approach," there was insufficient evidence due to the lack of control groups and pre-post group designs (p. 1).

Existing Canadian art therapy programs to support newcomers include the COSTI Immigrant Services (2013), Turtle House Art Play Centre (2016) and Access Alliance (Hanania, 2020) in Toronto, and Saskatoon's Open Door Society (n.d.) (Hanania, 2018). A recent art therapy group at a settlement organization in Toronto integrated embroidery (tartiz) artmaking to help 11 participants (ages 25 to 53) create community by sharing meaningful stories (Hanania, 2020). The group consisted of refugees from Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. With the information gained from one-on-one interviews and pre-post group questionnaires, the author concluded that "the women experienced a sense of pride and mastery over their completed artwork, built new friendships and community, and felt connected to their homeland through the embroidery" after the twelve-week group (Hanania, 2020, p. 62). The participants were asked to create artwork that explored two questions: 1. "when you moved to Canada, what did you leave behind?" and 2.

“what are your hopes and dreams for your life in Canada? What do they look like, what/who do they include?” (p. 64).

In another research study, art therapist, da Silva, co-led a virtual art therapy group with 10 Portuguese-speaking immigrant women at the Abrigo Centre in Toronto (Canada), alongside a psychotherapy student. The co-therapists invited participants to create embroidery artwork using the following guidance “the participants were invited to create images depicting: their protective factors, values, and strengths; positive memories and life stories from their home country; their experience of immigration; and hopes and/or dreams for their future” (p. 6). The artwork and narratives about their work were then shared in a virtual gallery, and viewers were invited to complete a survey about their relationship and learnings generated from the online exhibition. Nine of the group participants completed the survey and the majority (77%) reported that “I felt supported, and seen, and heard during the group,” and felt a sense of accomplishment. In addition, individuals who visited the virtual art gallery often connected the participants’ experience of immigration to their own memories and challenges immigrating to Canada, thus building empathy and a wider connected circle of belonging through shared experiences.

In an earlier study, Fitzpatrick’s (2002) case study with Nina, a 38-year-old Bosnian refugee woman who relocated to Australia with two children, found that art therapy helped her explore her experiences of war, oppression, exile, and resettlement. Fitzpatrick (2002) found that the “creation of artworks within a therapeutic relationship can provide a powerful way of remembering, mourning, and reconstructing experiences of trauma” (p. 151). Munt (2012) created a “brief microcosm of home” during a resilience-building art therapy group (after a cognitive behavioural therapy educational group) with refugees from diverse countries who have immigrated to the United Kingdom. The author used photo-narratives to explore the themes of “emotional geography” (p. 556). She noted that the therapeutic space became warm, nurturing and a safe space for expression through sharing food and intimate experiences between members.

Munt's (2012) group continued after it formally ended, highlighting its potential meaningfulness for participants and the sustainability of an open, expressive program. Art therapists Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch (2017) and Hanania (2020) also found that representations of “home” was a prevalent and important theme in newcomer refugee adults’ artwork. Hanania (2018; 2020). They believe that more research is needed on how to support the unique experiences of female refugees during post-migration.

### ***Intercultural Art Therapy and ABR with a Feminist Framework***

Ahmed (2017) views feminism as a collective movement, where people “ask ethical questions” and create meaningful relationships that aid “those who are less supported in society” (Talwar, 2018, p. 180). Educational researcher, Greenwood (2012) believes that “[w]e need to acknowledge the complex framework of meaning and interpretation in which we work, and then purposely select the frames we will work with” (p. 18). She suggests that arts-based approaches to research have developed from researchers’ desire to create and communicate understandings that may not be readily available through traditional scientific approaches. Moreover, feminist theorists such as De-Vault (1999) believed that researchers must interview in manners that explore the “inarticulate aspects of women’s experiences” (p. 65), as language was often created to define male-structures and realities within historically patriarchal systems (Huss & Cwikel, 2005). Bowler (1997) found that verbal forms of interviewing and questionnaires are not always effective with women from traditional cultures because they stress Western-style and male-dominant articulation. The author found that the marginalized female participants often tried to provide the “right” and polite answer when asked interview questions (Bowler, 1997). Thus, traditional Western male dominant forms of scientific inquiry and research methods can be insufficient when trying to include and comprehend women from different cultures (Huss & Cwikel, 2005; Lenette, 2019).

Israeli art therapists Huss and Cwikel (2005), in their research with Bedouin women, argued that visual data gathering and the use of the active creative process in research challenge the dominant Western reliance on words and verbal communication in both scientific inquiry and therapy. The authors stated that:

Using visual data-gathering methods, then, can be seen as a movement against the dominance of (Western-style) words and talk in research imaginations, perhaps offering alternate avenues of self-expression for women from traditional cultures. (p. 3)

Art can serve as a powerful avenue and meaningful approach for minority women who may face challenges in expressing their thoughts and emotions in the dominant language (Kolah, 2023; Lenette, 2019). Additionally, engaging in sensory-based movement through artistic practices can help support the nervous system, fostering relaxation and a sense of calm (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Kaimal et al., 2016). The need to find creative, embodied, and nonverbal ways to help people express their experiences in participatory, empowering, and safe ways with refugee, migrant, and asylum-seeking women is echoed by sociologists and policy researchers in refugee studies by Elena Vacchelli (2018a; 2018b) and Caroline Lenette (2019), and drama therapist Nisha Sajjani (2012). Vacchelli (2018a; 2018b) writes that collage artmaking can be an empowering way for refugee women of diverse cultures to express and share their lived experiences in a collaborative, feminist, and co-creative research group.

Embodied and sense-based experiences are informed by history, culture, gender, interrelations, and context (Vacchelli, 2018a). Lenette (2019) described that “Arts-based methods offer an opportunity to reinstate the importance of storytelling through creative, context-specific and culturally safe research approaches” (p. 35). Thus, the artwork created by both the researcher and Knowledge Holders can carry embodied knowledge that provide rich, emotional, multilayered meanings, which surpass purely cognitive experiences and understandings (Huss, 2015; Vacchelli, 2018b). Authentic and expressive artwork can engage others in empathetic

resonance by seeing the world through the artists' lens and from the creators' perspectives (Eisner, 2018; Lenette, 2019; Weber, 2008). In addition to including the Knowledge Holders' artwork in the research as co-creators, integrating reflexive art created by the artist-researcher-art therapist can simultaneously highlight our shared expressive artmaking, while critiquing my own biases, vulnerabilities, and lenses.

Art has been a method of expression throughout diverse cultures and history. Symbolic artwork can be perceived as an additional form of communication and language that can hold multiple meanings and truths all at once (Chilton et al., 2015; McNiff, 2017; Weber, 2008), and help people express their intersectional experiences while also critiquing dominant hegemonic assumptions (Sajjani, 2012). Henderson and Gladding (1998) state that, "Counselors who use the creative arts have, within their grasp, a tool that can help transcend the differences in clients whose cultures differ from their own" (p. 187). Art therapist, Wadeson (2000) and Hanania (2017; 2020) evaluated how sensitively focusing on traditional art forms from the client's unique culture may comfort, empower, and validate their ancestral traditions and spirituality in a new country. Traditional artmaking may evoke early family and childhood memories.

As mental health practitioners that focus on artistic expression, art therapists understand the power of images and that sometimes explaining an experience with words can be too painful, difficult, and confusing for people who are feeling vulnerable (de Witte et al., 2011; Malchiodi, 2011; 2017; Van Lith, 2016). This ability to express through art has often happened in my therapy sessions, particularly with cancer patients and children who were sexually abused. The words sometimes would not come, but the power of the images tell an individual's stories with sensitivity, genuineness, depth, safety, and compassion. Arts-based and refugee study researcher, Lenette (2019) believes that art can provide a safe haven and sanctuary for refugee newcomers to share their unique experiences in a celebratory and inclusive manner that can foster belonging.

The universality of symbols and images as forms of expression has been discussed and explored within psychoanalytic, art historical, anthropological, psychological, theological, educational, and sociological modalities (McNiff, 1995). Nonetheless, various art therapists caution against the artist-researcher-art therapist imposing Western hegemonic paradigms and interpretations onto artworks of participants from other cultures (Acton, 2001; Hocoy, 2002; Kapitan, 2015; McNiff, 1984; Potash et al., 2017; Talwar, 2018). For example, Acton (2001) wrote a foundational paper that described the harm that a *color-blind* white art therapist could inadvertently inflict on racialized Global Majority clients when they overgeneralize Western models of art therapy, while remaining unaware of their biases and privilege because they “do not see colour.” Moreover, multicultural competence has also been seen as problematic because it does not acknowledge the effects of multiple systems of oppression and take on a social justice approach (Talwar, 2018).

Thus, the artist-researcher-art therapist must be aware that symbolism and the artistic process is unique to an individual’s intersecting familial, ethnocultural, sociohistorical, and personal experiences and the systems that influence these experiences. Ethically, art therapists and researchers are mindful of the participants’ cultural symbols and manner of portraying affect without generating assumptions or stereotypes, in addition to their own biases (Kapitan, 2015; McNiff, 1984). The artist-researcher-art therapist must be acutely aware of power hierarchies within their roles to mediate these power differentials, acknowledge experiences of oppression, and strive for providing safe, transformative, inclusive, and equitable spaces within a critical race feminist framework with cultural humility (Hocoy, 2002; Karcher, 2017; Sajjani, 2012).

The field of art therapy is also a complex landscape with various forms of practice and theoretical influences. Art-based researchers and art therapists, Allen (1994), Sajjani (2012), and Moon (2000), use a critical race feminist and community-based approach to art therapy. Art therapy and arts-based research parallel considerably because they both involve “the use of

dialogue, observation, participant observation, and heuristic, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and grounded techniques of interpretation” (Huss, 2005, p. 4; Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017). Art therapy and arts-based research also both explore elements of the artistic process, expressive content, art interpretation, embodiment, and relational/dialectic experiences of art (Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017; Mason, 2000; Moon, 2000; Moon, 2002; Talbot Green, 1989). This connection is described as a new paradigm, called the *aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of arts-based research and art therapy* (Chilton et al., 2015) which is explained in the Theoretical Framework chapter.

Community art therapy and critical feminist art therapy promotes social justice and emphasizes liberation from systemic oppressions with multilevel collaborations and methodological pluralism that tries to reduce or eliminate hierarchies (Sajnani, 2012; Talwar, 2016; Tebes, 2017). It is also important for researchers and art therapists to not remain rigid about always maintaining social critical meta-theory, because perceiving all aspects of peoples’ experiences with a rigid methodological perspective can have the opposite effect of empowering others (Huss, 2015). It may lead artist-researchers-art therapists to interpret all lived and social experiences as disempowering, helpless, and emphasize victimization (Huss, 2015; Lenette, 2017).

Talwar (2018) recommends prioritizing radical care over a pathology-based model in art therapy. This study endeavors to work within the feminist and community-based approach to art therapy and arts-based research, as a strength-based, care and resilience-focused modality for expression. Strength-based art therapy approaches are based on positive psychology theory, where the therapist/researcher holistically focuses on the person’s strengths, inner-resources, and sources of resiliency, as opposed to diagnoses, vulnerabilities, and deficits. This model “...nourishes resilience by cultivating the strength to overcome hardship and effectively manage future adversity” (Kalaf & Plante, 2019, p. 4). This is critical, considering the common narrative in the

media that can focus solely on victimhood (Tinker, 2019). Art therapy is particularly suited for strength-based, resource-based, positive, and resiliency-focused approaches due to its integration of active creative processes, engagement of the body in movement and sensory-based activities, introduction of participants to new materials, and incorporation of the healthy neurological process of flow within the therapy session (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Czamanski-Cohen & Wiehs, 2015; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Malchiodi, 2017; Wilkinson & Chilton, 2017). Within a critical feminist art therapy framework, power, privilege, and systems of oppression within the different roles and intersectional identities are identified and mediated through involving the Knowledge Holders as wise and knowledgeable co-creators. Moreover, the artist-researcher-art therapist strives to continuously critique their privilege and biases through reflexive artmaking practices, engaging in ongoing community feedback and consultation, and a commitment to continued learning.

New models of art therapy that are culturally relevant and provide adequate support are needed (Huss, 2013; Eastwood et al., 2023; Jackson, 2020; 2023; Moon, 2017). Meanwhile, the WHO European Region report recommended that:

Anyone looking to engage with arts and health activities to support forcibly displaced persons should do so in collaboration and coordination with mental health and psychosocial support actors to ensure that the activities are based on locally assessed needs and adapted to the local culture. (p. 4)

Instead of solely concentrating on the individual diagnosis and distress of refugee women, community art therapy recognizes broader ecological and sociocultural understandings, encompassing strengths and challenges at the community, social, political, and economic levels (Eastwood et al., 2023; Hyman, 2011; Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023; Lenette et al., 2012; Spitzer, 2011; Sajjani, 2012; Talwar, 2016). The art therapy practice and ABR in this current study is informed by perspectivist, strengths-based, pragmatic, critical, empowerment, social justice,



embodied, systemic, and feminist theories (Chilton et al., 2015; Huss, 2013; Leavy, 2022; Tebes, 2017).

### ***Virtual Art Therapy: An Emerging Practice Addressing Loneliness***

The practice of virtual art therapy has become more widespread due to the COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, enabling access to mental health support while reducing potential contact due to the airborne transmission of the virus, particularly when working across borders (Arslanbek, 2022; Valldejuli & Vollmann, 2022). Virtual art therapy can benefit individuals who lack the time or access to commute to in-person sessions, those who wish to reduce stigma by receiving therapy from home, individuals unable to meet in person due to immunocompromised health or other physical conditions, and those living in rural or remote areas (Winkel, 2022). For forcibly displaced people who wish to access art therapy, Arslanbek (2022) noted that not all refugees who could benefit from art therapy have access to an art therapist in their community. Michelle Winkel, art therapist, Clinical Director of the Canadian International Institute of Art Therapy, and editor of the book titled, *Virtual Art Therapy: Research and Practice* (2022), believes that providing art therapy online is a “viable and important option” (p. 1). Elaborating on the importance of using technology in a safe and thoughtful way to provide therapy services to those who are unable to access it in-person, Winkel (2022) states that:

...the outreach possibility of virtual art therapy helps extend the access of services to isolated and marginalized people... [a]s a growing number of art therapists become confident and competent in providing online, or virtual, art therapy. (p. 1)

The United Nations (2020) policy brief, titled *COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health*, highlighted the urgent need for widespread availability of psychosocial and mental health support. They recommended that leaders and organizations begin “investing in mental health interventions that can be delivered remotely” (p. 3). Accordingly, art therapist authors, such as Potash and colleagues (2020), draw from their work with international epidemics

and pandemics (such as the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong from 2003-2004 and Ebola in Liberia from 2014-2015) to offer specific recommendations on how art therapists can adapt their practices to support clients and healthcare workers safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. For continuity of care, the authors recommend offering innovative and alternative approaches to support individuals experiencing loss and distress, such as open arts-based or art therapy support groups delivered online or via telehealth. Furthermore, when reporting on the outcomes of their virtual art therapy programs supporting Congolese and Syrian youth and their families, art therapists Feen-Calligan and co-researchers (2023) found that, "...virtual art therapy can expand accessibility and reach of beneficial methods to address trauma in refugee groups" (p. 22). Similarly, Valldejuli and Vollmann (2022) highlight the potential of online and virtual art therapy to foster coping skills, resilience, and meaningful bonds between participants, even when facilitated by art therapists located in different countries within an intercultural context.

In 1999, Collie and Čubranić argued that "art therapy is uniquely suited to telehealth" (p. 2) due to the active nature of the art therapy process and the fact that art, as a visual expressive medium, can be shared and viewed on computer screens. Although virtual art therapy has gained popularity because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Collie and Čubranić have been publishing research on the therapeutic potential of telehealth and virtual art therapy for over twenty years (Winkel, 2022). Additionally, a systematic review by Berryhill and co-authors (2019) found that the online delivery of psychotherapy to treat anxiety disorders has become increasingly prevalent, driven by technological innovations and individuals' improved computer proficiencies." Moreover, it can address the need for mental health support for people living in rural locations (Berryhill et al., 2019). The authors also recognized that telehealth included other benefits, such as low cost, client satisfaction, reducing barriers related to mental health and treatment stigma, and accessing those with agoraphobia. The quality of care can be equivalent to face-to-face psychotherapy (Berryhill et al., 2019). For example, virtual therapy was found not to affect the

therapeutic alliance (Wehmann et al., 2020). More research on delivering virtual art therapy during the COVID-19 lockdowns is needed to add to the growing body of literature.

Outcome-based research on the emergent practice of virtual art therapy with diverse individuals merits more research (Jones, 2017; Malchiodi, 2018; Winkel, 2022; Walls, 2018). However, one quasi-experimental study by Al Daleel and co-researchers (2023) found that virtual art therapy participants self-reported reduced anxiety levels. The study was completed over the span of twelve weeks (pre- and post-sessions) with 21 participants (ages 16-65 years old). Data was collected from over 171 art therapy sessions. Anxiety was assessed before and after art therapy sessions by asking clients to rate their anxiety levels on a scale of one to ten. Using this direct question, the student art therapists found a 42.7% reduction in reported anxiety levels in clients between their pre- and post-art therapy assessment. In addition, clients also completed the State-Trait-Anxiety Inventory – X-form (STAI-X, Spielberger et al., 1983-2020), and the authors found that anxiety was reduced by 6.5%. Nonetheless, more large-scale experimental studies are needed.

**Virtual Art Therapy Practice Recommendations.** In Malchiodi's (2018) book on art therapy with digital media, Jones and colleagues (2018) shared their experiences of creating and facilitating a virtual art therapy group for women undergoing cancer treatment in rural Wales. Attending in-person group therapy was considered risky for immunosuppressed patients, and the great distances rural patients needed to travel made a telemedicine virtual group an accessible alternative. The authors identified challenges for patients connecting through the videoconferencing platform, such as static audio interference when two patients spoke simultaneously (Jones et al., 2018). Nonetheless, this challenge created a new way for group members to communicate, as quieter patients were given more space to speak by taking turns. The authors interviewed group members before, midway through, and after the 8-week session period and integrated reflexive writing for data. The data revealed the following group themes: power

dynamics were less hierarchical than in in-person groups, communication patterns were more thoughtful, listening occurred more frequently, some patients preferred the online format, artmaking during the sessions provided space to process information from the dialogue, and being in their home environments was comforting.

McBride and Worrall (2021) adapted their in-person expressive arts therapies support group to online during the Covid-19 pandemic and detailed their experiences. The authors recommended integrating orientation sessions for those new to the videoconferencing platform, utilizing breakout rooms, reducing power hierarchies between therapists and participants, posting images of completed artwork, allowing space for silence, and providing support for artmaking between sessions.

Feen-Calligan (2023) and a multidisciplinary team partnered with a settlement services organization to support newcomer Syrian and Congolese refugee youth and their families in building personal strength and resilience within an ecological framework through virtual family-based art therapy. The authors found the program to be successful based on participant reports and the continued creation of artwork inspired by earlier strengths-based directives. As a result of the program's success, funding for creative arts therapy programming was expanded to five additional locations.

Stemming from the results of the intercultural virtual art therapy case studies, Feen-Calligan and colleagues (2023) advise integrating a multidisciplinary team with interpreters in the home for wrap-around support, giving participants the opportunity to close the camera based on their comfort levels, establishing consistent routines in the sessions, and incorporating multiple arts modalities within the interventions. From their reported professional observations, the authors believe that “virtual art therapy can expand accessibility and reach of beneficial methods to address trauma in refugee groups” (p. 22). In addition, for future research to ascertain the

potential benefits of virtual family art therapy for refugee youth, Feen-Calligan and colleagues (2023) recommend:

Working with communities to better understand how research activities can be performed in a transparent and accepted manner, and working with communities to ensure they are active participants and beneficiaries of all aspects of therapeutic programming, implementation, and research will be instrumental for future studies (Buchanan et al., 2020). (p. 28)

As the COVID-19 pandemic evolved and changed social conditions, along with the ability to meet in person during their study, varying recommendations were developed to reduce transmission of the virus, ensure accessibility to creative therapy practices and other innovations, and help people connect to reduce feelings of isolation and increase well-being. This made providing virtual art therapy a meaningful option (Feen-Calligan, 2023). While remote forms of support continue to develop, simultaneous research that focuses specifically on ethics, efficacy, and mechanisms of change when providing virtual art therapy, particularly within cross- and cross-border contexts, is needed (Jones et al., 2018; Malchiodi, 2018; Walls, 2018)

### ***Challenges and Benefits of Online Group Research***

Over the past decade, “[r]apid advancement in and availability of Internet technology...broaden[ed] the options for participant recruitment and data collection methodology in health care research” (Tuttas, 2015, p. 122). With emerging technology, synchronous and real-time audiovisual internet conferencing platforms allows for spontaneous and authentic conversations with Knowledge Holders who are vulnerable, despite participants and researchers being located in different areas (Reisner et al., 2018). Video conferencing platforms have changed researchers’ ability to reach people who may have not taken part in face-to-face (FTF) focus group research before, due to various obstacles. Obstacles could include living in rural areas, geographical dispersion between participants, the subject matter being taboo (Dodds & Hess,

2020), time and transportation costs (Abrams et al., 2020), access and awareness of the groups as a minority (Abrams et al., 2020; Birnbaum, 2004; Rhodes et al., 2003), or having a fragile immune system in which group participation can pose health risks (Jones et al., 2018).

During the years of 2020 until the end of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced social distancing measures for two years. People became more accustomed to online video conferencing platforms, which has instigated “a permanent change in the way people view online communication, thus making group interviews more relevant going forward” (Dodds & Hess, 2020, p. 211). Since the surge of the COVID-19 virus and with the emergence of new online technologies, conceptualizations and experiences of “space” have changed (Howlett, 2021). Shared space is no longer experienced as a static location but can be experienced as a continuum that is shared between individuals. Therefore, the dichotomies between public and private home spaces have become enmeshed, as people can now engage in everyday activities such as accessing healthcare, studying, visiting museums and galleries, and meeting friends, from diverse locations (Howlett, 2021). Akin to the liminal (Beaumont, 2018; Beech, 2011; Van Gennepe, 1960) and transitional space (Winnicott, 1971) of an art therapy studio and therapy office, the virtual space can also provide a relational co-created space of co-presence to enable connection and creative expression across time zones, physical places, and home spaces (Carpendale & Toll, 2021).

Although there are drawbacks to conducting group research, such as the inability to see a participants’ whole body and missing side conversations, as well as non-verbal cues (Reisner et al., 2018), there are also benefits. Qualitative researchers, Tuttas and colleagues (2015) found that:

Web conference technology supports immediacy and spontaneity in responses, facilitates an active moderator role, and enables the researcher to gain a deeper perspective about the degree and quality of interaction, engagement, and nonverbal activity among participants.

(p. 123)

Moreover, the virtual group format may change the way individuals interact. For instance, Reisner and colleagues (2018) found that their online focus group generated different types of conversations and quality of data with a vulnerable group about a sensitive topic which would not have been possible with in-person focus groups (i.e., adolescents speaking about alcohol consumption). Abrams and co-authors (2020) noted that online videoconferencing provided the same data richness as face-to-face focus groups. The authors reported that participants were able to "...meaningfully engage with one another" from their homes by connecting online (Reisner et al., 2018, p. 1670). Additionally, participants from diverse backgrounds were able to actively participate (Abrams et al., 2020).

Dodds and Hess (2020) concurred that the participants discussing sensitive topics felt more comfortable sharing personal information because they were "relaxed and less intimidated" in their homes (p. 208). Being able to see the researchers' home spaces and backgrounds could also reduce hierarchical power dynamics between researchers and participants (Hobbs, 2020). Abrams and co-researchers (2020), as well as Jones and colleagues (2018), discovered that they were less directive during the on-line group sessions because the conversations flowed naturally. Moreover, online video conferencing was engaging, convenient, and easy to operate. The researchers reported that they felt less fatigued and communicated more clearly with participants during the virtual focus groups (Dodds & Hess, 2020).

It is equally important to elaborate on the challenges of online synchronous group participation. For example, challenges involve problems connecting with the internet, participants being distracted at home, and the inability to ensure that online groups are private (Abrams et al., 2020; Dodds & Hess, 2020). Moreover, artworks created within the group would be perceived differently when experienced in person compared to viewing an online image of the art. To help Knowledge Holders easily connect online, Dodds and Hess (2020) recommended providing an information package to participants before meeting with them. The package should include

instructions for setting up the physical space at home, links to privacy information and consent forms, suggestions on how to photograph artwork, and steps to test the videoconferencing platform.

### **Art therapy, ABR, and Refugee Newcomers to Newfoundland**

Due to the increased need to support refugee women in their post-migratory and integration process, art therapy could be a safe way to improve well-being, enhance resilience, and ensure a sense of belonging (da Silva, 2023; Hanania, 2018; 2020; WHO European Region, 2022). Culturally informed and empowering women's groups can encourage gender-specific expressions and sharing of experiences among participants (Kira et al., 2012). While it is imperative to consider the impacts of culture and intercultural interactions within an art therapy framework with an intersectional lens, it is also important not to make assumptions, as culture is fluid and ever-evolving (Huss, 2015). Within our contemporary globalized world, people may live between multiple cultures and have hybrid cultural identities (Huss, 2015; Kapitan, 2015). For example, refugee participants may have lived in multiple locations and countries before moving to Canada and may have integrated cultural norms from these various countries. Intersectional identities, as a dynamic interplay between religious beliefs, locations, education, ethnicity, class, gender, social power, etc., make each person's experience unique.

Huss (2015) recommends that art therapists working in intercultural contexts assume a complex hybrid conceptualization of culture. Therefore, it may be helpful to focus on individual experiences of refugee women and the power relationships between cultures, as opposed to concentrating solely on surface-level cultural differences and similarities in artmaking and aesthetics (Huss, 2015). Although Dye's (2018) intercultural work emphasizes the concept of culture as central to identity, Huss (2015) suggests prioritizing the individual's perspective by exploring what they identify as a problem, how they envision a solution, and how they interpret their art, with an emphasis on their underlying values.



Furthermore, committing to cultural humility is integral to fostering inclusive and respectful practices (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). Cultural humility is an ongoing learning and reflective practice that strives for cultural sensitivity while acknowledging that we can never fully understand another's culture or unique experiences. It also involves a commitment to continuous anti-oppressive practices, advocacy, learning, and reflexive critique (Jackson, 2020; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998; Winkel, 2018).

Potash and colleagues (2017) believe that there are overlooked implicit biases that impact intercultural art therapy, which include: believing that people who need help have limited power; subconscious belief in a divisiveness between "us" and "them"; romanticizing other cultures; and, believing that people with more resources have the sole rights to empowerment, wellness and fulfillment. Another implicit bias is that Western psychology is more valid than traditional folk or ethnic healing systems (Potash et al., 2017). These biases, when working with cultural groups such as refugee women, must be identified, examined, and addressed with reflexive practices (Jackson, 2020; Kapitan, 2015). Reflexive artmaking and writing can help practitioners critically examine underlying power dynamics, subconscious motivations, personal and project goals and progress, and roles in intercultural encounters (Jackson, 2020; Kapitan, 2015; Potash et al., 2017).

Hanania (2018; 2020) proposes that Levantine embroidery is a culturally meaningful narrative art form that plays a major role in Syrian, Palestinian, Jordanian, and Lebanese female identity formation and storytelling. The author discusses the mental health benefits of textile art as she describes how *tartiz*, a type of Levantine embroidery, is a traditional way for women to symbolically express identities of women. In her art therapy sessions with eleven refugee women, all the participants indicated that learning and creating symbolic imagery with embroidery helped them feel connected to their "culture and homeland" (p. 67). Therefore, culturally meaningful art activities, such as embroidery, may be a relevant option (Kalmanowitz & Lloyd, 2005), although

it is important to discuss what meaningful artmaking activities are composed of with the community.

In summary, the growing and globally impactful Syrian refugee crisis requires creative and respectful support for newcomers arriving in new countries to counter post-migration trauma experiences and compounded distress. This is because post-migratory factors, such as social assistance and belonging, among others, can mediate these individuals' feelings of distress beyond their pre-migratory and flight experiences (Carswell et al., 2011; Miller & Rasmussen, 2016; Siriwardhana et al., 2014). The female refugee experience is complex, as women often navigate conflicting cross-cultural values related to intersectional gender roles in Western countries, while simultaneously taking on significant responsibilities in community and family support (Guruge et al., 2010; Vissandjée et al., 2003).

Art therapy can be a way to help refugee women express intersectional experiences and voice perspectives within a safe, supportive, and creative space (Hanania, 2018; 2020; Munt, 2012). In art therapy, the symbolic power of created artistic images can express inarticulate, embodied, multilayered, and emotional forms of knowing that transcend cultural and language barriers (Chilton et al., 2015; Henderson & Gladdin, 1997; Weber, 2008).

The participatory arts-based research and open art therapy method will be modeled from Huss and Cwikel's (2005) art therapy group with Bedouin women, Vacchelli's (2018a; 2018b) collage focus group with refugee women, and Hanania's (2020) art therapy group with Syrian refugee women. All these research groups presented a safe, nurturing, open, and empowering space for women to communicate their unique experiences with creative media. This approach can create a space of belonging (Valle Painter, 2013) leading to well-being (Deiner & Ryan, 2009) within an intercultural and feminist framework. The ABR and art therapy practice is also loosely based on the Art Hives virtual open art studio recommendations (Escobedo et al., 2020).

Culturally humble art therapy, informed by an intersectional and critical feminist lens, can simultaneously create safe spaces for connection, while reducing stress, and provide ways to articulate experiences that can lie beyond words (Boehm et al., 2014; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Lewis et al., 2018a; Lewis et al., 2018b; Kaimal et al., 2016; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010; Toll, 2018; Urgulu et al., 2016). Finally, this study is one of the first virtual arts-based research and art therapy groups with Syrian refugee women in the geographically isolated small urban center of St. John's, NL. Its uniqueness also stems from occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced concerns about contagion safety and the need to adapt accessibility requirements

### **Literature Review Summary**

The literature review provided context and a detailed rationale for an arts-based research study that explores the experiences of well-being and belonging for refugee women who have relocated to St. John's, NL. The review began with exploring the escalating global crisis of refugee migration, with a particular focus on the province of Newfoundland and Labrador as a destination for resettlement (Government of Canada, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020; Ibraheem et al., 2017; UNHCR, 2020; 2023). The intersectional complexity of mental health impacts and challenges among refugees was outlined along with an examination of their post-migratory experiences when resettling into a new country, including outlining the impacts of work, worry, and weariness on their physical and mental health (Allen & Allen, 2016; Spitzer, 2011; Tastsoglou, 2019).

Situating the context of the research that occurred during the COVID-19 crisis in 2020 to 2023, the impact of the pandemic on mental health and isolation was discussed. The need for generating equitable community-based support and increasing well-being through arts participation was highlighted (Lin, 2023; Pongou et al., 2022; WHO, 2022; WHO European Region, 2022). I explored the potential for virtual art therapy and ABR to meaningfully support refugee women with cultural humility and safety by providing accessible and equitable strengths-

based support (Annous et al., 2022; Feen-Calligan et al., 2020; 2023; Hanania, 2017; 2020; Quinlan et al., 2016; Roussau, et al., 2003; Rowe et al., 2017; Urgulu et al., 2016).

Lastly, I presented art therapy and ABR within a feminist framework, highlighting artmaking's potential for empowerment, its ability to communicate complex intersectional experiences, and its role in enhancing well-being, while also valuing traditional and embodied ways of knowing (Lenette, 2019; Sajnani, 2012; Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b). I described virtual art therapy and explained its ability to address the health impacts of loneliness, which became increasingly prevalent and researched during the COVID-19 pandemic due to social distancing restrictions (Feen-Calligan et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2018; Malchiodi, 2018; 2018b; McBride & Worrall, 2021; Winkel, 2022). I concluded the chapter by connecting the topics of art therapy, ABR, and the experiences of female refugees in St. John's (NL) to explain the reasoning for the unique research design of this study. This arts-based research design will be explained in the methodology chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### Theoretical Framework



Toll, H. (2019). *Floating Boat in Liminality. Transient. Transitional.* Mixed media (acrylic, oil, gold leaf) on canvas.

## Chapter 3

### Theoretical Framework

In the theoretical framework chapter, I detail the core components of the *aesthetic intersubjective paradigm* in arts-based research (ABR) and art therapy, which was developed by Chilton and colleagues in 2015. I discuss the paradigm's ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Moreover, I delineate critical feminist art therapy as a foundational theory for the overall application of my study and as a rationale for integrating collective artmaking when supporting newcomer refugee Syrian as co-creators and co-researchers (Lenette, 2019; Sajnani, 2012; Talwar, 2010; 2016; Vachelli, 2018). This approach prioritizes power, agency, and voice with an anti-oppressive perspective (Kapitan, 2010b).

Following the theoretical description, I describe the importance of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989; Talwar, 2010), and cultural humility (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998) theory and praxis. As core theoretical components of this study, I connect critical feminist theory to the ABR's alignment with intersectionality and cultural humility. This interconnectedness between these theoretical views generated a preliminary model that I developed in Figure 1. Finally, I introduce the evaluation criteria for arts-based research because the criteria informed the design of the study (Leavy, 2022).

#### **Aesthetic Intersubjective Paradigm of ABR and Art Therapy, Informed by a Critical Feminist Framework**

**A Critical Feminist Framework in Art Therapy.** Art therapist, Lynn Kapitan (2010), described the liberating, positive, and empowering potential of art therapy when she stated that:

Art therapy makes contact with a person's creative resources to effect change and creates the conditions of psychological freedom and safety to do so. Art therapy, in this sense, is a method of liberation and a practice for imagining social change. (Kapitan, 2010a, p. 129)

Referring to the field of creative arts therapies, Nisha Sajnani (2012) highlights that “Through our varied approaches, creative arts therapists enable an embodied, affective, and interpersonal responsiveness to change, amidst suffering, against oppression, and as an experience of social justice” (p. 186). Informed by a critical feminist theoretical framework and an intersubjective aesthetic paradigm, art therapy and ABR were chosen as research methodologies for studies involving newcomer refugee women in NL.

Similar to the art therapy research conducted by Huss and Cwikel (2005), I aim to expand on their exploration of “how art-based research literature and art therapy literature can jointly contribute to both working with and understanding women from a different culture” (p. 2). This focus is particularly relevant for newcomer refugee women, who are minorities within Newfoundland’s majority culture. In Newfoundland, 98% of the population are English-speaking, practice Christianity, and are of European descent (Statistics Canada, 2018). In this context, the Knowledge Holders are refugee Syrian women.

Therefore, art therapy can serve as a liberating and practical approach for envisioning social change through creative, health-enhancing practices (Sajnani, 2012). When practiced with cultural humility and sensitivity, it can offer a participatory and empowering space for authentic expression that is grounded in strengths-based approaches and principles of positive psychology (Wilkison & Chilton, 2017). By fostering secure relationships, art therapy can inspire individuals to apply expressive artmaking to imagine and cultivate meaningful connections and pathways for social change.

**Arts-Based Research (ABR).** ABR is defined by expressive arts therapist, McNiff (1995; 2017) as a transdisciplinary way to generate new knowledge by actively creating and perceiving art. This definition includes diverse modalities of the arts, such as visual arts, music, theatre, dance, poetry, etc. In her seminal novel, Pat Allen (1995) titled her work, *Art is a way of*

*knowing*, the author described how we can develop knowledge about ourselves and the world through intuitive artmaking.

To provide preliminary insights into how artmaking generates knowledge through research in the field of healthcare, Boydell and colleagues (2012) conducted a scoping review of ABR. After conducting this review, the authors believed that they were “witnessing a paradigmatic shift in how we approach inquiry into the social world” (Boydell et al., 2012, p. 24). As an artist-researcher-art therapist working interculturally in Canada, Botswana, and Mongolia, I approach my practice with cultural humility and a commitment to social justice. I have witnessed how art expression can provide empowering alternative ways for individuals facing trauma and life challenges to articulate experiences that are too visceral for words (Toll, 2018). I have also observed how a nuanced understanding of diverse knowledge and an appreciation for creative expression are growing across Canada and internationally through my work in art therapy and policy (Toll, 2023; 2024a).

Therefore, my research is guided by the *aesthetic intersubjective paradigm*, a theoretical approach that bridges ABR and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015). This paradigm aligns with a critical feminist framework, providing a meaningful rationale for its use as a theoretical orientation and methodology in refugee studies involving newcomer women. (Vachelli, 2018a; 2018b). Gerber and Myers-Coffman (2017) describe the ABR and art therapy paradigm as having an “aesthetic epistemology- sensory, embodied, and emotional knowledge; poiesis- the dynamics of kinetics and emergence; intersubjectivity- dialogue, dialectics, and temporality; iteration- pluralism and ambiguity; and interpretation and representation- symbolism and metaphor” (p. 592). This paradigm that includes critical feminist theory inherently deconstructs dominant forces, like Eurocentric male dominant historical research methods that value reliability, validity, and generalizability. By co-creating artwork within art therapy, non-verbal, intuitive, embodied, relational, and emotional knowledge is prioritized (Chilton et al., 2015; Lenette, 2020; Vachelli,



2018a; 2018b). This can provide a platform for those often marginalized in dominant refugee studies discourse (Lenette, 2020; Vachelli, 2018a; 2018b).

Expressive artmaking, within the creative arts therapies spectrum, is inherently therapeutic through specific mechanisms of change that inspire healing and transformation. In de Witte and co-researchers' (2021) scoping review analyzing the mechanisms of change inherent within all creative arts therapies, 67 empirical studies were reviewed to encapsulate therapeutic factors. Nineteen domains of change related to the creative arts therapies were documented as a result. Among these, three domains stand out as unique to creative arts therapies: "embodiment," and "concretization," and "symbolisms and metaphors" (de Witte et al., 2021, p. 1). Embodiment refers to actively connecting to one's somatic experience through sensory, kinesthetic, and tactile artmaking, which connects to tacit emotions. Concretization refers to the ability to change an abstract experience into something tangible to develop insight and new perspectives. Symbolism and metaphors refer to the ability to represent complex, known and subconscious concepts through creative representation (de Witte et al., 2021). These change mechanisms within the creative arts therapies are also linked to the emergent, transformative, and evocative principles of art participation in ABR.

Examining the mechanisms of change through artistic creation within arts therapies, Gerber and colleagues (2018) propose that change occurs in Knowledge Holders through a dynamic and interactive system within creative art therapy. This system nurtures capacities such as "relational attunement, imagination, dialectical tensions, creative resolutions, and ultimately, creative transformation" (p. 1). This dynamic, preconscious process relies on creative inner resources within each person, leading to "access, emergence, and insight" (Gerber, 2022, p. 20; Archibald & Gerber, 2018).

Gerber (2016; 2022) extends the ABR and art therapy paradigm to encompass and integrate all disciplines with a dialectic aesthetic intersubjective worldview. This worldview

merges and also reinterprets the foundational theoretical orientations of social constructivism, radical imagination within psychoanalysis, existentialism, post-qualitative inquiry, social justice approaches, critical feminist theory, and dialectical pluralism, among other theories. The ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions underlying this paradigm will be briefly outlined below.

To conduct ABR, researchers require "...a capacity to tolerate the unknown, trust the creative process, engage in emergent rather than predictive methods, value imaginative knowledge, and regard the impact of imaginative and arts-based investigative perspectives equally with other dominant traditions" (Gerber, 2022, p. 6). This emergent perspective guides the development of open-ended research questions, promotes the dialectical co-creation of research procedures, and allows for an intuitive analysis process to arrive at the findings. According to Hervey (2000), a dance/movement therapist and ABR researcher, the following steps must be completed by the artist/creator during the ABR data collection, analysis, and dissemination process:

1. *Initial awareness.* An idea or image emerges; in arts-based inquiry, this is recognized by the researcher/creator and inspires further query.
2. *Decontextualization and intentional re-creation.* The idea of image is re-created in an art medium [visual arts for this study]; in re-creating the idea of image with intention, it is removed from its original function. According to Hervey, the exploration is metaphoric rather than literal, reflecting the unique qualities of art and artistic processes.
3. *Appreciation and discrimination.* At this point, the re-creation is evaluated for merit, usefulness, success, or value; in arts-based inquiry, the artwork is evaluated (again, metaphorically) for its ability to address the research question or goal.

4. *Refinement and transformation.* Evaluation continues and the artwork is changed, reworked, and adjusted until a sense of completion and satisfaction results.
5. *Recontextualization.* At this stage, a completed artwork may be shared or exhibited to an audience; this recontextualization provides a space in which both the researcher/creator and others can perceive, evaluate, and interact with the artwork (Malchiodi, 2017, p. 75; Hervey, 2000).

During my research, both the Knowledge Holders and I will engage organically with the active, emergent, and creative procedure described by Hervey. This approach allows for flexibility while supporting self-expression, fostering insight, and authentically sharing experiences throughout the ABR process.

### ***Ontological Dynamic Pluralism***

The ontology of this paradigm is transdisciplinary, where various perspectives and disciplines, such as arts, health, neurobiology, psychology, education, anthropology, and critical feminist theory, will inform the study. Art therapist Bucciarelli (2016) describes art therapy as a *transdisciplinary* (trans signifying beyond) approach, as opposed to *interdisciplinary* (in-between). The author believes the transdisciplinary nature “indicates that by bringing together concepts of differing fields we transcend the boundaries of the independent disciplines, resulting in a more nuanced field” (p. 52). Analogously, art therapy is “a transdisciplinary field [that] embraces unity within diversity, collaboration within autonomy, and innovation that still honors art therapy’s historical roots” (Bucciarelli, 2016, p. 151)

This paradigm is informed by ontological pluralism, acknowledging that multiple, and sometimes contrasting, perspectives can coexist and remain valid within a dynamic context (Johnson & Gray, 2010). The inclusion of diverse perspectives and lived experiences creates space for “eclectic ways of knowing” (Gerber, 2020, p. 5), which is meaningful for a study that invites Knowledge Holders from diverse intersectional backgrounds to share their unique

experiences. New and more profound knowledge can be generated through the dialectic sharing of diverse truths within a supportive and safe environment (Chilton et al., 2015). Chilton and Leavy (2014) write that, “An ABR ontology would recognize that artistic, intersubjective realities are emergent and shifting, dialectical, hard to pin down, and difficult to convey in standard modes” (p. 403). Moreover, as a foundational theory to the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm of ABR and art therapy, deconstructing assumed truths by creating space for multiple concurrent forms of knowledge to emerge through artmaking is aligned with critical feminist, anti-oppressive, and social justice practices (France et al., 2021; Sajani, 2012).

ABR emphasizes “multiple truths and multiple ways of knowing” (Leavy, 2017b, p. 197). Informed by the dynamic constructivist approach, art therapist Kapitan (2015) views cultural frame-switching, while engaging in critical arts-based reflexivity, as helpful in intercultural encounters and research (Kapitan, 2015). This is because cultural frame-switching can aid artists-researchers-art therapists to strive for ethical practices in the face of oppressive societal systems. Critical feminist and dynamic constructivist theories view cultural norms as ever-evolving systems of implicit schemas and constructs that help individuals make sense of their experiences. An ontological pluralist lens, which values multiple subjective truths coexisting, actively deconstructs hegemonic and oppressive narratives by emphasizing non-dominant perspectives through personal narratives and symbolic iterative artmaking within safe and communal relationships.

Artwork and images embody multiple concurrent truths as created by the artist and filtered through their unique lens. These truths may be expressed through abstract or figurative imagery, using lines, shapes, colors, forms, poetic representation, body movements, words, dialogue, and more. The artwork serves as a knowledge mobilizer by representing and containing various truths, such as challenging experiences, through imagery that can feel more accessible and safer for

newcomer refugee women, as they do not need to label the images. This concept is further explored in the ethical framework chapter.

“Positionality” is also important to arts-based research because it identifies the researchers’ “awareness of her or his [or their] subjective experience in relation to that of her or his [or their] participants and recognizes the bidirectional nature of research” (Deutsch, 2004, pp. 888-889). Within an intersubjective model, as an artist-researcher-art therapist, I must critique and engage in my own arts-based reflexive processes alongside the Knowledge Holders. This allows me to present my vulnerable experience both as an ethical approach to creating egalitarian relationships and as a process-oriented method in ABR to identify my positionality (Leavy, 2022). Therefore, this critical feminist, constructivist, and ABR framework incorporates a creative arts-based reflexive method into the research process, which is presented in chapter seven (Leavy, 2015; Lenette, 2019).

### ***Epistemology of Dialectic Aesthetic, Poesis and Energia***

The dialectical aesthetic epistemology of this paradigm is informed by embodied and non-verbal aesthetic knowledge (Chilton et al., 2015). *Aesthetic* is defined by its Greek etymological meaning, which recounts awareness developed through the body’s senses (Geber & Myers-Coffman, 2017, p. 589; Eisner, 2008). Thus, experiencing and creating artwork can help individuals develop personal insight and knowledge through “unutterable sensory and embodied phenomena “through unconscious imaginative processes” (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017, p. 589). This method and perspective can be meaningful with newcomer women, according to critical feminist migration studies researchers, like Lenette (2019), Spitzer (2011), and Vacchelli (2018b). For example, discussing health of newcomer women, Spitzer (2019) believes that:

The body is the site of apprehension of the world; it is through the body that we experience, interpret, reflect, and respond to sensations, sights, textures; that we experience order, share

the world, creating intersubjective space where socio-cultural environments influence our behaviours and expectations of others (Spitzer, 2009; Young, 2005). (p. 26)

Indeed, neurobiologists and trauma specialists theorize that experiences are felt and remembered in the body with the following three senses: exteroceptive (sight, touch, smell, taste etc.), interoceptive (pain, kinaesthetic movement, etc.), and proprioceptive (“gut feelings”) (Czamanski-Cohen & Wiehs, 2015; Hass-Cohen & Findlay, 2015; Malchiodi, 2017, van der Kolk, 2014). These embodied experiences and knowledge can be hard to articulate in words, but artistic symbols, metaphors, and movement can capture and communicate them with sensory lines, shapes, textures, and colours (Dew et al., 2018; Malchiodi, 2017). Aesthetic art may be able to communicate subjective visceral bodily knowledge that logical words and linear text cannot always capture (Allen, 1995; Eisner, 2008).

*Poiesis* describes the process of “knowing by making,” describing how individuals can understand the human condition through active creation (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017, p. 591). *Energeia* describes the dynamic, participatory, and active physical corporal forces that push artwork into existence (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017). Another important element that describes this epistemology is *simultaneity*, where art can portray multiple co-existing temporal experiences, interpretations, and information at the same time through personal metaphors and symbols (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017; Weber, 2008).

### ***Axiology of Multiple Truths***

Incorporating axiology into the theoretical paradigm defines the foundational values of goodness while deepening our understanding of knowledge. The axiology in this ABR paradigm values multiple perspectives and truths (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Meanwhile, a critical feminist lens prioritizes egalitarian relationships, seeks to reduce power hierarchies, privileges women’s intersectional experiences, fosters empowerment, and views personal narratives as reflections of

larger sociocultural and historical systems, such as the oppressive forces of hegemonic colonial ideology (Sajnani, 2012).

Furthermore, the act of creating is considered "good" for many people because it fosters personal insight, promotes empathetic and sympathetic resonance (both through creating and connecting with others' artwork), enhances resilience, and reduces negative emotions (Chilton et al., 2015; Clift & Camic, 2016; Eisner, 2008; Fancourt & Finn, 2019; van der Vaart et al., 2018). Personal and expressive artmaking can lower biological stress markers, such as cortisol levels in saliva, and reduce subjective stress, as shown in both experimental and quasi-experimental studies involving adults from clinical and nonclinical populations (Curry & Kasser, 2005; Kaimal et al., 2016; Kaimal et al., 2017; Laurer et al., 2015; Sandmire et al., 2012; Shella, 2018; Walsh et al., 2007). Regarding mood, various authors have found that short artmaking sessions can reduce negative moods after induced stress (Dalebroux et al., 2008; Drake et al., 2011; Drake & Hodge, 2015; Drake & Winner, 2012). Finally, larger reviews and meta-analyses support the idea that engaging in arts interventions and therapies can reduce physical symptoms and mental health issues across diverse populations worldwide (Jensen & Lo, 2018, p. 2019; Boyce et al., 2018; Fancourt & Finn, 2019; Staricoff & Clift, 2011; Stuckey & Nobel, 2010).

Chilton and colleagues (2015) argue that creating purposeful artwork to express experiences and emotions is both inclusive and participatory. Beauty is subjective and the final piece of art does not have to be traditionally beautiful to be evocative, meaningful, healing, or inspire empathetic resonance with viewers (McNiff, 2011; Leavy, 2022). Paolo Knill (2005) and Shawn McNiff (2011), two influential expressive arts therapists, support the notion of *virtuosity* in ABR, where the artwork is profound and impactful, yet requires low skill to create. The notion of virtuosity and supportive artmaking in a non-judgmental environment is central to art therapy (McNiff, 2011). Creating a supportive, open, and respectful environment where individuals of all skill levels can participate aligns with art therapy ethics and promotes a sense of safety (Chilton et

al., 2015; Kapitan, 2010a; 2017; Malchiodi, 2017). Furthermore, research by Damiano and co-authors (2023) suggested that highly emotional artwork created by non-professional artists can more directly convey emotions, challenging the assumption that professional artists are better at expressing basic emotions through art through technical skills.

### **Connecting Intersectionality and Cultural Humility to the Intersubjective Aesthetic Paradigm of ABR and Art Therapy with a Critical Feminist Approach**

When describing the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm, I have intentionally connected it to the ethical concepts of cultural humility and intersectionality while conducting my research with Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's, using a critical feminist lens. In the following subsection, I describe intersectionality and cultural humility, explain their emergence within the field of art therapy, and conceptually connect their frameworks to the ontological and axiological perspectives of the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm. I will then illustrate a preliminary theoretical model that clarifies the interconnections between the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of ABR and art therapy, cultural humility, and intersubjectivity.

#### ***Intersectionality***

In her World Humanitarian Day Speech, author and Nigerian activist, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2016) shared that,

Nobody is ever just a refugee. Nobody is ever just a single thing. And yet, in the public discourse today, we often speak of people as single things. Refugee, immigrant. We dehumanize people when we reduce them to a single thing. And this dehumanization is insidious and unconscious. (n.p.)

Critical feminist anti-oppressive approaches to practice, using an intersectional lens and guided by cultural humility, are central to working with individuals from diverse Global Majority backgrounds, particularly those who have historically experienced oppression and marginalization (Collier & Eastwood, 2022; Eastwood et al., 2023; Talwar, 2010; Valldejuli & Elliott, 2023).



Discussing a decolonizing process for art therapy practice that addresses intersectional systems of oppression, Backos (2023) states that, "...when our work cares for the individual while also addressing the larger symptoms of the broader social conditions that created these symptoms, we genuinely provide client-focused care and long-term solutions" (p. 27).

The term "intersectionality" was developed by lawyer and civil rights activist Kimberly Crenshaw in the 1980s. Intersectionality is a theoretical and practical framework that recognizes the simultaneous and overlapping identities and social structures such as gender, race, ability, religion, minority status, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status (etc.), which both exacerbate systems of oppression and highlight sources of strength (Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectional studies on how men, women, and LGBTQ2A+ people experience refugeehood differently have largely been overlooked by migration researchers, despite the significance of intersectional experiences in refugee literature (Lenette, 2019; O'Neil et al., 2010). Nonetheless, Hua (in Sajnani, 2012) and Gagnon (2000) believe that identities and communities can be defined as a dynamic and shifting process, rather than a stable essence. Viewing intersecting identities as consistently changing and not stagnant "highlight[s] the dynamic negotiations and struggles that give rise to particular subjectivities and negotiations" (Sajnani, 2012, p. 189).

When working with newcomer women to Canada from Syria, Eritrea, and Congo, it is essential to recognize and address the systems of power and privilege within the interpersonal relationship, using a critical feminist framework (France et al., 2021; Sajnani, 2012; Talwar, 2010). As a Canadian citizen, researcher, and professional art therapist with Jewish-European ancestry and an intercultural family background, including children who practice three religions, I recognize the complexity of intersecting identities. These intersectional dynamics involve connections across different religions, cultural backgrounds, refugee status, ethnicity, mother tongue, socioeconomic status, and other visible and non-visible dimensions of identity. These intersecting identities have power implications that the researcher must be aware of to establish

authentic, trusting, and equitable relationships. Culturally humble practices, such as engaging in reflexive artmaking to challenge biases, can help mitigate some of the power imbalances (Kapitan, 2015).

The field of art therapy has faced criticism for its historical roots in Western Eurocentric psychoanalysis and psychodynamic theory, as well as for being predominantly shaped by White, middle-class female art therapy professionals (Kapitan, 2015; Talwar et al., 2004). Therefore, the biases underlying the assumptions of art therapy must be continuously questioned and dismantled through a critical lens that amplifies the voices of People of the Global Majority (Kapitan, 2015; Potash, 2005; Potash et al., 2017; Talwar, 2016; 2018; Talwar et al., 2004). Recent research, such as those featured in a collaborative special issue in the *International Journal of Art Therapy* that explores anti-oppressive practices in intersectional art therapy research and practice, is emerging (Eastwood et al., 2023).

I believe the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of ABR and art therapy aligns with an intersectional framework in intercultural research and practice. This alignment stems from its embrace of different ways of knowing (Leavy, 2017b) through a dialectic process. Ontological pluralism within this paradigm celebrates the coexistence of diverse, shifting, and evolving perspectives shaped by intersectional identities and experiences (Johnson & Gray, 2010). The paradigm's axiology values honoring multiple truths, which can be uncovered and generated through the dynamic sharing of diverse experiences through creative expression and dialectical discussions. This process unfolds in a safe, supportive space where individuals with intersectional identities can contribute their unique, and sometimes contrasting, perspectives. For instance, when creating artwork about an event, each person subjectively represents it based on personal significance, perspectives, and values, sharing their individual truth through symbolism. This approach aligns with Kapitan's (2015) constructionist framework of cultural frame-switching through critical arts-based reflexive practices. Multiple intersectional identities coexist,

complementing and contrasting with each other as they evolve through experiences, narratives, and insights.

### ***Cultural Humility***

Working with individuals whose cultures and intersecting identities differ from my own, throughout my career, has highlighted the significance of cultural humility. Cultural humility is conceptualized as "a process rather than a goal - a process that does not assume authority but rather acknowledges the fluidity of addressing contributing factors to cultural identities" (Winkel, 2018, p. 1). The concept of cultural competence is also crucial as it emphasizes engaging in meaningful efforts to understand other cultures. However, it has faced criticism for perpetuating cultural insensitivity by assuming complete understanding of another's cultural experiences without incorporating dynamic intersectional understandings of identities. Moreover, the framework of cultural competence indirectly assumes White Eurocentric Western models as the standard of a "helper," while people from the Global Majority are often positioned as patients or those being "helped." Consequently, those adopting the cultural competence lens may perceive the Global Majority and underrepresented groups as "others." Thus, the competence perspective is criticized for its outward focus and failure to emphasize the provider's humility in learning about dynamic and ever-evolving cultural influences (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013).

Cultural humility, a term created by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia in 1998, was developed as a tool to educate physicians working across cultures. This term denotes that researchers and clinicians working from another cultural standpoint will never truly know the culture with which they are working. Therefore, cultural sensitivity is an ongoing reflexive practice, and cultural competence can never truly be achieved (Jackson, 2020). Someone whose background differs from the intersectional identities of the cultures they are working with can never fully understand what it is like to be a member of that cultural group or to hold those unique identities.

The four cultural humility principles include a lifelong commitment to: learning and self-reflexivity, addressing power imbalances while striving for equity, creating mutually beneficial partnerships with agentic perspectives of the populations supported, and advocating for accountability within institutions with social justice approaches (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998; Jackson, 2020). Hook and colleagues (2013) define cultural humility as the "ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [individual]" (p. 2). Cultural humility involves three tenets and commitments: self-evaluation and self-critique, mitigating power inequities, and developing partnerships with people and groups who advocate for others (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia; 1998; Waters & Asbill, 2013).

Therefore, cultural humility involves self-reflection and continuous critique of one's background and biases to a gain deeper understanding of oneself and others (Yeager & Bauer-Wu, 2013). This practice aims to foster authentic relationships and promote cultural awareness. Building on the definition of cultural humility, Jackson (2020) describes its application in art therapy as:

...a skill set and a state of being that can offer a way to engage in critical social discourse. It is not a one-size-fits-all and may be difficult for some to absorb and cultivate. It is a way of developing a worldview with integrity and respect for oneself and those one works with. It can bring dignity to those who have felt stripped of their sense of self while lending empowerment to those whose voices have been denied witnessing. It offers a tangible way to enter into dialogue when tensions are surmounting all sense of reason and hope. (p. 19)

Cultural humility enhances the ABR paradigm, particularly ontological pluralism, by aligning with the notion that multiple perspectives and identities can coexist and contrast dynamically. This alignment fosters psychological flexibility, allowing the artist-researcher-art therapist to be emotionally and psychologically present in an authentic and empathetic

relationship with individuals from different cultures. It also creates space to acknowledge that the therapist may not fully understand the complexities of their client's experiences, while remaining committed to ongoing learning and personal critical reflection.

Cultural humility also connects to ontological pluralism and simultaneity in the creation and interpretation of artwork. Artworks can embody diverse cultural metaphors and symbols that coexist, juxtapose, and intersect simultaneously. The art therapist must hold the therapeutic space by understanding the cultural and historical symbols within the artwork, listening to the client's narrative about their creation, and witnessing the emotional impact of the creative process. Throughout, the therapist must recognize that they will never fully grasp the complexity and depth of meaning in the artistic image.

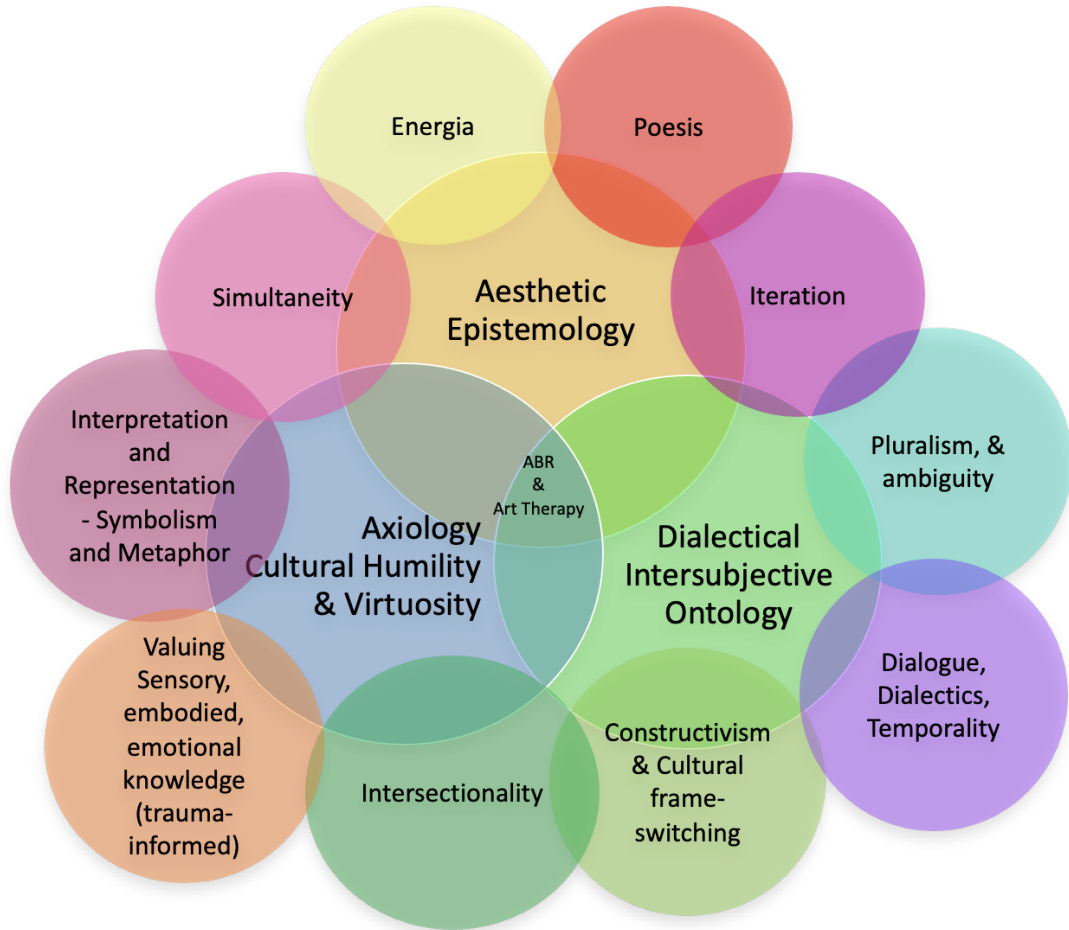
The need for cultural awareness, competence, and increased diversity has been discussed since the field of art therapy began in the 1970s (Jackson, 2020; Venture, 1977). Nonetheless, the concept of cultural humility was conceptually absent from the profession until Jackson (2016) and Har-Gil (2010) examined it in their doctoral theses. Since then, art therapists from diverse backgrounds have published on cultural humility practices and research (Bal & Kaur, 2018; Keselman & Awais, 2018; Winkel, 2018). Significant publications on cultural humility include Louvenia Jackson's book titled, *Cultural humility in art therapy: Applications for Practice, Research, Social Justice, Self-care, and Pedagogy* (2020) and the Art Therapy journal's special issue on *Anti-Oppressive Practice: Art Therapy and Cultural Humility* (Jackson, 2023).

I have developed a preliminary conceptualization of the Aesthetic Intersubjective Paradigm of Arts-Based Research, which connects ontological understandings to intersectional and culturally humble concepts, as shown in Figure 1. While this model has been useful in my research, I acknowledge that it is still a work in progress and requires further refinement to fully integrate the interrelated worldviews. The depiction is fashioned as colourful bubbles, that represent emergent, energetic, and simultaneously interacting converging ideas to create the

model. Cultural humility is connected to the axiology of virtuosity because it details the core values of practicing research.

**Figure 1**

*Aesthetic Intersubjective Paradigm of ABR and Art Therapy Integrating Intersectionality and Cultural Humility*



**ABR Evaluation: Criteria to Assess Research Quality**

Leavy (2017) posits that "ABR has the potential to be emotional, evocative, provocative, illuminating, educational, and transformative" (p. 213), while art making within a safe group can also inherently increase positive emotions and reduce stress. In this research study, the triangulation of Knowledge Holders' artworks, written and verbal reflections, and the researcher's

reflexive art and written material was employed to enhance the study's validity. However, within the framework of ABR, the traditional notion of objective "validity" is challenged. Instead, *holistic* and *synergistic* evaluative markers are preferred by ABR authors who study evaluative criteria in the field of education, such Blumefeld-Jones (2008), as well as Cole and Knowles (2008).

In ABR therapeutic settings, it is important to ensure meaningful participation and maintain individuals' safety and support throughout the process. Leavy recommends that each ABR project be assessed in alignment with its specific genre. In the case of this project, the genre pertains to art therapy that integrates expressive and non-judgemental visual artmaking and dialectical discussion. The primary consideration is the empowerment, validation, respect, and comfort of the Knowledge Holders, as this is the key factor in making evaluative decisions. For instance, the emphasis on evaluative criteria, such as *transparency* and *explicitness* may not be conducive to Knowledge Holders' feelings of safety and confidentiality when being vulnerable, and is not emphasized (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Rolling, 2013). Nonetheless, my work as the researcher could be evaluated for transparency and explicitness when sharing my reflexive artwork and excerpts from my reflexive journal as the artist-researcher-art therapist. Leavy (2017) recommends the following evaluative criteria for ABR research, which are detailed below: significance, accessibility and dissemination, trustworthiness, and artfulness.

**Significance.** A vital way to evaluate ABR is to assess how *significant* it is for society and the growth of knowledge (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Leavy, 2017). In consultation with community organizations, community leaders, and through co-creating components of the research project, this ABR is designed to be significant, both personally and broadly, for the participating Knowledge Holders, the collaborating settlement organization, the Syrian refugee community, newcomer women, and Canadian communities.

**Accessibility and Dissemination.** *Accessibility* was carefully considered when choosing the methodology, the hybrid model, the location, the art materials, and the recruitment of the Knowledge Holders. Cahnmann-Taylor and Siegesmund (2008) believe that arts-based research should be accessible to *broad audiences* and contribute to *public scholarship* outside of academia. Depending on how comfortable the Knowledge Holders are with sharing their art, their images can touch people of all educational levels and developmental abilities, to foster empathy and resonance. For example, individuals who have difficulty with language may be impacted by the powerful and emotive qualities of the artwork created by the Knowledge Holders and the researcher. Additionally, artwork images can convey multiple simultaneous meanings through metaphor and symbolism. This means the impact of the images can evolve over time, and they can hold multiple stories of lived experiences concurrently (McNiff, 1995; Chilton et al., 2015; Weber, 2008).

Knowledge Holders were asked whether they would like their artwork to be shared through public scholarship during the post-group interviews and member-checking sessions (Leavy, 2017). During the member-checking sessions, one Knowledge Holder said that she would prefer her artwork to not be featured in a virtual or community gallery exhibition within the local community. The Knowledge Holder articulated that, “About the art gallery, our art is okay, it's mediocre, so I don't think that it would be a good idea” (August 23, 2023). Therefore, since the artwork created during the sessions that focused on authentic emotional expression with virtuosity (Knill, 2005) (i.e. high intensity and no skill required) as a process rather than traditional beauty with technical skill as a product, the Knowledge Holders chose not to exhibit their work. Creating artwork for the purpose of public scholarship, rather than exploring internal authentic experiences, may activate the creators' inner critic.

Nonetheless, the public engagement criterion aims to foster empathy and strengthen connections with the wider community (Leavy, 2022; Weber, 2008). The principle seeks to shape



public discourse on refugee women's experiences by highlighting the narratives and perspectives of the Knowledge Holders. The idea is informed by projects like the arts and well-being workshops and gallery exhibition with refugee women in Australia by Hughes and colleagues (2021). Nonetheless, the Knowledge Holder's perspectives, comfort, and expressive voice took priority over this evaluative ABR criterion (Leavy, 2022). Plans were later developed with the settlement organization to explore selling other crafts at a farmer's market, which reflected the Knowledge Holders' desire to develop entrepreneurial skills, gain employment, and financially benefit from their creative work. The decision was based on discussions during the member-checking session in 2023.

**Trustworthiness.** Some questions used to evaluate the *trustworthiness* of the arts-based data created during the sessions, as well as through the researcher's reflexive practice, include the following: (Leavy, 2017): "Does the work resonate? ... Does it feel authentic?" (p. 213). These questions were chosen because they do not question the Knowledge Holders' unique experience, whereas other questions about truthfulness may be disempowering. To evaluate the researcher's artworks, more stringent evaluation can occur, which can include the *strength of the form* (Barone & Eisner, 2012) and *truthfulness* with the following questions (Leavy, 2017):

- Does it tell a story?
- Does it make sense?
- Does it follow the norms of the medium (or innovative in a way that makes sense)?
- Does it ring true?
- Is it believable? (p. 212-213)

**Artfulness.** The evaluative criteria for *artfulness* can, at times, diverge from authentic and emotionally truthful art creations. Art therapists view all forms of expressive art as valuable, emphasizing the healing - process and the artist's intentions over the final aesthetic product. As a

result, artworks considered "unconventional" or "ugly" within the context of traditional Western art history often possess a remarkable capacity to convey profound emotions and hold significant value for sharing (McNiff, 2011). It is crucial to recognize that art doesn't need to conform to traditional standards of beauty to be evocative, meaningful, and transformative. Aligned with the concept of virtuosity, coined by Knill (2005) and discussed in the axiology section, the artwork produced by Knowledge Holders values virtuous self-expression, emotional resonance, and in-the-moment storytelling over technical artfulness. In contrast, artworks created independently at home between sessions often emphasize technical skills, as participants have more time to refine their techniques.

Focusing on beauty and the final artistic product can sometimes undermine the healing aspect of art therapy groups. It may limit expressive capacity and self-compassion by imposing arbitrary beauty standards, fostering an internal critic. In contrast, art therapists deeply respect and value all artwork created during sessions. However, it's important to recognize that Knowledge Holders may wish to create aesthetically pleasing artwork. In such cases, the researcher can facilitate skill-building in technical artistry when it adds meaning, aligns with available time, and supports the healing process (Kramer, 1986; Kramer & Gerity, 2000). However, primary emphasis in the sessions remains on the artistic, emotional, and expressive process in relationship. This approach of non-judgment and acceptance of all artistic skill levels is crucial for helping participants feel free and safe to express themselves without the pressure to create aesthetically beautiful art. This perspective was communicated during the recruitment session, pre-interview (to contextualize the purpose of the art therapy group), and consistently throughout the sessions.

As a trained visual artist, I incorporated considerations of aesthetic power, quality, and artfulness when evaluating my reflexive artmaking (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Chilton & Leavy, 2014). Additionally, the concept of the *artistic fingerprint*, which refers to the distinct creative touch of the artist being evident in the work, was also considered (McNiff, 2011).

## **Theoretical Framework Summary**

In the Theoretical Framework chapter, I outlined the theory that both grounded and guided this arts-based research study. I began the chapter by explaining the core tenants of the Aesthetic Intersubjective Paradigm in Arts-based Research (ABR) and Art Therapy (Chilton et al., 2015), which is aligned with a critical feminist framework when working alongside refugee women (Sajnani, 2012). The dialectical intersubjective aesthetic paradigm focused on ontological pluralism, the epistemology of aesthetic, poiesis, and energia, and the axiology of the paradigm. Aligning the paradigm to a critical feminist and social justice lens, I defined the important terms of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) and cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) and discussed their connectedness to the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm. I emphasized the importance of intersectionality and cultural humility to understand and value the multiplicity and nuanced embodied artistic experiences within diverse cultural contexts. This interactive and interconnectedness between cultural humility, intersectionality, and the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm is illustrated in the preliminary model I presented in Figure 1. I concluded the chapter by presenting the evaluation criteria developed to assess the unique aspects of this ABR and art therapy study within an inclusive, intercultural context (Leavy, 2017).

## CHAPTER 4

### Methodology



Toll, H. (2023). *Walking Through the Forest Path. Ambition and Peace*. Acrylic and oil on canvas.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Methodology**

In the methodology chapter, I describe the iterative and emergent ABR study design and explain the rationale that informed the research decisions. I delineate the key terms of belonging and well-being. Afterwards, I discuss the interdisciplinary nature of the research and supervisor team, which leads to research questions. I then describe the collaborative recruitment process that led to purposeful sampling.

The dataset included transcribed verbal data from eight pre- and post-art therapy interviews conducted through interpreted (Arabic and English) individual phone interviews with each Knowledge Holder. It also encompassed artworks created by Knowledge Holders during the art therapy and member-checking sessions, their artwork titles, and intersubjective arts-based dialogues derived from researchers' session notes. Additionally, my process notes and artworks, created throughout the research project's development and data analysis stages, offered reflexive insights into the evolving relational dynamics and research journey. The combination of the Knowledge Holders' and my artwork reflects my ontological orientation toward dialectic meaning-making and my epistemological approach rooted in intuitive artmaking. Adopting a critical feminist perspective helped mitigate power hierarchies by embedding my vulnerable self within the research process.

Furthermore, I explain the research procedure and unique dynamics related to the hybrid online art therapy model. The process included seeking community advice for the creation of the study, pre- and post- individual semi-structured interviews, conducting and documenting the online art therapy group, my reflexive artmaking and journaling, and a group member-checking session. The method contributed to a holistic understanding of the Knowledge Holders' experiences of the art therapy group and artmaking, in addition to their perspectives of belonging and well-being.

Once the data was collected, I analyzed it using arts-based and qualitative methods to address the research questions. After preparing and organizing the dataset, I immersed myself in the material, seeking deeper understanding through reflexive artmaking (Leavy, 2017b) and Values Coding with MAXQDA 2022 Miner (Saldaña, 2014). Following coding, categorization, and theming, I identified patterns through Concept Maps, memo-writing, and horizontalization. Intuitive artmaking further deepened my empathetic understanding of the themes (Creswell, 2007). The tables generated during horizontalization were crucial for linking the data to the primary research questions.

Finally, I interpreted the data by answering the research questions while respecting intact stories through preserving direct quotations and creating space for the images to speak for themselves in the results section (Kapitan, 2010a; Leavy, 2017b). Feedback from the Knowledge Holders and community advisors was sought during the arts-based and relational member-checking session to ensure alignment with their perspectives. The Knowledge Holders and community partner manager were provided an opportunity to meet and respond to the emergent themes presented in a PowerPoint presentation by creating response-art. The Knowledge Holders, manager, and I created reflexive artwork based on the themes and experiences of the group (see Tables 4-7). The results are connected to contemporary literature in the discussion section.

### **Emergent Study Design**

In line with an aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of arts-based research and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015), this study focused on an unfolding, emergent, and evolving research process. This process aimed to foster dynamic and inclusive collaboration with Knowledge Holders (Toll, 2018), guided by a social justice framework and critical feminist perspective (Sajani, 2012), while prioritizing health considerations during a health crisis. ABR integrates artmaking as its subject, methodology, data, and analytical framework, adopting a participatory

approach (Huss & Cwikel, 2005; Leavy, 2022; McNiff, 1995, 2017). This methodology focuses on the changing nature of the creative process (Leavy, 2017a).

The study was designed to remain flexible, adapting to the preferences of the Knowledge Holders, the emerging group dynamics, and the creative process inherent in artmaking. For example, during the initial interview, refugee mothers were invited to specify their preferred art materials for the virtual art therapy sessions. Their request to meet in person, once COVID-19 policies allowed, was accommodated despite administrative challenges in quickly modifying the research procedure. As the artist-researcher-art therapist, I facilitated sessions virtually from Ottawa due to interprovincial travel restrictions and health considerations related to my high-risk pregnancy. This emergent, pragmatic, and collaborative approach was vital during the COVID-19 crisis, balancing health and safety with the Knowledge Holders' decisions.

Delivering art therapy through a hybrid model, where I was the only remote participant, presented unique challenges. I could not fully observe or assess interpersonal dynamics within the in-person group nor navigate the physical environment as I might in a fully in-person setting. Building trust and fostering strong relationships with both the supporting staff and Knowledge Holders was critical to establishing an equitable and supportive space for self-expression.

The study's procedures reflected an inclusive, emergent, and pragmatic approach, integrating participatory-action components with a critical feminist lens. The design was developed and adapted in consultation with diverse community leaders, Knowledge Holders, and the partnering community organization. This approach combined arts-based research (ABR) methodologies with qualitative coding and analysis, alongside reflexive artmaking by both the Knowledge Holders and I. Aligned with an intersubjective paradigm and Huss and Cwikel's (2005) social justice model of ABR and art therapy, the study also prioritized cultural humility (Jackson, 2022) and intercultural ethical considerations (Acton, 2001). The art images were intentionally not analyzed through symbolic interpretation, as such processes can introduce bias,

reinforce hegemonic ideologies, and perpetuate oppression (Acton, 2001). Instead, the Knowledge Holders' stories and words, though translated from Arabic to English, were regarded as absolute truths, while the images stood alone as non-verbal data.

To ensure sustainability, I aimed to enhance the skills of ANC social workers. By attending the virtual art therapy groups, they gained practical knowledge of arts-based counseling through firsthand experience. These social workers were expected to serve as future connectors, recommending therapy, support, or arts groups for Knowledge Holders. This approach was inspired by Munt's (2012) art therapy group with women, where participants continued to meet after the sessions had finished because their experiences remained meaningful. It also drew from my experience as an art therapist at an oncology hospital, where arts-based support groups continued informally, even after sessions ended, as peer support remained beneficial.

Ensuring continuity of care was a priority, though the hybrid virtual sessions introduced challenges related to confidentiality and vulnerability. These challenges were compounded by the presence of an interpreter, creating multiple layers of distance, including physical, linguistic, cultural, and technological barriers. The artmaking in the sessions had the potential to bridge and connect these layers (Kolah, 2023). These challenges, combined with the collaborative nature of working with diverse professionals, may reflect real-life intercultural interactions, particularly in international contexts and during times of crisis. My role was to foster as safe a space as possible through my demeanor, emergent interventions, and engagement. I observed that the social workers cultivated an empowered, protective, and supportive bond with the Knowledge Holders, collaborating with them and offering unwavering kindness, compassion, validation, and deep respect.

A pragmatic and emergent research approach allowed adaptation to shifting COVID-19 policies and restrictions throughout the study's implementation from 2019 to 2023. The timeline was further extended by my two maternity leaves, during which I gave birth to three children, a



four-month leave for my first child and a year-long leave for twins. This experience of motherhood shaped my research process and perspectives, a connection explored in the chapter on artmaking and reflexive analysis, given that all the Knowledge Holders were also mothers.

### ***Belonging and Well-being***

The Knowledge Holders' experiences of belonging and subjective well-being are explored in this ABR study through creative artmaking. Based on the recommendation of the Director and staff from the collaborating community organization, who reviewed and approved the research proposal, the group adopted a strengths-based art therapy approach informed by positive art therapy and positive psychology (S. Haghighi, personal communication, February 4, 2020; Wilkinson & Chilton, 2017). This approach was chosen over a past-focused, trauma-centered art psychotherapy model.

As a result, the group's goals and art invitations emphasized creating open-ended artwork related to resilience, present emotions, and the development of coping skills. These open-ended invitations ensured the focus remained on exploring strengths-based experiences of belonging and well-being through artmaking and storytelling. The following section defines the terms belonging and well-being and discusses their relevance to this study.

**Belonging.** Belonging is a critical topic when supporting newcomers to Canada, as it affects both personal and societal functioning (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2009; Valle Painter, 2013). Pearce's (2008) study on immigrants to Canada found that trusting one's neighbors, rather than the broader population, fostered a sense of belonging. In this study, Knowledge Holders explored their subjective experiences of belonging both through interviews and creative visual arts during virtual art therapy sessions.

Allen and colleagues (2020a) describe belonging as "a positive but often fluid and ephemeral connection with other people, places, or experiences" (p. 2). It extends beyond feeling part of a group to include relationships with the physical environment and associated memories.

For newcomers to Canada, factors such as immigrating at a younger age, residing in Canada for more years, and speaking English or French at home were associated with a stronger sense of belonging (Hou et al., 2016).

**Well-being.** Well-being involves evaluating a person's overall quality of life and includes subjective perceptions of life satisfaction. It encompasses feelings of happiness, comfort, contentment, and personal agency. Diener and Ryan (2009) conceptualized well-being as having three components: 1. Life satisfaction, 2. Positive experiences of pleasant emotions, and 3. Lower levels of negative moods. Well-being is culturally informed and shaped by an individual's value system, making it relevant in intercultural studies where it can involve diverse factors (Diener & Ryan, 2009). This study emphasizes that each person's understanding of well-being is unique, viewed through a strengths-based and intersectional lens rather than a deficit-based one.

In the field of arts in health, well-being goes beyond the absence of illness, focusing on whether individuals lead meaningful lives defined by agency and happiness, based on their own standards (Clift & Camic, 2016). Additionally, emerging research, including a large-scale cohort study of 23,000 people and fixed-effects analyses, found that "Frequent arts participation and cultural attendance were both associated with better mental health (lower mental distress) and higher well-being (life satisfaction)" (Fancourt et al., 2023, p. 19; Wang et al., 2020).

### ***The Interdisciplinary Research Team***

The research adopted an interdisciplinary approach, involving collaboration among: Dr. Heather McLeod from the Faculty of Education with an expertise in arts-based research; Dr. Xuemei Li whose research focuses on the experiences of newcomers to St. John's; and Dr. Leah Lewis with expertise in arts-based counselling within the Faculty of Education, in Counseling Psychology. Lewis, McLeod, and Li opened a community art studio in St. John's that is a part of the Art Hives network (Timm-Bottos & Chainey, n.d.; Timm-Bottos & Keilly, 2015) and was called *Hearthstone* (Lewis et al., 2018b). This community art studio was closed due to the

COVID-19 restrictions. Plans are in place to revitalize community art studios in the future. Lewis, Li, and McLeod also collaborated on creating an open art studio in a high school to support newcomer adolescents (Lewis et al., 2018a) and have published articles on creating newcomer connections through art along with myself (Lewis et al., 2018b). Therefore, this current research project with refugee women was inspired by the previous knowledge and experience gained from the collaborative development of the Hearthstone community art studio that merged multiple disciplines to ultimately support diverse communities St. John's. In this current arts-based research that I conducted in collaboration with the ANC, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do Syrian, Congolese, and Eritrean refugee women, who have arrived in Newfoundland and Labrador within the past seven years, voice their lived experiences through online art therapy?
2. How can artmaking in a safe online group setting help this population express their experiences of belonging and well-being in an online art therapy group?
3. How can artmaking in an online art therapy group help create meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders?

Knowledge Holders were chosen based on the ANC's current client load of recently arrived newcomers, which included Syrian, Congolese, and Eritrean refugee women. Thus, the research plan was created in consultation with individuals working in communities and organizations that support newcomers, such as the ANC, the Internationalization Office at Memorial University of Newfoundland, among other stakeholders.

Arts-based research (ABR) was the methodology used within an *aesthetic intersubjective paradigm* of ABR and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015) along with a feminist intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989; Sajnani, 2012; Talwar, 2016) with cultural humility (Jackson, 2020; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). The study focused on embodied, supportive, strength-based,

empowerment-focused, social-justice-oriented, and creative art making experience and expression (Spitzer, 2011; Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b). Furthermore, a lens of cultural humility was paramount to this research, while integrating intersectional and anti-oppressive art therapy (Collier & Eastwood, 2022; Eastwood et al., 2023; Jackson, 2020; 2023).

### ***Collaborative Role and Professional Experience of the Artist-Researcher-Art Therapist***

In this study, I identify as an artist-researcher-art therapist, as I simultaneously occupy these roles throughout the research process. In the following subsections, I explain the different perspectives I bring to the study as both an artist and art therapist.

**Artist Lens.** ABR encompasses various art modalities such as drama, psychodrama, music, poetry, and dance (Leavy, 2017a). This study focused on visual arts due to my expertise in visual arts and art therapy. Visual arts were chosen as the medium that I could best support Knowledge Holders in using because I could leverage my technical knowledge (Kapitan, 2010a).

Nevertheless, Knowledge Holders were encouraged to explore their experiences using their preferred art modalities, such as theatre, dance, or music, if these forms were more meaningful to them. For instance, Knowledge Holders were invited to select music they wished to listen to while creating art during sessions. The Arabic and Iraqi music, including songs by the Lebanese singer Fairuz, created a joyful and festive atmosphere as the Knowledge Holders created artwork and engaged in conversations during the sessions.

**Art Therapist and Psychotherapist Lens.** As a Registered Canadian Art Therapist (RCAT, Canadian Art Therapy Association), Certified Clinical Counselor (CCC, Canadian Counseling and Psychotherapy Association) and Registered Psychotherapist (RP, College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario), and artist, my role in the study was twofold: to create a safe and nurturing space to create artwork, and to facilitate an effective virtual art therapy group experience. According to Kapitan (2010), an art therapist researcher integrates aesthetic-relational tools by: “Seeing, creating art and facilitating the process of creation”; “Relating compassionately

to the art images created and to the people who are seeing, creating, and relating to the art images created”; “Attending to the therapeutic relationship, environment and surrounding socio-cultural contexts”; and “Interpreting all of these components as to their meaning and significance” (p. 31).

## **Knowledge Holders**

### ***Inclusion Criteria***

St. John’s was chosen as the location for this study because the majority (approximately 70%) of Newfoundland and Labrador’s newcomers settled in the city (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2016). As noted in the literature review, refugees are generally defined as individuals forced to flee their country due to violence, war, or persecution and are unable or too fearful to return (Fuentes, 2019; USA for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). Persecution can stem from religious, ethnic, tribal, national, or political factors, with ethnic, tribal, or religious violence and war being leading causes of refugee status (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.).

With the help of the settlement organization, I planned to recruit 10 refugee women from Syria, Congo, or Eritrea, who had relocated to St. John’s within the past seven years. While the literature recommended a mono-ethnic group for gender-specific expression (Hanania, 2018; 2020; Kira et al., 2012), the settlement services director suggested including women from three different countries to ensure the group and research were accessible and inclusive. Refugee women from Congo, Eritrea, and Syria were attending ANC programs at the time, making this approach more fitting for the community context (S. Haghighi, personal communication, February 4, 2020).

I aimed to recruit Knowledge Holders between the ages of 20 and 65, who were willing to participate. The uniqueness of the Knowledge Holders and their rich life experiences supported the use of purposeful sampling, in line with arts-based research practices (Leavy, 2017b;

Merriam, 2009). In consultation with the Association of New Canadians (ANC) and other community settlement organizations, female refugees from an empowerment-focused group were recruited for the study.

The director of the Association for New Canadians (ANC), the community organization collaborator, recommended including three different cultural groups for inclusivity: refugee female Knowledge Holders from Syria, Congo, and Eritrea. The initial plan was for different first languages to be spoken in the multicultural group, including Arabic, French, Lingala, Swahili, Tigrinya, Kituba (Kikongo), and Tshiluba, with English as the primary spoken language. In the case of Knowledge Holders with diverse linguistic backgrounds, interpreters from diverse language backgrounds would be present (S. Haghighi, personal communication, February 4, 2020). A social worker from the ANC was also involved in the recruitment process, interviews, and virtual art therapy sessions to provide on-the-ground follow-up support for Knowledge Holders in case any distressing memories surfaced, ensuring access to psychosocial support as needed (S. Haghighi, personal communication, February 4, 2020).

