

Exploring Art-Based Drawing for Non-Verbal Emotional Expression Among Malaysian Adolescents with Histories of Sexual Assault.

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Abstract

Objectives: Adolescents who experience sexual assault often encounter difficulties in verbally expressing traumatic experiences, particularly during the early stages of post-disclosure counselling. Non-verbal and developmentally appropriate interventions may support emotional communication in this context. This qualitative exploratory study aimed to examine the use of an adapted Art Drawing House–Tree–Person (ADHTP) activity as a non-diagnostic expressive medium to facilitate non-verbal emotional expression among adolescent sexual assault survivors.

Material and Methods: The study involved six female adolescents aged 13–15 years from Pahang, Malaysia. Data sources included participants' drawings, brief post-drawing narrative reflections and counsellor observational notes collected during a single-session intervention. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring expressive patterns across the House, Tree and Person drawings.

Results: Findings revealed consistent themes among participants. The House drawings reflected cautious engagement with the environment and indications of fragile identity development. The Tree drawings suggested emotional vulnerability, life challenges and emerging resilience processes. The Person drawings highlighted relational sensitivity, prosocial orientation and ongoing meaning-making following traumatic experiences. This study contributes to trauma-informed counselling practice by demonstrating the potential of ADHTP as an expressive, non-diagnostic intervention that supports emotional articulation, identity exploration and relational processing among adolescent sexual assault survivors during early counselling engagement.

Keywords: Non-Verbal Emotional Expression, Adolescent Sexual Assault Survivors, Arts-Based Expressive Intervention, trauma-informed

Introduction

Child sexual assault and the associated challenges in verbal emotional expression during early post-disclosure counselling constitute a significant concern within trauma-informed counselling and adolescent mental health practice (Ali et al., 2024; Bailey et al., 2024; Garner et al., 2025). This issue is particularly important as survivors may experience emotional shock, fear and difficulty articulating traumatic experiences, which can affect engagement in therapeutic processes (Shepp et al., 2019; Abdul latif et al., 2023). Adolescents, counsellors and mental health practitioners involved in early trauma intervention are directly impacted by the need for developmentally appropriate and psychologically safe expressive approaches (Edward & Sarilee, 2022).

Drawing activities, in particular, enable individuals to externalise internal experiences symbolically, providing a non-threatening medium through which thoughts and emotions can be communicated (Grennan et al., 2024; Berberi, 2025). For adolescents who may lack the vocabulary or emotional readiness to describe traumatic experiences directly, visual expression can support gradual emotional processing and meaning-making (Jean, 2024; Milkins et al., 2025). The use of drawing-based approaches such as the House Tree Person (HTP) framework has been widely documented in psychological and counselling contexts. Traditionally, HTP drawings

have been utilised as projective assessment tools to explore aspects of self-perception, emotional functioning and interpersonal relationships (Buck; Sheng et al., 2019).

Arts-based interventions have increasingly been recognized as supportive tools in counseling practice, particularly when working with trauma survivors who may experience difficulty expressing emotions verbally (Maddox et al., 2024; Strang et al., 2025). Drawing activities can provide a non-verbal medium through which participants communicate internal experiences, enabling counselors to facilitate emotional exploration in a supportive and developmentally appropriate manner. Such approaches align with the principles of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, which emphasize culturally responsive, contextually informed and empowerment-oriented counseling practices. As highlighted by Zhai and Prescod (2024), the development of multicultural and social justice competencies is essential for ensuring that counseling interventions remain responsive to diverse sociocultural identities and systemic contexts. Integrating expressive, non-diagnostic approaches such as drawing activities supports these competencies by promoting client-centered engagement and cultural sensitivity within therapeutic practice. By allowing participants to express experiences symbolically rather than through direct verbal disclosure, arts-based techniques can help counselors engage individuals who may otherwise struggle to articulate trauma-related emotions (Heijman et al., 2024). In addition, arts-based activities can strengthen the therapeutic alliance by creating a less confrontational and more supportive environment for emotional expression (Miles et al., 2023). This is particularly relevant when working with adolescents who have experienced sexual trauma, as creative methods may promote engagement, safety and reflective dialogue within the counseling process. Through these approaches, counselors demonstrate competencies related to emotional facilitation, empathy and responsiveness to clients' developmental and psychosocial needs.