### ***Recruitment***

**Purposeful Sampling.** Refugee women from minority backgrounds who had experienced war and relocation were considered vulnerable by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2018) and the settlement organization. Consequently, while we celebrate the agency, strengths, and empowerment of this group of women who have overcome many challenges, their emotional and psychological safety took priority over all other considerations. Due to the prioritization of emotional and psychological safety of potential Knowledge Holders and the ability to provide sustainable follow-up, not all refugee women in the larger community who were eligible to take part in the study ended up being part of the research.

To account for recruitment challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic that prioritized safety and in-line with ABR methodology that values rich and unique experiences (Leavy, 2022), I employed purposeful sampling and connected with Knowledge Holders through established community relationships with the Association for New Canadians NL settlement organization. This was particularly crucial to Knowledge Holder recruitment given the unique and hard-to-reach nature of the refugee population including those who were busy building new lives for themselves and their families in a new country. Describing the appropriateness of purposeful sampling in ABR, Leavy (2022) stated that:

Given the philosophical basis of ABR and particularly the value placed on multiple truths and multiple ways of knowing, a strategy of purposeful sampling is generally employed so that “the best” participants are selected- those with the most to offer in regard to the topic. (p. 213)

As opposed to snowball and chain-referencing sampling (Ibraheem et al., 2017; Penrod et al., 2003), purposeful sampling was the best fit when working with an existing caseload for follow-up support by staff.

**Screening for Art Therapy Group Participation.** The social workers from the ANC screened the Knowledge Holders who expressed interest in participating in the group for safety and suitability, identifying those who would benefit from a virtual arts-based support group in accordance with their ethical principles and expertise in the field. For instance, if a Knowledge Holder was in a state of psychological vulnerability at the time or was experiencing extreme emotional distress, group attendance might have resulted in re-traumatization for the Knowledge Holder or other group members. In that case, individual therapy would have been deemed more suitable and recommended. Nevertheless, all the Knowledge Holders who were interested in joining the group were able to do so.

**Recruitment Process.** In line with trust-building methods, I collaborated with the ANC to provide comprehensive support throughout the research and offer follow-up assistance to ensure the ongoing mental health and well-being of the Knowledge Holders during and after the study (S. Haghghi, ANC Director of Settlement Services, personal communication, February 23, 2021). ANC social workers played a crucial role in recruitment and screening to assess the emotional readiness of Knowledge Holders for group sessions that explored emotions through art, considering their mental health, agency, and willingness to participate throughout the project. For screening purposes and to provide sustainable support, the community organization recommended recruiting members from an existing group of refugee women in NL who were a part of the social workers' client caseload. These Knowledge Holders had already undergone screening and had established trusting relationships with the social workers. The Knowledge Holders were also encouraged to invite community members to the recruitment session.

After multiple consultations, members from a pre-existing activity-based group designed for strength-building among refugee women were targeted for recruitment. This group was chosen because its members had access to support in case of emotional distress. Social workers from this group maintained a trusting relationship with the Knowledge Holders, but were not involved in the recruitment process.

To address potential undue influence, as outlined in Articles 3.1 and 7.4 of the TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018), a staff member from a different ANC division led the recruitment, assisted by a hired interpreter. This approach was based on organizational realities and advice from both the ANC and Memorial University's Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR). A different ANC staff member gave an in-person presentation on Indigenous experiences in Canada and building relationships with newcomers, followed by the recruitment session. Five members from the strength-based group attended, and ANC social workers reached out to additional groups, leading



to the participation of two more refugee women. The ANC provided transportation, an interpreter, and space for the recruitment sessions.

During recruitment, an interpreter, well-versed in confidentiality procedures and having signed confidentiality agreements with the ANC, facilitated communication between the ANC worker, potential Knowledge Holders, and me as the principal researcher in both English and Arabic. Given the small number of cultural groups in St. John's, confidentiality and sensitivity were prioritized. The interpreter presented information in a gentle manner and highlighted that there were no consequences for non-participation.

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and my high-risk pregnancy, I attended the session via Zoom from Ottawa. Following the ANC staff presentation, I explained the research project, reviewed the Knowledge Holder invitation letter, and discussed the consent form (See Appendices A & B). I answered questions, and the information was interpreted from English to Arabic. Knowledge Holders were given printed consent forms and letters to take home, with ongoing verbal consent requested for participation. They were informed that the group focused on strengths, well-being, belonging, and community, rather than clinical mental health or trauma-focused support.

The interested Knowledge Holders provided contact information on confidential sheets, accessible only to interpreters, ANC workers, social workers, and I. Social workers pre-screened potential participants to ensure suitability for a strengths-based emotional and artistic expression group. I then contacted interested individuals to arrange pre-interview appointments.

**Group Amendments and Knowledge Holders' Requests: Shifting to a Hybrid Model.** During the recruitment session, the interested Knowledge Holders stated that they preferred in-person meetings over participating in virtual art therapy sessions. They expressed concerns about their ability to focus and actively engage from their homes through a video conferencing platform, as many were caring for their own children or grandchildren. These

caregiving responsibilities made it challenging to concentrate while at home. The Knowledge Holders wanted to gather at the ANC school, where childcare assistance was provided by the ANC. In response to this feedback, I submitted a formal request to the university's ethics committee to amend the group's participation format. The proposal suggested transitioning from virtual sessions on borrowed laptops to in-person meetings with a hybrid virtual model, allowing me to connect remotely from Ottawa due to the restrictions for inter-provincial travel and my health issues with a high-risk pregnancy.

After careful consideration and prioritization of the Knowledge Holders' preference for in-person meetings, the university ethics committee approved the amendment request. The ANC social workers organized transportation for the four consenting Knowledge Holders. The organization also provided trained interpreters, childcare, and secured a suitable location for hosting the in-person groups. The researcher contacted the interested Knowledge Holders to set-up the individual pre-group telephone interviews. While the hybrid virtual model presented challenges, including my limited ability to oversee the in-person environment and ensure direct communication, prioritizing the Knowledge Holders' preferences actively supported their agency and honored their lived realities. This approach centered their voices and needs, fostering a collaborative and inclusive framework that balanced health, safety, empowerment, and accessibility.

### ***Recruited Knowledge Holders: A Unique Population of Syrian Refugee Mothers***

Newly arrived refugee women from Congo, Eritrea, and Syria were targeted for recruitment based on the Association for New Canadians' client load of recent newcomers. While the community organization primarily supported women from these regions, only Syrian refugee mothers participated in the recruitment session, despite efforts to include Congolese and Eritrean women, and then extending the invitation to Iraqi refugee women. Five Knowledge Holders provided their information to participate in the research. When they were telephoned to

coordinate the pre-group interviews, four people committed to joining the research. The group member demographics are described in Table 1. The fifth individual shared that she was no longer able to attend because she was busy with a newborn baby.

**Table 1**

*Knowledge Holder Demographics*

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Locations lived	Time arrived in Canada	Family Status and Location
Amina	46	Syria, Jordan, Canada	2019	Canada with her daughter and grandchildren and fiancé.
Hafseen	29	Syria, Lebanon, Canada	2021	Canada with parents and two children. Her husband's location was unknown for 10 years during the time of the study.
Maryam	44	Syria, Lebanon, Canada	2016	Canada with her husband and six children.
Rayya	37	Syria, Turkey, Canada	2021	Canada with five children. Husband was in Turkey with their other children.

All the Knowledge Holders being a part of a particular subgroup, as mothers, is likely due to age-related and gender factors, as the participants were adult women. In collaboration with the UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) prioritizes family unity and reunification for refugees, a key reason many refugee women entering Canada are mothers. This aligns with Canada's Family Reunification class, a pathway for resettlement, as well as international laws, such as the "Right of Family Life and Family Unity," which is fundamental to children's survival and wellbeing (UN General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948; UNHCR, Refugee Family Reunification, 2012; United Nations, 1989; UNICEF, 2016).

As explained in the introduction chapter and detailed in the methodology section, this country-specific pool of Knowledge Holders was likely limited because the individuals were

recruited from an existing program at the community organization during the Covid-19 pandemic. The small number of Knowledge Holders was influenced by the recruitment process that prioritized psychological readiness, safety, ethics, and continuity of support. The ANC's existing programming enabled social workers to provide follow-up support if emotional distress arose during the therapy sessions, both in-between and after sessions. Purposeful sampling was helpful, as it was conducted within a limited pool of eligible women and constrained by ethical approval, health considerations (e.g., maternity leave), and staffing availability. Additionally, participation may have been affected by individuals' comfort with attending group recruitment sessions shortly after COVID-19 restrictions were lifted.

### **Triangulated Arts-based Data**

The data collection decisions were informed by Leavy's (2017c) ABR evaluative criteria described in chapter three, which include *method fit* (i.e., whether the method fits with the research question); a *holistic, thorough, congruent, and coherent* data collection process; the *artfulness* of the ABR; *ethics*; and whether the final product was *useful* for wider communities and the Knowledge Holders. The data analysis process entailed summarizing and organizing the data (Trent & Cho, 2014), while the translation process of arts-based data was considered an iterative assemblage (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2018). The verbal and nonverbal data elements, the inclusion of the Knowledge Holders' analysis, and the unique relationship between these elements provided triangulation (Mason, 2000; 2002; Sava & Nuutinen, 2003). This increased empiricism of the qualitative and arts-based research components. The reflexive artmaking and journaling intended to ethically reduce the power imbalance between myself and the Knowledge Holders by presenting my vulnerable experiences through art, while being critically reflexive towards social contexts that form understandings from a critical feminist and ABR lens (Kapitan, 2010; 2015). In this study, the following multimedia data was collected:

1. Transcribed verbal data from pre-and post-interviews during the first and last sessions.
2. Artwork created by Knowledge Holders during the sessions.
3. The Knowledge Holders' and researcher's titles for, and "intersubjective arts-based dialogues" (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017, p. 603; with their artworks (Huss & Cwikel, 2005).
4. The researcher's reflexive process notes written during and after each session.
5. The researcher's reflexive paintings and arts-based journaling that were created throughout the research process.
6. Relevant historical and contemporary research related to refugee women from Syria in NL engaging in supportive and meaningful artmaking, to increase experiences of belonging and well-being.

### **Research Procedure**

To collect the data described above, the research study was separated into the following data collection procedures described below: literature review and community advice; pre- and post-interviews and focus groups; hybrid online art therapy group; and reflexive artmaking of the researcher.

#### ***Community Advice***

Having gained a grounded understanding of arts-based research and the experiences of the refugee Syrian, Eritrean, and Congolese women in Canada during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic through reviewing the literature, I sought advice from community members working with newcomers to NL. I connected with members of the community from various cultural backgrounds and experts in the field for consultation on how best to conduct the research in the most empowering and supportive manner. Fourteen community members who were consulted are detailed in Table 2 and include founders and CEOs of companies supporting refugee youth,

individuals who have sponsored and housed refugee families to St. John’s, international doctorate students at Memorial University, a Community Outreach Worker at a childcare centre supporting newcomer parents and children, a Family and Sponsored Students Advisor at the Internationalization Office at Memorial University, and an academic who also conducts research on supporting newcomers in the community. In addition, the previous Executive Director of the Refugee and Immigrants Advisory Council (RIAC) was consulted, and the potential for collaboration to implement this research was discussed, in 2017. Unfortunately, the RIAC program had closed due to lack of funding before the research began (J. Rivera, RIAC electronic mail list communication, November 22, 2019).

**Table 2**

*Demographics of Community Consultations for Research Development and Feedback*

Community Member Leadership Position	Expertise/Program Focus	Location of Member	Meeting Type	Number of meetings
Executive Director	Non-governmental organization supporting refugees	St. John’s	In-person and telephone	2
Founder and CEO	Refugee youth and educational support program	St. John’s	Videoconference	1
Business Development and Board Member	Business development and newcomer women experiences, Women’s Council	St. John’s	Videoconference	1
Sponsor of refugee families	Academia	St. John’s	Videoconference	1
Director	Resettlement Services in Refugee Support Non-Governmental Organization	St. John’s	Telephone	10+ times
Community Outreach Worker	Childcare and parent support centre	St. John’s	Telephone	1

Instructor and Academic	Newcomers and linguistics in rural Newfoundland and Labrador	St. John's	Telephone	1
Social worker	Settlement Services in Refugee Support Non-Governmental Organization	St. John's	Telephone and videoconference	10+ times
Social Worker Manager	Resettlement Services in Refugee Support Non-Governmental Organization	St. John's	Telephone and videoconference	10+ times
Social Worker and Newcomer Family Advisor	University Internationalization Office	St. John's	Telephone	1
Social Worker and Newcomer Family Advisor	University Internationalization Office	St. John's	Telephone	1
Doctoral Student	Research and newcomer experiences	St. John's	In-person	1
Academic and Researcher	International and multicultural health	St. John's	Videoconference	1
Manager and Academic	Settlement Projects in Refugee Support Non-Governmental Organization	St. John's	Videoconference	2

Based on Einstein's (2011) research methodology, I established a small informal working advisory board within the settlement organization staff members and leaders. The primary goal of this group was to make ethical, respectful, and inclusive research decisions with a focus on cultural humility. It was composed of individuals, such as the Director of Settlement Services, social workers, etc. Members of the board were invited to participate in various aspects of the research process, including determining suitable art materials, creating an appropriate environment for the group, shaping the data collection process, offering insights on sustainability

of continued support for the Knowledge Holders, and providing other valuable advice. Their input was crucial to ensuring that the research and interventions aligned with the community's cultural values and the population's unique needs (Leavy, 2017b, p. 257). Importantly, careful thought was given to ensure that this involvement did not impose an additional time burden on the community leaders who had busy schedules, and their participation was scheduled to accommodate their availability during daytime work hours.

Given the collaborative nature of the work with the community organization, an informal version of the advisory board emerged. This informal board consisted of the Director of Settlement Services, social workers, and the Manager of Special Projects. Their close involvement with the Knowledge Holders and their deep understanding of their unique needs made their advice invaluable to develop and implement the research project within their organizational boundaries. For example, the Director of Settlement Services provided structured feedback to ensure that the research contained a strength-based and “here-and-now” focus when supporting newcomer refugee women, as opposed to focusing on past trauma. The director advised that the group be expanded to include female refugees from multiple countries to ensure that diverse Knowledge Holders had access to the program.

In addition, when I applied for the research to be approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR), I needed to negotiate between feedback from the university’s ethics committee and the settlement organization. For example, the committee provided requirements to ensure that the ANC social workers did not influence the recruitment process with their unique position in the organization. On the other hand, the restrictions needed to adhere to the settlement organization’s professional perspectives on best practices to provide ethical wrap-around support for a population that is deemed as vulnerable. Therefore, the process of gaining ethics approval for the project was complex and took months to navigate between the university and organization.



Recruiting other community members to provide signed consent forms and feedback also posed a significant challenge, particularly when we were about to commence recruitment, schedule pre- and post-interviews, and six virtual art therapy sessions. The data collection timeline was constrained, running from October 2021 to the end of December 2021. This limitation was due to factors such as the organization's existing programming, staff availability with an inflow of new refugees from Ukraine and Afghanistan arriving at the time, restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to revise multiple versions of the ethics approvals due to Knowledge Holders' feedback during the recruitment session to change the study design, and the researcher's impending birth of twins via a scheduled c-section due to a high-risk pregnancy. Nevertheless, preliminary meetings with a diverse set of community advisory members during the research development phase was instrumental in shaping the research, as were the interactions with community organization members and individuals involved in supporting refugees in St. John's.

### *Pre- and Post-Group Interviews*

**Consultations on Interview and Group Format.** Verbal telephone semi-structured interviews were conducted before and after the virtual art therapy group study to collect information about the group process, Knowledge Holder experiences of art therapy and artmaking, and perspectives of belonging and well-being in Newfoundland and Labrador. Diverse community members and leaders, in addition to the Knowledge Holders themselves, were consulted on inclusive, culturally meaningful, and preferred formats for the interviews and groups (see Table 2). The recruitment session that detailed the art therapy group process, consent forms, and inquiries about the Knowledge Holders' preferences evolved into an initial consultation session because the Knowledge Holders strongly conveyed a preference for an in-person art therapy group when the COVID-19 meeting restrictions were lifted. After the art therapy group was finished, the Knowledge Holders were asked whether they would prefer to meet as a group

for a final interview (with a focus-group style) or individually. After meeting in groups for five sessions, the Knowledge Holders shared that they would rather meet by telephone individually for the post-interviews. In addition, Knowledge Holders were asked about how they would like to share the group and disseminate the research post-group.

**Pre- and Post- Interview Script.** The pre- and post-group interviews, as outlined in Appendix C, served different distinct purposes. The interview questions were intentionally designed to be direct, open, and easily accessible, and align with the research questions and experiences of the Knowledge Holders (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Given the arts-based and emergent nature of this study, the incorporation of culturally inclusive and sensitive approaches, and guidance from community advisors and consultants, psychometric assessments were not utilized, nor were demographic questions that could be triggering or perpetuate assumptions.

Demographic inquiries, particularly those related to sensitive topics such as religious affiliation, could evoke feelings of danger or mistrust, especially for individuals seeking asylum due to religious persecution. Moreover, such questions risk imposing categories that may not align with participants' lived experiences or cultural identities, potentially compromising the authenticity and depth of their engagement. Prioritizing an open, non-invasive approach fosters trust, safety, and a sense of belonging, which are crucial for meaningful participation in this context. Thus, open-ended questions were designed for the purpose of this study with the intention to incite meaningful conversation about the research topic. The design of the pre-interview questions and format was multifaceted, aiming to achieve several goals, including:

1. To acquaint the Knowledge Holders with art therapy and inquire about their expectations for the group.
2. To create a safe and trusting space for addressing any queries or concerns regarding the process.

3. To generate another safe and separate space for Knowledge Holders to provide their verbal informed consent.
4. To gather insights into the Knowledge Holders' preferences for the art therapy group, including their art material choices.
5. To gain an understanding of their experiences related to artmaking, belonging, and well-being in St. John's.

For those interested, follow-up post-group individual interviews were conducted. At the conclusion of the group sessions, the post-group interview also intended to enable Knowledge Holders to reflect on their achievements, discuss internal and external changes, and formulate plans for next steps. These plans were based on their group experiences and personal preferences.

Due to the nature of the study, intercultural and therapeutic interviewing methods were used. However, it's important to note that the interpreter frequently conveyed the tone and message using their own voice. Art therapist Lynn Kapitan (2010) stated that, “[t]herapeutic interviews have been criticized for being subjective but...finely attuned subjectivity often is required to address certain research questions” (p. 156). As an art therapist, I have been trained in therapeutic interviewing. This form of interviewing focuses on validating responses and active listening, which I expressed in non-verbal and verbal manners with my tone of voice, validating words, affirming sounds, and integration of humor.

Therapeutic interviewing allows for “sensitivity toward the nature of the object [subject] being investigated” and allows for the art to sometimes “speak for itself” (Kapitan, 2010a, p. 156). Therapeutic interviewing allows for openness, where Knowledge Holders may raise and address their own concerns. It creates a space for Knowledge Holders to challenge the researcher’s preconceptions (Kapitan, 2010a). Despite the open nature of therapeutic interviewing, the research study is not a traditional art therapy session. Thus, as an artist-researcher-art therapist, I focused on the original question topics and did not include indirect

interviewing techniques to “get past the participants’ defenses,” which may occur in therapy situations (Kapitan, 2010a, p. 156). For example, art therapists may help Knowledge Holders uncover underlying family dynamics and childhood challenges through specific art directives, such as creating a sculptural diagram of their family engaging in an activity. This type of activity can highlight specific behavioural patterns that they find challenging. However, this supportive and strengths-based group emphasized open-ended questions that highlighted personal strengths, emotions, and experiences of belonging and well-being in the present moment. Using an empowerment model, their voices and perspectives were fully embraced as valid and integral to the process, with a deep respect for their individual truths. Each Knowledge Holder’s experience was viewed through a pluralistic and subjectivist lens, where their perspectives were not questioned or analyzed, but celebrated as authentic and central to the dialogue. This was further enriched through open dialectical conversations facilitated by artmaking, storytelling, and both group and individual discussions. Follow-up questions focused on eliciting details and encouraging storytelling to deepen understanding when further information was needed, as well as to inquire about their perspectives on next steps.

In *Cross-cultural Interviewing: Feminist Experiences and Reflections* (Griffin, 2016), authors from different countries describe the nuances of insider/outsider relationships and the complexities of interviewing marginalized individuals from different cultural backgrounds than the researchers. Griffin (2016) describes one large difference between inter- and intra-cultural interviewing: it may require an interpreter (or a gatekeeper), which entails nuances and requires different ways to build relationships. For example, most of the authors in Griffin’s (2016) novel employed amateur translators.

**Language Interpretation.** The difference between language translation and interpretation is that interpreters may be asked to summarize (interpret), while translators are asked to translate the responses verbatim. When summarizing, their own voices and perspectives

are often included in the research. Therefore, in some instances, it may be best to not use translation or interpretation, although considerations will be made regarding how the Knowledge Holders are most comfortable expressing themselves. Griffin (2016) emphasizes reflexivity throughout the process and describes cross- and inter-cultural interviewing as a “negotiated process” (p. 8) making fluidity and adaptability within the pre-and post-focus groups advantageous. For example, some post-session questions were generated from developments within the group.

In this current ABR research, two different Arabic-English speaking interpreters were involved in the study. One male interpreter with a research background and one female interpreter with a social work background. In my reflections, I found that working with different interpreters changed the tone of the conversations, as they were filtering nuanced language through their own lenses and experiences. Moreover, gender may influence the comfort and ease with which Knowledge Holders share their experiences, as their interactions with interpreters could be shaped by the interpreters' gender and cultural background. Hanania (2018) discusses how gender can influence the comfort level of Syrian women in disclosing personal stories in her art therapy group proposal.

### ***Hybrid Online Art Therapy Group***

**Group Context, Challenges, and Emergent Adaptations.** Although the study was initially planned for 10 Knowledge Holders, only four were able to take part in it due to time, administration, and personal constraints. Nonetheless, the in-depth process of arts-based reflection allowed for data-rich and detailed experiences to be shared. Knowledge Holders met for a total of five sessions of 1.5 hours in November and December 2021. Interpreters were present to aid communication and enable the Knowledge Holders to speak more freely, and caretaker staff were on-site to look after the Knowledge Holders' children. As explained earlier, a social worker from ANC was in attendance to help support the program and for continuity of

support for the Knowledge Holders, while childcare was provided by other ANC workers. Significant administrative effort and expert support were essential to the success of this intercultural ABR research project and group art therapy program.

Since the Knowledge Holders chose to meet in-person after the ICEHR and NL province had lifted their in-person meeting restrictions, the logistics and other variables had to be planned within a limited timeframe, while the settlement organization was focused on supporting a large number of Ukrainian refugees who had recently relocated to NL during that time, with limited time and available resources during the pandemic. The planning, support, and engagement of the collaborative settlement organization staff was commendable.

The online art therapy sessions became hybrid online art therapy sessions because I was unable to travel to St. John's from Ottawa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various factors contributed to my inability to attend in-person art therapy sessions during that time, such as travel restrictions due to the pandemic and being in the late stages of an at-risk pregnancy that required frequent specialized medical appointments. Similar to the Knowledge Holders, I also had caregiving responsibilities for my one-year-old child. Moreover, I aimed to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission from a larger city like Ottawa to the smaller urban center of St. John's. Consequently, despite my desire to be physically present, I connected with Knowledge Holders online through videoconferencing during the data collection process. I facilitated the art therapy sessions through the videoconferencing platform Zoom unless the platform did not work due to internet connectivity issues. In the case that Zoom did not work, Google Meetings video conferencing platform was used as a back-up, as it was widely used within the settlement organization. Luckily, I was able to meet with some of the Knowledge Holders in-person during the member checking session on August 23, 2023.

The challenges mentioned, along with facility and transportation closures caused by December snowstorms and an emergency health issue related to the researcher's pregnancy, led to

the last-minute cancellation, and rescheduling of some sessions. Additionally, sessions three and four were combined into a double session due to these cancellations. As a result, both Knowledge Holders and ANC staff members demonstrated flexibility and grace when adapting and navigating these changes. Such adaptability is often necessary within a settlement organization with limited resources in Atlantic Canada, particularly when responding swiftly to the arrival of new refugees and funding to meet global humanitarian needs (Tatsoglou et al., 2014).

**Relational Dynamics with a Collaborative Hybrid Model.** Working with a collaborative organization, including a social worker and an interpreter in a different province, introduced complexities and communication challenges during the meetings. For example, the group occasionally faced internet connectivity issues, delays due to winter weather, disruptions caused by double-booked rooms, or the organization's ongoing support for a new cohort of refugees from Ukraine. Moreover, I was unable to fully assess the group and relational dynamics occurring in the room among the Knowledge Holders, the interpreter, the child caregivers, and the social worker, who often switched conversations between English and Arabic. Through a single camera lens and without fluency in Arabic, I could only grasp the discussions directed toward me, while other conversations remained outside my understanding. This lack of access to all discussions, along with limited information about delays or room changes when connecting from Ottawa, sometimes left me feeling excluded from the space. Nevertheless, I maintained a therapeutic perspective that emphasized trust in the process. I accepted that the conversations shared with me were intended for me, while those not directed toward me remained confidential and integral to the group's autonomy.

The hybrid, intercultural, and collaborative setting that included childcare fostered a more relaxed and contained atmosphere than traditional art therapy. The social workers and interpreter were visible most of the time to support the Knowledge Holders, while the Knowledge Holders' children and staff caregivers moved in and out of sessions. This dynamic resembled an Open

Studio art therapy model (Timm-Bottos & Chainey, 2015), which emphasizes hospitality, inclusivity, and positive regard, while integrating families and diverse participants in a shared space centered on creativity, acceptance, and care.

My approach to navigating the unknown was rooted in building trust and fostering safe spaces, guided by Brené Brown's (2015; 2021) strengths-based and positive psychology research. Central to this was the concept of generous assumptions, defined as offering "the most generous interpretation to the intentions, words, and actions of others" (Brown, 2021, n.p.). During the sessions, I observed kind, caring, and respectful dynamics between the staff and the Knowledge Holders, which further reinforced the sense of community and support within the group. I also modelled these dynamics myself.

Nonetheless, multiple layers of disconnection emerged between the Knowledge Holders and I, including spatial, linguistic, and interpersonal barriers. The challenges reflect the realities of providing intercultural support during crises, particularly when working with refugee populations who are displaced and reliant on multi-disciplinary teams. Such complexities underscore the importance of adaptability, cultural humility, and effective collaboration in intercultural, multilingual, and hybrid settings (Davoren et al., 2024). This research highlights the need for innovative strategies to bridge communication gaps and foster meaningful connections despite logistical and linguistic barriers.

The collaborative creation and sharing of artwork, combined with the group's process-focused approach to sharing experiences, fostered a sense of connection that transcended geographical, temporal, relational, and linguistic boundaries. Artmaking, with an emphasis on safe expression through non-technical artwork (i.e., prioritizing process and self-expression over aesthetic beauty), became a way to bridge the layers of disconnection. Furthermore, this research highlights the Knowledge Holders' strengths, resilience, and grace throughout the process.



**Chosen Art Materials.** Art therapy, and culturally humble art therapy, requires careful consideration of the art materials used in the session because “[a]rt materials serve as the basic components of the language spoken in the process of art therapy” (Snir & Regev, 2013, p. 94). The use and perception of each art material can evoke diverse experiences, emotions, and memories through their use (Hinz, 2009). Accordingly, during the pre-session interviews, I asked the Knowledge Holders about their previous experience with artmaking and which art materials they would prefer to use during the art therapy sessions. The materials requested by Knowledge Holders were shipped to the ANC to use. The following interview excerpts highlight the art materials preferred by the Knowledge Holders.

- Amina: “I just want to wait for the materials...I don’t have anything in mind... I’m waiting for you because I don’t have any experience in painting... I want basic things to draw or paint, you know? Just like basic paint” (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021).
- Hafseen: “Yea, painting. I like to do painting... With pens, or with [sound became fuzzy]. Okay. Like with pens, pencils, things like this. Colour.” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021)
- Maryam: “I like to make some paintings and drawings.” And “I would like to learn more, like to have more experience. And, plus, if I have free time, that’s a good thing for my free time. The most important thing is that I want to accomplish things I have time for in the future. What made me interested is that I can express what I want to do and I have something in mind that I want to do” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021).
- Rayya: “I don’t have anything in mind to ask you to bring. Maybe at the next meeting, I will decide... I want to do handicrafts...
  - Interpreter clarifies: She does something like, she does sewing, the art using sewing. You know, this kind of arts?
  - Researcher: Is it embroidery? Is that kind of what it is... or?
  - Social worker clarifies: “Like macramé.”
  - Rayya: “I use some kind of coloured beads. Yea, coloured and do sewing with these kinds of beads. I do art with sewing and use coloured beads.... Next meeting, I will bring something that, to be multimedia of what I am doing. I will bring a sample to show you.” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021)

Three out of the four Knowledge Holders asked for painting and drawing materials, while one Knowledge Holder asked for macramé materials. The following materials were shipped to the settlement organization for each Knowledge Holder: art journals of various colours, pencils, erasers, pens, paint palettes, paint brushes, acrylic paint kits, macramé string, macramé beads and accessories, jars for water, and oil pastels. It is important to note that, although the art materials that Rayya described were interpreted as macramé by the social worker, she had shared images of embroidery work later in the art therapy sessions. I believe that Rayya may have initially asked for embroidery materials, which was described in the theoretical and arts-based embroidery research groups facilitated and authored by Hanania (2017; 2020) and da Silva (2023). Due to possible misinterpretation (and highlighting the limits of interpretation between languages), macramé materials sent to the organization, while painting and drawing materials were the only materials that the Knowledge Holders used in the art therapy sessions.

**Art Therapy Group Process.** *Art therapy* is defined as a psychotherapeutic process that integrates symbolic artmaking to communicate, heal, and develop meaningful relationships (Canadian Art Therapy Association, 2014; Naumburg, 1966). Through a safe therapeutic relationship, the art therapist guides participants in purposefully creating symbolic images using various art mediums, including colors, shapes, and lines, to support self-expression. This process, combined with verbal communication, fosters healing and enhances well-being through a dynamic, dialectical approach. (Henderson & Gladding, 1998; Malchiodi, 2003; 2017). *Art expression* is defined as an art activity that is used for symbolic communication (Huss & Cwikel, 2005).

Based on themes of belonging and well-being, Knowledge Holders were invited to gather in a safe space, create expressive artwork, and discuss their artistic process and art creations verbally. Knowledge Holders were also invited to create artwork and write in their visual journals between sessions, which all four of them did. The group process was divided into four stages that

integrated Huss and Cwikel’s (2005) model of expressive arts therapy and arts-based research with Bedouin women. Their model included the following steps:

1. Knowledge Holders interacts with artmaking (within the group and with a question used for art inspiration).
2. Knowledge Holders interacts with art and group and group leader simultaneously.
3. Knowledge Holder observes the pictures as a group exhibition (if they are comfortable).
4. Knowledge Holder re-interacts with the above stages of artmaking, discussing, and observing, over an issue that arose in the former “wave” (previous events described above) (Huss and Cwikel, 2005, p. 6)

**Art Therapy Group Structure.** Table three outlines the emergent structure and themes of the art therapy group sessions, and provides an overview of the activities, discussions, and context that helped to shape each gathering. The art therapy sessions, held from November 24 to December 14, 2021, were thoughtfully and intuitively designed to create a supportive space in a strengths-based manner. These sessions helped Knowledge Holders to explore their emotions, well-being, and sense of belonging through artistic expression, using a variety of materials they had personally recommended. The sessions were led in an open and emergent manner within a positive psychology and strengths-based model (Wilkinson & Chilton, 2017), where the Knowledge Holders were also invited to create artwork in between the sessions about their experiences of well-being and belonging, if they wished to. The table includes elements of an art therapy group, such as check-ins, sharing of artwork, thematic discussions, and check-outs, to offer insights into the group progress and each session.

**Table 3**

*Art Therapy Group Topics and Structure based on an Emergent and Open Artmaking Model*

Session	Date	Session Structure	Brief Contextual Notes
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1	November 24, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introductions</li> <li>• Check-in: Knowledge Holders were invited to choose a colour that represents how they are feeling in the current moment.</li> <li>• Discussions of art therapy, belonging, and well-being.</li> <li>• Handing out and sharing art materials with Knowledge Holders to take home and bring to sessions.</li> <li>• An invitation to create any artwork with any material by decorating the first page of the visual journal with the theme of well-being.</li> <li>• Each Knowledge Holder is invited to share their artwork with one another and describe their work with open questions asked by group members and the researcher.</li> <li>• Check-out: Creation of a symbol that represents your current emotions in the moment.</li> <li>• Homework: Invitation to document or create artwork about anything that brings you well-being and belongingness over the week</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Room was double-booked, so the session began late.</li> <li>• Children were present in the room because childcare was provided, and they sometimes sat on the Knowledge Holders laps or asked for things.</li> <li>• The Knowledge Holders seemed excited to use the materials and were invited to make artwork at home with the art materials provided (such as visual journals).</li> <li>• The feeling was very celebratory as exciting art materials were distributed and given to Knowledge Holders.</li> </ul>
2	November 26, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check-in inviting Knowledge Holders to create a symbol that represents their emotions in the present moment.</li> <li>• Sharing of artwork that was created over the past week.</li> <li>• Invitation to create a painting that explores</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Technical issues: Meeting started and was frozen, and then session closed twice. Therefore, the session began later.</li> <li>• Everyone immediately began artmaking and focusing. I played music during the artmaking process and children were present during the sessions in the background.</li> </ul>

		<p>experiences of well-being.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Each Knowledge Holder is invited to share their artwork with one another and describe their work with open questions asked by group members and the researcher.</li> <li>• Check-out: The question was framed as, “What do you need right now? (In terms of nurturance or for you to feel well-being)”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One Knowledge Holder could not attend the session, so her friend brought an artwork to the session on her behalf.</li> </ul>
3 & 4	December 10, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge Holders were excited to show the artwork that they had finished or created between the sessions.</li> <li>• Check-in: “If your emotions were a flower, plant, or weather pattern today, what would they be?”</li> <li>• Creating artwork that explores Knowledge Holder’s experiences of belonging.</li> <li>• Each Knowledge Holder is invited to share their artwork with one another and describe their work with open questions asked by group members and the researcher.</li> <li>• Check-out: Knowledge Holders were asked: How does it feel to take time to paint?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The sessions began in a different room this time that looks like a lobby of some kind. It would have been nice to know and be present in the building to get a “feel” for the space. This was a double-session and therefore was the whole morning, as the session the previous week was cancelled due to my pregnancy medical issues and need for an emergency ultrasound.</li> <li>• The longer session enabled in-depth explorations of the theme of belonging and many deep emotions were shared in this session.</li> </ul>
5	December 14, 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check-in: Feeling within a circle.</li> <li>• Sharing of artwork created between sessions.</li> <li>• Knowledge Holders were invited to create artwork on the cover of their visual journal that represents their</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Same room as the previous session. This was the final session, because of scheduling.</li> <li>• The interpreter is different from before.</li> </ul>

experiences in and feelings about the group (as the journals were used a lot throughout and between the sessions).

- Each Knowledge Holder is invited to share their artwork with one another and describe their work with open questions asked by group members and the researcher.
- Final circle and closing: Reflections on the group and feelings about goodbye.

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### ***Reflexive Artmaking of the Researcher***

In intercultural, critical feminist, and arts-based research, reflexive practices are important and helpful for researchers to move beyond clichés, to represent *multidimensional portrayals of human* experience (Griffin, 2016; Leavy, 2017b). Art therapist Lynn Kapitan (2015) believes that “[s]elf-reflexivity is crucial to broadening one’s lens because it allows one to pay attention not only to what one experiences across cultures but also, just as importantly, how one navigates the cultures internalized within oneself” (p. 108). Moreover, Talwar and colleagues (2018) share that, “whether doing research or preparing to be a therapist, deconstructing our own positions of power and privilege lies at the heart of a social model” (p. 66).

Reflexivity describes “a confessional tale and transparent account” (Finlay, 2003, p. 2) of the researcher's subjective biases throughout the ongoing research process to contextualize and increase the richness of the qualitative or arts-based study and interrupt the “ethnocentric gaze” (Kapitan, 2015, p. 108). Artist-researcher-art therapists can strive to understand, remain self-aware, and be transparent about their own paradigms and preconceptions about the Knowledge Holders, subject matter, and methodology to retain ethical integrity while in the field (Jenkins, 1992). This includes documenting emotions, hopes, connections, biases, attractions, and

repulsions throughout the research process. From a critical feminist perspective, presenting my own vulnerable artwork and experiences, alongside the Knowledge Holders, can foster a more empathetic and egalitarian relationship (Sajnani, 2012).

This arts-based reflexive research process included visual images and written notes before, throughout, and after each group session, and during my data analysis process. ABR scholars advise that researchers remain in-tune with their emotional, psychological, and carnal processes as an *internal dialogue* (Tenni et al., 2003) by using an arts-based journal and creating artwork images in relation to the group. Throughout the comprehensive examination process, research proposal development, ethics review, research coordination, data collection, and data analysis, I engaged in artistic painting and journaling. These creative practices allowed me to vulnerably reflect on my core values, emotions, and experiences while working with the population and during the writing of this dissertation.

In addition to *introspection*, the reflexive process included engaging with elements of *intersubjective reflections, mutual collaboration, social critiques, and discursive deconstructions* (Finlay, 2003). The reflexive painting series and written journal that I created is considered data to be included in the research and are presented in chapter seven. Although the reflexive art-making process is essential in this ABR research as a form of analysis, dissemination, and in fostering cultural humility through a transparent account of my emotional and perceptual experiences (Kapitan, 2015), it is presented in a separate chapter to prioritize the voices and artwork of the Knowledge Holders as the primary results.

**Sharing Artwork.** Sharing my artwork with the Knowledge Holders was a deliberate and thoughtful process, informed by my person-centered and strengths-based art therapy training. Only some of the artwork I created during the group sessions, alongside the Knowledge Holders, was shared with them when it served a therapeutic and supportive purpose. These reasons included validating the group members, their emotions, and the group relationships, as well as

fostering a sense of community through artmaking. Additionally, during the member-checking session, I shared some of my analysis artwork while presenting the initial themes to the Knowledge Holders in a PowerPoint presentation. However, I deliberately shared my artwork sparingly and only when it could benefit the group, ensuring that the focus remained on the Knowledge Holders' artmaking and sharing processes without detracting from their time to express.

**Art interpretation during the sessions.** In the art therapy group, Knowledge Holders were invited to interpret their artwork by sharing the stories related to their art, which is a common sharing process in art therapy sessions. Knowledge Holders were also asked questions to elaborate on their artwork, such as where they would place themselves in the image, emotions that may have surfaced when creating the artwork, and the meaning of symbols in their lives.

**Post-interview interpretations:** Furthermore, during the individual post-session interviews, the Knowledge Holders chose the piece of artwork that they had created that was the most meaningful to them. I asked the Knowledge Holders the following question: "What was the most meaningful artwork that you had created in these sessions, and if your artwork could tell a story, what would it tell?" The Knowledge Holders' artwork choices and their respective stories are provided in Table 4 and are further elaborated upon in the results section.

**Table 4**

*Post-Interview Data Interpretation of the Most Meaningful Artwork Created*

Knowledge Holder	Artwork, Title, Date, and Session	Story
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Amina



Artwork 1: *Seniors Centre. A.* Seniors center. Pencil on canvas. November 26, 2021. Session 2.

“My preference is between the hospital building or the senior people’s house” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

“I will choose the nursing home, and I would describe it like, I would like someone who would take care of me when I become old. Because I would like to help them, provide them care, and teach them, so that’s what I would choose. We should be taking care of all of them because when they become old, they are like kids because we need to give them more attention and care” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).



Artwork 2: *Working at the hospital.* Acrylic paint and pencil on canvas. December 10, 2021, Session 3 & 4.

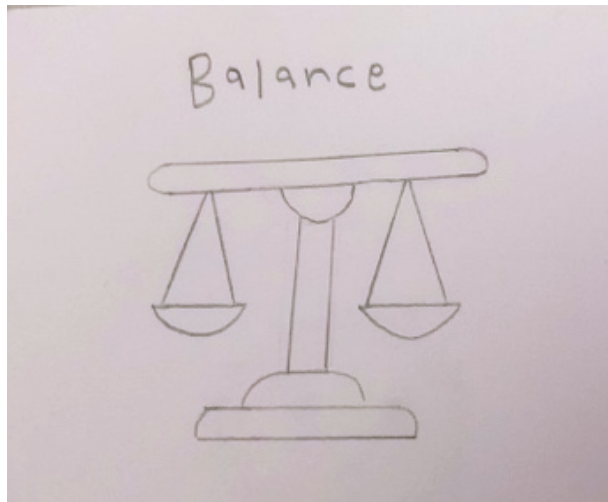
Hafseen



*Roses.* November 26, 2021. Session 2 and at home between sessions.

“When I drew the roses, I loves roses and this is like the most, actually, I drew many roses... The roses represent love and yea, this is what I said actually” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Maryam



*Balance.* December 10, 2021. Session 3 and 4.

“I love the art about balance. The scale that I drew represents incredible fairness and impartial, like this kind of, blindfold things. Wherever I go, wherever I live, I love to be fair everywhere. Yes, for me. For all of the world” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

“I would like to find fairness and balance wherever I go. I want to feel happy and comfortable” (Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

Rayya



*Family Tree*. November 26, 2021. Session 3 & 4.

“The family tree I was talking about was about Syria and almost my family or relatives were missing and maybe dead because of the war and I tried to [draw] my feelings to [show]... when I was back in Syria. I drew destroyed buildings and houses. And I drew a balance, or something like that, because all the country did not do anything towards the people there... And it wasn't fair... My neighbour, she likes it, and she took it... I like it and I drew it already” (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

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### ***Data Analysis***

The data analysis process also was considered rich due to the diversity of data which integrated visual, oral, and potentially written elements. Once the data was collected and the Knowledge Holders interpreted their artwork and experience during the member-checking session and post-interviews, the following data analysis techniques helped me interpret the results in an iterative process:

1. **Data preparation and Organization.** The data was organized, translated, and transcribed (Leavy, 2017b). In addition, images of the artwork taken were organized by session number, date, and the creator's pseudonym. The original artwork created by Knowledge Holders was retained by the Knowledge Holders and considered their property. The researcher (referred to as “I” or “my” herein) created reflexive

artwork and journals which were photographed and organized by date, session numbers, and themes. While I transcribed and organized the data, I continued to create artwork and journal entries about my reflections. The digital data was stored and organized in a password protected electronic repository and back-ups of the data were stored in a password-protected file on my personal computer. This password-protected file was also stored on a cloud-based storage platform accessible only to me.

2. **Data immersion.** I immersed myself in the data to gain a deeper knowledge of the content and to check the “pulse” of the data (Leavy, 2017b, p. 150). As I sifted through the data, I created a series of six paintings that helped process my felt experience and impressions of the data. The series is presented and discussed in the results chapter.
3. **Coding.** The researcher coded the qualitative data with a *Values Coding* strategy (Sandaña, 2014) by using the MAXQDA 2022 Miner. Sandaña (2014) states that value coding is particularly important for qualitative studies that “explore cultural values, identity, intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (p. 268). This coding method prioritizes the Knowledge Holders’ emotions, values, struggles, and worldviews (Saldaña, 2014). Values coding helped provide information for analyzing the experiences and concepts of belonging and well-being. This type of coding was helpful for an inquiry within feminist and arts-based emotive paradigms. *In vivo* coding, a coding process that prioritizes the Knowledge Holders’ words to create themed groups, was also used to code the data. Thus, some of the coded themes were titled based on the Knowledge Holders’ unique phrases that summarized the content or were interpreted as powerful (Saldaña, 2014).

4. **Categorizing and Theming.** Once the information was coded, I searched for similar patterns and grouped the codes together (Saldaña, 2014) by creating Code Models with the MAXMaps program. The themes that emerged from the codes contained phrases from Knowledge Holders and general words, such as “connecting community.” I also engaged in memo-writing to create links between the codes and interpretations by documenting emerging ideas, insights, and perceptions throughout the process (Leavy, 2017b). These memos helped link literature to the codes and to develop interpretative ideas.

The artwork and interpretative verbal/written reflections from Knowledge Holders were categorized through *horizontalization* within both Excel and Microsoft Word tables. The horizontalization process included creating clusters of meaning and then creating an arts-based response or textual description (Creswell, 2007). I colour-coded these clusters of meaning to better organize the complex integration of themes, quotations, and images.

5. **Interpretation.** Interpretation of the data tied together the ideas to answer the research questions. Interpretation was guided by the memos generated from the codes and marked the point when I synthesized the data from the clusters of meaning, integrating these with relevant literature from the field. I focused on preserving the integrity of the stories, paying particular attention to the narrative components that "honor people's stories as documented data revealing social, psychological, and culturally meaningful patterns." (Kapitan, 2010a, p. 274). To generate larger conceptual ideas from the data, the following questions were asked: “What are the relationships between the categories, themes, and concepts?”; “What is the essence of the data telling me?”; and “What do I learn from placing the data in the context of existing literature?” (Leavy, 2017a, p. 153). A text description

was created, outlining the setting and context in which the Knowledge Holder experiences these concepts, while respecting confidentiality and sensitive moments. The description also included connections to the literature, framed through community and critical art therapy perspectives (Kapitan, 2010a). The artwork documented was presented within tables throughout the text, and on the title pages of different chapters of this dissertation to speak for themselves. The Knowledge Holders and community advisors were invited to provide feedback and their perspectives on the themes and artwork during the member-checking session. Finally, the interpretation included an iterative process of consulting, artmaking, and including literature to further understand and contextualize the final themes.

#### ***Member Checking: Integrating Participatory-Action Research Components***

Walsh and colleagues (2013) believe that arts-based research is "founded on the idea that the arts are useful as a means to *engage* in research as a participatory act that allow those involved to more directly express their voices through artistic media with the goal of enhanced self-expression" (p. 121). When working with groups who have historically experienced marginalization and oppression by dominant societies, such as refugee Syrian mothers, participatory processes that reduce power imbalances are important from a critical feminist lens. Although this is not a participatory action study, certain participatory action methodological elements influenced the design. Specifically, Knowledge Holders were involved in many aspects of the study as co-researchers and decision-makers, with the aim of generating meaningful action based on the research findings (Finley, 2005; Huss & Cwikel, 2005; Leavy, 2022; Rubesin, 2018). The action component depended on the Knowledge Holders' preferences and what emerged from the research findings. Action was only to be taken if Knowledge Holders felt empowered by the action, which could have been creating a document to inform policy makers on how best to support the community, or by creating a virtual online gallery.

Member-checking, which includes asking feedback from Knowledge Holders about the data and their experiences of the group, helped to increase the validity of the study (Creswell, 2007). It is important to note that this research project included community-based participatory research (CBPR) aspects, but it is not fully CBPR. In a complete CBPR study, “community involvement characterizes every aspect of the research process from the identification of the problem to the distribution of research findings” (Leavy, 2017b, p. 256). This study consulted the community on art materials, meeting logistics (i.e., in-person versus online or hybrid), and project outcomes, and included power-sharing in decision-making. However, although the settlement organization advisors and community advisors were involved in the study design, the Syrian refugee community were not involved in all aspects of research work, due to linguistic challenges and the desire to not take too much of their time.

**The Member-Checking Session Story.** After my one-year maternity leave, I reconnected with the settlement organization to arrange an in-person member-checking session. In August 2023, the session took place with two Knowledge Holders present, along with the social worker manager and an interpreter. The social worker was still in contact with the four Knowledge Holders and all four members indicated that they would like to attend the meeting. Yet, only two members were available on the day of the meeting. I recorded and transcribed the conversations that occurred during the session.

The member-checking session was held in-person in St. John’s. The session began with sharing brief updates on our lives since we last met, and remarking on the experience of finally meeting in-person after time has passed. The Knowledge Holders were then shown a PowerPoint presentation with the preliminary themes that I created, based on qualitative and arts-based analysis. The Knowledge Holders were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the themes that emerged. When discussing the themes, the Knowledge Holders remarked that “It’s a really sad past,” (Rayya) and “Everyone’s facing the same thing. All Syrians are” (Maryam) when

discussing their experiences that were shared related to their artwork (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

The Knowledge Holders were shown slides documenting the artwork that they created during our time together. One slide was shown for each Knowledge Holder, featuring all their artworks along with their pseudonym. They were also shown the artwork they had identified as the "most meaningful" from their post-interviews. The researcher then re-shared a synthesized version of the story that the Knowledge Holder had narrated about that artwork (see Table 3). During the presentation, the Knowledge Holders were invited to comment on their artwork, provide or change their pseudonym, and discuss their favourite piece of artwork created during the sessions.

The Knowledge Holders appeared to enjoy viewing their artwork and discussing the themes it depicted. It was interesting to note that the two Knowledge Holders did not always remember the artworks that they created, particularly the ones that did not look like their artistic style. For example, in response to the family portrait that Maryam created, she mentioned that "I am not sure if I drew it, or someone else. I am not sure if I drew the family portrait" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023). A conversation ensued, and the other Knowledge Holder shared that she remembers Maryam creating that artwork in session four. In addition, Rayya commented that she would have preferred to create more crafts and sell her art. Maryam agreed that she would like further sessions that focused on selling her art.

Following the presentation and feedback, the members had the opportunity to create artwork about their experiences, providing an arts-based analysis of the sessions and the themes that emerged, similar the fourth stage of Huss and Cwikel's (2005) model. The art materials were selected to resemble those used in the art therapy sessions, since similar materials could evoke memories of the previous art therapy experiences. The materials included using markers, paint,



canvas boards, and watercolor paper. Knowledge Holders were invited to keep the art materials and take them home after the session.

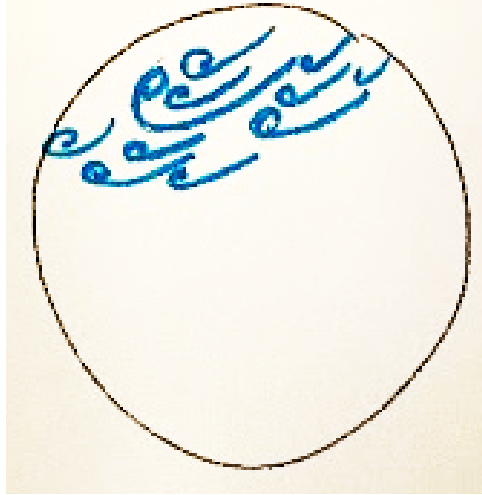
To promote egalitarian participation, reduce hierarchies, and foster a sense of warmth and vulnerability, the Knowledge Holders, the social worker, and I engaged in the artmaking process together. By participating and sharing our emotions, the social worker and I aimed to diminish power imbalances and prevent the Knowledge Holders from feeling like they were being “studied.” Instead, we were all seen as equal contributors to the member-checking. This collaborative, arts-based approach helped us to collectively analyze the research data and share our emotions in an accessible way. Although the social worker created artwork and shared their story during the session, their narrative will not be included in the documentation, as they did not sign a consent form for publication. While their willingness to participate is considered consent for involvement, their contributions will remain confidential due to the lack of signed consent for publication.

To create a space of openness, I proposed a quick arts-based check-in. The group then created a quick artwork to ascertain our current emotions in the moment. The artwork is shown below with a short narrative in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Arts-based Check-in during the Member-Checking Session*

Person	Check-in Artwork	Story
Rayya		Points to her artwork and says "hurricane" and laughs.  “Angry. It's not because of the road test. I came angry and I was anxious about it. There was another reason why it was frustrating. There was another person who was complaining that they had failed, but I am fine. I am happy about that...I went to my family doctor to have (unintelligible). I went to my



family doctor to be the guarantor on my daughter's passport, and she couldn't, so I am just frustrated that things didn't go well. I had applied for the passport a few months ago and I just needed someone to sign as a guarantor to process it. I went to the doctor. The doctor says that they can't. It's frustrating. Because my daughter is getting married in Turkey. She is getting married and she needs the passport to go...

The fact that they didn't take the passport in the appointment that I had today, she said that she can't sign the passport as a guarantor. It's frustrating" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

Maryam



"I drew my house, and I am looking from the porch. I am looking at my kids and I like that. I like the house to be clean, done with my laundry. Everything is done by the time my husband and kids come home. I am happy when I am productive, and I am (unintelligible, maybe busy) all of the time."

"[Feeling] happy. I've learned how to make myself happy, even if I am not. So, I learned that through time, and I am content with my life, and I am happy with it" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

Researcher



“I have this like, the waves of like, so I just landed in St. John's yesterday. So, I am just happy to be by the ocean and I am happy to see you guys. I feel like the flow is all coming together, finally, after so much disconnection... So I am feeling, just very grateful. Yea” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

Following the check-in artwork, Knowledge Holders were invited to create artwork that reflected on our sessions together and explore, “all of the images that you have created, the ideas of belonging and well-being, but really whatever comes to you [in relation to the themes and artwork presented to the Knowledge Holders]” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023). This was an accessible and arts-based way for Knowledge Holders to analyze the presented data. Arabic music by the artist Fairuz was played while the group created reflective artwork, presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**

*Arts-Based Reflections on the Art Therapy Group and Preliminary Themes During the Member-Checking Session*

Person	Check-in Artwork	Story
Rayya		“I remember my kids watching cartoons. When I see them happy, that makes me happy too... Yea, so if you connect it to my drawings, as long as my kids are happy, I am happy, and it makes me happy to see them watching cartoons... Oh happiness and hope. It brings hope to kids when they're watching” (Member-checking).



“I would put this on top of my young child's bed because he loves drawing, and he loves cartoons” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

Maryam



“I have peace and happiness... I love watching the ocean and the water, and that makes me very happy and at peace when I am. I feel like I am in a different place when I see it... Yes, whenever I see water, it brings happiness. My husband and I... (Knowledge Holders laugh). It brings my husband and I together as well. Whenever we have any work to do, we both go and to the ocean, or the pond, or the river. That brings my honeymoon back... It's a time for bonding.”

“... but if I would, I would picture myself on the boat visiting my family... Whenever I see boats or cruises, I look at them, and I (envision/imagine/pretend) that I am on one of them that would take me to see my family.”

“My family [would be on the boat]. We would all go together. Inshallah. Realistically, it would be on a plane, but it's just, it's just that I hope to see them. I love the ocean and water. I forget at the world when I look at it (emotional and teary-eyed)” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

“[I would place this artwork] The entrance of the house. I also have this [pointing to her painting of the ocean] painting in my entrance. This one, because I feel that it brings hope... As soon as you open the door, you see it in front of your face. I will put this beside it and I will just have to re-draw it and fix it” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

Researcher



“It is connected to a forest, and everyone is growing together, and then branching out. So that was, what kind of came to mind to me. That all of these strong trees are gaining roots, and also branching out. (Pause for translation between English and Arabic). And there have been so many seasons that have passed between meeting, and everything has been growing, and growing, and growing” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

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After the reflective artworks were created, the Knowledge Holders were asked, more than a year later, whether the art therapy group had impacted them, and if so, how it had influenced their lives. The Knowledge Holders responded with the following answers:

- Rayya: “We got to know each other; we created friendships. It was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed our time” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).
- Maryam: “I really enjoyed my time. I learned that I have to live my life, and life is beautiful, if you want to make it” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

The Knowledge Holders were asked if any symbols in the artwork created during the art therapy sessions stood out to them, or if there was a piece that symbolically connected them to our time together in 2021. The Knowledge Holders provided the following answers:

- Rayya: “I love justice, so, I like peace, even though I am a little naughty sometimes (laughs). I only like Justice. I don't like it otherwise. So, I value my friendships. I have also learned that it's about the person, your friend, and that's it. You can't give it to anyone. I have one friend that I have been friends since I was 17, when I first got married, and we are not in-touch right now. That symbolizes friendship, because that's it. That's a very

strong one. During the war, we lost connection, but I will always regard her as a really good friend. I am really sad that we are not in touch right now. I just remember that. I still remember her until this day and I will never forget her, and how strong our friendship was” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

- Maryam: “One thing that stands out to me, is this drawing, the lady that is holding her Quran, her holy book. I am proud of my religion and that connects me to this life, and to my God. That's what makes me happy. That's what stands out... My life is really nice. It's very beautiful” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

Since a year and a half had passed since the Knowledge Holders were asked about their preferred next steps to this research project, they were given some ideas about possible next steps. The ideas included hosting a virtual online gallery showing their artwork, writing a white paper document for policy makers, establishment of an art and craft entrepreneurship program, etcetera. Rayya and Maryam were asked what they would like to do next based on their experience with this research. The Knowledge Holders provided the following answers:

- Rayya: “About the art gallery, our art is okay, it's mediocre, so I don't think that it would be a good idea” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).
- From the beginning of the member-checking session, Rayya showed images of handmade and craft art that she had created and said:

I would like to work and sell this, but I don't know where to start from... I also make table flowers... I would like to start and work like that.... I had a session at (unintelligible, but a location). I don't mind teaching it and doing it for work, for sessions, but I want my own kind of job or business... I don't want to volunteer. I want work” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

The interpreter and social worker discussed connecting Rayya to existing entrepreneurship programs.

- From the beginning of the member-checking session and in response to Rayya’s suggestion about building art and craft entrepreneurship programs, Maryam said that “Life here requires you to get out and work, and to get out of your comfort zone” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023). She also suggested the following:

I would like that there are some workshops, like training workshops for more artwork. Like a sewing class, a DIY class, like things that Rayya does. I

would like to see more job opportunities come from it as well. It will take some time to start, I don't know where to start from. Now that my kids are all grown up and everyone is taking care of themselves, this would be something good that I would to have fun and also have an income from at the same time, even if there's a cooking class, or something like that. (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

After the Knowledge Holders were asked these final questions and given time to provide feedback, they were invited to participate in a closing check-out to conclude the session. They were invited to identify their current emotions by choosing a marker colour. Their narratives are shared in Table 7.

**Table 7**

*Symbolic Closing Check-Out During the Member-Checking Session*

Person	Check-out Colour	Story
Rayya	Chose many colours to represent white.	“Because it represents nature... I love nature and, even though, from the inside, there are a lot of emotions, I wish that I picked nature, because I love nature, and nature represents hope, happiness, and simplicity. I picked the white colour. So, we have an expression in Arabic that says, "May your path be white," which means "may you have a bright future," So I wish that my kids have a bright future with that colour” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023)
Maryam	Blue.	“I feel that blue gives me hope and, light blue, not dark blue, gives me hope, happiness, and peace. And it’s such a pleasant colour to the eye” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).
Researcher	Red	“Every time I meet with you guys; I have felt so much brighter after. So, I am also just really, so happy that you came. Happy that you are here. Thank you” (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

*Art Data Interpreted by Knowledge Holders.* Mullen (2003) suggests that blurring the roles of artist, arts facilitator, and researcher is beneficial, as it reflects the true complexity of the research-Knowledge Holder relationship. From a critical feminist perspective, Mullen argues that merging these roles helps reduce inherent power dynamics. ABR allows refugee women to engage in the creative art process and serve as interpreters of their data and experiences through

member-checking. Art as data can hold multiple meanings simultaneously (Chilton et al., 2015; Weber, 2008). According to Talwar (2002), ABR can also be seen as a decolonizing process when Knowledge Holder-artists interpret the art through their own narratives. The Knowledge Holders' verbal and arts-based analysis of their own works fosters a more transformative and open inquiry process (Huss & Cwikel, 2005; Mullen, 2003). By combining visual artwork with verbal and written interpretations from the Knowledge Holders, alongside the researcher's artistic and reflexive written processes, a more inclusive and empowered approach to data analysis is created. This approach invites the Knowledge Holders to interpret their data while also highlighting my vulnerable voice as the researcher.

"Intersubjective arts-based dialogues" (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017, p. 603) refer to the creation of new meaning through shared interactions with others (Chilton & Leavy, 2015). This process aligns with Huss and Cwikel's (2005) research, which emphasized social justice approaches when working interculturally with individuals who may face marginalization in dominant cultures. In their study, Bedouin women created and independently analyzed their artistic data (Chilton & Leavy, 2015). The authors believed that,

...by handing over creativity (the contents of the research) and its interpretation (an explanation of the contents) to the research participant, the participant is empowered, the relationship between researcher and research participant is intensified and made more equal, and the contents are more culturally exact and explicit, using emotional as well as cognitive ways of knowing. (Huss & Cwikel, 2005, p. 45)

The member-checking session was designed to be accessible, creative, participatory, and inclusive, ensuring that the interpretation process was not overly demanding or exhausting for the Knowledge Holders (Lenette, 2019; McNiff, 2011). For example, while a thematic analysis could be useful, especially if the Knowledge Holders wished to write a white paper for dissemination, it



might have been too time-consuming and analytic. In contrast, an intuitive arts-based analysis within a relational context was a more fitting approach.

### ***Representation***

Within a critical feminist framework, the representation of the information was shaped by the Knowledge Holders' perspectives on the most meaningful way to share their experiences, while also supporting public scholarship (Leavy, 2017b). Since the Knowledge Holders expressed interest in participating in arts and crafts entrepreneurship courses rather than creating an online art gallery to showcase their artwork, the settlement organization's social workers connected them to existing programs designed for this purpose. The doctoral dissertation includes images of the artworks created by both the Knowledge Holders and the researcher, synthesizing the literature and detailing the process and methodology.

### **Methodology Summary**

In Chapter Four, I outlined the research methodology, describing the ABR research design within the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of arts-based research and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015). The approach was pragmatist, inclusive, and emergent, framed through a critical feminist lens. This emergent approach proved beneficial during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it prioritized health, supported agentic decisions from the Knowledge Holders, and fostered collaboration with a transdisciplinary staff at the settlement organization. I also detailed the process and changes that occurred throughout the research.

Following this discussion, I provided a detailed explanation of the key terms belonging and well-being, highlighting their relevance to the study. The interdisciplinary nature of the research supervisory committee was emphasized, along with my experience in international and intercultural art therapy as an artist-researcher-art therapist. The research questions were then outlined, along with a description of the multimedia data.

The recruitment subsection detailed the recruitment decisions, the purposeful sampling process, and the Knowledge Holders' demographics. I then described the research and data collection procedures, outlining six key steps: the literature review, seeking community advice, conducting pre- and post-group interviews, providing an online art therapy group, and engaging in reflexive artmaking. I then detail the iterative data analysis process and detail the member-checking purpose. The process and outcomes of the member-checking session were explained with a narrative and tables depicting the artworks created during the session. The methodology chapter concluded with discussing representation, which was informed by the Knowledge Holders' preferences.

## CHAPTER 5

### Ethical Considerations



Rayya (Pseudonym). (2021). *Vase of Flowers (Well-being Painting)*. Acrylic on canvas.

## CHAPTER 5

### Ethical Considerations

In the following chapter, I outline the ethical procedures and special considerations that guided the intercultural study. I examine the ethical factors unique to ABR, as well as the collaboration with a community organization specializing in settlement services for newcomer refugees in NL. This discussion takes place within the context of my roles as an artist-researcher-art therapist, as a registered art psychotherapist, artist, counselor, and researcher. Furthermore, I delve into the attention given to ensuring equity, diversity, and inclusion for the Knowledge Holders participating in a study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic's 2020-2021 waves in Canada with a critical feminist lens. Lastly, I discuss the measures taken to safeguard the mental health of Knowledge Holders, particularly while conducting research online in NL from Ontario with a hybrid virtual art therapy model that collaborates with settlement organization staff in a systemic manner.

#### **ABR Ethics**

The research project received approval from the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) ensuring that it aligns with the institution's ethical standards and guidelines of the *Tri-council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS2, Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). Furthermore, within an ABR paradigm, unique ethical standards speak inform this modality (Leavy, 2017b). For example, when working with a population with complex intersectional experiences, *multidimensional portrayals of human* experience is emphasized (Leavy, 2017a; 2022). Additionally, researchers should safeguard audience members and Knowledge Holders from feeling triggered or re-traumatized if difficult information arises, ensuring that supportive resources and support persons are available.

**Ownership of Artwork.** Regarding the artwork created during and outside of the group sessions, Knowledge Holders were advised that they would remain the owners of their artwork. Permission was needed to publish their artworks in the research dissertation and academic publications related to this research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). In addition, Knowledge Holders were given the choice about how they would like their artwork to be presented, and while as a group they chose not to show their artwork in a virtual online gallery during the member-checking session, some expressed openness or ambivalence during the post-group interviews.

Images of the artwork were taken to document the artwork. The social workers from the settlement organization took images of the artwork, as I was not physically present. I took screenshots of the artwork not captured by the social workers from video recordings of the virtual sessions as a backup. As such, the quality of the images of the artworks varied. The original artworks remained with and belonged to the artist Knowledge Holders, as their agency as creators is emphasized throughout the study and was prioritized over the quality of the photographs that documented the artwork. For example, one Knowledge Holder gave one of her paintings to a neighbour who admired it, while another Knowledge Holder shared that she hung two of the paintings at the entrance of her home “because I feel that it brings hope” (Member-checking session, August 24, 2023). Therefore, the Knowledge Holder’s ownership of the artwork they created during their sessions was meaningful in building belonging and well-being through building relationships and as reminders of hope in their home.

## **Ethical Praxis**

### ***Professional and Regulatory Associations***

As the primary researcher, who was a Registered Art Therapist, Certified Clinical Counselor, and Registered Psychotherapist in the Province of Ontario, I brought the experience of working

with vulnerable individuals across Canada and internationally. I worked as an interned art therapist and counselor with adults in long-term and palliative care at Maimonides Geriatric Residence in Montreal from 2010-2011, with Inuit, Metis, Autochthones, and First Nations adults at a homeless shelter called Projects Autochthones du Quebec from 2011-2012, and with children with diverse emotional and psychological diagnoses at the Jewish General Hospital from 2011-2012.

Following graduation from the Art Therapy Master's Program at Concordia University, I continued my work as an art therapist with adolescents considered at-risk at Stepping Stones International in Mochudi, Botswana, from 2012-2013. I also worked with children and adolescents who were HIV-positive at the Baylor-Botswana Children's Clinical Centre in Gaborone, Botswana, during the same time. In 2014, I worked with children on the autism spectrum at the Miriam Foundation in Montreal. Subsequently, in 2014-2015, I supported children and adolescents who were sexually abused in Squamish, B.C. After my work in Quebec and British Colombia, I relocated to Alberta to work with families dealing with a cancer diagnosis at the Cross-Cancer Institute in Edmonton from 2015-2017. Prior to commencing my graduate studies, I served as a policy advisor in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia, supporting the Mongolian national government in program planning to aid families who experienced domestic violence.

As an instructor, I teach master's-level courses on art therapy with children and adolescents, research, practicum, creativity, and with families in various Canadian institutions in Thailand, Vancouver, Edmonton, St. John's, and online. I developed and piloted a program at the Association for New Canadians, named the "Journey of Hope," where refugee youth provided arts-based peer support within a narrative exposure framework. I was then contracted by the Mississauga Arts Council to develop proposal and an art on prescription model for the region (Toll, 2023).

Given the art therapy, counseling, and psychotherapy accreditations, I adhere to multiple research and practice ethical codes, in addition to the TCPS2 (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018) with the ICEHR at Memorial University of Newfoundland. The study conformed to the ethical code of conduct of the Canadian Art Therapy Association (CATA, 2004), the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario (CRPO, 2017), the Canadian Counseling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA, 2007), and the ICEHR at Memorial University of Newfoundland regarding professional and researcher conduct and standards. Standards include practicing within one's scope and providing a high standard of support. The College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario's Professional Practice and Jurisprudence for Registered Psychotherapists, which states that Registered Psychotherapists will "conduct only such research as potentially benefits society, and to do so safely, ethically, and with the informed consent of all participants" (p. 14), was particularly pertinent when formulating and conducting the study.

In terms of relational ethics, all relationships developed with Knowledge Holders and the advisory council were characterized by respect, care, and an emphasis on equity, with a focus on reducing power dynamics and dual-role relationships (Talwar, 2016). All appropriate professional, cultural, and therapeutic boundaries were meticulously maintained throughout the study. Art therapy involves unique ethical considerations, such as the ethical presentation and use of art materials, a commitment to keeping Knowledge Holders' artwork confidential, and the importance of the therapeutic space in which the artwork is created (Green, 2012). Additionally, attention must be paid to the use of culturally informed art materials that are accessible, relevant, and inviting to individuals from different cultural groups (Dye, 2017; Huss, 2015; Prasad, 2013; Potash et al., 2017). Consequently, Knowledge Holders were consulted on their preferred meeting locations once the COVID-19 group restrictions were lifted, and they were invited to provide feedback on the art materials they wished to use during the sessions.

Given that this research encompasses three distinct roles – researcher, artist, and art therapist - the power dynamics within the relationships were acknowledged and mitigated through a considerate demeanor, open-ended questioning, and the cultivation of trusting relationships (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018). When appropriate, I created check-in artwork during the beginning and opening of the sessions, sharing my feelings, and validating Knowledge Holders' group experiences based on my professional judgment. Furthermore, I kept an arts-based critical reflexive journal to challenge my assumptions through critical inquiry, using artmaking to explore vulnerability and authentic emotions throughout the research process.

### ***Ethical Praxis of Collaborating Settlement Organization Staff***

**Social Workers.** The social workers participating in the settlement organization were members of a professional college that upholds a Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice for their professional conduct (Newfoundland and Labrador College of Social Workers, 2020). In their capacity as supporters of this research project and as representatives of their professional college, the social workers took great care to avoid exerting undue influence or coercion on any Knowledge Holder's involvement in any program, be it research-related or otherwise. They ensured that Knowledge Holders had the autonomy to decline any form of support offered by the program, including assessments, engagement in settlement activities, or other services. Notably, two of the three social workers supporting this study shared both the Arabic language and the same ethnic and national background as the Knowledge Holders, which can help foster trust and mutual understanding.

As professionals working within a settlement organization and championing cultural humility in their daily roles, the social workers were acutely aware of power dynamics inherent in therapeutic or service relationships. They received professional training focused on the continuous



effort to diminish or mitigate any power imbalances through both verbal and non-verbal communication. They were trained to deliver programs with sensitivity and compassion, consistently promoting the agency of all members and service users within the settlement organization, a commitment that extended to their involvement in this research project.

**Interpreters.** The interpreters at the settlement organization underwent training provided by the organization, signed confidentiality agreements with the organization, and possessed experience in their respective professional roles. These interpreters were engaged in a variety of sensitive assignments where confidentiality was of utmost importance, such as facilitating healthcare consultations between refugee newcomers and healthcare providers. In the context of interpretation and power dynamics, ethical considerations necessitate an examination of the interpreter's investment in the subject matter and the diverse factors of race, class, ethnocultural background, and socioeconomic status related to both the interpreter and the Knowledge Holders in intercultural communication. For this study, two main interpreters provided support, one male and one female, both Arabic-speaking newcomers with Arabic backgrounds. Their qualifications and shared language and background helped facilitate effective communication within the study, but may have also unintentionally contributed to power dynamics.

### **Culturally Informed Ethics**

#### ***Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion***

I acknowledge the barriers and inequities that may affect participation in this research group, and I remain committed to addressing and eliminating these inequities within a critical feminist framework (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018; Sajjani, 2012). In addition, the Knowledge Holders were consistently asked about their voluntary participation in this research project and advised of their ability to withdraw at any time without consequence (CCPA Code of Ethics E3, 2007; Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). All reasonable steps were taken throughout the research process to minimize harm or discomfort for

the Knowledge Holders, including ensuring the study's accessibility and discussing the possibility of emotional content emerging before the sessions (CATA Standards of Practice, E. 12, 2004; Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018).

The research and art therapy sessions were centered on strength and resiliency-based approaches to artmaking. All session content was thoughtfully planned to ensure cultural sensitivity and humility, drawing on prior research and consultations with community leaders. The research plans were built upon cultural humility practices informed by a critical feminist framework, including community consultation, collaboration with the Knowledge Holders as co-researchers, efforts to reduce power imbalances within relationships, engagement in vulnerable arts-based reflexivity, and honoring tacit and diverse forms of knowledge and communication (Acton, 2001; Abernathy, 1995; Kapitan, 2010b; 2015; Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998). I recognize that I can never completely grasp another individual's culture, which is dynamic and changing. Moreover, the attempt to maintain cultural competence and humility is an evolving process where I continuously strive to understand experiences that are different from my own (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998; Waters & Asbill, 2013). This process of striving for cultural humility involves a continuous pursuit of understanding, while maintaining humility about the limits of one's own knowledge (Bal and Kaur, 2018; Jackson, 2020).

Cultural safety and sensitivity informed the study design, including the potential for social repercussions for participation (Canadian Institutes of Health Research et al., 2018). The research was designed through a strengths-based lens to reduce stigma associated with participation by prioritizing collaboration with the settlement organization to address and overcome barriers. It focused on well-being, belonging, and artmaking, rather than on mental illness or vulnerabilities (Ahmed et al., 2017). Additionally, the artmaking component, which focused on strength-based narratives and connection, helped ensure that Knowledge Holders in

the group did not feel stigmatized due to mental health taboos in smaller communities, particularly among underrepresented groups, such as Syrian refugee women.

### ***Verbal Informed Consent***

Consent forms were provided to the Knowledge Holders before they engaged in the study and were interpreted in the Knowledge Holders' first language during the recruitment session (See Appendix A & B). The consent forms outlined their contributions, the session plans, how their artwork would be cared for and stored in their homes, in what formats the research would be published, possible risks of harm, and ways that the researcher would reduce this risk. Additionally, information about community and medical mental health supports and resources was provided to Knowledge Holders. I was available to support Knowledge Holders when needed. They also had follow-up support from social workers at the settlement organization outside of the sessions and after the research was completed.

During the recruitment sessions and pre-interviews, Knowledge Holders were invited to keep printed copies of the consent forms and gave verbal consent by registering their names and expressing interest. The ICEHR at Memorial University, along with the Association for New Canadians Director, advised that consent should be provided verbally because some Knowledge Holders could lack the reading skills to review the detailed written consent form and be confident enough to sign it, despite consenting to the research (S. Haghghi, personal communication, February 4, 2020). Therefore, during the recruitment process, the interpreter interpreted the consent form, while I was present to clarify the content and questions. The Knowledge Holders who wished to join the study had the opportunity to sign the consent forms if they wished. The five Knowledge Holders who wanted to join the study signed the consent forms, and their verbal consent to continue to participate was sought on an ongoing basis.

During the pre-interview, I re-explained the project. The Knowledge Holders were asked if they had any questions regarding the consent form, research process, and their willingness to

engage in the research (See Appendix C), which was recorded. When asked about their interest in participating in the research, some Knowledge Holders elaborated on their reasons for participating, which included the following responses: "I'm really happy to be participating"; "You are welcome. Anytime. I am also happy to be with you and to hear from you"; "I don't know how to draw, but I will learn, and I want to help you [researcher]. That's all."; and "Haley [researcher], I want to continue, and I would like to participate." Finally, consent to continue participating was requested throughout the sessions, at the final session, and during the post-group interview.

### **COVID-19 Considerations During the 2020-2021 Waves in Canada**

This research study began during the COVID-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2022, a time when healthcare systems were overwhelmed and the risk of illness, long-term consequences, and mortality was heightened. The concept of risk for Knowledge Holders evolved dramatically during this period. Traveling between provinces, such as from Ontario to NL, and gathering in person to create art was considered a physical risk. Policies aimed at reducing virus transmission, such as travel restrictions and physical distancing, were constantly changing from March 2020 to January 2022. For instance, the Atlantic bubble, which limited travel to Atlantic Canadian provinces, was implemented in March 2020.

Initially, the research plan involved in-person group sessions with the Knowledge Holders and researcher. However, as the pandemic unfolded, the plan adapted to a virtual format, where all participants engaged in online art therapy. This change was made following reviews by the university's ethics committee, the settlement organization, and the research supervisory committee during the winter, spring, and summer of 2021. The shift to virtual art therapy was seen as a safer alternative, allowing individuals to receive support in their homes while minimizing contagion risks. Additionally, the impact of the 2019 snowstorm, which had trapped individuals in their homes for days, highlighted the importance of providing community support within home spaces

(Freedman and Knowles, 2020). The virtual format allowed those with limited access to arts-based support due to physical vulnerabilities, isolation, or lack of transportation to still receive assistance by borrowing laptops from the settlement organization (Jones et al., 2018). Despite the benefits, challenges remained, such as difficulties with childcare and finding private, confidential spaces for support sessions.

By the end of the summer 2021 academic semester, in-person gathering restrictions were lifted by the university's ICEHR, and the research project was scheduled to begin in Fall 2021. During recruitment in November 2021, potential Knowledge Holders expressed a strong preference for in-person meetings at the settlement organization, citing challenges with childcare and focusing while at home. Although they were open to using videoconferencing software, they preferred the in-person option. Given the reduced viral transmission rates in NL, the research plan was amended to accommodate in-person meetings, and the application was re-submitted to ICEHR for review. The amendment was approved with the condition that the researcher would lead virtually due to a high-risk pregnancy and concerns about cross-provincial transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

### ***Safeguarding Mental Health***

The research involved Knowledge Holders who, despite their many strengths and resilience, can also be considered vulnerable due to the intersectional systemic oppression, loss, and potential trauma associated with relocation and experiencing civil war. As a result, safety precautions were implemented to protect the mental health of these individuals. The research design focused on strengths-based approaches, which aimed to provide creative coping strategies to enhance the Knowledge Holders' well-being and improve their present experiences through reflective artmaking and open discussions. The art experience and topics of discussion focused on self-care, stress reduction, a sense of belonging, and overall well-being, with the participatory expressive artmaking process within safe relationships providing intrinsic health-enhancing

benefits. Therefore, the art invitations intentionally did not focus on sharing past traumatic experiences or analyzing systems of oppression, as the settlement director emphasized the importance of focusing on strengths, empowerment, and the present moment.

However, creating artwork can also consciously and subconsciously evoke unexpected and challenging emotions due to the involvement of emotional processes represented through personal metaphor. To address this possibility and in alignment with my professional qualifications, comprehensive measures were incorporated and implemented to protect the emotional and psychological well-being of the Knowledge Holders throughout the study. My professional art therapy training and experience equipped me to work effectively with individuals who have high emotional and psychological needs and challenges. Furthermore, the artist-researcher-art therapist role helped me remain sensitive to identifying and responding to signs of emotional distress.

Although the art therapy group was conducted in person, I maintained a virtual connection with Knowledge Holders by participating through the Zoom video conference platform, although it was sometimes switched to Google Meet, depending on the quality of the videoconference. Prior to scheduling meetings, Knowledge Holders were consulted on the most suitable time of day, ensuring it fell within the settlement organization's operating hours and ability to provide transportation and space. The interviews and meetings involved interpreters, social workers, and childcare staff, who upheld confidentiality during the sessions. The social workers provided additional support and follow-up assistance when necessary, such as with Knowledge Holders who may have shared distressing stories that may put them at risk. For example, during the member-checking session, one Knowledge Holder shared that she was distressed due to administrative challenges related to applying for a passport. The interpreter, who also happened to be a social worker, assisted the Knowledge Holder by printing necessary

documents (among other forms of help) after the session, effectively alleviating the Knowledge Holder's stress through this tangible follow-up support.

Moreover, the group was structured to include adult women of varying ages, with the intention of providing a safe and supportive environment to promote wellness and foster a strong support system. The location within the settlement organization (Association for New Canadians, ANC, 2019) was chosen due to its provision of valuable resources and support for the newcomers and refugees in the province. Furthermore, the Knowledge Holders shared that they preferred to meet at the organization. Being situated within a supportive organization that offers various types of settlement and newcomer resources proved to be beneficial. Additionally, after the completion of the study, I conducted member-checking with the Knowledge Holders and inquired about their well-being one year after the study was completed.

### ***Technostress and Online Video Conferencing***

Although the art therapy plan transitioned from in-person to virtual, and eventually became a hybrid model (both in-person and online), the implications of technostress may still be relevant. Technostress describes the struggle to use and adapt to digital technology (Reidl et al., 2012). Challenges with connecting to an online platform and over-use of virtual meetings may contribute to stress related to the use of technology, particularly if the individual is alone at home and feeling isolated (Malchiodi, 2018a). Therefore, despite the wish to connect, disruptive internet connections and challenges with the use of any platform may create a more isolating experience for some people, which can further increase stress. The researcher and group facilitators were sensitive to this potential experience and group members if they became frustrated when the internet disconnected. Furthermore, the Knowledge Holders were consistently encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable discussing (Lenette, 2019; Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b). In the field of art therapy and ABR, the artwork is believed to serve as a therapeutic container for their

private experiences that can keep their emotions safe, particularly when they do not feel comfortable explaining these experiences verbally to others.

While there is a limited amount of research and publications on virtual art therapy (Winkel, 2022), Jones and colleagues (2018) found that the virtual art therapy sessions were helpful in their case study. Al Daleel and co-researchers (2022) also found that virtual art therapy helped to reduce anxiety of diverse clients. Despite the initial disruptions caused by audio and visual internet disconnections during sessions, Jones and co-authors (2018) found that the group Knowledge Holders, who were women with cancer in rural areas undergoing chemotherapy treatment, still managed to share profound and candid stories with one another and engage in meaningful artmaking. This experience of emotional storytelling and artmaking parallels the findings of this current ABR study.

Since audio static occurred when multiple people spoke at once in the Jones and colleagues (2018) study, the authors and Knowledge Holders found that, "...what initially appeared to be a technological limitation seemed to result in more focused, meaningful, and respectful communication as group members consciously limited unnecessary responses and allowed space for each other's talk to unfold" (p. 314) because of a natural turn-taking process. Knowledge Holders commented that they did not feel pressured to respond, which allowed them to focus on deeper listening. Meanwhile, other Knowledge Holders shared that they had more space to tell their stories because dominant voices in the group were less likely to interrupt. Similarly, the process of interpretation in this study created space where Knowledge Holders could take turns sharing and listening to one another, in addition to slowing down the pace of the sessions through pauses.

In the case study by Jones and colleagues. (2018), Knowledge Holders found joy in creating artwork in the comfort of their own homes, free from the feeling of constant observation by the therapist during the entire session. Similarly, in this research project, the Knowledge Holders



created sketches and finished their paintings in-between the art therapy sessions. I also observed that over multiple sessions, some Knowledge Holders naturally selected seating locations where they felt most at ease. For instance, one Knowledge Holder frequently positioned herself outside the view of the video conference camera. She chose when to reveal herself and share her artwork. As a result, the Knowledge Holder had the autonomy to choose when she wanted to be visible and when she preferred to remain out of sight, based on her comfort level. Similarly, Feen-Calligan and colleagues (2023) found that their virtual family-centered art therapy sessions, developed in collaboration with a multidisciplinary care team at a resettlement organization, were accessible, flexible, and impactful.

Consequently, technological challenges can offer alternative and innovative ways to connect and build meaningful relationships, which may be particularly beneficial for quieter Knowledge Holders and lead to distinct privacy-related choices compared to a traditional in-person setting (Jones et al., 2018). As individuals adapt to new technological means of seeking support, such as a researcher/therapist videoconferencing into an in-person session, they can develop new skills and make different choices based on their comfort levels.

**Considerations for Virtual Art Therapy with Refugees.** Since “refugees predominantly reside in countries where accessing art therapy is difficult due to the limited number of trained art therapists” (Arslanbek, 2022, p. 67), research on program adaptations, ethical considerations, and cultural nuances in providing intercultural client-centered virtual art therapy with cultural humility is crucial. Valdejuli and Vollman (2022) found that their remote intercultural virtual art therapy program, developed in collaboration with two NGOs in Kenya alongside the Red Pencil NGO, created meaningful bonds between members, generated a transformative healing space, and produced positive outcomes. The online intercultural program supported the well-being of twenty-one Kenyan educators and support staff working with children in Kibera to express their experiences and develop coping strategies to reduce workplace stress amongst the Covid-19

pandemic. Shaped by the COVID-19 travel restrictions that limited in-person support, the program was designed to prioritize collaboration, adaptability, and the participants' voices throughout the process. The authors noted that their approach to program planning, assessment, and implementation furthered their goals by cultivating egalitarian dynamics, strengthening the cultural fit of the group's content and structure, and placing participants at the forefront. They emphasized that "clients are the experts about their needs and how best to address them" (p. 189).

Valdejuli and Vollman (2022) also highlighted the importance of flexibility, cultural humility, empowerment, and reflexivity for art therapists engaging in virtual, intercultural work to increase connection and bonds with the participants. While highlighting how online and virtual support can provide accessible options, they also advised practitioners to remain mindful of the "missed nuances and connective opportunities of in-person experiences" and to pay particular attention to cultural dynamics and relationship-building in these contexts (Valdejuli & Vollman, 2022, p. 189).

**Considerations for a Hybrid Virtual Model.** Since a hybrid virtual art therapy model was adopted to replace the in-person and virtual model, the Knowledge Holders chose to meet in person as a group at the school with the support of an interpreter, a social worker, and childcare assistance. This model was implemented due to the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions on in-person meetings and the Knowledge Holders' decision to meet in person, while I could not travel due to my medicalized pregnancy and inter-provincial travel restrictions. This hybrid model, which balanced the Knowledge Holders' decision with safety, policy, and health, posed challenges that merit ethical consideration and documentation.

One significant challenge was my inability to control the environment where the Knowledge Holders met, as I was videoconferencing from another location in Ottawa. Furthermore, I could not assess relational or power dynamics that were outside of my view from the video camera, nor could I monitor any conversations that occurred off-camera and were not interpreted. I may also

have felt excluded from the process as the only person videoconferencing into the room, while diverse conversations were occurring. I would not be able to set-up the room or provide in-person technical art skill support.

Arslanbek (2022) conducted a study assessing the feasibility of an online art therapy program designed to support eight refugee children over three weeks. Due to internet connectivity issues in their homes in Istanbul, Turkey, the children participated in a group setting with volunteer support, while the art therapist and researcher connected virtually. Arslanbek reported several challenges, including internet disruptions that hindered the ability to observe details in the children's artwork, reduced their willingness to share stories, limited assistance with technical skills during artmaking, and difficulties in applying clinical techniques such as Kramer's (1986) "third hand" technique.

Therefore, it is crucial to be aware of and transparent about these challenges and ethical dilemmas while actively seeking ways to mitigate them. One possible solution is to use a small group format, which can create a safer environment for the Knowledge Holders to share and foster the development of positive relational bonds within the group and with myself. To minimize disruptions and technical difficulties, it is also essential to establish clear guidelines for virtual participation, set up optimal technological supports in advance, and have a backup videoconferencing platform ready.

In addition, collaborating closely with support personnel such as interpreters and social workers. Building trusting relationships with collaborating staff can enhance communication and address power dynamics. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the staff supporting this study were trained in intercultural sensitivity, humility, and proficiency. They had experience working with diverse cultures at the settlement organization and often shared similar cultural backgrounds with the Arabic-speaking newcomers to St. John's. Furthermore, the social workers received arts-based

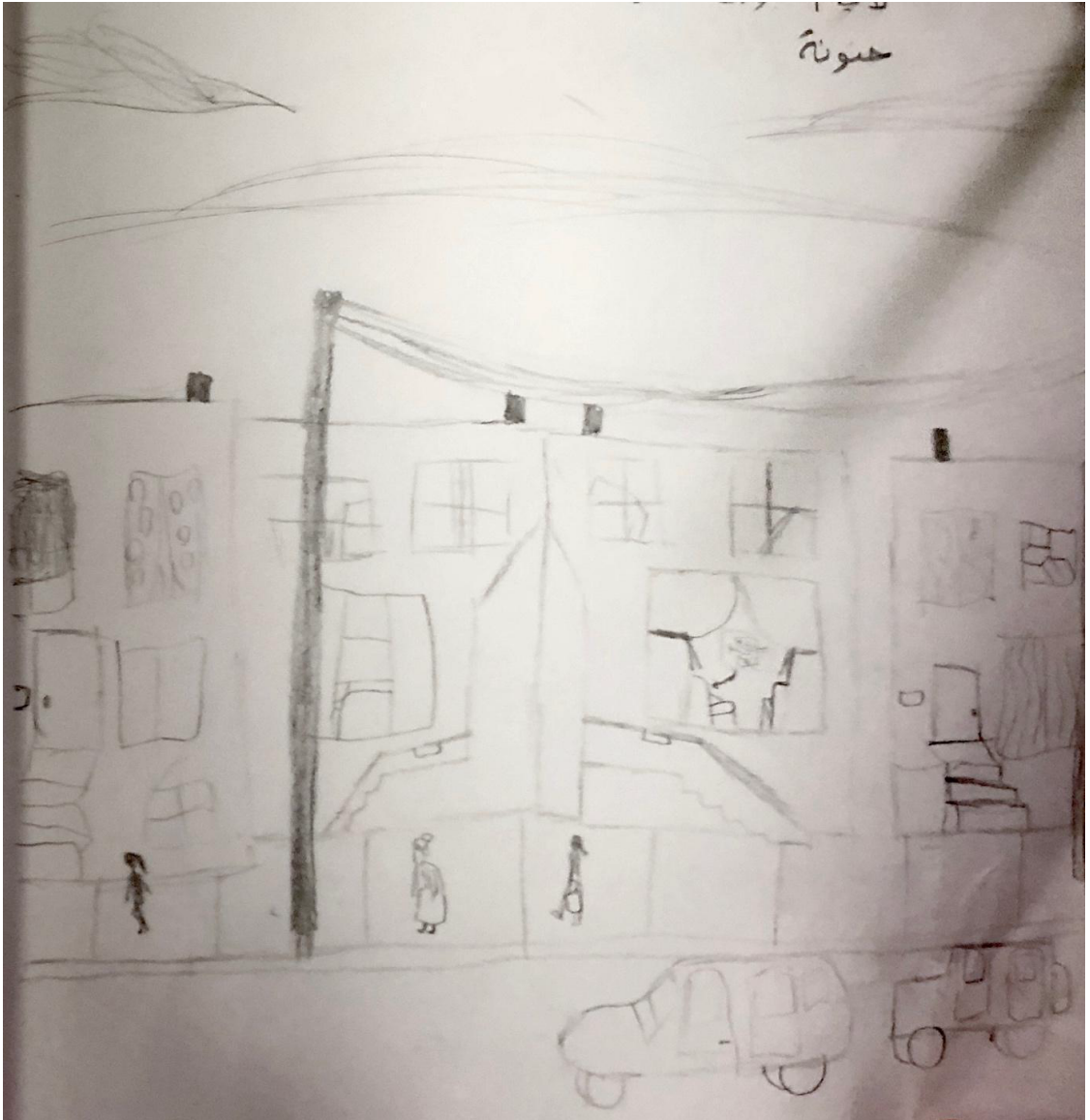
counseling training that I provided for another program (i.e. Journey of Hope arts-based peer support program for refugee youth).

### **Ethical Considerations Summary**

In chapter five, the ethics that informed the study design were described in addition to the professional and institutional organizations that guide ethical praxis and research. Delving into the ethical considerations within intercultural ABR, the focus was on ethical praxis and its application when collaborating with a community resettlement organization and with a unique group of newcomer refugee mothers. In this chapter, I explored the ethical dimensions of ABR in relation to cultural sensitivity, equity, diversity, and inclusion with a critical feminist lens and when working with a multidisciplinary team. The chapter addressed the nuances of obtaining verbal informed consent and provided insights into navigating ethical challenges amidst the COVID-19 pandemic with a virtual hybrid art therapy model when supporting refugee women, specifically during the 2020-2021 waves in Canada. The following chapter six explores the results of the research study.

## CHAPTER 6

### Results



Amina (pseudonym). (2021). *Street Landscape of Newfoundland (I Love People)*. Pencil on paper.

## CHAPTER 6

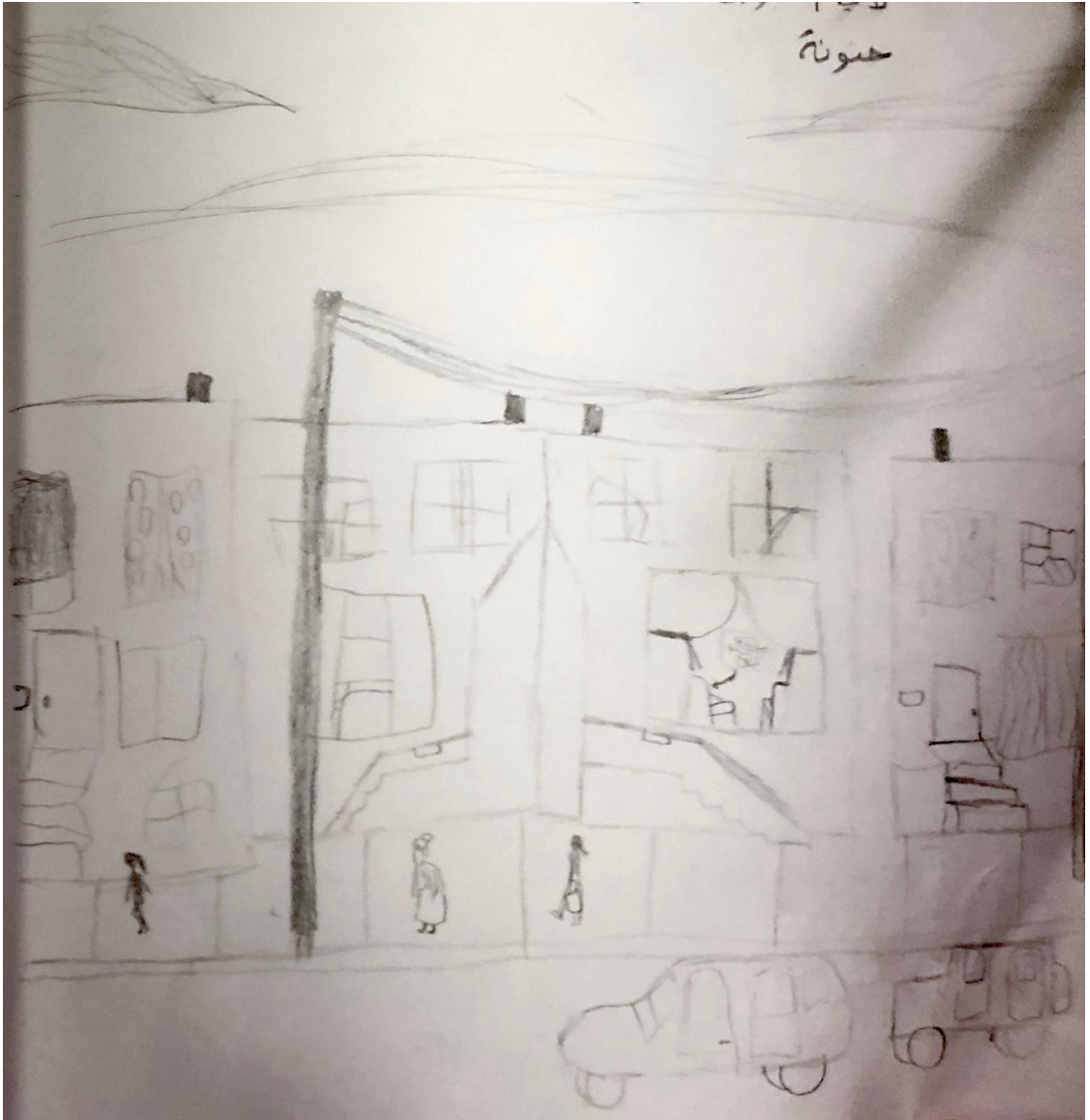
### Results

The results section details the findings of the study. I begin chapter six by introducing each Knowledge Holder by briefly describing their migration history and family context, as meaningful demographics that inform the study. Honouring voice, the interpreted Knowledge Holders' quotations and artworks highlight first person accounts of their experiences and stories shared throughout the pre-and post-interviews, five art therapy sessions, and member-checking session. A total of 77 artworks were created by the Syrian refugee mothers during and between the five art therapy sessions, as well as during the one member-checking session. The artwork created between the sessions, often in their visual journals and on canvases, was brought to the art therapy sessions by the Knowledge Holders to share with the group at the beginning of the sessions. The image quality and sharpness of the artwork images vary, as some were taken by the social workers on the ground, while others were captured as screenshots from the video recordings

When introducing each Knowledge Holder, a table containing their artwork is dedicated to each of the four individuals. The table encompasses their art, artwork titles, and brief narratives about their art. Following the presentation of each Knowledge Holders' journey, I examine the three research questions, since questions can be central to the ABR investigative process and outcomes (Leavy, 2022; McNiff, 2017). Below each research question, I discuss key themes that emerged from the data to address how artmaking in a safe hybrid art therapy group can facilitate the voicing of experiences, the expression of belonging and well-being in St. John's, and help generate meaningful connections for the four Syrian refugee Knowledge Holders. I created diagrams to illustrate the interactions between the emergent themes related to each research question.

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The first research question explored how refugee women who have recently resettled in NL voice their lived experiences through hybrid online art therapy. Through arts-based and qualitative analysis of artwork and verbal data derived from interviews, sessions, and reflexive artmaking, I found that refugee women in NL can voice their lived experience with artmaking. Through artmaking, they may be able to express their experiences by deepening emotional awareness, evoking memories through embodied elicitation, fostering a safe space for authentic emotional expression, enhancing mood to facilitate communication, and integrating symbolism and metaphor. It is important to note that not all Knowledge Holders consistently experienced these insights through their artworks in every art therapy session.

The second research question investigated how refugee women can express their experiences of belonging and well-being through artmaking in a safe art therapy group with a strengths-based approach. I found that belonging, expressed through the artmaking group, was connected to experiencing care, kindness, and friendliness from hospitable locals (locals refer to all those who reside in Newfoundland and Labrador of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and histories); the ability to access economic opportunities in Canada through work and education; and by bridging their identity across the diverse countries where they have lived. The experiences of well-being were related to the following themes: awe (in nature, spirituality, and ordinary events), family opportunities and wellness, safety through freedom and peace, and an intentionally resilient mindset.

The final research question examined how artmaking within a safe hybrid art therapy group could foster authentic connections between the Knowledge Holders. Through analyzing my notes on the group dynamics, interview answers, and artwork, I found that artmaking was able to help the refugee women build meaningful relationships. Artmaking increased opportunities for members to create together and actively support one another's artmaking; facilitate empathetic resonance through the artwork concretely showing others how the artist sees the world; and

validate the relationships in the group by depicting the friendships with their drawings and paintings. Through Knowledge Holder introductions, descriptions, and visual representations, the results chapter captures the unique narratives of Amina, Hafseen, Maryam, and Rayya.

### **Knowledge Holders' Individual Stories and Artwork**

#### ***Amina***

Amina was 46 years old and was born in Syria. She is a proud grandmother whose grandchildren accompanied her to the art therapy sessions, as she cared for her grandchildren throughout the sessions. Amina shared that she loves children and caring for others. She moved to Jordan in 2011 and spent eight years there before she arrived in St. John's, Canada in 2019 along with her daughter.

Amina had been divorced and was recently engaged. Throughout the interviews with Amina, she shared that, "I've had no experience in art, but I had experience in nursing...I loved what I was doing, and I hope to find some place to do it here as well...I want to work and I love to work" (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). Amina used to cook in hospitals and nursing homes. When describing her interest in participating, she stated that, "I don't know how to draw, but I want to learn and help you [researcher]" (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021) and "I like art. It's something wonderful and I would like to learn more about art" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). In addition, Amina expressed her desire to help the community through participating in this research by saying, "Thank you for your caring, too, for our group to maybe provide more help through your research" (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021).

Amina believed that participating in the art therapy sessions could help her learn and gain experience to secure work as a caregiver in a hospital or senior's center. When describing her previous work in Syria Amina conveyed that, "I loved what I was doing, and I hope to find some place to do this [in St. John's] as well. I want to learn more... I want to work and love to work"


(Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). Amina elaborated on her desire to learn English from a native English-speaker and develop connections with locals.

During and in between the art therapy sessions, Amina created 31 paintings and drawings. She created artwork that focused on experiences of joy, identity, belonging, and well-being, while also helping her develop technical art skills. Amina shared that her sense of well-being and belonging was impacted by her ability to work and care for others.

Other symbols depicted in her artwork include: a city landscape of the streets of St. John’s, figurative emotional portraits, arctic or Nordic animals such as penguins, snowmen, a polar bear, hearts to represent love and connection, children, families being together, sitting and inviting members to a dinner table, sunshine, flowers, and animals who are happy. Amina’s artwork and brief interpreted narratives based on her narratives are documented in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Amina’s Artwork and Descriptions*

Session	Title (or description)	Artwork	Story (based on notes)
1	A heart		“I love hearts and that is why I am showing hearts” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). (Note: The names were covered by the researcher to ensure confidentiality.)

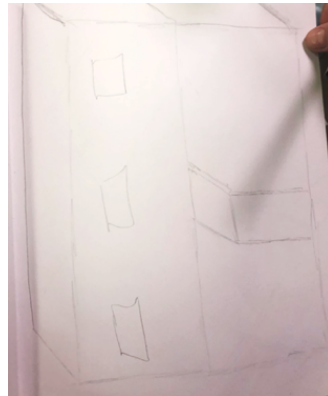
Between sessions

Coffee



Between sessions

Street view



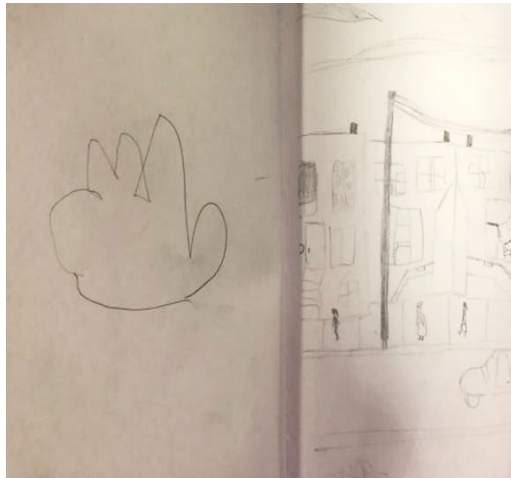
2

Check-in artwork: A bright, yellow sunshine.



“I am feeling bright and sunny” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

2 Well-being artwork: The streets of St. John's.



“St. John’s Streets and the Newfoundland and Labrador neighborhood and houses. I want to work in senior care homes, and I also used to care for seniors, and for my grandfather. I was living with my grandparents, and I was also taking care of a colleague who was 82 years old when I was living in Syria” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

2 Well-being: Working in a senior’s centre



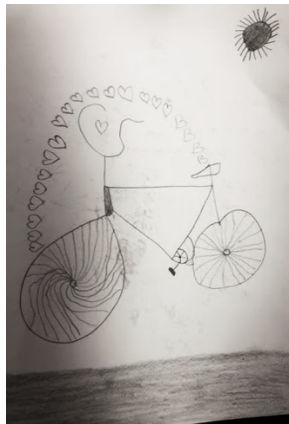
“I love to garden and loved for the seniors to enjoy the nature. I would feed them, take care of them, and I also lived at the home itself, beside the seniors, which is where I have shown myself in the image” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

2 Check-out artwork: All women and every woman.



“I wish for every woman to see, and every woman to have a child, to not be alone, and to have hope” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

Between sessions Bicycle



“I would like to go back in time and play like a kid and with my kids. I would like to learn how to ride a bicycle. I hope and wish to do so in the future, even now” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

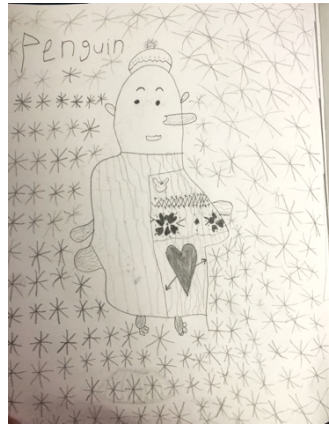
Between sessions Flowers in a vase and a perfume bottle



“Exploring their beauty through art” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

Between sessions

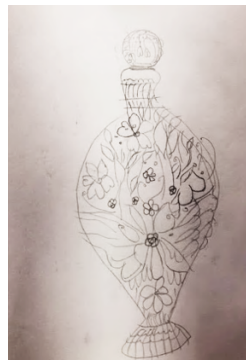
Snowman



“A snowman because I love the snow, and I used to play in snow back in Syria. There are snowflakes falling in the image. This image brings me well-being because I love to be in the snow” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

Between sessions

Perfume bottle

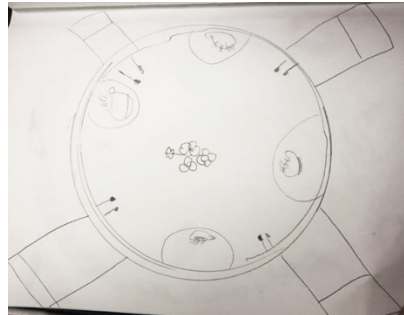


“Exploring their beauty through art”

“Kids are inside the circle, like kids around the world are playing” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

3 & 4

Check-in: A kitchen table with everyone's seats.



“I prefer coffee and breakfast and to look through the window. I like the snow and the white colour of the snow. I feel comfortable” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4

Belonging: The hospital



“This is the hospital, where the brown pieces represent hospital beds. I like to work with seniors. I would like to work and bring my family here. I hope is to get similar work and support my family in St. John's” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

3 & 4  
Check-out artwork: A woman who is sad.



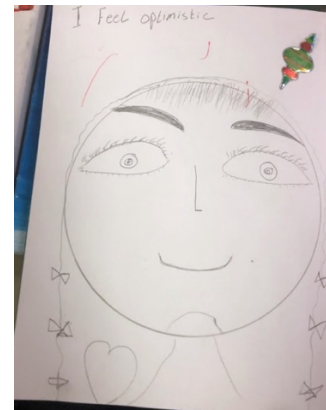
“I don’t feel like being strong only to be strong. Need to find strength in something” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

3 & 4  
Check-out: Kids inside the circle playing



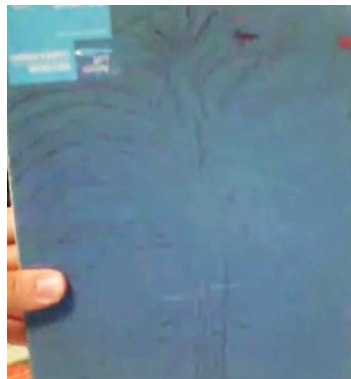
“Kids are inside the circle, like kids around the world are playing” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

5  
Check-in: Self-portrait



“I feel optimistic” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

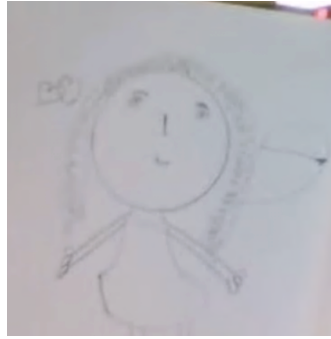
5  
Final artwork: A tree with many branches



“There is a tree and the leaves had fallen. I believe that I could do that on a canvas as well” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).



5  
Check-out  
artwork:  
Portrait of  
researcher



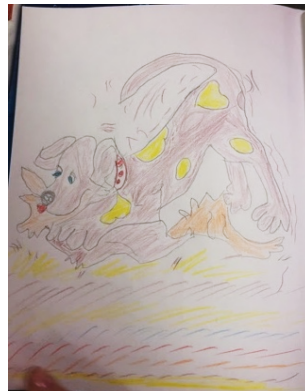
“I created a drawing of Haley [researcher] because she is pregnant and happy” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between  
sessions  
Sleeping  
child



“I like children” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between  
sessions  
Dog  
wagging his  
tail



“I like dogs, and I copied it from a reference image. I would not like to raise, feed, or walk the dog myself” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between  
sessions  
Flowers



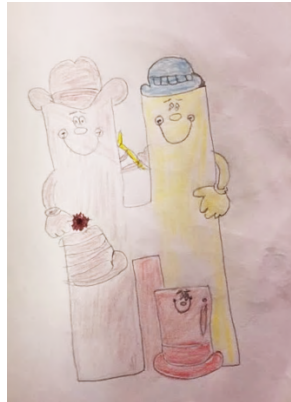
“I created the flowers side by side because I love flowers” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions Little girl with glasses



“The girl is going to the beach and has a bird on her shoulder. I would like to go to the beach as well” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions Family



“It is an image of parents and where I had lived. I would like to have a family.” The image has a very cute aesthetic, with a symbolic father, wife, and child. The father has a cowboy hat and is holding a flower, while the mother has a little blue hat on. They are all smiling” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions Candles



“I love candles” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions

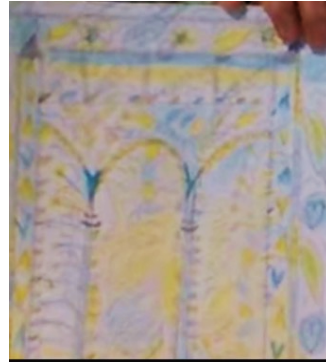
Polar bear and snow falling



“I love the snow”  
(Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions

Prayer mat



“With gold and blue”  
(Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions

Flower branches



Between sessions

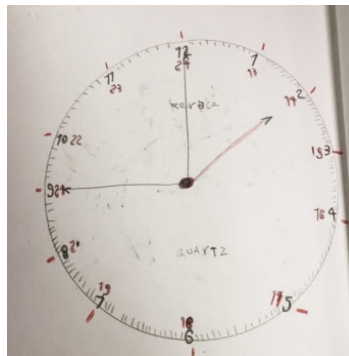
Love



Between sessions      Family of snow people

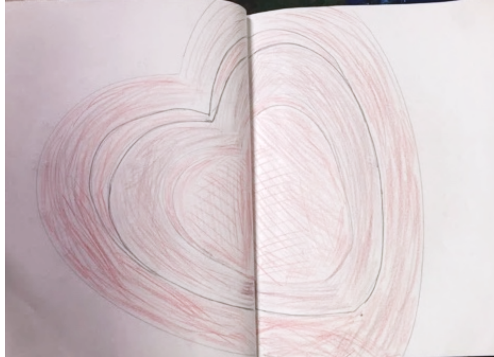


Between sessions      Clock



“I would like to schedule my day and priorities like studying, kids, and sports” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions      Hearts



Between sessions      Yellow flower



Between sessions      Yellow banana



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After the art therapy sessions, Amina expressed a desire to further develop her artmaking and English skills. Amina voiced that “I like art. It’s something wonderful and I would like to learn more about art...but I would like to learn more about English” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). The ANC social worker offered to support her in pursuing these goals. When asked about how art could help Amina talk about her experience, she declared that:

It’s something wonderful. Meeting new people, making art, like, learn more about artworks. And meeting you, having met you, because you are taking care about people. You care about others, yea. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

I am feeling wonderful because I met you people. Same as what I said earlier with that question. I am happy because I am feeling a bit isolated from the Arabic communication because we are communicating with you, trying to get to know more things. Like different from what we are used to doing. Yes, I am feeling happy because of that. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Amina also explained that she enjoyed getting to know me and that she is looking for jobs in the future. In addition, she appreciated the experience of the art therapy group and making art.

She stated that, “And I am very happy because I met you and had the opportunity to get to know you.” In addition, Amina expressed gratitude and said, “Thank you for taking care of us, and what you gave us, for everything that you gave us” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

When asked about her experiences of belonging in St. John’s, Amina shared that she is connected and happy with the community. She said:

I feel like I am very happy here, especially with the community, and like I get to learn more new things. Like I had been with the group. I would like to learn more thing, to be able to...I would like to get more of those things and get to know a little about things. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Amina also described her thoughts about the relationships that have developed during the sessions:

We knew each other from before, and after this, we have become closer to each other, and we got the opportunity to meet with another more. So, we are very happy with that. We are the same age, same mentality, so we are very happy with that. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Expressing her interest in continuing relationships with the other group members, Amina demonstrated openness based on her ability to build connections:

There’s no problem to be with all of them more. I don’t mind that, and I don’t have any problem with anyone. I can get in a good relationship with anyone...I am social, and I don’t mind being in contact with anyone or be in a relationship with anyone. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Amina was both open and ambivalent about next steps for the group: “No preferences. Any one is fine. Choose whatever you would like from the arts and put them anywhere. It’s fine for me” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). In addition, Amina communicated that, “I am fine with knowing new people or going to new classes.” Amina ended the final interview with sharing gratitude and asking about my pregnancy. Her kindness and compassion were apparent throughout her participation.

***Hafseen***




Hafseen was a 29-year-old mother born in Syria. She lived in Lebanon for four years before moving to Canada in 2021. Hafseen relocated to Canada with her parents and two adolescent children. She had not seen her husband in 10 years. Hafseen shared she does not know where he is and disclosed that, “I don’t know anything about my husband. I don’t know anything about him. He’s maybe lost” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). Hafseen also voiced that she was feeling sad before the art therapy sessions because one of her children had a chronic illness. When explaining her experience of belonging in St. John’s, Hafseen disclosed that, “I feel really good here. Good hospitality and people are friendly. And in general, good. I’d like to learn more here in St. John’s and do whatever it takes to learn and get experience” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). When asked about what she would like to do to gain experience, Hafseen said that “Because of the disaster that is happening in Syria, I sometimes feel very bad, but this [art therapy group] may help me to overcome or surpass the pain. The problems” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021)

Hafseen explained that she was interested in participating for “new ideas ... About art therapy... Mainly, I will feel less depression through this program because my son has [a chronic illness]” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). Further elaborating on her interest in participating, Hafseen believed that “The art makes you feel better. Makes you feel less depressed and changes your life to a better mood” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). Stating her desire to create, she said “I really don’t really have something that helps me voice my experience, but I just like creating something and the idea that I can do it with artmaking” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021).

Throughout the art therapy sessions, Hafseen created nine artworks representing flowers, hearts, music (a guitar), butterflies, a bird, friendship, and a snow globe. She was able to attend almost all the sessions, except the combined session three and four due to an appointment. Hafseen’s artworks, titles, and descriptions are shared in Table 9.

**Table 9**

*Hafseen's Artwork and Descriptions*

Session	Title (or description)	Artwork	Story (based on notes)
1	Heart with a heartbeat		“Heart with a heartbeat. Loves life and life is beautiful” (Session 1, November 24, 2021).
Between sessions	Guitar music and a cloud (well-being)		“I love Arabic music, and I listen to it when I feel depressed. I also love Iraqi music that talks about feelings and is emotional. It moves something inside your heart” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).
2	Check-in: Three butterflies		“The butterflies represent freedom” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

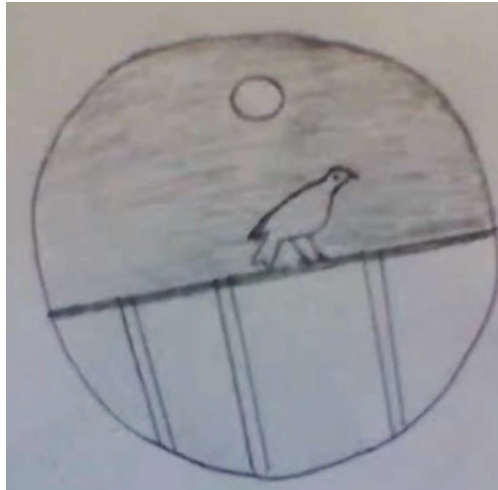


2 Well-being:  
flowers



“At home in Syria, I used to buy flowers and put them in a vase in my living room. The four flowers could be anyone or anything, such as roses, tulips, or jasmine. My son’s name is (confidential), or flower, while the red and white colours mean purity and cleanliness” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

2 Check-out:  
bird at sunset



“This drawing depicts a bird at sunset who is sitting on the wall. It is calm and there is no work to do” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

Between sessions

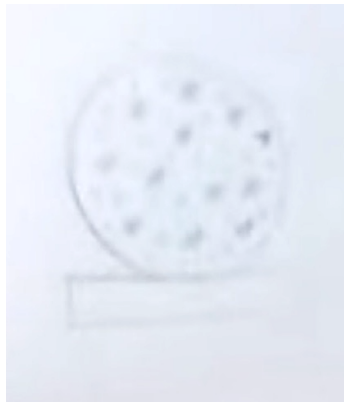
Flower vase



“I have added flowers to the vase. I like flowers and keep flowers in the house all day. These flowers include roses and jasmine. I used to be a florist in Lebanon and love flowers because I used to work with them. I would get seeds from Turkey to grow flowers, and it was a lot of hard work. I would like to do the same thing in St. John’s. Flowers are so meaningful that my son’s name means flower” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

5

Check-in:  
Snow globe.



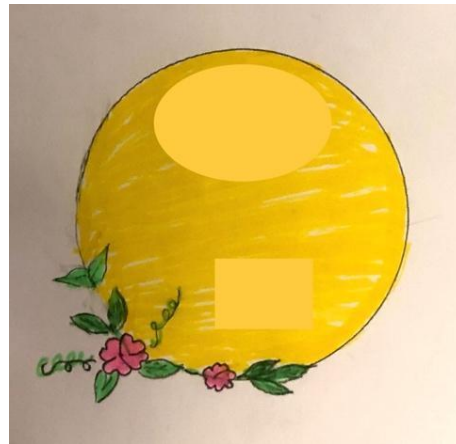
“I am happy because it is snowing out today and I like the snow” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Flowers



“I have written all the names of everyone here. We are all together inside the circle and our names are written in Arabic. This represents our day together” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). (Note: The names were covered by the researcher to ensure confidentiality.)

5 Check-out:  
Sunshine and  
flowers



“Sunshine in the summer with flowers growing because of the heat. I like the summer and love the colours of flowers. I feel very happy, with my name and my friend’s names written inside of the circle” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). (Note: The names were covered by the researcher to ensure confidentiality.)

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During the post-interviews, Hafseen reflected on her experience with the group and communicated that artmaking helped voice her experiences “most of the time in the group” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Elaborating on her experience of making art inside and outside of the group, Hafseen expressed that, “I like the art. Art is wonderful...Sometimes, like, when I draw something, I remember something or try to express, like, enjoyment during the drawing” (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021). Discussing how she felt about the group and whether it met her

expectations, Hafseen shared that she enjoyed developing relationships with other members. She remarked that:

In general, it was good, and I like the group and the way that I participated in the group, and the relations with the other members. I wasn't expecting something different. (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021)

When asked about the relationships that have developed during the group, Hafseen explained that some relationships remained the same, while others grew to become close friendships. She declared that:

I knew most of them before the workshop. Before the group, but I have a good relationship with [Knowledge Holder], but I didn't know [another Knowledge Holder] before. I have a good relationship with [the second Knowledge Holder]. She is the closest friend of mine. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Although Hafseen was not present for sessions three and four, which invited members to create art about belonging, Hafseen mentioned that her experiences of belonging were positive during the pre-interview and post-interview. During the post-interview, Hafseen tied belonging and well-being to her prioritization of education for her children. She explained that:

I like it very very much here. It's like even better than my back home. I like the schools, which are good. The education system [schools] was bad back home, but here it's much better. I was unhappy in Lebanon. I had spent three and a half years in Lebanon. My children didn't go to school. They didn't allow my children to attend the school (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021).

Hafseen connected her sense of belonging to her extended family support system in St. John's. She said that "I am very happy because I am here with my family. Like my dad and brothers are here. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). She also shared hope for her family to reunite:

My dad and mother, my brothers, sisters. Only two of them [are living elsewhere]. One of them is in Lebanon and one is living in Syria. I hope that they will also be joining us here. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Hafseen was asked about next steps after the group was over. She was given examples, such as a new group, or creating a policy document, or a virtual art exhibition to share their

artwork. Hafseen was open to different options, although she wanted to focus on artmaking. She shared that, “Whenever I feel free, why not? I can do drawing, art things” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Hafseen expressed a desire for the relationships to continue, particularly the close friendship she had developed during the group sessions:

Yes, I would like to continue the relationships. Whenever I see [the Knowledge Holders], or maybe meet them, I would be happy to meet them... Maybe we meet at the house, or she comes to my house, or I visit her, and maybe sometimes at school, we meet each other. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Throughout the interviews and sessions, Hafseen shared that artmaking held meaning in her life, allowing her to express herself. She experienced a sense of well-being and belonging through a stable education system for her children and an extended family network in St. John’s. During her pre-interviews, Hafseen expressed sadness because her son has a chronic illness, while the post-interview resonated with a happier tone by mentioning her support system, relationships, and positive experiences of the education system in St. John’s. Hafseen developed one deep relationship throughout the art therapy sessions. She would be open to continuing to create artwork and meet her friends in a similar group.

### ***Maryam***

Maryam was born in Syria. She resettled in St. John’s with her husband and six children in 2016. She had resided in Canada for seven years, the longest tenure among the other Knowledge Holders. Before moving to Canada, Maryam lived in Lebanon for one year.

When asked about her experiences of well-being and belonging in St. John’s in the pre-interview, Maryam said that “I am so happy here, to be here in St. John’s, and I won’t think of moving from here” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). Maryam described the kindness of residents by stating, “It’s really nice here. People are really nice and helpful” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). She does not enjoy the winter because the cold weather stops her from leaving her home. As a source of strength to cope with feeling housebound during the winter,

Maryam finds strength in her family. She shared that, “I am really happy here and the most important thing is that I have a good husband, and my kids are really good too. So, that’s what makes it easier for me” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021).

Maryam was enthusiastic about creating artwork and participating in the art therapy group. Delineating her interest in participating, Maryam wanted to learn and gain experience through the group. She elaborated that:

I would like to learn more, like have more experience. And, plus, if I have free time, that’s a good thing for my free time. The most important thing is that I want to accomplish things I have time to in the future. What made me interested is that I can express what I want to do, and I have something in mind that I want to do. (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021)

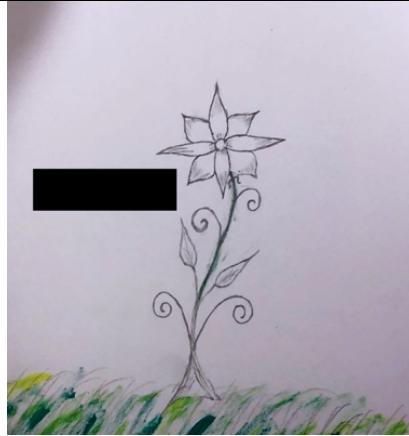
As an accomplished artist, Maryam wanted to create more art. She wanted a community to provide feedback and support her artwork. She declared that “I want to do more of what I am doing, and [someone] be interested in my accomplishments in the drawing that I am doing” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). Maryam was “really interested in this thing [art therapy]” because “I like to make paintings and drawings.” During the art therapy sessions, Maryam created art at home between the sessions. She crafted 21 artworks that included the following metaphors and symbolic themes: Islamic religion, happy faces, birds, justice, weather, landscapes, pathways, the ocean, women, nature, flowers, seasons, balance, homes, peace, school, family, children, and coffee, among others. Maryam’s artworks, titles, and descriptions created through the sessions are presented in Table 10.

**Table 10**

*Maryam’s Artwork and Brief Descriptions*

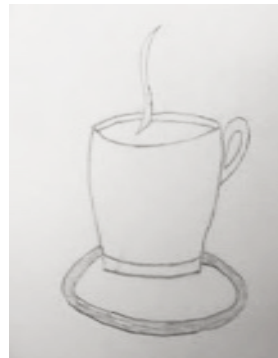
Session	Title (or description)	Artwork	Story (based on notes)
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1 A flower



“I love nature, green, flowers, trees. I used to have a garden in Syria. When drawing flowers, I try to remember the flowers back home and try to remember back home” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). (Note: The names were covered by the researcher to ensure confidentiality.)

Between sessions Coffee



“Things that bring well-being” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

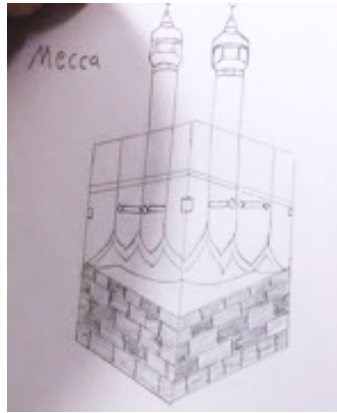
Between sessions



“House in the Fall beside the river with trees that have no leaves in St. John’s” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

Mecca



“I wish I could visit Mecca and Kaaba to worship. I have not gone yet but would love to go. Inshallah” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

A woman  
with the  
Quran

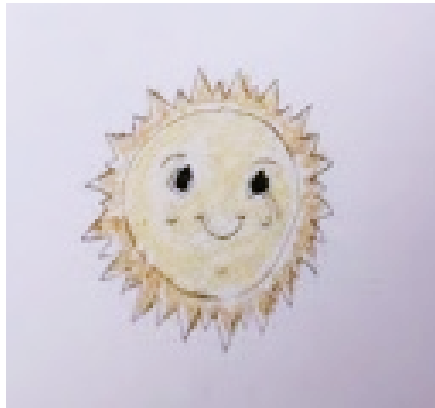


“I love to pray and stay with the Quran. This is a self-portrait. I feels comfortable and at peace and forget my challenges when I pray” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

“One thing that stands out to me, is this drawing, the lady that is holding her Quran, her holy book. I am proud of my religion and that connects me to this life, and to my God. That's what makes me happy. That's what stands out” (description provided during Member-checking session, August 24, 2023).



2 Check-in: A bright, happy sunshine



“I am feeling good” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

2 Bouquets of flowers



“I painted roses and jasmine. I love nature and would love to have a house in nature. I also love summer and the smell of the flowers that she had painted. I have roses in my backyard garden and would also buy flowers from the store. I love nature, flowers, and the summer” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

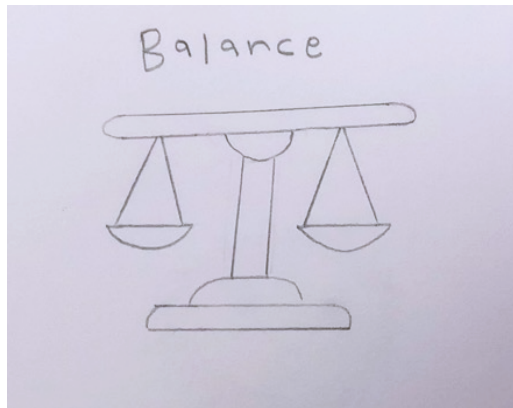
2 Check-out: Evening walks in nature



“My circle depicts the evening. I love to go walking and I just like to walk in the evening with family because it feels very good. Would do this every day in the summer. I would do this in Syria as well” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

Balance



“I would like to find fairness and balance wherever I go. I want to feel happy and comfortable” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

The ocean



“I like watching the ocean and seeing the waves. I feel comfortable watching the water and the birds and the sea. They are also wonderful to draw. I went on a trip to St. John’s on Harper Road. I liked the view, and I try to separate from myself, to feel like I am in the current. Seeing the ocean brings me to another world” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

House



Between  
n  
sessions

Peace doves



“I always would like to live in peace” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

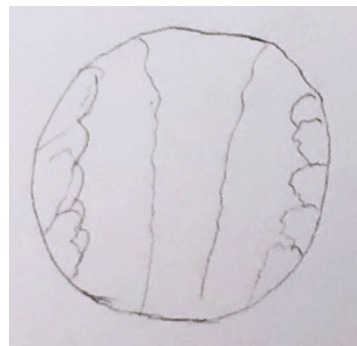
A school



“This is a school in St. John’s called the [school]. My children go there. I have hope for my kids and hope that my children will stay in school” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4

Check-in: A road with snow on the sides



“The artwork above represents a road (from the top) and on side, there is tons of snow. I saw a picture in the morning of tons of snow and I feel stressed because of the blizzard and snow” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4

Belonging:  
Family  
portrait



“My family would like to visit soon, and I will be with them soon. My husband is in Syria. Before the war, we were together in Daraa. When the war started, my family got displaced and went to Saudi Arabia, America, and Canada. I am praying that we get the

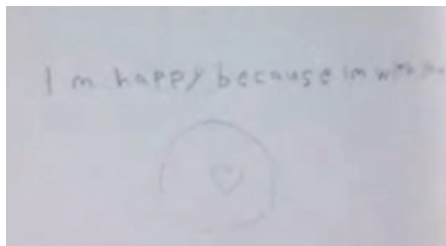
chance to be together. The Canadian flag is in the top left corner, and Canada feels like home because we live in peace and love here. If I could, I would like to meet my family at our house in Syria with my parents, brother, and sister. I have 16 brothers and sisters. Even if I couldn't be back in Syria, would like to see my family. My parents are still in Syria and have one brother in America. Everyone is now everywhere” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4 Check-out:  
Happy face



“Happy because I’m with you. I’m now feeling happy. My heart feels heavy because I am here, in Canada. Strength is happiness I like to help people, and I am always in front of people. When you are happy, I am always happy” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

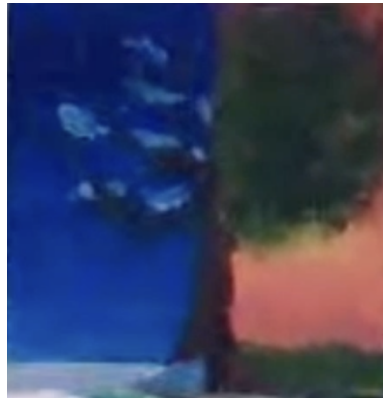
3 & 4 Check-out:  
I’m happy because I’m with you.



“I feel happy and drew a happy face” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

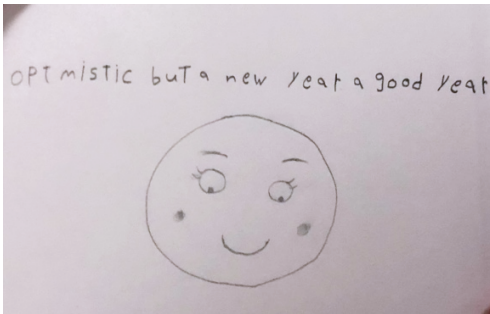
Between  
n  
sessions

Two  
seasons



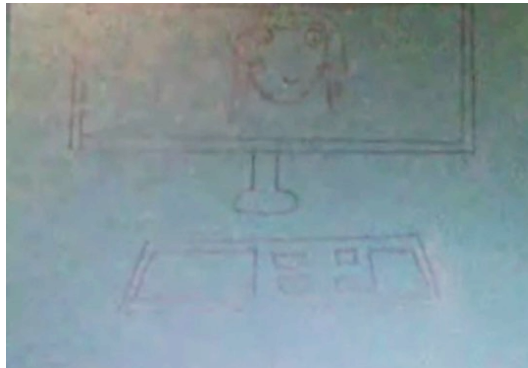
“I have been working for two semesters and one side represents the winter semester, while the other side of the tree represents the Fall semester” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Check-in:  
Optimistic,  
but a new  
year, a good  
year.



“I feel happy and drew a happy face. Optimistic, but a new year, a good year” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Gathering  
here



“This is the computer with Haley’s smiling face on it. I drew us all together and I liked gathering here” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Check-out:  
Days and  
nights of the  
summer



“This is a circle that is divided. The left side includes the sun and birds in the sky on a summer day. The right side includes the stars and the moon at night. It’s not related to how I am feeling, but I love the days and nights of the summer” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Maryam attended all five art therapy sessions between November and December of 2021 in addition to the member-checking session that took place in August 2023. While attending the sessions with her peers, she often helped fellow group members with artmaking. She drew images for some members as a base for them to expand upon. Maryam's children sometimes attended the sessions while a caregiver was on-site. She often began a painting during the session and then added details to the artwork at home, in-between the art therapy sessions. During the post-interview, Maryam shared that she was able to create artwork when her children went to sleep and said that "when my children go to sleep at night, and it's quiet and I can do whatever I want" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Furthermore, artmaking helped her relax. Maryam explained that "I love art. I am happy when I am doing it, and I feel like, relaxed, you know?" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

When conveying her experiences of well-being in St. John's, Maryam said that "When I see my children going to school, and education, and they are safe. That is well-being for me" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). In addition, Maryam found that she was surrounded by friendly people. She voiced that, "I like it here. People here are so friendly, and no discrimination or something like that, and it's like diversity of the people. But the only complaint is the weather, that's all" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Discussing her experience of the group, Maryam communicated that she did not quite understand the nature of the art therapy group before it began, but she enjoyed it over time. She asserted that,

When I started with the art therapy with you at the group, I didn't understand what kind of happened exactly, like the full picture, but was going to go...But, after all, I really liked what we did together, and discussion, and drawing, and talking to you, and like expressing this kind of stuff. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

When remembering her group experience during the member-checking session in 2023, Maryam recalled a very positive experience when she said, “I really enjoyed my time... I learned that I have to live my life, and life is beautiful if you want to make it” (Member checking, August 24, 2023). Regarding relationships that developed during the group, Maryam knew members of the group before. She disclosed that her relationships with group members continued to be the same, while one Knowledge Holder was a close friend. Maryam also meets with other Knowledge Holders during religious events and would “like to continue with the relations with them [other group members]” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

During the post-interview, Maryam expressed interest in participating in an arts and crafts creation and discussion group. She would be interested to participate in “...discussion and even drawing and do any kind of artwork. Art therapy-like things” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Furthermore, although she would not create similar drawings, she would like to talk about her art. She said that, “To be honest, I would not do, like these kinds of drawings [related to emotion-based drawings], but if there is a group that discusses it, I would participate. I like art and crafts” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Maryam showed interest in an online gallery, although during the member-checking session, she expressed her desire, akin to Rayya, to concentrate on an arts and crafts group that emphasizes entrepreneurial skills. She would like to sell her artwork, envisioning it as a blend of enjoyment and an income-generating opportunity. Maryam recommended that:

I would like to have some workshops, like training workshops for more artwork. Like a sewing class, a DIY class, like things that Rayya does. I would like to see more job opportunities come from it as well. It will take some time to start, I don't know where to start from. Now that my kids are all grown up and everyone is taking care of themselves, this would be something good that I would have fun and also have an income from at the same time, even if there's a cooking class, or something like that. (Member checking, August 24, 2023)

Providing context to her suggestion, Maryam gave the following advice about life in Canada, “Life here requires you to get out and work, and to get out of your comfort zone” (Member checking, August 24, 2023).

***Rayya***

Rayya and her five children had been in Canada for four months. Her husband was still in Turkey with their other children. Rayya was born in Syria and then left for Turkey with her family in 2013. She lived there for eight years before resettling in St. John’s, Canada. Rayya explained that “I am living now in St. John’s with five children. There are six more children in Turkey with their dad. My husband is right now in Turkey with six children” (Pre-Interview, November 10, 2021). Rayya hopes that her family will be reunited soon. She was in the process of filling out paperwork for her husband and the rest of their children to relocate to St. John’s.

Explaining her interest in joining the group, Rayya said that “Sometimes there is something that I don’t know how to do in art therapy, and I want to learn” (Pre-Interview, November 10, 2021). Rayya elaborated on what art means in her life when she communicated that:

I like what I am doing and when I do something, I feel like I did something great and really (well), you know? When I am trying to start doing handicraft and stuff like that, at the end of the work, I feel very happy and experience happiness at the end of the achievement (Pre-interview, November 20, 2021).

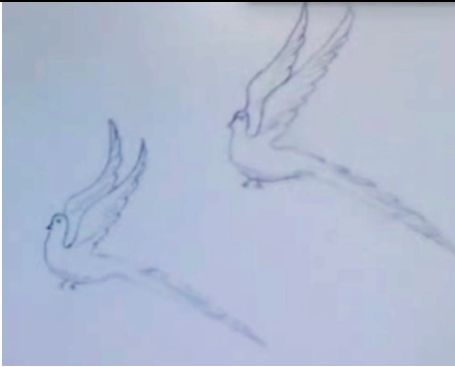
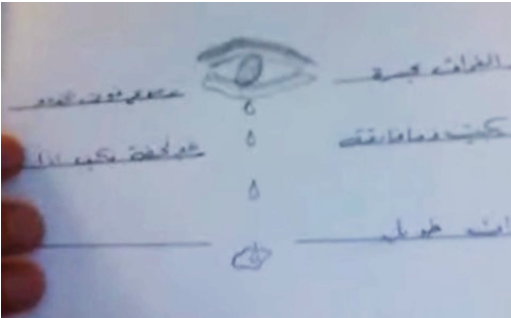
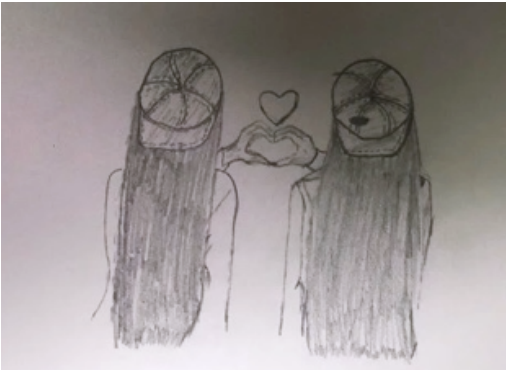
During the art therapy sessions, Rayya created 12 artworks presented in Table 11 with the symbols and metaphors of birds, coffee with friends, friendship, sadness and pain, eyes, peace, justice, hearts, puzzles, tables, family, trees, buildings, blood, flowers, time, cute cartoons, childhood, calligraphy of religious poems, among others. Rayya was unable to attend the second session. She asked her friend, who was one of the group members, to bring in her artwork on her behalf. Rayya is an accomplished craftsperson who created embroidered flower designs and shared images of them with the group. Rayya mentioned that she enjoyed sewing, which was



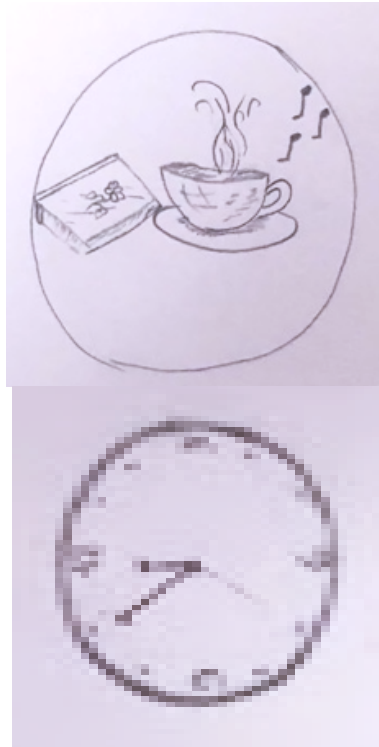
interpreted as macramé during the pre-interview. I believe that she may have wanted to embroider in the group because she showed her embroidery art during the sessions.

**Table 11**

*Rayya's Artwork and Descriptions*

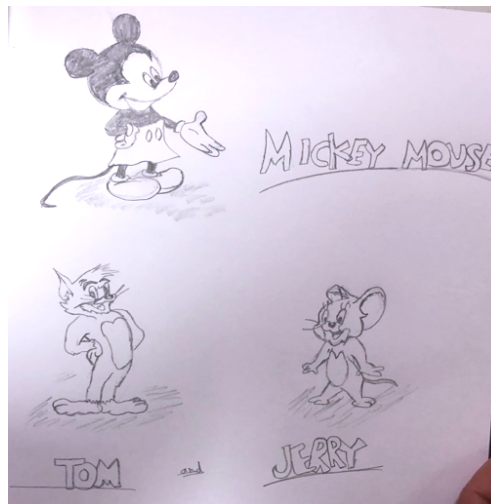
Session #	Title (or description)	Artwork	Story (based on notes)
1	Two doves		“Two doves that represent love and peace” (Session 1, November 24, 2021).
1	Poem for my father		“First of all, sad because I left my home and family. The Arabic poem is about a father who had passed away” (Session 1, November 24, 2021).
Between sessions (brought to session 2 by friend)	Friendship		“Friendship. A friend is a home. Everyone has home and can share their homes with one another” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

3 & 4      Check-in:  
Coffee and  
a book, and  
a clock



“The good memory relates to back home when I would sit outside with music and think back on life. I am thinking about life before, and now. I enjoy relaxing when in the house, drinking coffee, and chatting together with friends” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Between  
sessions      Mickey  
Mouse,  
Tom, and  
Jerry



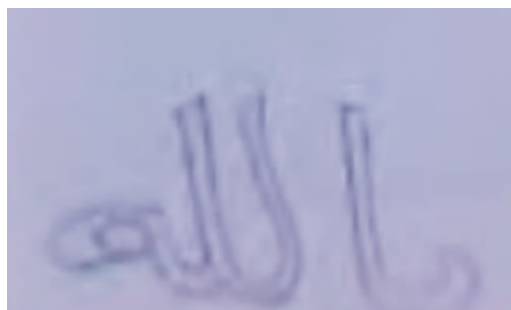
“Mickey mouse. I have been taking cartoon classes, and I love it. I was watching Tom and Jerry, and I was inspired by the cartoon. Tom and Jerry remind me of my childhood days” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4 Belonging:  
Justice



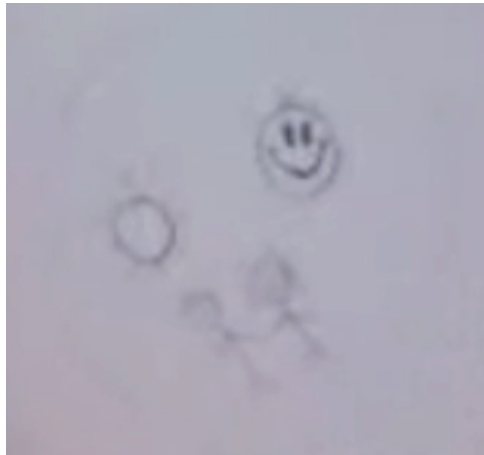
“The tree represents family, and the tree branches are broken. The branches are also those who had been lost in my family. On the left-hand side, there is an imbalanced scale, which is another symbol of no balance. No one stood next to our family or helped us during the war, except Canada. The flag and the ground are full of dripping red blood. I included a broken heart of the Syrian people who fell, and the green grass belongs to the tree”  
These symbols, and the grass are meant for people who have lost their lives and the houses that have been destroyed. In the left corner under the scale, there are buildings being destroyed. I wrote and the image is titled, “In God we Trust” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4 Check-out:  
“In God we trust”



“In God we Trust”  
(Session 3 & 4,  
December 10, 2021).

3 & 4      Check-out:  
              Kids are  
              hopeful



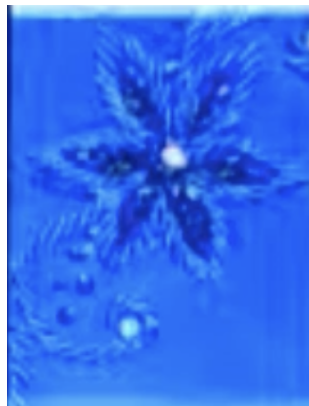
“Kids are always hopeful. They are always following or surrounding us. There are smiles, hopefulness and sunshine with two people holding hands” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

5            Check-in:  
              A man and  
              woman  
              sitting by  
              the window



“This is a man and a woman sitting by a window around a table. They are sitting together on two chairs and snow is falling outside the window. The person in the art is feeling good while sitting and watching the snow is falling from the window. It is a puzzle room, and it is calming to be in that space” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). Note that the quality of the artwork images varies as some were captured as screenshots from video recordings.

Between      Flower  
sessions      embroidery



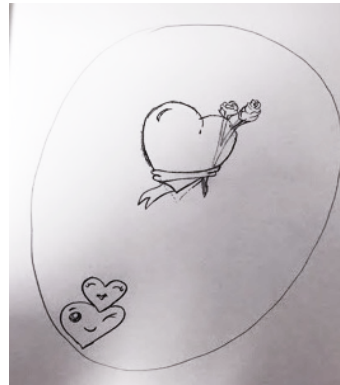
“An embroidered flower design” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Flower design



“I added a flower design to the cover page because I used to work with flowers. The cover is nice to draw on and the image is decorative” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Check-out: Heart



“I am happy because I had found the electricity bill. The two hearts together on the left represents friendship and gathering with our time spent with one another” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

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Rayya was interviewed after the art therapy sessions finished on December 22, 2021. She also attended the member-checking session on August 24, 2023. During the post-interview session, Rayya discussed how art enables emotional expression and declared that “Art for me is to express what I feel. If I feel bad, I express about the feeling by the art or if I feel good. So, it’s just like feeling... Yes, it’s like a voice to express, but I don’t know how to express our voice or experiences” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021). Artmaking helped her voice emotions during the sessions when she said: “When, through the past three weeks, during the workshop, I tried to express and voice my experience doing the drawing and explaining what I did. It’s like, some of my voiced experience” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021).

Finally, Rayya shared that she enjoyed her time in the art therapy sessions. She explained that “Even the little things I drew, when discussed with you during the past few weeks, I really liked what I did and I appreciated the time I spent and I really like it here” (Post-Interview,

December 22, 2021). In addition, the group had met her expectations: “I expect, like, it was really wonderful, and I like it. My expectation is good [laugh]” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021).

Rayya also appreciated building a relationship with the researcher/therapist throughout the group when expressed that “I also appreciate you and it was really nice to meet you, and I like the way you laugh and your smile (Post-Interview, December 22, 201)

When asked about her experience of well-being during the post-interview, Rayya shared how her experience was tied to being with her children, their ability to study, and feeling embraced as a community member in Canada. She said:

I am really happy to be here with my children. I already said, well-being here in St. John’s, (is) with my children. I really like how Canada treats me as a part of the community, and I am happy that my children now study at school because they stopped studying during the war. This gives me good feelings and good experiences. (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021)

Rayya wanted to focus on creating handicrafts, like textile art with embroidery for next steps or subsequent group programming. She responded that, “I have nothing to add, but I like to do more handicrafts...I do many things, not just like one [type of craft]” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021). Rayya also shared that she felt ambivalent about continuing the relationships developed during the group. She disclosed, “To be honest, I am unsocial. I do not have many relationships with people and friendships, but I respect and like them” ((Post-Interview, December 22, 2021). Nonetheless, she would be interested in upcoming sessions or workshops. and said, “I would like to engage in another workshop or like sessions with the same group. Yea, I am okay with that...if there is anything in the future, it’s okay. I don’t have any issues” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

The following subsection presents the findings rising from my arts-based and qualitative analysis of the data. These findings are structured according to the three research questions.

Beneath each research question, four models outline the primary themes derived from analyzing

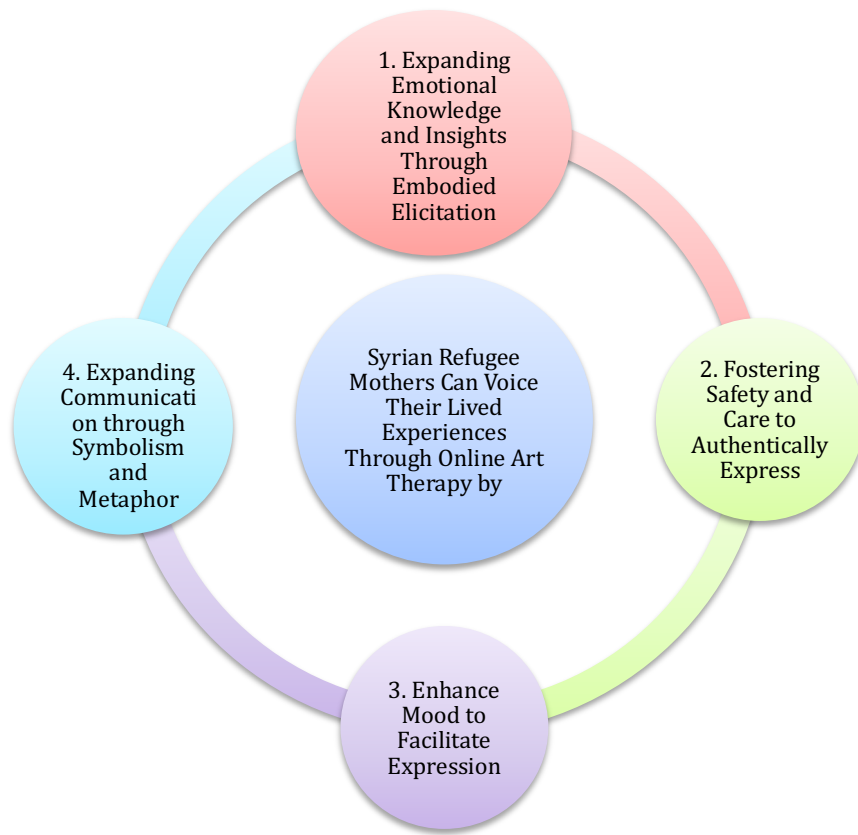
the multimedia data. Following each model, the identified themes are elucidated. The subsections offer explanations and insights, supported by direct data from session notes, quotations, and artworks created by both the Knowledge Holders and I throughout the research study.

**Research Question 1: How do Syrian, Congolese, and Eritrean refugee women, who have arrived in Newfoundland and Labrador within the past seven years, voice their lived experiences through online art therapy?**

The data suggest that Syrian mothers engaging in artmaking during an online group art therapy can influence how they voice their lived experiences. This transformation occurs through increased emotional awareness and mood enhancement within a supportive and secure environment, fostering symbolic communication in an art therapy session. By analyzing the reflective and expressive data, four themes emerged. These themes shed light on the nuanced ways in which lived experiences are articulated through artmaking in an art therapy session. The four themes are presented as a model in Figure 15 and elaborated upon below with examples generated from observations, quotations, and artwork from the Knowledge Holders. The first theme highlights how artmaking broadens emotional understanding and insights in an art therapy session through embodied elicitation. The second theme emphasizes how artmaking can create a safe and nurturing space conducive to authentic expression in an art therapy session. The third theme highlights artmaking's capacity to uplift mood, thereby enabling emotional expression in an art therapy group. Lastly, the fourth theme encapsulates artmaking's role in enhancing communication through symbolism and metaphor.

**Figure 2**

*Model Depicting How Syrian Refugee Mothers Can Voice Their Lived Experiences Through Artmaking*



*Note.* Figure created by Haley Toll.

***Theme 1: Artmaking Expands Emotional Knowledge and Insights Through Embodied Elicitation***

**Changes in understanding art’s potential to express experiences.** Knowledge Holders were asked the question, "Does artmaking help you voice your experience, and if so, how?" during both pre- and post-individual interviews. Amina's initial response before engaging in art therapy was, “Any hobby is important for any person, so painting or art will have an effect on ideas, and I love it, but I do not have much experience to know” (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, Amina's answer changed. She described art as "something wonderful. Meeting new people, making art, like, learn more about artworks. And meeting you, having met you, because you are taking care of people. You care about others” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).



Hafseen's initial response before the art therapy sessions indicated that she lacked a specific method to voice her experiences, but she expressed appreciation for the idea of using art to create something. She said: "I really don't have really something that helps me voice my experience, but I just like creating something and the idea that I can do it with artmaking" (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, Hafseen answered that, "Sometimes, like, when I draw something, I remember something or try to express, like, enjoying [during] the drawing. It happened most of the time in the group." (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Rayya's pre-art therapy response focuses on the joy and achievement derived from doing handicrafts when she communicated:

When I am trying to start doing handicraft and stuff like that, at the end of the work, I am feeling very happy and happiness at the end of the achievement. I am wondering if you can help me to do business from this, or I can sell it in the future and do a home business and stuff. Yea. (added name to business programs) (Post-interview, November 10, 2021).

In the post-art therapy interview, Rayya linked art to voicing her experiences, describing it as:

Like a voice to express, but I don't know how to express our voice or experiences. Yes. When, through the past 3 weeks, during the workshop, I tried to express and voice my experience doing the drawing and what I did. It's like, some of my voiced experience. (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

Maryam's pre-art therapy response was "Nothing in particular" (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, she replied that, "Yea, it's hard to explain. Usually when my children go to sleep at night, and to be quiet and I can do whatever I want. Into art and drawing. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Therefore, the art therapy sessions changed their experience and therefore the content of the Knowledge Holders' answers. This can indicate that a change occurred due to art therapy group, whereby the Knowledge Holders were able to articulate the capacity of artmaking to voice experiences, increase positive mood, generate positive experiences, remembering events, and foster care.

**What does art mean in your life?** The question: “What does art mean in your life” was asked during the pre- and post- interviews. During the pre-interview, Amina focused on the beauty of art and art’s ability to provide relief. Amina answered, “Art is beauty, just gorgeous, and it provides relief” (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). During the post-interview, Amina responded with emphasizing her enjoyment of art and her willingness to learn more about it when she conveyed, “I like art. It’s something wonderful and I would like to learn more about art” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

Rayya's pre-art therapy response highlighted the satisfaction derived from her crafting, describing the joy of accomplishment and the positive feelings associated with her hobbies. She said, “I like what I am doing and when I do something, I feel like I did something great and really (well), you know? I like the hobbies that I have, and I like what I am doing” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, Rayya's understanding of art changed. She connected artmaking to emotional expression. Art, for Rayya, became a way to convey her feelings, whether positive or negative. Rayya asserted that, “Art for me is to express what I feel. If I feel bad, I express about the feeling by the art or if I feel good. So, it’s just like feeling” (Post-interview, December 22, 2021). The change could suggest that art therapy has not only heightened her sense of achievement, but artmaking has now become a way to communicate, elicit, process, and connect to emotions.

Hafseen's pre-art therapy response linked art to emotional well-being. She described art as a mood enhancer that can alleviate depression when she declared that “The art makes you feel better. Makes you feel less depressed and change your life to better mood” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). In the post- interview, Hafseen maintained her positive stance on art and stated, "I like the art. Art is wonderful" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). This consistency suggests that, for Hafseen, the potential therapeutic and expressive impact of art remained stable.

Art continued to be a positive experience in her life and reinforced the notion that engagement in artmaking can contribute to her well-being to reduce feelings of sadness.

Maryam's pre-art therapy response indicated a general enjoyment of artmaking during the pre-interview when she answered, "I like to make some paintings and drawings" (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, her appreciation for art changed as she expressed love for it. Moreover, Maryam described the emotional impact it had on her. Maryam voiced, "I love art. I am happy when I am doing it, and I feel like, relaxed" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Feeling happy, relaxed, and expressing love for art suggests that the art therapy sessions may have amplified Maryam's enjoyment of the creative process and connected her more deeply to the therapeutic potential of artmaking. The shift emphasizes the transformative potential of art therapy to enrich peoples' association with art beyond surface-level enjoyment. Nonetheless, enjoyment of artmaking is also meaningful. The Knowledge Holders' shared experiences of the meaning of artwork in their lives suggest that artmaking prompted a transformation, evoking more emotions, positive experiences with the creative process, and connections to memories.

### ***Symbols in Art Eliciting Emotional Memories***

Many of the Knowledge Holders' artworks explored and expressed their memories in Syria. Thus, they generated a visual narrative that united personal and shared memories during the group sessions (refer to Figure 3 for Maryam's water paintings). Notably, during member-checking, Rayya described some of her artworks depicting her experience of "a really sad past," shared by all Syrians. This sentiment was supported by Maryam, who expanded the sentiment to the collective experience of Syrians when she responded, "Everyone's facing the same thing. All Syrians are" (Member checking session, August 24, 2023). Reflecting on the artwork created in the group revealed a connection to sad memories, highlighting the emotional depth embedded in

their creations. During the group, Maryam created a painting of a boat traversing the ocean in Figure 3, which was rich in emotional significance. When describing the image, she narrated:

Whenever I see water, it brings happiness. My husband and I... It brings my husband and I together as well. Whenever we have any work to do, we both go and to the ocean, or the pond, or the river. That brings my honeymoon back... It's a time for bonding. (Member-checking, August 24, 2023)

### Figure 3

*Maryam's Depiction of the Ocean that "Brings my Honeymoon Back"*



Building on emotionally infused symbols that evoked memories, the thematic use of flowers emerged as a metaphor linking past memories with the present. For Maryam, flowers hearken back to her garden in Syria. During session two, Maryam shared that she drew flowers to “Try to remember back home” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). In addition, in Session 2, Maryam revisited the theme of flowers and reconnected flowers with positive experiences (See Figure 4 for Maryam’s flower images).

I painted roses and jasmine. I love nature and would love to have a house in nature. I also love summer and the smell of the flowers that I had painted. I have roses in my backyard garden and would also buy flowers from the store. I love nature, flowers, and the summer. (Session 2, November 24, 2021)

### Figure 4

*Maryam's Artwork of Flowers to "Try to Remember Back Home"*



Hafseen's representation of roses simultaneously represented love, memories of being a florist in Syria, ambition, enjoyment, purity, cleanliness, and her relationship with her son. Hafseen's artwork with symbolic flowers are depicted in Figure 5. In the post-art therapy interview, Hafseen said that her favourite painting was the flower vase. For her, "roses represent love" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Hafseen's consistent portrayal of flowers and the emotional stories they carried highlight how artmaking about this particular symbol helped her preserve and express memories. Reflecting on the symbolic meaning of her flower vase painting, created during Session 2 and completed at home, Hafseen shared:

At home in Syria, I used to buy flowers and put them in a vase in my living room. The four flowers could be anyone or anything, such as roses, tulips, or jasmine. My son's name is (confidential), or flower, while the red and white colours mean purity and cleanliness. I have added flowers to the vase. I like flowers and keep flowers in the house all day. These flowers include roses and jasmine. I used to be a florist in Lebanon and love flowers because I used to work with them. I would get seeds from Turkey to grow flowers, and it was a lot of hard work. I would like to do the same thing in St. John's. (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

**Figure 5**

*Hafseen's Flowers that "Represent Love"*



For the Knowledge Holders, creating artwork about well-being brought forth playful and happy childhood memories. Amina's drawing of a snowman (Figure 6) symbolized positive memories of playing in the snow in Syria. She described the image as:

A snowman because I love the snow, and I used to play in snow back in Syria. There are snowflakes falling in the image. This image brings me well-being because I love to be in the snow” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

**Figure 6**

*Amina’s Drawing Portraying “A Snowman because I Love the Snow and I Used to Play in the Snow Back in Syria”*



Rayya's drawing of cartoons elicited positive memories, presented in Figure 7. Inspired by cartoons, like Tom and Jerry, Rayya said that she was, "...taking cartoon classes and I love it. I was watching Tom and Jerry, and I was inspired by the cartoon. Tom and Jerry [cartoons] remind me of my childhood days" during session three and four (December 10, 2021). She drew cartoon images at home between sessions. During the member-checking session, Rayya also created a picture of an anime character to evoke memories of her children's happiness while watching cartoons. She expressed, "I remember my kids watching cartoons. When I see them happy, that makes me happy too" (Member checking session, August 24, 2024).

**Figure 7**

*Rayya's Cartoons that "Remind me of my Childhood Days"*



The ability of the artwork created within the group to evoke emotional memories extended beyond the examples mentioned above, as shown in Tables 7 to 11. For example, Rayya depicted a coffee cup, music, and a book to connect to a good memory. She said that "The good memory relates to back home when I would sit outside with music and think back on life. I am thinking about life before, and now." Over the course of the art therapy sessions, a total of 77 artworks were created, each multifaceted and expressive, depicting memories that bridged the Knowledge Holders' past and present emotional experiences. Nostalgic symbols in their artwork may have

served as a means to evoke memories and share lived experiences. Transforming intangible memories into tangible artworks allowed for simultaneous representations and experiences to emerge. Moreover, the symbols, such as flowers depicted in one Knowledge Holder's artwork, could inspire memories in another group member through a dialectical process.

Art therapy, with its emphasis on expressive, multifaceted, sensory-based symbolism, facilitates emotional expression and enriches emotional knowledge by evoking complex memories. Throughout the sessions, art bridged and transcended temporal boundaries, linking memories and present emotions through symbolism and metaphor. Each Knowledge Holder transformed their personal stories and memories into their creations, drawing inspiration from their homeland and childhood. The theme of expanded emotional knowledge through memory elicitation is captured by Hafseen, who said that artmaking helps her remember.

***Theme 2: Artmaking Fosters Care and Safety to Authentically Express***

**Secure Bonds Created in the Group.** Amina initially expressed a lack of experience with artmaking during the pre-interview, uncertain about its ability to voice her experiences, despite finding joy in the creative process. However, in the post-interview, Amina emphasized the supportive group environment as a key factor in her ability to articulate herself. Describing the group dynamics, where individuals engaged in art creation under the guidance of an art therapist within a caring space, she expressed how this environment helped her express herself with art. Amina emphasized the significance of meeting new people, engaging in art, and learning more about artworks. She also appreciated the care extended by the artist-researcher-art therapist, stating, "Meeting you, having met you, because you are taking care of people. You care about others" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

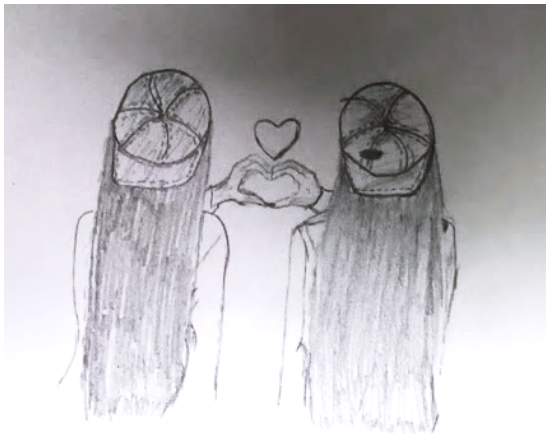
Reflecting on the group during the member-checking session, Rayya stated, "We got to know each other, we created friendships. It was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed our time" (Member Checking, August 24, 2023). The Knowledge Holders created artwork representing



positive bonds formed within the group, including between members and myself. Friendship and care emerged as prominent metaphors in the Knowledge Holders' artwork. For example, Rayya conveyed that, "Friendship. A friend is a home. Everyone has a home and can share their homes with one another" (Session 2, November 26, 2021). The connection between friendship, homes, and sharing homes is significant because homes can represent safe places. Offering one's home to others through sharing conveys reciprocity, generosity, and hospitality. The significance of friendship is exemplified in Rayya's drawing of two women together. The image in Figure 8 depicts portraits of Rayya and another group member. Their hands are posed together to form a collective heart.

**Figure 8**

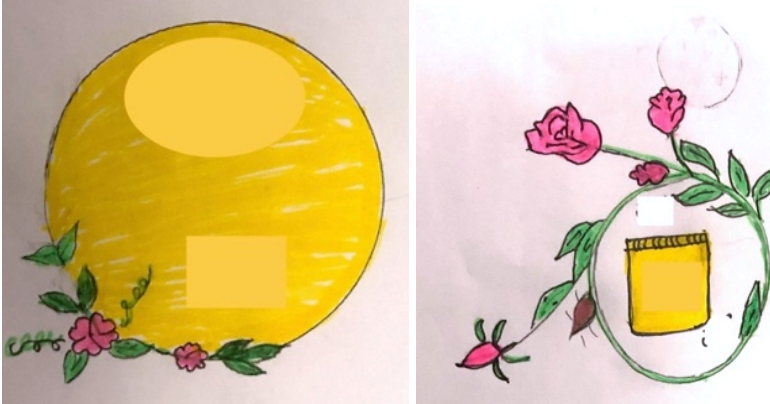
*Rayya's Friendship Because "A friend is a Home"*



In the final session, Hafseen created a symbolic representation of the safe group space with roses in Figures 5 and 9. Names of the group members were written in the yellow square image. The yellow circle represented Hafseen's friendship with Rayya. When describing the images, Hafseen declared, "I have written the names of everyone here. We are all together inside the circle and our names are written in Arabic. This represents our day together" (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 9**

*Hafseen's Circle Representing "Our Day Together"*



The Knowledge Holders also drew portraits of me, which could portray our therapeutic alliance and bond. Guided by the narratives behind the images, the drawings exemplified the positive group bonds that were formed. Amina a portrait of me in session five and communicated that, "I created a drawing of Haley [researcher] because she is pregnant and happy" (Session 5, December 14, 2021) in Figure 10. Mariam also a portrait of me with the final artwork to depict her positive experience of the group on the right side of Figure 10. When describing the image, she said that "This is the computer with Haley's smiling face on it. I drew us all together and I liked gathering here" (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 10**

*Amina and Maryam's Portraits that Depict Me "Pregnant and Happy"*



Maryam also shared that being with me made her feel happy and helped her express emotions related to her isolation from family. When describing a self-portrait of a smiling woman depicted in Figure 11, Maryam disclosed that she felt:

Happy because I'm with you. I'm now feeling happy. My heart feels heavy because I am here, in Canada. Strength is happiness. I like to help people, and I am always in front of people. When you are happy, I am always happy" (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

**Figure 11**

*Maryam's Self-Portrait Being "Happy Because I'm With You"*



During the post-interviews, various Knowledge Holders expressed that they enjoyed developing relationships with me, which may exemplify that they felt safe, and we had a positive relationship, despite the language barriers and connecting virtually across Provinces. Amina said, "And I am very happy because I met you and had the opportunity to get to know you." Amina also shared that, "Thank you for taking care of us, and what you gave us, for everything that you gave us" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Similarly, Rayya stated that, "I also appreciate you and it was really nice to meet you, and I like the way you laugh, your smile and...I hope [wish] you all the best..." (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

**Safe and Comfortable Spaces Depicted in Art.** The Knowledge Holder' choice of environmental motifs in their artwork, such as flowers and the ocean, indicates their inclination to recreate soothing surroundings, potentially eliciting feelings of safety and tranquility. For

example, in Maryam's description of the ocean presented above, she shared that being by the ocean brought her comfort. Moreover, Hafseen's shared memories of bringing flowers into her home in Syria and Canada, described in her narrative above, increased her well-being.

Homes and houses could represent comfort, cleanliness, contentment, domesticity, and productivity in the Knowledge Holders' artwork. Maryam depicted homes from the outside with an emphasis on the outdoor landscapes surrounding the homes represented in Figure 12. When describing one of the homes, she articulated that, "I drew my house, and I am looking from the porch. I am looking at my kids and I like that. I like the house to be clean, done with my laundry. Everything is done by the time my husband and kids come home. I am happy when I am productive" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

**Figure 12**

*Maryam's Houses*



In Rayya's check-in drawings during sessions three, four, and five, she created images that represent safe, nurturing, and comforting environments with friends. For example, on the right side of Figure 13, Rayya created an image of coffee, a book, and music. She shared that:

The good memory relates to back home when I would sit outside with music and think back on life. I am thinking about life before, and now. I enjoy relaxing when in the house, drinking coffee, and chatting together with friends. (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

The image on the right side of Figure 13 portrays a peaceful indoor scene where a man and a woman are looking outside at snow from the window. Rayya conveyed that the image illustrated the following:

This is a man and a woman sitting by a window around a table. They are sitting together on two chairs and snow is falling outside the window. The person in the art is feeling good while sitting and watching the snow is falling from the window. It is a puzzle room, and it is calming to be in that space (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 13**

*Rayya's Memories Where "It is Calming to Be in the Space"*



The examples from narratives and artwork presented suggest that the Knowledge Holders could have experienced a sense of care and safety in art therapy through the relationships and through artmaking, which created an environment conducive to self-expression. The theme of positive social bonds and safety is essential for authentic storytelling for the Knowledge Holders and is well-known in the field of clinical psychotherapy and counselling (de Witte et al., 2022). Creating a secure space, facilitated by positive relationships among Knowledge Holders and the art therapist, is crucial for genuine verbal and artistic expression. The Knowledge Holders emphasized the importance of a welcoming and safe environment for self-expression by symbolizing safe spaces and relationships in their artworks. Moreover, the Knowledge Holders also communicated the importance of meeting new people and developing friendships when they

summarized their experiences of the art therapy sessions. The third research question of this study delves into how the social bonds were created between the Knowledge Holders through artmaking.

### ***Theme 3: Artmaking Enhances Mood to Facilitate Expression***

The Knowledge Holders in the study expressed that art could increase emotional well-being and reduce negative emotions. Hafseen explained that she was interested in participating in the art therapy because “Mainly, I will feel less depression through this program because my son has [a chronic illness].” She elaborated that, “art makes you feel better. Makes you feel less depressed and change your life to better mood” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021).

In the pre-interview on November 9, 2021, Amina expressed that art could help people feel relaxed and calm. She said that “Art makes, like relief and makes the mind feel more relaxed, sometimes when you look at art or if you draw something.” Similarly, Maryam felt that artmaking helped bring emotional relief and help her relax when she communicated that, “I love art. I am happy when I am doing it, and I feel like, relaxed, you know?” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

**Positive Group Experiences.** When reflecting on the art therapy group during the post-interviews and member-checking sessions, the Knowledge Holders stated that they enjoyed it. Maryam shared that she appreciated the group and meeting with others when she said that:

When I started with the art therapy with you at the group, I didn’t understand what kind of happened exactly, like the full picture ...But, after all, I really liked what we did together, and discussion, and drawing, and talking to you, and like expressing this kind of stuff. (Maryam, Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Amina voiced that, “I am very happy with the group, with everything” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Hafseen believed that, “In general, it was good, and I like the group and the way that I participated in the group, and the relations with the other members. And I wasn’t

expecting something different” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Rayya said that “It was really wonderful, and I liked it [the group]” (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

During the member-checking session, Maryam and Rayya reflected on their positive experiences of the group. Maryam stated, “I really enjoyed my time. I learned that I have to live my life, and life is beautiful, if you want to make it” (Member Checking, August 24). Rayya concurred with Maryam and expressed, “It was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed our time” (Member Checking, August 24, 2023).

**Positive Changes Reflected in Art.** Changes in emotions experienced by the Knowledge Holders were documented in my session notes. In my reflexive documentation of the art therapy sessions, I wrote that, “Everyone seems energized at the end of the session with new things and possibilities, despite wrapping themselves in thick jackets before embracing the winter weather outside. (Session 1 Notes, November 24, 2021).

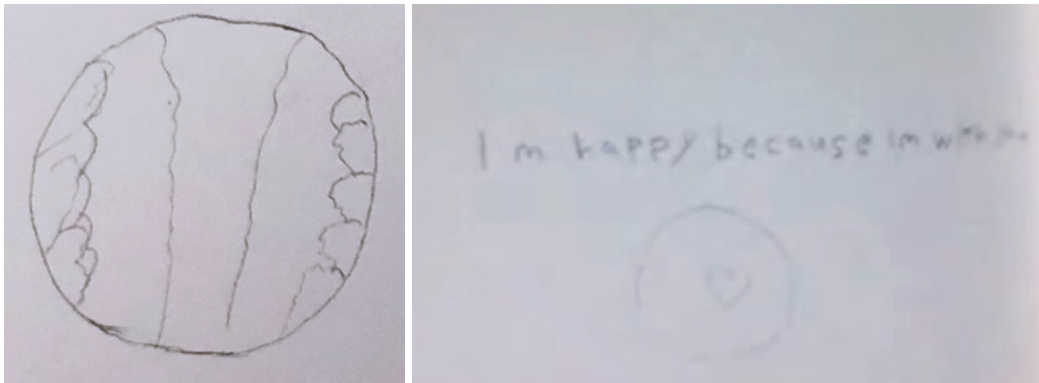
I observed changes in mood during the group check-ins and check-outs, utilizing a small circle as a stimulus. Knowledge Holders were invited to represent their current mood with artistic metaphors, generating a brief (two to five minute) artwork within a small circle with lines, shapes, and colours (Malchiodi & Warson, 2015). The brief nature of the check-ins and check-outs can evoke spontaneous art creation that directly taps into their current emotions (Malchiodi & Warson, 2015). A larger thematic drawing or painting was created in-between the check-ins and outs. This process can help me understand the group members’ current emotional state. Simultaneously, it creates a way for the Knowledge Holders to connect with one another through empathetic resonance (Brinck, 2018; Franklin, 2010; Weber, 2008) by sharing their emotions in a consistent ritual. Moreover, the check-ins and check-outs serve as valuable data, qualitatively and artistically revealing mood shifts that occur at the beginning and at the end of the group sessions.