Ethical considerations also support the use of non-diagnostic expressive techniques in trauma contexts. The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics emphasises the importance of beneficence, nonmaleficence and respect for client autonomy when implementing counselling interventions (Cohen & Cohen, 2018). When drawing-based activities are used as expressive media rather than diagnostic tools, they may help reduce pressure on survivors to disclose traumatic experiences prematurely while still allowing meaningful emotional communication to occur. Although interest in expressive approaches has grown, much of the existing literature on drawing-based techniques continues to focus on interpretive or assessment-oriented applications. Studies conducted between 2000 and 2024 frequently examined HTP drawings as screening or diagnostic tools emphasising symbolic interpretation and clinical inference (Lavania & Ballal, 2025). Consequently, less attention has been given to understanding how drawing activities function specifically as safe expressive mediums that support emotional communication during early counselling engagement. Existing studies have largely focused on assessment or therapeutic outcomes in clinical populations, leaving a gap in understanding how art can function specifically to facilitate safe emotional expression during early counselling interventions (Soma et al., 2019).

Arts-based counseling strategies are also relevant to counselor preparation and professional training. Standards developed by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs emphasize the importance of developing diverse counseling skills and intervention strategies that are responsive to the needs of diverse populations (Cor et al., 2025). Exposure to creative and expressive techniques during counselor education can expand trainees' repertoire of therapeutic tools and enhance their capacity to work effectively with individuals who may have difficulty engaging in traditional talk-based counseling. In the context of trauma-informed counseling practice, creative approaches such as drawing activities can help counselors facilitate emotional processing while maintaining a supportive and structured therapeutic environment. Integrating these techniques into counselor training programs may therefore contribute to the development of culturally responsive, ethically grounded and developmentally appropriate counseling interventions.

Furthermore, the majority of available research has been conducted within Western clinical contexts, limiting understanding of how drawing-based expressive activities may function in different cultural and institutional settings. In Malaysia, adolescent sexual assault survivors often engage with multiple formal systems following disclosure, including police reporting, medical examinations and counselling services. These processes may create additional emotional stress during early stages of support, highlighting the need for counselling approaches that prioritise psychological safety and non-verbal emotional expression. Building on this gap in the literature, the present study explores the use of an adapted House Tree Person (ADHTP) drawing activity as a non-verbal

expressive medium rather than a diagnostic instrument. By examining shared expressive patterns among adolescent sexual assault survivors aged 13 to 15 years in Pahang, Malaysia, this study contributes context-specific insights into how art-based drawing activities may support emotional expression and meaning-making during early post-disclosure counselling (McTavish, 2018).

Study Objectives

This qualitative exploratory study examined the use of an adapted House–Tree–Person (ADHTP) drawing activity as a non-diagnostic expressive tool among adolescent sexual assault survivors during early post-disclosure counselling. The study aimed to identify shared expressive patterns in participants' drawings and brief reflections to better understand how structured art-based activities may support non-verbal emotional communication within trauma-informed practice. The findings are intended for counsellors, psychologists and researchers working in adolescent trauma intervention and expressive arts approaches, with emphasis on using drawing as a supportive communication method rather than a diagnostic instrument.

A qualitative exploratory design was adopted to support contextual understanding rather than hypothesis testing or causal explanation. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, the study assumes that individuals construct meaning through symbolic expression; thus, drawings were interpreted as communicative artefacts reflecting participants' experiences. This approach aligns with trauma-informed principles and focuses on expressive processes rather than symbolic diagnosis.