An example of an emotional shift observed during the check-in and check-out artmaking occurred in Sessions 3 and 4. During the check-in, Maryam expressed stress related to a blizzard

and snow. She depicted her feelings about the blizzard and her journey through the snow. The image on the left side of Figure 14 shows snow on both sides of a small road she traveled to reach the center. By the check-out, Maryam's mood had shifted. At the end of the session, she drew a self-portrait with a smiling face. She also wrote that she felt “happy because I’m with you” with a smiling face (see Figure 11) and an image of a heart with the text on that is presented on the right side of Figure 14.

**Figure 14**

*Maryam’s Blizzard (left) that Changed to Being “Happy Because I’m With You” (right)*



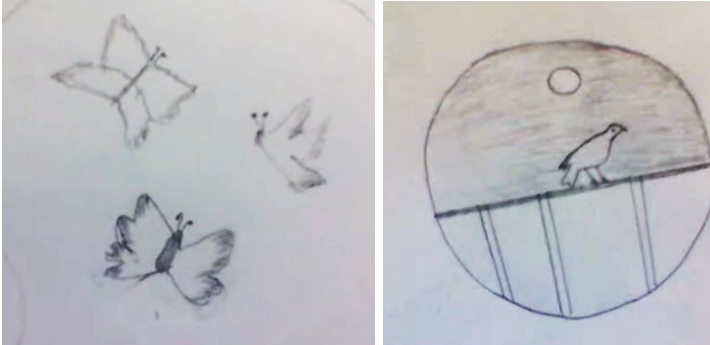
Similarly, Rayya portrayed a shift in her mood through her check-in and check-out artwork. At the beginning of a member checking session, Rayya explained that she felt “like a hurricane” and had created blue swirls that represented her frustration with administrative challenges related to applying for a passport (see Table 5). At the end of the session, Rayya chose the colour white because it represented “hope, happiness, and simplicity” (see Table 7).

In Session 2, Hafseen associated three butterflies with freedom during the check-in, presented on the left side of Figure 15. In the check-out, Hafseen drew an image of a bird at sunset that is sitting on a wall, conveying calmness and relaxation. She expressed that, “It is calm and there is no work to do” (Session 2, November 26, 2021) on the right side of Figure 15. While both images conveyed positive emotions, the second image specifically evoked a sense of tranquility.



**Figure 15**

*Hafseen’s Butterflies Representing Freedom and Birds Portraying “Calm and There is No Work”*



During the check-in in Session 5, Hafseen shared her joy about the snowfall outside with an image of a snow globe positioned on the left side of Figure 16. In the check-out, she created an image of a warmer climate with a drawing of sunshine in the summer with flowers. She expressed happiness and included names of herself and her friend inside the bright yellow circle. This artwork emphasized a friendship with another member in the group alongside her frequently used symbol of a rose, representing love (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 16**

*Hafseen’s Snow Globe and Sun Representing Happiness and Joy*



Another example of positive moods depicted at the beginning and end of the sessions occurred in Session 2. Maryam expressed “feeling good” during the check-in with an image of a smiling sun in Figure 17 below. Smiling suns were a common symbol used by Maryam and

Amina who associated the symbol with feeling “bright and sunny.” At the end of the session,

Maryam drew a walking path with sunshine, birds, and palm trees. She voiced that,

My circle depicts the evening. I love to go walking, and I just like to walk in the evening with family because it feels very good. I would do this every day in the summer. I would do this in Syria as well. (Session 2, November 24, 2021)

The pathway drawing can portray a positive affect related to spending time with family on a walk. Often, the Knowledge Holders described images that symbolically depicted comfort, peace, sunshine, and joy in their check-out artwork.

### **Figure 17**

*Maryam’s Sunshine and Pathway*



These examples illustrate how artistic and symbolic check-ins and check-outs, using small circles at the beginning and end of the sessions, could have been meaningful for the Knowledge Holders. They qualitatively and artistically captured their immediate moods or wishes. The Knowledge Holders' statements and artworks highlight how the art therapy sessions and the act of artmaking can evoke positive emotions, fostering the sharing of experiences with one another.

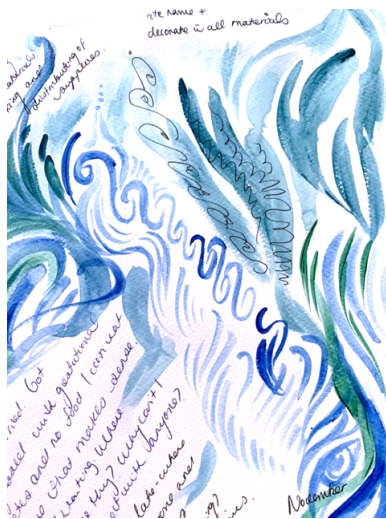
I also noted a shift in my own mood that I documented in the reflexive session notes. I felt a shift from stress to happiness after each session and enjoyed the time spent with the Knowledge Holders, despite the physical distance. Conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic felt stressful because some sessions quickly rescheduled before the holidays began. There was pressure to complete the data collection process before my twins were born in January.

Cancellations occurred due to rooms being double-booked, difficulty coordinating transportation during a very busy time for the settlement organization, and my own health issues related to the late stages of a medicalized pregnancy. Researchers have noted that, “Pregnant women expecting twins are more likely to experience stress, which can lead to anxiety and depression” (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1). Before the first art therapy session, I wrote that,

Late. Worried. Got diagnosed with gestational diabetes and there is no food that I can eat at home that makes sense. Waiting. Where are they? Why can't I connect with anyone? 20 minutes late. Where is everyone and what's happening? Very nervous. The room was double-booked (Session One Notes, November 24, 2021)

### Figure 18

#### *Session 1 Arts-Based Reflexive Notes Reflecting Personal Changes from Worry to Happiness*



The images I created during the art therapy check-ins, shown in Figure 18, were often not shared with the Knowledge Holders. They consisted of blue spirals and clouds, reflecting my stress and fatigue. I typically did not share my own artwork at the beginning of the session because it reflected stressful emotions, and I wanted to prioritize the Knowledge Holders' experiences. I chose to share artwork when it reflected group dynamics, validated the Knowledge Holders' experiences, and contributed to framing their emotions to enhance their well-being and comfort in a therapeutic way.

During the first session and at the end of the art therapy group, I noticed that facilitating the group and spending time with the Knowledge Holders lifted my mood. At the end of the art therapy group, I recalled positive memories of painting live models in St. John's when taking graduate courses at Memorial University, which brought me well-being and happiness. I wrote that, "I remember painting models within studio sessions in St. John's. That focus and undivided attention was so soothing and therapeutic for me." (Session One Notes, November 24, 2021). In addition, during session two, I created an image of a purple cloud that looked like a brain in Figure 19 and wrote that I felt tired at the beginning of the session. In addition, I felt stressed about childcare and emotional issues due to my pregnancy. I wrote:

Planning the changes...Makes me want to cry, being away from my son. The constant unknown in planning makes me cry. I am so on-edge and teary-eyed this morning, just trying to hold back tears from the past couple of days. Hard to find childcare and all I want to do is be with my child (Session Two Notes, November 26, 2021).

**Figure 19**

*Session 2 Arts-Based Reflexive Image Created During the Check-in at the Beginning of the Session*



At the end of the session, I created a bright sunflower that represented the feeling, "Brighter, more focused" (Session 2 notes, November 26, 2021) in Figure 20.

**Figure 20**

*Session 2 Arts-Based Reflexive Image Created at the End of the Session*



Finally, at the end of the member-checking session that occurred more than one year after the art therapy group, I found that being with the Knowledge Holders increased my mood during the check-out component (see Table 6). I reflected that these changes were related to the Knowledge Holders' gracious demeanour, creating artwork together, and spending time with one another, despite the distance. I was also grateful for them to share their time and participate. I shared that, "Every time I meet with you guys, I have felt so much brighter after. So, I am also just really, so happy that you came. Happy that you are here. Thank you" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023). Therefore, the artwork created at the beginning and end of the sessions captured shifts in affect, particularly towards positive moods.

***Theme 4: Artmaking Expands Communication Through Symbolism and Metaphor***

The thread running through all art therapy sessions and the researcher's reflexive artwork is the active use of art as a symbolic language, conveying complex emotional experiences that extend verbal expression. With lines, shapes, textures, colors, and symbolic images, the symbolic artwork helped the Knowledge Holders to express embodied and ineffable experiences that may be too difficult to articulate with words. The ability to express experiences beyond verbal language is meaningful because the Knowledge Holders and I were from different cultures and spoke different first languages (Kolah, 2023).

The symbolic communication in art, which could transcend language barriers, provided an accessible way for the Knowledge Holders to articulate complex feelings and experiences.

Maryam shared that artmaking helped her express her experiences, especially when her children were asleep at night, though she found it difficult to explain how. She said that:

First of all, yes, but I can't explain how...Yea, it's hard to explain. Usually when my children go to sleep at night, and to be quiet and I can do whatever I want. Into art and drawing" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Examples of symbolic images that conveyed emotional expression beyond verbal communication can be seen in the following instances. This theme was also central to my research analysis practice, as represented in Figures 44–56. The artwork created during the art therapy groups (Tables 8–11) and the member-checking session (Table 4) is rich in metaphoric symbols. For instance, Rayya drew an image of crying eyes to express her sadness about leaving her home and family (see Table 11). This drawing, accompanied by an Arabic poem about her father, became a powerful expression of her emotions about loss. In Session 5, her quick drawing of a man and a woman by a window with snow falling portrayed a sense of calmness and enjoyment. Rayya expressed that “it is calming to be in that space” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

In Sessions 3 and 4, Rayya painted a tree with broken branches to represent “family and the tree branches are broken. The branches are also those who had been lost in my family” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). Moreover, in this painting embedded with symbolism, Rayya created an “imbalanced scale, which is another symbol of no balance.” These symbols, along with a broken heart and dripping blood portrayed that, “No one stood next to our family or helped us during the war, except Canada” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Other examples include the following symbolic artworks that were drawn and painted throughout the art therapy sessions. Hafseen's drawing of sunshine in the summer with flowers in Session 5 represented her feelings of happiness: “I feel very happy, with my name and my friend's names written inside of the circle” (Table 9; Session 5, December 14, 2021). Moreover,

her heart painting with a heartbeat created in session one symbolized that, “I love life, and life is beautiful” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). In the post-interview, Hafseen highlighted her painting of roses as the most meaningful artwork created because it symbolized love. She explained that the artwork “has this very big meaning and it tells different stories” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Hafseen’s artwork in session two conveyed her desire for freedom, depicted through a drawing of butterflies.

Maryam represented her value for peace and justice with images of doves, a balancing scale, a cup of coffee, houses in tranquil landscapes, and the ocean throughout various sessions (see Table 10 for the artworks). Moreover, her self-portrait with a Quran depicted her pride in her religion. She said, “I am proud of my religion and that connects me to this life, and to my God” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Amina symbolically drew a portrait of me pregnant in Session 5. For Amina, motherhood and children symbolized happiness and hope (Table 8). Moreover, she associated her drawings of children playing with joy and hope. For example, at the end of Session 2, Amina created an image of a woman and said that “I wish for every woman to see, and every woman to have a child, to not be alone, and to have hope” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

The Knowledge Holders expertly depicted their experiences and emotions with rich and impactful symbolism throughout the art therapy sessions and member-checking session. When viewing their artwork and reading the descriptions in Tables 9-11, the art enhances the descriptions and often speaks for itself. Therefore, the symbolic art can help the Knowledge Holders express their lived experiences through metaphor.

**Research Question 2: How can artmaking in a safe group setting help this population express their experiences of belonging and well-being in an online art therapy group?**

In exploring the role of artmaking for Syrian refugee mothers in a hybrid online art therapy group, I invited the Knowledge Holders to reflect on and express their experiences of

well-being and belonging. The Knowledge Holders created symbolic drawings and paintings using their chosen materials to convey their sense of belonging and well-being during and between the art therapy sessions. The creation of 77 images throughout and between the sessions, depicting themes of belonging, well-being, and current emotional experiences, highlights the Knowledge Holders' dedication, creativity, and willingness to explore these topics.

To answer the second research question, I present belonging and well-being as two separate concepts. Meaningful themes emerged from the analysis of the multimodal arts, verbal, and written data using arts-based and qualitative methods. Although the two concepts are presented separately, the experiences of belonging and well-being are interconnected.

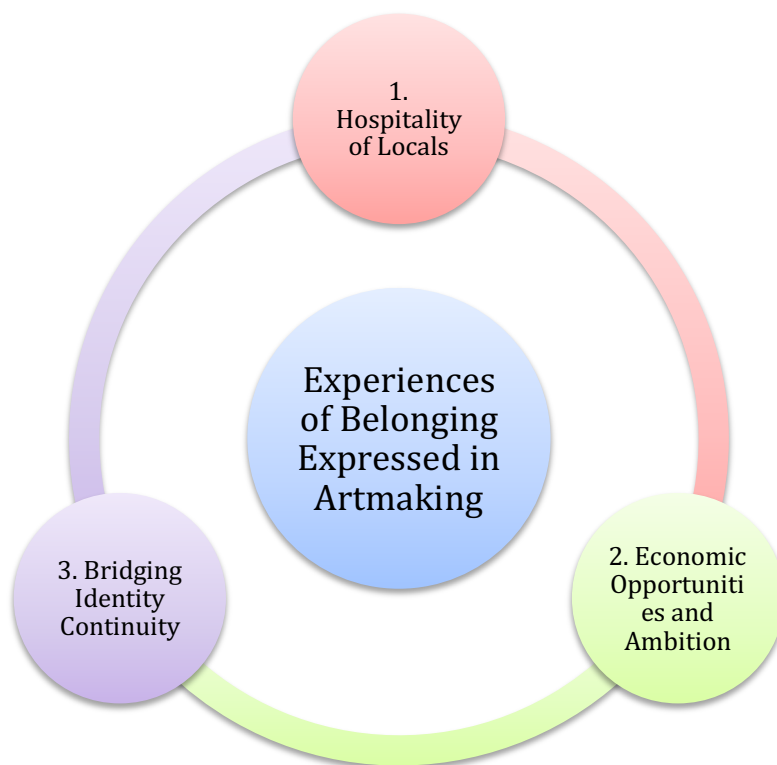
### ***Belonging Expressed Through Artmaking***

The Syrian refugee mothers shared their experiences of belonging in St. John's during the interviews and created artwork to explore this strengths-based topic in the art therapy sessions. The Knowledge Holders affirmed a positive sense of belonging in St. John's. Three themes that encapsulate belonging in St. John's emerged. These three themes are depicted as a model in Figure 21. The first theme found that belonging was connected to friendliness, hospitality, and care from people in St. John's (considered locals), with an emphasis on not experiencing discrimination or Islamophobia. The second theme illustrates the Knowledge Holders' sense of belonging through the pursuit of educational goals and access to economic opportunities in St. John's. Lastly, belonging was experienced as the Knowledge Holders bridged their Syrian and Canadian identities in their artwork.

### **Figure 21**

*Model Depicting How Syrian Refugee Mothers Can Express Experiences of Belonging with Artmaking*





*Note.* Figure created by Haley Toll.

***Theme 1: Belonging Felt with Kindness, Friendliness, and Care from Hospitable Locals***

Hafseen, Amina, and Maryam shared positive sentiments about the hospitality and friendliness they have encountered in St. John’s during their pre-interviews. The term “locals” refers to all individuals who resided in NL at the time, with a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, and histories. Amina shared that, “I love this city. I have never been in any other Province, but the people here are friendly, nice, there is no discrimination” (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). Hafseen expressed that, “I feel really good here. Good hospitality and people are friendly. And in general, good.” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). Rayya’s answer was inaudible due to phone static and the line cutting out. However, Maryam, who had lived in St. John’s for more than five years, provided answers consistent with those of her peers. She stated that, “I am so happy here, to be here in St. John’s, and I won’t think of moving from here...It’s

really nice here. People are really nice and helpful” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). Amina elaborated on her experience in her post-interview. She said:

I feel like I am very happy here, especially with the community, and like I get to learn more new things. Like I had been with the group. I would like to learn more thing, to be able to.

I like it here. I like to make friends. I love people, and love to be positive, you know? In general, I don't have many connections with people, but people are nice, and the city is a nice place and environment. The connections that I have right now are mostly in Arabic, because of my language. I don't know how to speak English very well, so, yea. But, in general the environment is very positive and a good environment to live. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

The Knowledge Holders connected feeling happy to their experience of belonging. In the post-interview, Maryam declared, “I like it here. People here are so friendly, and no discrimination or something like that, and it's like diversity of the people. But the only complaint is the weather, that's all” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Rayya shared that, “First of all, I am really happy to be here with my children” (Post-interview, December 22, 2021). Hafseen communicated similar sentiments in her interview, highlighting the importance of schools to her experience of belonging. She said that,

I like it very very much here. It's like even better than my back home. So... liking it ... Like schools are good. Education was bad back home, but here it's better. Not only the English, but in general. Education is really important (yea). I was unhappy in Lebanon. I had three and a half years in Lebanon...They didn't allow my children to attend the school. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

### ***Theme 2: Belonging Experienced through Economic Opportunities and Ambition***

The Knowledge Holders connected their experience of belonging in St. John's to their access to educational and work opportunities in their art and during their interviews. Maryam summarized that, “Life here [in Canada] requires you to get out and work, and to get out of your comfort zone” (Member Checking Session, August 24, 2023). Amina consistently linked her sense of belonging to her desire to work, emphasizing her experience in healthcare in Syria in her drawings. In St. John's, she hoped to get a job in the same field. During her pre-interview, Amina stated that, “I want to work and love to work” (November 9, 2021). She wanted the art therapy

group to help her gain skills that she could apply to the healthcare sector. Amina revisited her desire to work in healthcare and senior care during the post-interview when she discussed the most meaningful artworks that she created. She specified that, “My preference [favorite artwork created during the sessions] is between the hospital building or the senior people’s house” (December 16, 2021). She expressed her aspiration to work in a nursing home in St. John’s, explaining that,

I will choose the nursing home, and I would describe it like, I would like someone who would take care of me when I become old. Because I would like to help them, provide them care, and teach them, so that’s what I would choose. We should be taking care of all of them because when they become old, they are like kids because we need to give them more attention and care (December 16, 2021).

Amina's connection to healthcare is represented in her drawings of a hospital and a nursing home in Figure 22. She explained, “This is the hospital, where the brown pieces represent hospital beds. I like to work with seniors. I would like to work and bring my family here. I hope is to get similar work and support my family in St. John’s” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). In another session, she highlighted her experience in caregiving, stating that the image that she had created was of the geriatric centre where she used to work.

I want to work in senior care homes, and I also used to care for seniors, and also for my grandfather. I was living with my grandparents, and I was also taking care of a colleague who was 82 years old when I was living in Syria” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

Amina’s desire to improve the well-being of seniors through her work highlights the connection she has established between her sense of belonging and the use of her valuable skills. The images in Figure 22 depict screenshots of drawings crafted with pencil and paint. However, the intricate details of various rooms within the building, alongside Amina's self-portrait engaged in caregiving (featured on the left side of the right image), are somewhat challenging to discern. Amina's careful attention to detail and spatial arrangement suggest that she was creating maps depicting her memories of the geriatric home and hospital facilities. Her meticulous attention to detail highlights the significance of her work in hospitals and senior centers.

**Figure 22**

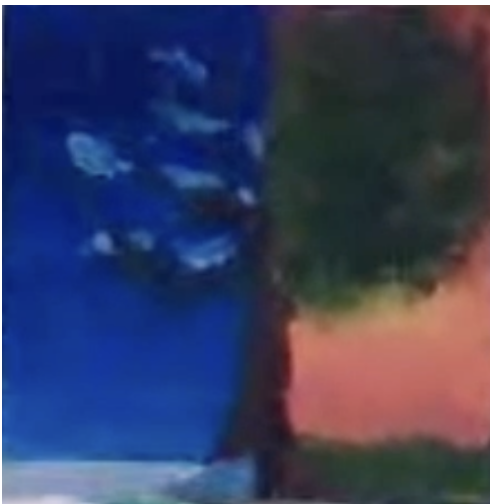
*Amina's Artwork Depicting Her Work in Senior's Care Homes and Hospitals Representing Belonging*



In addition, Maryam represented her time working in Canada through a painting of a tree with two seasons in Figure 23. She said, “I have been working for two semesters, and one side represents the winter semester, while the other side of the tree represents the Fall semester” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 23**

*Maryam's Tree Representing Two Semesters of Work*



The Knowledge Holders also placed a higher priority on developing entrepreneurship skills than on participating in groups focused on emotional expression when envisioning next steps. When asked about their next steps after the art therapy group, Rayya and Maryam expressed interest in entrepreneurship workshops to help them develop a business for selling their artwork. They wanted to contribute financially to support themselves and their families. When sharing images of the flower wall decorations she had crafted, Rayya explained that:

I would like to start and work like that... I had a session at [a location]. I don't mind teaching it [crafts] and doing it for work, for sessions, but I want my own kind of job or business...I don't want to volunteer. I want work. (Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023).

Maryam agreed when she said that “I also want to learn about a new thing. Life here requires you to get out and work” (Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023). The social worker and interpreter who was present during the member-checking session were able to connect them to existing female newcomer entrepreneurship programs.

The theme of ambition and its connection to the Knowledge Holders’ sense of belonging in St. John’s is reflected in their expressed desire to learn more about art, life in the city, and English. Amina and Hafseen both expressed a goal of acquiring new skills in St. John’s. Amina emphasized her eagerness to learn within the local community, noting the positive impact of education on her well-being when discussing her experience of belonging in St. John’s. During her post-interview, she communicated, “I feel like I am very happy here, especially with the community, and like I get to learn more new things, like I had been able to do with the group. I would like to learn more things” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Amina mentioned at the start of the post-interview that she would appreciate help practicing her English with a native speaker. She expressed that:

I am very happy with the group, with everything, and I am wondering, will I be able to have teacher that will help me improve my English? Yes, I am going to the school, I think two days per week, but I am not improving ...because when we are meeting with the class, we are speaking Arabic. When I go home, I speak Arabic as well. So, I am asking if I can get more help to practice English more. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Similarly, during her pre-interview, Hafseen shared that,

I'd like to learn more here in St. John's and do whatever it takes to learn and get experience. Yes, because of the disaster that is happening in Syria, I sometimes feel very bad, but this may help me to overcome or surpass the problems (November 19, 2021).

During the art therapy sessions and interviews, the Knowledge Holders shared that their sense of belonging is closely linked to achieving their career and educational goals through their art and dialogue. Their interest in entrepreneurial endeavors, where they sell their arts and crafts, reflects the connection between contributing to society, belonging, and well-being in St. John's.

### ***Theme 3: Belonging Increased by Bridging Identity Continuity***

The Knowledge Holders created artwork that symbolically connected their past and present experiences in Newfoundland and Labrador to their Syrian roots. This sense of continuity between diverse cultural identities across different landscapes and nations may strengthen their sense of belonging. In Figure 24, Maryam created a portrait depicting a reunited family, with the Syrian flag in the top right corner of the image and the Canadian flag in the top left. Maryam expressed her wish for her family to reunite when they all visit Syria together, and she also reflected on her journey to Canada. The juxtaposition of the flags, along with Maryam's description, highlights her deep connection to both countries, with Canada representing peace and love for her. When describing her family portrait, Maryam said:

My family would like to visit [Syria] soon, and I will be with them soon. My husband is in Syria. Before the war, we were together in [location]. When the war started, my family got displaced and we went to Saudi Arabia, Syria, America, and Canada. I am praying that we get the chance to be together. The Canadian flag is in the top left corner, and Canada feels like home because we live in peace and love here. If I could, I would like to meet my family at our house in Syria with my parents, brother, and sister. I have 16 brothers and sisters. Even if I couldn't be back in Syria, would like to see my family. My parents are still in Syria and have one brother in America. Everyone is now everywhere. (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

### **Figure 24**

*Maryam's Artwork Reuniting Her Family*



Additionally, Rayya's painting of a broken tree in Figure 25 features various symbols that convey her feelings of grief, loss, despair, and hope for Syria. She explained the painting (Figure 25) as follows:

The tree represents family, and the tree branches are broken. The branches are also those who had been lost in my family. On the left-hand side, there is an imbalanced scale, which is another symbol of no balance. No one stood next to our family or helped us during the war, except Canada. Therefore, the flag and the ground are full of dripping red blood. I included a broken heart of the Syrian people who fell, and the green grass belongs to the tree. These symbols, and the grass are meant for people who have lost their lives and the houses that have been destroyed. In the left corner under the scale, there are buildings being destroyed. The image is titled, "In God we Trust." (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

During the post-interviews, Rayya re-examined the image she had created, which she gave to her neighbor, who was deeply touched by the artwork. Rayya shared that:

The family tree I was talking about was about Syria and almost my family or relatives were missing and maybe dead because of the war and I tried to [draw] my feelings to [show]... when I was back in Syria. I drew destroyed buildings and houses. And I drew a balance, or something like that, because all the country did not do anything towards the people there... And it wasn't fair... My neighbour, she likes it, and she took it... I like it and I drew it already" (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

The emotional resonance and impact of the artworks can extend beyond the art therapy sessions, influencing the creator's ability to connect with the broader local community. For instance, Rayya's neighbor's emotional response and validation of her artwork, which represented

Rayya's emotions and experiences, demonstrate how artistic expressions can transcend individual stories and evolve into a shared narrative. Through her artwork's representational vision, the artist can be seen and share her perspective. This allows group members, the therapist, and viewers to experience Rayya's world through her eyes, fostering a deeper empathetic understanding of her journey. Rayya's ongoing sense of self, connecting her past hardships in Syria with her faith in God and her search for peace in Canada, was validated and appreciated by both her group members and her neighbor.

**Figure 25**

*Rayya's Symbolic Painting Portraying Loss and Grief, and "In G\*d We Trust"*



The theme of bridging identity continuity through artmaking is evident in Rayya's artwork, which reveals the tragedies, traumas, and losses experienced by herself, her family, and her community. In this instance, her narrative and artwork complement each other, intertwining to tell a deeply emotional story. During the member-checking session, Rayya shared the collective narrative of loss and tragedy linked to her Syrian identity, stating, "It's a really sad past" (Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023). Maryam responded by connecting this shared history to their Syrian identity, saying, "Everyone's facing the same thing. All Syrians are"



(Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023). The collective recounting of loss and tragedy by Rayya and Maryam highlights the shared experiences that bind the Syrian community. This unified narrative is essential for understanding the challenges faced by the Syrian community in St. John's. Creating symbolic artwork around these experiences provides a lens through which to view the world from their perspective and therefore fostering connections and shared belonging. Exploring the collective stories that connect their Syrian homeland to their new life in Canada offers a deeper understanding of the Knowledge Holders' journeys. By encapsulating this unique liminal experience, especially within an art therapy group, a cohesive identity is formed that merges cultural experiences across time and space to create a sense of belonging.

### ***Well-being Expressed Through Artmaking***

The Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's shared their personal ideas about well-being through both interviews and expressive artwork, created during and between art therapy group sessions. By engaging in the creation and sharing of artwork on this topic, they expressed experiences that reflected their subjective perceptions of well-being. While a sense of belonging influenced their well-being, four major themes emerged from the Knowledge Holders that encapsulate different aspects of well-being, as illustrated in Figure 26.

The first theme links well-being to transcendent awe, derived from connections with nature, spirituality (especially Islamic religious practices), and moments of beauty experienced through aesthetic encounters, such as listening to music. The second theme connects well-being to the welfare of their families, with a particular emphasis on their children's happiness and access to opportunities, where children often symbolized hope. The third theme highlights the association between well-being and feelings of safety, rooted in peace, justice, and freedom. Finally, the fourth theme links a resilient and optimistic mindset to experiencing well-being in St. John's.

### **Figure 26**

*Model Depicting How Syrian Refugee Mothers Can Express Well-being Through Artmaking*



*Note.* Figure created by Haley Toll.

***Theme 1: Well-being Experienced Through a Transcendent Sense of Awe Derived from Nature, Spirituality, and Aesthetic Encounters***

**Awe in Nature and Environment.** When exploring the well-being experiences depicted in the artwork of the Knowledge Holders, a sense of awe emerged from the beauty, tranquility, and positive encounters found in nature, music, artistic expressions, and spiritual rituals. In this study, symbols and scenes from nature appeared when the Knowledge Holders explored themes of well-being in Newfoundland and Labrador, as these were often associated with peace and tranquility. Nature became a recurring theme in their artwork, symbolizing beauty, comfort, and a connection to memories. Maryam expressed her love for nature, flowers, and summer, while Amina associated comfort with snow, incorporating it as a motif in her artwork (see Table 8). Hafseen linked her emotions of happiness, freedom, and relaxation to butterflies, birds, sunshine,

sunsets, snow, and flowers. She shared that flowers, particularly roses, held the most meaning for her, as they reminded her of her past work, comfortable spaces, and her sons. Additionally, Rayya connected the color white to her love of nature and positive emotions, stating:

I love nature and, even though, from the inside, there are a lot of emotions, I wish that I picked nature because I love nature, and nature represents hope, happiness, and simplicity. (Member-checking session, August 24, 2023)

Maryam described her love of nature when she shared how evening walks outside with her family brought her well-being in Syria (Figure 27 and Table 10). In addition, the aesthetic experiences and symbolic nature of the seasons brought her well-being, when she described a “House in the Fall beside the river with trees that have no leaves in St. John’s” (Session 2, November 24, 2021). Maryam’s images of flowers symbolized connection between nature and well-being when she shared:

I love nature, green, flowers, trees. I used to have a garden in Syria. When drawing flowers, I try to remember the flowers back home and try to remember back home. (Session 1, November 24, 2021)

I painted roses and jasmine. I love nature and would love to have a house in nature. I also love summer and the smell of the flowers that I had painted. I have roses in my backyard garden and would also buy flowers from the store. I love nature, flowers, and summer” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

### **Figure 27**

*Maryam’s Artworks that Represent Joy and Well-being Experienced in Nature*



Watching the ocean from the NL coast was a peaceful place for some Knowledge Holders in this study. Maryam also conveyed her love for nature with her paintings of the ocean in Figure 3. Describing her images, she said that:

I like watching the ocean and seeing the waves. I feel comfortable watching the water and the birds and the sea. They are also wonderful to draw. I went on a trip to St. John's on Harper Road. I liked the view, and I try to separate from myself, to feel like I am in the current. Seeing the ocean brings me to another world" (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

I love watching the ocean and the water, and that makes me very happy and at peace when I am. I feel like I am in a different place when I see it... Yes, whenever I see water, it brings happiness... It brings my husband and I together as well. Whenever we have any work to do, we both go and to the ocean, or the pond, or the river. That brings my honeymoon back... It's a time for bonding... but if I would, I would picture myself on the boat visiting my family... Whenever I see boats or cruises, I look at them, and I imagine that I am on one of them that would take me to see my family. My family [would be on the boat]. We would all go together. Inshallah. Realistically, it would be on a plane, but it's just, it's just that I hope to see them. I love the ocean and water. I forget the world when I look at it (emotional and teary-eyed)" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

[I would place this artwork at] The entrance of the house. I also have this [pointing to her painting of the ocean] painting in my entrance. This one, because I feel that it brings hope... As soon as you open the door, you see it in front of your face. (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

Finally, the Knowledge Holders drew snow as a metaphor to represent feelings, such as in Figure 28. Amina shared that she loved snow and often shared images of snowmen or animals, such as a polar bear or penguins, which brought her joy.

### **Figure 28**

*Depictions of Snow or Creatures in the Snow by the Knowledge Holders*



The link between newcomer refugee's belonging and well-being in nature in St. John's is noteworthy. The healing influence of green and blue zones on well-being emerged in the

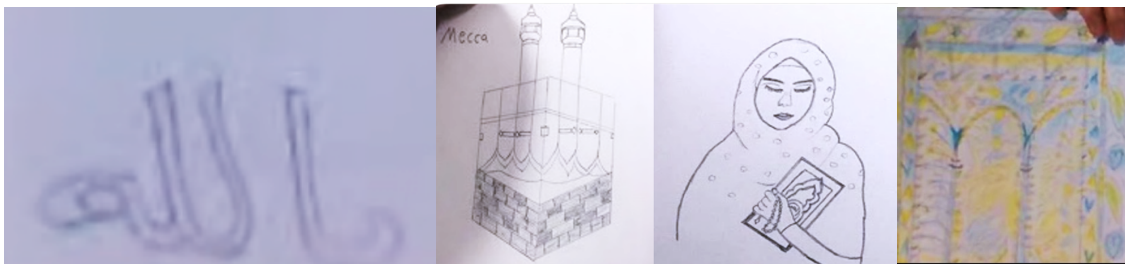
Knowledge Holders' stories and symbolic art featuring flowers, landscapes, and the ocean. The narratives and artworks of the Knowledge Holders highlight nature's role in nurturing well-being and fostering belonging among newcomer refugees.

***Spiritual and Religious Awe.*** The Knowledge Holders connected their well-being to religious and spiritual experiences rooted in their Islamic faith and Muslim identity, both through their artwork and during interviews and group discussions. Rayya’s inclusion of the phrase “In God We Trust” in her artwork, which depicted the injustice, loss, and pain of the Syrian war, reflects her spiritual values and faith in God. She represented this in a calligraphy on the left side of the image in Figure 29 (see also Table 11). Amina created a detailed image of a prayer mat, adorned with gold and blue details (see the far right of Figure 29 and Table 8). In Sessions 3 and 4, Maryam shared a drawing of Mecca, expressing her desire to visit Mecca and the Kaaba (Figure 29, Table 7). Reflecting on the artwork that resonated most with her from the group, Maryam pointed to her self-portrait with a Quran (mid-right side of Figure 29, Table 7). She said,

One thing that stands out to me is this drawing, the lady that is holding her Quran, her holy book. I am proud of my religion, and that connects me to this life, and to my God. That's what makes me happy. That's what stands out... My life is really nice. It's very beautiful. (Member-checking, August 24, 2023)

### **Figure 29**

#### *Maryam’s Well-being Experienced in Religious Practice*



Maryam’s description of the significance of faith in her life, enhancing her happiness while connecting her to “this life” and “my God,” illustrates the impact of spirituality on her well-being. The artworks emphasize the interconnection between religious beliefs, a sense of purpose,

well-being, and a connection to something greater than oneself, which can be linked to feelings of awe. Religious expressions, such as “Inshallah” (meaning God willing), were commonly used in conversations among the Knowledge Holders to convey humility and hope, depending on God’s will.

*Aesthetic Beauty in the Ordinary and Art.* Throughout the study, the Knowledge Holders created artwork reflecting the everyday joys in their lives. They connected these pleasant aesthetic experiences such as enjoying a good cup of coffee, admiring a beautiful perfume bottle, or listening to music with their sense of well-being. This aesthetic appreciation linked to happiness is captured in Hafseen’s statement, “I love life, and life is beautiful,” which she expressed through a drawing of a heart with a heartbeat (see Table 9).

In Session 2, Amina shared drawings created at home that depicted objects, experiences, and images encountered between the art therapy sessions. These included candle holders, perfume bottles, flowers, a prayer mat, streets in St. John’s, snowmen, penguins, and many other images. These drawings are presented in Table 8 and examples are detailed in Figure 30. Amina’s intent with these sketches was to explore “their beauty through art” (Amina, Session 2, November 26, 2021). When discussing the images she sketched at home, Amina explained she created them because they were beautiful. For instance, she shared, “I love candles” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). Reflecting on the meaning of art in her life, Amina connected it to both beauty and relief, stating, “Art is beauty, just gorgeous. And, it makes, like relief” (Amina, Pre-interview, November 9, 2021).

**Figure 30**

*Amina’s Drawings Representing “Their Beauty Through Art”*

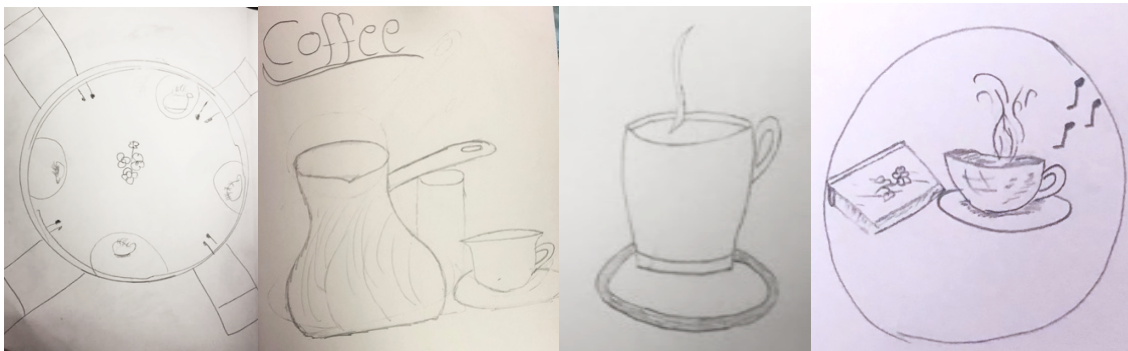


A common pleasurable everyday experience depicted by the Knowledge Holders was drinking coffee. Amina shared that, “I prefer coffee and breakfast and to look through the window. I like the snow and the white color of the snow. I feel comfortable” with a table setting depicted on the left side of Figure 31. Maryam, Amina, and Rayya also drew images of coffee featured in Figure 31. Rayya shared an image that depicted a positive memory of drinking coffee with friends while pondering life and listening to music on the right side of Figure 31. She expressed that:

The good memory relates to back home when I would sit outside with music and think back on life. I am thinking about life before, and now. I enjoy relaxing when in the house, drinking coffee, and chatting together with friends. (Session 3 & 4)

**Figure 31**

*Amina, Maryam, and Rayya’s Drawings of Coffee Representing Positive Emotions*



Hafseen believed that the emotions evoked while listening to Arabic and Iraqi music helped her cope with sadness, as illustrated in her image of a guitar, music notes, and a heart with headphones in Figure 32. She shared, “I love Arabic music, and I listen to it when I feel

depressed. I also love Iraqi music that talks about feelings and is emotional. It moves something inside your heart” (Session 2, November 26, 2021). In this narrative, Hafseen emphasizes that the emotional experience of awe, found in the beauty of everyday aesthetic encounters, contributes to her sense of well-being.

**Figure 32**

*Hafseen’s Portrayal of Music That “Moves Something Inside Your Heart”*



The Knowledge Holders created artwork reflecting a variety of awe-inspiring experiences during the art therapy sessions. Their creations evoke both aesthetic and emotional responses, capturing memories and everyday moments that contribute to their sense of well-being through awe. These Syrian refugee mothers expressed awe through symbols related to their interactions with nature, religion, and the beauty they encounter in their daily lives.

***Theme 2: Well-being Connected to Family (Children’s) Well-being and Opportunities***

***Mother’s Well-being Connected to their Children’s Well-being.*** All the Knowledge Holders in this study were mothers, with one grandmother. Throughout the interviews and art therapy sessions, they consistently linked their sense of well-being to their children's happiness and access to educational opportunities. Portraits of their children and families were frequently featured in their artwork, with examples shown in Figure 33.



**Figure 33**

*Maryam's and Amina's Depiction of Children*



As mothers between the ages of 29 and 46, the Knowledge Holders' children were regularly present throughout the research process and played a significant role in their decision-making. Despite expressing concerns during the pre-interviews about potential distractions from caregiving duties while participating in virtual art therapy at home, the Knowledge Holders' children were often present during the sessions, receiving care from staff at the collaborating organization. Many of the younger children accompanied the Knowledge Holders to the art therapy sessions and were cared for on-site by staff members.

Children would often intermittently check-in with their mothers during the art therapy sessions, sitting on their laps and seeking hugs. Furthermore, background sounds of children were frequently heard during the phone interviews. Finally, the fifth potential Knowledge Holder who was about to participate in the study was no longer to attend due to her commitment in caring for her newborn baby.

Throughout the sessions and during the final interviews, the Knowledge Holders often acknowledged my pregnancy. For instance, Rayya expressed her well-wishes, stating, "I hope [wish] you all the best with your pregnancy and your baby" (Post-interview, December 22, 2021). At the conclusion of the interview, Amina also offered her well-wishes and inquired about my

children, saying, “I thank you more for that and for your time, especially like, during you are pregnant and giving your time” (Post-interview, December 26, 2021). During our sessions, Amina also engaged in conversation about our shared experience of motherhood. This excerpt from our conversation illustrates that connection:

Researcher: Perfect, and if you ever want to meet with me, you can speak with [social worker], and she'll be able to connect with me anytime. Thank you.

[Interpreter interpreting English and Arabic. Amina and the interpreter laugh].

Amina: Are they girls, or boys?

Researcher: Oh, yes. So, they are boys, and I also have one and a half right now, so I'll have three boys under two.

Interpreter: Three boys?

Researcher: Three boys under two years old, yeah. [Laughs].

[Interpreter interpreting English and Arabic.]

Amina: God bless them for you. (Post-interview, December 26, 2021)

In my reflexive notes, I reflected on how my pregnancy and the births of all my children influenced the research process, as these events occurred while I was planning and conducting the study. Becoming a mother during this time allowed me to connect more deeply with the Knowledge Holders, who often spoke about their children and their experiences of motherhood. This shared dynamic of motherhood underscored the central role that children played in the lives of the Knowledge Holders and how their presence shaped the direction of the research.

In both their artwork and narratives, each Knowledge Holder linked their well-being to the well-being of their children. For them, children's well-being encompassed happiness, access to opportunities in Canada, and their role as symbols of hope. Children emerged as significant themes in both the artwork and discussions about well-being. Maryam, for example, connected her well-being to her children and family, stating, "I am really happy here, and the most important

thing is that I have a good husband, and my kids are really good too. So, that's what makes it easier for me" (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). Her depiction of her house and children in her artwork symbolized her happiness when everything was in order and her family was content. Maryam's artwork often featured warm family homes set in natural landscapes, as shown in Figure 12, reflecting her love for a calm and peaceful family life in nature.

Rayya's creation of an image of Pikachu during the data analysis art-making process in the Member-checking session linked her well-being to her children's happiness. In Figure 34, she drew this cartoon character, similar to the joyful depictions of Tom and Jerry in Table 11. Rayya expressed:

I remember my kids watching cartoons. When I see them happy, that makes me happy too. When my kids are happy, I am happy too.... Yea, so if you connect it to my drawings, as long as my kids are happy, I am happy, and it makes me happy to see them watching cartoons. (Member Checking, August 24, 2023).

**Figure 34**

*Rayya's Cartoons Portraying "When I See Them (My Children) Happy, That Makes Me Happy"*



Rayya shared that her drawing of Pikachu depicted "happiness and hope. It brings hope to kids when they're watching" (Member-Checking, August 24, 2023). She chose to place the painting on top of her child's bed because, "he loves drawings, and he loves cartoons." Rayya hoped the painting would bring her child joy and hope.

The symbol of joyful and playful children emerged as a metaphor for hope. For instance, during the member-checking session, the Knowledge Holders were asked to summarize their emotional experiences with a color. Rayya explained, “We have an expression in Arabic that says, 'May your path be white,' which means 'may you have a bright future.' So, I wish that my kids have a bright future with that color” (Member-Checking, August 24, 2023). Through the symbolic metaphor of white, she connected her emotional experience to her hope for her children’s future.

In Sessions 3 and 4, Rayya ended an emotionally powerful session by discussing how children represent hope. She explained, “Kids are always hopeful. They are always following or surrounding us. There are smiles, hopefulness, and sunshine with two people holding hands” while describing the right-side drawing in Figure 34 (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). Similarly, on the left side of Figure 35, Amina shared a similar sentiment, showing an image of children playing. She expressed, “Kids are inside the circle, like kids around the world are playing” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

**Figure 35**

*Rayya and Amina’s Drawings of Children Representing Playfulness and Hope*



In Session 2, Amina concluded her experience of the session by creating an image that represented a benevolent wish for women, as shown in Figure 36. She expressed, “I wish for

every woman to see, and every woman to have a child, to not be alone, and to have hope”  
(Session 2, November 26, 2021).

**Figure 36**

*Amina’s Wish for “Every Woman to Have a Child...and Have Hope”*



***Children’s Access to Education and Future Opportunities.*** When the Knowledge Holders discussed their experiences of well-being and belonging during the interviews and art therapy sessions, they emphasized that their well-being was closely tied to hope, particularly regarding their children's access to education and opportunities in Canada. Maryam encapsulated this sentiment in her post-art therapy session interview, stating, "When I see my children going to school, getting an education, and being safe, that is well-being for me" (Maryam, Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Maryam also created an image of a school to represent her experiences of belonging and well-being. Describing the image in Figure 37, she explained, "This is a school in St. John's called [school]. My children go there. I have hope for my kids and hope that they will stay in school" (Maryam, Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

**Figure 37**

*Maryam’s Drawing of her Children’s School Representing Well-being*



Likewise, Hafseen shared in an individual interview that her experience of well-being and belonging in St. John's is closely tied to her children's access to education. She asserted:

I like it very very much here. It's like even better than my back home. I like the schools, which are good. The education system [schools] was bad back home, but here it's much better. I was unhappy in Lebanon. I had spent three and a half years in Lebanon. My children didn't go to school. They didn't allow my children to attend the school (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021).

Rayya similarly connected her well-being to her children's access to education:

First of all, I am really happy to be here with my children. I already said, well-being here in St. John's, (is) with my children. I really like how Canada treats me as a part of the community and I am happy that my children how study at school because they stopped studying during the war and this is like, gives me emotional and good feelings and good experiences (Post-interview, December 22, 2021)

Through conversations and artwork, children emerged as symbols of hope for the Knowledge Holders, representing happiness and educational opportunities. As a result, their children's well-being and aspirations became deeply intertwined with their own sense of well-being. This connection, rooted in their roles as mothers and grandmothers, reflected the Knowledge Holders' hopes for their children's future and influenced their decisions to participate in the study.

***Theme 3: Well-being Connected to Safety, Peace, Justice, and Freedom***

The theme of safety emerged in the Knowledge Holders' artwork and discussions, highlighting their experiences of well-being and belonging. In their creations, symbols of safety were tied to feelings of hope for peace, freedom, and justice. During the Member-checking session, as the emergent themes were summarized, Rayya expressed her commitment to peace and justice as core elements of her identity, stating, "I love justice, so I like peace, even though I am a little naughty sometimes [laughs]" (Member Checking, August 24, 2023). Rayya's artwork often reflected these aspirations, such as her depiction of two doves in Figure 38 and her symbolic image of a broken tree in Figure 25.

**Figure 38**

**Rayya's Doves Representing "Love and Peace"**



When describing her artwork of a broken family tree in Figure 25, Rayya explained that the symbols represented loss, despair, and the absence of justice and peace in her beloved country. She expressed a longing for justice and peace, with the tree symbolizing family. The broken branches represented those who were missing or deceased. On the left side of the image, an imbalanced scale further symbolized injustice, as it reflected the lack of support for her family during the war, except from Canada. The flag and ground were marked with dripping red blood. Rayya explained, "I included a broken heart of the Syrian people who fell, and the green grass

belongs to the tree” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). Additionally, Rayya elaborated on another image titled “In God We Trust,” explaining its connection to her sense of injustice:

The tree represents family, and the tree branches are broken. The branches are also those who had been lost in my family. On the left-hand side, there is an imbalanced scale, which is another symbol of no balance. No one stood next to our family or helped us during the war, except Canada. Therefore, the flag and the ground are full of dripping red blood. I included a broken heart of the Syrian people who fell, and the green grass belongs to the tree” These symbols, and the grass are meant for people who have lost their lives and the houses that have been destroyed. In the left corner under the scale, there are buildings being destroyed. I wrote and the image is titled, “In God we Trust.” (Session 3 & 4)

The family tree that I was talking about was about Syria and almost my family or relatives were missing and maybe dead because of the war and I tried to [draw] my feelings to [show]... when I was back in Syria. I drew destroyed buildings and houses. And I drew a balance, or something like that, because all the country did not do anything towards the people there... And it wasn't fair. (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

Maryam's artistic expressions featured symbols of peace and justice. She described experiencing peace when gazing at the ocean, which she portrayed in two paintings shown in Figure 3. Additionally, Maryam created an image of doves on the right side of Figure 39, accompanied by the phrase “Peace Bath,” explaining, “I always would like to live in peace” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

The metaphoric portrayal of justice, symbolized by a drawing of a scale, held significant meaning for Maryam. She described this artwork as the most meaningful piece she created during the sessions. Maryam shared, "I would like to find fairness and balance wherever I go. I want to feel happy and comfortable" (Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021). She also described herself as a fair and just person, which is reflected in the artwork. During the post-interview, Maryam further elaborated on this image and said:

I love the art about balance. The scale that I drew represents incredible fairness and impartial, like this kind of, blindfold things. Wherever I go, wherever I live, I love to be fair everywhere. Yes, for me. For all of the world...The scale that I drew represents incredible fairness and impartial, like this kind of, blindfold things...Wherever I go, wherever I live, I love to be fair everywhere... For me. For all of the world.” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

### **Figure 39**



*Maryam's Scale and Dove Drawings Representing Justice and Peace*



Hafseen's artwork also encapsulated the theme of flight as a representation of peace and freedom. In her check-in during session two, she portrayed her emotions with three butterflies, symbolizing freedom in Figure 15.

The pursuit of safety, interlaced with aspirations for peace, justice, and freedom, emerged as a central theme in the expressions of well-being for the Knowledge Holders. This theme also reflected the personal aspirations and struggles of the Syrian refugee mothers who relocated to St. John's. Symbolic representations in their artwork highlighted how safety-related experiences influenced their lives as they navigated the process of resettlement.

***Theme 4: Well-being Connected to a Resilient and Optimistic Mindset***

During the interviews and art therapy sessions, the Knowledge Holders consistently connected their well-being to resilience and coping strategies, highlighting the importance of maintaining an optimistic mindset. Given that the art therapy group focused on the strengths and resilience of the Syrian refugee mothers, discussions about coping strategies emerged naturally. All the Knowledge Holders approached their participation with grace, gratitude, and positive attitudes, fostering a harmonious and supportive environment.

Maryam shared her insights on cultivating happiness through learned experience: "I've learned how to make myself happy, even if I am not. So, I learned that through time, and I am content with my life, and I am happy with it" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023). Hafseen echoed this sentiment, expressing her love for life's beauty through an image of a heart with a heartbeat (see Table 9). Additionally, Amina, in response to feelings of sadness during session three and four, emphasized the need to "find strength in something" and depicted a woman crying (see Table 8 and Figure 40). This was followed by a drawing of children playing, symbolizing hope.

**Figure 40**

*Amina Sharing "I Need to Find Strength in Something"*



Despite generously offering their time to participate in the group, the Knowledge Holders often expressed gratitude during the interviews and art therapy sessions. For example, at the end of Amina's post-interview, she said: "I thank you more for that and for your time, especially like, during you are pregnant and giving your time" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Maryam also expressed gratitude, communicating: "I appreciate you as well and I am appreciative and feel

pleasure and an honour to do all of that” during the final interview (December 16, 2021). Rayya expressed appreciation and well-wishes during the pandemic when she said:

I also appreciate you and I really nice to meet you and I like the way you laugh, your smile and...I hope [wish] you all the best with your pregnancy and your baby. And for you to be safe. (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

The theme of connecting well-being to resilience and coping strategies, marked by a positive outlook and gratitude, permeates the narratives and artworks of the Knowledge Holders, who created pieces representing well-being and belonging in Tables 8-11. Additionally, their artwork and narratives about their children as symbols of hope emphasize the significance of familial aspirations and positive identification with the role of a mother, as seen in Figures 32-37. Furthermore, appreciating small everyday aesthetic experiences also plays a role in coping, as depicted in Figures 30-32. Throughout the interviews and art therapy sessions, the Syrian refugee mothers demonstrated the power of maintaining optimism, finding strength in shared struggles, envisioning a better future for new generations, and embracing coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges of displacement and resettlement. This resilience was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Knowledge Holders adapted and chose to participate in an in-person art therapy group as soon as meeting restrictions were lifted.

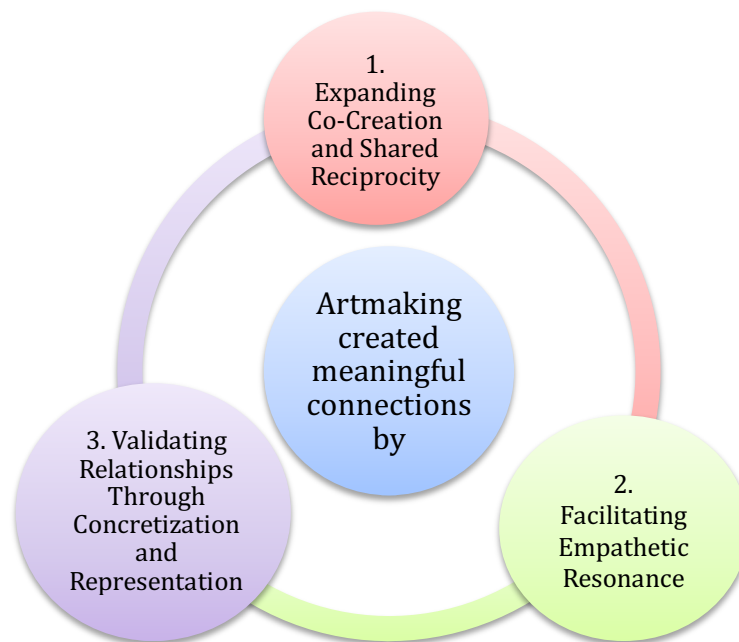
**Research Question 3: How can artmaking in an online art therapy group help create meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders (Knowledge Holders)?**

The final research question investigated how artmaking may generate meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders in the online hybrid art therapy group. Through examining the artworks created, conducting interviews, reflecting on artwork, and reviewing session notes using qualitative and arts-based methods, several themes emerged. These themes shed light on how artmaking can foster meaningful connections among Syrian refugee mothers during the art therapy sessions. The first theme is that the shared task of artmaking helped to increase Knowledge Holders' support for one another and form social bonds through shared

reciprocity. The second theme is that artmaking increased empathetic resonance among the Knowledge Holders, enhancing intersubjective understandings. The final theme is how the artwork in the sessions symbolized and reflected the relationships that developed during the group, thereby solidifying and validating the friendships. The three themes are detailed below with quotations and artwork.

**Figure 41**

*Model Depicting Artmaking Can Create Meaningful Connections*



*Note.* Figure created by Haley Toll.

**Unique Group Dynamics of a Hybrid Collaborative Model.** It is important to note that, traditionally, in a physical or virtual art therapy space, the room typically contains only the Knowledge Holders and the art therapist, with all participants meeting at the same consistent time and day. However, due to various constraints such as room bookings, transportation challenges, a surge of refugees arriving during that period, COVID-19 restrictions, and the researcher's health conditions related to pregnancy, the scheduled meeting times and dates occasionally had to be

changed at the last minute. These changes may have impacted the group dynamic. Therefore, it is essential to highlight the grace, kindness, and flexibility demonstrated by the Knowledge Holders and partner organization staff in navigating these challenges when discussing the group dynamics.

Multiple staff members from the partner organization were present to support the Knowledge Holders, including an interpreter to assist with communication, a social worker to provide ongoing follow-up support if needed, and caregivers for the children of the Knowledge Holders, who required childcare during the sessions. Meanwhile, I facilitated the art therapy sessions virtually from Ottawa due to interprovincial travel restrictions and health issues.

Although the children were well cared for, they would occasionally seek support, comfort, and attention from their mothers and grandmothers during the sessions. One example of this is documented in my observational note from session three and four:

Amina brought a little boy, a toddler, to her lap and began cuddling him, while Maryam greeted the little boy. Amina took off his jacket and hat, as he sat quietly. She hugged him and began to put on his shoes. I waved at the little boy and greeted him. (Researcher's Notes, Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

The children and social worker come in, to check-in and give little hugs, and then they all walk away. Amina puts the little boy on her lap and gives him a kiss and strokes his hair. She hugs him close to her and then moves him to face the table. The little boy then briefly holds onto Maryam's shoulder. Amina continues to intermittently kiss the little boy, point at the camera, and laugh at his reactions and engagement. The little boy takes Amina's gum, gives it to her, and then she gives it back. Amina puts the little boy back on the ground and he waddles away, as she takes the paint and art supplies out of her bag (Researcher's Notes, Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

Both Maryam and Amina get visits from their little children, who are curious about their artmaking. Music is played and they continue their creative process, sometimes pausing to think, and then going back to the artwork to continue to create (Researcher's Notes, Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

The dynamics within this group, which supported mothers in receiving art therapy and engaging in artmaking, were unique because they involved multiple support professionals. This setup also facilitated the organic process of children checking in with their mothers and caregivers without judgment, which helped both the children and caregivers feel more comfortable bonding

with one another. The affection shared between caregivers and children, as well as the pride children felt when witnessing their parents create artwork, was also observed. For example, in Session 2, I wrote the following note about the group dynamic: “Maryam’s child is smiling in the background behind the painting as Maryam explains her painting. Her daughter seems to be proud” (Researcher’s Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021).

**Reported Experiences of the Connections that have Developed.** The art therapy sessions took place in the fall and winter of 2021, with the member-checking session held in the summer of 2023. When reflecting on how the art therapy group had impacted her one and a half years after the sessions, Rayya emphasized, “We got to know each other, we created friendships. It was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed our time” (Member checking, August 24, 2023). The Knowledge Holders were also asked about the nature of the relationships they had built within the group, whether they wished for these relationships to continue, and if so, how. Since many of the Syrian refugee women in this art therapy group had previously been members of an empowerment group at the partner organization, some were already familiar with one another. However, several relationships had deepened through their participation in the art therapy sessions. Amina shared that the connections within the group enhanced her overall positive experience. She shared that,

I am feeling wonderful because I met you people. Same as what I said earlier with that question. I am happy because I am feeling a bit isolated from the Arabic communication because we are communicating with you, trying to get to know more things. Like different from what we are used to doing. Yes, I am feeling happy because of that. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

We knew each other from before, and after this, we have become closer to each other, and we got the opportunity to meet with another more. So, we are very happy with that. We are the same age, same mentality, so we are very happy with that (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

Maryam, Hafseen, and Rayya said that they developed unique friendships during the group, despite knowing one another from before. Maryam asserted that,

You know, I knew everyone before the art therapy, but the relationships were the same before and after, but [Knowledge Holder], she was a close friend for me...For sure, I would

like to continue with the relations with them, and I know them, and I would still like a relationship with them. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Rayya communicated that, despite not being a social person, she would be willing to participate in another workshop with the other Knowledge Holders in the future. She expressed,

To be honest, I am unsocial. I do not do many relationships with people and friendships, but I respect and like it...I would like to engage in another workshop or like sessions with the same group. Yea, I am okay with that. (Post-interview, December 22, 2021)

Furthermore, Hafseen shared that she developed a particular friendship in the group with someone who she did not know well before when she said,

Actually, I knew most of them before the workshop. Before the group, but I have a good relationship with Amina. I didn't know Amina before. I have a good relationship with Amina. She is the closest friend of mine... Yes, I would like to continue the relationships. Whenever I see them, or maybe meet them, I would be happy to meet them... Maybe we meet at the house, or she comes to my house, or I visit her... and maybe sometimes at school, we meet each other.

(Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Hafseen further emphasized that the development of relationships enhanced her positive experience in the group, stating:

In general, it was good, and I like the group and the way that I participated in the group, and the relations with the other members. I wasn't expecting something different. (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021)

Connections between the Knowledge Holders were evident through behaviors such as laughter, which was frequently shared during each session and some interviews. The Knowledge Holders often shared artwork or notes from their visual journals that elicited laughter among the group. One example from my observational notes is presented below:

Maryam then laughs and opens to show her artwork. There is something funny in her sketchbook that makes everyone laugh (Researcher's Notes, Session 1, November 24, 2021)

Despite the Knowledge Holders already knowing one another before joining the small group, many reported that participating in the art therapy sessions either strengthened existing friendships or facilitated the formation of new ones. The relationships nurtured within the sessions

contributed to a positive experience for Knowledge Holders like Amina and Hafseen. As a result, the rapport built through the art therapy sessions may have fostered generative artmaking and enabled the Knowledge Holders to authentically share their experiences with one another.

***Theme 1: Artmaking Expanded Co-Creation and Shared Reciprocity***

Creating artwork together encouraged reciprocal sharing and support among the Knowledge Holders. They helped each other with drawing images on one another's canvases, setting up their artwork, sharing materials, offering encouragement, and assisting with cleanup. This collaborative dynamic was evident in both my session notes and the session recordings. The Knowledge Holders frequently took care of one another, offering support in various ways. For example, two of the Knowledge Holders brought each other's artwork to the session when their peer was absent, ensuring that their friend's presence was felt in a different way. These gestures reflected the mutual support that was central to their interactions throughout the sessions. I wrote:

Hafseen brought Rayya's artwork that depicted their friendship to the session. Bringing the artwork of one another's friend feels like Rayya (the creator) is present in the room as well. They have a stand-in and have contributed to the group, despite not being there (Researcher's Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021)

In addition, I observed several instances where the Knowledge Holders supported one another in the artmaking process, such as drawing outlines for requested images or demonstrating new art techniques. Maryam, who had technical drawing and painting skills, often assisted her peers in completing their artwork while also creating her own. These interactions fostered a sense of camaraderie and collaboration, as the Knowledge Holders bonded over their shared creative experiences and helped each other throughout the sessions, despite each person having their own art materials and canvases to create individual images. The following observation highlights how these moments of assistance contributed to the group's dynamic and connection:

Hafseen asks Maryam to help with sections of her painting, which looks like the creation of flowers, while she watches. Hafseen adds more paint for Maryam. Hafseen then continues to paint on the images that Maryam had begun. Hafseen also continues to look up images to add to her painting. (Researcher's Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021)



Maryam began with fine details with a fine brush and sketched the outline of her artwork. Maryam is in the middle of the other Knowledge Holders and shares her materials with the other women, and talks about her art. She also helps Hafseen outline her painting and puts her artwork aside to do this. She seems to enjoy what she is creating on Hafseen's painting and showing Hafseen how to paint flowers (Researcher's Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021)

The Knowledge Holders readily begin their check-in artwork, while Hafseen erases something on Rayya's sketchbook, and takes time to admire her artwork...Amina passes an eraser to Rayya who returns it. Hafseen discusses her art briefly with Rayya...There seems to be a lot of joy in the room. (Researchers' Notes, Session 5, December 14, 2021)

The Knowledge Holders also physically held up one another's' artworks to help the creator explain their work to the group. For example, I observed the following:

Amina presents Maryam's painting again, and the interpreter shows the camera the design. Maryam takes time to discuss the meaning of her work. (Researchers' Notes, Session 5, December 14, 2021)

Setting up and cleaning the art materials after creating art is a crucial part of the art therapy process. Ideally, I would have liked to assist with these tasks to demonstrate care and nurturance in my role as an art therapist. However, due to my physical absence, I was unable to do so. Instead, I observed that the Knowledge Holders demonstrated connection by setting up and cleaning one another's art materials. Through these acts of care, they physically expressed nurturance and support for one another. These tasks related to the physical aspects of artmaking fostered social bonds, as the Knowledge Holders instinctively and graciously supported each other. The following observational notes reflect this process:

Maryam looks around, pensive and thoughtful, as Amina and Rayya clean the art materials. We discuss when we will meet next. Maryam then packs her paintings while Amina and Rayya continue to clean. (Researchers' Notes, Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

The examples drawn from notes documenting group dynamics through tangible interactions and body language highlight how artmaking can foster connections among the Knowledge Holders in an art therapy group. The Knowledge Holders actively supported one another in various aspects of the creative process, including drawing on each other's canvases and

journals, teaching technical art skills, sharing materials, offering encouragement, and assisting with the setup and cleanup. Notably, some Knowledge Holders brought each other's artwork to sessions when a participant was absent, creating a sense of presence and continuity within the group dynamic.

### ***Theme 2: Artmaking Facilitated Empathetic Resonance***

Frequently, the Knowledge Holders found connections with one another through the creation and sharing of stories about their symbolic artworks, as recorded in my observation notes detailing group dynamics. Empathetic resonance (Weber, 2008), refers to the empathy that grows as people see the world through others' eyes via their art, offering a momentary immersion in the artist's world. This occurs because each artwork reflects the artist's unique perspective, especially when symbols are used intentionally to express and share experiences, ideas, and emotions.

Throughout the art therapy sessions, various symbols emerged as metaphors, reflecting both shared emotions and unique experiences of the Knowledge Holders. These symbols included birds on walls, flowers, gardens, sunsets, moons, suns, trees, windows, snow, family portraits, tables, pathways, and many others. Not only did these symbols allow the Knowledge Holders to express themselves, but they also provided the other group members with an opportunity to view the world from a distinct perspective. These insights often evoked familiar emotions or fostered empathy and compassion, helping to create meaningful social bonds.

Creating artwork that symbolizes one's current emotions and experiences can help group members connect through the sharing of immediate feelings. For instance, the Knowledge Holders were asked to create quick artworks within small circles to represent their emotions as a way of checking in and checking out of the sessions. These ritualized check-in and check-out artworks were created quickly with spontaneous sketches or paintings. The circular format of the artwork not only helped me understand the Knowledge Holders' emotional states for follow-up but also served as an easy way to warm up to artmaking using a simple, consistent stimulus. The

process of creating these pieces encouraged questions and fostered a sense of safety through ritualized emotional sharing.

This method was inspired by the “Trauma-Informed Art Therapy Level One” training with Malchiodi and Ward in Anchorage, Alaska, in August 2015. The small, quick images generated immediate and spontaneous visual data through symbolic imagery. I often invited the Knowledge Holders to title their artworks to help put words to their images, thereby deepening their insights. When time allowed, I also created my own check-in and check-out artworks and shared them with the group. In doing so, I reflected on the sentiments and dynamics of the group, while validating their emotional sharing.

Examples of questions used to metaphorically represent emotions in a quick and accessible way included: “What do you need right now, in terms of nurturance or to feel well-being?” (Researcher’s Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021), or inviting the Knowledge Holders to create a weather pattern to portray their emotions. By creating artwork focused on immediate emotions, the Knowledge Holders were encouraged to share, understand, and access their feelings through symbolic artmaking. This process helped foster deeper relationships through authentic emotional sharing and the use of spontaneous artmaking.

Often, the Knowledge Holders demonstrated emotional resonance with each other's artwork and explanations. For example, during the first session, which marked their initial encounter in the art therapy group, the Knowledge Holders were asked to create artwork incorporating their names as an introduction. Rayya created two poignant images paired with a poem that expressed her longing for her deceased father. One image depicted crying eyes to symbolize her grief, while the other showed two doves in flight, symbolizing peace (see Figure 38 and Table 11). Rayya shared, “First of all, sad because I left my home and family. The Arabic poem is about a father who had passed away” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). An excerpt from my observational notes captures the moment when the Knowledge Holders gathered around

Rayya, offering support as she shared her emotions. Their reactions to her artwork further demonstrated the deep emotional connection within the group:

Hafseen claps for Rayya's beautiful and meaningful poem. Hafseen is also excited to answer for Rayya's questions. She reacts as very supportive and involved in Rayya's emotional story, providing support with her body language, while there is an in-depth conversation about Rayya's work. Maryam helps Rayya pass her artwork back and forth (Researcher's Notes, Session 1, November 24, 2021)

Another example of emotional resonance occurred when artwork created in the art therapy session emotionally impacted the other members. During sessions three and four, the Knowledge Holders had more time to create due to the combined session exploring belonging. In this session, Rayya painted an emotionally symbolic piece about her experience of loss and lack of justice, presented in Figure 25. Meanwhile, Maryam depicted her longing for her family to be reunited in Syria or Canada, as seen in Figure 24. When asked to create reflective artwork based on their previous impactful pieces, Amina's artwork was a sad self-portrait (Figure 41). She shared, "I don't feel like being strong only to be strong. I need to find strength in something" (Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

The image in Figure 41 reflected Amina's sadness and seemed to mirror her response to the tragic stories of loss shared by her peers. It likely resonated with Amina's own experiences of loss, particularly her journey to seek refuge in Canada due to the Syrian war. Additionally, this artwork appeared to represent an emotional transition for Amina. She began the session with a drawing of a table with coffee, symbolizing comfort (see Table 8; Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). However, this shift is interpretative, as Amina did not explicitly state that the artwork of her group members had influenced her emotions.

Rayya's artwork of the broken tree also had an emotional impact beyond the group, resonating with a local neighbor in the community. The neighbor, moved by the piece, asked to keep the painting, and Rayya kindly gave it to them. This symbolic artwork of loss, shared with a neighbor, further deepened connections within the community through empathetic resonance.

Understanding the impact of the art beyond the therapeutic space offers valuable insight into how creative expression contributes to community building and fosters a collective sense of belonging by strengthening relationships (Kesner & Horáček, 2017). Rayya's painting, which linked her past experiences of tragedy and injustice in Syria with her newfound peace in Canada, was validated and appreciated both by the group members and her local community.

These examples illustrate shifts in relational dynamics among the Knowledge Holders, as documented in my art therapy session notes, the Knowledge Holders' artwork, and the check-in and check-out artworks related to emotions. These excerpts and quotations show how engaging in artmaking focused on emotions and experiences can enhance connections among group members by fostering empathetic resonance. Additionally, the Knowledge Holders expressed the impact of artwork and narratives on their emotions through verbal expressions of connection, body language (such as clapping), and their own emotional artwork. Each Knowledge Holder used symbolic expressive artworks to share their perceptions and emotions, and their authenticity and openness helped foster empathy and understanding among the group members.

### ***Theme 3: Artmaking Validated Relationships Through Concretization and Representation***

The Knowledge Holders incorporated symbols of group bonding and friendship into their artwork and shared narratives. The Syrian refugee mothers' desire to intuitively depict meaningful relationships in the group, reflecting their experiences of belonging and well-being, solidified the social bonds formed. Representing one another and their friendships validated and celebrated these relationships. Themes of love and friendship were conveyed through symbols such as flowers, portraits, and hearts. Rayya emphasized the importance of friendship in her life during the member-checking session, stating: "I value my friendships. I have also learned that it's about the person, your friend, and that's it" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

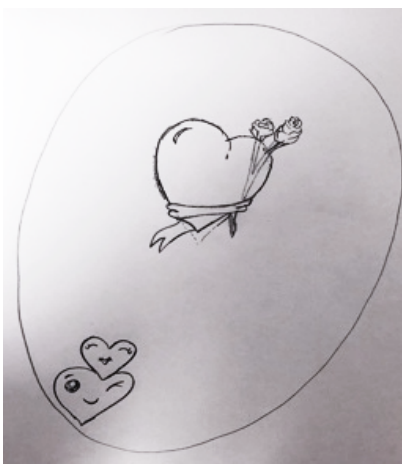
Although Rayya was unable to attend the second group session, she requested that Hafseen bring an artwork she had created, symbolically participating in the group through her

drawing in Figure 8. In the subsequent session, when Hafseen was absent, Rayya brought Hafseen’s artwork of roses, symbolizing love, as shown in Figure 16. The artwork Rayya created between sessions one and two encapsulated the friendship between her and Hafseen, as seen in Figure 8. The drawing portrayed two women with hats, their backs turned to the viewer, with their hands forming a shared heart, emphasizing their connection. Upon attending the following session in person, Rayya titled the artwork “friendship” and remarked, “A friend is a home. Everyone has a home and can share their homes with one another” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

During the final session, the Knowledge Holders were invited to depict their experience of the group on the cover of their art journals. In Rayya’s artwork, the theme of friendship emerged through her depiction of a heart with two flowers in a circle, with two additional hearts placed in the corner of the circle (see Figure 43). Rayya explained her artwork, saying, “The two hearts together on the left represent friendship and gathering with our time spent with one another” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). Although Rayya’s artworks often symbolized the friendships that grew within the group, she described herself as “not a social person” during the individual post-group interview (Post-group Interview, December 22, 2021).

**Figure 42**

*Rayya’s Hearts Representing “Friendship and Gathering”*



Hafseen also represented her social bonds with the other group members during the final session in her artwork. In Figure 9, Hafseen connected her friendships to enjoyment of the summer sunshine and described the drawing as containing:

Sunshine in the summer with flowers growing because of the heat. I like the summer and love colours of flowers. I feel very happy, with my name and my friend's names written inside of the circle. (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

In the final session, Hafseen created artwork featuring roses, a symbol of love for her (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). The symbol of the rose appeared frequently in Hafseen's work (see Table 9). In her final piece, the stems of the roses formed a circle, and Hafseen explained, "I have written all the names of everyone here. We are all together inside the circle, and our names are written in Arabic. This represents our day together" (Session 5, December 14, 2021). This image symbolized the relationships and shared experiences of the group members, as shown in Figure 9.

In my own reflexive artmaking, I represented the group dynamics and experiences, which were especially significant to me as someone connecting virtually. The group's dynamics also affected me emotionally, which I expressed in my countertransference art. For example, in the check-out image of the final session, I created a small painting of five flowers in a circle, representing each group member and myself on the left side of Figure 43. I wrote that the image "Represented the energy, passion, and grace of the four Knowledge Holders and my gratitude for them showing up, expressing, and creating together with openness and care" (Researcher's notes, Session 5, December 14, 2021).

### **Figure 43**

*My Reflexive Representation of Knowledge Holders, Energy, and Passion*



Similarly, the image of flowers in a circle, depicted on the right side of Figure 43, expands on the small painting and is presented on the left side of the figure. Titled, *Flowers Blossoming of Each Group Member: Connected and Unique Creators*, this painting was inspired by the Knowledge Holders' metaphors, memories, and images connected to flowers. I represented each group member as a flower, set against an abstract, flowing background that symbolizes peace and the movement of water.

Throughout the art therapy sessions, the Knowledge Holders explored themes of friendship and love through their creative expressions. Their artwork reflected the relationships and connections that developed within and beyond the art therapy sessions. By creating tangible images representing friendships and positive relationships through portraits and symbolism, the Knowledge Holders validated, celebrated, and deepened their relationships. Through art, these relationships became named, represented, and more tangible, thus strengthening the connections between the Knowledge Holders through their reflective expressions. My reflexive artmaking, imbued with gratitude for the Knowledge Holders, mirrored the emotional impact of the group dynamics on me.

The final research question explored how artmaking in an online art therapy group might help create meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders. Despite the unique dynamics of



the group, meaningful connections seem to have been forged among the Knowledge Holders, as evidenced by the session notes detailing their interactions and the interviews conducted with them. The unique dynamics influencing these relationships included circumstances such as COVID-19 restrictions on interprovincial travel, the small number of group members, the presence of an interpreter facilitating communication across two languages, and the nature of supporting Syrian refugee mothers who were also primary caregivers to young children.

Through analysis of session notes, Knowledge Holders' artwork, and interview responses, it became clear that artmaking facilitated meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders in three ways. Firstly, group artmaking fostered shared reciprocity and care by encouraging mutual assistance, creating a supportive environment where members helped each other. Secondly, artmaking enhanced empathetic resonance by allowing members to express their current emotions and unique perspectives through their artwork. This process enabled the Knowledge Holders, and even a community member, to see the world through one another's eyes. Lastly, the Knowledge Holders created artwork that concretized and validated the social bonds within the group, with members even presenting each other's artwork in one another's absence. However, it is important to acknowledge that artmaking may have facilitated and enhanced connections in other ways, and additional themes may emerge from the rich textual and visual data.

### **Results Summary**

I began chapter six by introducing each Knowledge Holder who participated in the study and providing a textually rich description of their art therapy group process, with a focus on direct quotations. Complementing this narrative, I presented a table dedicated to each Knowledge Holder, which included their artwork, titles, and descriptions.

I then connected the responses gathered through both arts-based and textual methods to the emerging themes linked to the three research questions. The findings from the first research question indicated that artmaking within an art therapy group can help Syrian refugee mothers

express their lived experiences. Key themes identified included increasing emotional awareness, providing a safe space to voice experiences, enhancing mood, and facilitating communication through symbolism.

The second question examined how creative activity in an art therapy group could support Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's in expressing their sense of belonging and well-being. Belonging was experienced through the hospitality of local residents, access to educational and economic opportunities, and the integration of Syrian and Canadian cultural identities. Knowledge Holders' experiences of well-being were characterized by a sense of transcendent awe, family welfare, safety, access to opportunities, and an optimistic outlook.

The final research question explored how artmaking in a hybrid online art therapy group could foster meaningful connections among the Knowledge Holders and help them form authentic relationships. Artmaking contributed to the development of social bonds by promoting shared reciprocity through co-creation, increasing empathetic resonance, and validating relationships through symbolic representation. Chapter Seven delves into the results of my reflexive artmaking and analysis.

The first research question explored how refugee women who have recently resettled in NL voice their lived experiences through hybrid online art therapy. Through arts-based and qualitative analysis of artwork and verbal data derived from interviews, sessions, and reflexive artmaking, I found that refugee women in NL can voice their lived experience with artmaking. Through artmaking, they may be able to express their experiences by deepening emotional awareness, evoking memories through embodied elicitation, fostering a safe space for authentic emotional expression, enhancing mood to facilitate communication, and integrating symbolism and metaphor. It is important to note that not all Knowledge Holders consistently experienced these insights through their artworks in every art therapy session.

The second research question investigated how refugee women can express their experiences of belonging and well-being through artmaking in a safe art therapy group with a strengths-based approach. I found that belonging, expressed through the artmaking group, was connected to experiencing care, kindness, and friendliness from hospitable locals (locals refer to all those who reside in Newfoundland and Labrador of diverse backgrounds, cultures, and histories); the ability to access economic opportunities in Canada through work and education; and by bridging their identity across the diverse countries where they have lived. The experiences of well-being were related to the following themes: awe (in nature, spirituality, and ordinary events), family opportunities and wellness, safety through freedom and peace, and an intentionally resilient mindset.

The final research question examined how artmaking within a safe hybrid art therapy group could foster authentic connections between the Knowledge Holders. Through analyzing my notes on the group dynamics, interview answers, and artwork, I found that artmaking was able to help the refugee women build meaningful relationships. Artmaking increased opportunities for members to create together and actively support one another's artmaking; facilitate empathetic resonance through the artwork concretely showing others how the artist sees the world; and

validate the relationships in the group by depicting the friendships with their drawings and paintings. Through Knowledge Holder introductions, descriptions, and visual representations, the results chapter captures the unique narratives of Amina, Hafseen, Maryam, and Rayya.

### **Knowledge Holders' Individual Stories and Artwork**

#### ***Amina***

Amina was 46 years old and was born in Syria. She is a proud grandmother whose grandchildren accompanied her to the art therapy sessions, as she cared for her grandchildren throughout the sessions. Amina shared that she loves children and caring for others. She moved to Jordan in 2011 and spent eight years there before she arrived in St. John's, Canada in 2019 along with her daughter.

Amina had been divorced and was recently engaged. Throughout the interviews with Amina, she shared that, "I've had no experience in art, but I had experience in nursing...I loved what I was doing, and I hope to find some place to do it here as well...I want to work and I love to work" (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). Amina used to cook in hospitals and nursing homes. When describing her interest in participating, she stated that, "I don't know how to draw, but I want to learn and help you [researcher]" (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021) and "I like art. It's something wonderful and I would like to learn more about art" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). In addition, Amina expressed her desire to help the community through participating in this research by saying, "Thank you for your caring, too, for our group to maybe provide more help through your research" (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021).

Amina believed that participating in the art therapy sessions could help her learn and gain experience to secure work as a caregiver in a hospital or senior's center. When describing her previous work in Syria Amina conveyed that, "I loved what I was doing, and I hope to find some place to do this [in St. John's] as well. I want to learn more... I want to work and love to work"


(Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). Amina elaborated on her desire to learn English from a native English-speaker and develop connections with locals.

During and in between the art therapy sessions, Amina created 31 paintings and drawings. She created artwork that focused on experiences of joy, identity, belonging, and well-being, while also helping her develop technical art skills. Amina shared that her sense of well-being and belonging was impacted by her ability to work and care for others.

Other symbols depicted in her artwork include: a city landscape of the streets of St. John's, figurative emotional portraits, arctic or Nordic animals such as penguins, snowmen, a polar bear, hearts to represent love and connection, children, families being together, sitting and inviting members to a dinner table, sunshine, flowers, and animals who are happy. Amina's artwork and brief interpreted narratives based on her narratives are documented in Table 8.

**Table 8**

*Amina's Artwork and Descriptions*

Session	Title (or description)	Artwork	Story (based on notes)
1	A heart		"I love hearts and that is why I am showing hearts" (Session 1, November 24, 2021). (Note: The names were covered by the researcher to ensure confidentiality.)

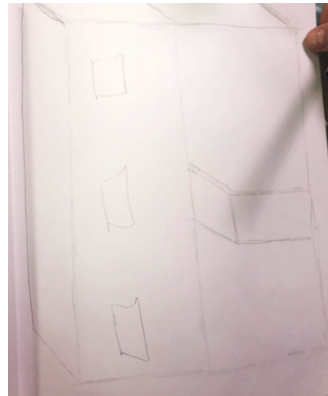
Between sessions

Coffee



Between sessions

Street view



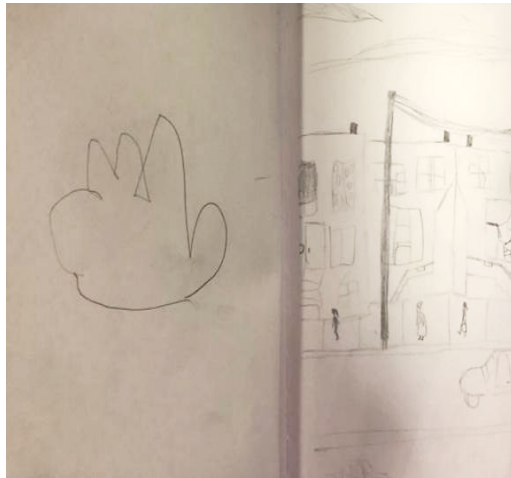
2

Check-in artwork: A bright, yellow sunshine.



“I am feeling bright and sunny” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

2 Well-being artwork: The streets of St. John's.



“St. John’s Streets and the Newfoundland and Labrador neighborhood and houses. I want to work in senior care homes, and I also used to care for seniors, and for my grandfather. I was living with my grandparents, and I was also taking care of a colleague who was 82 years old when I was living in Syria” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

2 Well-being: Working in a senior’s centre



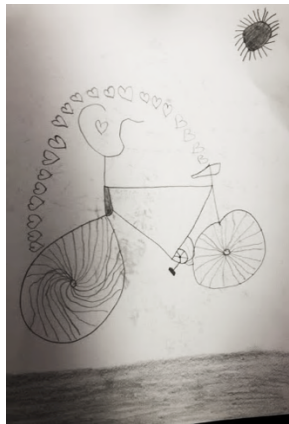
“I love to garden and loved for the seniors to enjoy the nature. I would feed them, take care of them, and I also lived at the home itself, beside the seniors, which is where I have shown myself in the image” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

2 Check-out artwork: All women and every woman.



“I wish for every woman to see, and every woman to have a child, to not be alone, and to have hope” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

Between sessions Bicycle



“I would like to go back in time and play like a kid and with my kids. I would like to learn how to ride a bicycle. I hope and wish to do so in the future, even now” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

Between sessions Flowers in a vase and a perfume bottle

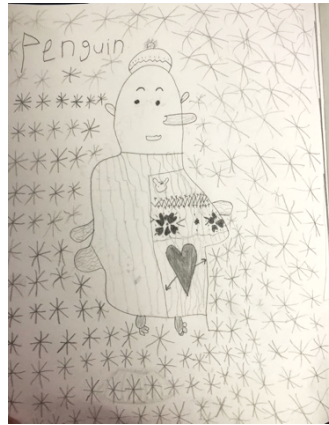


“Exploring their beauty through art” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).



Between sessions

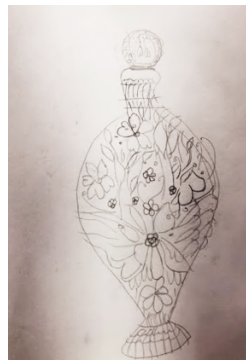
Snowman



“A snowman because I love the snow, and I used to play in snow back in Syria. There are snowflakes falling in the image. This image brings me well-being because I love to be in the snow” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

Between sessions

Perfume bottle

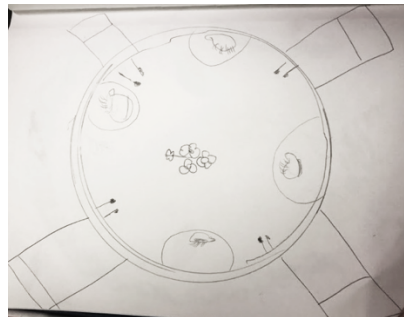


“Exploring their beauty through art”

“Kids are inside the circle, like kids around the world are playing” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

3 & 4

Check-in: A kitchen table with everyone's seats.



“I prefer coffee and breakfast and to look through the window. I like the snow and the white colour of the snow. I feel comfortable” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4

Belonging: The hospital



“This is the hospital, where the brown pieces represent hospital beds. I like to work with seniors. I would like to work and bring my family here. I hope is to get similar work and support my family in St. John's” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

3 & 4  
Check-out artwork: A woman who is sad.



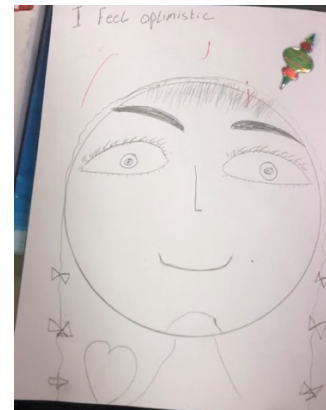
“I don’t feel like being strong only to be strong. Need to find strength in something” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

3 & 4  
Check-out: Kids inside the circle playing



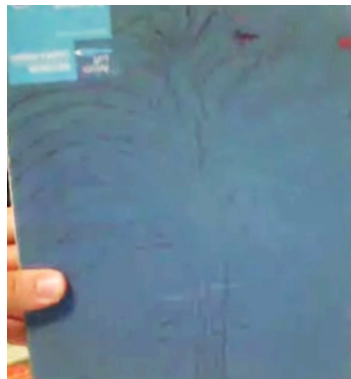
“Kids are inside the circle, like kids around the world are playing” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

5  
Check-in: Self-portrait



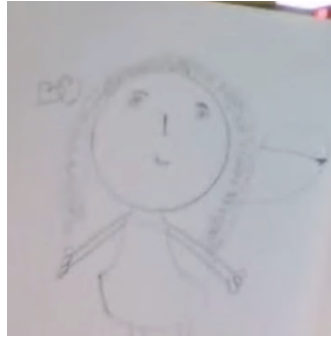
“I feel optimistic” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5  
Final artwork: A tree with many branches



“There is a tree and the leaves had fallen. I believe that I could do that on a canvas as well” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5  
Check-out  
artwork:  
Portrait of  
researcher



“I created a drawing of Haley [researcher] because she is pregnant and happy” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between  
sessions  
Sleeping  
child



“I like children” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between  
sessions  
Dog  
wagging his  
tail



“I like dogs, and I copied it from a reference image. I would not like to raise, feed, or walk the dog myself” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between  
sessions  
Flowers



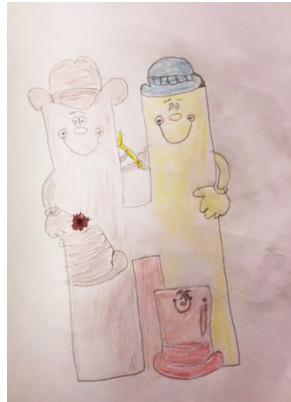
“I created the flowers side by side because I love flowers” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions Little girl with glasses



“The girl is going to the beach and has a bird on her shoulder. I would like to go to the beach as well” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions Family



“It is an image of parents and where I had lived. I would like to have a family.” The image has a very cute aesthetic, with a symbolic father, wife, and child. The father has a cowboy hat and is holding a flower, while the mother has a little blue hat on. They are all smiling” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions Candles



“I love candles” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions

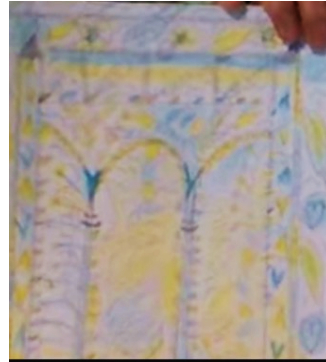
Polar bear and snow falling



“I love the snow”  
(Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions

Prayer mat



“With gold and blue”  
(Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions

Flower branches



Between sessions

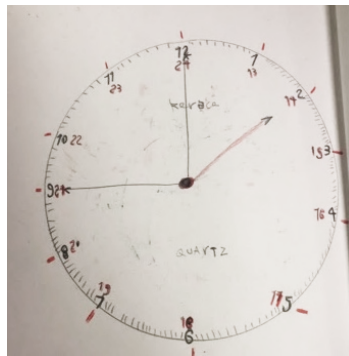
Love



Between sessions      Family of snow people

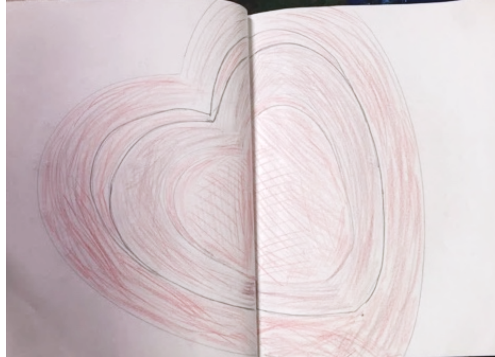


Between sessions      Clock



“I would like to schedule my day and priorities like studying, kids, and sports” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Between sessions      Hearts





Between sessions      Yellow flower



Between sessions      Yellow banana



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After the art therapy sessions, Amina expressed a desire to further develop her artmaking and English skills. Amina voiced that “I like art. It’s something wonderful and I would like to learn more about art...but I would like to learn more about English” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). The ANC social worker offered to support her in pursuing these goals. When asked about how art could help Amina talk about her experience, she declared that:

It’s something wonderful. Meeting new people, making art, like, learn more about artworks. And meeting you, having met you, because you are taking care about people. You care about others, yea. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

I am feeling wonderful because I met you people. Same as what I said earlier with that question. I am happy because I am feeling a bit isolated from the Arabic communication because we are communicating with you, trying to get to know more things. Like different from what we are used to doing. Yes, I am feeling happy because of that. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Amina also explained that she enjoyed getting to know me and that she is looking for jobs in the future. In addition, she appreciated the experience of the art therapy group and making art.

She stated that, “And I am very happy because I met you and had the opportunity to get to know you.” In addition, Amina expressed gratitude and said, “Thank you for taking care of us, and what you gave us, for everything that you gave us” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

When asked about her experiences of belonging in St. John’s, Amina shared that she is connected and happy with the community. She said:

I feel like I am very happy here, especially with the community, and like I get to learn more new things. Like I had been with the group. I would like to learn more thing, to be able to...I would like to get more of those things and get to know a little about things. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Amina also described her thoughts about the relationships that have developed during the sessions:

We knew each other from before, and after this, we have become closer to each other, and we got the opportunity to meet with another more. So, we are very happy with that. We are the same age, same mentality, so we are very happy with that. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Expressing her interest in continuing relationships with the other group members, Amina demonstrated openness based on her ability to build connections:

There’s no problem to be with all of them more. I don’t mind that, and I don’t have any problem with anyone. I can get in a good relationship with anyone...I am social, and I don’t mind being in contact with anyone or be in a relationship with anyone. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Amina was both open and ambivalent about next steps for the group: “No preferences. Any one is fine. Choose whatever you would like from the arts and put them anywhere. It’s fine for me” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). In addition, Amina communicated that, “I am fine with knowing new people or going to new classes.” Amina ended the final interview with sharing gratitude and asking about my pregnancy. Her kindness and compassion were apparent throughout her participation.

***Hafseen***






Hafseen was a 29-year-old mother born in Syria. She lived in Lebanon for four years before moving to Canada in 2021. Hafseen relocated to Canada with her parents and two adolescent children. She had not seen her husband in 10 years. Hafseen shared she does not know where he is and disclosed that, “I don’t know anything about my husband. I don’t know anything about him. He’s maybe lost” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). Hafseen also voiced that she was feeling sad before the art therapy sessions because one of her children had a chronic illness. When explaining her experience of belonging in St. John’s, Hafseen disclosed that, “I feel really good here. Good hospitality and people are friendly. And in general, good. I’d like to learn more here in St. John’s and do whatever it takes to learn and get experience” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). When asked about what she would like to do to gain experience, Hafseen said that “Because of the disaster that is happening in Syria, I sometimes feel very bad, but this [art therapy group] may help me to overcome or surpass the pain. The problems” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021)

Hafseen explained that she was interested in participating for “new ideas ... About art therapy... Mainly, I will feel less depression through this program because my son has [a chronic illness]” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). Further elaborating on her interest in participating, Hafseen believed that “The art makes you feel better. Makes you feel less depressed and changes your life to a better mood” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). Stating her desire to create, she said “I really don’t really have something that helps me voice my experience, but I just like creating something and the idea that I can do it with artmaking” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021).

Throughout the art therapy sessions, Hafseen created nine artworks representing flowers, hearts, music (a guitar), butterflies, a bird, friendship, and a snow globe. She was able to attend almost all the sessions, except the combined session three and four due to an appointment. Hafseen’s artworks, titles, and descriptions are shared in Table 9.

**Table 9**

*Hafseen's Artwork and Descriptions*

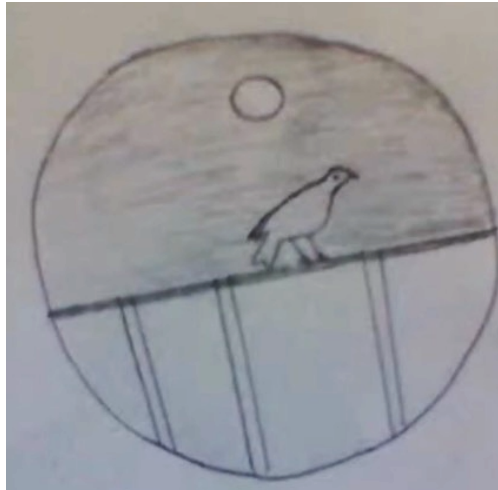
Session	Title (or description)	Artwork	Story (based on notes)
1	Heart with a heartbeat		“Heart with a heartbeat. Loves life and life is beautiful” (Session 1, November 24, 2021).
Between sessions	Guitar music and a cloud (well-being)		“I love Arabic music, and I listen to it when I feel depressed. I also love Iraqi music that talks about feelings and is emotional. It moves something inside your heart” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).
2	Check-in: Three butterflies		“The butterflies represent freedom” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

2 Well-being:  
flowers



“At home in Syria, I used to buy flowers and put them in a vase in my living room. The four flowers could be anyone or anything, such as roses, tulips, or jasmine. My son’s name is (confidential), or flower, while the red and white colours mean purity and cleanliness” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

2 Check-out:  
bird at sunset



“This drawing depicts a bird at sunset who is sitting on the wall. It is calm and there is no work to do” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

Between sessions

Flower vase



“I have added flowers to the vase. I like flowers and keep flowers in the house all day. These flowers include roses and jasmine. I used to be a florist in Lebanon and love flowers because I used to work with them. I would get seeds from Turkey to grow flowers, and it was a lot of hard work. I would like to do the same thing in St. John’s. Flowers are so meaningful that my son’s name means flower” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

5

Check-in:  
Snow globe.



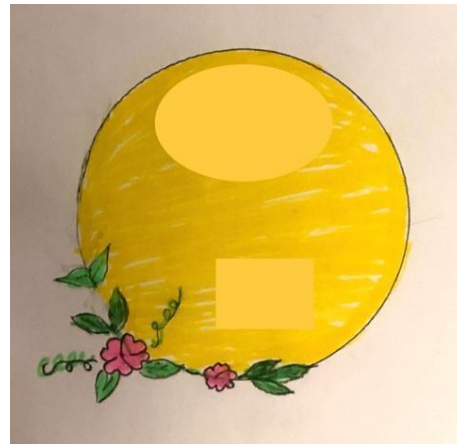
“I am happy because it is snowing out today and I like the snow” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Flowers



“I have written all the names of everyone here. We are all together inside the circle and our names are written in Arabic. This represents our day together” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). (Note: The names were covered by the researcher to ensure confidentiality.)

5 Check-out:  
Sunshine and  
flowers



“Sunshine in the summer with flowers growing because of the heat. I like the summer and love the colours of flowers. I feel very happy, with my name and my friend’s names written inside of the circle” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). (Note: The names were covered by the researcher to ensure confidentiality.)

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During the post-interviews, Hafseen reflected on her experience with the group and communicated that artmaking helped voice her experiences “most of the time in the group” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Elaborating on her experience of making art inside and outside of the group, Hafseen expressed that, “I like the art. Art is wonderful...Sometimes, like, when I draw something, I remember something or try to express, like, enjoyment during the drawing” (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021). Discussing how she felt about the group and whether it met her

expectations, Hafseen shared that she enjoyed developing relationships with other members. She remarked that:

In general, it was good, and I like the group and the way that I participated in the group, and the relations with the other members. I wasn't expecting something different. (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021)

When asked about the relationships that have developed during the group, Hafseen explained that some relationships remained the same, while others grew to become close friendships. She declared that:

I knew most of them before the workshop. Before the group, but I have a good relationship with [Knowledge Holder], but I didn't know [another Knowledge Holder] before. I have a good relationship with [the second Knowledge Holder]. She is the closest friend of mine. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Although Hafseen was not present for sessions three and four, which invited members to create art about belonging, Hafseen mentioned that her experiences of belonging were positive during the pre-interview and post-interview. During the post-interview, Hafseen tied belonging and well-being to her prioritization of education for her children. She explained that:

I like it very very much here. It's like even better than my back home. I like the schools, which are good. The education system [schools] was bad back home, but here it's much better. I was unhappy in Lebanon. I had spent three and a half years in Lebanon. My children didn't go to school. They didn't allow my children to attend the school (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021).

Hafseen connected her sense of belonging to her extended family support system in St. John's. She said that "I am very happy because I am here with my family. Like my dad and brothers are here. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). She also shared hope for her family to reunite:

My dad and mother, my brothers, sisters. Only two of them [are living elsewhere]. One of them is in Lebanon and one is living in Syria. I hope that they will also be joining us here. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Hafseen was asked about next steps after the group was over. She was given examples, such as a new group, or creating a policy document, or a virtual art exhibition to share their

artwork. Hafseen was open to different options, although she wanted to focus on artmaking. She shared that, “Whenever I feel free, why not? I can do drawing, art things” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Hafseen expressed a desire for the relationships to continue, particularly the close friendship she had developed during the group sessions:

Yes, I would like to continue the relationships. Whenever I see [the Knowledge Holders], or maybe meet them, I would be happy to meet them... Maybe we meet at the house, or she comes to my house, or I visit her, and maybe sometimes at school, we meet each other. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Throughout the interviews and sessions, Hafseen shared that artmaking held meaning in her life, allowing her to express herself. She experienced a sense of well-being and belonging through a stable education system for her children and an extended family network in St. John’s. During her pre-interviews, Hafseen expressed sadness because her son has a chronic illness, while the post-interview resonated with a happier tone by mentioning her support system, relationships, and positive experiences of the education system in St. John’s. Hafseen developed one deep relationship throughout the art therapy sessions. She would be open to continuing to create artwork and meet her friends in a similar group.

### ***Maryam***

Maryam was born in Syria. She resettled in St. John’s with her husband and six children in 2016. She had resided in Canada for seven years, the longest tenure among the other Knowledge Holders. Before moving to Canada, Maryam lived in Lebanon for one year.

When asked about her experiences of well-being and belonging in St. John’s in the pre-interview, Maryam said that “I am so happy here, to be here in St. John’s, and I won’t think of moving from here” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). Maryam described the kindness of residents by stating, “It’s really nice here. People are really nice and helpful” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). She does not enjoy the winter because the cold weather stops her from leaving her home. As a source of strength to cope with feeling housebound during the winter,

Maryam finds strength in her family. She shared that, “I am really happy here and the most important thing is that I have a good husband, and my kids are really good too. So, that’s what makes it easier for me” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021).

Maryam was enthusiastic about creating artwork and participating in the art therapy group. Delineating her interest in participating, Maryam wanted to learn and gain experience through the group. She elaborated that:

I would like to learn more, like have more experience. And, plus, if I have free time, that’s a good thing for my free time. The most important thing is that I want to accomplish things I have time to in the future. What made me interested is that I can express what I want to do, and I have something in mind that I want to do. (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021)

As an accomplished artist, Maryam wanted to create more art. She wanted a community to provide feedback and support her artwork. She declared that “I want to do more of what I am doing, and [someone] be interested in my accomplishments in the drawing that I am doing” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). Maryam was “really interested in this thing [art therapy]” because “I like to make paintings and drawings.” During the art therapy sessions, Maryam created art at home between the sessions. She crafted 21 artworks that included the following metaphors and symbolic themes: Islamic religion, happy faces, birds, justice, weather, landscapes, pathways, the ocean, women, nature, flowers, seasons, balance, homes, peace, school, family, children, and coffee, among others. Maryam’s artworks, titles, and descriptions created through the sessions are presented in Table 10.

**Table 10**

*Maryam’s Artwork and Brief Descriptions*

Session	Title (or description)	Artwork	Story (based on notes)
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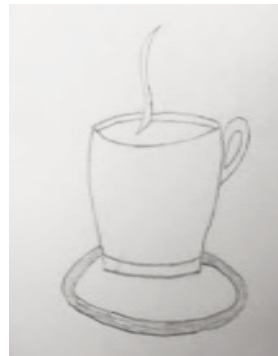


1 A flower



“I love nature, green, flowers, trees. I used to have a garden in Syria. When drawing flowers, I try to remember the flowers back home and try to remember back home” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). (Note: The names were covered by the researcher to ensure confidentiality.)

Between sessions Coffee



“Things that bring well-being” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

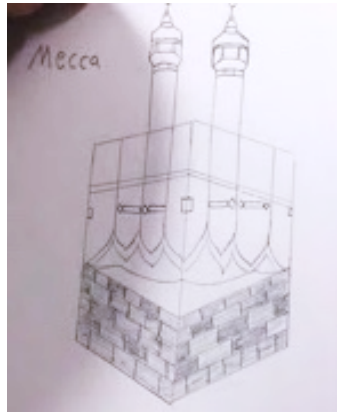
Between sessions



“House in the Fall beside the river with trees that have no leaves in St. John’s” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

Mecca



“I wish I could visit Mecca and Kaaba to worship. I have not gone yet but would love to go. Inshallah” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

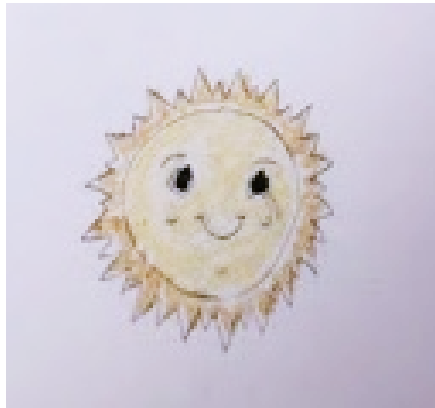
Between  
n  
sessions

A woman  
with the  
Quran



“I love to pray and stay with the Quran. This is a self-portrait. I feels comfortable and at peace and forget my challenges when I pray” (Session 2, November 24, 2021). “One thing that stands out to me, is this drawing, the lady that is holding her Quran, her holy book. I am proud of my religion and that connects me to this life, and to my God. That's what makes me happy. That's what stands out” (description provided during Member-checking session, August 24, 2023).

2 Check-in: A bright, happy sunshine



“I am feeling good” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

2 Bouquets of flowers



“I painted roses and jasmine. I love nature and would love to have a house in nature. I also love summer and the smell of the flowers that she had painted. I have roses in my backyard garden and would also buy flowers from the store. I love nature, flowers, and the summer” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

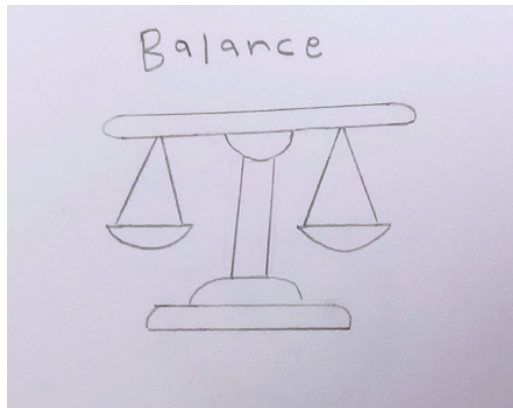
2 Check-out: Evening walks in nature



“My circle depicts the evening. I love to go walking and I just like to walk in the evening with family because it feels very good. Would do this every day in the summer. I would do this in Syria as well” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

Balance



“I would like to find fairness and balance wherever I go. I want to feel happy and comfortable” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

The ocean



“I like watching the ocean and seeing the waves. I feel comfortable watching the water and the birds and the sea. They are also wonderful to draw. I went on a trip to St. John’s on Harper Road. I liked the view, and I try to separate from myself, to feel like I am in the current. Seeing the ocean brings me to another world” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

House



Between  
n  
sessions

Peace doves



“I always would like to live in peace” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Between  
n  
sessions

A school



“This is a school in St. John’s called the [school]. My children go there. I have hope for my kids and hope that my children will stay in school” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4

Check-in: A road with snow on the sides



“The artwork above represents a road (from the top) and on side, there is tons of snow. I saw a picture in the morning of tons of snow and I feel stressed because of the blizzard and snow” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4

Belonging:  
Family  
portrait



“My family would like to visit soon, and I will be with them soon. My husband is in Syria. Before the war, we were together in Daraa. When the war started, my family got displaced and went to Saudi Arabia, America, and Canada. I am praying that we get the

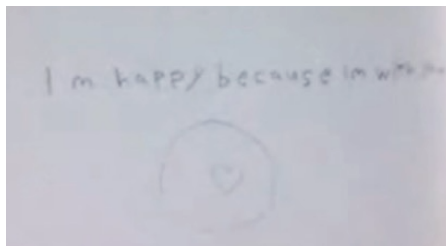
chance to be together. The Canadian flag is in the top left corner, and Canada feels like home because we live in peace and love here. If I could, I would like to meet my family at our house in Syria with my parents, brother, and sister. I have 16 brothers and sisters. Even if I couldn't be back in Syria, would like to see my family. My parents are still in Syria and have one brother in America. Everyone is now everywhere” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4 Check-out:  
Happy face



“Happy because I’m with you. I’m now feeling happy. My heart feels heavy because I am here, in Canada. Strength is happiness I like to help people, and I am always in front of people. When you are happy, I am always happy” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4 Check-out:  
I’m happy because I’m with you.

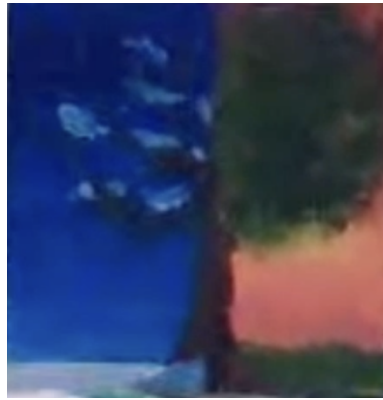


“I feel happy and drew a happy face” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).



Between  
n  
sessions

Two  
seasons



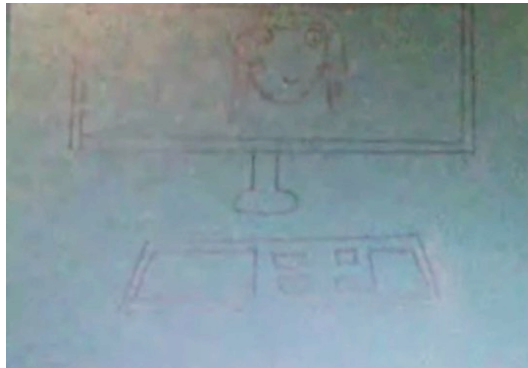
“I have been working for two semesters and one side represents the winter semester, while the other side of the tree represents the Fall semester” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Check-in:  
Optimistic,  
but a new  
year, a good  
year.



“I feel happy and drew a happy face. Optimistic, but a new year, a good year” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Gathering  
here



“This is the computer with Haley’s smiling face on it. I drew us all together and I liked gathering here” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Check-out:  
Days and  
nights of the  
summer



“This is a circle that is divided. The left side includes the sun and birds in the sky on a summer day. The right side includes the stars and the moon at night. It’s not related to how I am feeling, but I love the days and nights of the summer” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

Maryam attended all five art therapy sessions between November and December of 2021 in addition to the member-checking session that took place in August 2023. While attending the sessions with her peers, she often helped fellow group members with artmaking. She drew images for some members as a base for them to expand upon. Maryam's children sometimes attended the sessions while a caregiver was on-site. She often began a painting during the session and then added details to the artwork at home, in-between the art therapy sessions. During the post-interview, Maryam shared that she was able to create artwork when her children went to sleep and said that "when my children go to sleep at night, and it's quiet and I can do whatever I want" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Furthermore, artmaking helped her relax. Maryam explained that "I love art. I am happy when I am doing it, and I feel like, relaxed, you know?" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

When conveying her experiences of well-being in St. John's, Maryam said that "When I see my children going to school, and education, and they are safe. That is well-being for me" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). In addition, Maryam found that she was surrounded by friendly people. She voiced that, "I like it here. People here are so friendly, and no discrimination or something like that, and it's like diversity of the people. But the only complaint is the weather, that's all" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Discussing her experience of the group, Maryam communicated that she did not quite understand the nature of the art therapy group before it began, but she enjoyed it over time. She asserted that,

When I started with the art therapy with you at the group, I didn't understand what kind of happened exactly, like the full picture, but was going to go...But, after all, I really liked what we did together, and discussion, and drawing, and talking to you, and like expressing this kind of stuff. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)



When remembering her group experience during the member-checking session in 2023, Maryam recalled a very positive experience when she said, “I really enjoyed my time... I learned that I have to live my life, and life is beautiful if you want to make it” (Member checking, August 24, 2023). Regarding relationships that developed during the group, Maryam knew members of the group before. She disclosed that her relationships with group members continued to be the same, while one Knowledge Holder was a close friend. Maryam also meets with other Knowledge Holders during religious events and would “like to continue with the relations with them [other group members]” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

During the post-interview, Maryam expressed interest in participating in an arts and crafts creation and discussion group. She would be interested to participate in “...discussion and even drawing and do any kind of artwork. Art therapy-like things” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Furthermore, although she would not create similar drawings, she would like to talk about her art. She said that, “To be honest, I would not do, like these kinds of drawings [related to emotion-based drawings], but if there is a group that discusses it, I would participate. I like art and crafts” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Maryam showed interest in an online gallery, although during the member-checking session, she expressed her desire, akin to Rayya, to concentrate on an arts and crafts group that emphasizes entrepreneurial skills. She would like to sell her artwork, envisioning it as a blend of enjoyment and an income-generating opportunity. Maryam recommended that:

I would like to have some workshops, like training workshops for more artwork. Like a sewing class, a DIY class, like things that Rayya does. I would like to see more job opportunities come from it as well. It will take some time to start, I don't know where to start from. Now that my kids are all grown up and everyone is taking care of themselves, this would be something good that I would have fun and also have an income from at the same time, even if there's a cooking class, or something like that. (Member checking, August 24, 2023)

Providing context to her suggestion, Maryam gave the following advice about life in Canada, “Life here requires you to get out and work, and to get out of your comfort zone” (Member checking, August 24, 2023).

### ***Rayya***

Rayya and her five children had been in Canada for four months. Her husband was still in Turkey with their other children. Rayya was born in Syria and then left for Turkey with her family in 2013. She lived there for eight years before resettling in St. John’s, Canada. Rayya explained that “I am living now in St. John’s with five children. There are six more children in Turkey with their dad. My husband is right now in Turkey with six children” (Pre-Interview, November 10, 2021). Rayya hopes that her family will be reunited soon. She was in the process of filling out paperwork for her husband and the rest of their children to relocate to St. John’s.

Explaining her interest in joining the group, Rayya said that “Sometimes there is something that I don’t know how to do in art therapy, and I want to learn” (Pre-Interview, November 10, 2021). Rayya elaborated on what art means in her life when she communicated that:

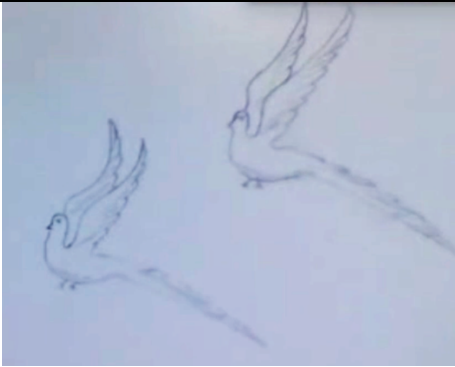
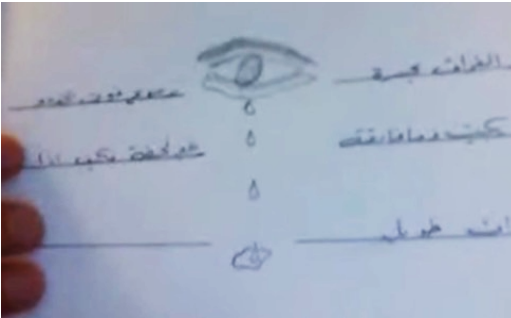
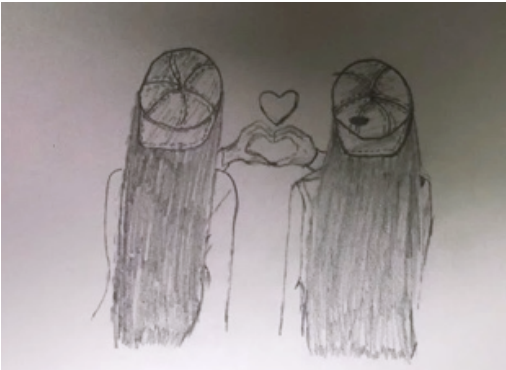
I like what I am doing and when I do something, I feel like I did something great and really (well), you know? When I am trying to start doing handicraft and stuff like that, at the end of the work, I feel very happy and experience happiness at the end of the achievement (Pre-interview, November 20, 2021).

During the art therapy sessions, Rayya created 12 artworks presented in Table 11 with the symbols and metaphors of birds, coffee with friends, friendship, sadness and pain, eyes, peace, justice, hearts, puzzles, tables, family, trees, buildings, blood, flowers, time, cute cartoons, childhood, calligraphy of religious poems, among others. Rayya was unable to attend the second session. She asked her friend, who was one of the group members, to bring in her artwork on her behalf. Rayya is an accomplished craftsperson who created embroidered flower designs and shared images of them with the group. Rayya mentioned that she enjoyed sewing, which was

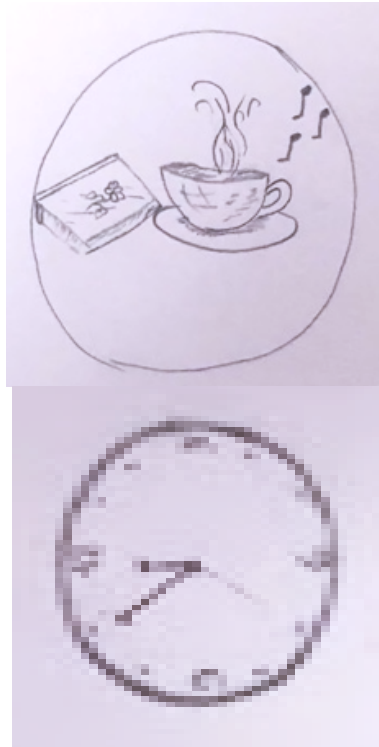
interpreted as macramé during the pre-interview. I believe that she may have wanted to embroider in the group because she showed her embroidery art during the sessions.

**Table 11**

*Rayya's Artwork and Descriptions*

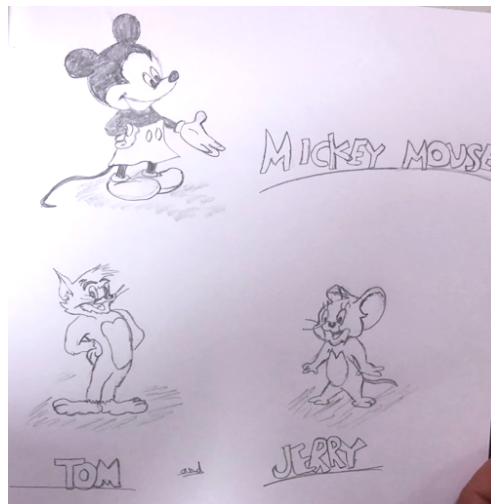
Session #	Title (or description)	Artwork	Story (based on notes)
1	Two doves		“Two doves that represent love and peace” (Session 1, November 24, 2021).
1	Poem for my father		“First of all, sad because I left my home and family. The Arabic poem is about a father who had passed away” (Session 1, November 24, 2021).
Between sessions (brought to session 2 by friend)	Friendship		“Friendship. A friend is a home. Everyone has home and can share their homes with one another” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

3 & 4      Check-in:  
Coffee and  
a book, and  
a clock



“The good memory relates to back home when I would sit outside with music and think back on life. I am thinking about life before, and now. I enjoy relaxing when in the house, drinking coffee, and chatting together with friends” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Between  
sessions      Mickey  
Mouse,  
Tom, and  
Jerry



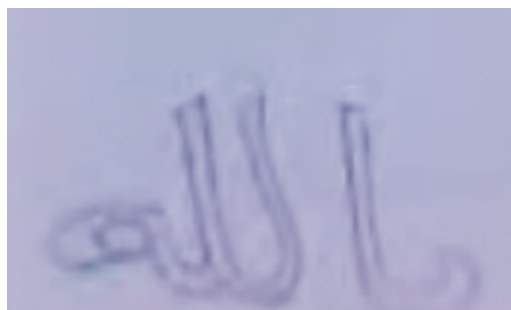
“Mickey mouse. I have been taking cartoon classes, and I love it. I was watching Tom and Jerry, and I was inspired by the cartoon. Tom and Jerry remind me of my childhood days” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4      Belonging:  
                 Justice



“The tree represents family, and the tree branches are broken. The branches are also those who had been lost in my family. On the left-hand side, there is an imbalanced scale, which is another symbol of no balance. No one stood next to our family or helped us during the war, except Canada. The flag and the ground are full of dripping red blood. I included a broken heart of the Syrian people who fell, and the green grass belongs to the tree”  
These symbols, and the grass are meant for people who have lost their lives and the houses that have been destroyed. In the left corner under the scale, there are buildings being destroyed. I wrote and the image is titled, “In God we Trust” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

3 & 4      Check-out:  
                 “In God we  
                 trust”



“In God we Trust”  
(Session 3 & 4,  
December 10, 2021).

3 & 4 Check-out:  
Kids are hopeful



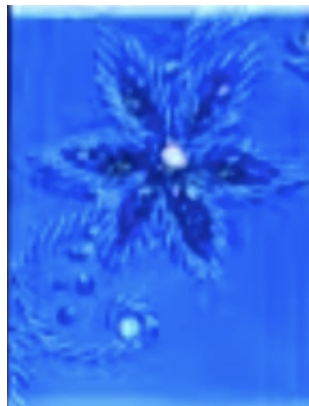
“Kids are always hopeful. They are always following or surrounding us. There are smiles, hopefulness and sunshine with two people holding hands” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

5 Check-in:  
A man and woman sitting by the window



“This is a man and a woman sitting by a window around a table. They are sitting together on two chairs and snow is falling outside the window. The person in the art is feeling good while sitting and watching the snow is falling from the window. It is a puzzle room, and it is calming to be in that space” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). Note that the quality of the artwork images varies as some were captured as screenshots from video recordings.

Between sessions Flower embroidery



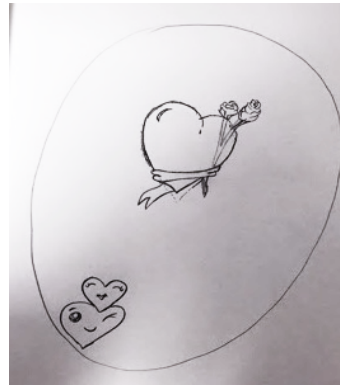
“An embroidered flower design” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Flower design



“I added a flower design to the cover page because I used to work with flowers. The cover is nice to draw on and the image is decorative” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

5 Check-out: Heart



“I am happy because I had found the electricity bill. The two hearts together on the left represents friendship and gathering with our time spent with one another” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

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Rayya was interviewed after the art therapy sessions finished on December 22, 2021. She also attended the member-checking session on August 24, 2023. During the post-interview session, Rayya discussed how art enables emotional expression and declared that “Art for me is to express what I feel. If I feel bad, I express about the feeling by the art or if I feel good. So, it’s just like feeling... Yes, it’s like a voice to express, but I don’t know how to express our voice or experiences” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021). Artmaking helped her voice emotions during the sessions when she said: “When, through the past three weeks, during the workshop, I tried to express and voice my experience doing the drawing and explaining what I did. It’s like, some of my voiced experience” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021).

Finally, Rayya shared that she enjoyed her time in the art therapy sessions. She explained that “Even the little things I drew, when discussed with you during the past few weeks, I really liked what I did and I appreciated the time I spent and I really like it here” (Post-Interview,

December 22, 2021). In addition, the group had met her expectations: “I expect, like, it was really wonderful, and I like it. My expectation is good [laugh]” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021).

Rayya also appreciated building a relationship with the researcher/therapist throughout the group when expressed that “I also appreciate you and it was really nice to meet you, and I like the way you laugh and your smile (Post-Interview, December 22, 201)

When asked about her experience of well-being during the post-interview, Rayya shared how her experience was tied to being with her children, their ability to study, and feeling embraced as a community member in Canada. She said:

I am really happy to be here with my children. I already said, well-being here in St. John’s, (is) with my children. I really like how Canada treats me as a part of the community, and I am happy that my children now study at school because they stopped studying during the war. This gives me good feelings and good experiences. (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021)

Rayya wanted to focus on creating handicrafts, like textile art with embroidery for next steps or subsequent group programming. She responded that, “I have nothing to add, but I like to do more handicrafts...I do many things, not just like one [type of craft]” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021). Rayya also shared that she felt ambivalent about continuing the relationships developed during the group. She disclosed, “To be honest, I am unsocial. I do not have many relationships with people and friendships, but I respect and like them” ((Post-Interview, December 22, 2021). Nonetheless, she would be interested in upcoming sessions or workshops. and said, “I would like to engage in another workshop or like sessions with the same group. Yea, I am okay with that...if there is anything in the future, it’s okay. I don’t have any issues” (Post-Interview, December 22, 2021).

### **Research Questions**

The following subsection presents the findings rising from my arts-based and qualitative analysis of the data. These findings are structured according to the three research questions.

Beneath each research question, four models outline the primary themes derived from analyzing



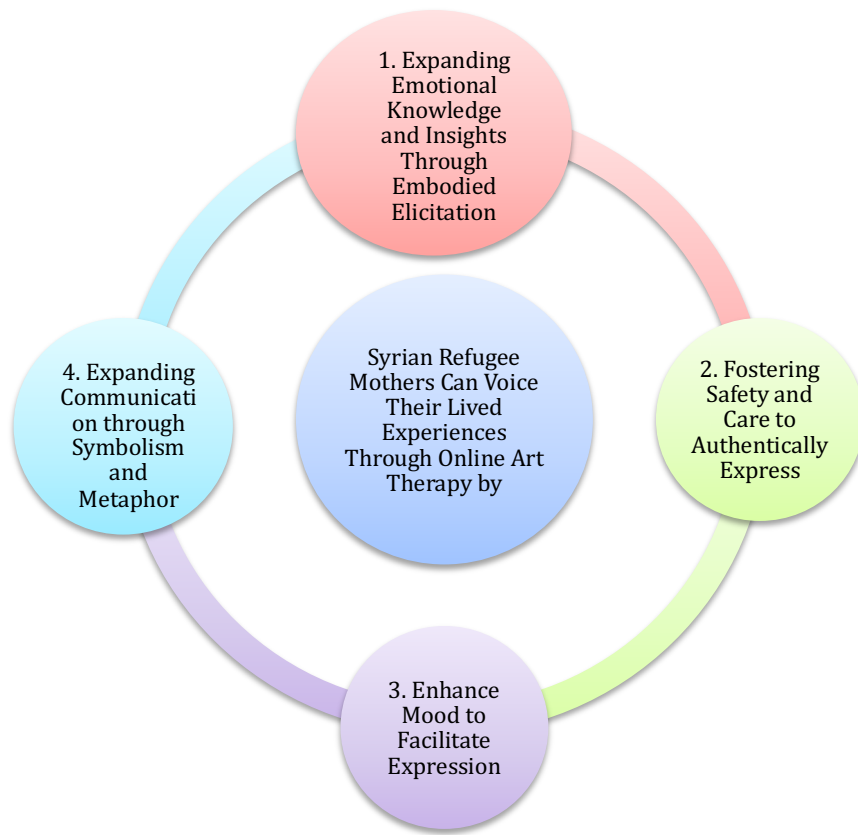
the multimedia data. Following each model, the identified themes are elucidated. The subsections offer explanations and insights, supported by direct data from session notes, quotations, and artworks created by both the Knowledge Holders and I throughout the research study.

**Research Question 1: How do Syrian, Congolese, and Eritrean refugee women, who have arrived in Newfoundland and Labrador within the past seven years, voice their lived experiences through online art therapy?**

The data suggest that Syrian mothers engaging in artmaking during an online group art therapy can influence how they voice their lived experiences. This transformation occurs through increased emotional awareness and mood enhancement within a supportive and secure environment, fostering symbolic communication in an art therapy session. By analyzing the reflective and expressive data, four themes emerged. These themes shed light on the nuanced ways in which lived experiences are articulated through artmaking in an art therapy session. The four themes are presented as a model in Figure 15 and elaborated upon below with examples generated from observations, quotations, and artwork from the Knowledge Holders. The first theme highlights how artmaking broadens emotional understanding and insights in an art therapy session through embodied elicitation. The second theme emphasizes how artmaking can create a safe and nurturing space conducive to authentic expression in an art therapy session. The third theme highlights artmaking's capacity to uplift mood, thereby enabling emotional expression in an art therapy group. Lastly, the fourth theme encapsulates artmaking's role in enhancing communication through symbolism and metaphor.

**Figure 2**

*Model Depicting How Syrian Refugee Mothers Can Voice Their Lived Experiences Through Artmaking*



*Note.* Figure created by Haley Toll.

***Theme 1: Artmaking Expands Emotional Knowledge and Insights Through Embodied Elicitation***

**Changes in understanding art’s potential to express experiences.** Knowledge Holders were asked the question, "Does artmaking help you voice your experience, and if so, how?" during both pre- and post-individual interviews. Amina's initial response before engaging in art therapy was, “Any hobby is important for any person, so painting or art will have an effect on ideas, and I love it, but I do not have much experience to know” (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, Amina's answer changed. She described art as "something wonderful. Meeting new people, making art, like, learn more about artworks. And meeting you, having met you, because you are taking care of people. You care about others” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

Hafseen's initial response before the art therapy sessions indicated that she lacked a specific method to voice her experiences, but she expressed appreciation for the idea of using art to create something. She said: "I really don't have really something that helps me voice my experience, but I just like creating something and the idea that I can do it with artmaking" (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, Hafseen answered that, "Sometimes, like, when I draw something, I remember something or try to express, like, enjoying [during] the drawing. It happened most of the time in the group." (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Rayya's pre-art therapy response focuses on the joy and achievement derived from doing handicrafts when she communicated:

When I am trying to start doing handicraft and stuff like that, at the end of the work, I am feeling very happy and happiness at the end of the achievement. I am wondering if you can help me to do business from this, or I can sell it in the future and do a home business and stuff. Yea. (added name to business programs) (Post-interview, November 10, 2021).

In the post-art therapy interview, Rayya linked art to voicing her experiences, describing it as:

Like a voice to express, but I don't know how to express our voice or experiences. Yes. When, through the past 3 weeks, during the workshop, I tried to express and voice my experience doing the drawing and what I did. It's like, some of my voiced experience. (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

Maryam's pre-art therapy response was "Nothing in particular" (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, she replied that, "Yea, it's hard to explain. Usually when my children go to sleep at night, and to be quiet and I can do whatever I want. Into art and drawing. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Therefore, the art therapy sessions changed their experience and therefore the content of the Knowledge Holders' answers. This can indicate that a change occurred due to art therapy group, whereby the Knowledge Holders were able to articulate the capacity of artmaking to voice experiences, increase positive mood, generate positive experiences, remembering events, and foster care.

**What does art mean in your life?** The question: “What does art mean in your life” was asked during the pre- and post- interviews. During the pre-interview, Amina focused on the beauty of art and art’s ability to provide relief. Amina answered, “Art is beauty, just gorgeous, and it provides relief” (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). During the post-interview, Amina responded with emphasizing her enjoyment of art and her willingness to learn more about it when she conveyed, “I like art. It’s something wonderful and I would like to learn more about art” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

Rayya's pre-art therapy response highlighted the satisfaction derived from her crafting, describing the joy of accomplishment and the positive feelings associated with her hobbies. She said, “I like what I am doing and when I do something, I feel like I did something great and really (well), you know? I like the hobbies that I have, and I like what I am doing” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, Rayya's understanding of art changed. She connected artmaking to emotional expression. Art, for Rayya, became a way to convey her feelings, whether positive or negative. Rayya asserted that, “Art for me is to express what I feel. If I feel bad, I express about the feeling by the art or if I feel good. So, it’s just like feeling” (Post-interview, December 22, 2021). The change could suggest that art therapy has not only heightened her sense of achievement, but artmaking has now become a way to communicate, elicit, process, and connect to emotions.

Hafseen's pre-art therapy response linked art to emotional well-being. She described art as a mood enhancer that can alleviate depression when she declared that “The art makes you feel better. Makes you feel less depressed and change your life to better mood” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). In the post- interview, Hafseen maintained her positive stance on art and stated, "I like the art. Art is wonderful" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). This consistency suggests that, for Hafseen, the potential therapeutic and expressive impact of art remained stable.

Art continued to be a positive experience in her life and reinforced the notion that engagement in artmaking can contribute to her well-being to reduce feelings of sadness.

Maryam's pre-art therapy response indicated a general enjoyment of artmaking during the pre-interview when she answered, "I like to make some paintings and drawings" (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). In the post-art therapy interview, her appreciation for art changed as she expressed love for it. Moreover, Maryam described the emotional impact it had on her. Maryam voiced, "I love art. I am happy when I am doing it, and I feel like, relaxed" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Feeling happy, relaxed, and expressing love for art suggests that the art therapy sessions may have amplified Maryam's enjoyment of the creative process and connected her more deeply to the therapeutic potential of artmaking. The shift emphasizes the transformative potential of art therapy to enrich peoples' association with art beyond surface-level enjoyment. Nonetheless, enjoyment of artmaking is also meaningful. The Knowledge Holders' shared experiences of the meaning of artwork in their lives suggest that artmaking prompted a transformation, evoking more emotions, positive experiences with the creative process, and connections to memories.

### ***Symbols in Art Eliciting Emotional Memories***

Many of the Knowledge Holders' artworks explored and expressed their memories in Syria. Thus, they generated a visual narrative that united personal and shared memories during the group sessions (refer to Figure 3 for Maryam's water paintings). Notably, during member-checking, Rayya described some of her artworks depicting her experience of "a really sad past," shared by all Syrians. This sentiment was supported by Maryam, who expanded the sentiment to the collective experience of Syrians when she responded, "Everyone's facing the same thing. All Syrians are" (Member checking session, August 24, 2023). Reflecting on the artwork created in the group revealed a connection to sad memories, highlighting the emotional depth embedded in

their creations. During the group, Maryam created a painting of a boat traversing the ocean in Figure 3, which was rich in emotional significance. When describing the image, she narrated:

Whenever I see water, it brings happiness. My husband and I... It brings my husband and I together as well. Whenever we have any work to do, we both go and to the ocean, or the pond, or the river. That brings my honeymoon back... It's a time for bonding. (Member-checking, August 24, 2023)

### Figure 3

*Maryam's Depiction of the Ocean that "Brings my Honeymoon Back"*



Building on emotionally infused symbols that evoked memories, the thematic use of flowers emerged as a metaphor linking past memories with the present. For Maryam, flowers hearken back to her garden in Syria. During session two, Maryam shared that she drew flowers to “Try to remember back home” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). In addition, in Session 2, Maryam revisited the theme of flowers and reconnected flowers with positive experiences (See Figure 4 for Maryam’s flower images).

I painted roses and jasmine. I love nature and would love to have a house in nature. I also love summer and the smell of the flowers that I had painted. I have roses in my backyard garden and would also buy flowers from the store. I love nature, flowers, and the summer. (Session 2, November 24, 2021)

### Figure 4

*Maryam's Artwork of Flowers to "Try to Remember Back Home"*



Hafseen's representation of roses simultaneously represented love, memories of being a florist in Syria, ambition, enjoyment, purity, cleanliness, and her relationship with her son. Hafseen's artwork with symbolic flowers are depicted in Figure 5. In the post-art therapy interview, Hafseen said that her favourite painting was the flower vase. For her, "roses represent love" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Hafseen's consistent portrayal of flowers and the emotional stories they carried highlight how artmaking about this particular symbol helped her preserve and express memories. Reflecting on the symbolic meaning of her flower vase painting, created during Session 2 and completed at home, Hafseen shared:

At home in Syria, I used to buy flowers and put them in a vase in my living room. The four flowers could be anyone or anything, such as roses, tulips, or jasmine. My son's name is (confidential), or flower, while the red and white colours mean purity and cleanliness. I have added flowers to the vase. I like flowers and keep flowers in the house all day. These flowers include roses and jasmine. I used to be a florist in Lebanon and love flowers because I used to work with them. I would get seeds from Turkey to grow flowers, and it was a lot of hard work. I would like to do the same thing in St. John's. (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

**Figure 5**

*Hafseen's Flowers that "Represent Love"*



For the Knowledge Holders, creating artwork about well-being brought forth playful and happy childhood memories. Amina's drawing of a snowman (Figure 6) symbolized positive memories of playing in the snow in Syria. She described the image as:

A snowman because I love the snow, and I used to play in snow back in Syria. There are snowflakes falling in the image. This image brings me well-being because I love to be in the snow” (Session 2, November 26, 2021)

**Figure 6**

*Amina’s Drawing Portraying “A Snowman because I Love the Snow and I Used to Play in the Snow Back in Syria”*

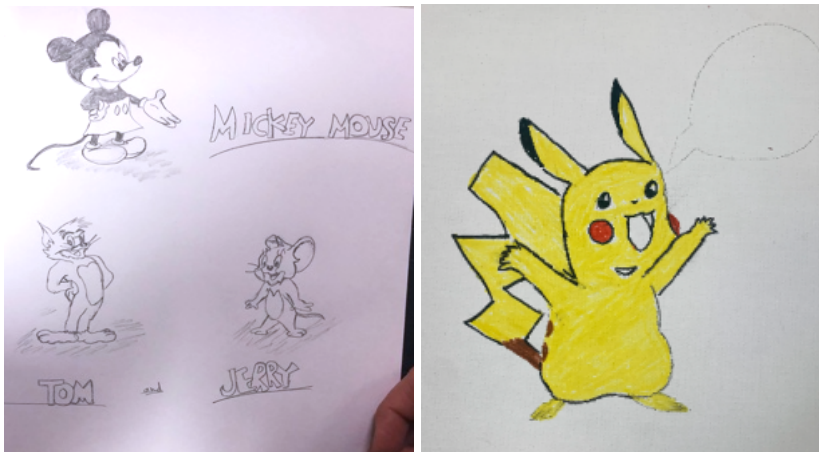




Rayya's drawing of cartoons elicited positive memories, presented in Figure 7. Inspired by cartoons, like Tom and Jerry, Rayya said that she was, "...taking cartoon classes and I love it. I was watching Tom and Jerry, and I was inspired by the cartoon. Tom and Jerry [cartoons] remind me of my childhood days" during session three and four (December 10, 2021). She drew cartoon images at home between sessions. During the member-checking session, Rayya also created a picture of an anime character to evoke memories of her children's happiness while watching cartoons. She expressed, "I remember my kids watching cartoons. When I see them happy, that makes me happy too" (Member checking session, August 24, 2024).

**Figure 7**

*Rayya's Cartoons that "Remind me of my Childhood Days"*



The ability of the artwork created within the group to evoke emotional memories extended beyond the examples mentioned above, as shown in Tables 7 to 11. For example, Rayya depicted a coffee cup, music, and a book to connect to a good memory. She said that "The good memory relates to back home when I would sit outside with music and think back on life. I am thinking about life before, and now." Over the course of the art therapy sessions, a total of 77 artworks were created, each multifaceted and expressive, depicting memories that bridged the Knowledge Holders' past and present emotional experiences. Nostalgic symbols in their artwork may have

served as a means to evoke memories and share lived experiences. Transforming intangible memories into tangible artworks allowed for simultaneous representations and experiences to emerge. Moreover, the symbols, such as flowers depicted in one Knowledge Holder's artwork, could inspire memories in another group member through a dialectical process.

Art therapy, with its emphasis on expressive, multifaceted, sensory-based symbolism, facilitates emotional expression and enriches emotional knowledge by evoking complex memories. Throughout the sessions, art bridged and transcended temporal boundaries, linking memories and present emotions through symbolism and metaphor. Each Knowledge Holder transformed their personal stories and memories into their creations, drawing inspiration from their homeland and childhood. The theme of expanded emotional knowledge through memory elicitation is captured by Hafseen, who said that artmaking helps her remember.

***Theme 2: Artmaking Fosters Care and Safety to Authentically Express***

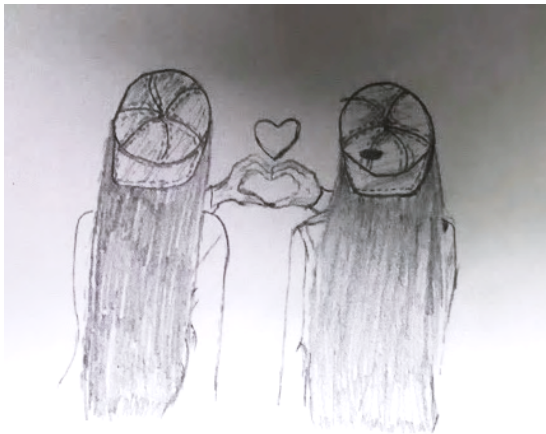
**Secure Bonds Created in the Group.** Amina initially expressed a lack of experience with artmaking during the pre-interview, uncertain about its ability to voice her experiences, despite finding joy in the creative process. However, in the post-interview, Amina emphasized the supportive group environment as a key factor in her ability to articulate herself. Describing the group dynamics, where individuals engaged in art creation under the guidance of an art therapist within a caring space, she expressed how this environment helped her express herself with art. Amina emphasized the significance of meeting new people, engaging in art, and learning more about artworks. She also appreciated the care extended by the artist-researcher-art therapist, stating, "Meeting you, having met you, because you are taking care of people. You care about others" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

Reflecting on the group during the member-checking session, Rayya stated, "We got to know each other, we created friendships. It was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed our time" (Member Checking, August 24, 2023). The Knowledge Holders created artwork representing

positive bonds formed within the group, including between members and myself. Friendship and care emerged as prominent metaphors in the Knowledge Holders' artwork. For example, Rayya conveyed that, "Friendship. A friend is a home. Everyone has a home and can share their homes with one another" (Session 2, November 26, 2021). The connection between friendship, homes, and sharing homes is significant because homes can represent safe places. Offering one's home to others through sharing conveys reciprocity, generosity, and hospitality. The significance of friendship is exemplified in Rayya's drawing of two women together. The image in Figure 8 depicts portraits of Rayya and another group member. Their hands are posed together to form a collective heart.

**Figure 8**

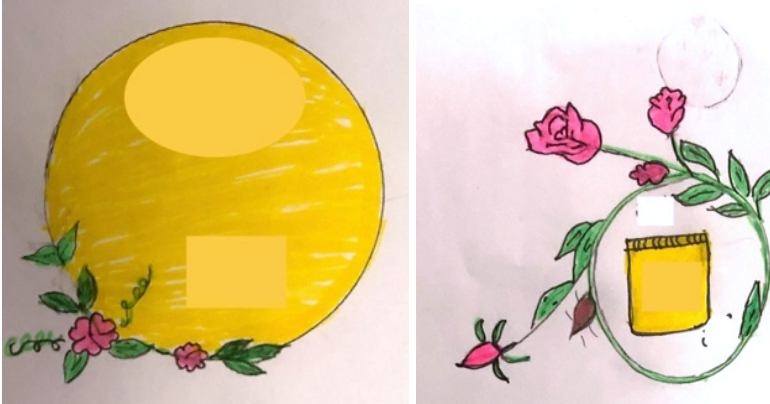
*Rayya's Friendship Because "A friend is a Home"*



In the final session, Hafseen created a symbolic representation of the safe group space with roses in Figures 5 and 9. Names of the group members were written in the yellow square image. The yellow circle represented Hafseen's friendship with Rayya. When describing the images, Hafseen declared, "I have written the names of everyone here. We are all together inside the circle and our names are written in Arabic. This represents our day together" (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 9**

*Hafseen's Circle Representing "Our Day Together"*



The Knowledge Holders also drew portraits of me, which could portray our therapeutic alliance and bond. Guided by the narratives behind the images, the drawings exemplified the positive group bonds that were formed. Amina a portrait of me in session five and communicated that, "I created a drawing of Haley [researcher] because she is pregnant and happy" (Session 5, December 14, 2021) in Figure 10. Mariam also a portrait of me with the final artwork to depict her positive experience of the group on the right side of Figure 10. When describing the image, she said that "This is the computer with Haley's smiling face on it. I drew us all together and I liked gathering here" (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 10**

*Amina and Maryam's Portraits that Depict Me "Pregnant and Happy"*



Maryam also shared that being with me made her feel happy and helped her express emotions related to her isolation from family. When describing a self-portrait of a smiling woman depicted in Figure 11, Maryam disclosed that she felt:

Happy because I'm with you. I'm now feeling happy. My heart feels heavy because I am here, in Canada. Strength is happiness. I like to help people, and I am always in front of people. When you are happy, I am always happy" (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

**Figure 11**

*Maryam's Self-Portrait Being "Happy Because I'm With You"*



During the post-interviews, various Knowledge Holders expressed that they enjoyed developing relationships with me, which may exemplify that they felt safe, and we had a positive relationship, despite the language barriers and connecting virtually across Provinces. Amina said, "And I am very happy because I met you and had the opportunity to get to know you." Amina also shared that, "Thank you for taking care of us, and what you gave us, for everything that you gave us" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Similarly, Rayya stated that, "I also appreciate you and it was really nice to meet you, and I like the way you laugh, your smile and...I hope [wish] you all the best..." (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

**Safe and Comfortable Spaces Depicted in Art.** The Knowledge Holder' choice of environmental motifs in their artwork, such as flowers and the ocean, indicates their inclination to recreate soothing surroundings, potentially eliciting feelings of safety and tranquility. For

example, in Maryam's description of the ocean presented above, she shared that being by the ocean brought her comfort. Moreover, Hafseen's shared memories of bringing flowers into her home in Syria and Canada, described in her narrative above, increased her well-being.

Homes and houses could represent comfort, cleanliness, contentment, domesticity, and productivity in the Knowledge Holders' artwork. Maryam depicted homes from the outside with an emphasis on the outdoor landscapes surrounding the homes represented in Figure 12. When describing one of the homes, she articulated that, "I drew my house, and I am looking from the porch. I am looking at my kids and I like that. I like the house to be clean, done with my laundry. Everything is done by the time my husband and kids come home. I am happy when I am productive" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

**Figure 12**

*Maryam's Houses*



In Rayya's check-in drawings during sessions three, four, and five, she created images that represent safe, nurturing, and comforting environments with friends. For example, on the right side of Figure 13, Rayya created an image of coffee, a book, and music. She shared that:

The good memory relates to back home when I would sit outside with music and think back on life. I am thinking about life before, and now. I enjoy relaxing when in the house, drinking coffee, and chatting together with friends. (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

The image on the right side of Figure 13 portrays a peaceful indoor scene where a man and a woman are looking outside at snow from the window. Rayya conveyed that the image illustrated the following:

This is a man and a woman sitting by a window around a table. They are sitting together on two chairs and snow is falling outside the window. The person in the art is feeling good while sitting and watching the snow is falling from the window. It is a puzzle room, and it is calming to be in that space (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 13**

*Rayya's Memories Where "It is Calming to Be in the Space"*



The examples from narratives and artwork presented suggest that the Knowledge Holders could have experienced a sense of care and safety in art therapy through the relationships and through artmaking, which created an environment conducive to self-expression. The theme of positive social bonds and safety is essential for authentic storytelling for the Knowledge Holders and is well-known in the field of clinical psychotherapy and counselling (de Witte et al., 2022). Creating a secure space, facilitated by positive relationships among Knowledge Holders and the art therapist, is crucial for genuine verbal and artistic expression. The Knowledge Holders emphasized the importance of a welcoming and safe environment for self-expression by symbolizing safe spaces and relationships in their artworks. Moreover, the Knowledge Holders also communicated the importance of meeting new people and developing friendships when they

summarized their experiences of the art therapy sessions. The third research question of this study delves into how the social bonds were created between the Knowledge Holders through artmaking.

### ***Theme 3: Artmaking Enhances Mood to Facilitate Expression***

The Knowledge Holders in the study expressed that art could increase emotional well-being and reduce negative emotions. Hafseen explained that she was interested in participating in the art therapy because “Mainly, I will feel less depression through this program because my son has [a chronic illness].” She elaborated that, “art makes you feel better. Makes you feel less depressed and change your life to better mood” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021).

In the pre-interview on November 9, 2021, Amina expressed that art could help people feel relaxed and calm. She said that “Art makes, like relief and makes the mind feel more relaxed, sometimes when you look at art or if you draw something.” Similarly, Maryam felt that artmaking helped bring emotional relief and help her relax when she communicated that, “I love art. I am happy when I am doing it, and I feel like, relaxed, you know?” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

**Positive Group Experiences.** When reflecting on the art therapy group during the post-interviews and member-checking sessions, the Knowledge Holders stated that they enjoyed it. Maryam shared that she appreciated the group and meeting with others when she said that:

When I started with the art therapy with you at the group, I didn’t understand what kind of happened exactly, like the full picture ...But, after all, I really liked what we did together, and discussion, and drawing, and talking to you, and like expressing this kind of stuff. (Maryam, Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Amina voiced that, “I am very happy with the group, with everything” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Hafseen believed that, “In general, it was good, and I like the group and the way that I participated in the group, and the relations with the other members. And I wasn’t



expecting something different” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Rayya said that “It was really wonderful, and I liked it [the group]” (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

During the member-checking session, Maryam and Rayya reflected on their positive experiences of the group. Maryam stated, “I really enjoyed my time. I learned that I have to live my life, and life is beautiful, if you want to make it” (Member Checking, August 24). Rayya concurred with Maryam and expressed, “It was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed our time” (Member Checking, August 24, 2023).

**Positive Changes Reflected in Art.** Changes in emotions experienced by the Knowledge Holders were documented in my session notes. In my reflexive documentation of the art therapy sessions, I wrote that, “Everyone seems energized at the end of the session with new things and possibilities, despite wrapping themselves in thick jackets before embracing the winter weather outside. (Session 1 Notes, November 24, 2021).

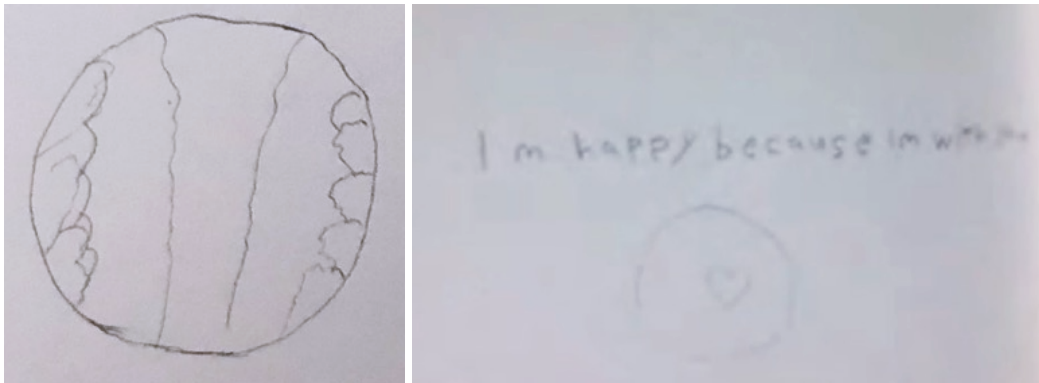
I observed changes in mood during the group check-ins and check-outs, utilizing a small circle as a stimulus. Knowledge Holders were invited to represent their current mood with artistic metaphors, generating a brief (two to five minute) artwork within a small circle with lines, shapes, and colours (Malchiodi & Warson, 2015). The brief nature of the check-ins and check-outs can evoke spontaneous art creation that directly taps into their current emotions (Malchiodi & Warson, 2015). A larger thematic drawing or painting was created in-between the check-ins and outs. This process can help me understand the group members’ current emotional state. Simultaneously, it creates a way for the Knowledge Holders to connect with one another through empathetic resonance (Brinck, 2018; Franklin, 2010; Weber, 2008) by sharing their emotions in a consistent ritual. Moreover, the check-ins and check-outs serve as valuable data, qualitatively and artistically revealing mood shifts that occur at the beginning and at the end of the group sessions.

An example of an emotional shift observed during the check-in and check-out artmaking occurred in Sessions 3 and 4. During the check-in, Maryam expressed stress related to a blizzard

and snow. She depicted her feelings about the blizzard and her journey through the snow. The image on the left side of Figure 14 shows snow on both sides of a small road she traveled to reach the center. By the check-out, Maryam's mood had shifted. At the end of the session, she drew a self-portrait with a smiling face. She also wrote that she felt “happy because I’m with you” with a smiling face (see Figure 11) and an image of a heart with the text on that is presented on the right side of Figure 14.

**Figure 14**

*Maryam’s Blizzard (left) that Changed to Being “Happy Because I’m With You” (right)*



Similarly, Rayya portrayed a shift in her mood through her check-in and check-out artwork. At the beginning of a member checking session, Rayya explained that she felt “like a hurricane” and had created blue swirls that represented her frustration with administrative challenges related to applying for a passport (see Table 5). At the end of the session, Rayya chose the colour white because it represented “hope, happiness, and simplicity” (see Table 7).

In Session 2, Hafseen associated three butterflies with freedom during the check-in, presented on the left side of Figure 15. In the check-out, Hafseen drew an image of a bird at sunset that is sitting on a wall, conveying calmness and relaxation. She expressed that, “It is calm and there is no work to do” (Session 2, November 26, 2021) on the right side of Figure 15. While both images conveyed positive emotions, the second image specifically evoked a sense of tranquility.

**Figure 15**

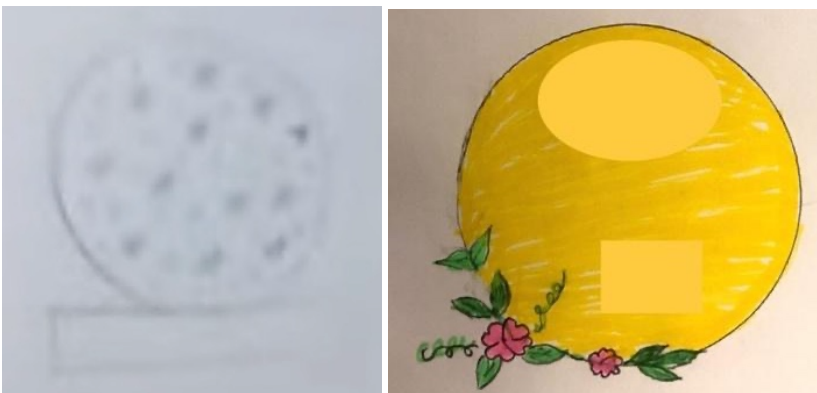
*Hafseen’s Butterflies Representing Freedom and Birds Portraying “Calm and There is No Work”*



During the check-in in Session 5, Hafseen shared her joy about the snowfall outside with an image of a snow globe positioned on the left side of Figure 16. In the check-out, she created an image of a warmer climate with a drawing of sunshine in the summer with flowers. She expressed happiness and included names of herself and her friend inside the bright yellow circle. This artwork emphasized a friendship with another member in the group alongside her frequently used symbol of a rose, representing love (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 16**

*Hafseen’s Snow Globe and Sun Representing Happiness and Joy*



Another example of positive moods depicted at the beginning and end of the sessions occurred in Session 2. Maryam expressed “feeling good” during the check-in with an image of a smiling sun in Figure 17 below. Smiling suns were a common symbol used by Maryam and

Amina who associated the symbol with feeling “bright and sunny.” At the end of the session,

Maryam drew a walking path with sunshine, birds, and palm trees. She voiced that,

My circle depicts the evening. I love to go walking, and I just like to walk in the evening with family because it feels very good. I would do this every day in the summer. I would do this in Syria as well. (Session 2, November 24, 2021)

The pathway drawing can portray a positive affect related to spending time with family on a walk. Often, the Knowledge Holders described images that symbolically depicted comfort, peace, sunshine, and joy in their check-out artwork.

### **Figure 17**

*Maryam’s Sunshine and Pathway*



These examples illustrate how artistic and symbolic check-ins and check-outs, using small circles at the beginning and end of the sessions, could have been meaningful for the Knowledge Holders. They qualitatively and artistically captured their immediate moods or wishes. The Knowledge Holders' statements and artworks highlight how the art therapy sessions and the act of artmaking can evoke positive emotions, fostering the sharing of experiences with one another.

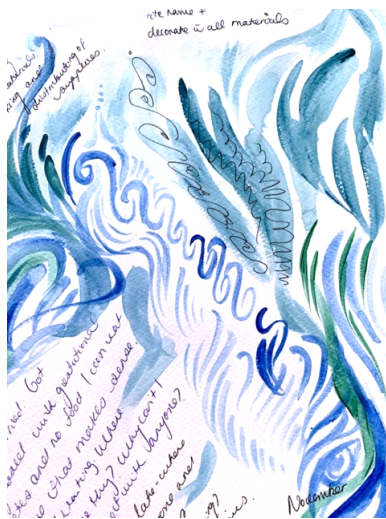
I also noted a shift in my own mood that I documented in the reflexive session notes. I felt a shift from stress to happiness after each session and enjoyed the time spent with the Knowledge Holders, despite the physical distance. Conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic felt stressful because some sessions quickly rescheduled before the holidays began. There was pressure to complete the data collection process before my twins were born in January.

Cancellations occurred due to rooms being double-booked, difficulty coordinating transportation during a very busy time for the settlement organization, and my own health issues related to the late stages of a medicalized pregnancy. Researchers have noted that, “Pregnant women expecting twins are more likely to experience stress, which can lead to anxiety and depression” (Zhou et al., 2022, p. 1). Before the first art therapy session, I wrote that,

Late. Worried. Got diagnosed with gestational diabetes and there is no food that I can eat at home that makes sense. Waiting. Where are they? Why can't I connect with anyone? 20 minutes late. Where is everyone and what's happening? Very nervous. The room was double-booked (Session One Notes, November 24, 2021)

### Figure 18

#### *Session 1 Arts-Based Reflexive Notes Reflecting Personal Changes from Worry to Happiness*



The images I created during the art therapy check-ins, shown in Figure 18, were often not shared with the Knowledge Holders. They consisted of blue spirals and clouds, reflecting my stress and fatigue. I typically did not share my own artwork at the beginning of the session because it reflected stressful emotions, and I wanted to prioritize the Knowledge Holders' experiences. I chose to share artwork when it reflected group dynamics, validated the Knowledge Holders' experiences, and contributed to framing their emotions to enhance their well-being and comfort in a therapeutic way.

During the first session and at the end of the art therapy group, I noticed that facilitating the group and spending time with the Knowledge Holders lifted my mood. At the end of the art therapy group, I recalled positive memories of painting live models in St. John's when taking graduate courses at Memorial University, which brought me well-being and happiness. I wrote that, "I remember painting models within studio sessions in St. John's. That focus and undivided attention was so soothing and therapeutic for me." (Session One Notes, November 24, 2021). In addition, during session two, I created an image of a purple cloud that looked like a brain in Figure 19 and wrote that I felt tired at the beginning of the session. In addition, I felt stressed about childcare and emotional issues due to my pregnancy. I wrote:

Planning the changes...Makes me want to cry, being away from my son. The constant unknown in planning makes me cry. I am so on-edge and teary-eyed this morning, just trying to hold back tears from the past couple of days. Hard to find childcare and all I want to do is be with my child (Session Two Notes, November 26, 2021).

**Figure 19**

*Session 2 Arts-Based Reflexive Image Created During the Check-in at the Beginning of the Session*



At the end of the session, I created a bright sunflower that represented the feeling, "Brighter, more focused" (Session 2 notes, November 26, 2021) in Figure 20.

**Figure 20**

*Session 2 Arts-Based Reflexive Image Created at the End of the Session*



Finally, at the end of the member-checking session that occurred more than one year after the art therapy group, I found that being with the Knowledge Holders increased my mood during the check-out component (see Table 6). I reflected that these changes were related to the Knowledge Holders' gracious demeanour, creating artwork together, and spending time with one another, despite the distance. I was also grateful for them to share their time and participate. I shared that, "Every time I meet with you guys, I have felt so much brighter after. So, I am also just really, so happy that you came. Happy that you are here. Thank you" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023). Therefore, the artwork created at the beginning and end of the sessions captured shifts in affect, particularly towards positive moods.

***Theme 4: Artmaking Expands Communication Through Symbolism and Metaphor***

The thread running through all art therapy sessions and the researcher's reflexive artwork is the active use of art as a symbolic language, conveying complex emotional experiences that extend verbal expression. With lines, shapes, textures, colors, and symbolic images, the symbolic artwork helped the Knowledge Holders to express embodied and ineffable experiences that may be too difficult to articulate with words. The ability to express experiences beyond verbal language is meaningful because the Knowledge Holders and I were from different cultures and spoke different first languages (Kolah, 2023).

The symbolic communication in art, which could transcend language barriers, provided an accessible way for the Knowledge Holders to articulate complex feelings and experiences.

Maryam shared that artmaking helped her express her experiences, especially when her children were asleep at night, though she found it difficult to explain how. She said that:

First of all, yes, but I can't explain how...Yea, it's hard to explain. Usually when my children go to sleep at night, and to be quiet and I can do whatever I want. Into art and drawing" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Examples of symbolic images that conveyed emotional expression beyond verbal communication can be seen in the following instances. This theme was also central to my research analysis practice, as represented in Figures 44–56. The artwork created during the art therapy groups (Tables 8–11) and the member-checking session (Table 4) is rich in metaphoric symbols. For instance, Rayya drew an image of crying eyes to express her sadness about leaving her home and family (see Table 11). This drawing, accompanied by an Arabic poem about her father, became a powerful expression of her emotions about loss. In Session 5, her quick drawing of a man and a woman by a window with snow falling portrayed a sense of calmness and enjoyment. Rayya expressed that “it is calming to be in that space” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

In Sessions 3 and 4, Rayya painted a tree with broken branches to represent “family and the tree branches are broken. The branches are also those who had been lost in my family” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). Moreover, in this painting embedded with symbolism, Rayya created an “imbalanced scale, which is another symbol of no balance.” These symbols, along with a broken heart and dripping blood portrayed that, “No one stood next to our family or helped us during the war, except Canada” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Other examples include the following symbolic artworks that were drawn and painted throughout the art therapy sessions. Hafseen's drawing of sunshine in the summer with flowers in Session 5 represented her feelings of happiness: “I feel very happy, with my name and my friend's names written inside of the circle” (Table 9; Session 5, December 14, 2021). Moreover,



her heart painting with a heartbeat created in session one symbolized that, “I love life, and life is beautiful” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). In the post-interview, Hafseen highlighted her painting of roses as the most meaningful artwork created because it symbolized love. She explained that the artwork “has this very big meaning and it tells different stories” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Hafseen’s artwork in session two conveyed her desire for freedom, depicted through a drawing of butterflies.

Maryam represented her value for peace and justice with images of doves, a balancing scale, a cup of coffee, houses in tranquil landscapes, and the ocean throughout various sessions (see Table 10 for the artworks). Moreover, her self-portrait with a Quran depicted her pride in her religion. She said, “I am proud of my religion and that connects me to this life, and to my God” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

Amina symbolically drew a portrait of me pregnant in Session 5. For Amina, motherhood and children symbolized happiness and hope (Table 8). Moreover, she associated her drawings of children playing with joy and hope. For example, at the end of Session 2, Amina created an image of a woman and said that “I wish for every woman to see, and every woman to have a child, to not be alone, and to have hope” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

The Knowledge Holders expertly depicted their experiences and emotions with rich and impactful symbolism throughout the art therapy sessions and member-checking session. When viewing their artwork and reading the descriptions in Tables 9-11, the art enhances the descriptions and often speaks for itself. Therefore, the symbolic art can help the Knowledge Holders express their lived experiences through metaphor.

**Research Question 2: How can artmaking in a safe group setting help this population express their experiences of belonging and well-being in an online art therapy group?**

In exploring the role of artmaking for Syrian refugee mothers in a hybrid online art therapy group, I invited the Knowledge Holders to reflect on and express their experiences of

well-being and belonging. The Knowledge Holders created symbolic drawings and paintings using their chosen materials to convey their sense of belonging and well-being during and between the art therapy sessions. The creation of 77 images throughout and between the sessions, depicting themes of belonging, well-being, and current emotional experiences, highlights the Knowledge Holders' dedication, creativity, and willingness to explore these topics.

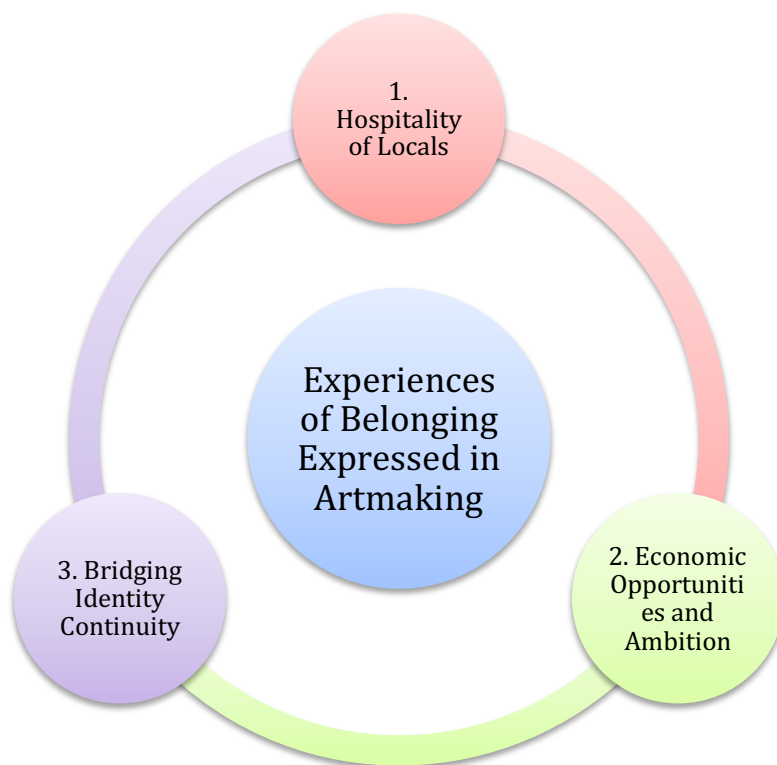
To answer the second research question, I present belonging and well-being as two separate concepts. Meaningful themes emerged from the analysis of the multimodal arts, verbal, and written data using arts-based and qualitative methods. Although the two concepts are presented separately, the experiences of belonging and well-being are interconnected.

### ***Belonging Expressed Through Artmaking***

The Syrian refugee mothers shared their experiences of belonging in St. John's during the interviews and created artwork to explore this strengths-based topic in the art therapy sessions. The Knowledge Holders affirmed a positive sense of belonging in St. John's. Three themes that encapsulate belonging in St. John's emerged. These three themes are depicted as a model in Figure 21. The first theme found that belonging was connected to friendliness, hospitality, and care from people in St. John's (considered locals), with an emphasis on not experiencing discrimination or Islamophobia. The second theme illustrates the Knowledge Holders' sense of belonging through the pursuit of educational goals and access to economic opportunities in St. John's. Lastly, belonging was experienced as the Knowledge Holders bridged their Syrian and Canadian identities in their artwork.

### **Figure 21**

*Model Depicting How Syrian Refugee Mothers Can Express Experiences of Belonging with Artmaking*



*Note.* Figure created by Haley Toll.

***Theme 1: Belonging Felt with Kindness, Friendliness, and Care from Hospitable Locals***

Hafseen, Amina, and Maryam shared positive sentiments about the hospitality and friendliness they have encountered in St. John’s during their pre-interviews. The term “locals” refers to all individuals who resided in NL at the time, with a wide range of backgrounds, cultures, and histories. Amina shared that, “I love this city. I have never been in any other Province, but the people here are friendly, nice, there is no discrimination” (Pre-interview, November 9, 2021). Hafseen expressed that, “I feel really good here. Good hospitality and people are friendly. And in general, good.” (Pre-interview, November 19, 2021). Rayya’s answer was inaudible due to phone static and the line cutting out. However, Maryam, who had lived in St. John’s for more than five years, provided answers consistent with those of her peers. She stated that, “I am so happy here, to be here in St. John’s, and I won’t think of moving from here...It’s

really nice here. People are really nice and helpful” (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). Amina elaborated on her experience in her post-interview. She said:

I feel like I am very happy here, especially with the community, and like I get to learn more new things. Like I had been with the group. I would like to learn more thing, to be able to.

I like it here. I like to make friends. I love people, and love to be positive, you know? In general, I don't have many connections with people, but people are nice, and the city is a nice place and environment. The connections that I have right now are mostly in Arabic, because of my language. I don't know how to speak English very well, so, yea. But, in general the environment is very positive and a good environment to live. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

The Knowledge Holders connected feeling happy to their experience of belonging. In the post-interview, Maryam declared, “I like it here. People here are so friendly, and no discrimination or something like that, and it's like diversity of the people. But the only complaint is the weather, that's all” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Rayya shared that, “First of all, I am really happy to be here with my children” (Post-interview, December 22, 2021). Hafseen communicated similar sentiments in her interview, highlighting the importance of schools to her experience of belonging. She said that,

I like it very very much here. It's like even better than my back home. So... liking it ... Like schools are good. Education was bad back home, but here it's better. Not only the English, but in general. Education is really important (yea). I was unhappy in Lebanon. I had three and a half years in Lebanon...They didn't allow my children to attend the school. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

### ***Theme 2: Belonging Experienced through Economic Opportunities and Ambition***

The Knowledge Holders connected their experience of belonging in St. John's to their access to educational and work opportunities in their art and during their interviews. Maryam summarized that, “Life here [in Canada] requires you to get out and work, and to get out of your comfort zone” (Member Checking Session, August 24, 2023). Amina consistently linked her sense of belonging to her desire to work, emphasizing her experience in healthcare in Syria in her drawings. In St. John's, she hoped to get a job in the same field. During her pre-interview, Amina stated that, “I want to work and love to work” (November 9, 2021). She wanted the art therapy

group to help her gain skills that she could apply to the healthcare sector. Amina revisited her desire to work in healthcare and senior care during the post-interview when she discussed the most meaningful artworks that she created. She specified that, “My preference [favorite artwork created during the sessions] is between the hospital building or the senior people’s house” (December 16, 2021). She expressed her aspiration to work in a nursing home in St. John’s, explaining that,

I will choose the nursing home, and I would describe it like, I would like someone who would take care of me when I become old. Because I would like to help them, provide them care, and teach them, so that’s what I would choose. We should be taking care of all of them because when they become old, they are like kids because we need to give them more attention and care (December 16, 2021).

Amina's connection to healthcare is represented in her drawings of a hospital and a nursing home in Figure 22. She explained, “This is the hospital, where the brown pieces represent hospital beds. I like to work with seniors. I would like to work and bring my family here. I hope is to get similar work and support my family in St. John’s” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). In another session, she highlighted her experience in caregiving, stating that the image that she had created was of the geriatric centre where she used to work.

I want to work in senior care homes, and I also used to care for seniors, and also for my grandfather. I was living with my grandparents, and I was also taking care of a colleague who was 82 years old when I was living in Syria” (Session 2, November 26, 2021).

Amina’s desire to improve the well-being of seniors through her work highlights the connection she has established between her sense of belonging and the use of her valuable skills. The images in Figure 22 depict screenshots of drawings crafted with pencil and paint. However, the intricate details of various rooms within the building, alongside Amina's self-portrait engaged in caregiving (featured on the left side of the right image), are somewhat challenging to discern. Amina's careful attention to detail and spatial arrangement suggest that she was creating maps depicting her memories of the geriatric home and hospital facilities. Her meticulous attention to detail highlights the significance of her work in hospitals and senior centers.

**Figure 22**

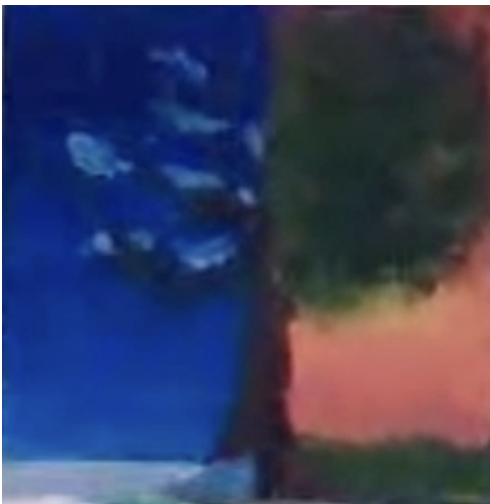
*Amina's Artwork Depicting Her Work in Senior's Care Homes and Hospitals Representing Belonging*



In addition, Maryam represented her time working in Canada through a painting of a tree with two seasons in Figure 23. She said, “I have been working for two semesters, and one side represents the winter semester, while the other side of the tree represents the Fall semester” (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

**Figure 23**

*Maryam's Tree Representing Two Semesters of Work*



The Knowledge Holders also placed a higher priority on developing entrepreneurship skills than on participating in groups focused on emotional expression when envisioning next steps. When asked about their next steps after the art therapy group, Rayya and Maryam expressed interest in entrepreneurship workshops to help them develop a business for selling their artwork. They wanted to contribute financially to support themselves and their families. When sharing images of the flower wall decorations she had crafted, Rayya explained that:

I would like to start and work like that... I had a session at [a location]. I don't mind teaching it [crafts] and doing it for work, for sessions, but I want my own kind of job or business...I don't want to volunteer. I want work. (Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023).