Unlike traditional projective applications of drawing techniques, this study positions ADHTP as a structured expressive intervention in early counselling, contributing to literature by emphasising emotional expression and trauma-informed adaptation rather than diagnostic interpretation.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory design to examine the use of the adapted House–Tree–Person (ADHTP) drawing activity as a medium for non-verbal expression among adolescent sexual assault survivors. The approach was descriptive and interpretive, aiming to develop contextual understanding of shared expressive patterns rather than to test hypotheses or generate diagnostic conclusions (Tenny et al., 2025). Data collection involved an art-based drawing task (ADHTP), followed by participant verbal reflections and therapist observational notes. Data analysis was conducted using thematic procedures, including descriptive coding, categorisation and theme development. Triangulation across multiple data sources was applied to enhance methodological integrity.

The rationale for selecting a qualitative exploratory design was its suitability for trauma-informed inquiry, particularly in contexts where participants may experience difficulty with verbal articulation. The design supported participant-centred meaning-making and aligned with a non-pathologising framework.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of confidentiality, informed consent and psychological safety were strictly observed. Participants' identities were anonymised using pseudonyms and no identifying information was included in the drawings or transcripts. The drawing activity was conducted within a counselling setting and participants were informed that they could stop the activity at any time without consequence. The ADHTP activity was not used for forensic, diagnostic, or evaluative purposes and care was taken to avoid re-traumatisation during the session.

Data Sources

The researcher possesses professional training and experience in counselling practice, particularly within trauma-related contexts. Prior knowledge and experience in expressive arts interventions informed the structured yet non-directive implementation of the Adapted Draw-A-House-Tree-Person (ADHTP) activity during the counselling sessions. This professional background guided the facilitation of the drawing activity in a manner that prioritised emotional safety while allowing participants to express their experiences in a supportive environment. These prior understandings also influenced the research process by emphasising the importance of maintaining participant autonomy and avoiding excessive symbolic interpretation of drawings. Reflexive awareness was maintained

throughout the research process to minimise potential researcher bias. Interpretations of the expressive elements were therefore grounded primarily in participants' own reflections and explanations rather than relying solely on researcher assumptions (Sony et al., 2025).

A total of six female adolescents ($n = 6$) participated in the study. Participants were aged between 13 and 15 years, with a mean age of 14 years. All participants were survivors of sexual assault who had attended counselling sessions following formal disclosure and police reporting in Pahang, Malaysia. At the time of data collection, participants were receiving psychological support services. Data sources consisted of completed ADHTP drawings produced by the participants, participants' verbal reflections regarding their drawings and therapist observational notes recorded during the counselling sessions. No archived datasets were used in this study, as all data were collected directly during the study period within the counselling context. Basic demographic information such as participants' age, district of residence and type of reported assault was documented to provide contextual understanding of the participants' backgrounds.

The researcher interacted with participants within a professional counselling setting and had no prior personal relationship with them outside this context. The dual role of the researcher as both facilitator and researcher were managed carefully to maintain ethical boundaries and professional integrity. Participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and that their decision to participate or withdraw would not affect the counselling services they received. Throughout the research process, emphasis was placed on ensuring emotional safety, maintaining confidentiality and providing appropriate psychological support for participants.

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited face-to-face within counselling service settings after formal police reporting and during ongoing sessions, using purposive sampling to ensure eligibility. All communication was conducted in person, with no online methods used. Written parental or guardian consent and participant assent were obtained prior to participation. Ethical safeguards included continuous psychological safety monitoring and the option to withdraw at any time without affecting counselling services. No incentives were provided.

The sample size ($n = 6$) reflected the qualitative exploratory design, prioritising depth over statistical representation. Recruitment ended once all eligible participants had consented, with no attrition. Data collection concluded when sufficient descriptive depth was achieved to identify recurring expressive patterns. The study was framed as an exploration of art-based emotional expression, not a diagnostic assessment.

Inclusion Criteria:

Female adolescents aged 13–15 years

Identified as sexual assault survivors

Attended at least one counselling session after police reporting

Assessed as emotionally stable for participation

Exclusion Criteria:

Individuals who had not completed formal reporting procedures

Individuals assessed as emotionally unfit at the time of data collection

The study was conducted in counselling settings in Pahang, Malaysia. Data collection occurred during scheduled sessions in a supportive therapeutic environment. The selection approach was consistent with qualitative research practices that emphasise contextual depth and transferability rather than statistical generalisation.