Maryam agreed when she said that “I also want to learn about a new thing. Life here requires you to get out and work” (Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023). The social worker and interpreter who was present during the member-checking session were able to connect them to existing female newcomer entrepreneurship programs.

The theme of ambition and its connection to the Knowledge Holders’ sense of belonging in St. John’s is reflected in their expressed desire to learn more about art, life in the city, and English. Amina and Hafseen both expressed a goal of acquiring new skills in St. John’s. Amina emphasized her eagerness to learn within the local community, noting the positive impact of education on her well-being when discussing her experience of belonging in St. John’s. During her post-interview, she communicated, “I feel like I am very happy here, especially with the community, and like I get to learn more new things, like I had been able to do with the group. I would like to learn more things” (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Amina mentioned at the start of the post-interview that she would appreciate help practicing her English with a native speaker. She expressed that:

I am very happy with the group, with everything, and I am wondering, will I be able to have teacher that will help me improve my English? Yes, I am going to the school, I think two days per week, but I am not improving ...because when we are meeting with the class, we are speaking Arabic. When I go home, I speak Arabic as well. So, I am asking if I can get more help to practice English more. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

Similarly, during her pre-interview, Hafseen shared that,

I'd like to learn more here in St. John's and do whatever it takes to learn and get experience. Yes, because of the disaster that is happening in Syria, I sometimes feel very bad, but this may help me to overcome or surpass the problems (November 19, 2021).

During the art therapy sessions and interviews, the Knowledge Holders shared that their sense of belonging is closely linked to achieving their career and educational goals through their art and dialogue. Their interest in entrepreneurial endeavors, where they sell their arts and crafts, reflects the connection between contributing to society, belonging, and well-being in St. John's.

### ***Theme 3: Belonging Increased by Bridging Identity Continuity***

The Knowledge Holders created artwork that symbolically connected their past and present experiences in Newfoundland and Labrador to their Syrian roots. This sense of continuity between diverse cultural identities across different landscapes and nations may strengthen their sense of belonging. In Figure 24, Maryam created a portrait depicting a reunited family, with the Syrian flag in the top right corner of the image and the Canadian flag in the top left. Maryam expressed her wish for her family to reunite when they all visit Syria together, and she also reflected on her journey to Canada. The juxtaposition of the flags, along with Maryam's description, highlights her deep connection to both countries, with Canada representing peace and love for her. When describing her family portrait, Maryam said:

My family would like to visit [Syria] soon, and I will be with them soon. My husband is in Syria. Before the war, we were together in [location]. When the war started, my family got displaced and we went to Saudi Arabia, Syria, America, and Canada. I am praying that we get the chance to be together. The Canadian flag is in the top left corner, and Canada feels like home because we live in peace and love here. If I could, I would like to meet my family at our house in Syria with my parents, brother, and sister. I have 16 brothers and sisters. Even if I couldn't be back in Syria, would like to see my family. My parents are still in Syria and have one brother in America. Everyone is now everywhere. (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

### **Figure 24**

*Maryam's Artwork Reuniting Her Family*





Additionally, Rayya's painting of a broken tree in Figure 25 features various symbols that convey her feelings of grief, loss, despair, and hope for Syria. She explained the painting (Figure 25) as follows:

The tree represents family, and the tree branches are broken. The branches are also those who had been lost in my family. On the left-hand side, there is an imbalanced scale, which is another symbol of no balance. No one stood next to our family or helped us during the war, except Canada. Therefore, the flag and the ground are full of dripping red blood. I included a broken heart of the Syrian people who fell, and the green grass belongs to the tree. These symbols, and the grass are meant for people who have lost their lives and the houses that have been destroyed. In the left corner under the scale, there are buildings being destroyed. The image is titled, "In God we Trust." (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

During the post-interviews, Rayya re-examined the image she had created, which she gave to her neighbor, who was deeply touched by the artwork. Rayya shared that:

The family tree I was talking about was about Syria and almost my family or relatives were missing and maybe dead because of the war and I tried to [draw] my feelings to [show]... when I was back in Syria. I drew destroyed buildings and houses. And I drew a balance, or something like that, because all the country did not do anything towards the people there... And it wasn't fair... My neighbour, she likes it, and she took it... I like it and I drew it already" (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

The emotional resonance and impact of the artworks can extend beyond the art therapy sessions, influencing the creator's ability to connect with the broader local community. For instance, Rayya's neighbor's emotional response and validation of her artwork, which represented

Rayya's emotions and experiences, demonstrate how artistic expressions can transcend individual stories and evolve into a shared narrative. Through her artwork's representational vision, the artist can be seen and share her perspective. This allows group members, the therapist, and viewers to experience Rayya's world through her eyes, fostering a deeper empathetic understanding of her journey. Rayya's ongoing sense of self, connecting her past hardships in Syria with her faith in God and her search for peace in Canada, was validated and appreciated by both her group members and her neighbor.

**Figure 25**

*Rayya's Symbolic Painting Portraying Loss and Grief, and "In G\*d We Trust"*



The theme of bridging identity continuity through artmaking is evident in Rayya's artwork, which reveals the tragedies, traumas, and losses experienced by herself, her family, and her community. In this instance, her narrative and artwork complement each other, intertwining to tell a deeply emotional story. During the member-checking session, Rayya shared the collective narrative of loss and tragedy linked to her Syrian identity, stating, "It's a really sad past" (Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023). Maryam responded by connecting this shared history to their Syrian identity, saying, "Everyone's facing the same thing. All Syrians are"

(Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023). The collective recounting of loss and tragedy by Rayya and Maryam highlights the shared experiences that bind the Syrian community. This unified narrative is essential for understanding the challenges faced by the Syrian community in St. John's. Creating symbolic artwork around these experiences provides a lens through which to view the world from their perspective and therefore fostering connections and shared belonging. Exploring the collective stories that connect their Syrian homeland to their new life in Canada offers a deeper understanding of the Knowledge Holders' journeys. By encapsulating this unique liminal experience, especially within an art therapy group, a cohesive identity is formed that merges cultural experiences across time and space to create a sense of belonging.

### ***Well-being Expressed Through Artmaking***

The Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's shared their personal ideas about well-being through both interviews and expressive artwork, created during and between art therapy group sessions. By engaging in the creation and sharing of artwork on this topic, they expressed experiences that reflected their subjective perceptions of well-being. While a sense of belonging influenced their well-being, four major themes emerged from the Knowledge Holders that encapsulate different aspects of well-being, as illustrated in Figure 26.

The first theme links well-being to transcendent awe, derived from connections with nature, spirituality (especially Islamic religious practices), and moments of beauty experienced through aesthetic encounters, such as listening to music. The second theme connects well-being to the welfare of their families, with a particular emphasis on their children's happiness and access to opportunities, where children often symbolized hope. The third theme highlights the association between well-being and feelings of safety, rooted in peace, justice, and freedom. Finally, the fourth theme links a resilient and optimistic mindset to experiencing well-being in St. John's.

### **Figure 26**

*Model Depicting How Syrian Refugee Mothers Can Express Well-being Through Artmaking*



*Note.* Figure created by Haley Toll.

***Theme 1: Well-being Experienced Through a Transcendent Sense of Awe Derived from Nature, Spirituality, and Aesthetic Encounters***

**Awe in Nature and Environment.** When exploring the well-being experiences depicted in the artwork of the Knowledge Holders, a sense of awe emerged from the beauty, tranquility, and positive encounters found in nature, music, artistic expressions, and spiritual rituals. In this study, symbols and scenes from nature appeared when the Knowledge Holders explored themes of well-being in Newfoundland and Labrador, as these were often associated with peace and tranquility. Nature became a recurring theme in their artwork, symbolizing beauty, comfort, and a connection to memories. Maryam expressed her love for nature, flowers, and summer, while Amina associated comfort with snow, incorporating it as a motif in her artwork (see Table 8). Hafseen linked her emotions of happiness, freedom, and relaxation to butterflies, birds, sunshine,

sunsets, snow, and flowers. She shared that flowers, particularly roses, held the most meaning for her, as they reminded her of her past work, comfortable spaces, and her sons. Additionally, Rayya connected the color white to her love of nature and positive emotions, stating:

I love nature and, even though, from the inside, there are a lot of emotions, I wish that I picked nature because I love nature, and nature represents hope, happiness, and simplicity. (Member-checking session, August 24, 2023)

Maryam described her love of nature when she shared how evening walks outside with her family brought her well-being in Syria (Figure 27 and Table 10). In addition, the aesthetic experiences and symbolic nature of the seasons brought her well-being, when she described a “House in the Fall beside the river with trees that have no leaves in St. John’s” (Session 2, November 24, 2021). Maryam’s images of flowers symbolized connection between nature and well-being when she shared:

I love nature, green, flowers, trees. I used to have a garden in Syria. When drawing flowers, I try to remember the flowers back home and try to remember back home. (Session 1, November 24, 2021)

I painted roses and jasmine. I love nature and would love to have a house in nature. I also love summer and the smell of the flowers that I had painted. I have roses in my backyard garden and would also buy flowers from the store. I love nature, flowers, and summer” (Session 2, November 24, 2021).

### **Figure 27**

*Maryam’s Artworks that Represent Joy and Well-being Experienced in Nature*



Watching the ocean from the NL coast was a peaceful place for some Knowledge Holders in this study. Maryam also conveyed her love for nature with her paintings of the ocean in Figure 3. Describing her images, she said that:

I like watching the ocean and seeing the waves. I feel comfortable watching the water and the birds and the sea. They are also wonderful to draw. I went on a trip to St. John's on Harper Road. I liked the view, and I try to separate from myself, to feel like I am in the current. Seeing the ocean brings me to another world" (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

I love watching the ocean and the water, and that makes me very happy and at peace when I am. I feel like I am in a different place when I see it... Yes, whenever I see water, it brings happiness... It brings my husband and I together as well. Whenever we have any work to do, we both go and to the ocean, or the pond, or the river. That brings my honeymoon back... It's a time for bonding... but if I would, I would picture myself on the boat visiting my family... Whenever I see boats or cruises, I look at them, and I imagine that I am on one of them that would take me to see my family. My family [would be on the boat]. We would all go together. Inshallah. Realistically, it would be on a plane, but it's just, it's just that I hope to see them. I love the ocean and water. I forget the world when I look at it (emotional and teary-eyed)" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

[I would place this artwork at] The entrance of the house. I also have this [pointing to her painting of the ocean] painting in my entrance. This one, because I feel that it brings hope... As soon as you open the door, you see it in front of your face. (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

Finally, the Knowledge Holders drew snow as a metaphor to represent feelings, such as in Figure 28. Amina shared that she loved snow and often shared images of snowmen or animals, such as a polar bear or penguins, which brought her joy.

### **Figure 28**

*Depictions of Snow or Creatures in the Snow by the Knowledge Holders*



The link between newcomer refugee's belonging and well-being in nature in St. John's is noteworthy. The healing influence of green and blue zones on well-being emerged in the

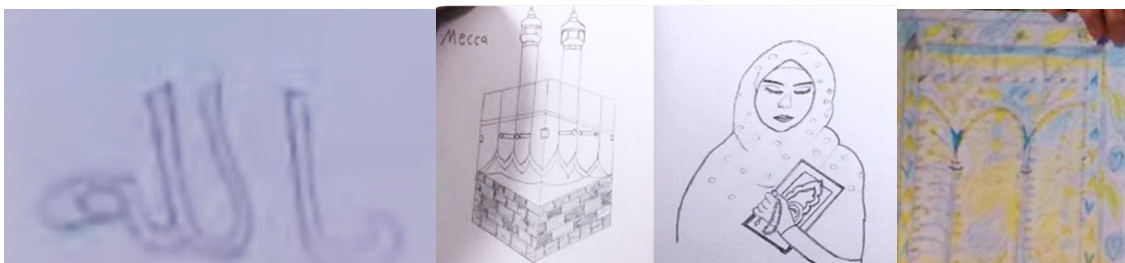
Knowledge Holders' stories and symbolic art featuring flowers, landscapes, and the ocean. The narratives and artworks of the Knowledge Holders highlight nature's role in nurturing well-being and fostering belonging among newcomer refugees.

***Spiritual and Religious Awe.*** The Knowledge Holders connected their well-being to religious and spiritual experiences rooted in their Islamic faith and Muslim identity, both through their artwork and during interviews and group discussions. Rayya’s inclusion of the phrase “In God We Trust” in her artwork, which depicted the injustice, loss, and pain of the Syrian war, reflects her spiritual values and faith in God. She represented this in a calligraphy on the left side of the image in Figure 29 (see also Table 11). Amina created a detailed image of a prayer mat, adorned with gold and blue details (see the far right of Figure 29 and Table 8). In Sessions 3 and 4, Maryam shared a drawing of Mecca, expressing her desire to visit Mecca and the Kaaba (Figure 29, Table 7). Reflecting on the artwork that resonated most with her from the group, Maryam pointed to her self-portrait with a Quran (mid-right side of Figure 29, Table 7). She said,

One thing that stands out to me is this drawing, the lady that is holding her Quran, her holy book. I am proud of my religion, and that connects me to this life, and to my God. That's what makes me happy. That's what stands out... My life is really nice. It's very beautiful. (Member-checking, August 24, 2023)

### **Figure 29**

#### *Maryam’s Well-being Experienced in Religious Practice*



Maryam’s description of the significance of faith in her life, enhancing her happiness while connecting her to “this life” and “my God,” illustrates the impact of spirituality on her well-being. The artworks emphasize the interconnection between religious beliefs, a sense of purpose,

well-being, and a connection to something greater than oneself, which can be linked to feelings of awe. Religious expressions, such as “Inshallah” (meaning God willing), were commonly used in conversations among the Knowledge Holders to convey humility and hope, depending on God’s will.

*Aesthetic Beauty in the Ordinary and Art.* Throughout the study, the Knowledge Holders created artwork reflecting the everyday joys in their lives. They connected these pleasant aesthetic experiences such as enjoying a good cup of coffee, admiring a beautiful perfume bottle, or listening to music with their sense of well-being. This aesthetic appreciation linked to happiness is captured in Hafseen’s statement, “I love life, and life is beautiful,” which she expressed through a drawing of a heart with a heartbeat (see Table 9).

In Session 2, Amina shared drawings created at home that depicted objects, experiences, and images encountered between the art therapy sessions. These included candle holders, perfume bottles, flowers, a prayer mat, streets in St. John’s, snowmen, penguins, and many other images. These drawings are presented in Table 8 and examples are detailed in Figure 30. Amina’s intent with these sketches was to explore “their beauty through art” (Amina, Session 2, November 26, 2021). When discussing the images she sketched at home, Amina explained she created them because they were beautiful. For instance, she shared, “I love candles” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). Reflecting on the meaning of art in her life, Amina connected it to both beauty and relief, stating, “Art is beauty, just gorgeous. And, it makes, like relief” (Amina, Pre-interview, November 9, 2021).

**Figure 30**

*Amina’s Drawings Representing “Their Beauty Through Art”*





A common pleasurable everyday experience depicted by the Knowledge Holders was drinking coffee. Amina shared that, “I prefer coffee and breakfast and to look through the window. I like the snow and the white color of the snow. I feel comfortable” with a table setting depicted on the left side of Figure 31. Maryam, Amina, and Rayya also drew images of coffee featured in Figure 31. Rayya shared an image that depicted a positive memory of drinking coffee with friends while pondering life and listening to music on the right side of Figure 31. She expressed that:

The good memory relates to back home when I would sit outside with music and think back on life. I am thinking about life before, and now. I enjoy relaxing when in the house, drinking coffee, and chatting together with friends. (Session 3 & 4)

**Figure 31**

*Amina, Maryam, and Rayya’s Drawings of Coffee Representing Positive Emotions*



Hafseen believed that the emotions evoked while listening to Arabic and Iraqi music helped her cope with sadness, as illustrated in her image of a guitar, music notes, and a heart with headphones in Figure 32. She shared, “I love Arabic music, and I listen to it when I feel

depressed. I also love Iraqi music that talks about feelings and is emotional. It moves something inside your heart” (Session 2, November 26, 2021). In this narrative, Hafseen emphasizes that the emotional experience of awe, found in the beauty of everyday aesthetic encounters, contributes to her sense of well-being.

**Figure 32**

*Hafseen’s Portrayal of Music That “Moves Something Inside Your Heart”*



The Knowledge Holders created artwork reflecting a variety of awe-inspiring experiences during the art therapy sessions. Their creations evoke both aesthetic and emotional responses, capturing memories and everyday moments that contribute to their sense of well-being through awe. These Syrian refugee mothers expressed awe through symbols related to their interactions with nature, religion, and the beauty they encounter in their daily lives.

***Theme 2: Well-being Connected to Family (Children’s) Well-being and Opportunities***

***Mother’s Well-being Connected to their Children’s Well-being.*** All the Knowledge Holders in this study were mothers, with one grandmother. Throughout the interviews and art therapy sessions, they consistently linked their sense of well-being to their children's happiness and access to educational opportunities. Portraits of their children and families were frequently featured in their artwork, with examples shown in Figure 33.

**Figure 33**

*Maryam's and Amina's Depiction of Children*



As mothers between the ages of 29 and 46, the Knowledge Holders' children were regularly present throughout the research process and played a significant role in their decision-making. Despite expressing concerns during the pre-interviews about potential distractions from caregiving duties while participating in virtual art therapy at home, the Knowledge Holders' children were often present during the sessions, receiving care from staff at the collaborating organization. Many of the younger children accompanied the Knowledge Holders to the art therapy sessions and were cared for on-site by staff members.

Children would often intermittently check-in with their mothers during the art therapy sessions, sitting on their laps and seeking hugs. Furthermore, background sounds of children were frequently heard during the phone interviews. Finally, the fifth potential Knowledge Holder who was about to participate in the study was no longer to attend due to her commitment in caring for her newborn baby.

Throughout the sessions and during the final interviews, the Knowledge Holders often acknowledged my pregnancy. For instance, Rayya expressed her well-wishes, stating, "I hope [wish] you all the best with your pregnancy and your baby" (Post-interview, December 22, 2021). At the conclusion of the interview, Amina also offered her well-wishes and inquired about my

children, saying, “I thank you more for that and for your time, especially like, during you are pregnant and giving your time” (Post-interview, December 26, 2021). During our sessions, Amina also engaged in conversation about our shared experience of motherhood. This excerpt from our conversation illustrates that connection:

Researcher: Perfect, and if you ever want to meet with me, you can speak with [social worker], and she'll be able to connect with me anytime. Thank you.

[Interpreter interpreting English and Arabic. Amina and the interpreter laugh].

Amina: Are they girls, or boys?

Researcher: Oh, yes. So, they are boys, and I also have one and a half right now, so I'll have three boys under two.

Interpreter: Three boys?

Researcher: Three boys under two years old, yeah. [Laughs].

[Interpreter interpreting English and Arabic.]

Amina: God bless them for you. (Post-interview, December 26, 2021)

In my reflexive notes, I reflected on how my pregnancy and the births of all my children influenced the research process, as these events occurred while I was planning and conducting the study. Becoming a mother during this time allowed me to connect more deeply with the Knowledge Holders, who often spoke about their children and their experiences of motherhood. This shared dynamic of motherhood underscored the central role that children played in the lives of the Knowledge Holders and how their presence shaped the direction of the research.

In both their artwork and narratives, each Knowledge Holder linked their well-being to the well-being of their children. For them, children's well-being encompassed happiness, access to opportunities in Canada, and their role as symbols of hope. Children emerged as significant themes in both the artwork and discussions about well-being. Maryam, for example, connected her well-being to her children and family, stating, "I am really happy here, and the most important

thing is that I have a good husband, and my kids are really good too. So, that's what makes it easier for me" (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021). Her depiction of her house and children in her artwork symbolized her happiness when everything was in order and her family was content. Maryam's artwork often featured warm family homes set in natural landscapes, as shown in Figure 12, reflecting her love for a calm and peaceful family life in nature.

Rayya's creation of an image of Pikachu during the data analysis art-making process in the Member-checking session linked her well-being to her children's happiness. In Figure 34, she drew this cartoon character, similar to the joyful depictions of Tom and Jerry in Table 11. Rayya expressed:

I remember my kids watching cartoons. When I see them happy, that makes me happy too. When my kids are happy, I am happy too.... Yea, so if you connect it to my drawings, as long as my kids are happy, I am happy, and it makes me happy to see them watching cartoons. (Member Checking, August 24, 2023).

**Figure 34**

*Rayya's Cartoons Portraying "When I See Them (My Children) Happy, That Makes Me Happy"*



Rayya shared that her drawing of Pikachu depicted "happiness and hope. It brings hope to kids when they're watching" (Member-Checking, August 24, 2023). She chose to place the painting on top of her child's bed because, "he loves drawings, and he loves cartoons." Rayya hoped the painting would bring her child joy and hope.

The symbol of joyful and playful children emerged as a metaphor for hope. For instance, during the member-checking session, the Knowledge Holders were asked to summarize their emotional experiences with a color. Rayya explained, “We have an expression in Arabic that says, 'May your path be white,' which means 'may you have a bright future.' So, I wish that my kids have a bright future with that color” (Member-Checking, August 24, 2023). Through the symbolic metaphor of white, she connected her emotional experience to her hope for her children’s future.

In Sessions 3 and 4, Rayya ended an emotionally powerful session by discussing how children represent hope. She explained, “Kids are always hopeful. They are always following or surrounding us. There are smiles, hopefulness, and sunshine with two people holding hands” while describing the right-side drawing in Figure 34 (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). Similarly, on the left side of Figure 35, Amina shared a similar sentiment, showing an image of children playing. She expressed, “Kids are inside the circle, like kids around the world are playing” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

**Figure 35**

*Rayya and Amina’s Drawings of Children Representing Playfulness and Hope*



In Session 2, Amina concluded her experience of the session by creating an image that represented a benevolent wish for women, as shown in Figure 36. She expressed, “I wish for

every woman to see, and every woman to have a child, to not be alone, and to have hope”  
(Session 2, November 26, 2021).

**Figure 36**

*Amina’s Wish for “Every Woman to Have a Child...and Have Hope”*



***Children’s Access to Education and Future Opportunities.*** When the Knowledge Holders discussed their experiences of well-being and belonging during the interviews and art therapy sessions, they emphasized that their well-being was closely tied to hope, particularly regarding their children's access to education and opportunities in Canada. Maryam encapsulated this sentiment in her post-art therapy session interview, stating, "When I see my children going to school, getting an education, and being safe, that is well-being for me" (Maryam, Post-interview, December 24, 2021). Maryam also created an image of a school to represent her experiences of belonging and well-being. Describing the image in Figure 37, she explained, "This is a school in St. John's called [school]. My children go there. I have hope for my kids and hope that they will stay in school" (Maryam, Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

**Figure 37**

*Maryam’s Drawing of her Children’s School Representing Well-being*





Likewise, Hafseen shared in an individual interview that her experience of well-being and belonging in St. John's is closely tied to her children's access to education. She asserted:

I like it very very much here. It's like even better than my back home. I like the schools, which are good. The education system [schools] was bad back home, but here it's much better. I was unhappy in Lebanon. I had spent three and a half years in Lebanon. My children didn't go to school. They didn't allow my children to attend the school (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021).

Rayya similarly connected her well-being to her children's access to education:

First of all, I am really happy to be here with my children. I already said, well-being here in St. John's, (is) with my children. I really like how Canada treats me as a part of the community and I am happy that my children how study at school because they stopped studying during the war and this is like, gives me emotional and good feelings and good experiences (Post-interview, December 22, 2021)

Through conversations and artwork, children emerged as symbols of hope for the Knowledge Holders, representing happiness and educational opportunities. As a result, their children's well-being and aspirations became deeply intertwined with their own sense of well-being. This connection, rooted in their roles as mothers and grandmothers, reflected the Knowledge Holders' hopes for their children's future and influenced their decisions to participate in the study.

***Theme 3: Well-being Connected to Safety, Peace, Justice, and Freedom***



The theme of safety emerged in the Knowledge Holders' artwork and discussions, highlighting their experiences of well-being and belonging. In their creations, symbols of safety were tied to feelings of hope for peace, freedom, and justice. During the Member-checking session, as the emergent themes were summarized, Rayya expressed her commitment to peace and justice as core elements of her identity, stating, "I love justice, so I like peace, even though I am a little naughty sometimes [laughs]" (Member Checking, August 24, 2023). Rayya's artwork often reflected these aspirations, such as her depiction of two doves in Figure 38 and her symbolic image of a broken tree in Figure 25.

**Figure 38**

**Rayya's Doves Representing "Love and Peace"**



When describing her artwork of a broken family tree in Figure 25, Rayya explained that the symbols represented loss, despair, and the absence of justice and peace in her beloved country. She expressed a longing for justice and peace, with the tree symbolizing family. The broken branches represented those who were missing or deceased. On the left side of the image, an imbalanced scale further symbolized injustice, as it reflected the lack of support for her family during the war, except from Canada. The flag and ground were marked with dripping red blood. Rayya explained, "I included a broken heart of the Syrian people who fell, and the green grass

belongs to the tree” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). Additionally, Rayya elaborated on another image titled “In God We Trust,” explaining its connection to her sense of injustice:

The tree represents family, and the tree branches are broken. The branches are also those who had been lost in my family. On the left-hand side, there is an imbalanced scale, which is another symbol of no balance. No one stood next to our family or helped us during the war, except Canada. Therefore, the flag and the ground are full of dripping red blood. I included a broken heart of the Syrian people who fell, and the green grass belongs to the tree” These symbols, and the grass are meant for people who have lost their lives and the houses that have been destroyed. In the left corner under the scale, there are buildings being destroyed. I wrote and the image is titled, “In God we Trust.” (Session 3 & 4)

The family tree that I was talking about was about Syria and almost my family or relatives were missing and maybe dead because of the war and I tried to [draw] my feelings to [show]... when I was back in Syria. I drew destroyed buildings and houses. And I drew a balance, or something like that, because all the country did not do anything towards the people there... And it wasn't fair. (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

Maryam's artistic expressions featured symbols of peace and justice. She described experiencing peace when gazing at the ocean, which she portrayed in two paintings shown in Figure 3. Additionally, Maryam created an image of doves on the right side of Figure 39, accompanied by the phrase “Peace Bath,” explaining, “I always would like to live in peace” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

The metaphoric portrayal of justice, symbolized by a drawing of a scale, held significant meaning for Maryam. She described this artwork as the most meaningful piece she created during the sessions. Maryam shared, "I would like to find fairness and balance wherever I go. I want to feel happy and comfortable" (Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021). She also described herself as a fair and just person, which is reflected in the artwork. During the post-interview, Maryam further elaborated on this image and said:

I love the art about balance. The scale that I drew represents incredible fairness and impartial, like this kind of, blindfold things. Wherever I go, wherever I live, I love to be fair everywhere. Yes, for me. For all of the world...The scale that I drew represents incredible fairness and impartial, like this kind of, blindfold things...Wherever I go, wherever I live, I love to be fair everywhere... For me. For all of the world.” (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

### **Figure 39**

*Maryam's Scale and Dove Drawings Representing Justice and Peace*



Hafseen's artwork also encapsulated the theme of flight as a representation of peace and freedom. In her check-in during session two, she portrayed her emotions with three butterflies, symbolizing freedom in Figure 15.

The pursuit of safety, interlaced with aspirations for peace, justice, and freedom, emerged as a central theme in the expressions of well-being for the Knowledge Holders. This theme also reflected the personal aspirations and struggles of the Syrian refugee mothers who relocated to St. John's. Symbolic representations in their artwork highlighted how safety-related experiences influenced their lives as they navigated the process of resettlement.

***Theme 4: Well-being Connected to a Resilient and Optimistic Mindset***

During the interviews and art therapy sessions, the Knowledge Holders consistently connected their well-being to resilience and coping strategies, highlighting the importance of maintaining an optimistic mindset. Given that the art therapy group focused on the strengths and resilience of the Syrian refugee mothers, discussions about coping strategies emerged naturally. All the Knowledge Holders approached their participation with grace, gratitude, and positive attitudes, fostering a harmonious and supportive environment.

Maryam shared her insights on cultivating happiness through learned experience: "I've learned how to make myself happy, even if I am not. So, I learned that through time, and I am content with my life, and I am happy with it" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023). Hafseen echoed this sentiment, expressing her love for life's beauty through an image of a heart with a heartbeat (see Table 9). Additionally, Amina, in response to feelings of sadness during session three and four, emphasized the need to "find strength in something" and depicted a woman crying (see Table 8 and Figure 40). This was followed by a drawing of children playing, symbolizing hope.

**Figure 40**

*Amina Sharing "I Need to Find Strength in Something"*



Despite generously offering their time to participate in the group, the Knowledge Holders often expressed gratitude during the interviews and art therapy sessions. For example, at the end of Amina's post-interview, she said: "I thank you more for that and for your time, especially like, during you are pregnant and giving your time" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Maryam also expressed gratitude, communicating: "I appreciate you as well and I am appreciative and feel

pleasure and an honour to do all of that” during the final interview (December 16, 2021). Rayya expressed appreciation and well-wishes during the pandemic when she said:

I also appreciate you and I really nice to meet you and I like the way you laugh, your smile and...I hope [wish] you all the best with your pregnancy and your baby. And for you to be safe. (Post-interview, December 22, 2021).

The theme of connecting well-being to resilience and coping strategies, marked by a positive outlook and gratitude, permeates the narratives and artworks of the Knowledge Holders, who created pieces representing well-being and belonging in Tables 8-11. Additionally, their artwork and narratives about their children as symbols of hope emphasize the significance of familial aspirations and positive identification with the role of a mother, as seen in Figures 32-37. Furthermore, appreciating small everyday aesthetic experiences also plays a role in coping, as depicted in Figures 30-32. Throughout the interviews and art therapy sessions, the Syrian refugee mothers demonstrated the power of maintaining optimism, finding strength in shared struggles, envisioning a better future for new generations, and embracing coping mechanisms to navigate the challenges of displacement and resettlement. This resilience was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the Knowledge Holders adapted and chose to participate in an in-person art therapy group as soon as meeting restrictions were lifted.

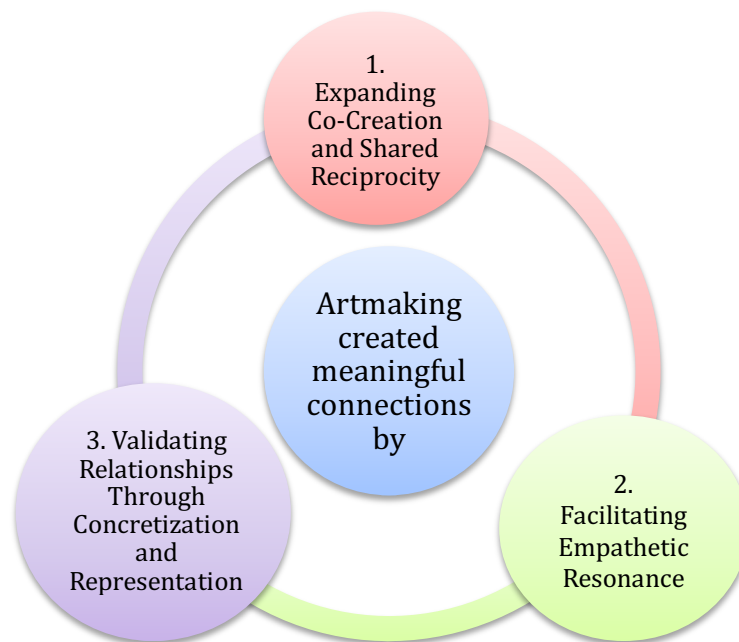
**Research Question 3: How can artmaking in an online art therapy group help create meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders (Knowledge Holders)?**

The final research question investigated how artmaking may generate meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders in the online hybrid art therapy group. Through examining the artworks created, conducting interviews, reflecting on artwork, and reviewing session notes using qualitative and arts-based methods, several themes emerged. These themes shed light on how artmaking can foster meaningful connections among Syrian refugee mothers during the art therapy sessions. The first theme is that the shared task of artmaking helped to increase Knowledge Holders' support for one another and form social bonds through shared

reciprocity. The second theme is that artmaking increased empathetic resonance among the Knowledge Holders, enhancing intersubjective understandings. The final theme is how the artwork in the sessions symbolized and reflected the relationships that developed during the group, thereby solidifying and validating the friendships. The three themes are detailed below with quotations and artwork.

**Figure 41**

*Model Depicting Artmaking Can Create Meaningful Connections*



*Note.* Figure created by Haley Toll.

**Unique Group Dynamics of a Hybrid Collaborative Model.** It is important to note that, traditionally, in a physical or virtual art therapy space, the room typically contains only the Knowledge Holders and the art therapist, with all participants meeting at the same consistent time and day. However, due to various constraints such as room bookings, transportation challenges, a surge of refugees arriving during that period, COVID-19 restrictions, and the researcher's health conditions related to pregnancy, the scheduled meeting times and dates occasionally had to be

changed at the last minute. These changes may have impacted the group dynamic. Therefore, it is essential to highlight the grace, kindness, and flexibility demonstrated by the Knowledge Holders and partner organization staff in navigating these challenges when discussing the group dynamics.

Multiple staff members from the partner organization were present to support the Knowledge Holders, including an interpreter to assist with communication, a social worker to provide ongoing follow-up support if needed, and caregivers for the children of the Knowledge Holders, who required childcare during the sessions. Meanwhile, I facilitated the art therapy sessions virtually from Ottawa due to interprovincial travel restrictions and health issues.

Although the children were well cared for, they would occasionally seek support, comfort, and attention from their mothers and grandmothers during the sessions. One example of this is documented in my observational note from session three and four:

Amina brought a little boy, a toddler, to her lap and began cuddling him, while Maryam greeted the little boy. Amina took off his jacket and hat, as he sat quietly. She hugged him and began to put on his shoes. I waved at the little boy and greeted him. (Researcher's Notes, Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

The children and social worker come in, to check-in and give little hugs, and then they all walk away. Amina puts the little boy on her lap and gives him a kiss and strokes his hair. She hugs him close to her and then moves him to face the table. The little boy then briefly holds onto Maryam's shoulder. Amina continues to intermittently kiss the little boy, point at the camera, and laugh at his reactions and engagement. The little boy takes Amina's gum, gives it to her, and then she gives it back. Amina puts the little boy back on the ground and he waddles away, as she takes the paint and art supplies out of her bag (Researcher's Notes, Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

Both Maryam and Amina get visits from their little children, who are curious about their artmaking. Music is played and they continue their creative process, sometimes pausing to think, and then going back to the artwork to continue to create (Researcher's Notes, Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

The dynamics within this group, which supported mothers in receiving art therapy and engaging in artmaking, were unique because they involved multiple support professionals. This setup also facilitated the organic process of children checking in with their mothers and caregivers without judgment, which helped both the children and caregivers feel more comfortable bonding

with one another. The affection shared between caregivers and children, as well as the pride children felt when witnessing their parents create artwork, was also observed. For example, in Session 2, I wrote the following note about the group dynamic: “Maryam’s child is smiling in the background behind the painting as Maryam explains her painting. Her daughter seems to be proud” (Researcher’s Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021).

**Reported Experiences of the Connections that have Developed.** The art therapy sessions took place in the fall and winter of 2021, with the member-checking session held in the summer of 2023. When reflecting on how the art therapy group had impacted her one and a half years after the sessions, Rayya emphasized, “We got to know each other, we created friendships. It was a lot of fun. We really enjoyed our time” (Member checking, August 24, 2023). The Knowledge Holders were also asked about the nature of the relationships they had built within the group, whether they wished for these relationships to continue, and if so, how. Since many of the Syrian refugee women in this art therapy group had previously been members of an empowerment group at the partner organization, some were already familiar with one another. However, several relationships had deepened through their participation in the art therapy sessions. Amina shared that the connections within the group enhanced her overall positive experience. She shared that,

I am feeling wonderful because I met you people. Same as what I said earlier with that question. I am happy because I am feeling a bit isolated from the Arabic communication because we are communicating with you, trying to get to know more things. Like different from what we are used to doing. Yes, I am feeling happy because of that. (Post-interview, December 16, 2021)

We knew each other from before, and after this, we have become closer to each other, and we got the opportunity to meet with another more. So, we are very happy with that. We are the same age, same mentality, so we are very happy with that (Post-interview, December 16, 2021).

Maryam, Hafseen, and Rayya said that they developed unique friendships during the group, despite knowing one another from before. Maryam asserted that,

You know, I knew everyone before the art therapy, but the relationships were the same before and after, but [Knowledge Holder], she was a close friend for me...For sure, I would



like to continue with the relations with them, and I know them, and I would still like a relationship with them. (Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Rayya communicated that, despite not being a social person, she would be willing to participate in another workshop with the other Knowledge Holders in the future. She expressed,

To be honest, I am unsocial. I do not do many relationships with people and friendships, but I respect and like it...I would like to engage in another workshop or like sessions with the same group. Yea, I am okay with that. (Post-interview, December 22, 2021)

Furthermore, Hafseen shared that she developed a particular friendship in the group with someone who she did not know well before when she said,

Actually, I knew most of them before the workshop. Before the group, but I have a good relationship with Amina. I didn't know Amina before. I have a good relationship with Amina. She is the closest friend of mine... Yes, I would like to continue the relationships. Whenever I see them, or maybe meet them, I would be happy to meet them... Maybe we meet at the house, or she comes to my house, or I visit her... and maybe sometimes at school, we meet each other.

(Post-interview, December 24, 2021)

Hafseen further emphasized that the development of relationships enhanced her positive experience in the group, stating:

In general, it was good, and I like the group and the way that I participated in the group, and the relations with the other members. I wasn't expecting something different. (Post-Interview, December 24, 2021)

Connections between the Knowledge Holders were evident through behaviors such as laughter, which was frequently shared during each session and some interviews. The Knowledge Holders often shared artwork or notes from their visual journals that elicited laughter among the group. One example from my observational notes is presented below:

Maryam then laughs and opens to show her artwork. There is something funny in her sketchbook that makes everyone laugh (Researcher's Notes, Session 1, November 24, 2021)

Despite the Knowledge Holders already knowing one another before joining the small group, many reported that participating in the art therapy sessions either strengthened existing friendships or facilitated the formation of new ones. The relationships nurtured within the sessions

contributed to a positive experience for Knowledge Holders like Amina and Hafseen. As a result, the rapport built through the art therapy sessions may have fostered generative artmaking and enabled the Knowledge Holders to authentically share their experiences with one another.

***Theme 1: Artmaking Expanded Co-Creation and Shared Reciprocity***

Creating artwork together encouraged reciprocal sharing and support among the Knowledge Holders. They helped each other with drawing images on one another's canvases, setting up their artwork, sharing materials, offering encouragement, and assisting with cleanup. This collaborative dynamic was evident in both my session notes and the session recordings. The Knowledge Holders frequently took care of one another, offering support in various ways. For example, two of the Knowledge Holders brought each other's artwork to the session when their peer was absent, ensuring that their friend's presence was felt in a different way. These gestures reflected the mutual support that was central to their interactions throughout the sessions. I wrote:

Hafseen brought Rayya's artwork that depicted their friendship to the session. Bringing the artwork of one another's friend feels like Rayya (the creator) is present in the room as well. They have a stand-in and have contributed to the group, despite not being there (Researcher's Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021)

In addition, I observed several instances where the Knowledge Holders supported one another in the artmaking process, such as drawing outlines for requested images or demonstrating new art techniques. Maryam, who had technical drawing and painting skills, often assisted her peers in completing their artwork while also creating her own. These interactions fostered a sense of camaraderie and collaboration, as the Knowledge Holders bonded over their shared creative experiences and helped each other throughout the sessions, despite each person having their own art materials and canvases to create individual images. The following observation highlights how these moments of assistance contributed to the group's dynamic and connection:

Hafseen asks Maryam to help with sections of her painting, which looks like the creation of flowers, while she watches. Hafseen adds more paint for Maryam. Hafseen then continues to paint on the images that Maryam had begun. Hafseen also continues to look up images to add to her painting. (Researcher's Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021)

Maryam began with fine details with a fine brush and sketched the outline of her artwork. Maryam is in the middle of the other Knowledge Holders and shares her materials with the other women, and talks about her art. She also helps Hafseen outline her painting and puts her artwork aside to do this. She seems to enjoy what she is creating on Hafseen's painting and showing Hafseen how to paint flowers (Researcher's Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021)

The Knowledge Holders readily begin their check-in artwork, while Hafseen erases something on Rayya's sketchbook, and takes time to admire her artwork...Amina passes an eraser to Rayya who returns it. Hafseen discusses her art briefly with Rayya...There seems to be a lot of joy in the room. (Researchers' Notes, Session 5, December 14, 2021)

The Knowledge Holders also physically held up one another's' artworks to help the creator explain their work to the group. For example, I observed the following:

Amina presents Maryam's painting again, and the interpreter shows the camera the design. Maryam takes time to discuss the meaning of her work. (Researchers' Notes, Session 5, December 14, 2021)

Setting up and cleaning the art materials after creating art is a crucial part of the art therapy process. Ideally, I would have liked to assist with these tasks to demonstrate care and nurturance in my role as an art therapist. However, due to my physical absence, I was unable to do so. Instead, I observed that the Knowledge Holders demonstrated connection by setting up and cleaning one another's art materials. Through these acts of care, they physically expressed nurturance and support for one another. These tasks related to the physical aspects of artmaking fostered social bonds, as the Knowledge Holders instinctively and graciously supported each other. The following observational notes reflect this process:

Maryam looks around, pensive and thoughtful, as Amina and Rayya clean the art materials. We discuss when we will meet next. Maryam then packs her paintings while Amina and Rayya continue to clean. (Researchers' Notes, Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021)

The examples drawn from notes documenting group dynamics through tangible interactions and body language highlight how artmaking can foster connections among the Knowledge Holders in an art therapy group. The Knowledge Holders actively supported one another in various aspects of the creative process, including drawing on each other's canvases and

journals, teaching technical art skills, sharing materials, offering encouragement, and assisting with the setup and cleanup. Notably, some Knowledge Holders brought each other's artwork to sessions when a participant was absent, creating a sense of presence and continuity within the group dynamic.

### ***Theme 2: Artmaking Facilitated Empathetic Resonance***

Frequently, the Knowledge Holders found connections with one another through the creation and sharing of stories about their symbolic artworks, as recorded in my observation notes detailing group dynamics. Empathetic resonance (Weber, 2008), refers to the empathy that grows as people see the world through others' eyes via their art, offering a momentary immersion in the artist's world. This occurs because each artwork reflects the artist's unique perspective, especially when symbols are used intentionally to express and share experiences, ideas, and emotions.

Throughout the art therapy sessions, various symbols emerged as metaphors, reflecting both shared emotions and unique experiences of the Knowledge Holders. These symbols included birds on walls, flowers, gardens, sunsets, moons, suns, trees, windows, snow, family portraits, tables, pathways, and many others. Not only did these symbols allow the Knowledge Holders to express themselves, but they also provided the other group members with an opportunity to view the world from a distinct perspective. These insights often evoked familiar emotions or fostered empathy and compassion, helping to create meaningful social bonds.

Creating artwork that symbolizes one's current emotions and experiences can help group members connect through the sharing of immediate feelings. For instance, the Knowledge Holders were asked to create quick artworks within small circles to represent their emotions as a way of checking in and checking out of the sessions. These ritualized check-in and check-out artworks were created quickly with spontaneous sketches or paintings. The circular format of the artwork not only helped me understand the Knowledge Holders' emotional states for follow-up but also served as an easy way to warm up to artmaking using a simple, consistent stimulus. The

process of creating these pieces encouraged questions and fostered a sense of safety through ritualized emotional sharing.

This method was inspired by the “Trauma-Informed Art Therapy Level One” training with Malchiodi and Ward in Anchorage, Alaska, in August 2015. The small, quick images generated immediate and spontaneous visual data through symbolic imagery. I often invited the Knowledge Holders to title their artworks to help put words to their images, thereby deepening their insights. When time allowed, I also created my own check-in and check-out artworks and shared them with the group. In doing so, I reflected on the sentiments and dynamics of the group, while validating their emotional sharing.

Examples of questions used to metaphorically represent emotions in a quick and accessible way included: “What do you need right now, in terms of nurturance or to feel well-being?” (Researcher’s Notes, Session 2, November 26, 2021), or inviting the Knowledge Holders to create a weather pattern to portray their emotions. By creating artwork focused on immediate emotions, the Knowledge Holders were encouraged to share, understand, and access their feelings through symbolic artmaking. This process helped foster deeper relationships through authentic emotional sharing and the use of spontaneous artmaking.

Often, the Knowledge Holders demonstrated emotional resonance with each other's artwork and explanations. For example, during the first session, which marked their initial encounter in the art therapy group, the Knowledge Holders were asked to create artwork incorporating their names as an introduction. Rayya created two poignant images paired with a poem that expressed her longing for her deceased father. One image depicted crying eyes to symbolize her grief, while the other showed two doves in flight, symbolizing peace (see Figure 38 and Table 11). Rayya shared, “First of all, sad because I left my home and family. The Arabic poem is about a father who had passed away” (Session 1, November 24, 2021). An excerpt from my observational notes captures the moment when the Knowledge Holders gathered around

Rayya, offering support as she shared her emotions. Their reactions to her artwork further demonstrated the deep emotional connection within the group:

Hafseen claps for Rayya's beautiful and meaningful poem. Hafseen is also excited to answer for Rayya's questions. She reacts as very supportive and involved in Rayya's emotional story, providing support with her body language, while there is an in-depth conversation about Rayya's work. Maryam helps Rayya pass her artwork back and forth (Researcher's Notes, Session 1, November 24, 2021)

Another example of emotional resonance occurred when artwork created in the art therapy session emotionally impacted the other members. During sessions three and four, the Knowledge Holders had more time to create due to the combined session exploring belonging. In this session, Rayya painted an emotionally symbolic piece about her experience of loss and lack of justice, presented in Figure 25. Meanwhile, Maryam depicted her longing for her family to be reunited in Syria or Canada, as seen in Figure 24. When asked to create reflective artwork based on their previous impactful pieces, Amina's artwork was a sad self-portrait (Figure 41). She shared, "I don't feel like being strong only to be strong. I need to find strength in something" (Session 3 and 4, December 10, 2021).

The image in Figure 41 reflected Amina's sadness and seemed to mirror her response to the tragic stories of loss shared by her peers. It likely resonated with Amina's own experiences of loss, particularly her journey to seek refuge in Canada due to the Syrian war. Additionally, this artwork appeared to represent an emotional transition for Amina. She began the session with a drawing of a table with coffee, symbolizing comfort (see Table 8; Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). However, this shift is interpretative, as Amina did not explicitly state that the artwork of her group members had influenced her emotions.

Rayya's artwork of the broken tree also had an emotional impact beyond the group, resonating with a local neighbor in the community. The neighbor, moved by the piece, asked to keep the painting, and Rayya kindly gave it to them. This symbolic artwork of loss, shared with a neighbor, further deepened connections within the community through empathetic resonance.

Understanding the impact of the art beyond the therapeutic space offers valuable insight into how creative expression contributes to community building and fosters a collective sense of belonging by strengthening relationships (Kesner & Horáček, 2017). Rayya's painting, which linked her past experiences of tragedy and injustice in Syria with her newfound peace in Canada, was validated and appreciated both by the group members and her local community.

These examples illustrate shifts in relational dynamics among the Knowledge Holders, as documented in my art therapy session notes, the Knowledge Holders' artwork, and the check-in and check-out artworks related to emotions. These excerpts and quotations show how engaging in artmaking focused on emotions and experiences can enhance connections among group members by fostering empathetic resonance. Additionally, the Knowledge Holders expressed the impact of artwork and narratives on their emotions through verbal expressions of connection, body language (such as clapping), and their own emotional artwork. Each Knowledge Holder used symbolic expressive artworks to share their perceptions and emotions, and their authenticity and openness helped foster empathy and understanding among the group members.

### ***Theme 3: Artmaking Validated Relationships Through Concretization and Representation***

The Knowledge Holders incorporated symbols of group bonding and friendship into their artwork and shared narratives. The Syrian refugee mothers' desire to intuitively depict meaningful relationships in the group, reflecting their experiences of belonging and well-being, solidified the social bonds formed. Representing one another and their friendships validated and celebrated these relationships. Themes of love and friendship were conveyed through symbols such as flowers, portraits, and hearts. Rayya emphasized the importance of friendship in her life during the member-checking session, stating: "I value my friendships. I have also learned that it's about the person, your friend, and that's it" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023).

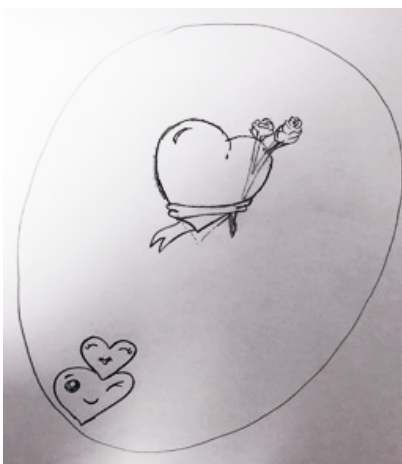
Although Rayya was unable to attend the second group session, she requested that Hafseen bring an artwork she had created, symbolically participating in the group through her

drawing in Figure 8. In the subsequent session, when Hafseen was absent, Rayya brought Hafseen’s artwork of roses, symbolizing love, as shown in Figure 16. The artwork Rayya created between sessions one and two encapsulated the friendship between her and Hafseen, as seen in Figure 8. The drawing portrayed two women with hats, their backs turned to the viewer, with their hands forming a shared heart, emphasizing their connection. Upon attending the following session in person, Rayya titled the artwork “friendship” and remarked, “A friend is a home. Everyone has a home and can share their homes with one another” (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

During the final session, the Knowledge Holders were invited to depict their experience of the group on the cover of their art journals. In Rayya’s artwork, the theme of friendship emerged through her depiction of a heart with two flowers in a circle, with two additional hearts placed in the corner of the circle (see Figure 43). Rayya explained her artwork, saying, “The two hearts together on the left represent friendship and gathering with our time spent with one another” (Session 5, December 14, 2021). Although Rayya’s artworks often symbolized the friendships that grew within the group, she described herself as “not a social person” during the individual post-group interview (Post-group Interview, December 22, 2021).

**Figure 42**

*Rayya’s Hearts Representing “Friendship and Gathering”*





Hafseen also represented her social bonds with the other group members during the final session in her artwork. In Figure 9, Hafseen connected her friendships to enjoyment of the summer sunshine and described the drawing as containing:

Sunshine in the summer with flowers growing because of the heat. I like the summer and love colours of flowers. I feel very happy, with my name and my friend's names written inside of the circle. (Session 5, December 14, 2021).

In the final session, Hafseen created artwork featuring roses, a symbol of love for her (Post-interview, December 24, 2021). The symbol of the rose appeared frequently in Hafseen's work (see Table 9). In her final piece, the stems of the roses formed a circle, and Hafseen explained, "I have written all the names of everyone here. We are all together inside the circle, and our names are written in Arabic. This represents our day together" (Session 5, December 14, 2021). This image symbolized the relationships and shared experiences of the group members, as shown in Figure 9.

In my own reflexive artmaking, I represented the group dynamics and experiences, which were especially significant to me as someone connecting virtually. The group's dynamics also affected me emotionally, which I expressed in my countertransference art. For example, in the check-out image of the final session, I created a small painting of five flowers in a circle, representing each group member and myself on the left side of Figure 43. I wrote that the image "Represented the energy, passion, and grace of the four Knowledge Holders and my gratitude for them showing up, expressing, and creating together with openness and care" (Researcher's notes, Session 5, December 14, 2021).

### **Figure 43**

*My Reflexive Representation of Knowledge Holders, Energy, and Passion*



Similarly, the image of flowers in a circle, depicted on the right side of Figure 43, expands on the small painting and is presented on the left side of the figure. Titled, *Flowers Blossoming of Each Group Member: Connected and Unique Creators*, this painting was inspired by the Knowledge Holders' metaphors, memories, and images connected to flowers. I represented each group member as a flower, set against an abstract, flowing background that symbolizes peace and the movement of water.

Throughout the art therapy sessions, the Knowledge Holders explored themes of friendship and love through their creative expressions. Their artwork reflected the relationships and connections that developed within and beyond the art therapy sessions. By creating tangible images representing friendships and positive relationships through portraits and symbolism, the Knowledge Holders validated, celebrated, and deepened their relationships. Through art, these relationships became named, represented, and more tangible, thus strengthening the connections between the Knowledge Holders through their reflective expressions. My reflexive artmaking, imbued with gratitude for the Knowledge Holders, mirrored the emotional impact of the group dynamics on me.

The final research question explored how artmaking in an online art therapy group might help create meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders. Despite the unique dynamics of

the group, meaningful connections seem to have been forged among the Knowledge Holders, as evidenced by the session notes detailing their interactions and the interviews conducted with them. The unique dynamics influencing these relationships included circumstances such as COVID-19 restrictions on interprovincial travel, the small number of group members, the presence of an interpreter facilitating communication across two languages, and the nature of supporting Syrian refugee mothers who were also primary caregivers to young children.

Through analysis of session notes, Knowledge Holders' artwork, and interview responses, it became clear that artmaking facilitated meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders in three ways. Firstly, group artmaking fostered shared reciprocity and care by encouraging mutual assistance, creating a supportive environment where members helped each other. Secondly, artmaking enhanced empathetic resonance by allowing members to express their current emotions and unique perspectives through their artwork. This process enabled the Knowledge Holders, and even a community member, to see the world through one another's eyes. Lastly, the Knowledge Holders created artwork that concretized and validated the social bonds within the group, with members even presenting each other's artwork in one another's absence. However, it is important to acknowledge that artmaking may have facilitated and enhanced connections in other ways, and additional themes may emerge from the rich textual and visual data.

### **Results Summary**

I began chapter six by introducing each Knowledge Holder who participated in the study and providing a textually rich description of their art therapy group process, with a focus on direct quotations. Complementing this narrative, I presented a table dedicated to each Knowledge Holder, which included their artwork, titles, and descriptions.

I then connected the responses gathered through both arts-based and textual methods to the emerging themes linked to the three research questions. The findings from the first research question indicated that artmaking within an art therapy group can help Syrian refugee mothers

express their lived experiences. Key themes identified included increasing emotional awareness, providing a safe space to voice experiences, enhancing mood, and facilitating communication through symbolism.

The second question examined how creative activity in an art therapy group could support Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's in expressing their sense of belonging and well-being. Belonging was experienced through the hospitality of local residents, access to educational and economic opportunities, and the integration of Syrian and Canadian cultural identities. Knowledge Holders' experiences of well-being were characterized by a sense of transcendent awe, family welfare, safety, access to opportunities, and an optimistic outlook.

The final research question explored how artmaking in a hybrid online art therapy group could foster meaningful connections among the Knowledge Holders and help them form authentic relationships. Artmaking contributed to the development of social bonds by promoting shared reciprocity through co-creation, increasing empathetic resonance, and validating relationships through symbolic representation. Chapter Seven delves into the results of my reflexive artmaking and analysis.

## CHAPTER 7

### Reflexive Artmaking and Analysis



Toll, H. (2022). *Eagle Soaring- Above It All*. Oil on canvas.

## CHAPTER 7

### Reflexive Artmaking and Analysis

Chapter Seven details the research journey and data analysis, emphasizing my reflexive artwork and excerpts from my visual and written journal. As an artist-researcher-art therapist, I created 45 drawings and paintings throughout this process (see Figures 44–57). Reflexive journaling and artmaking helped me to critically examine my preconscious biases, perspectives, power dynamics, privileges, beliefs, emotions, and insights. These practices informed both the critique and the development of the research findings through a culturally humble, arts-based process (Kapitan, 2015).

This critical, arts-based reflexive approach is grounded in a feminist framework and the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm of ABR and art therapy, which values emergent, tacit, emotional, ineffable, and embodied knowledge (Chilton et al., 2015). Engaging in artmaking throughout the research process not only deepened my understanding of the emergent themes but also supported my motivation and emotional processing.

The reflexive artwork and journal excerpts are organized into six stages, each representing a thematic milestone in the research journey. A quilt of all the images is presented in Figure 44. These stages span the design of the research and preparation for comprehensive exams (June 2019–October 2019), the data collection process and art therapy sessions (September 2021–January 2022), the creation of artwork following my return from maternity leave (October 2022–March 2023), the production of art while reviewing and transcribing pre-interviews (January 2023–April 2023), the generation of art during the review and annotation of session notes (June 2023–July 2023), and the development of a painting series during the analysis phase (July 2023–September 2023).

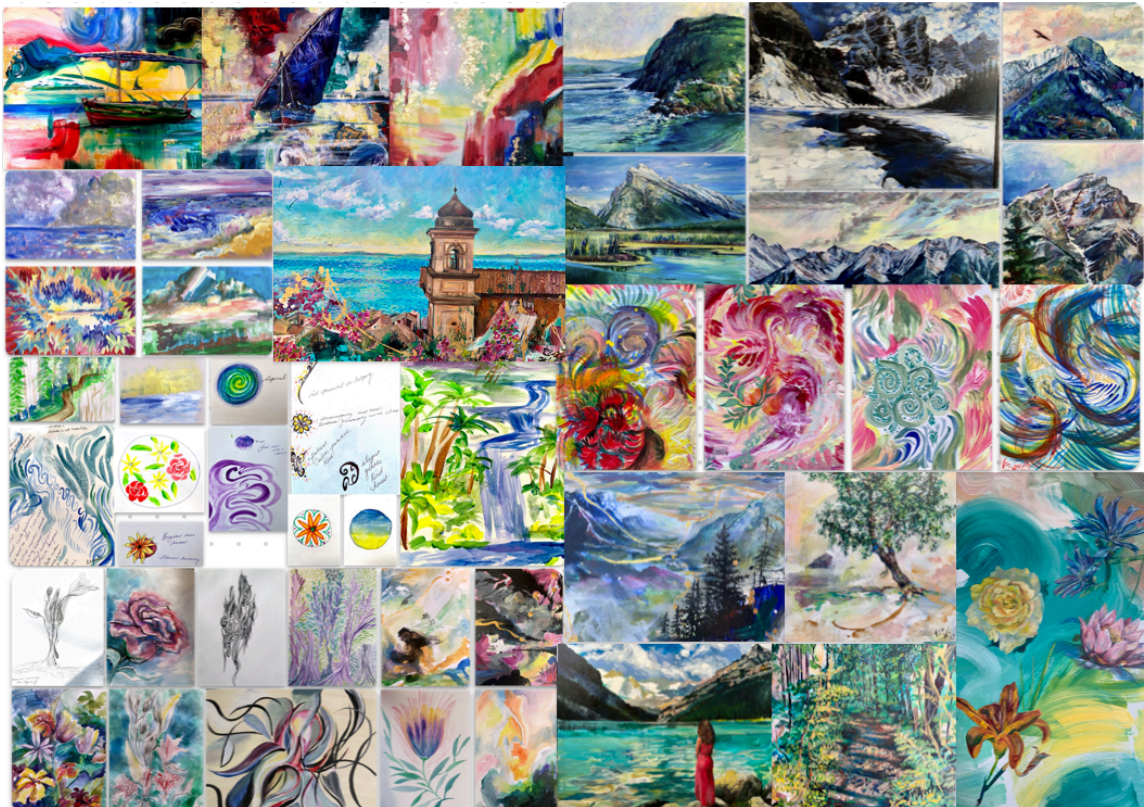
Integrating a chapter dedicated to the reflexive aesthetic artmaking and journaling process highlights the value of ABR in capturing tacit, imaginal, pre-verbal, emotional, and embodied



knowledge. This approach emphasizes the unique insights that emerge through ABR practices. Additionally, the reflexive artworks can be shared in venues such as art galleries, extending the research's impact beyond academic audiences and fostering empathetic engagement (Chilton & Leavy, 2014; Leavy, 2022). While this research prioritizes the knowledge generated from the Knowledge Holders' insights, stories, perspectives, and artwork, chapter seven aims to balance power dynamics by vulnerably presenting my process and perspective within the research (McNiff, 1998).

**Figure 44**

*Composite Quilt of Reflexive Artwork Created Throughout Six Stages of the Study from June 2019 to July 25, 2023*



**1. Creating the Research Design and Comprehensive Exams (June 2019-October 2019)**

While developing my research project and completing my comprehensive exams, I created a series of three paintings featuring liminal spaces and boats, symbolizing uncertainty and the precariousness of navigating uncharted waters. During this time, I discovered I was pregnant with my first child and experienced persistent nausea (like seasickness). These experiences are captured in the Figure 45 tripartite painting series and the journal excerpts presented below. The middle painting, titled *Floating Boat in Liminality: Transient, Transitional*, was exhibited in the LAIR 2021 online juried art exhibition and received a 2021 LAIR Award (Toll, 2021).

**Figure 45**

*Reflexive Response Artwork Series Created During the Comprehensive Exam about the Research Topic*



*These decrepit-looking boats represent both my desire to flee and the transient, vulnerable, ungrounded nature of refugees during their asylum-seeking journeys. The precarious and vulnerable nature of the images evoked images of the three-year-old boy, Alan Kurdie, whose body was washed ashore after attempting to flee Syria (Hynie, 2018) and the St. Louis boat of Jewish-German asylum-seekers that was refused by Canada in 1939 (Tastoglou et al., 2014). (Author's reflexive writing, September 14-17, 2019)*

*In the third image, I planned to portray an anchored boat on the shore, but I could not relate to an experience of groundedness. At the beginning of my comprehensive exam, in the midst of moving to Calgary, I found out that I was pregnant when attempting to rule-out reasons for fatigue. For me, my precarious experiences can only be represented with floating boats. I cannot be anchored yet. (Author's reflexive journal, October 5, 2019)*

**2. The Data Collection Process and Art Therapy Sessions (September 2021-January 2022)**

While collecting data, we faced significant time constraints due to programming limitations at the settlement organization, delays in ethics approval, and my impending C-section for a high-risk

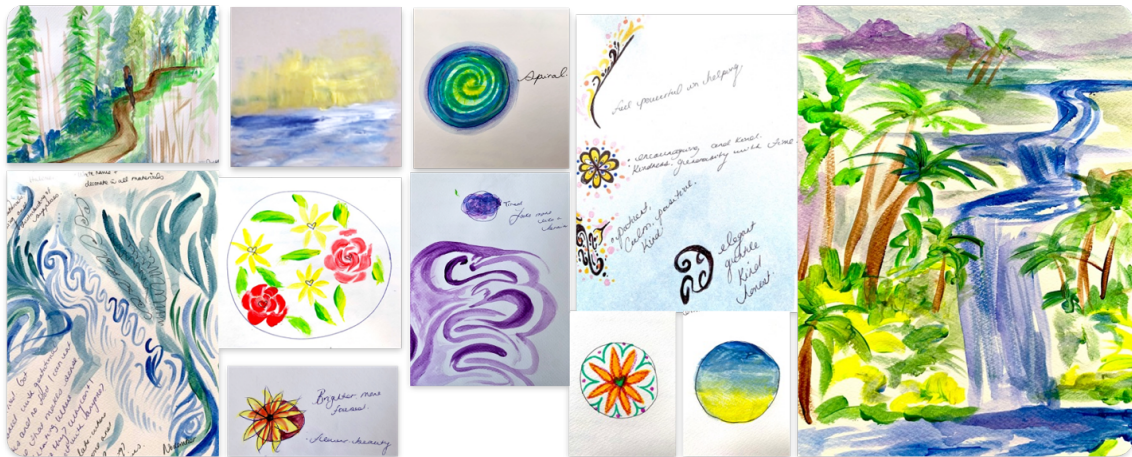


pregnancy. As a result, the time available for data collection, including booking interviews and art therapy sessions, was limited to two months. Cancellations and quick rescheduling were frequent due to health emergencies, coordination challenges, work commitments involving an influx of new refugees, evolving COVID-19 protocols, internet connectivity issues, childcare difficulties, and closures caused by snowstorms in November and December of 2021.

This abstract and symbolic series of eleven artworks was created during, before, and after the interviews and art therapy sessions and does not follow a specific theme. Instead, the pieces reflect cathartic and raw emotions tied to the experience and the deep connections formed with the Knowledge Holders. After sessions with the Knowledge Holders, my artwork consistently took on a sunnier, more focused, and brighter tone, inspired by their ideas, creativity, perspectives, kindness, and stories. The virtual art therapy sessions provided a sense of peace and stillness amidst the administrative and personal chaos of that time. These experiences are represented in the Figure 46 series and the journal excerpts presented below.

**Figure 46**

*Reflexive Response Artwork Series Created During the Data Collection Process*



*It was a sad ending for me, as the amount of time together, and my not being present, does not feel “good enough” or competent enough. I am grateful for the meaningful, gracious, and grateful Knowledge Holders. (Author’s reflexive journal after Session 5, December 14,*

2021)

### 3. Returning from my Maternity Leave (October 2022-March 2023)

In this series, created between October 2022 and March 2023, I felt apprehensive about returning to my dissertation work after a year of maternity leave, especially as I now cared for three young children under two years old. The metaphor of climbing giant mountains, such as those in Canmore, Banff, Jasper, and the hills of St. John's Fort Amherst, emerged to symbolize the challenge of diving back into my research. My reflexive thoughts are captured in the Figure 47 mountain series, which includes six paintings, along with the journal excerpts presented below.

#### Figure 47

*Reflexive Response Artwork Series Created Upon Return from Maternity Leave*



*I am trying to make sense of all the threads that were left untied before I left on maternity leave and had twins. It feels so disjointed, since I had left, and I am unsure about how I will pick up the pieces or make sense of them. I was so exhausted, overwhelmed, and distracted while I was doing the data collection and I could not follow-up, feeling and being so far away, and COVID-19 challenges, snowstorms, it being before the holidays. How will I be able to conceptualize and do this? Will my data be enough? I am completely unsure. (Author's reflexive journal, November 29, 2022)*

*Akiv (my two-and-a-half-year-old and oldest child) just woke up crying in his blackout-dark room, pointing his finger toward the end of the crib while repeating "no, no, no, no." How*

*do I work with crying babies? How do I connect these two lives? I get it, little buddy. I totally get it. “No, no, no, no” is right (Author’s reflexive journal, January 3, 2023).*

*There are so many grey areas and so much fear on my side. The fog has rolled in on the mountains, making it hard to see what I can expect and much more difficult to navigate what lies ahead. (Author’s reflexive journal, January 4, 2023)*

#### **4. Reviewing and Transcribing Pre-interviews (January 2023-April 2023)**

After transcribing the interviews, I created eight response paintings to imaginatively conceptualize and reflect on the experience. While creating these images and writing notes, I often thought about follow-up questions I could have asked and areas I would have liked to explore further if I were to redo the interviews. As I worked on these pieces, I revisited and processed the emotions, such as nervousness, excitement, curiosity, and fear, that I had felt during the pre-interviews. These artworks are presented in Figures 48 and 49 with an abstract series, along with corresponding journal excerpts.

**Figure 48**

*Reflexive Response Artwork Series Created After the Pre-Interviews were Transcribed*



*I was just too afraid of digging too deep and making the Knowledge Holder uncomfortable that I had sacrificed some good data that could have been collected. The image is of swirls again, different colours, but the same chaos in my mind and body. I just want to connect, and I felt so grateful for the Knowledge Holders’ time. A mother of six children with two young children. How does she do it? I heard children’s voices in the background at the beginning of our conversation and we discussed how hard it is to focus with young children. I totally understand that - our children yearn for our attention, love, and validation. Only then do they experience calm. How am I supposed to provide that to three little ones while completing my Ph.D.? It took a lot from the Knowledge Holders to be able to take time to participate in*



*the study, and a lot of support from the ANC. I am very grateful. (Author's reflexive journal, January 13, 2023)*

**Figure 49**

*Reflexive Response Artwork Series Created After the Post-Interviews were Transcribed*



*The meeting ended with a lot of warmth and good wishes. It does seem like I extended that I would connect in one year with Knowledge Holders, so it should be okay if I do connect with them once I gather and feel grounded in my current work. The challenge is a translator for future sessions and how it all may look. I also want to ensure that Knowledge Holders feel included and celebrated for their wonderful artwork and what they shared. Started out feeling sick with my voice cracking, but it's clear that the Knowledge Holders' kindness gave energy and positivity. There is a generosity in purely kind exchanges that is hard to explain. Painting: Kindness. Heart opening. Celebration. (Author's reflexive journal, February 23, 2023)*

##### **5. Reviewing and Writing Notes on the Sessions (June 2023-July 2023)**

While reviewing the five recordings of the art therapy sessions, I took notes on the physical reactions observed, body language, social interactions, previous notes, and the artwork shared during the videos. After watching each session and completing my notes, I created 11

reflexive paintings and drawings. These response artworks (Fish, 2019) were made in a spontaneous and intuitive way to reflect on what happened and to trust art as a way of knowing (Allen, 1995). I created artwork based on my emotional experiences of the sessions and my feelings about them through an intuitive process.

Symbols of flowers, teardrops, trees, lines, and abstracted landscapes emerged, as shown in Figure 50.

As I created the artwork, feelings of inadequacy in my role as an art therapist and researcher connecting virtually from afar, along with fears related to completing the data collection while feeling sick from pregnancy, surfaced. Additionally, my artwork featuring flowers reflects my awe and appreciation for the Knowledge Holders, who had created personally meaningful images and shared candid stories of their emotions and lives. These images are presented in Figure 50 and are inspired by the previous paintings that the Knowledge Holders and I created throughout the art therapy sessions. At times, I needed to process the sessions with more than one image. I also wrote reflexive poems in response to the artwork. The poems felt like a safer way to express my experiences, emotions, and reflections than a journal excerpt at the time. One of the poems, created in response to note-taking while watching the session one recording, is presented after Figure 50.

### **Figure 50**

*Reflexive Response Artwork Series Created While Documenting and Reviewing the Sessions*



***Session 1:***

*Let it unfold*

*Let it bloom*

*Be who they need you to be*

*Not what feels comfortable and cozy*

*Be*

*Whole and accomplished*

*Take the space*

*Take the time*

*Weaving my research together*

*Braiding my research together*

*Letting it flow through me by disengaging my “self”*

*It is the only way to push*

*Through (Author’s reflexive journal, June 5, 2023).*

**6. Data Analysis Painting Series (July 2023- September 2023)**

Using an arts-based analysis method, I created a painting series comprising six landscape and figurative images, presented in Figure 51. The intention behind this series, crafted on canvas sizes ranging from 16 x 24 inches to 60 x 72 inches, was to make sense of the diverse coded content and themes generated from the research study. This process unfolded in an iterative, subconscious, embodied, and visual manner, complementing the qualitative coding and data analysis (Leavy, 2017b). All the reference images for the series were sourced from photographs that I took over the past ten years, clustered or quilted together in Figure 51. Each individual painting will be described following the presentation of the quilted series, along with two excerpts

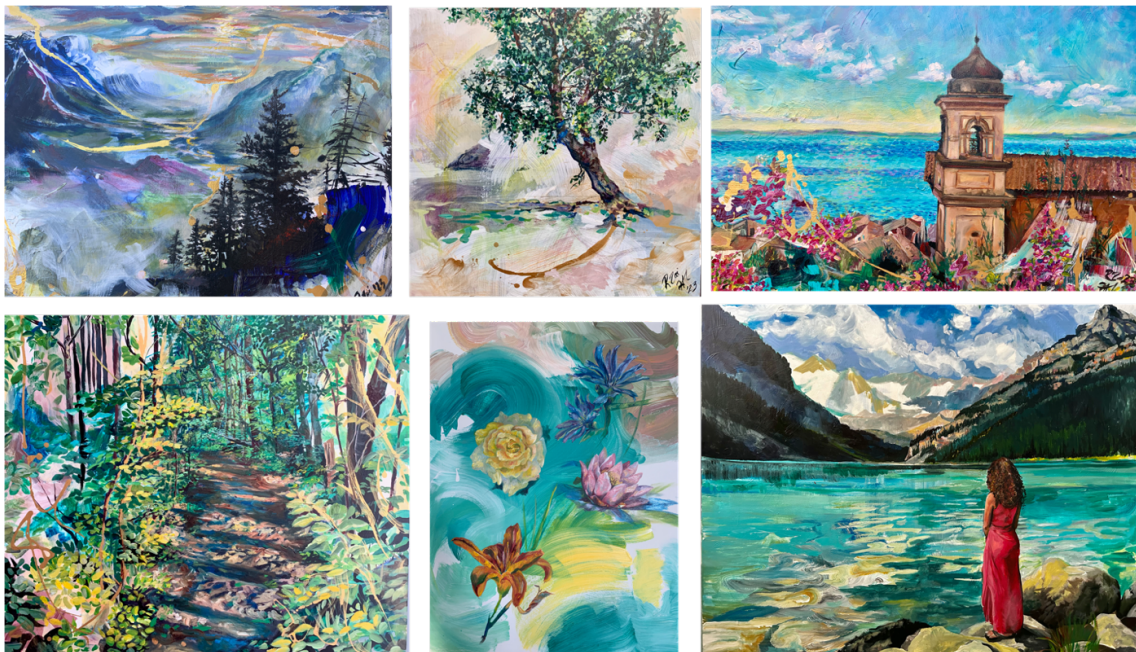


from my reflexive journal. The paintings are displayed in order of creation date (from earliest to latest), though I also worked on the paintings simultaneously.

The experience of simultaneity, where symbolic artist symbols could represent various themes, emotions, and aspects of both the group and my current experiences as a researcher concurrently, often occurred as I painted the images (Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017; Weber, 2008). Therefore, the images captured multiple meta-themes and emotions all at once through symbolic metaphor, reflecting meta-cognitive processes that emerged as I trusted the artmaking process (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016). The painting series, reflexive journal quotes, and descriptions depicted in Figures 51-57, reflect a fusion of personal memories, imagination, and research reflections. They demonstrate the interconnectedness of art, research, and the human experience.

**Figure 51**

*Data Analysis Reflexive Artwork Series*



**Figure 52**

*First Artwork Created Titled “Roads ahead. Roads in the future. Being in Nature as Well-being”*



*Title: Slowly distilling... something? Windy days.  
Where are we now?  
There is a path  
We passed some trees  
But I don't know where we are  
Yet  
Stay here. (Author's reflexive journal, July 12, 2023).*

The mountainous landscape painting (Figure 52) was inspired by a reference photo taken when I lived in Calgary and visited Banff, Alberta. It overlooks the Rocky Mountains, although the perspective is foggy, and there is wind. Experiences, stories, and images of nature, both in Canada and Syria, were often linked to well-being for the Knowledge Holders and became a major theme.

**Figure 53**

*Second Artwork Created Titled “Sacred Wishing Tree. Connections to family, friends, and each other”*





*Growth? Progress? What is the image telling me.*

*Answer: I am strong, and I will hold you through this. (Author's reflexive journal, July 18, 2023).*

The second painting (Figure 53) depicts a sacred tree overlooking water, inspired by a photo I took along Lake Baikal in Russia. The tree was adorned with cloth strung on its branches, symbolizing its sacredness. The roots represent deep-rooted connectedness to early memories, spiritual practices, relationships, and family. The branches, reaching outward, symbolize the balance between our sense of place and the potential for growth, hope, awe, and insight. As all the Knowledge Holders were mothers, they shared that their experiences of well-being were closely tied to the opportunities available for their children in a new country. Thus, this image also portrays a family tree in motion. The painting was exhibited at the 22nd annual *Education Graduate Students Society Conference*, which focused on the theme: Education for Peace and Social Justice: Theory, Research, and Praxis in 2024.

**Figure 54**

*Third Artwork Created Titled, “Bright future ahead. Hope”*



*Today, I spent time on one painting, guiltily. I should be coding, but I had a need, and I followed it. Sometimes I just need to follow it.  
... gazing over the turquoise waters. Serene. Effeminate. Beautiful. The need to see further?  
(Author’s reflexive journal, July 14, 2023).*

Spirituality, faith, and connections to hope for the future emerged as significant themes related to well-being, depicted through images of prayer mats, Mecca, the Quran, and religious calligraphy. The phrase “Inshallah,” meaning “God willing,” was frequently expressed by group members when sharing their hopes for family reunions and creating a safe, happy future. This painting (Figure 54) helped me arrive at the significance and connection between awe and spiritual practices. For me, I turned to my artwork for guidance, embracing it to move forward and find hope.

**Figure 55**

*Fourth Artwork Created Titled, “Walking Through the Forest Path. Ambition and peace”*



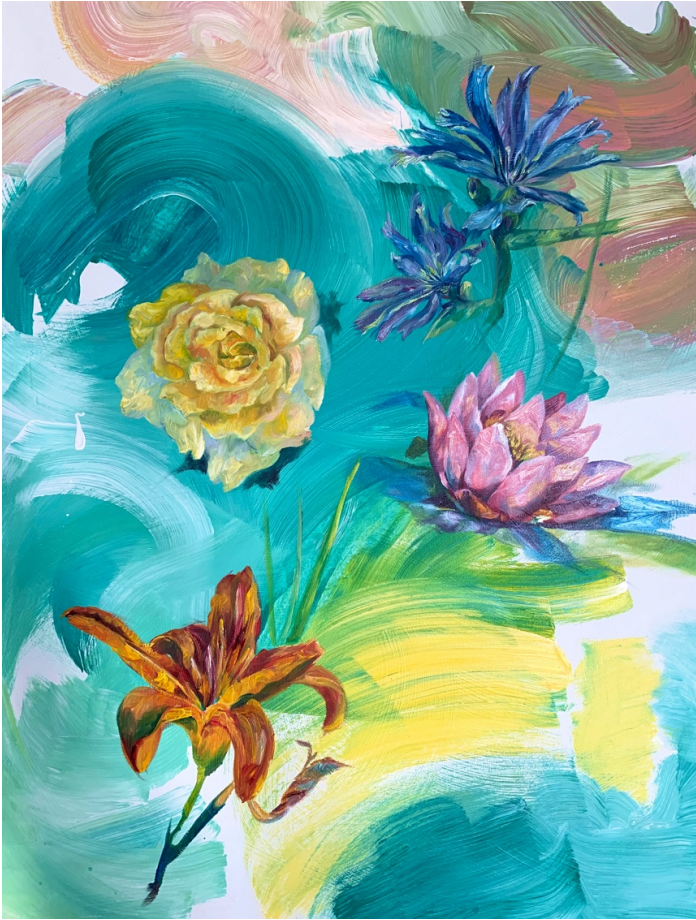


*“Into the woods”* (Author’s reflexive journal, July 14, 2023).

This enchanted forest path (Figure 55) symbolizes trusting the emergent process of ABR. The image of walking through a forest reconnects to the theme of nature as a source of personal nourishment, self-care, peace, and well-being. Additionally, it reflects the Knowledge Holders' aspirations to achieve their personal goals for employment and entrepreneurship.

**Figure 56**

*Fifth Artwork Created Titled “Flowers blossoming of Each Knowledge Holder. Connected and unique Creators”*



*I have been able to code a lot today, despite having another sick little munchkin baby home, and generate interesting insights. I can hopefully group them together by specific quotes and look forward to doing that tomorrow. I am looking forward and feel renewed by being able to meet the Knowledge Holders again in-person. I feel grateful that they all expressed interest in participating. How wonderful! (Author's reflexive journal, July 25, 2023).*

In Figure 56, I created a flower to represent each member of the group, building upon the final artwork created after the last art therapy session, which focused on gratitude for their participation and the relationships we developed (see Figure 43). Flowers, particularly roses and jasmine, were common symbols in the Knowledge Holders' artwork. This image also seeks to honor each member as a powerful flower, reflecting their grace, generosity, kindness, and care throughout the group. Each flower holds a unique metaphor that speaks to the individual qualities of the Knowledge Holders.



**Figure 57**

*Sixth Artwork Created Titled “Looking at an Uncertain Road Ahead. Lots to Do. Lots to Accomplish”*



*Today, I don't have words. I am just focusing on the art (Author's reflexive journal, July 25, 2023).*

As I completed the paintings, words no longer came to me, so I focused entirely on the images. The final painting in the analysis series depicts a woman gazing towards the mountainscape of Lake Moraine, Alberta. The mountains are not fully rendered, symbolizing the uncertainty of the future, while the lake remains calm and serene. This image reflects the theme of looking towards a new and unknown future, capturing both the completion of the research process and the Knowledge Holders' experiences of building a new life for themselves and their families in Canada.

## **Reflexive Artmaking and Analysis Summary**

The reflexive artmaking and analysis chapter is grounded in the emergent, intersubjective, and creative ABR method, guided by my feminist ontological perspective. This perspective integrates my vulnerable voice throughout the process, allowing for richer meaning while critically examining my biases and fears. The arts-based research approach, which incorporates artmaking as both data and analysis, is outlined in detail in the theoretical framework and methodology chapters. This chapter presents the personal insights and critiques that arose during the research, including brief descriptions of the research phases, a series of 45 visual artworks, and personal quotations from my reflexive journal. These elements aim to illuminate my biases, considerations, challenges, and emotions (see Figures 44-57).

The artwork and journal excerpts are organized into six research stages: the research design and comprehensive exams; the data collection process and art therapy sessions; artwork created after returning from maternity leave with two infants and a toddler; art produced during the review and transcription of pre-interviews; art created while reviewing and writing notes on the sessions; and a painting series developed during the analysis phase. My reflexive art and journal excerpts shed light on the intersubjective, dialectic, and aesthetic research process inherent in the ABR paradigm (Chilton et al., 2015), offering an intuitive analysis that embraces art as a way of understanding (Allen, 1995; McNiff, 1998).

This chapter emphasizes my ontology, epistemology, and axiology, highlighting the significance of personal insights, emotions, embodiment, and symbolic representations of the research process. Through intuitive artmaking, I gain a deeper, more intuitive understanding of the data while confronting my biases and making visceral connections. The reflexive art images may extend beyond academic circles, informing public discourse by presenting emotionally resonant, symbolic works to a wider audience through venues such as art exhibitions. The

discussion in the next chapter will elaborate on and contextualize the findings, linking the themes to contemporary literature on art therapy, well-being, and belonging with Syrian refugee mothers.

## CHAPTER 8

### Discussion



Hafseen (pseudonym). (2021). *Our Day Together*. Marker and pen on paper.



## CHAPTER 8

### Discussion

In the discussion chapter, I connect the diverse themes that emerged from this study to relevant contemporary literature on refugee newcomer women in St. John's, NL, Canada, and art therapy research. New literature is integrated with the emergent findings to contextualize and deepen the understanding of the phenomena. This exploratory ABR study developed 14 conceptual themes to address complex "how" questions with depth and nuance. Investigating and addressing open-ended how questions could be considered pivotal for understanding mechanisms of change (de Witte et al., 2021) in therapeutic artmaking, particularly within a hybrid online art therapy group conducted in collaboration with a resettlement organization during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this chapter, I first explore how Syrian refugee women who arrived in Newfoundland and Labrador within the past seven years can voice their lived experiences through online art therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results suggest that artmaking can enhance emotional awareness through embodied elicitation, foster safety and improve mood to facilitate expression, and offer an alternative means of communication through symbolic imagery. I investigate these findings by connecting them to existing literature on the mechanisms of change in art therapy.

Secondly, I investigate how artmaking in a safe group setting could support this population in expressing their experiences of belonging and well-being in an art therapy group, by linking the findings to existing literature. I divided the result themes into two sections: one that explored experiences of belonging with artmaking, while the second sub-theme explored well-being expressed with artmaking. I found that the Knowledge Holders connected their experiences of belonging to receiving kindness and care from locals, achieving economic and educational goals, and bridging their continued identity across the multiple countries where they lived. The

Syrian refugee mothers associated well-being with the following themes: experiencing a transcendent sense of awe, the well-being of their family and particularly their children, feeling safe and free, and maintaining an optimistic mindset.

Finally, I delineate how artmaking in an online art therapy group can help foster meaningful connections between the refugee female Knowledge Holders, while linking these findings to existing literature on social support and the therapeutic benefits of artmaking in group settings. I found that artmaking in a safe group can generate shared reciprocity, increase empathetic resonance, and validate group relationships through concretization, which can ultimately increase meaningful connections between members. Due to the transdisciplinary approach within the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm of ABR and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber, 2016; 2022), the findings are situated within the broader context of various fields, including art therapy, ABR, refugee studies, psychology, neurobiology, and visual studies. Given the subjective and iterative nature of the analysis, alternative results and interpretations could emerge from this dataset if it were analyzed through a different theoretical paradigm and lens.

### **Refugee Syrian Mothers can Voice Experiences through Artmaking Voices by: Enhancing Emotional Knowledge, Fostering Safety, and Expanding Communication Through Symbolism**

#### ***Documented Transformative Shifts in How Artmaking Can Voice Experiences***

The study's thematic findings, derived from arts-based and qualitative data, indicate that online group art therapy can influence how refugee women express their lived experiences. The subjective question, "Does artmaking help you voice your experience, and if so, how?" was posed to the Knowledge Holders during the pre- and post-individual interviews to gain insight into their perspectives on the first research question. Before assessing the themes related to how artmaking can impact and influence voicing experiences for this population, it was important to understand whether the Knowledge Holders identified change.

During the interviews, the Knowledge Holders said that art became a way for them to express affect and embody their emotions. For example, Rayya emphasized that "Art for me is to express what I feel. If I feel bad, I express the feeling by the art or if I feel good. So, it's just like feeling" (Post-interview, December 22, 2021). This shift highlights the impact of art therapy on articulating emotions. Amina's response before art therapy highlighted the importance of hobbies, such as painting or artmaking, in generating ideas. In the post-art therapy interview, Amina's perspective changed as she described art as "something wonderful. Meeting new people, making art, like, learn more about artworks. And meeting you, having met you, because you are taking care of people. You care about others." (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). Amina connected art to meeting new people, learning about artworks, and appreciating my approach to caring for the group. This shift suggests that art therapy may have deepened Amina's understanding of art's positive impact, linking it to her experiences of connection, learning, and care.

After completing the art therapy sessions, the Knowledge Holders' responses evolved, as reflected in their verbal feedback, transcribed quotations, artwork, and the experiences documented in the results section. The thematic findings highlight the transformative potential of artmaking in an open, safe group that explores emotional stories through dialectic and intersubjective sharing. In the second interview, compared to their pre-interview responses, the Knowledge Holders provided more detailed answers, elaborating on how artmaking helped them voice their experiences and incite joy within the group or at home. Their responses demonstrated a deeper, more tacit understanding of the capacity of symbolic artmaking to facilitate expression in art therapy.

The question, "What does art mean in your life?" was posed to the Knowledge Holders in both the initial and final interviews to explore how their perceptions of art evolved before and after the art therapy sessions. The responses revealed shifts in their perspectives. Amina initially saw art as "beauty" and a source of relief, but after the sessions, she viewed it as "something

wonderful" and expressed a desire for deeper learning. Rayya, who first emphasized the joy of creativity, later recognized art can be a way to express emotions. Hafseen consistently saw art as a way to enhance mood, describing it as "wonderful" after the sessions. Maryam's perspective shifted from enjoying painting and drawing to expressing a love for art, while feeling happy and relaxed. These shifts highlight the transformative potential of art making.

The Knowledge Holders' insights into the potential of artmaking to voice experiences, as well as their conceptualization of art in their lives, evolved after the art therapy group. Pre- and post-art therapy interviews, session notes, artwork created during the sessions, and the researcher's reflexive artwork were reviewed and analyzed to identify four key themes: 1. Artmaking expands emotional knowledge through embodied elicitation; 2. Artmaking fosters care and safety for authentic expression; 3. Artmaking enhances mood to facilitate expression; and 4. Artmaking facilitates communication through symbolism and metaphor.

***Theme 1: Artmaking Expands Emotional Knowledge and Insights Through Embodied Elicitation***

The first theme describes the process of artmaking to help the Knowledge Holders voice their experiences through expanding emotional knowledge and insights by eliciting emotional memories. This theme aligns with existing literature related to the trauma-informed neurodevelopmental models and embodiment theories that describe how emotional memories are stored non-verbally (van der Kolk, 2014). Memories can then be elicited through sensory embodied experiences (de Witte et al., 2021; Gabel & Robb, 2017; Malchiodi & Warson, 2015). Therefore, the creative arts therapies can help Knowledge Holders reconnect to key emotional memories and experience relief through emotional elicitation (de Witte et al., 2021).

The findings also align with the mechanism of change unique to the creative arts therapies, which describes how "non-verbal expression enables emotional elicitation and processing" in visual symbolic artmaking (de Witte et al., 2021, p. 9; Gabel and Robb, 2017; Haeyen et al.,

2015). Sensory-based emotional knowledge is an integral part of the aesthetic component of the intersubjective and aesthetic paradigm of ABR and art therapy (and the intersubjective dialectic aesthetic paradigm) (Gerber, 2016; 2022). According to the ABR and art therapy paradigm, expressive art created and shared in a safe space can become an “aesthetic form of communication [that] nurtures emotional and sensorial expression self-discovery, healing, and transformation” (Chilton et al., 2015, pp. 10-11).

Adopting a transdisciplinary approach, refugee studies researchers working with marginalized populations have incorporated art mediums like collage and photography into the interview process for their ability to symbolically voice experiences (Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b). Sociologists and anthropologists refer to this sensory-based process aimed at evoking memories as elicitation. Elicitation refers to “a process aimed at triggering memory and experience and not just as a means to elicit talk to be analysed discursively” (Vacchelli, 2018a, p. 176; 2018b). These elicited memories are often linked to the core sense of self and the body. ABR and qualitative researchers who integrate elicitation through visual images value both emotional ways of knowing and seeing the world through the visual realm. Similarly, Weber (2008) explains how art can elicit subconscious memories because:

Art makes us look; it engages us. The reason we need and create art has to do with its ability to discover what we didn't know we knew, or to see what we never noticed before, even when it was right in front of our noses. (p. 6)

According to the mind-body model integrating neurobiological findings into art therapy, ABR, and the bioinformational theory (Bradley et al., 2023), “Imagery evokes emotion via 3 pathways: 1) sensory stimulation of emotional systems in the brain; 2) responding to imagery as real emotion-arousing events; and 3) activating memories for emotional episodes in the past” (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016, p. 3). Evoking images in response to emotions or well-being, and recreating them through sensory arts-based experiences, stimulates memories and provides

insight. The brain stores both implicit and explicit memories as images and sensory experiences, and perceived or actual images of objects activate similar brain areas, causing the body to react as if the image were real (Holmes & Mathews, 2010; Pearson et al., 2015). For example, a picture of a lemon may trigger salivation and the sensation of tasting it, as the body responds physiologically as if the lemon were real (Damasio, 1994; Pearson et al., 2015). This subconscious response draws on sensory-based memories before the image is consciously identified.

Emotional memories were expressed in the stories and symbolic artwork created by the Knowledge Holders throughout the art therapy group. Flowers served as a meaningful symbol in the artwork of all the Knowledge Holders. Flowers, represented in art, became a way to connect with one another and express their cherished memories of gardens in Syria, their childhood, their children, and past work in diverse countries. Amina drew a cartoon of a snowman in her journal that expressed her experiences of well-being as a child who played in snow. Rayya playfully drew cartoons of Tom and Jerry because they reminded her of her childhood. These nostalgic symbols, among others, became a language through which Knowledge Holders communicated their emotional past. The Knowledge Holders transformed personal memories into tangible drawings and paintings, using them to represent their emotions and experiences of belonging and well-being. As an arts-based researcher, I also integrated artmaking to elicit emotionally focused and intuitive insights based on empathizing with the felt experience of the Knowledge Holders and the content of their artwork (see Figures 44-56).

Artmaking connecting to memories within an art therapy group for newcomer mothers echoes a theme that was found in art therapist, da Silva's (2023) narrative art therapy embroidery group with Portuguese-speaking immigrants. One of the Knowledge Holders in her group elaborated on how engaging in art creation facilitated a connection to emotional recollections, as expressed within her artist statement below:

...one stitch pulls the other, and when you least expect it, a memory comes, a new perception. It's embroidery approaching emotions. And if I had any feelings that I still couldn't put into words... the embroidery reached those emotions and subtly untied the knot. (p. 94)

A recent literature review of neuroimaging studies conducted over the past fifty years supported the bioinformational theory that emotional imagery activates both motor regions and episodic and semantic memory retrieval areas (Bradley et al., 2023). Thus, images can evoke emotional, cognitive memories, and the body's physical reactions and actions in relation to the memory all at once. The intersubjective aesthetic paradigm of ABR and art therapy (2016) also integrates neurobiological theory and evidence to describe how actively creating artwork can evoke insight, particularly emotional memories, and embodied knowledge through "poiesis" (knowing by making) and "aesthetics" (sensory-based awareness) (Eisner, 2008; Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017).

Emotional and visual memory are linked to the brain's limbic system, specifically the amygdala, which is associated with implicit (subconscious and emotional) memory (Pearson et al., 2015; Subic-Wrana et al., 2005). As a result, creating images can tap into deeply held emotional memories, making the process of creating artwork in art therapy both emotionally powerful and sometimes surprising for Knowledge Holders as it brings old memories to the surface. Expressive arts therapist, Malchiodi explains:

While it is also true that the arts are "whole-brain" experiences, implicit memory is key to supporting reparation and recovery, particularly in the area of psychological trauma (van der Kolk, 2014); this is one example of how artistic expression gives credence to the arts as a form of knowing that supports sensory-based, non-verbal communications as not only valid, but significant. (p. 78)

In summary, artmaking's ability to elicit and evoke embodied, emotional memories stored as implicit memories helped the Syrian refugee mothers voice their lived experiences in the hybrid online art therapy group. The emotional significance was evident during member-checking, where Maryam discussed the impact of artmaking on her memories and emotions. Nostalgic symbols, such as roses used by Hafseen and a snowman chosen by Amina, expressed personal memories and shared past experiences from Syria. These symbolic representations highlight how art can preserve and communicate meaningful memories, enriching emotional knowledge within the therapeutic group setting.

The artmaking evoking emotional memories echoes findings from da Silva's (2023) art therapy study with newcomer Portuguese women to Canada and Vacchelli's (2018a; 2018b) feminist studies with refugee women creating collage. Rooted in the mind-body model of art therapy, Knowledge Holders' artworks serve as a sensory-based, non-verbal form of communication, activating implicit memories through the body. As a bridge, art can connect past and present experiences (Allen, 1995) with symbolic elements, such as flowers. These findings align with literature on the mechanisms of change in art therapy (de Witte et al., 2021, p. 9; Gabel & Robb, 2017; Haeyen et al., 2015) and highlight artmaking's potential as a significant form of knowing within the intersectional and sensory-based experiences of refugee women (Lenette, 2019; Vacchelli, 2018b).

### ***Theme 2: Artmaking Fosters Care and Safety to Authentically Express***

An important factor in facilitating the artistic expression of the Knowledge Holders' lived experiences is the intentional creation of supportive, caring environments and relationships, characterized by non-judgment and safety. The safety in an art therapy group is fostered by emphasizing the intention of a non-judgmental and confidential space, creating positive and authentic connections between members and the art therapist through both verbal and non-verbal validation, and providing a safe container for non-verbal symbolic expression of emotions within



the artwork, along with instilling therapeutic boundaries (Abbing et al., 2018; Bosgraaf et al., 2020; de Witte et al., 2021; Keidar et al., 2020; Van Lith, 2015). These factors, present in the environment, relationships, and artwork can instill a sense of safety to authentically tell stories and create emotional artwork.

Migration studies researchers who approach their work with refugee women through a feminist and arts-based lens (Lenette, 2019; Vacchelli, 2018b) suggest that participatory artmaking allows Knowledge Holders to determine how and what they wish to share about their lives. Therefore, the artwork, through holding multiple meanings, can contain their emotions and experiences without the necessity of verbal explanation. Lenette (2019) described artmaking as a sanctuary for the refugee women Knowledge Holders in her research, providing them with a safe space during their resettlement process. Similarly, creative arts therapists Dieterich-Hartwell and Koch (2017) likened artmaking for refugees to the metaphor of a shelter or safe home. Compared to verbal interviews, participatory artmaking and the selection of personal symbols offer a less intrusive, enjoyable, and empowering approach, fostering a sense of safety for the refugee Knowledge Holders to express themselves and connect with one another.

The Knowledge Holders' art choices, inspired by their surroundings, such as flowers and the ocean, reflect a desire to recreate comforting environments. These peaceful images of memories and spaces can evoke genuine feelings of safety and peace. Homes and houses symbolize comfort, cleanliness, and productivity in their artwork. Drawing houses represented happiness in the domestic sphere, as Maryam shared her joy in a clean home. Rayya's check-in artworks often depicted safe and nurturing environments with familiar people. For example, Rayya drew a scene with a puzzle room, where she was observing the snowfall from a window with a friend. In another session, she created a table with coffee, a book, and music playing. The spaces were reminiscent of pleasant memories from her homeland.

During member-checking, Rayya expressed that, "We got to know each other, created friendships. It was a lot of fun. We enjoyed our time" (Member Checking, August 24, 2023). Amina, initially uncertain about art's expressive potential in the first interview, shared that she experienced joy in artmaking despite her lack of previous experience creating art. This uncertainty was communicated in the first interview where Amina questioned art's role in her life. In the post-interview, she credited the supportive group environment, guided by an art therapist, for fostering her self-expression. Amina highlighted the benefits of meeting new people, engaging in artmaking, and learning about artworks. She appreciated the care of the art therapist in the therapeutic alliance by recognizing my care for the group. Amina said that it was meaningful "Meeting you, having met you, because you are taking care of people. You care about others" (Post-interview, December 16, 2021). In my artwork and notes that reflected on the sessions, I often noted that the session felt warm and comforting, despite the physical distance between myself and the Knowledge Holders being in different provinces.

Fostering safe spaces for expression are meaningful for refugee populations to process their past experiences, generate authentic relationships, and celebrate their identities. For refugees from diverse countries, seeking and finding meaning after a traumatic experience can occur on both individual and relational levels through dialectical discussions within a group of people (Keyers & Rober, 2020; Matos et al., 2021). Various authors have found that when refugees are exposed to collective trauma and violence, the perspectives of other community members offer ways to both make sense of the event while also building social support systems (Hirschberger, 2018; Matos et al., 2021; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014). Within the ABR and art therapy paradigm, Chilton and colleagues (2015) describe how insight and knowledge are deepened through the dialectical intersubjective process of creating a series of artworks and sharing them with others in an art therapy group. As Chilton and co-authors (2015) elaborate:

These eclectic forms of aesthetic knowledge are often expressed in art therapy through dialectic dialogues, as meaning is sought in iterative ways such as joint verbal discussions, artistic deconstruction and reconstruction, or working in a series to explore metaphors that shift meaning over time. (p. 10)

Within an intersubjective aesthetic framework, meaning, knowledge, and insights emerge through dialectical relationships and dialogues within safe, supportive connections between people and their series of artworks. These relationships foster honest sharing, expanding understanding among the Knowledge Holders. In the ABR and art therapy paradigm, dialectical pluralism refers to the collaborative construction of knowledge through interactive and dynamic processes, engaging with the diverse and authentic realities of individuals. Meaning is co-created through the unconscious and subconscious relational narratives between the Knowledge Holders, their artwork, and the art therapist (Brown, 2011; Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber, 2016; 2022).

**The Artwork Represented and Fostered Relationships.** The Knowledge Holders also represented their relationships within the group through their artwork, which emphasized the safety and connections fostered in the group. One of Rayya's pieces depicted her friendship with another group member, symbolized by two women forming a collective heart. Hafseen used roses to represent the safe space of the group and incorporated the Knowledge Holders' names. Several of the Knowledge Holders depicted my pregnancy as a symbol of positive connections, expressing joy and gratitude. In the post-interview, Amina conveyed happiness and gratitude, highlighting the supportive environment she felt. Rayya and Amina expressed appreciation for me in my role as both researcher and art therapist, acknowledging the positive impact of the therapeutic alliance despite virtual connections and language barriers. This theme underscores the supportive and caring environment nurtured through artistic expression, even with virtual interactions and language challenges.

The therapeutic alliance refers to the bond and trusting relationship established between clients and therapists. Contemporary researchers agree that "there is consistent evidence that the quality of the therapeutic alliance is linked to the success of psychotherapeutic treatment across a broad spectrum of patients, treatment modalities, presenting problems, contexts, and measurements," as mentioned in a literature review by Stubbe (2018, p. 402). In the context of art therapy, analytic art therapist Schaverien (2000) views the therapeutic alliance as triangular, involving the client, art therapist, and artwork. This triangle emphasizes that the relationship with the artwork and art materials is just as crucial as the trusting, safe relationship between therapist and client. This triangular dynamic creates an additional symbolic space for expressing experiences that may be difficult to articulate in words, either due to language limitations or the emotional discomfort of voicing certain feelings (Keidar et al., 2020).

Both art therapists da Silva (2023) and Hanania (2020) found that embroidery storytelling art therapy groups supported newcomer women in Canada by fostering community support and friendships. In Hanania's (2020) feedback form, 100% of the Arabic female refugee Knowledge Holders reported that the group helped increase friendships, a sense of community, and provided meaningful social interactions. Additionally, 70% of respondents felt the group alleviated their feelings of loneliness (Hanania, 2020). Similarly, the Knowledge Holders in this study also depicted positive connections within the group, with many of their artworks emphasizing themes of friendship and mutual care.

If Knowledge Holders feel judged based on the aesthetic quality of their artwork, they may prioritize creating visually appealing pieces over expressive, emotionally sensitive (McNiff, 2017), and meaningful images. The ABR and art therapy paradigm, along with the axiology of virtuosity, prioritizes authentic expressive artwork over traditionally "beautiful" pieces. This approach creates space for art to serve as a symbolic voice, conveying experiences beyond words

through various senses (e.g., sight, touch). Czamanski-Cohen and Weihs (2016) agree that safety, relaxation, and openness are crucial for fostering insight and metacognitive abilities.

In summary, creating artwork in safe group spaces can facilitate authentic storytelling among Syrian refugee women in Newfoundland and Labrador. Meaning-making within community groups is vital for newcomers to process collective trauma (Keyers & Rober, 2020; Hirschberger, 2018; Matos et al., 2021; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014), and artmaking in a supportive environment can help foster meaningful relationships that aid emotional expression (Hanania, 2020; da Silva, 2023). The Knowledge Holders articulated the importance of a safe environment to express themselves when they emphasized the value of meeting new people, creating friendships, and my role in caring about them during the final interviews. Moreover, the Knowledge Holders' artworks depicted friendships and care.

The creation of a secure and non-judgmental space, cultivated through caring therapeutic relationships between Knowledge Holders and the art therapist, coupled with the use of symbolism in artwork, can help foster genuine emotional sharing (Abbing et al., 2018; Bosgraaf et al., 2020; de Witte et al., 2021; Keidar et al., 2020). For refugee women, expressing experiences through symbolic artwork that transcends words can foster safe emotional expression as a safe haven, a home, or a refuge (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Lenette, 2019; Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b). In addition, the unique triangular therapeutic relationship shared between the client, art therapist, and artworks can foster safe expression beyond verbal communication (Keidar et al., 2020; Schaverien, 2000).

### ***Theme 3: Artmaking Enhances Mood to Facilitate Expression***

The arts-based data revealed that artmaking in the group setting positively impacted both the Knowledge Holders' and my mood, likely contributing to their openness in self-expression. The joy, playfulness, and fun inherent in artmaking are recognized as mechanisms of change within the creative arts therapies (de Witte et al., 2021), helping individuals feel more comfortable

sharing their experiences. During the interviews, the Knowledge Holders noted how art improved their mood and assisted in managing feelings of depression, highlighting artmaking's potential to enhance emotional well-being and reduce negative emotions.

This research with refugee mothers revealed that arts-based check-ins and check-outs using small circles captured emotional mood shifts, offering valuable insights into the Knowledge Holders' experiences. Hafseen joined seeking relief from depression linked to her son's illness and found that art boosted her mood. In pre-interviews, Amina and Maryam shared that artmaking brought relief and relaxation. During member-checking, both Maryam and Rayya highlighted the enjoyment and fun they experienced. Similar findings were reported by de Silva (2023) and Rugendyke and co-authors (2021), who observed that artmaking and storytelling improved emotional well-being in immigrant and refugee women. As a researcher and facilitator, I also noticed positive changes in my mood before, during, and after the sessions. Despite challenges like room double-bookings and personal health issues, the sessions had a positive impact on my mood, contributing to a reciprocal positive emotional state between all of us.

Artmaking can connect individuals to positive experiences through engaging in creative self-soothing sensory activities, such as simply mixing paint colours with a paintbrush while listening to relaxing and emotional music (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; Malchiodi & Warson, 2015). Hence, the deliberate hands-on engagement with art materials can elicit positive experiences and a sense of calm, potentially diverting individuals from stress-provoking thoughts and ailments by immersing them in the present moment (de Witte et al., 2021). Artmaking has been shown to reduce stress and increase relaxation, as evidenced by lower cortisol levels in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Abbing et al., 2018; Curry & Kasser, 2005; Kaimal et al., 2016; Kaimal et al., 2017; Laurer et al., 2015; Sandmire et al., 2012; Shella, 2018; Walsh et al., 2007). Therefore, evidence supporting the well-being benefits of artistic and aesthetic pleasure is

increasing for various populations (de Witte et al., 2021; Gabel & Robb, 2017; Rylatt, 2012; Van Lith, 2015).

Even if challenging emotions are expressed in artwork, expressing these emotions can provide relief. For example, a narrative study conducted by Collie and co-authors (2006) indicated that, despite expressing negative and challenging emotions during art therapy sessions, the study participants felt relief and had a positive experience. Additionally, Holmes and colleagues' (2005; 2006) laboratory studies found that imagery, such as imaging emotional experiences visually, had a greater impact on mood changes than verbal conditions, such as imagining the verbal meaning of a recited narrative. Positive emotions, which can be experienced in the body as possible internal sense of safety, may be important before people can engage in reflection, perspective-taking, meaning making, and share authentic experiences with one another (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2015).

In addition to reducing stress, artmaking can enhance positive emotions by helping individuals reach a flow state, where they are deeply engaged in the present moment within a safe group space (Abbing et al., 2018; Chilton, 2013; Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; de Witte et al., 2021). Flow, a concept from positive psychology developed by Csikszentmihalyi (1997), describes a state where action and consciousness merge, leading to deep concentration, diminished self-awareness, and a warped sense of time. This liminal experience, where the process is valued as much as the outcome, has been positively correlated with subjective well-being and improved mood (Chilton, 2013; Dwight et al., 2021; Csikszentmihalyi, 2002; Wu et al., 2021).

Interconnecting the mind and body, the flow state is related to the brain's dopaminergic brain reward systems and increased "respiratory depth during flow experience indicating more relaxation and parasympathetic involvement, where the body enters a relaxed state indicated by an internal sense of safety" (van der Linden et al., 2021, p. 958). Therefore, when engaged in this

state of full absorption with a creative and meaningful task, an individual experiences a reduction of self-consciousness, in addition to increased positive neurological feedback and an internal sense of calm (Peifer et al., 2014; Ulrich et al., 2014; Ulrich et al., 2016). Furthermore, social flow, thus engaging in a flow state with others, was perceived as more enjoyable than engaging in solitary flow (Łuczniak et al., 2021; van der Hout et al., 2018; Walker, 2008). Engaging in creative flow through artistic pleasure in an art therapy group can increase the positive and calming emotions.

In summary, both the arts-based and verbal data from the Knowledge Holders and me, as the artist-researcher-art therapist, demonstrate the positive impact of artmaking on mood throughout the research process. The positive emotions generated in the group facilitated authentic sharing. The Knowledge Holders consistently linked artmaking to relief, relaxation, and improved mood, mirroring findings from da Silva (2021) and Rugendyke and colleagues (2021). Research also supports artmaking's potential to reduce stress, increase positive emotions, and promote relaxation (Curry & Kasser, 2005; Kaimal et al., 2016; Kaimal et al., 2017; Laurer et al., 2015; Sandmire et al., 2012; Shella, 2018; Walsh et al., 2007). The tactile nature of sensory-based artmaking enhances self-soothing (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016), fosters flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), and helps individuals ease stress by focusing on the present moment (de Witte et al., 2021). These effects can increase emotional expression through artistic pleasure.

#### ***Theme 4: Artmaking Expands Communication Through Symbolism and Metaphor***

An overarching theme across all art therapy sessions and reflected in my own art is that symbolic images can serve as an alternative language to communicate experiences, particularly when language barriers arise from interpretation challenges and physical distance. Images, through metaphor, can extend and sometimes even replace verbal communication when words fail to convey a felt experience (de Witte et al., 2022). Through using lines, shapes, textures, colors, and symbols, the artwork provided a platform for the Knowledge Holders to express their



experiences. This theme aligns with Kolah's (2023) review, which highlights how expressive arts therapies can help overcome language barriers. In a scoping review, the author found that "expressive arts therapies can mitigate linguistic barriers in mental health treatment" (Kolah, 2023, p. 2).

Johnson (1998) expands on how artwork can communicate through symbolism. They share that, through artistic symbolism, "inner states are externalized or projected into the arts media, transformed in health-promoting ways and then re-internalized by the client" (p. 85). The use of symbolism in artwork may have helped the Knowledge Holders and I convey complex emotions and experiences that were difficult to articulate in words, both during the art therapy group, the member-checking session, and throughout my reflexive artmaking and analysis. The symbolic capacity of visual art to convey and express what words cannot capture is both a core component of the ABR and art therapy paradigm, which is the theoretical framework that informs this study (Chilton et al., 2015). Indeed, de Witte and colleagues (2021) identified symbolism and metaphor as one of the three primary mechanisms of change in the creative arts therapies that are unique to the field.

The paintings and drawings created during the art therapy groups and member-checking session (Tables 4, 8-11) provide examples of how artwork transcended verbal expression. These images highlight the potential of online art therapy for Syrian refugee women in NL to voice their lived experiences. Artwork's capacity to symbolically communicate complex, nonverbal experiences is evident in my research analysis (Figures 44-56). Symbols in the Knowledge Holders' artwork align with those identified by Hanania (2020) in her study of Syrian refugee women in Toronto, including monuments, Arabic script, flowers, trees, hearts, and birds. These artworks serve as visual narratives, with Maryam's drawing of her house illustrating her ideal living environment and emotions. In this way, the virtual art therapy provided a space for the

Knowledge Holders to share their stories through visual language, distinct from verbal communication.

Art's ability to express experiences that transcend verbal language is a cornerstone of the art therapy and ABR paradigms. Therefore, these findings are not new but contribute to an existing literature that describe the potential of symbolic images to communicate with a visual language (de Witte et al., 2017). Malchiodi (2017), a psychologist and expressive arts therapist, elaborated that,

...the core value of creative arts therapies as agents of health and well-being is their ability to expand the limits of language and give voice to which cannot be communicated or completely known through words or logic. (p. 68)

Further, Edith Kramer, a pioneer in the field who is considered one of the grandmothers of art therapy, believed that verbal explanations are not necessary for healing and communication to take place. In an interview with Koodrin and colleagues (1994), Kramer asserted that with imaginal art,

...there is a door opened to a kind of communication with yourself and others that is, indeed, symbolic and need not be necessarily translated into words. After all, any good work that anybody does, the image tells you more than words could tell. (p.181)

Research on how people represent emotions through symbolic art is expanding. While it is acknowledged that the interpretation of symbols, such as colors and lines, is influenced by both individual and cultural factors (Acton, 2001), there is a growing body of evidence suggesting that non-artists can effectively convey specific emotions through their use of color, shapes, and lines in artworks (Bar & Neta, 2006; Damiano et al., 2021a; Damiano et al., 2023; Jonauskaite et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2007; Pecchinenda et al., 2014). For example, Damiano and colleagues (2021a) conducted a study involving 242 Knowledge Holders, combining behavioral analysis and computational techniques to analyze drawings. Their findings consistently demonstrated that

certain colors and line features employed represented six different basic emotions. The feelings were anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and wonder. Anger was typically depicted with red hues and denser lines compared to other emotions, while sadness often featured blue tones and more vertical lines. Previous studies linked the colour yellow to joy. Additionally, the prediction accuracy between colours and emotions were higher for non-artists than for artwork created by artists. Another study found that even young children from diverse cultures (preschoolers) understand the symbolic use of color to express emotions, with certain colors consistently linked to specific emotions (Pouliou et al., 2018). Emotional appraisals of visual stimuli often occur rapidly and automatically (Barret et al., 2007; Moors et al., 2013).

The use of symbols in the artwork, like flowers, butterflies, and homes, implies that art therapy can help people communicate symbolically. This symbolic communication can transcend language barriers (Adnam Jones, 2018; Dye, 2017; Henderson & Gladding, 1998; Kolah, 2023), offering an accessible way for Knowledge Holders to interculturally articulate complex emotional experiences. Artwork can portray pre-verbal sensory, embodied, and emotional experiences that can facilitate making implicit knowledge explicit through symbolism and metaphor (Chilton et al., 2015). As Gerber and Myers-Coffman (2017) describe in the art therapy and ABR paradigm, the nature of symbolism, whether individual or collective, provides a way to signify and depict phenomena. Sometimes, the nature of artistic symbolism is elusive, ambiguous, invisible, or only partially understood, which cannot be fully articulated through language. Notably, metaphors, referring to a deliberate process to symbolize emotions and experiences, deliver “psychological insights that go beyond linear rationality” (Moon, 2007, p. 4). When discussing the potential of metaphoric artwork in ABR, Gerber and Myers-Coffman (2017) shared that:

Metaphor also gives form, connection, and meaning to multiple human experiences of mind and body, facilitating the translation of the paradoxical and confusing language of the unconscious into a comprehensible language with new meaning and possibilities (Gorelick,

1989). Because of this inherent creative nature of metaphor, it lends itself to the mining of the imagination, unearthing and depicting archaic sensory and embodied artifacts, assembling and constructing intricate stories— stories that hold and represent rich and multiple meanings that are otherwise inaccessible (Gorelick, 1989; Moon, 2007). (pp. 595-596)

Similarly, Maryam shared that artmaking helped her voice her experiences, though she found it difficult to articulate exactly how. In the post-interview, she explained that creating art in her home, when her children were asleep, provided her with a sense of solace and the freedom to express herself without interruptions. The difficulty in articulating how art can help her express emotions suggests that artmaking is an ineffable experience. Arts-based researcher, Weber (2012) agreed that,

Artistic images can help us access those elusive, hard-to-put-into-words aspects of knowledge that might otherwise remain hidden or are ignored. Eisner (1995) argues that the use of images provides an “all-at-once-ness” that reveals what would be hard to grasp through language and numbers alone. (p. 5)

When exploring the symbolic potential of artmaking, it is important discuss the presence of simultaneity during the art therapy and ABR process (de Witte et al., 2022). Symbolic artwork can portray multiple meanings simultaneously, while meanings can also change over time (Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017). Simultaneity, conveyed through symbolism, allows people to communicate complex, sometimes contradictory ideas that may be subconscious or preconscious, as multiple meanings can coexist in an intersubjective manner. For example, my painting *Bright Future Ahead: Hope* (Figure 54) symbolized not only hope but also the Knowledge Holders' representations of spirituality and a vivid personal memory of mine, all at once.

Similarly, Maryam attributed two different interpretations to the woman with the Quran (left of Figure 29). In Session 2, she described the image as symbolizing the peace prayer brought her, helping her “forget my challenges” (November 24, 2021). During the Member-checking Session, Maryam shared that the same self-portrait with the Quran also represented pride in her religion, connecting her to life and to God, which brought her happiness (August 24, 2023). Both symbolic interpretations of the image can coexist and be equally true.

Weber (2008) argued that visual images help creators and viewers maintain awareness of both the overall contextual meaning of an image and the different meanings embedded in its individual components simultaneously. This ability to hold multiple, often contrasting meanings can arise through metaphor, facilitating storytelling. In the context of the mind-body model, which integrates body and neurological research to expand art therapy and ABR theory, symbolic artmaking can foster metacognition, which refers to evaluating one’s thinking processes about a specific topic (Flavell, 1979). Metacognition, or "thinking about thinking" (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016, p. 6), may occur implicitly, where stimuli are subconsciously evaluated as a whole. Symbolic images aid in making implicit thoughts, emotions, and memories explicit, as "mentalization is limited through verbal means" (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016, p. 6). Thus, while verbal introspection has its limitations, engaging with somatic, visual processes can help express experiences that words cannot fully capture.

In essence, artmaking facilitated communication of emotional, shared, and unique experiences among the Knowledge Holders within this hybrid online art therapy group through symbolic artwork. Some symbols created by the Knowledge Holders, such as flowers, trees, and religious buildings, bore resemblance to those produced by refugee female Arabic Knowledge Holders in Hanania’s (2020) embroidery art therapy group. The capacity of visual artwork to aid in communication through symbolism is well-documented in both art therapy (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; de Witte et al., 2021; Malchiodi, 2017) and ABR literature (Chilton et al., 2015;

Gerber, 2022; Gerber & Myers-Coffman, 2017; Webber, 2008), which integrate metacognitive processes and simultaneity. Furthermore, research indicates that artwork created by non-artists can consistently and effectively convey emotions through associations with colors and textures (Bar & Neta, 2006; Damiano et al., 2023; Jonauskaite et al., 2020; Larson et al., 2007; Pecchinenda et al., 2014). Nevertheless, researchers and art therapists must exercise caution regarding biased intercultural associations related to symbolism (Acton, 2001).

**Summary of Artmaking to Voice Lived Experiences in Art Therapy.** In this hybrid art therapy group and ABR, artmaking facilitated the expression of lived experiences for Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's. The Knowledge Holders' responses to questions like "Does artmaking help you express your experiences?" and "What does art mean in your life?" indicated a noticeable shift. This change suggests the transformative potential of expressive artmaking in art therapy, even when facilitated remotely by an art therapist/researcher. This arts-based study aimed to explore how artmaking impacts the ability to voice experiences for this unique population, navigating the challenges of language interpretation between Arabic and English in a hybrid online setting.

Through the analysis of transcribed interviews, artworks, narratives, and reflexive notes, four themes emerged. These themes were discussed in relation to contemporary literature on art therapy; (Kolah, 2023), ABR (Weber, 2008), psychology (van der Linden et al., 2021), visual studies (Damiano et al., 2023) and refugee studies (Lenette, 2019; Vacchelli, 2018b). The first theme revealed that artmaking can evoke emergent emotional knowledge through embodiment (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; de Witte et al., 2021; Malchiodi, 2017). The second theme highlighted that artmaking, within a supportive environment, can enhance feelings of safety and encourage emotional expression (Dieterich-Hartwell & Koch, 2017; Schaverien, 2000; Stubbe, 2018). The third theme suggested that artmaking can improve mood and affect while reducing stress, thereby fostering a sense of comfort in sharing authentic experiences (Csikszentmihalyi,

1997; Kaimal et al., 2016; Kaimal et al., 2017). Lastly, the final theme, a well-established concept in the field of art therapy and ABR, emphasized how communication can be broadened through symbolic metaphors in visual artworks (Kolah, 2023).

## **Syrian Refugee Mothers' Experiences of Belonging and Well-being Expressed Through Artmaking in a Safe Group**

### ***Belonging Expressed Through Artmaking***

When developing a conceptual framework to describe the experience of belonging, researchers in the field, Allen and colleagues (2021) define belonging as a "fundamental human need" (p. 87). They further conceptualize it as a "subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences—a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes" (p. 87). Belonging was a primary consideration in Citizenship and Immigration Canada's 2015 mandate because the experience of belonging was linked to increased well-being, community participation, and life satisfaction for newcomers (Badali et al., Chavis et al., 2008; Hou et al., 2016; Painter, 2013).

Therefore, in this current study, the Knowledge Holders' positive experiences of belonging are significant, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has heightened feelings of isolation and loneliness in both the general Canadian and international populations (Allen et al., 2021; Lin, 2023; The U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). The Syrian refugee mothers' positive experiences of belonging align with survey research conducted by the Government of Canada analyzing belonging among newcomers and Canadian-born adults. For instance, according to Statistics Canada (2023), "Immigrants have a stronger sense of belonging to Canada than the Canadian-born population" (para. 5). The survey revealed that over 77% of immigrant respondents reported feeling "a very strong or somewhat strong sense of belonging to Canada" (para. 5). This recent population-based survey builds upon previous research conducted in 2016,

which found that 93% of Canada newcomers experienced a strong sense of belonging to the country (Hou et al., 2016).

The 2020 General Social Survey found that more newcomers resettled in Atlantic Canada, including St. John's, reported higher levels of belonging compared to other provinces and territories (Stick et al., 2023). In this study, respondents who identify as a part of a racialized group also reported a stronger sense of belonging than the non-racialized groups (Stick et al., 2023). Therefore, this literature on newcomers' strong sense of belonging in Canada aligns with the Knowledge Holders' answers to the pre- and post- interview answers and artistic exploration of their experience of belonging in St. John's. The Syrian refugee mothers' artwork explorations and stories shed light on what factors affect their unique experiences of belonging. Meanwhile, the World Health Organization European Region (2022) has recommended that arts engagement (such as artmaking and participating in cultural activities) can increase social inclusion and belonging for forcibly displaced people.

While exploring the phenomena of belonging in St. John's, three main themes emerged from the visual, written, and verbal data. The first theme connects belonging to the kindness and care from locals, which contrasts previous research in Newfoundland that found the community unwelcoming (Baker, 2013; Baker et al., 2016; El-Bilay & Mulay, 2016; Fang et al., 2018; Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008). The second theme found that belonging was connected to achieving vocational ambitions for newcomer Syrian mothers in Canada (Hou et al., 2018; Hanania, 2020; Moffitt et al., 2020; Que, 2020). The final theme explored how bridging identity continuity across countries and cultures can foster a sense of belonging, particularly through artmaking (Allen et al., 2021; Fazel et al., 2012). Artmaking can support identity continuity by fostering simultaneity and creating a shared sense of community through connection with others through art (Gerber, 2014; 2016). The sections below explore the key themes and elaborate on the contemporary research on belonging for refugee women and artmaking.



### ***Theme 1: Belonging Felt with Kindness, Friendliness, and Care from Hospitable Locals***

In the individual interviews, many Knowledge Holders noted that the friendliness and kindness of locals (residents from diverse backgrounds) enhanced their sense of belonging in St. John's. Nonetheless, the cold winter weather reduced that sense of belonging for some. Hafseen, Amina, and Maryam expressed gratitude for the warmth and friendliness they've faced in St. John's. Amina appreciated the inclusive atmosphere and emphasized the absence of experiencing discrimination. Hafseen felt genuinely welcomed by locals and appreciated the hospitality. Maryam, having lived in St. John's for over five years, echoed the sentiments about the kindness of the locals in St. John's, despite disliking the cold winters that felt isolating. In their post-interviews, the Knowledge Holders continue to highlight the positive experiences of belonging in the St. John's community. This finding contradicts El-Bilay and Mulay's (2016) ethnographic qualitative study where eight former refugees to St. John's reported feelings of exclusion. The refugees who resettled in NL, in the 2016 study, felt like they were "othered" and treated as different from the local communities, including institutional groups like businesses and schools. They reported a lack of social support due to an absence of shared history and trust. For example, one newcomer Knowledge Holder in the study shared that,

Establishing partnerships here is really hard, because you have to essentially show them that you are looking out for them. But they won't accept it, right? They won't trust you, right? Especially if you're foreign, because there's a history. (p. 55)

In contrast to Maryam and Amina's reports of not experiencing discrimination, previous studies interviewing newcomer youth, parents, and students in St. John's highlighted high levels of racism and discrimination (Baker, 2013; Baker et al., 2016; Burnaby et al., 2009; Gien & Law, 2009; Fang et al., 2018; Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008; Whelan and Rivera, 2009). A report for the Association for New Canadians (Baker, 2008) found that 40% of White youth in St. John's believed racism was an issue in their schools. Additionally, newcomer Muslim women accessing

maternity healthcare reported discrimination and insensitivity, negatively impacting their perinatal and postnatal experiences.

The Knowledge Holders' unprompted reports of not feeling discriminated against may suggest that initiatives aimed at reducing Islamophobia and fostering belonging, integration, and communication in St. John's have been effective. Programs such as the Association for New Canadians' (ANC) Community Connections groups, like the Stay-at-Home Mothers' Group, support isolated communities (ANC, 2020). Projects like the 2Gether Youth Mental Health & Wellness Project empower refugee youth and promote cultural humility among health service providers (ANC, 2020).

Initiatives like the Open Studio Community-based Arts program (Lewis et al., 2018a; 2018b), held at a local high school for adolescents, may also support well-being, belonging, and resiliency. The Knowledge Holders in this study were actively engaged with the local settlement organization, ANC, participating in English courses and an Empowerment Group, which likely contributed to their sense of belonging and positive interactions with locals. Additionally, it's probable that local staff at ANC received intercultural sensitivity and cultural humility training, further fostering positive relationships and belonging. The Knowledge Holders' reports of caring relationships suggest that such programs can enhance newcomers' sense of community.

### ***Theme 2: Belonging Experienced through Economic Opportunities and Ambition***

The Knowledge Holders' sense of belonging was explored artistically through drawings and paintings during this study. Several of the Syrian refugee mothers linked their experiences of belonging to their work and ambition, such as Maryam, Rayya, and Amina. Maryam stated that during the member-checking session, "Life here [in Canada] requires you to get out and work" (Member Checking Session, August 24, 2023). Another example is Amina's portrayal of two hospitals in her artwork, along with her expressed desire to work in senior care homes to share her sense of belonging. The theme of ambition is evident as the Knowledge Holders express interest

in learning more about art, life in St. John's, and English. During the member-checking session and interviews, many suggested linking their artmaking to entrepreneurship training for selling their work. This theme of vocational attainment corresponds to Hou and colleagues' report (2018), which finds that "Immigrants' sense of belonging is dependent on their prospects for economically contributing to the receiving society and securing material well-being for themselves and their families" (p. 3). Similarly, when interviewing twenty refugee youth to St. John's, Canada, Que (2020) found that a "A new life in Canada lit a beacon of hope in them" to seek "university post-secondary education" (p. 163).

Moffitt and colleagues' (2020) qualitative research on economic immigrants found that newcomers linked their Canadian identities and sense of inclusion to work attainment and professional success. Thus, the newcomer Knowledge Holders believed that "desirable' immigrants are those that are well integrated professionally" (p. 84). Finally, when Hanania (2020) interviewed Arabic female refugees, attaining work and educational opportunities in Canada emerged as a prevalent theme.

Spitzer's (2011) work, worry, and weariness model sheds light on the challenges newcomer women face in accessing economic opportunities, which affects their sense of belonging and well-being in Canada. The model emphasizes inequities in both paid and unpaid labor that impact newcomers' health. Historically, many newcomers left St. John's due to limited employment opportunities, as noted in Burnaby's (2008) study on immigration retention in Newfoundland and Labrador. Therefore, access to employment is crucial for the well-being of refugee Syrian mothers.

The Knowledge Holders' aspirations for entrepreneurial attainment, highlighted in their interviews and artwork, underscore their determination to contribute to society by linking their sense of belonging in St. John's. This theme reaffirms findings from Hou and colleagues (2018) and Moffitt and colleagues' (2020) studies that highlight newcomers' sense of belonging being

connected to economic contributions and vocational attainment in Canada. Also, previous research by Spitzer (2011) correlated economic opportunities to female newcomers' health and well-being. In art therapy, Hanania's (2020) interviews with refugee women highlight the groups' connection between Canada and vocational/educational opportunities.

***Theme 3: Belonging Increased by Bridging Identity Continuity***

Allen and colleagues (2021), who are key researchers in the field of studying belonging, emphasized the importance of cultural and subcultural identities when conceptualizing the phenomena. The authors elaborated that:

A need to belong — to connect deeply with other people and secure places, to align with one's cultural and subcultural identities, and to feel like one is a part of the systems around them — appears to be buried deep inside our biology, all the way down to the human genome (Slavich & Cole, 2013). (p. 2)

The authors argue that belonging in communities through shared cultural identities has evolutionary ties to physical survival. Early humans, for instance, relied on social networks for survival in threatening environments with scarce resources (Allen et al., 2021). The biological need for belonging is closely tied to safety through cultural community connections. For visual minority refugee women, this sense of belonging integrates with feelings of psychological and physical security.

Challenges in finding a sense of belonging are particularly pronounced in marginalized communities and groups historically excluded from the dominant culture, such as intersectional visual minority refugee women in St. John's, Canada (Allen et al., 2021; Borho et al., 2020; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Li et al., 2016; Spitzer, 2011). When refugees relocate to a different country, their ability to bridge multiple identities, such as between their origin and host country, is crucial for experiencing an internal sense of belonging (Fazel et al., 2012). Additionally, through an intersectional lens, identities may encompass a variety of factors, including ethnicity, language,

gender, religion, and cultural influences. Thus, a symbolic artistic image can help generate a narrative framework to connect, express, and contextualize complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural and subcultural identities that Knowledge Holders may bring to Canada. For refugees, creating artwork that connects and expresses complex cultural identities across time can influence felt experiences of belonging in a new resettlement location.

The emphasis on connecting the continuity of multiple cultural identities parallels Rayya's and Maryam's artwork that explored belonging. During sessions three and four of the art therapy group, they were invited to reflect on their experiences of belonging in St. John's. The session became very emotional for the Knowledge Holders, who bridged cultural and national identities, experiences, and hopes. Maryam's portrait depicted her reunited family alongside the Syrian and Canadian flags, symbolizing her emotional connection to Canada as a place of peace and her enduring love for Syria. She explained, "The Canadian flag is in the top left corner, and Canada feels like home because we live in peace and love here" (Sessions 3 & 4, December 10, 2021).

Rayya's painting captured the deep loss her family and country experienced, using symbols like broken trees and bombed buildings to convey her emotional story. Her work touched not only the group members but also her neighbor, who was moved by the painting and requested to keep it. Rayya gladly shared it, further connecting with her community. This act of sharing not only expressed her emotions as a Syrian but also fostered a collective sense of belonging in their new home.

During the member-checking session, Rayya and Maryam discussed their shared experiences of tragedy and loss, reflecting the communal emotional journey of Syrians in St. John's. As Maryam expressed, "Everyone's facing the same thing. All Syrians are" (Member-checking session, August 24, 2023). Rayya highlighted the importance of justice and peace in her artwork, while Maryam emphasized her commitment to justice. Their collective stories,

connecting Syrian and Canadian values of fairness (Government of Canada, Department of Justice, 2001) with a history of loss, offer insight into the Knowledge Holders' resilience. Their symbolic artwork bridges their heritage with their new lives as Canadians, resonating with de Witte and colleagues (2022) concept of artmaking as a means to “modulate time and space” between the “here and now” and the “there and then” all at once (p. 13; Chilton et al., 2015).

Symbolic artwork created in a safe group setting “can assist individuals in increasing emotional awareness” and “personal insight” (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016, p. 9). Adopting an ontological intersubjective pluralist perspective in art allows contradictory realities to coexist, as described by Gerber (2014). This perspective enables the blending of the logical and illogical, real and surreal, and time and timelessness, providing space to explore conflicting emotions, histories, and identities. Gerber’s (2016) concept of dialectical interactions helps explain how the Knowledge Holders navigate multiple, contrasting identities and experiences in their artwork, contributing to a deeper exploration of intersectional identities (de Witte et al., 2022).

Complementing the theme that emerged with the Knowledge Holders, bridging of identity continuity was also apparent in my reflexive artwork that was presented in chapter seven. For example, the series of mountains (Figure 46) explores the connection between my identity as a mother, including the fears and psychological and physical burdens of mothering, my desire to reconnect with the Knowledge Holders, and my academic identity as I delved back into the research. Therefore, artmaking may have fostered belonging and identity integration by bridging multiple identities, times, spaces, complex emotions, relationships, and realities in a dynamic intersubjective and dialectical way.

During the hybrid art therapy sessions and throughout the research process, art becomes a bridge between cultural and national identities that contribute to a sense of continuity and belonging. Therefore, a sense of belonging, explored through symbolic simultaneity within the artworks, was expressed as identity continuity across Syrian, Canadian, and other cultures and

locations (such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan) (Gerber's, 2014; 2016). This finding associates with contemporary literature that aligns with maintaining cultural and subcultural identities (Allen et al., 2021).

According to evolutionary theory, being part of social systems and experiencing belonging is linked to psychological and physical safety and well-being (Allen et al., 2021; WHO European Region, 2022). Therefore, an internalized sense of belonging, fostered through the maintenance of cultural and subcultural identities, is essential for well-being and can be enhanced through artmaking and art therapy (WHO European Region, 2022). Bridging multiple simultaneous identities is crucial to developing an internalized sense of belonging, particularly for intersectional groups who have historically experienced marginalization and vulnerability, such as refugee Syrian mothers (Borho et al., 2020; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Fazel et al., 2012; Spitzer, 2011).

### ***Well-being Expressed Through Artmaking***

NL researcher, Power (2021), states that “Research directed at identifying factors that negatively and positively impact young refugees’ psychological well-being is more important than ever” (p. 4). The psychological perceptions and experiences of well-being and belonging are interconnected. This interconnection between well-being and belonging is particularly pronounced with research involving newcomers to Canada and people experiencing displacement (Allen et al., 2021; Badali et al., Chavis et al., 2008; Hou et al., 2016; Painter, 2013). Maintaining one's cultural identity while integrating into Canadian society has been identified as a protective factor for well-being (Fazel et al., 2012).

Well-being can be defined differently based on peoples’ unique sets of beliefs, values, identities, and experiences. Thus, viewing well-being as unique to each person is an important study when supporting intersectional experiences of refugee Syrian mothers in NL. Refugees and newcomers to Canada can encounter diverse daily stressors during the resettlement stage, which

are influenced by experiences of socioeconomic instability and language barriers (Bogic et al., 2012; Hanley et al., 2018; Power, 2021; Siriwardhana et al., 2014; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014). These post-migratory experiences exacerbate the emotional and psychological toll related to trauma, loss, mass violence, and stress that preceded and may have led to the decision to relocate (Forrest-Bank et al., 2019; Im et al., 2020; Rubesin, 2018). These stressful experiences can be compounded by intersectional factors related to gender, religion, and motherhood, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rubesin, 2018). For example, Zivot and colleagues (2022) found that refugee mothers who had relocated to Calgary during the COVID-19 pandemic reported reduced well-being, increased stress, worry, and social isolation due to education and employment interruptions (such as lockdowns), and barriers accessing healthcare. Thus, the challenges and responsibilities associated with mothering without communal support intensified (Zivot et al., 2022).

Akin to Zivot and colleagues' study (2022), the Knowledge Holders in this research identified several resources that have increased their well-being, and thus resilience, in their artwork and during the interviews. Through creating artwork and discussing well-being, group members bonded over shared experiences, highlighting moments that enhanced their sense of well-being. The Knowledge Holders related their well-being to the following three main themes. The first theme links well-being to experiencing awe through nature, spirituality, and aesthetic beauty. The second theme revealed that the refugee Syrian women linked their well-being to the wellness, opportunities, and happiness of their families, particularly their children. The final theme showed that the Knowledge Holders linked their well-being to maintaining an optimistic mindset. The following subsections examine these key themes in relation to contemporary and seminal transdisciplinary refugee studies research.

***Theme 1: Well-being Experienced Through a Transcendent Sense of Awe Derived from Nature, Spirituality, and Aesthetic Encounters***



When exploring well-being experiences of the Knowledge Holders embedded in their artwork, the beauty, peace, and positive experiences arising from nature, music, the arts, and spiritual practices could all be associated with the distinct emotion of awe. Psychologists Monroy and Keltner (2023) recently explored the connection between well-being and the awe inspired by positive aesthetic experiences, such as beautiful music, spiritual events, and nature. Awe, described as both a spiritual and aesthetic emotion (Keltner, 2023; Keltner & Haidt, 2003), can be peripherally linked to the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm in ABR and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015).

In the field of psychology, awe is conceptualized as a transcendent "meaning-making emotion" through "authentic self-pursuit" (Yuan et al., 2023, p. 1). Thus, when the Knowledge Holders recounted their experiences of being in nature, listening to beautiful music, appreciating art, and undergoing spiritual transcendence, awe may serve as the connecting factor to their felt emotion of well-being. Meaning making is important for the well-being of refugee women because "[i]n post-migration settings, refugees attempt to create narratives that allow them to make sense of the past as they adjust to life and negotiate places of safety and growth, both within their own exiled communities and in their new host communities" (Matos et al., 2021, p. 1). Creating meaning from experiences can reduce distress and aid integration in new environments while providing positive psychological changes (Matos et al., 2021; Strang & Quinn, 2021). Therefore, awe, as a meaning-making emotion, can play an important role in the well-being of refugee women, helping them process their past experiences and navigate their integration into new environments, fostering both personal growth and a sense of belonging.

A growing body of research indicates that the experience of awe not only contributes to enhanced well-being but also influences temporal perception, decision-making processes, and the promotion of prosocial behaviors (Allen, 2018; Guan et al., 2019; Jiang & Sedikides, 2022; Rudd et al., 2012; Van Cappellen & Saroglou, 2012). These effects are achieved through aesthetic

mind-body "shifts in neurophysiology, a diminished focus on the self, increased prosocial relationality, greater social integration, and a heightened sense of meaning" (Monroy & Keltner, 2023, p. 309). Moreover, the psychological experience of awe contributes to positive mental and physical health, thereby enhancing overall well-being. For example, self-reports of awe reduced the biomarker, interleukin-6, which is linked to inflammation (Stellar et al., 2015). Thus, awe can reduce bodily inflammation. Consequently, awe enhances physical health and well-being by fostering deeper personal insight through emotional, aesthetic, embodied, and relational experiences.

Awe has been extensively studied at the Greater Good Science Centre at UC Berkeley, where Allen (2018) linked the emotion to historical philosophers and religious scholars. Keltner (2023), in his research on happiness, connected awe to the eight wonders of life, including nature, music, visual design, and moral beauty, as well as more profound experiences like spiritual moments, epiphanies, births, and deaths. Defined by "perceived vastness" (Keltner & Haidt, 2003, p. 297), awe transcends ordinary experiences, shifting our understanding of the world in a self-transcendent state similar to Csikszentmihalyi's (1997) flow state.

Awe can be experienced in everyday life, such as through music or walks in nature. While awe often involves elements like "threat, beauty, ability, virtue, and supernatural causality" (Allen, 2018, p. 8; Keltner & Haidt, 2003), it remains distinct from these aspects. Notably, there are universal and cultural variations in how awe is experienced (Bai et al., 2017). For example, although generally a positive emotion (Shiota et al., 2011), awe can be perceived negatively in some cultures, such as in Japan, where it is more commonly linked to threat (Nakayama et al., 2020).

**Awe in Nature and Environment.** Engagement with nature is the most common elicitor of awe in most cultures and countries (Bai et al., 2017; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Monroy & Keltner, 2023; Shiota et al., 2007). Allen and researchers (2021) emphasize that dynamic

interactions with place, such as in nature, is integral to belonging and well-being, although it is often neglected in definitions of belonging. For example, a qualitative study in Sweden that integrated artmaking and engagement in nature, found that nature encounters fostered belonging and well-being for refugees (Haswell, 2023).

In this current study, the Knowledge Holders in NL also connected their experiences of belonging and wellbeing to nature in their artwork, which could be connected to the experience of awe. Natural elements and landscapes depicted in their art tended to symbolize beauty, comfort, peace, tranquility, and nostalgic connections for the Syrian mothers, inciting wonder, peace, and well-being. Maryam verbally and artistically expressed her relationship with nature through symbols of flowers, the sky, trees, landscapes, the ocean, sunshine, and seasons. In her artwork, Maryam also depicted evening walks with her family in natural landscapes in both NL and Syria, which made her feel good. Her paintings of flowers also evoked positive emotional memories of her garden in Syria. Amina also drew images of snow to depict positive and playful childhood memories from her childhood, which is akin Hafseen's snow globe that portrayed happiness (because it was snowing outside). Amina shared her love for gardening in the seniors' homes in Syria. Rayya associated the color white with positive emotions tied to nature, symbolizing hope and happiness. Her drawings of two doves represented love and peace. Hafseen depicted flowers to portray love, relationships, her children, and her memories of growing flowers in Syria as a florist. Her butterfly painting represented positive emotions related to freedom. Thus, natural metaphors and the joy of nature were evident throughout their artwork.

Like artmaking, engagement in nature is linked to increased relaxation in addition to both physical and mental health. A systematic review and meta-analysis found that nature exposure increased both physical and psychological health (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). In this study, exposure to greenspace led to statistically significant reductions in diastolic blood pressure, salivary cortisol, and heart rate, thereby increasing relaxation and a physical experience of calm.

In addition, White and colleagues (2019) found that spending 120 minutes in nature was associated with increased reported well-being in a study of 19,806 adults.

The connection between the healing effects of nature and refugees in NL's reported well-being aligns with El-Bialy's (2015) research. In their study, refugees from diverse countries reported that the natural landscape of NL "offered a healing environment" (El-Bialy, 2015, p. 45). The aesthetic experience of being in nature contributed to their emotional healing and sense of well-being, which influenced their decision to remain in the province (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016). A participant in El-Bialy's study advised new refugees to seek nature to cope with stress and recommended that, "if you are homesick or depressed, go to the ocean; waves are helping you, look like they are giving you advice. Calming your nerves" (p. 45). Comparably, interviewed refugees in Calgary also indicated that walking in nature helped reduce their worry and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic (Zivot et al., 2022).

Similarly, in this current study, Maryam explained that watching the ocean brought her solace, peace, wonder, vivid memories, and increased bonding with her husband when she described the oceanic paintings in Figure 3. Evoking the ineffable experience of awe and wonder, Maryam said that she, "[I]iked the view and I try to separate from myself, to feel like I am in the current. Seeing the ocean brings me to another world" (Session 3 & 4, December 10, 2021). Furthermore, she hung the marine painting at the front entrance of her home because it brought her hope. Describing the boat painting (Table 10), Maryam shared that, "I feel like I am in a different place when I see it... Yes, whenever I see water, it brings happiness" (Member-checking session, August 24, 2023). The experience of feeling transported and beyond ourselves as a response to an aesthetic encounter can indicate awe (Keltner, 2023). Maryam planned to hang the second nautical painting alongside the first once it was finished. The Knowledge Holders also depicted and discussed various moments in nature where they experienced well-being,

connection, contentment, and peace, which may have incited feelings of awe that naturally arise in nature (Keltner, 2023; Monroy & Keltner, 2023).

The meaningful relationship between the experience of awe, elicited through engagement with nature, and the sense of belonging and well-being for new Canadians is notable.

Resettlement organizations have offered programs that offer travel to natural landscapes, such as when refugee women who were a part of an empowerment program at the ANC traveled to a remote coastal area. The Knowledge Holders who took part in this experience expressed how impactful their journeys to diverse coasts in NL were within the group. The connection between awe in nature and well-being shared by the Knowledge Holders align with existing literature on refugees who have relocated to NL feeling well-being in the rugged landscapes (El-Bialy's, 2015; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016). Experiencing awe in nature is associated not only with enhanced psychological well-being but also with improved physical health (Bai et al., 2017; Keltner & Haidt, 2003; Monroy & Keltner, 2023; Shiota et al., 2007; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; White et al., 2019).

***Spiritual and Religious Awe.*** In this study, some of the Knowledge Holders incorporated elements of their religious and spiritual beliefs in their artwork to express well-being. Their art featured Islamic religious themes, such as statements of faith to cope with injustice, as well as imagery like prayer mats, religious structures like Mecca, and a portrait of a woman holding a Quran. Spiritual experiences can enhance well-being for refugees by helping them find meaning in tragic events, such as the injustices of war (Abraham et al., 2021; Lenette et al., 2012).

In a meta-analysis by Van Cappelin and Rimé (2013), the sense of awe was connected to spiritual and religious experiences. Spiritual awe can be felt through a relationship to the Divine or through formalized religious practices (Monroy & Keltner, 2022). For instance, spiritual engagement can help individuals connect to a larger life and collective meaning beyond oneself.

Additionally, a spiritual community can engender a "heightened sense of purpose and enhanced physical robustness" (Monroy & Keltner, 2022, p. 314).

Religious faith and symbols were also present in the Arabic refugee women's artwork in Hanania's (2020) embroidery art therapy group in Toronto, which featured mosques and religious landmarks. In a qualitative study exploring resilience among refugee single mothers, the participants expressed that prayer, and community-based religious events helped them cope with stress and develop courage to face life challenges associated with displacement, isolation, and raising children (Lenette et al., 2012). In addition, Eritrean female refugees in a Norwegian refugee center asylum associated their religious beliefs with subjective well-being and a heightened quality of life (Abraham et al., 2021). The link between religious belonging and spiritual experiences may also correlate with decreased depression and increased life expectancy among general populations (George et al., 2000; McCullough & Larson, 1999).

Nonetheless, a study by Naja and co-researchers (2016) involving 310 Syrian refugees found no significant correlation between religiosity and depression, suggesting that religious beliefs may not alleviate depression for all individuals, particularly Syrian refugees. The Knowledge Holders' experiences with Islam may vary, reflecting personal and collective spiritual practices. Thus, awe in religious and spiritual experiences could mediate this relationship, requiring further investigation to understand individual nuances (Naja et al., 2016). Cultural humility is essential when interpreting spiritual and religious symbols in artwork.

In this study, Islamic faith was important to the well-being of many of the Syrian refugee mothers. For example, Rayya's painting, titled "In God We Trust" (Figure 25), conveyed her faith despite the tragic loss she experienced in Syria. Group discussions around their faith-based artwork revealed that the Knowledge Holders' religious identity and practices helped them cope with the injustices of war, find meaning in their experiences, and navigate life's challenges to enhance their well-being (see Figure 29).

*Aesthetic Beauty in the Ordinary and in Art.* The Knowledge Holders in this study described that their well-being was connected to experiencing beauty in everyday aesthetic experiences, such as listening to music (see Figure 32) or enjoying a cup of coffee with a friend while looking out of a window (see Figure 31). In Keltner's (2023), new book entitled, *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How it can Transform your Life*, the author argues that people can "find awe anywhere" (Keltner, 2023, p. xvi). Therefore, the health benefits of experiencing awe can appear in brief aesthetic moments during our daily routines. In their study, Lenette and colleagues (2012) established a link between the resilience of single refugee mothers and a social process rooted in daily routines and interactions with the environment. The refugee women in Lenette and colleagues' (2012) study recognized that small moments evoking aesthetic joy and awe are linked to well-being. This recognition was also reflected in the creative dialectical exploration of well-being by the Knowledge Holders in the current study through their artwork and stories.

In this present ABR study, the Knowledge Holders often created drawings and artwork about everyday wonders in their life and associated these pleasurable aesthetic experiences with well-being. When sharing her journal drawings between art therapy sessions, Amina depicted moments and objects she found beautiful and believed contributed to her well-being, including candles, perfume bottles, and various flowers. During discussions about the significance of art in their lives during the interviews, several Knowledge Holders appreciated art's capacity to evoke beauty. Hafseen shared how listening to Arabic and Iraqi music helped her process her emotions. Positive psychology research has linked the ability to appreciate beauty with improved recovery from trauma, physical ailments, and psychological illnesses (Peterson et al., 2006). Thus, discussing and depicting accessible aesthetic experiences through artmaking can promote practices that enhance well-being. These experiences may include finding pleasure and awe in everyday activities such as listening to music, drinking coffee, or admiring a perfume bottle.

In summary, the Syrian refugee mothers' artistic exploration of well-being was linked to awe, experienced through nature, spirituality, and the appreciation of everyday beauty. Their artworks and stories highlighted how awe can enhance well-being in both profound and subtle ways. Positive psychology research suggests that frequent awe can catalyze healing, resilience, and joy (Keltner, 2023; Peterson et al., 2006). From painting spiritual symbols to finding joy in ordinary moments, the Knowledge Holders expressed a holistic approach to well-being that interconnects cultural, social, spiritual, and aesthetic experiences. The finding aligns with Keltner's (2023) argument that awe, even in the small everyday experiences, can increase well-being and health. The relationship between experiencing awe in nature, engaging in spiritual practices, and appreciating everyday beauty offers insights into the resilience-building strategies employed by the Syrian refugee mothers to cope with adversity.

***Theme 2: Well-being Connected to Family (Children's) Well-being and Opportunities***

**Mother's Well-being Connected to Their Children's Well-being.** In this study, the experience of motherhood was a central and pervasive identity/experience that shaped all our interactions. For example, both the Knowledge Holders' and the artist-researcher-art therapist's roles as mothers influenced study design decisions, such as the preference for in-person meetings and my maternity leaves, as outlined in the methodology section. The Knowledge Holders' young children were often present during data collection, either heard in the background of interview calls or cared for by ANC staff during the art therapy sessions. My own experience of motherhood and being pregnant with twins also impacted the study timeline, our reciprocal interactions, and created a shared connection. As mothers and grandmothers from Syria, the Knowledge Holders connected their well-being to their children's happiness and educational opportunities. Children, depicted in their artwork, often symbolized hope and joy for the Knowledge Holders.



The Knowledge Holders conveyed the interconnectedness of their well-being and their children's wellness through conversations, research decisions, and symbolic artwork (see Figures 33-37). Recent literature similarly highlights newcomer mothers in Canada prioritizing their children's well-being (Al-Hamad, 2022; da Silva; 2023; Hanania; 2020; Pandey et al., 2022; Que, 2020). In da Silva's (2023) study of ten Knowledge Holders, half cited their motivation for immigrating as providing a better future for their children. Similarly, Hanania (2020) found that female Arabic refugee Knowledge Holders associated their Canadian experience with improved educational and career opportunities for their children. One participant expressed that "Canada gave life to my children" (p. 66). Pandey and colleagues (2022) and Al-Hamad and co-researchers (2022) also reported that women relocating to Canada, particularly Syrian refugees, often do so with the goal of enhancing their children's opportunities, despite the challenges of adapting to a new culture. For example, Raina, a 22-year-old participant, shared that:

When we decided to move to Canada, I was scared, but I don't know why. You know I feel that I am far away from a different country, different everything, their people, their weather, their culture. Then I agreed to go to Canada for my kid's future and opportunities, but I don't know if I took the right decision for our children or not. (Al-Hamad et al., 2022, p. 11)

In St. John's, refugee youth reported that their parents highly valued their educational and vocational achievements (Que, 2020). However, these parents faced challenges in supporting their children's educational goals due to cultural and linguistic barriers (Que, 2020).

The interdependent relationship between Syrian refugee mothers and their children's happiness has significant implications for parental well-being research. While studies on the reciprocal relationship between the well-being of refugee mothers and their children are limited, general population research shows a positive correlation between maternal mental health and children's well-being. Coles and Cage's (2022) large-scale study of 2,396 adolescents and their

biological mothers (from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds) found that better maternal mental health was linked to higher children's well-being, and vice versa.

In contrast, Kuipers and co-researchers (2021) found that motherhood is associated with decreased well-being over time compared to women without children, regardless of social determinants such as economic status. However, a longitudinal study in Finland (Grundström et al., 2023) showed increased subjective meaningfulness (i.e. fulfilment and life satisfaction) for middle-aged parents with children. Factors like maternal support and cultural influences may impact mothers' well-being, as demonstrated by Zivot and colleagues (2022) in their study of Syrian refugee women in Calgary during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The mental health of Syrian mothers may be shaped by concerns for their children, who have experienced trauma from the Syrian war and resettlement (Rizkallah et al., 2020b). Consequently, the well-being of Syrian refugee mothers is often closely linked to their children's well-being, as reflected by the Knowledge Holders in this study. For example, Rayya expressed, "When my kids are happy, I am happy too" (Member Checking, August 24, 2023). Similarly, Maryam stated, "I am really happy here, and the most important thing is that I have a good husband, and my kids are really good too. So, that's what makes it easier for me" (Pre-interview, November 10, 2021).

The relationship between Syrian refugee mothers and their children's well-being accentuates the significance of family in shaping the Knowledge Holders' experiences of happiness and fulfillment in a new country (da Silva, 2023; Hanania, 2020; Pandey et al., 2022; Que, 2020). This interrelationship between personal and family well-being is evident in the narratives, artwork, decision-making, and daily lives of the Knowledge Holders. It demonstrates the importance of considering the family context when supporting the well-being of refugee women (Coles & Cage, 2022). As these mothers navigate the complexities of intercultural

resettlement in St. John's, the welfare of their children can profoundly influence their sense of purpose, decision-making, and overall contentment.

**Refugee Mother's Well-being Linked to Their Children's Education.** As a subsection within the second theme, the Knowledge Holders acutely connected their experiences of well-being and belonging to their children's ability to attend school and receive a consistent education. Images of schools were represented in the artworks of Knowledge Holders, meanwhile they shared that their children's ability to safely attend school was linked to their well-being. Maryam said, "When I see my children going to school, and education, and they are safe. That is well-being for me" (Post-interview, December 24, 2021).

For refugee families establishing themselves in a new country, the educational system, particularly physical schools, can become a place for facilitating the integration of refugee children, youth, and families into their new communities. These schools play a vital role in providing not just academic education, but also social support and cultural integration opportunities (Block et al., 2014; Pinson & Arnot, 2010; Power, 2021; Rutter, 2006). Physical schools and a structured education system can offer newcomers routine, structure, and a semblance of "normalcy," while also fostering the development of social networks and community. Furthermore, some mental health support programs tailored for refugee children and families can be offered within school settings (Tyrer & Fazel, 2014; Lewis et al., 2018a; 2018b). Thus, a stable educational environment can foster academic growth while providing a social framework that supports refugee families' well-being.

In NL, Que (2020) reported that refugee youth in St. John's had parents with high educational expectations and aspirations for their children, regardless of their own educational backgrounds. This observation aligns with broader research indicating that newcomer and refugee parents prioritize their children's education and hold optimistic views about their academic potential. The motivation for seeking resettlement is often rooted in providing opportunities for

their children through education (Fugilni, 1997; Sweet et al., 2010; Wilkinson, 2002). Similarly, in an interview study involving Middle Eastern refugee families, Bergnehr (2022) found that children's educational success in Sweden increased parental well-being and reduced acculturation-related stress. In Turkey, Erdemir (2021) found that Syrian refugee children's (n=128) participation in a preschool education intervention program positively impacted child development and maternal practices. Thus, refugee children engaged in stable education systems in their resettled country can positively influence their mothers' well-being.

The education system's influence on refugee families' well-being is evident in the Knowledge Holders' narratives, where children were often symbolized as "hope." For Syrian refugee mothers and grandmothers, who frequently assume primary caregiving roles, access to education provides routine and normalcy while shaping their well-being in resettled communities, such as St. John's. As shared by the Knowledge Holders in interviews and artwork, the opportunities afforded by the Canadian education system for their children significantly contribute to their sense of well-being.

In summary, the artwork and narratives of the Syrian refugee mothers demonstrate the close relationship between their own well-being and that of their families, particularly their children. The presence of children, both physically and symbolically in the art, emerged as central to their experience of well-being in St. John's. The Knowledge Holders' deep emotional connection with their children highlighted the children's role as symbols of hope for the family. This reciprocal relationship aligns with broader research on maternal well-being, particularly among refugee mothers and their children (Coles & Cage, 2022; Kuipers et al., 2021; Pandey et al., 2022; Rizkallah et al., 2020b). The educational system also emerged as a key space for supporting the integration and well-being of refugee families, offering routine, structure, and a sense of community while facilitating social support (Bergnehr, 2022; Block et al., 2014; Erdemir, 2021; Fugilni, 1997; Pinson & Arnot, 2010; Power, 2021; Rutter, 2006; Sweet et al.,

2010; Que, 2020; Wilkinson, 2002). The connection between children and hope was evident in both the artwork and the shared sentiments of the Knowledge Holders. The interdependent nature of well-being between mothers and children reinforces the importance of considering the familial context in supporting Syrian refugee mothers' well-being in St. John's.

***Theme 3: Well-being Connected to Safety, Peace, Justice, and Freedom***

A predominant theme that materialised from the interviews and artmaking of Knowledge Holders emphasized the connection between well-being, belonging, and safety. The Knowledge Holders connected the concepts of peace, justice, and freedom with psychological, emotional, and physical safety. For example, both Maryam and Rayya connected the significance of justice to well-being and belonging with their spontaneous drawings and paintings of weighing scales. Meanwhile, both Knowledge Holders shared that they deeply value justice during their interviews and Member-checking session. Many of the Syrian refugee mothers expressed experiencing well-being when they find inner peace through encounters with nature, such as observing butterflies and natural landscapes. Additionally, safe, clean, and stable homes, depicted in their artwork, also provided peace and tranquility for the Knowledge Holders.

The relationship between well-being and safety aligns with El-Bialy and Mulay's (2016) study on refugee well-being in St. John's, which emphasized the prioritization of safety by Knowledge Holders. In addition, Hanania's (2020) findings corroborated the themes, indicating that Canada was perceived as representing freedom of expression and safety. For example, one Knowledge Holder in Hanania's study expressed that, "Canada represents equality. Canada gave us freedom of religion and a life for my four kids" (2020, p. 66). The prioritization of safety and freedom highlights their impact on the well-being and sense of belonging of refugees resettled in Canada.

Displacement due to war and violence profoundly impacts both collective and individual experiences of safety, predictability, and control (Matos et al., 2021). Consequently, when

resettling in a new country, the pursuit of safety, freedom, and peace significantly contributes to refugees' sense of well-being and belonging (Allen et al., 2021). In Hanania's (2020) embroidery art therapy group, female refugee Knowledge Holders from Syria, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates expressed themes of experiencing safety and freedom of speech in Canada. Four of the eleven participants also voiced a desire for Syria to attain freedom, with one stating, "It is our daily dream that Syria will raise a flag that truly represents the freedom of the country" (Hanania, 2020, p. 66).

A Canadian government study on social cohesion highlighted safety as a fundamental value, essential for maintaining a high quality of life for Canadians (Government of Canada, Department of Justice, 2001). The interviewed newcomer youth group affirmed that, "immigrants and visitors frequently mention peace, safety and civility as among Canada's greatest attributes" (para. 5). Thus, the pursuit of peace, safety, and justice are important reasons for newcomers to move to Canada. This is true for refugees escaping the injustices of war, like the Syrian refugee mothers in this current ABR research.

Psychologist Slavich (2020) and trauma expert van der Kolk (2014) explain that the drive to seek safety and avoid threats, both internal and external, is a biologically ingrained need shaped by evolution. The fulfillment of the biological need for safety can contribute to the experience of well-being. Furthermore, according to humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1954), experiencing safety is foundational. In line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, conditions of love, belonging, freedom, self-esteem, and self-actualization can only be fulfilled once the need for physical safety is met. When describing the multifaceted conceptualization of belonging, Allen and colleagues (2022) emphasize that physical safety is integral for developing social connections, community, and well-being. Relatedly, social safety theory suggests that authentic community connections promote psychological, emotional, and physical safety in a bidirectional manner (Slavich, 2020).

In this hybrid online art therapy group, Syrian refugee mothers linked their well-being to belonging, with safety, peace, and freedom emerging as key themes in both their stories and art. Similarly, Hanania's (2020) study of Arabic female refugees highlighted the importance of these values. A Canadian government study also found that safety and peace are fundamental to quality of life, especially for newcomers (Government of Canada, 2001). For refugees escaping war, safety and justice are particularly meaningful (Allen et al., 2021; Matos et al., 2021). In psychology, physical, emotional, and psychological safety are essential for well-being and self-actualization (van der Kolk, 2014; Slavich, 2020; Maslow, 1954).

***Theme 4: Well-being Connected to a Resilient and Optimistic Mindset***

In interviews and art therapy sessions, the Knowledge Holders consistently connected their well-being to resilience and coping strategies, highlighting the importance of a positive perspective and hope. Since the art therapy group focused on strengths and resilience of Knowledge Holders, the focus on coping strategies could be expected, although the Knowledge Holders also explored their diverse emotions that included grief and loss. All the Knowledge Holders approached their involvement with the group with grace, gratitude, and positive attitudes, contributing to a harmonious and supportive environment. For example, during the member-checking session, Maryam shared her insight on building happiness through her attitude and learned experiences: "I've learned how to make myself happy, even if I am not. So, I learned that through time, and I am content with my life, and I am happy with it" (Member-checking, August 24, 2023). Hafseen echoed this sentiment and expressed her love for life's beauty through an image of a heart with a heartbeat (see Table 9). Additionally, Amina, in response to feelings of sadness during sessions three and four, emphasized the need to "find strength in something" and depicted a woman crying (see Table 8). The artwork was followed by an image of children playing, symbolizing hope and Amina's attempt to shift her mood.

Drawing from Zivot and colleagues' (2022) study, maintaining an optimistic perspective was a shared resilience strategy among refugee mothers in Calgary during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interviewed mothers found strength in a positive attitude, seeking "silver linings" during challenging situations (Zivot et al., 2022, p. 530). Similarly, many Knowledge Holders in this current ABR study navigated the Syrian experience of loss collectively and emphasized their shared struggle. Maryam expressed this communal perspective when she stated, "Everyone's facing the same thing. All Syrians are" (Member-checking Session, August 24, 2023), in response to Rayya's description of Syrians' shared sad history due to the war.

In a related study with thirty-nine Syrian refugees in Portugal, Matos and co-authors (2021) identified themes of positive psychological adjustment, including growth through courage, strength, kindness, and peace. These themes included perceived growth through narratives of courage, strength, and kindness, as well as experiencing a sense of peace. Analogously, all Knowledge Holders in the current ABR study depicted coping and resilience in their experiences of well-being in NL. For instance, Maryam portrayed images of the ocean and a boat (see Table 10), conveying a sense of peace associated with the sea. Hafseen shared her passion for music, describing how listening to Iraqi music alleviated her depression and facilitated a connection to her emotions. Amina and Rayya highlighted the joy of children's play and childhood memories, with Amina focusing on finding strength and coping mechanisms in tough times. Maryam particularly emphasized learning from life's challenges, reinforcing the Knowledge Holders' resilience in their relocation and resettlement journeys in St. John's.

In summary, the theme of connecting well-being to resilience and coping strategies, marked by a positive outlook, emerged in the narratives and artworks of the Knowledge Holders. Throughout the interviews and art therapy sessions, the Syrian refugee mothers consistently showed the importance of an optimistic mindset, hope, and finding strength in shared struggles. Maintaining an optimistic perspective to boost resilience, especially during the Covid-19



pandemic, aligns with the experiences of refugee mothers in Calgary (Zivot et al., 2022) and Syrian refugees in Portugal (Matos et al., 2021).

**Summary of Artmaking to Explore Experiences of Well-being and Belonging for Syrian Refugee Mothers.** Understanding and supporting intersectional experiences of belonging and well-being for newcomer Syrian refugee mothers who have relocated to small urban centre in Canada is important, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lin, 2023; The U.S. Surgeon General, 2023). During the hybrid online art therapy group, the Knowledge Holders shared their experiences of well-being and belonging through their artworks and stories. Stemming from arts-based and qualitative analysis, belonging generally related to the hospitality of those residing in NL, striving for economic opportunities, and bridging identities across time and places. The Knowledge Holders connected their experiences of well-being to a sense of awe, their children's (and family's) well-being in a reciprocal relationship, feeling safe through experiencing peace, justice, and freedom; and maintaining an optimistic perspective. Incorporating the perspectives of Syrian refugee mothers into support programs, initiatives, and research can help policymakers and mental health practitioners develop more effective strategies to enhance belonging, well-being, and reduce isolation.

**Artmaking in A Hybrid Online Art Therapy Group Can Foster Meaningful Connections Between Syrian Refugee Mothers Through Shared Reciprocity, Increasing Empathetic Resonance, and Validating Relationships**

When supporting asylum seekers and refugees when relocating into a new country, one of the key policy and practice priorities recommended by authors, Strang and Quinn (2021) was to help refugees “develop sufficient close bonding relationships” (pp. 1-2). After experiencing loss, relocation, and trauma, refugees may seek meaning through personal reflection and communal dialogue, co-creating meaning that fosters emotional recovery and healing (Keyers & Rober, 2020; Matos et al., 2021). Amid collective trauma and violence, sharing perspectives and offering

support within the community can help make sense of the profound losses and devastating experiences related to seeking refuge and fleeing civil war (Hirshberger, 2018; Tuval-Mashiach & Dekel, 2014).

Guruge and co-authors (2018) found that social support was missing with Syrian refugee women who relocated to Toronto. Meanwhile, the crisis of loneliness perpetuated by the COVID-19 pandemic further decreased social bonds and supports for newcomer refugees to Canada (Ernst et al., 2022; LaRochelle-Côté & Uppal, 2020; Lin, 2023; Pongou et al., 2022). For example, a Statistics Canada study found that more new Canadians reported higher concerns about civil disorder, reduced social ties, and decreased ability to support one another during the pandemic compared to Canadian-born respondents (LaRochelle-Côté & Uppal, 2020). Compounding the experience of the pandemic, the geographically isolated and culturally homogenous province of NL can exacerbate newcomers' feelings of isolation and disconnection from the community (Baker, 2013; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Fang et al., 2018).

To address pre-pandemic and pandemic-related experiences of isolation, experienced by newcomer women to Canada, both Hanania (2020) and da Silva (2023) discovered that their art therapy groups helped build community support and friendships. For instance, during the pre-group questionnaire, Hanania (2020) found that “27% of participants reported feeling a lack of community and 55% reported feeling loneliness” (p. 65). Following Hanania’s art therapy embroidery group, 100% of the Knowledge Holders reported feeling a part of a community, while 80% reported feeling less lonely. In da Silva’s (2023) virtual art therapy group supporting newcomer Portuguese-speaking women, 100% of the Knowledge Holders reported feeling “as part of a community” after the group and 88% reported that they were able to “build new friendships” (p. 95). Following da Silva’s group, the Knowledge Holders created a messenger group to remain connected with one another after the art therapy group finished. Nonetheless, these studies were done in the populated and culturally diverse city of Toronto. In countries like

Australia, refugee and migrant women participated in a community arts project focused on narrative artmaking through textile works to share childhood stories. This qualitative case study showed that their involvement increased well-being, confidence, and a sense of belonging as they connected with each other and the larger community (Hughes et al., 2021; Rugendyke et al., 2021). It would be valuable to explore which mechanisms of change can foster relational bonding among Syrian refugee mothers in an intercultural hybrid art therapy group (de Witte et al., 2022).

By analysing the multimedia data, three themes emerged that can deepen understandings about how artmaking can increase relational bonds between Syrian refugee women during the pandemic. The emergent themes include shared reciprocity, concretization through representing the friendships, and empathetic resonance. The following subsections explore themes and connect them to contemporary research and theory on the dialectic intersubjective aesthetic paradigm of ABR and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015; Geber, 2016; 2022), mechanisms of change in creative arts therapies (de Witte et al., 2022) and contemporary literature on Syrian refugee women.

### ***Theme 1: Artmaking Expanded Co-Creation and Shared Reciprocity***

Artmaking in the hybrid online art therapy group helped the Knowledge Holders develop meaningful connections through assisting one another in creating art together. For example, Maryam, a Knowledge Holder with technical art skills, frequently assisted other group members by sketching the structure of their desired image on their canvases for them to complete when they asked her to do so. Thus, many of the artworks were created in collaboration. Additionally, Maryam taught painting techniques to other group members by working on their canvases. Many Knowledge Holders sought assistance from Maryam during the art therapy sessions. Other Knowledge Holders contributed to each other's visual journals, resulting in co-created artworks that reflect their aspirations for specific aesthetic qualities and the desire to learn new art skills.

Often, an art therapist may assist group members with technical skills to complete their intended artwork through the "third hand technique" (Kramer, 1986; Kramer & Gerity, 2000).

The concept of the third hand, introduced by art therapy pioneer Edith Kramer, refers to a metaphorical tool used in the therapeutic process (Feen-Calligan, 2014; Kramer, 1986). This metaphor builds on Theodore Reik's (1948) psychoanalytic concept of the "Third ear," which hears more than what is spoken in therapy, and the "Third eye," which perceives divergent simultaneous messages "embodied in artwork produced in the course of art therapy-messages that defy translation into words" (Kramer & Gerity, 2000, p. 48). The third hand technique involves an intuitive and empathetic approach to assisting clients in creating artwork, by supporting them in developing the technical skills necessary to effectively communicate through visual arts (Feen-Calligan, 2014, p. 181). Kramer believes that it is essential for art therapists to develop:

...a hand that helps the creative process along without being intrusive, without distorting meaning or imposing pictorial ideas or preferences alien to the client. The Third Hand must be capable of conducting pictorial dialogues that complement or replace verbal exchange. (p. 48)

Since I was present virtually and not in-person, this created space for the Knowledge Holders to actively assist each other in completing artworks "that eloquently and truthfully convey experience" (Kramer & Gerity, 2000, p. 48). The process echoes a third-hand technique. This spontaneous, empathetic assistance fostered deeper bonds through the co-creation of artwork. The ability to help one another paint was meaningful, surprising, and unique. Echoing the third hand, this collaborative support not only empowered the Knowledge Holders to rely on each other but also facilitated more sustainable peer bonds, reducing their reliance on me for technical artistic guidance.

The Knowledge Holders supported each other by setting up and cleaning art materials, displaying each other's artwork, and bringing artwork to sessions when a creator could not attend. Art materials, chosen by the Knowledge Holders during the initial interview, play a central role in art therapy by evoking emotions, memories, and sensations through tactile experiences (Snir &

Regev, 2013). The collaborative process of setting up, cleaning, and caring for materials fostered group cohesion, as everyone actively contributed to supporting one another.

As an artist-researcher-art therapist, I often enjoyed setting the space and cleaning up after the group, as an act of caring for them providing in-person art therapy. However, my inability to be physically present during online facilitation made me unable to do so. I observed that, before, during, and after the art therapy sessions, the Knowledge Holders continuously helped one another set up and clean their art materials and spaces. I observed during the sessions and while reviewing the session videos that the way the Knowledge Holders supported each other felt nurturing and caring. Therefore, the Knowledge Holders physically developed bonds and connections through taking care of one another through their artmaking process. The peer support involved in assisting each other's artmaking was significant. My absence reduced the therapist-client power dynamic, as the Knowledge Holders actively helped one another, mirroring the third hand technique, and assisted with setup and cleanup. Jones and colleagues (2018) similarly found that power dynamics were less hierarchical in their online art therapy group. Nonetheless, having an interpreter, social worker, and caregiving staff present may have influenced the group dynamics in different ways.

Berryhill and colleagues (2019) and Wehmann and co-authors (2020) found that the quality of care and therapeutic relationships in virtual mental health care are comparable to in-person interactions. However, the connections among the Knowledge Holders were in-person. The reciprocal support in physically helping one another enhanced prosocial bonds. While power differentials may have existed based on art skills, the value of virtuosity (Knill, 2005) was emphasized in every interaction.

Through an empowerment lens, the Knowledge Holders' mutual support highlighted their personal strengths, such as kindness, empathy, and thoughtfulness. Co-creating and assisting with art therapy tasks fostered connections between members. While the positive traits of Maryam,

Amina, Rayya, and Hafseen may not be generalizable to all Syrian refugee mothers, mutual care through artmaking was consistently evident during the sessions. The Knowledge Holders demonstrated shared reciprocity through the third-hand technique (Kramer, 1986; Kramer & Gerity, 2000), assisting each other with art materials (Snir & Regev, 2013). Further research is needed to explore how intersectional and cultural factors influence dynamics, including helping behaviors, in art therapy groups for Syrian refugee mothers.