Data Collection

The primary form of data collected in this study consisted of art-based drawings (ADHTP), participant verbal reflections and therapist observational notes. The adapted House–Tree–Person (ADHTP) drawing task served as the central data-generation activity. Written narratives were not required; instead, participants provided brief oral reflections following completion of their drawings. The data-collection protocol was adapted from the traditional House–Tree–Person (HTP) technique and modified to align with a trauma-informed, non-pathologising framework. The original structured projective approach was adjusted to emphasise expressive freedom and

participant-led meaning-making rather than symbolic interpretation. No major alterations to the data-collection strategy occurred during the study, as the procedures remained consistent across all participants.

Data were collected during scheduled counselling sessions in a private and supportive therapeutic setting in Pahang, Malaysia. Sessions were conducted individually to ensure confidentiality and psychological safety. No other individuals were present during the drawing activity, except the researcher acting in a professional facilitative role.

Each participant completed the ADHTP task once. The process involved:

Introduction and rapport building

Completion of consent and assent procedures

Provision of blank paper and drawing materials

Instructions to draw a house, tree and person freely

Completion of drawings without time limits

Participant verbal reflection about the artwork

Participant verification of meanings was incorporated into the data-collection process to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in participants' own perspectives (Haeyen et al., 2015). During the counselling sessions, participants were invited to explain and reflect on the elements they included in their drawings. These explanations were used to confirm the meanings associated with the expressive features observed in the drawings before the data were interpreted analytically. The average duration of each session was approximately 45 to 60 minutes, which included rapport building, completion of the drawing activity, reflective discussion and debriefing. The level of engagement was considered moderate to in-depth, as participants were given sufficient time to complete their drawings at their own pace and to share their reflections in a supportive environment without pressure.

The data-collection process allowed for meaningful engagement within a single structured session for each participant. Although the study did not involve repeated interviews or multiple sessions, the integration of drawing activities, participant reflection and verification of meanings supported a deeper exploration of participants' experiences within the expressive task. The flexible and non-time-bound structure of the activity encouraged spontaneous expression and helped reduce performance-related anxiety among participants. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the data-collection process. The researcher remained aware that prior professional experience in counselling and expressive arts interventions could potentially influence interpretations of the drawings. To minimise this possibility, the meanings of the drawings were verified with participants before the analysis was conducted. Interpretations were therefore limited to participant-validated descriptions and no diagnostic or clinical inferences were made from the drawings. Reflective notes were also maintained to document procedural decisions and contextual observations during the counselling sessions.

The primary instrument used in this study was an art-based drawing activity, specifically the adapted House Tree Person (ADHTP) drawing task. The original House Tree Person (HTP) drawing technique was introduced by John N. Buck in 1948 as a projective drawing method aimed at exploring individuals' perceptions of themselves and their environment through non-verbal expression (McCallum, 2013). Traditionally, the HTP has been used to gain insights into emotional functioning, self-concept and interpersonal perceptions, particularly among children and adolescents (Gussak & Rosal, 2016). The meanings of the symbols are unique to each participant and require their confirmation to ensure accurate understanding (Arp et al., 2018; Santillo et al., 2025). Participants were provided with blank paper and asked to draw a house, a tree and a person at their own pace. They were encouraged to draw freely without pressure for artistic quality or correctness (Othman, 2021). The specific drawing instructions and open-ended prompts used during the sessions are detailed in Table 1

Table 1: AD-HTP Drawing Instructions and Open-Ended Prompts

Section	Procedure / Prompts	Purpose (Non-Interpretive)
Drawing Instructions	Participants were given blank paper and asked to draw a house, tree and person at their own pace. They were encouraged to draw freely without emphasis on artistic quality or correctness.	To facilitate spontaneous expression and reduce performance pressure.
House Component	“Would you like to tell me about this house?” “What does this house mean to you?” “Is there anything about this house that you would like to share?” “You may describe the house in any way that feels comfortable.”	To encourage participant-centred reflection regarding personal meaning without symbolic interpretation.
Tree Component	“Would you like to talk about this tree?” “What inspired this tree drawing?” “Is there any part of the tree that feels important to you?” “How would you describe this tree?”	To support exploration of self-expressed experiences in a neutral and open manner.
Person Component	“Would you like to share anything about this person?” “What does this person represent for you?” “Is there anything you would like to explain about this drawing?” “You may describe the person in your own words.”	To facilitate voluntary disclosure of intended meaning while maintaining participant autonomy.