### ***Theme 2: Artmaking Facilitated Empathetic Resonance***

In the hybrid online art therapy group, the Knowledge Holders formed deep connections through empathetic resonance while creating art, sharing, and discussing the stories behind their works. A ritual was established at the start and end of each session where everyone created a metaphorical artwork representing their current emotions and shared them with the group. Therefore, virtuous, meaning highly emotional artwork based on their expressive capacity (Knill, 2005), was created and represented the Knowledge Holders' current experiences. Artworks representing tragedy and loss, especially related to the war in Syria, shifted the emotions of others. For example, Maryam and Rayya's works on loss influenced Amina, whose artwork depicted a sad, crying figure. Further examples of artmaking fostering empathetic resonance are discussed in the results section.

Empathetic resonance, as described by Weber (2008), refers to the empathy that develops through seeing the world through one another's eyes via their artistic creations (p. 7). Empathy involves experiencing the world from another's perspective, "which does not seem to originate within you, but is encountered as a fait accompli" (Brinck, 2017, p. 202). Empathy, fostered through understanding one another's experiences, strengthens emotional bonds and creates emotional depth, enhancing insight for both the viewer and artist. According to visual studies researcher Weber (2008), "Images literally help us to adopt someone else's gaze, see someone else's point of view, and borrow their experience for a moment" (p. 7).

Intersubjectivity theory further elucidates this phenomenon. Art therapist Franklin (2010) links intersubjectivity to attachment theory, defining empathetic resonance as "the sharing of subjective states through emotional attunement. Similarly, an artist attunes to his or her subject by empathetically feeling into the phenomenological object" (p. 160). In the following subsections, I will explore the mechanisms behind empathetic resonance in collaborative artmaking, linking dialectical intersubjectivity (Chilton et al., 2025; Gerber, 2022) with the neurological processes of mirror neurons (Brinck, 2017; Franklin, 2010). I will then contextualize this within contemporary literature on art fostering connections among newcomer women.

**Dialectical Intersubjectivity.** When artworks are created through a dialectical process, such as in a group discussion of a series of works, deeper meanings and empathetic understandings emerge (Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber, 2022). Dialectical intersubjectivity describes how multiple simultaneous truths from individuals with unique intersectional experiences converge, fostering deeper meaning. Empathy is generated through aesthetic sensations that provoke embodied emotional responses. Intersubjectivity, related to attachment theory is described as "the sharing of subjective states through emotional attunement. Similarly, an artist attunes to his or her subject by empathetically feeling into the phenomenological object" (Franklin, 2010, p. 160).

**Mirror Neurons.** Neuropsychology and neurophysiological research can elucidate how artwork generates empathetic resonance with neuroimaging of mirror neurons (Ferrari et al., 2018; Franklin, 2010; King & Kaimal, 2019). From a dynamic perspective that integrates psychology, phenomenology, and cognitive science, neuroscientific insights into mirror neurons may elucidate how empathetic resonance and emotions arise from aesthetically experiencing artwork in a reciprocal interaction. Mirror neurons activate both when an individual performs a task and when observing someone else perform it (Kilner & Lemon, 2013). Mirror neurons also activate when viewing another person emotive. When an individual observes another experiencing

emotion or activity, mirror neurons activate, simulating the viewer's engagement (Kilner & Lemon, 2013). Mirror neurons, present in humans and other mammals, can help neuroscientists and other researchers understand how “[l]ooking at art can evoke strong experiences in the viewer” (Brinck, 2017, p. 201).

Scholar and philosopher at Lund University, Ingar Brinck (2017), links aesthetic experiences to the art viewers' mirror neurons, positing that empathy involves a form of inner imitation. By observing aesthetic visual artwork, mirror neurons in the brain replicate an “automatic simulation of actions, emotions, and bodily sensations depicted in an artwork” (Brinck, 2017, p. 201). Consequently, the viewer mentally places themselves in the artist's position, engaging in sensory experiences like mark-making, and situates themselves in the artist's space in front of the artwork. The viewer encounters what the artist might have felt, which encompass both interoceptive and exteroceptive sensations (sensations experienced within and outside of the body). This embodiment through mirror neurons, in turn, influences the viewer's emotional connection to the artwork and the artist, fostering empathy. Artwork can:

...cause the viewer to bodily and emotionally move with and be moved by individual works of art, and consequently to recognize another psychological orientation than her own, which explains how art can cause feelings of insight or awe and disclose aspects of life that are unfamiliar or novel to the viewer. (Brinck, 2017, p. 201)

When the artist explains the emotions and stories behind their artwork, they foster mutual emotional connection through both verbal and visual symbolism. This process of dialectic sharing enhances the ability for empathetic connection among Knowledge Holders. Authentic emotional expression through quick artwork during check-ins and check-outs provides a direct avenue for emotional connection (Malchiodi & Warson, 2015).

This ability to connect, foster empathetic resonance, promote belonging, and enhance well-being mirrors findings from a community arts research project in Australia. In this project,



refugee and migrant women from Myanmar, Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq shared their stories through artwork for the Stories for Freedom public art exhibition (Hughes et al., 2021). The study examined the benefits of community art for newcomer women in Australia adjusting to life in a new country. The case study showed that artmaking positively impacted well-being when the Knowledge Holders connected as a group with shared experiences (Rugendyke et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2021). These women felt understood, heard, and a sense of belonging within the community when they created art together and shared stories. While researchers like da Silva (2023) and Hanania (2020) explore art therapy's role in fostering relational connections, my research investigates the mechanisms behind this change, particularly empathetic resonance.

Although the Knowledge Holders in this study were hesitant to share their artwork outside of the art therapy session, it is crucial to gain insights into how artworks can impact individuals beyond therapy. This understanding can lead to a better appreciation of how art can foster community and a collective sense of belonging through empathetic resonance (da Silva, 2023; Kesner & Horáček, 2017; Hughes et al., 2021; Rugendyke et al., 2021). For instance, when Rayya shared her painting of a broken tree (among other symbols) with her neighbor, her neighbor was emotionally impacted by the work and asked to keep the painting. This interaction demonstrates how the painting impacted her neighbor and fostered empathy and connection, ultimately leading Rayya to want to gift the painting. In the future, it may be beneficial to offer support and opportunities to enhance technical skills, particularly if concerns about technical proficiency hinder willingness to share, such as with collage (Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b). Addressing technical barriers could involve providing technical art training sessions and continuing to foster an environment that validates the expressive capacity of the artworks.

In summary, through the process of empathetic resonance, artistic expression can be a substantial way to increase connection and understanding for refugee Syrian mothers in a hybrid online art therapy group. Through shared experiences of artmaking and storytelling, the

Knowledge Holders had the opportunity to see the world through one another's' eyes with emotionally rich symbolic artworks about current emotions, belonging, and well-being. Through gaining a deeper understanding of how empathetic resonance is elicited in art, with the aid of dialectical intersubjectivity theory and cognitive neurological studies on mirror neurons, comprehension of the interrelationships between art, emotion, and empathy is advanced. Nevertheless, it is important to deepen our understanding of these relationships and explore them within broader cultural perspectives on artwork in future art therapy research.

### ***Theme 3: Artmaking Validated Relationships Through Concretization and Representation***

In de Witte and co-authors' (2021) scoping review, concretization emerges as one of the three primary mechanisms of change distinctive to creative arts therapies that “warrants further empirical investigation” (p. 17). Through spontaneously creating tangible artwork that represents group relationships, concretization fosters meaningful connections among Knowledge Holders. By using drawing and painting to depict friendships and interpersonal bonds, the group members of Syrian refugee mothers validated, celebrated, and deepened their relationships.

For instance, Rayya illustrated herself and another group member forming a heart with their hands, symbolizing her sense of well-being. Although Rayya was absent, Hafseen shared this image with the group. Since Rayya chose to depict her friendship with a group member through portraiture, she shared that the relationship is meaningful to her and celebrated the relationship. Additionally, Hafseen visually depicted the social bonds within the group by inscribing all group members' names within a sun adorned with flowers during the final session. Similarly, Amina portrayed the personal connections with a metaphor of a table set for four people. Maryam visually represented the personal connections on the title page of her journal to convey her group experience.

Concretization is an intervention used in various forms of psychotherapy. The term can take on different meanings depending on the psychotherapeutic approach applied (Kushnir &

Orkibi, 2021). Within the field of creative arts therapies, psychodramatist, Blatner (1991) believes that concretization involves transforming abstract statements into tangible representations that can be perceived visually or experienced physically. In art therapy, this process involves externalizing internally felt concepts, emotions, or experiences into something physical through artistic elements like lines, shapes, colors, and symbols. Such externalization facilitates deeper exploration of both conscious and subconscious processes and may prompt verbal reflection on the depicted ideas and multi-faceted metaphors. Nonetheless, the relationship between concretization through representation and cultural factors within art therapy has not been comprehensively examined yet.

With a strengths-based approach, concretizing positive group experiences such as friendship can also create space for the Knowledge Holders to affirm and celebrate these experiences in a tangible way. Therefore, making an intangible experience physically present by being a subject of a concrete artwork is meaningful and unique within art therapy (Abbing et al., 2018; Bosgraaf et al., 2020; de Witte, 2021). Thus, the Knowledge Holders validated their social bonds and celebrated individuals in the artwork through visual representation.

The importance of representation in validating experiences and identities is evident in media and refugee studies (Bleich et al., 2017). Historically and currently, mainstream media has predominantly showcased Western and European aesthetics and individuals in art and entertainment (Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016). This perpetuates cultural stereotypes when portraying people from marginalized groups, such as refugee and migrant women (Abidi & Nourpanah, 2019). Moreover, the depiction of Syrians during the civil war by Western media was often filtered through a dichotomous political lens, either exacerbating threat-based xenophobia or helplessness-based sympathy (Abidi & Nourpanah, 2019; Berry et al., 2015; Bleiker et al., 2013; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2016). Consequently, self-representation through the creation of portraits and images becomes meaningful and empowering (Rosa & Soto-Vásquez, 2022). For newcomer refugee mothers settling in smaller communities like St. John's, visual representations

of their unique experiences may currently be scarce (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008). Depicting oneself and relationships within meaningful friendships becomes a validating, empowering act that deepens connections between group members.

In summary, within the hybrid online art therapy group, the Knowledge Holders created images of one another and their relationships within the group. The process of artistic representation deepened and celebrated social cohesion by making the connections tangible. In the field of creative arts therapies, this mechanism of change is called concretization (Blatner, 1991). While studies that document how art therapy and artmaking can support newcomer refugee women in Canada discuss outcomes related to increased friendships that have developed through artmaking and storytelling (da Silva, 2023; Hanania, 2020; Hughes et al., 2021; Rugendyke et al., 2021), they have not yet explored the mechanisms of change behind how the bonding relationships have developed through artmaking. Concretizing the relationships through artistic representation may be one way to celebrate the relationships and one another, thereby deepening and validating the relationships between the group members.

**Summary of Artmaking to Develop Meaningful Bonds Between the Knowledge Holders.** The final research question examined how artmaking could help create meaningful relationships between the group of Syrian refugee mothers in a hybrid online art therapy group. For newcomer refugee women who have relocated to a new country, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, developing close relationships to counter feelings of loneliness is paramount (Ernst et al., 2022; LaRochelle-Côté & Uppal, 2020; Lin, 2023; Statistics Canada, 2021; Strang & Quinn, 2021; WHO, 2022). In this hybrid art therapy group, the Knowledge Holders created meaningful connections with one another in three main ways. Firstly, the Syrian mothers engaged in shared reciprocity through helping one another co-create artwork, while also helping each other actively prepare and clean art materials. Secondly, the visual artwork helped build meaningful connections through facilitating empathetic resonance. Thus, the Knowledge Holders were able to

see the world through one another's eyes, therefore experience empathy by looking at others' emotionally based artwork. Finally, the Knowledge Holders artistically represented relationships that were in the group. Through concretizing the abstract experience of social bonds, the Knowledge Holders celebrated, validated, and deepened the relationships. It is important to note that this small sample size of Syrian refugee mothers reflects a group of compassionate and caring people. The small group size may create a space of intimacy to enable deep sharing and relationship building that may not have occurred in larger gatherings.

### **Discussion Summary**

In the discussion chapter, I linked the findings to contemporary art therapy literature, the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm of ABR, and Syrian refugee mothers' experiences of well-being and belonging during resettlement. Drawing on the transdisciplinary nature of ABR, I incorporated insights from art therapy, refugee studies, neurobiology, psychology, and visual studies to address complex "how" questions. Initially, I explored the results related to how Syrian refugee women, who arrived in Newfoundland and Labrador within the past seven years, expressed their lived experiences through online art therapy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion delved into four themes detailing artmaking's transformative capacity to elicit emotional insights through embodiment, foster relational and internal safety, enhance positive affect, and expand communication through symbolic metaphor.

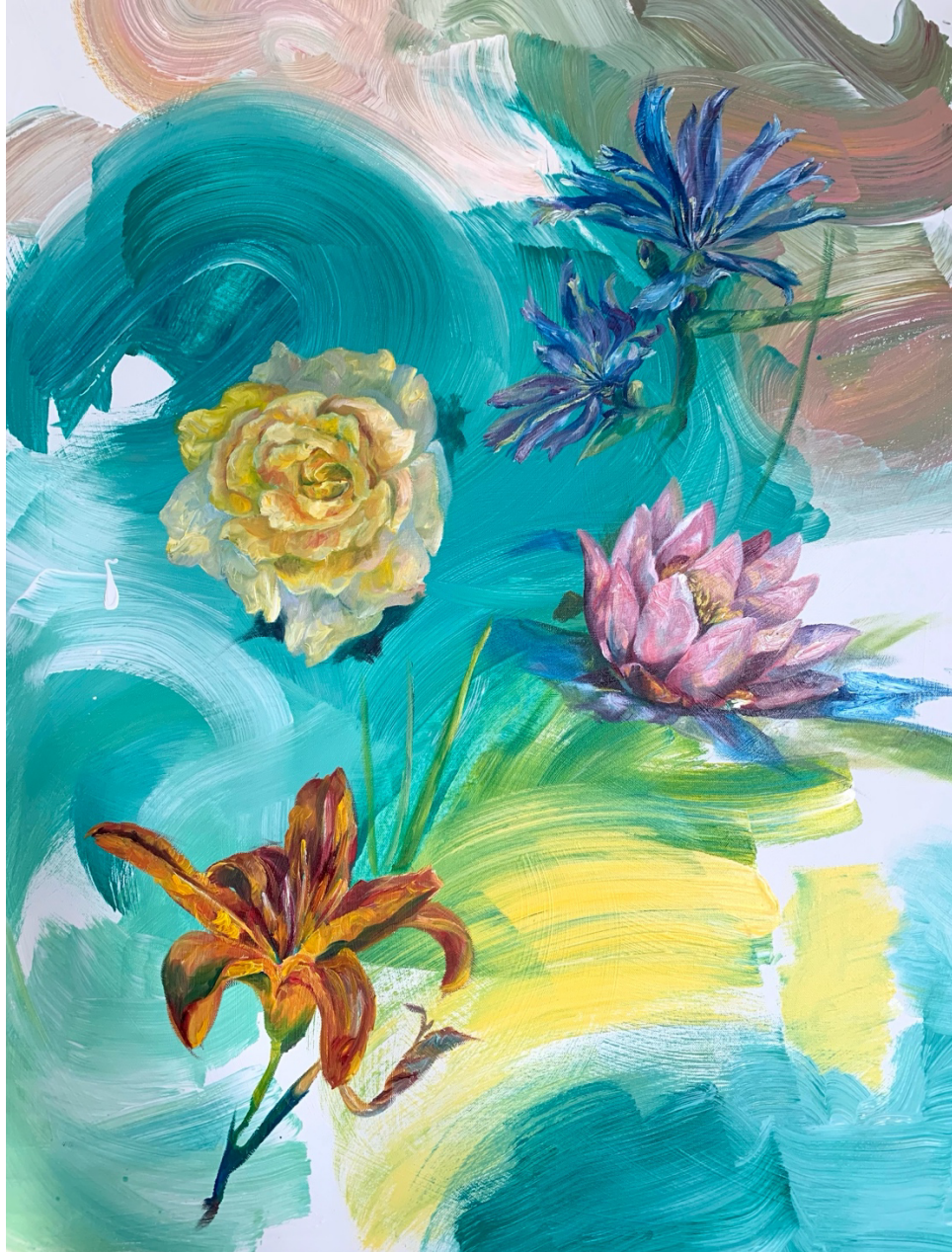
I also investigated how artmaking could assist this population in articulating their experiences of belonging and well-being within an art therapy group. Belonging and well-being are closely intertwined, especially in studies involving refugees who have resettled in Canada. In this unique intersectional context, belonging was perceived through the kindness and support from locals (residents of all backgrounds residing in St. John's), the opportunity to pursue career aspirations, and the bridging of cultural identities across different geographic locations. Well-

being was experienced through moments of awe in daily life, the welfare of their families and children, feelings of safety, and maintaining an optimistic outlook.

Lastly, I examined how participation in an online hybrid art therapy group facilitated meaningful connections among Knowledge Holders. In this group, the Knowledge Holders met in-person in St. John's with the support of a collaborating community organization, while I facilitated the group online from Ottawa. Artmaking contributed to social cohesion by fostering shared reciprocity, empathetic resonance, and validation through tangible expression. In the conclusion chapter, I will summarize the ABR study, highlight its significance for supporting newcomer refugee women in Canada within art therapy, and discuss its limitations, delimitations, and implications for future research.

## CHAPTER 9

### Conclusion



Toll, H. (2023). *Flowers Blossoming of Each Knowledge Holders. Connected and Unique Creators*. Oil and acrylic on canvas.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **Conclusion**

In the conclusion chapter, I summarize the ABR research project. Following the synopsis, I connect the methodology and results to the ABR evaluation criteria of accessibility, dissemination, trustworthiness, artfulness, and significance. The evaluation criteria are unique to the research methodology because of the dialectical intersubjective and aesthetic epistemological and ontological lens (Chilton et al., 2015; Geber, 2022; Leavy, 2017). Next, I discuss the limitations and delimitations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ontological assumptions in art therapy and ABR methodology. I then address the study's limitations and delimitations, followed by recommendations for future research and practice using art therapy with newcomer refugee women in small urban centers, incorporating a critical feminist lens. I conclude the final chapter by suggesting key implications for practice and knowledge mobilization.

### **Summary of the Research**

Artmaking in an art therapy group can act as a meaningful way to foster connections, explore feelings of belonging and well-being, and express the lived experiences of refugee mothers who have relocated from Syria to St. John's, Canada. The research intended to integrate art therapy and ABR to provide a safe space for female refugee Syrian women to express their emotions and lived experiences in a strengths-based, creative, and empowering way. Within the intersubjective paradigm of ABR and art therapy, which informed the theoretical lens and methodological decisions of this arts-based study, art is believed to be "a way of knowing" by being able to elicit and document emergent embodied, tacit, emotional, and intuitive knowledge that can transcend and extend verbal communication (Allen, 1995, p. 172; Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber, 2016; 2022). The theoretical and praxis lens of maintaining cultural humility and an intersectional perspective informed the methodological choice and study design. The hope and



intention of this research study was to interweave the Knowledge Holders' collective and creative strengths to share stories with one another and generate an understanding of their experiences of belonging and well-being through artmaking.

During the ABR study, the partner community organization's staff, 14 community leaders, and five Knowledge Holders were consulted on the research design. Four Syrian refugee mothers (ages 29-46) who had relocated to St. John's within the past seven years participated in this study. They engaged as Knowledge Holders by providing insight about their unique lived experiences and by actively creating artwork together in a hybrid art therapy group. The global Covid-19 pandemic limited my ability as an artist-researcher-art therapist to conduct interviews and facilitate the art therapy group in-person. During the recruitment session, the Knowledge Holders shared their preference for face-to-face art therapy sessions. As a result of this recommendation, the Knowledge Holders convened at the ANC community partner organization, which supported the research by arranging for an interpreter and childcare for them in St. John's. I facilitated the art therapy sessions remotely from Ottawa.

Despite the small and homogenous group, where recruitment was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and my upcoming pregnancy, the Knowledge Holders created 77 artworks during and between the art therapy sessions to share their experiences in stories and symbolic artwork during the winter of 2021. I created 45 reflexive artworks and journaled throughout the research process, which helped to shed light on the experience of conducting research while balancing the roles of a pregnant art therapist, researcher, cultural outsider, and mother from a different province during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Multimedia data was gathered from individual pre- and post-interviews, artwork and notes created from the hybrid art therapy group, and a member-checking session, and my reflexive artwork and journals. Arts-based, qualitative, and participatory analysis methods that integrated contemporary research with artmaking, qualitative coding, and consulting the

Knowledge Holders led to key findings and themes. The findings indicate that Syrian refugee mothers may voice their lived experiences through online art therapy by:

1. Eliciting emotional knowledge and insights through embodiment,
2. Fostering safety and care to authentically express experiences,
3. Improving mood to facilitate expression, and
4. Increasing communication through symbolism and metaphor.

These arts-based findings aligned with the dialectic aesthetic intersubjectivity ontological and epistemological assumptions (Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber, 2015; 2022). Furthermore, in the field of art therapy, the results point to meaningful mechanisms of change (de Witte et al., 2021) that can inform future art therapy interventions and best practices within intercultural hybrid art therapy sessions with this unique intersectional population.

The Knowledge Holders shared their experiences of well-being and belonging through interviews and art therapy sessions using their preferred materials. The research findings highlight the interconnected nature of well-being and belonging for this group of Syrian refugee mothers (Allen et al., 2021; Badali et al., Chavis et al., 2008; Hou et al., 2016; Painter, 2013). According to Allen and colleagues, a sense of belonging is a “core part of what makes one a human being” (2021, p. 14). The experiences of belonging for these Syrian refugee mothers in St. John’s, explored through art therapy sessions and interviews, are reflected in three major themes:

1. Kindness from locals with an absence of discrimination through hometown hospitality,
2. An opportunity to gain economic opportunities, and
3. Experiencing identity continuity across the different countries.

Well-being was also explored throughout the art therapy sessions. The Knowledge Holders lived experience of well-being were connected to the following four major themes:

1. Awe experienced through encounters with nature, spirituality, and beauty in small aesthetic experiences,
2. Safety through peace, justice, and freedom,
3. Well-being of their family and particularly children, and
4. A resilient mindset with an optimistic lens.

Finally, some social bonds between the Knowledge Holders were created or increased throughout the art therapy group. The final research question explored how artmaking can create meaningful connections between the group members within the art therapy group. The data pointed to the following three themes that indicated that that artmaking can:

1. Facilitate shared reciprocity through the Knowledge Holders helping one another create their artwork,
2. Increase empathetic resonance between the group members, and
3. Validate and celebrate friendships through depiction of their relationships with concretization.

With an arts-based methodology and intersubjective aesthetic theoretical paradigm, I gathered data about emotional, intuitive, and embodied experiences through symbolic metaphorical images as well as storytelling within a hybrid online art therapy group. The research study and researcher valued implicit memories and knowledge that were detail rich and sensory based (Leavy, 2017a; 2017b; Gerber, 2022). This study contributes to the overall ABR scholarship and contemporary art therapy practice. It provides insights into how a hybrid online art therapy group, offered during the Covid-19 pandemic, can offer a way for Syrian refugee mothers to dialectically share their lived experiences in ways that cannot be fully expressed through words alone. These findings and session descriptions that highlight mechanisms of change and group dynamics can inform how art therapy can be applied in crises situations while in collaboration with settlement organizations.

Additionally, the study sheds light on the ways in which Syrian refugee mothers experience belonging and well-being through artmaking. Furthermore, it investigates how the act of artmaking can foster relational connections among this unique population in a hybrid online art therapy group. Finally, these results capture distinctive intersectional dialectic experiences that occurred during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Results cannot be generalized to all refugee mothers or women in other countries or Canadian provinces, as St. John's is a unique urban center in NL and the sample size is unique. Further studies with culturally informed, strengths-based assessments are recommended to better understand belonging, well-being, and the impact of art therapy. Studies that integrate feedback from settlement staff, including interpreters, would be valuable. Additionally, based on Knowledge Holders' feedback, research and programs focused on crafts-based art therapy and arts groups that enhance entrepreneurship skills are recommended.

### **Evaluating with ABR Criteria: Accessibility, Dissemination, Trustworthiness, Artfulness, and Significance**

Methodological decisions limit scholarship by how information is gathered, analyzed, and interpreted. Nonetheless, the focus on depth, richness, emotional, and evocative results with an emergent and imaginative ABR approach within art therapy groups also has limitations. Limitations of ABR include reduced objective validity and reliability to provide perspectives on wider populations through generalizability (Leavy, 2017b). The criteria to evaluate ABR research is different due to its unique ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions that emphasize emotions, embodiment, sensory-based experiences, intuition, and the creative process to explore phenomena (Blumefeld-Jones, 2008; Chilton et al., 2015; Cole & Knowles, 2008; Leavy, 2017b). Therefore, the evaluative criteria of accessibility, dissemination, trustworthiness, artfulness, and significance (described in Chapter 3) can be used to appraise this study within the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of ABR and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015).

### ***Accessibility and Dissemination***

The accessibility and dissemination of the research were shaped by the Knowledge Holders' comfort levels. They chose not to exhibit their artwork or use the research for policy development. Their art was exploratory, conceptual, process-oriented, and emotional, featuring sketches and paintings rather than polished professional work. The Knowledge Holders' varying technical skills with their chosen art mediums may have influenced their decision. In the member-checking session, Rayya stated, "About the art gallery, our art is okay, it's mediocre, so I don't think that it would be a good idea" (August 23, 2023). As a result, their artwork is featured within this dissertation.

My reflexive artwork, presented in chapter seven, will continue to be exhibited to a wider audience through my doctoral defense, conferences, publications, and art gallery exhibitions. Two of my paintings were featured in virtual and in-person group exhibitions (Toll, 2021; Toll, 2022; Toll, 2024). *The Floating Boat in Liminality. Transient. Transitional* (Toll, 2021) won the 2021 LAIR Award at the LAIR 2021 Exhibition.

### ***Trustworthiness and Artfulness***

The Knowledge Holders' artworks convey their perceptual experiences, allowing us to see the world through their eyes with empathetic resonance through symbolic, evocative, and authentic images (de Witte et al., 2022; McNiff, 2011; 2017). Virtuosity (Knill, 2005) values emotional authenticity and evocative art over aesthetic "beauty," although I believe all the artworks are beautiful as honest reflections of perceptual and felt experiences. The artwork created by the Knowledge Holders and I, particularly the sketches made between sessions and the check-in and check-out (produced in five to ten minutes), shows the immediacy of quickly drawn and uninhibited creations. This immediacy often leads to a direct connection with the subconscious, preconscious, intuition, and embodied emotional memory through implicit knowledge. This is because there simply isn't enough time to filter, question, or edit the

immediate image and story (Czamanski-Cohen & Weihs, 2016; McNiff, 2017). Conversely, the larger paintings and drawings created by the Knowledge Holders, which were further refined outside of the sessions, represent more carefully crafted artworks that exhibit technical skills and artistic risks. Therefore, these *virtuous* (Knill, 2005) images could fulfill the criteria of trustworthiness in ABR, exemplifying both spontaneous and thoughtful artistic expressions of experiences and explorations.

The large quantity of artworks produced by the small group, combined with the Knowledge Holders' willingness to spontaneously create numerous images, far beyond what was expected when they were initially invited to create artwork, contributes to the detailed richness of their experiences. This willingness to engage in the artmaking process, particularly through their visual journals between sessions, highlights their commitment to the artmaking journey. The abundance of artworks created by a small group within a limited time reflects the level of trust the Knowledge Holders have established within the group to produce authentic images during and between the art therapy sessions. Furthermore, it can also reflect the Knowledge Holders' ability to inspire one another to be artistically generative, take artistic risks, and openly share the stories and metaphors behind their artwork. Finally, it can reflect the joy that the Knowledge Holders found in creating, which can contribute to the trustworthiness of the research process and artwork data.

### ***Significance***

**The Need for Culturally Sensitive Support for Refugee Mothers.** There is an increasing need for culturally sensitive, strengths-based support for newcomers to St. John's, Canada, particularly refugees who have experienced significant loss and trauma during relocation (Acarturk et al., 2017; Alpak et al., 2015; Al-Qdah & Lacroix, 2017; Annous et al., 2022; Baker, 2013; Ghumman et al., 2016; Hassan et al., 2016). This need is especially urgent for Syrian refugees, whose displacement following the 2011 civil war, compounded by loss and adversity,

has led to psychological distress and PTSD in 23%-83% of adults (Peconga & Høgh Thøgersen, 2020; Rubesin, 2018). Supporting Syrian refugee women requires specialized skills from resettlement agencies, mental health practitioners, art therapists, and medical professionals, along with a strengths-based approach, awareness of intersectional systems of oppression, and cultural humility (Bawadi et al., 2022; Hanania, 2017; 2020; Kolah, 2023).

Moreover, refugee women and mothers have intersectional vulnerabilities and strengths that require support (El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Kohli & Fineran, 2020; Roger & Daou, 2022; Spitzer, 2011). In their literature review, Roger and Daou (2022) found that “interventions involving refugee mothers rarely provide adequate support for their specific mental health needs and challenges,” with this population at risk for PTSD, depression, anxiety, and suicidality (p. 337). The authors recommend interventions that build community and provide safe spaces, using the Knowledge Holders' preferred language for communication (Roger & Daou, 2022). This research addresses the gap in literature on mental health interventions for refugee mothers, as the Knowledge Holders in this study were mothers and grandmothers (Roger & Daou, 2022).

**Building Belonging and Reducing Isolation for Syrian Refugee Mothers.** Creating strengths-based safe spaces for expression and reflection is crucial for supporting refugees, especially during crises, such as severe weather conditions (i.e., blizzards in St. John's) or the COVID-19 pandemic, which have heightened feelings of isolation and loneliness (Matti, 2020; Quon, 2020; Rajkumar, 2020; Statistics Canada, 2020; Toll, 2018; Lin, 2023). This need is amplified by research showing that newcomers to St. John's face isolation and xenophobia in the geographically isolated island setting (Baker, 2013; Baker & Bittner, 2013; Baker et al., 2016; Baker, 2017; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016). Furthermore, similar challenges of loneliness, discrimination, and lack of support during the COVID-19 pandemic were experienced by Syrian refugee mothers in Calgary, which is a larger city with more cultural diversity (Zivot et al., 2022). Therefore, this study builds on the findings of Zivot and co-researchers' (2022) work with

refugee mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic, as this study takes place in a different Canadian context on the geographically isolated island and in the small urban center of St. John's

**Adapting Program Models to Align with WHO Initiatives.** This research aligns with the WHO European Region's (2021) call for arts-based interventions to promote well-being and belonging among displaced populations, implemented by professionals with experience in arts-based mental health practices. By integrating expertise in mental health and the arts as an art therapist, along with cultural humility and an intersectional lens, it offers a collaborative approach to supporting refugees. Specifically, the study focuses on Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's and incorporates participatory components with Arts-Based Research (ABR) within the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm.

The hybrid online art therapy group, facilitated across provinces during the COVID-19 pandemic, represents a novel integration of ABR and art therapy in a small urban center within an intercultural context. Given travel limitations during the pandemic, the study was conducted virtually from Ottawa while Knowledge Holders and an interpreter met in person in St. John's, illustrating the flexibility required during times of crisis. This arrangement also prioritized the Knowledge Holders' wishes in shaping the study. Such adaptability when collaborating with multiple stakeholders, especially in a limited timeframe and during a pandemic, are essential when working with forcibly displaced people whose relocation often results from crises (Mullings & Anderson, 2012).

This study also documents the practical changes involved in transitioning to virtual art therapy, particularly the collaboration with a settlement organization for wrap-around support in St. John's. The impacts of these adjustments were captured through my reflexive artwork and journals, reflecting on my emotional experiences while working with Knowledge Holders from a different cultural background. This research not only documents an art therapy program and arts-



based study, but also highlights the challenges of adapting to changing health protocols and my own limitations as a pregnant researcher and new mother.

**Arts-Based Research and Theoretical Contributions.** This ABR study is unique in integrating a participatory arts-based research methodology within the aesthetic intersubjective paradigm of ABR and art therapy, focusing on supporting Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's during the global pandemic. It tells the story of this distinct population and emphasizes cultural humility and intersectionality through a hybrid online art therapy group conducted across provinces, addressing both the Covid-19 pandemic and the loneliness epidemic (Lin, 2023) with art and stories.

Arts-based research can help marginalized Knowledge Holders communicate their experiences in an affirming and deep manner, while simultaneously experiencing agency and self-efficacy (Huss, 2013; Leavy, 2017; Lenette, 2020; Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b). This study is notable within ABR for its exploration of emotional, tacit, embodied, and subconscious experiences related to well-being and belonging among Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's, Canada within intercultural interactions during a hybrid online group. It emphasizes implicit memory, intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and cultural humility (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998; Jackson, 2020) within an intersubjective dialectical aesthetic paradigm (Chilton et al., 2015; Geber, 2016; 2022), viewed through a critical feminist lens (Sajani, 2012; Talwar, 2016). The study examines how artmaking and art therapy foster social cohesion, creating imaginative spaces for Syrian refugee mothers to express their lived experiences through ABR (de Witte et al., 2021).

It also highlights the reflexive art practices of both the researcher and Knowledge Holders, facilitating co-creation of knowledge in a safe group setting through artmaking and storytelling (Chilton et al., 2015; Gerber, 2016; 2022). The researcher's vulnerable occupation of space—as a researcher, Canadian citizen, artist, mother, pregnant woman, and art therapist—is

reflected through reflexive writing and artwork. Through vulnerable and reflexive artmaking, I aimed to reduce power hierarchies, foster tacit awareness of the research process, integrate artmaking as a form of intuitive analysis, and connect with audiences beyond academia by sharing evocative images in art exhibitions.

Rooted in the dialectic intersubjective aesthetic paradigm, the study examines multiple inter- and intra-subjective realities through sensory-based transformative artmaking. Through this study, I attempt to create meaning through dialectical creative and relational processes in a safe and imaginative space, drawing from insights by Chilton and colleagues (2015) and Gerber (2016, 2022). By incorporating the creativity, imaginal images, and perspectives of refugee women through dialogue in a shared space, the study provides a platform for them to express their lived experiences through aesthetic and visual artmaking during a unique historical moment as they resettled in Canada during the Covid-19 pandemic (Lenette, 2019; Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b).

Reflexive arts-based paintings document the researcher's evolving experiences, conveying emotional authenticity through words, poetry, and symbolic metaphors. This process enhances research transparency, centers researcher vulnerability as a co-creator, and fosters cultural humility by challenging biases and ethnocentric perspectives (McNiff, 1995; Jackson, 2020). Sharing this artwork beyond traditional academic settings allows for the communication of experiences that words cannot fully capture, engaging a wider audience (Weber, 2008; Leavy, 2022). ABR engages meaning-making through verbal, nonverbal, emotional, embodied, tacit, and arts-based data (Gerber, 2015, 2022; Kapitan, 2017; Leavy, 2017, 2022).

**Policy Implications for Refugee Well-being.** This study demonstrates the potential of artmaking in art therapy sessions to foster connections and deepen understanding of well-being and belonging among Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's, while amplifying their experiences and emotions within refugee studies and art therapy research. Thus, supporting refugee mothers

to explore belonging and well-being through strengths-based artmaking in a safe space can be beneficial, particularly when group members share a common linguistic, cultural, and religious background (Allen et al., 2020a; Hirschberger, 2018). For the Syrian women in this study, belonging centered on the kindness of locals, maintaining identity continuity, and pursuing economic opportunities. The themes of well-being expressed in their artwork include awe, family well-being, safety, and optimism. These insights are valuable for mental health professionals and settlement services seeking to support newcomer women through creative programs that foster kindness, safety, and resilience (WHO European Region, 2021). Leading authors on belonging, such as Allen and co-researchers (2021), suggest focusing on “competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions” to enhance individual and collective belonging (p. 14). This study contributes to the literature by exploring newcomers' perceptions of belonging and offering insights into its tacit and emotional dimensions to benefit future programs supporting refugee populations.

The detailed and artistically rich descriptions of these key themes can guide mental health professionals and settlement services in generating programs that increase belonging and well-being for newcomer women. These programs may include fostering opportunities for shared kindness with locals, bridging identity continuity, and supporting projects that enable Knowledge Holders to economically succeed in St. John’s through their creative passions. Resettlement organizations can create workshops that encourage moments of awe (through spirituality, nature, and the arts), prioritize safety and peace, strengthen resilience and optimism, and foster connections between parents and children. Furthermore, these objectives could be met by focusing on families and addressing trauma from mass violence through creative arts therapies and therapeutic artmaking (WHO European Region, 2021).

The symbolic and unique stories shared by Syrian refugee mothers can inform Canadian public policy initiatives aimed at enhancing refugee women’s belonging and well-being. This

aligns with Citizenship and Immigration Canada's 2015 mandate to increase belonging (Badali et al., Hou et al., 2016; Painter, 2013) and findings from Statistics Canada studies (2023; Stick et al., 2023). This ABR provides mental health organizations with visual and detailed insights into how art therapy fosters change, relational bonds, voice, and safety for newcomer refugee women. It can inform policies supporting maternal mental health for refugee mothers in St. John's and advocate for enhanced support for both new and experienced mothers (Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008). Since the well-being of the Knowledge Holders is linked to their children's opportunities and happiness, further research on systemic and family-focused art therapy is warranted.

**Advancing Art Therapy in Intercultural Contexts.** Art therapy offers a safe, supportive, and empowering way to care for refugee women with cultural humility (Bal & Kaur, 2018; Hanania, 2017; 2020; Jackson, 2020), transcending language, distance, and cultural barriers to support the Knowledge Holders in a meaningful way (Adnam Jones, 2018; Dye, 2017; Kolach, 2023). Consequently, the group process seemed to foster meaning and positive experiences for the Knowledge Holders through artwork and the sharing of metaphor-rich stories, despite it taking place in a hybrid online format and across provinces.

Research on art therapy's effectiveness in enhancing refugees' well-being and reducing anxiety-related symptoms is growing (Annous et al., 2022). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023) has highlighted a global crisis with over 108.4 million refugees and internally displaced persons, while the WHO European Region has called for cultural and arts-based interventions to support displaced populations (Hynie, 2017; Miller & Rasmussen, 2017; WHO European Region, 2022). This research adds to the body of literature documenting the benefits of group art therapy for newcomer and refugee women in Canada (da Silva, 2023; Hanania, 2020). It uncovers recurring themes within the symbolic artwork and discussions of the Knowledge Holders, such as the connection between their well-being and their children, and the importance of spirituality.

This ABR study focuses on the impacts and experiences of artmaking in art therapy, highlighting meaningful mechanisms of change (de Witte et al., 2022) that can occur during intercultural therapy, with an interpreter, and with an online hybrid format. Contributing to the growing body of ABR literature, the results suggest that Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's can voice their lived experiences through artmaking by expanding emotional knowledge through embodied elicitation, providing care and safety for self-expression, enhancing mood to facilitate expression, and using symbolism and metaphor to expand emotional expression. Moreover, these mechanisms of change in art therapy can occur, even when the art therapist is connecting to a group of Knowledge Holders virtually and with an interpreter (Feen-Calligan et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2018; McBride & Worrall, 2021; Winkel, 2022).

The study emphasizes the importance of strengths-based, empowering, and creative interventions to support the well-being and resilience of refugee communities with unique intersectional experiences and when working in intercultural contexts (Hughes et al., 2021; Rugendyke et al., 2021). It also highlights the need for collaboration with community organizations with cultural humility (Jackson, 2020). In this study, I detail the challenges posed by the global pandemic, geographical distances, collaboration between a university ethics board and the community organization, and the researcher's health limitations during motherhood. Together, these factors provide a candid depiction of the realities influencing art therapy fieldwork, viewed through the lens of a female art therapist who became a mother during this research process.

### **Limitations, Delimitations, and Recommendations**

Discussing the research's limitations and challenges enhances transparency and rigor. The following subsection delineates the scope of the study, concluding with recommendations for future research. Some of the study's challenges have unexpectedly resulted in strengths. For example, the inclusion of a unique and specific population of Syrian refugee mothers in St.

John's may have facilitated more culturally specific sharing due to their shared lived experiences, identities, and language (Hanania, 2017; 2020). The limitations and the chosen scope of the study inspire recommendations for further research on the experiences of belonging, well-being, artmaking, and art therapy among refugee mothers in St. John's.

### ***Cohort Size of Syrian Refugee Mothers***

This ABR research focused on the unique population of refugee women (ages 29-46) who arrived in St. John's within the past seven years. The data collection process occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the smaller sample size and the methodology valuing aesthetic, dialectic, and intersubjective emergent knowledge, the study's results cannot be generalized to a larger population of refugee women.

All four Knowledge Holders in this study were mothers, with one being a grandmother. They often connected through shared experiences as mothers, Muslims, and Syrian women in Canada. The small group size allowed for in-depth sharing, but it limited exploration with and connections between refugees with different intersectional identities, such as those from other genders, religions, or age groups. Expanding the study to include a larger, more diverse population, including other understudied refugee groups in NL or other Canadian provinces, would be valuable.

Various resettlement and refugee support organizations were contacted for collaboration, but one closed due to funding issues, and others did not respond, possibly due to time or capacity constraints. The focus on the ANC's recruitment and screening limited the involvement of other potential Knowledge Holders not receiving services from the organization. However, the ANC's support, as the largest settlement organization in the province, helped me reach and build trust with Knowledge Holders who otherwise might have been inaccessible. Furthermore, the experience, perspectives, and buy-in of the staff supporting the project helped ensure its success. I recommend that future studies coordinate amongst various settlement organizations to reach a

larger cohort size of Knowledge Holders and build more community connections between organizations and their members, if possible. This approach can benefit both Knowledge Holders and organizations by connecting individuals to more support while helping organizations offer tailored psychosocial services and expand their community impact.

### ***Generalizability and Unique Population***

Although the community partner and I tried to recruit refugee women who relocated from other countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, and Iraq, only mothers from Syria who attended a specific group at the ANC chose to participate in the study. Low recruitment was influenced by the timing of the research during the COVID-19 pandemic and limitations in the recruitment process. To ensure that the Knowledge Holders shared their experiences in a safe space and received prompt follow-up support provided with cultural humility, diverse community leaders and organizations were consulted.

It was essential for a social worker from the community partner organization, along with a trained interpreter, to remain present during art therapy sessions and interviews. These social workers had pre-established relationships of trust with the Knowledge Holders, which was beneficial to create a safe space conducive to sharing and healing. However, the relationships between social workers, caregivers, and interpreters may have influenced what was shared and impacted group dynamics. Screening by the social workers ensured that participation would not re-traumatize the Knowledge Holders. As a result, recruitment was initially limited to members of a specific ANC group, with further invitations extended to other members of the association that fit within the population demographic, such as Iraqi refugee women.

The Knowledge Holders in this study were homogeneous in gender, country of origin, ethnicity, and religion due to restrictions that prioritized the safety of the group within an existing program. All participants were Arabic-speaking women from Syria, who had lived in temporary locations (e.g., Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon) before relocating to St. John's, Canada. The shared

ethnic, cultural, and lived experiences likely facilitated nuanced cultural and gendered expressions in their artmaking within the therapy group (Hanania, 2017; Saca & Saca, 2016). This could be considered a strength (Saca & Saca, 2017). Authors such as Ghumman and colleagues (2017) and Hanania (2017) believe that therapy groups of women with shared cultural and gendered identities can increase safety to connect and bond. This is especially beneficial for populations with high psychological and emotional needs, such as refugee women who have fled civil wars (Rubesin, 2018).

The experiences of newcomers to St. John's are shaped by Newfoundland's isolated geographic setting and distinct cultural, linguistic, religious, and socioeconomic history, which has led many to leave for community and economic opportunities elsewhere (Baker, 2013; Baker et al., 2016; Burnaby et al., 2009; Gien & Law, 2009; El-Bialy & Mulay, 2016; Fang et al., 2018; Reitmanova & Gustafson, 2008; Sullivan et al., 2009; Whelan & Rivera, 2009). NL is one of Canada's most isolated provinces, with a historically small, linguistically, culturally, ethnically, and religiously uniform population (Government of Canada, 2015; Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2015). Knowledge Holders' experiences may vary in larger, more culturally diverse cities like Toronto, Montréal, Vancouver, or Calgary (Hanania, 2020; da Silva, 2023; Zivot et al., 2022), as well as in rural areas, such as remote parts of Labrador (Anderson, 2012; Mullings & Anderson, 2015). More art therapy studies integrating arts-based research are recommended to explore belonging and well-being among refugee mothers in diverse Canadian regions.

### ***A Hybrid Online Model Delivered Across Canadian Provinces***

Due to COVID-19 restrictions and safety concerns associated with physical gatherings, as well as my high-risk pregnancy, I facilitated the art-based support group virtually from Ottawa while the Knowledge Holders remained in St. John's. The group chose to convene face-to-face at a location where they felt most at ease, which was at the resettlement organization's



school. Consequently, this situation limited my ability to be physically present in the same space as the Knowledge Holders and have control over the space during the art therapy sessions.

My visual perception of the group, such as assessing and responding to the Knowledge Holders' body language, was limited by what I was able to see through the camera. Moreover, my capability to see facial expressions was restricted when the Knowledge Holders occasionally wore face masks to restrict transmission of the Covid-19 virus. At times, some Knowledge Holders moved out of the camera's frame. Therefore, I could not fully listen to or understand all the relational dynamics that occurred between the Knowledge Holders, and with the staff members. In addition to these challenges, I was unable to take the photographs of the artwork created by Knowledge Holders during the sessions. The social workers helped by taking photographs of the art created. This led to some of the images being of modest quality. Some of the images that were not photographed were captured from screenshots of the session recordings.

Another consideration that limited this study is the delivery of materials to the Knowledge Holders. I ordered art materials to be mailed to the community organization after the initial interviews where the Knowledge Holders decided on the art supplies that they wanted. The first art therapy session felt like a fun "un-boxing" of art materials, where the supplies were taken out of the packages and given to the group members. I was unable to easily show the Knowledge Holders creative techniques to use the art materials in person, which may have been helpful. Mailing art materials could also limit the type of art materials used. For example, clay is heavy and expensive to ship, while paper is not. Lastly, audio or visual disruptions due to internet connection issues occurred, which may have limited Knowledge Holders' willingness to share in a virtual group. The internet connection challenges were like the virtual art therapy groups delivered by Jones and colleagues (2018) and McBride and Worrall (2021).

### ***Timelines Due to Maternity Leaves***

The coordination of the group times was further complicated due to time restrictions on my end due to the delivery of my twin children. Delays occurred in conducting research, adjusting ethics approval, and coordinating schedules with the Knowledge Holders and partner organization's staff and space. Despite the non-ideal context, meaningful connections between a therapist-researcher and group members across time zones, spaces, language barriers, and cultures were built. This research documents the potential of art therapy and research groups to remain flexible, adapt, and points to social bonds that take place despite limited timeframes.

Drawing from my experience delivering art therapy programs and trainings in Canada and abroad, it is rare for programs to start on time or evade sudden changes. This is particularly the case in non-Western countries that have different perspectives of time and schedules. The current ABR group thus mirrors actual conditions of art therapy program implementation within international development contexts. Furthermore, intersectional experiences of motherhood are also a meaningful reality that merits more research. The study indicates the potential for more research on how art therapists can deliver meaningful programs to locations that are hard to reach in-person or during crisis situations (e.g. humanitarian, pandemics, and natural disasters).

Due to diverse circumstances related to maternity leave, there was a significant time gap between the data collection conducted in Fall and Winter of 2021 and the member-checking session held in Summer 2023. This extended time between the interviews, art therapy group, and the member-checking session occurred due to my two maternity leaves with the birth of three children during the research period. Furthermore, my ability to complete the data analysis in an expedited manner was impacted by caring for three children born within a short span of two years. As a result, and despite all Knowledge Holders expressing interest when contacted by the partner organization before the member-checking session, two of the four Knowledge Holders attended in-person. The connections fostered by the program and the Knowledge Holders' recollection of the experience may have diminished over the year and a half. Nevertheless, the

substantial time span between the data collection and the member-checking session could offer broader insights into the long-term effects of the art therapy group on the Knowledge Holders. For example, the Knowledge Holders shared that the group had impacted them meaningfully during a particularly tough time during the global pandemic.

### ***Intercultural Factors and Language Dynamics***

The research is limited because its methodological design included assumptions based on my Western-based preconceptions, theoretical lens, and the existing contemporary literature published in English on the topic. One assumption is that creating a place to discuss the population's experiences would be meaningful to them (Lenette, 2019). Another assumption is that these individuals would benefit from an all-female collective community created in this context (Kapitan, 2015). This study is also limited because it attempts to understand “non-Western experiences, through Western methods” of arts-based inquiry and art therapy paradigms (Huss & Cwikel, 2005, p.14; Kapitan, 2015; Potash et al., 2017). Furthermore, it was founded on the presumption that the Knowledge Holders may find arts expression meaningful, or may want to create artwork (Acton, 2001; Lenette, 2019).

Intercultural factors, as a Canadian and non-Syrian artist-art therapist-researcher providing art therapy to Syrian refugee mothers, warrants attention and should be central to future studies. Language barriers may also limit the study. Interpretation service was offered by the partner community organization to interpret Arabic to English conversations between the Knowledge Holders and myself. Three different interpreters participated and supported the study: one male and two females with high educational backgrounds and similar ethnic backgrounds to the Knowledge Holders. All these interpreters would have brought their own cultural, educational, and personal values to the conversations and could have influenced power dynamics (Kolah, 2023; Griffin, 2016). The interpreters' advanced educational levels, different genders (both male and female interpreters participated), and proficiency in two languages may have

influenced the power dynamics within the art therapy sessions (Griffin, 2016). To minimize interpersonal power dynamics in the future, emerging confidential AI-based language interpretation programs could be utilized in healthcare settings, either in place of or alongside human interpreters in future studies. However, these programs are still under development, would merit more research, and would need to comply with HPPA standards, such as the program called Mars Translation (Mars Translation. n.d.)

In addition, most of the social workers who were present during the interviews and art therapy sessions were also Arabic speaking and they were all women. The social workers helped to further clarify communications and cultural meanings between the Knowledge Holders and myself, while also simultaneously creating a comfortable space for the Knowledge Holders. Therefore, this study expands understanding of how artmaking in art therapy sessions can enhance the ability to communicate across cultures, particularly with refugee populations (Koch, 2023).

The improved ability to communicate interculturally through art occurred through empathetic resonance and imaginal symbolic metaphors. These factors and experiences merit future study between diverse intercultural interactions within art therapy groups (Koch, 2023). Some of the interpreters in this study had a background in social work and counselling while none had a background in art therapy. Therefore, the true meaning and intentions of the communications could be lost in translation, while the symbolic artwork provided a non-verbal form of communication and connection (Kapitan, 2015; Koch, 2023; Lenette, 2019). Visual art can be a significant way for minority women who may encounter challenges in expressing their thoughts and emotions verbally and in dominant languages (Koch, 2023; Lenette, 2019; Vachelli, 2018a; 2018b).

As there were no professional art therapists employed at the partner organization at the time, the engagement of social workers and interpreters during the art therapy sessions might

have enriched their professional understanding of art therapy. This, in turn, could inform the development of future art therapy or arts-based programs aimed at fostering well-being and belonging for forcibly displaced people, as recommended by the partnership between the WHO and the European Region (2021). In a future study, it would be helpful to interview the social workers, interpreters, and organization leaders for their perspectives on the art therapy group for program evaluation purposes and factors that may have influenced my understanding of the Knowledge Holders' experiences. This research will contribute to the development of future art therapy and mental health programs by providing insights from key professional stakeholders, as demonstrated in Feen-Calligan and colleagues' (2023) virtual art therapy study assisting refugee families. Professionals in the field of settlement services, such as social workers, may possess additional insights into the effects of art therapy on Knowledge Holders.

#### ***Feminist and Inclusive Approaches to Traditional Assessments***

The decision to not include pre- and post-group questionnaires or assessments to ascertain changes before and after the group was made due to recommendations from community leaders and when examining the literature. At this time, pre- and post-interviews with Knowledge Holders with open-ended questions were considered more valuable because they allowed for fluid and comfortable conversations that focused on relationship-building. A critical feminist and aesthetic intersubjective perspective also argue for prioritizing inclusive, alternative, embodied, agentic, and safe forms of communication and knowledge sharing, such as generating subjective artwork within a dialectical group (Chilton et al., 2015; Lenette, 2019; Vacchelli, 2018a; 2018b).

This decision was made because of the difficulty in finding a culturally appropriate assessment that does not represent Western paradigms of mental health, art images, and lived experiences for this exploratory arts-based study (Ghumman et al., 2016; Tribe et al., 2017). The ABR study intended to focus on storied and embodied constructions of experiences while integrating artwork. Meanwhile, assessments could be reductionist during this preliminary

exploratory study, particularly for research with women from traditional non-Western cultures (Bowler, 1997; Huss & Cwikel, 2005). Conventional scientific methods of data gathering and categorization, such as post-positivist assessments utilizing diagnostic criteria like the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), have been criticized for their potential Eurocentric and patriarchal biases. These methods may not fully capture or incorporate the diverse experiences of women from non-Western cultural backgrounds, thus potentially leading to underrepresentation or misinterpretation of their experiences within research and clinical settings (Huss & Cwikel, 2005; Lenette, 2019). This reality becomes more complex when we consider the intersectionality of being women refugees, mothers, and resettling in a new country amidst a civil war.

Adding to the complexity, the use of an open interview was recommended by the ethics board and community leaders because the Knowledge Holders may not have the literacy skills to complete a written questionnaire in Arabic. Oral questionnaires could further be misinterpreted or intimidating. Knowledge Holders may feel compelled to provide the “right” answer (De-Vault, 1999). For example, Rowe and co-authors (2017) stated that their quantitative questionnaires did not capture the art therapy process or the growth that the Knowledge Holders experienced from their art therapy group. Meanwhile, the arts-based and open interview process can capture the “inarticulate aspects of women’s experiences” (De-Vault, 1999, p. 65). Nonetheless, the potential for assessments to reflect experiences of people from diverse cultures, and the study of global mental health paradigms, is increasing (Nielson et al., 2023).

After conducting this exploratory study, I recommend that future research focus on investigating the experiences of a larger sample size of Syrian refugee mothers. This could be achieved through the utilization of culturally competent questionnaires administered by trained practitioners. By employing such methods, researchers can gain deeper insights into the diverse experiences of this population and contribute to more nuanced understandings of their needs and challenges. These studies could integrate culturally appropriate and strengths-based pre- and

post-assessments, in addition to pre- and post-interviews, and arts-based evaluative explorations. Therefore, a mixed methods study would shed light on belonging, well-being, and artmaking to voice experiences by providing a diverse lens to understand the phenomenon. This may lead to more generalizable results.

The assessments could be delivered verbally in Arabic and focus on how the art therapy group influenced strengths-based changes, such as post-traumatic growth, belonging, and well-being. Recommended assessments may include the widely used World Health Organization-Five Well-Being Index (WHO-5) that is implemented globally in diverse contexts (WHO, 1998; Topp et al., 2015). The WHO-5 assesses current experiences of well-being and has been translated into over thirty languages. A recommended assessment to measure changes in experiences of belonging for refugee Syrian mothers may be the Challenged Sense of Belonging Scale (CSBS), which has growing evidence of intercultural validity for English, Arabic, Farsi/Dari-speaking refugees (Fuchs et al., 2021). Finally, valuing symbolic ways of knowing and expression, an arts-based assessment could provide a meaningful way to capture the Knowledge Holders' experiences through symbolic metaphor. The bridge drawing (Darewych, 2014; Hays & Lyons, 1981) could creatively illuminate the refugee female Knowledge Holders' perceptions of their past, present experiences, and future, both before and after resettling in St. John's.

### ***Recommendations for Future Art Therapy Practice and Research***

Rayya recommended that future art therapy groups include more traditional craft making, resembling Hanania's tartiz embroidery art therapy group (2018; 2020). While the materials in this study were selected based on feedback provided by the Knowledge Holders during the initial interviews. I was surprised that most of the Syrian refugee mothers chose traditional art materials because they did not have experience using them, such as paint and drawing supplies. I had expected the Knowledge Holders to prioritize embroidery and craft materials, similar to Hanania's study (2018; 2020) on tartiz crafts. Further study on the art material preferences of art

therapy group members with intersectional experiences is needed to inform art therapy practice. These preferences could be ascertained through large-scale questionnaire studies that directly ask Knowledge Holders from diverse cultural backgrounds and lived experiences.

During Rayya's interview, she expressed an interest in textile arts, which might have been misunderstood by the interpreter and social worker as a desire to create macramé, when she may have meant embroidery. The transcribed conversation went as follows:

- Rayya: I want to do handicrafts.
- Interpreter: Handicrafts, Haley?
- Researcher: That's great.
- Interpreter: Yea, handicrafts.
- Rayya: I like...I want to do... I like more of the handicraft things, you know?
- Researcher: Like what exactly?
- Interpreter: She does something like, she does sewing, the art using sewing. You know, this kind of arts?
- Researcher: Is it embroidery? Is that kind of what it is... or um?
- Social worker: Like macramé.
- Researcher: Macramé. Oh cool. That's amazing.
- Rayya: I use some kind of coloured beads. Yea, coloured and do sewing with these kinds of beads. I do art with sewing and use coloured beads.

In the art therapy sessions, Rayya clarified her desire to create textile embroidery tartiz art by showing the group members photographs taken of her tapestries in the final session. Rayya also suggested integrating craft materials during the member-checking session. Since the macramé art materials were already ordered and delivered before the art therapy group, changes could not be made due to budget and time limitations. Therefore, I recommend that future art therapy studies provide a variety of textile art materials and craft options. This approach will



facilitate synthesizing the Knowledge Holders' recommendations with existing literature, enabling an in-depth exploration of experiences and changes in belonging and well-being, while being mindful of the financial constraints.

The Knowledge Holders also recommended that future groups focus on entrepreneurial skill-building, enabling them to sell the artwork created during and between sessions. This aligns with the findings of Rugendyke and colleagues (2021), who conducted a case study on community artmaking with refugee women from various countries resettled in Australia. The authors discovered that some refugee women were built businesses by selling the artworks created within the group.

Entrepreneurship programs existed at the collaborating community resettlement organization at the time of the Knowledge Holders' recommendation. The interpreter, manager, and social worker who heard this recommendation were able to connect the interested Knowledge Holders to existing entrepreneurship programs and suggested tailoring programs for their needs. Therefore, more advertising about arts and crafts entrepreneurship programs to reach interested stakeholders is recommended. Research on integrating art therapy groups with economic outcomes and entrepreneurship skills for refugee mothers is further merited.

## **Key Implications**

### ***Practice Implications***

Although the sample size is small, the emotional and nuanced findings of this ABR-based study hold significant implications for art therapy, particularly in addressing the intersectional experiences of Syrian refugee mothers. These implications extend beyond a traditional focus on outcome-oriented research, with research that focuses on tacit, emotional, creative, and imaginal experiences (Leavy, 2022). The study offers insights into the potential helpfulness of hybrid art therapy models, particularly in times of crisis, by facilitating connections across cultures, time zones, and languages, and through collaborations with refugee

organizations to support refugee mothers. It demonstrates how artmaking within an online hybrid AT group can facilitate the expression of experiences, integrating symbolic artmaking to establish a safe environment, evoke positive emotions for communication, and enhance emotional understanding and insights.

The mechanisms of change observed in this hybrid model align with de Witte and colleagues' (2021) findings on how art therapy fosters connection and communication, even in crisis settings. Relationships were fostered through artmaking by promoting shared reciprocity via collaborative creation and validating these connections through tangible visual representation, fostering empathetic resonance. These outcomes support the literature on mechanisms of change and transformation in Creative Arts Therapies (CATs) (de Witte et al., 2021), which emphasize:

- a) Identifying therapeutic factors contributing to change,
- b) Enhancing CATs intervention effectiveness,
- c) Refining a theory of change for CATs interventions, and
- d) Developing evidence-based training and supervision (Hardy and Llewelyn, 2015).

Analysis of the artwork, stories, and therapist notes revealed key themes unique to Syrian refugee mothers in St. John's. These findings highlight how artmaking can help this population express themselves, build social connections, and experience well-being and belonging. Such insights guide art therapists in adapting interventions globally, especially in intercultural contexts, when working with interpreters, interdisciplinary teams, or hybrid virtual sessions (Winkel, 2022). For example, interventions could focus on increasing empathetic resonance, solidifying relationships formed in the group, or aligning goals to foster well-being, awe (Monroy & Kelner, 2023), and belonging through eco-art therapy (i.e. art therapy integrated with nature and ecology) (Carpendale, 2015; Pike, 2021). These findings highlight how hybrid art therapy, when focusing on strengths and well-being, can still be meaningful during crises and enhance

refugee resettlement efforts to support mental health through creative and collaborative approaches (WHO European Region, 2022).

### ***Policy and Program Implications***

The Knowledge Holders' descriptions of their intersectional experiences of well-being and belonging offer valuable insights that can inform art therapy practice, guide the development of resettlement programs, and shape public policies to support refugees. These narratives can inform art therapists, community organizations, and policymakers to create initiatives that enhance belonging and well-being. For example, programs could emphasize the Knowledge Holders' voices, lenses, and stories while incorporating their recommendations to expand initiatives addressing the loneliness epidemic (Lin, 2023) and social determinants of loneliness and health (Allen & Allen, 2016). Art therapy programs that foster a sense of awe through engagement with nature, strengthening spiritual community, or creating comfortable spaces for aesthetic activities like having coffee while making art can enhance belonging and well-being. These programs may be particularly beneficial for newcomer refugee women navigating the complexities of relocation. Culturally-sensitive verbal and arts-based assessments that evaluate and analyze changes in well-being and belonging in response to these art therapy group sessions and workshops are recommended.

Community resettlement organizations could consider employing art therapists to design and facilitate strengths-based art therapy programs that enhance and support social bonds between groups (such as groups of older Syrian refugee women) and enhance mother-child relationships, recognizing these connections as integral to refugee women's well-being, hope, and resilience (Coles & Cage, 2022; Zivot et al., 2019) with cultural humility (Jackson, 2020). Collaborative craft sessions and family artmaking trips in nature could facilitate attachment dynamics and contribute to well-being for refugee mothers and their children. Integrating empowerment-focused art and entrepreneurship programs into resettlement efforts could equip

refugee mothers with valuable skills to navigate vocational opportunities and foster economic independence in their new environment, which can align with their well-being and sense of belonging. These programs could include workshops that combine emotional expression, connection, and positive coping skills through art therapy with skill-building activities designed to enhance both artistic and entrepreneurial abilities.

Canadian federal and provincial policymakers can support larger initiatives and research efforts aimed at improving the complex, interconnected experiences of well-being and belonging for Syrian refugee mothers and their children. By creating policies and funding evidence-based programs that address the dynamics of belonging, well-being, and social cohesion through health-enhancing artmaking, they can contribute to broader solutions for countering the loneliness epidemic (Allen & Allen, 2016; Lin, 2023; The U.S. Surgeon General, 2023; WHO European Region, 2022). This is especially important for resettled refugee mothers during the Covid-19 pandemic who have relocated to a geographically isolated urban center (St. John's), who face and continue to face unique intersectional challenges (Zivot et al., 2019).

### **Conclusion Summary**

In the conclusion chapter, I summarized the arts-based research that explored the experiences of refugee Syrian mothers in a hybrid online art therapy during the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the ABR evaluative criteria of accessibility, dissemination, trustworthiness, artfulness, and significance of the study was discussed within the intersubjective aesthetic paradigm of ABR and art therapy (Chilton et al., 2015). The study's limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research are presented. Lastly, key practice, policy, and program implications are provided.

Although the study had a small sample size, its outcomes contribute to a rich and creative narrative that encompasses the expressive potential of art, experiences of well-being and belonging, and the social connections formed during the Covid-19 pandemic among Syrian

refugee mothers who resettled in St. John's, Canada. The significance of the findings lies in the Knowledge Holders' comprehensive exploration, which incorporates 77 artworks along with rich dialectical narratives, stories, and perspectives. The multimodal data sheds light on the transformative role of artmaking within a hybrid online art therapy group, empowering the Knowledge Holders to share their experiences in emotional, powerful, embodied, connecting, and non-verbal ways, beyond words. The process of artmaking, by concretizing relationships, enhancing empathetic resonance, and facilitating shared reciprocity, can strengthen social bonds among the gracious and kind group of Syrian refugee mothers. This arts-based approach complements quantitative and qualitative research with larger sample sizes (de Witte et al., 2021). Moreover, the arts-based methodology suggests that the imaginal and visceral dataset yields multiple valuable insights and interpretations.

Just like my family's stories of survivorship, heartbreak, and resiliency that guided them to Canada, I hope that these newcomer refugee women's stories are shared, honoured, and respected. Previous generations of my family did not have an easy time adapting to Canada. Despite creating economic sustainability for subsequent generations to thrive and pursue higher education, they struggled to address the pain of their loss in healthy ways. In fact, the emotional stories were often repressed, yet spaces were created for following generations to process these stories through artmaking and dialectical discussions. Today, I believe that family stories can foster a sense of belonging and connection, and intentional efforts must be made to ensure they are not forgotten.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Invitation Letter to Participate in:**

#### **Creative Community Connections: Arts-based research with newcomer female refugees in Canada**

My name is Haley Toll, and I am a Ph.D. Candidate in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting a research project called Creative Community Connections: Arts-based research with newcomer female refugees in Canada for my PhD degree under the supervision of Dr. Heather McLeod.

The purpose of this research is to explore how a supportive virtual art therapy group can help newcomer women refugees from Syria, Eritrea, and Congo who have moved to Newfoundland and Labrador increase their experiences of belonging and well-being. We will explore experiences of belonging and well-being in a strengths-based art therapy group that will be hosted online as a part of the ANC's Empowerment Group.

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in an online virtual art therapy group where you will be asked to make art and talk about your experiences of belonging and well-being in a group. Participating in research is not a requirement at the ANC. You are also welcome to participate in the art therapy group even you do not participate in the research study.

Participation will require an interview before and after the group, in addition to participating in 6 virtual art therapy sessions for 1.5 hours each. We will then decide whether presenting the group members' experiences in an online virtual art gallery or a policy whitepaper will be helpful or relevant for the group members. This may take about 13.5-15.25 hours of your time in total.

This time commitment is divided into the following:

1. Pre-group 1-on-1 online interview (45 minutes)
2. Virtual art therapy group that lasts 6 sessions for 1.5 hours each session (9 hours)
3. After-group follow-up interview (45 minutes) or focus group (1.5 hours)
4. A follow-up art exhibition or a whitepaper policy document (1-3 hours, depending on your group choice)

The interviews and online groups will be held on an online Google Meet platform and the researcher will mail you art materials.

A Community Advisory Committee of 2-5 community leaders have helped the researcher develop this art therapy group. They will help guide the researcher to ethically create and present the study in a culturally-informed way. The Community Advisory Committee would not have access to any data, but give advice based on a general overview of the study.

A social worker from the Association for New Canadians Settlement Services Department has informed me that you would be a good candidate to participate in this study because you are a



newcomer refugee woman, between the ages of 20 to 65 years old, from Syria, Eritrea, and Congo who have moved to Newfoundland and Labrador within the past seven years.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please inform Haley Toll, the researcher.

If you have any questions about me or my project, please contact me by email at [htmtoll@mun.ca](mailto:htmtoll@mun.ca), or by phone at 514-778-0937.

Thank-you in advance for considering my request,

*Haley Toll*

*Ph.D. Cand., CCC, RCAT, RP (inactive)*

*she/her*

*Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland*

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr.chair@mun.ca](mailto:icehr.chair@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent Form

Title: *Creative Community Connections: Arts-based research with newcomer female refugees in Canada*

Researcher:

*Haley Toll, Ph.D. Cand., CCC, RCAT, RP (inactive)  
she/her  
Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland  
contact: [hrtoll@mun.ca](mailto:hrtoll@mun.ca)  
514-778-0937*

Supervisor(s):

*Heather McLeod, Ph.D., Faculty of Education, Memorial University of  
Newfoundland  
[hmcLeod@mun.ca](mailto:hmcLeod@mun.ca)*

Committee Members:

*Xuemei Li, Ph.D., Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland  
Leah Lewis, Ph.D., Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland*

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “Creative Community Connections: Arts-based research with newcomer female refugees in Canada.”

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Haley Toll, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

#### **Introduction:**

As part of my doctoral studies in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Heather McLeod and in collaboration with the Association for New Canadians in Newfoundland and Labrador. I am also a Registered Canadian Art Therapist (with the Canadian Art Therapy Association), Canadian Certified Counsellor (Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association), and

Registered Psychotherapist in the province of Ontario (Canadian College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario).

This research is supported by the Joseph-Armand Bombardier Graduate Scholarship (SSHRC).

### **Purpose of Study:**

A sense of belonging to a community can have a positive health impact. In Newfoundland and Labrador, newcomers can experience particular challenges, while major events, such as the 2020 blizzard and the COVID-19 pandemic can make us all feel isolated.

The Creative Community Connections project is interested in exploring Newcomer refugee Syrian, Eritrean and Congolese women's experiences of belongingness and well-being when people are connecting with one another in a group that creates art together. Therefore, we will explore experiences of belonging and well-being in a strengths-based art therapy group that will be hosted online as a part of the ANC's Empowerment Group.

Strengths-based art therapy is a resiliency-building therapeutic approach that can help people share experiences in creative ways, beyond what words can describe. I will also be asking participants to share their point of view through interviews and focus groups.

In this study, I am asking the following questions:

1. How do Syrian, Congolese, and Eritrean refugee women, who have arrived in Newfoundland and Labrador within the past seven years, voice their lived experiences through group art therapy?
2. How can artmaking in a safe group setting help this population express their experiences of belonging and well-being in an art therapy group?
3. How can artmaking in an art therapy group help create meaningful connections between Knowledge Holders (participants)?

### **What You Will Do in this Study:**

A social worker from the Association for New Canadians Settlement Services Department has informed me that you would be a good candidate to participate in this study. All levels of comfort with artmaking is welcome, including people who have never made art before. In this group, no matter what your art skills are, we are all considered artists and we do not judge one another's artwork or stories.

In this study, I invite you to participate in group art therapy with a group of 10 other refugee women. A social worker from the Association for New Canadians and also an interpreter will be there to help you participate in a language that you prefer. In this group, you are invited to connect with other group members, create artwork about, and talk about your experiences about coming to Canada. We will explore how you experience well-being and belonging by creating artwork about your experiences.

Before this online art therapy group, I will ask you to participate in an online interview with Google Meet online meetings. During this interview, an interpreter and a social worker that you

are comfortable with will be present to support you. We will look at the consent form to see if you have any questions, talk about the group and your background when coming to Canada, and I will ask you about your preferences for participating in the group (examples: what art materials you would like to use, help with participating online, etc.)

After the art therapy group and based on your preference, you are invited to a Post-group individual or focus group interview. During this focus group, I will be asking you about your experiences with the art therapy group and any next steps that you would like to make after the group. This interview or focus group will be online with Google Meet, in-person, or by phone.

I will be sending art materials to you by mail to create artwork during the groups, but you are also welcome to use whatever art materials are meaningful to you (basket weaving, sewing, etc.) After the group is finished, our group members (and you) will choose how we would like to share your experiences with the community in St. John's, which could take the form of an online gallery exhibition or a paper that will help inform public policy.

Data collected (information from the study) will include artwork created during the art therapy sessions, your stories and descriptions of your artwork, and our conversations during the art therapy groups. Data will also include my artwork created as a response to the group and a journal that details my own personal reflections and experiences.

Participating in research is *not* a requirement at the ANC. You are also welcome to participate in the art therapy group even you do not participate in the research study.

A Community Advisory Committee of 2-5 community leaders have helped the researcher develop this art therapy group. They will help guide the researcher to ethically create and present the study in a culturally-informed way. The Community Advisory Committee would not have access to any data, but give advice based on a general overview of the study.

**Length of Time:**

For this group, the total time commitment will be about *13.5-15.25 hours*. I would love your feedback and the time commitment can be changed to suit the group members.

This time commitment is divided into the following things:

5. Pre-group 1-on-1 online interview (45 minutes)
6. Art therapy group that lasts 6 sessions for 1.5 hours each session (9 hours)
7. After-group follow-up interview (45 minutes) or focus group (1.5 hours)
8. An optional follow-up art exhibition or an optional whitepaper policy document where you are welcome to provide your feedback on the document (1-3 hours, depending on your group's choice)

**Withdrawal from the Study:**

You are welcome to withdraw from this study at any time during the data collection process or after the study has been completed.

**Ending your participation early:**

- You may decide to stop your participation at certain points in the process.
- You may stop an interview, even if the interview is not complete.
- You may decide to leave a focus group, even if the focus group is not complete
- If you decide to withdraw/ stop your participation, there will be no consequence to you.
- If you decide to stop an interview process and leave the study, your recorded interview will be removed.
- If you decided to leave the study after your interview has been completed, the transcript will be removed/shredded and your interview will not be part of the study.
- If you decide to leave the study, you may continue taking part in the Open Studio group process without taking part in interview or focus group sessions.

All of your information is presented as anonymous and you are welcome to create your own pseudonym (nickname so people cannot identify you).

### **Limits of Withdrawal:**

- If you decide to leave the study after a focus group has been completed, your content may not be able to be completely removed, although the researcher will do her best to remove as much data as reasonably possible. This is due to the fact that it is impossible to guarantee that all contributions will be identifiable and removable from a group audio or video recording.
- You can withdraw from the study up to three months after the data collection has ended. Afterwards, it will be difficult to remove any individual data.

### **Possible Benefits:**

Possible benefits from the study include:

- Getting to know other group members in a meaningful and supportive way
- Feeling empowered and increased well-being by creating meaningful art in a group
- Feeling belonging and making friends
- Building some art skills and having fun making art
- Getting to know yourself better by sharing your stories and creating art
- Sharing your story through your artwork and narratives with the community (in a virtual art gallery or in another way that is most meaningful to the group).

This study will also benefit the scholarly community by better understanding how strength-based art therapy can help people share their experiences with one another. In addition, the community of St. John's and the scholarly community will better understand how you, as a refugee woman, experience well-being and belonging in Canada, to eventually (and hopefully) create ways to better support you and other refugee women in the future.

### **Possible Risks:**

Although we will be focusing on stories of well-being and belonging in a strength-based way, expressing ourselves with artwork can make different emotions surface. The intention of this

group is not to explore deep trauma. Some possible risks of participating in the study are the following:

- While art making is a personal process, it is possible that this process can cause some stress. Because making art often involves emotions and can be a reminder of past events, you may find that the process causes you to recall stressful or upsetting events. These risks are also true of interview and focus group experiences, where themes and questions may cause you distress. Focus groups will also take place with and alongside your peers, so some discomfort may take place depending on what is shared. We have a social worker from the ANC (who you are likely to know) to help support you in finding counselling services or medical help, if these emotions indicate that you need more help with mental health and well-being. The social worker and I will check-in on your well-being throughout the group.
- You may hear really distressing stories of other group members' experiences when relocating to Canada. In this case, you are welcome to tell us that the story is too difficult to hear and you can "mute" the story. The social worker will also be present during our calls to help you find counselling services or medical help.
- If we choose to create an online gallery, many people in the community can see the artwork that you would choose to show (you do not have to show all of any artwork in this format). If your artwork is shown in an online gallery, people may share their comments about the artwork. Some comments from the public can be upsetting, but we hope that they will all be supportive.
- Since we are hosting the research online, videoconferencing fatigue could happen, where you feel very tired after being in a videoconference.
- Sharing and creating artwork that are emotional and meaningful can also be tiring.

**Here are some other services that can be helpful:**

- Mental Health Crisis Line, 24 hour Toll Free: **1-888-737-4668** or **(709)737-4668**
- Mobile Crisis Response Team: **709-737-4668**
- Doorways walk-in counseling (in-person, walk-in, telephone): **(709) 752-4903**  
website: <https://nl.bridgethegapp.ca/adult/service-directory/doorways-mental-health-walk-in-clinics-st-johns/>
- Right here, right now in-person and virtual counseling St. John's Women's centre: **709-753-0220**  
website: <https://sjwomenscentre.ca/programs/st-johns-womens-centre/>
- Ken Reid, Social Worker, for Individual ANC Telephone counseling: [kreid@anc.ca](mailto:kreid@anc.ca)

**Confidentiality:**

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure.

The data from this research project will be published in peer-reviewed journals, and presented at conferences. Although we will report direct quotations from the interviews and focus groups, if preferred you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information will be removed.

Your privacy and confidentiality will be maintained by the researcher in the following ways:

- Your data will be stored (including images of your artworks) on the researcher's personal computer and will be password-protected.
- You will create an anonymous pseudonym for your name, so that no one can identify you in any publications. If you choose to include your given name, that choice is available.
- We recommend that you choose a private space (if possible) to participate in the online group, use headphones, and store your artwork created in a private space. Our virtual art therapy group is also based on trust, and therefore no members can share stories or artwork created in the group with anyone outside of the group. Although the researcher will safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion to the best of his/her ability, the nature of groups prevents the researcher from guaranteeing that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not repeating what is said in the group to others, and be aware that other members of the group may not respect your confidentiality.
- Google Meet is the online platform chosen for this group because it is accessible and easy to use. You may also be familiar with this technology because the ANC uses Google Meet for online English as a Second Language Classes. Although Google Meet may not be the perfect platform, it was chosen because it is what ANC uses for all programs and you might be most comfortable with it. Google Meet's privacy and security policy states: "At Google, we design, build and operate all our products on a secure foundation, providing the protections needed to keep our users safe, their data secure and their information private. Meet is no exception, and we have built-in default-on protections to keep meetings safe." Here is a link to their Privacy Statement:  
<https://support.google.com/meet/answer/9852160?hl=en#zippy=%2Cencryption>
- After your interview, and before the data are included in the final report, you will be able to review the transcript of your interview, and to add, change, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit.
- All interpreters will sign a confidentiality agreement to ensure participant confidentiality.

**COVID-19 Confidentiality**

Memorial University requires researchers to keep a record of each participant's name, contact information, and the date and time of their participation, which will be provided to health

authorities for contact tracing in the event that participants may be exposed to COVID-19. This information will be stored separately from the consent forms and research data online.

### **Obligation to Inform**

There are some exceptions to confidentiality. As a psychotherapist and counsellor, I have the following duty to protect yourself or another person in the following cases:

- “Disclosure is required to prevent clear and imminent danger to the client or others;
- Legal requirements demand that confidential material be revealed;
- A child is in need of protection;
- Others are threatened, placed in danger or there is a potential for harm;
- Secretaries and other professionals have access to files;
- Clinical supervisors listen to or view recordings of supervisees’ counselling sessions;
- Consulting with other professionals; and,
- Counselling information is given to parents or legal guardians”

(From: Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association Standards of Practice, 5<sup>th</sup> edition, 2015).

### **Anonymity:**

Anonymity refers to protecting participants’ identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance.

Since this is a group that focuses on participation and empowerment in a community, you are welcome to choose your own pseudonym. You are also welcome to include your name, especially if we create an online art exhibition, if that is more meaningful to you. Your data and information will be stored on the researcher’s password-protected computer and cloud, in a password-protected file with the pseudonym and chosen name.

If you choose to be anonymous, every reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity. You will not be identified in publications without your explicit permission.

There are some limits to anonymity, which are the following:

- Although the researcher will safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion to the best of his/her ability, the nature of an online group prevents the researcher from guaranteeing that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other



members of the group by not repeating what is said in the group to others, and be aware that other members of the group may not respect your confidentiality.

- Because the participants for this research project have been selected from a small group of people, all of whom are known to each other, it is possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of what you have said.
- A social worker and interpreters will be present in this group, who have also signed confidentiality agreements with the ANC.

#### **Recording of Data:**

- Since it is hard for the researcher to write notes while being active during our online group meetings, our meetings will be videorecorded.
- Photographs of your artwork (which will be taken by you, since you will make them at home) will also be considered data and stored.
- In addition, photographs of our group process can also be meaningful for the data collection.
- You can choose for your pre-and post interviews not to be videorecorded and for your art not to be recorded.

#### **Use, Access, Ownership, and Storage of Data:**

- Your data will be stored on the researchers' computer hard drive and iCloud platform that is password-protected. Electronic data files are password-protected and stored on a password-protected device.
- The following people will also have access to the data:
  - Researcher's supervisory team (named above)
  - Association for New Canadians Social Worker (who will be present throughout the group)
- The researcher maintains the intellectual property of the data collected. Scholars receiving SSHRC grants for research activities that involve a partnership must retain ownership of all **intellectual property** and publication rights accruing from the joint activities.
- Regarding the artwork created, you, as the Knowledge Holder retain the intellectual property of your artwork created during the art therapy group and the physical artwork created.

Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research and will not be disposed of until ten years after the research has been complete.

#### **Third-Party Data Collection and/or Storage:**

Data collected from you as part of your participation in this project will be hosted and/or stored electronically by iCloud and is subject to their privacy policy, and to any relevant laws of the country in which their servers are located. Therefore, anonymity and confidentiality of data may not be guaranteed in the rare instance, for example, that government agencies obtain a court order compelling the provider to grant access to specific data stored on their servers. If you have questions or concerns about how your data will be collected or stored, please contact the

researcher and/or visit the provider's website for more information before participating. The privacy and security policy of the third-party hosting data collection and/or storing data can be found at:

1. <https://www.apple.com/legal/privacy/en-ww/>
2. <https://support.apple.com/en-ca/HT202303#:~:text=Data%20security,end%2Dto%2Dend%20encryption.&text=No%20one%20else%2C%20not%20even,%2Dto%2Dend%20encrypted%20information.>

### **Reporting of Results:**

- Upon completion, my dissertation will be available at Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II library, and can be accessed online at: <http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/search/collection/theses>.
- The data may also be published in: journal articles, conference presentations, a whitepaper policy document, reporting to SSHRC, and maybe on an online art gallery.
- Data will be reported by using direct quotations, artwork created during the sessions, and by using a pseudonym (or your name, depending on your consent). Your data may also be reported in a summarized form.

### **Sharing of Results with Participants:**

After the project is complete, I would love your feedback on any follow-up reports, thesis, poster presentations, or follow-up online gallery shows.

### **Questions:**

You are welcome to ask questions before, during, or after your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact:

- Haley Toll, Ph.D. Cand., CCC, RCAT, RP (inactive)  
she/her  
[hrmtoll@mun.ca](mailto:hrmtoll@mun.ca)
- Heather McLeod, Ph.D., Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland  
[hmcLeod@mun.ca](mailto:hmcLeod@mun.ca)

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at [icehr@mun.ca](mailto:icehr@mun.ca) or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

### **Consent:**

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.

- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end participation **during** data collection, you may decide on what should happen to the artwork you've produced to date.
- You understand that your focus group data will contain no identifiers (ie. No identifiers will be attached to who said what) and therefore cannot be removed once data collection has ended.
- You understand that you can withdraw from the study up to three months after the data collection has ended.
- You understand that, should you decide to withdraw, you may still attend the art therapy group independently.

**Withdrawal during data collection:**

- You understand that if you choose to end participation during data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be destroyed.

**Withdrawal after data collection:**

- You understand that if you choose to withdraw **after** data collection has ended, your data can be removed from the study up to three months after the final data is collected. At this point, the participants' data would have been integrated into the final dissertation.

- I agree to participate in the Journey of Hope program for 14 weeks  Yes  No
- I agree to be video-recorded during online videoconferencing  Yes  No
- I agree to be photographed  Yes  No
- I agree to my artworks in the sessions to be photographed  Yes  No
- I agree to the use of direct quotations  Yes  No
- I agree to have my artwork photographed for publications purposes  Yes  No
- I agree that any additional use of my data will seek my consent first.  Yes  No

By signing this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

**Your Signature Confirms:**

- I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.
- I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Researcher's Signature:**

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Principal Investigator

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix C**

### **Pre- and Post-Group Individual Interview/Consent**

#### **Welcome and Introductions**

“Thank you for your interest in participating in this Virtual Art Therapy Research Group, where you will be making artwork with 10 other members about your experiences of well-being and belonging in St. John’s. This group will last 6 sessions, where we will meet for 1.5 hours online. No prior art experience is needed, and we maintain an expectation of non-judgment towards our art and others’ artwork. During this pre-group interview you can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.”

#### **Consent form and objectives of research explained**

- Project, Consent form, and confidentiality explained in detail and time is given for questions.

#### **Background**

We would love to know more about your background, can you tell us about:

- When did you come to Canada and from where?
- Is your immediate family with you? If not, where are they located right now?

#### **Expectations**

- What are your expectations for participating in this virtual art therapy group?
- Do you have any questions about strength-focused art therapy?

#### **Group Access, Materials, Participation**

- Would you like a translator for participating in this group?
  - If so, what language?
- Do you know how to use Google Meet meetings and do you need any support with connecting online with Google Meet meetings?
- Does daytime, evening, or morning work best for you, with participating in the groups?
- We recommend that you find a private and comfortable space to participate in the group and create artwork. Do you imagine a particular space in your home that would be helpful? Do you have headphones or any other way to keep the conversations private?
- Are there any challenges with participating online in the virtual online group that you can foresee? (Adapted when the group was able to meet in-person)

### **Art Materials and Artwork**

- I will be sending art materials by mail with a budget of 30\$ per participant. Are there any art materials within that budget that you would like to use?
- We also ask that you keep your artwork and art materials safe throughout the group process. Do you have a space to store your art materials and artwork?

Thank you and we look forward to seeing you in the group! We will be sending you “Google Calendar invitations with the link to participate in the groups.”