Analysis

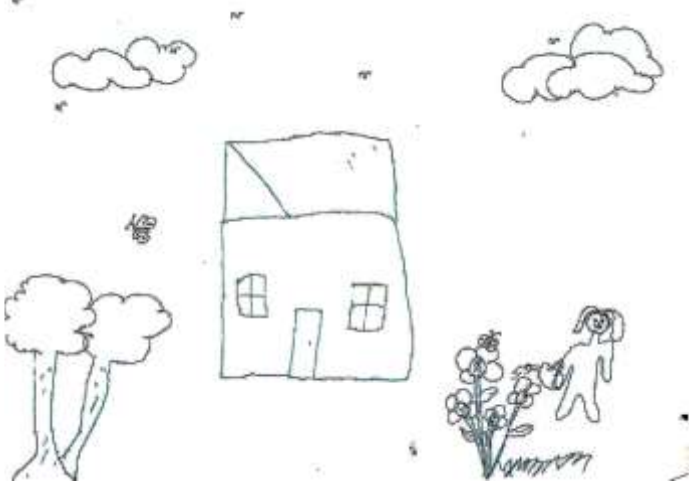
Data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis to identify shared expressive patterns across participants' ADHTP drawings, verbal reflections and therapist observational notes. The analysis followed a systematic process involving repeated data familiarisation, descriptive coding, category development and iterative theme refinement. Codes emerged inductively from the data, consistent with the exploratory design and analysis was conducted manually without software.

Themes were developed through within-case and cross-case comparison to identify convergent patterns related to self-representation, emotional expression and relational orientation. Methodological integrity was ensured through triangulation of three data sources, participant verification of meanings and maintenance of an audit trail. Interpretations were grounded in observable expressive features and participant-confirmed meanings, ensuring credibility and consistency across cases.

Results and Discussion

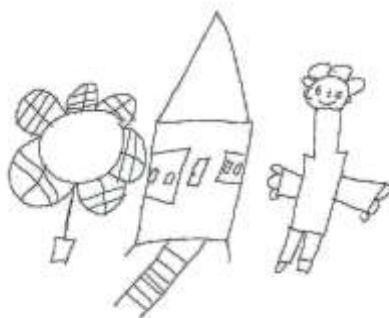
An overview of the findings is presented first. Table 2 summarizes the specific expressive features observed in each participant's ADHTP drawings.

Table 2. Expressive Features Observed in ADHTP Drawings

Art Drawing House Tree Person	Result
	House drawing suggested uncertainty in self-identity. The tree drawing reflected experiences of life challenges and personal growth. The person drawing illustrated a tendency toward self-development and helping others
	House drawing suggested a developing sense of identity. The tree drawing reflected feelings related to self-confidence. The person drawing highlighted closeness to family and acceptance of life experiences.
	House drawing indicated uncertainty in identity formation. The tree drawing reflected the presence of personal goals and aspirations. The person drawing suggested acceptance toward life experiences
	House drawing illustrated underlying concerns related to identity. The tree drawing showed elements suggesting confused or disorganised thinking patterns. The person drawing indicated a helping orientation and openness toward being understood by others

Art Drawing House Tree Person**Result**

House drawing suggested a preference for privacy, limited communication with others and dark side. The tree drawing reflected references to past life difficulties. The person drawing highlighted a tendency to provide support to others



House drawing suggested limited openness toward the outside environment. The tree drawing reflected a gentle or emotionally sensitive nature. The person drawing indicated relational awareness and willingness to help others

Table 3. Shared Background Characteristics of Participants

Category	Participants	Key Characteristics	Observed Pattern
Non-consensual sexual assault + intact family	Clients 1, 2, 6	Living with biological parents	Higher emotional distress observed; 2 reported self-harm
Consensual sexual experience + separated parents	Clients 3, 4, 5	Parents separated	No self-harm reported
Gender	All participants	Female adolescents (13–15 years)	Homogeneous gender group
Birth order	All participants	Not first-born	Shared sibling positioning context
Trauma response variability	Across groups	Different coping responses	Demonstrates individual differences despite similar contexts

Shared Background Characteristics

Table 3 analysis of participant backgrounds revealed several patterns among the adolescent sexual assault survivors. Clients 1, 2 and 6 experienced non-consensual sexual assault and resided with their biological parents. Despite living in intact family structures, the participants experienced significant emotional challenges following the traumatic events.

Two participants within this group (Clients 1 and 6) reported previous self-harm behaviours, suggesting elevated emotional distress and potential maladaptive coping strategies. However, Client 2 did not report any self-injurious behaviour, highlighting the variability of coping responses among adolescents who have experienced similar forms of trauma.

In contrast, Clients 3, 4 and 5 were involved in cases classified as consensual sexual experiences and lived in households where parents were separated. These participants did not report any self-harm behaviours. The differences in family background and trauma context illustrate the diverse psychosocial environments in which adolescent sexual experiences may occur.

All participants were female adolescents aged between 13 and 15 years and were not first-born children in their families. Although the present study does not aim to establish causal relationships, these background similarities provide contextual insights into potential family dynamics that may shape adolescents' emotional development and interpersonal relationships.

A summary of the shared expressive patterns identified across the different drawing components is presented in Table 4

Table 4. Shared Expressive Patterns in ADHTP Drawings

ADHTP Component	Main Themes Identified	Non-Consensual Group	Consensual Group	Overall Pattern
House	Identity development, emotional safety, boundaries	Cautious engagement; safety concerns; boundary awareness	Privacy preference; identity exploration	Developmental negotiation of self-concept across all participants
Tree	Resilience, coping, growth, life challenges	Emotional vulnerability; low confidence; processing trauma	Aspirations; reflection; adaptive thinking	Indicators of developmental adaptation and resilience
Person	Relational awareness, prosocial orientation	Emotional sensitivity; interpersonal awareness	Acceptance; openness; concern for others	Strong relational strengths across all participants

Shared Patterns in ADHTP Drawings

House Component

Across participants, the house drawings frequently illustrated themes related to identity formation and perceived emotional safety. Several drawings contained features that suggested uncertainty or developing self-concept. Among participants who experienced non-consensual sexual assault (Clients 1, 2 and 6), the house drawings often reflected cautious engagement with the surrounding environment. These expressive elements may represent participants' efforts to negotiate feelings of safety, trust and personal boundaries following traumatic experiences. Similarly, participants in the consensual sexual experience group (Clients 3, 4 and 5) also produced house drawings that suggested emerging identity development and a degree of emotional withdrawal or preference for privacy. Collectively, these patterns highlight that adolescents in both groups may experience challenges related to self-identity and emotional security during the post-disclosure period

Tree Component

The tree drawings across participants revealed expressive elements related to life experiences, emotional resilience and developmental challenges. Several participants included features suggesting struggles, personal growth or references to past life difficulties. Participants in the non-consensual trauma group illustrated trees that reflected emotional vulnerability, low self-confidence or ongoing life challenges. These drawings may represent attempts to process difficult experiences while navigating developmental transitions during adolescence. Participants in the consensual experience group illustrated trees that reflected personal goals, aspirations or cognitive processing of experiences. Although the expressive elements differed slightly across participants, the tree component consistently reflected developmental processes related to coping, adaptation and resilience

Person Component

The person drawings across all participants revealed a consistent pattern of relational awareness and prosocial orientation. Many drawings included elements suggesting a tendency to help others, maintain relationships or support those around them. Among participants in the non-consensual trauma group, additional expressive features suggested ongoing personal growth and sensitivity to interpersonal relationships. Participants also described elements reflecting their efforts to understand and manage their emotional experiences. Similarly, participants in the consensual experience group expressed themes related to acceptance of life experiences, openness to being understood by others and concern for the wellbeing of people around them. These patterns suggest that despite experiencing challenging circumstances, adolescents may retain relational strengths that support emotional recovery

Table 5. Cross-Case Integrated Thematic Outcomes

Emergent Theme	Evidence Source	Interpretation Across Cases
Identity Formation	House drawings	Ongoing self-concept development in adolescence
Emotional Regulation	Tree drawings + reflections	Adaptive coping processes present in both groups
Relational Strengths	Person drawings	Consistent prosocial and interpersonal orientation
Trauma Adaptation	Drawing patterns (NC group)	Heightened boundary awareness and emotional vulnerability
Developmental Resilience	All components	Shared indicators of psychological growth despite adversity

Cross-Case Integrated Thematic Outcomes

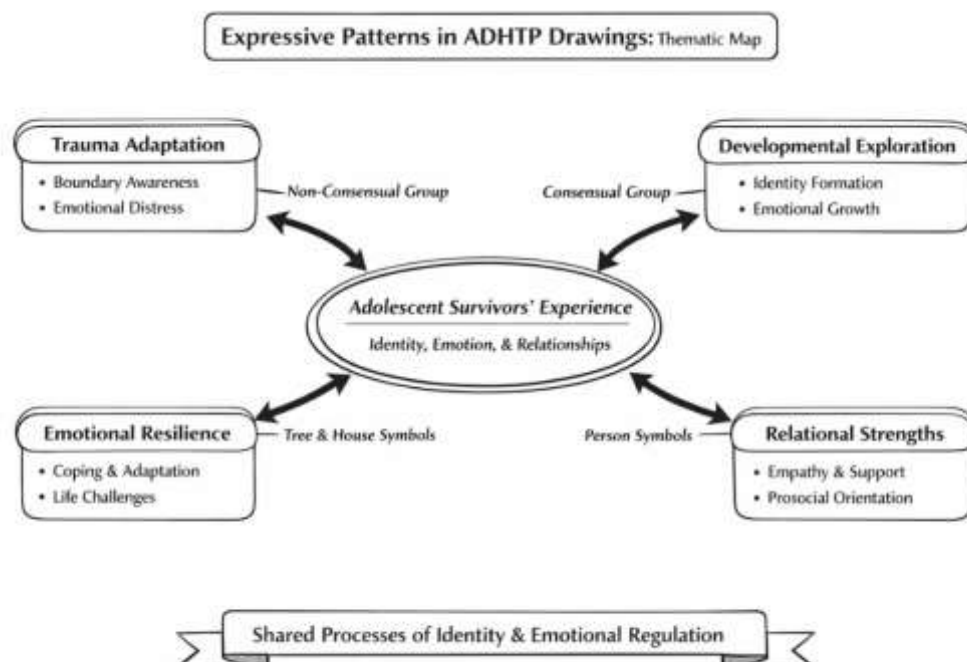
Table 5 presents the cross-case integration of emergent themes derived from the ADHTP drawings, highlighting how different components of the drawings contributed to a holistic understanding of participants' experiences across cases. The theme of identity formation was primarily reflected in the house drawings. Across participants, these drawings indicated an ongoing process of self-concept development, which is consistent with the developmental stage of adolescence. The house representations appeared to capture participants' sense of self, personal space and evolving identity within their social and familial contexts.

The theme of emotional regulation emerged through the tree drawings and accompanying reflections. These elements revealed the presence of adaptive coping processes across both groups, suggesting that participants were able to engage in emotional processing and regulation despite differing life experiences. The tree drawings, in particular, appeared to symbolise internal states and the ways participants managed emotional challenges. In the person drawings, the theme of relational strengths was consistently identified across all cases. Participants demonstrated elements of empathy, interpersonal awareness and prosocial orientation, indicating a shared capacity for forming and maintaining social connections. This suggests that relational functioning remained a key strength among participants regardless of their background.

The theme of trauma adaptation was uniquely observed in the non-consensual group and was inferred from specific drawing patterns. These patterns reflected heightened boundary awareness and emotional vulnerability, indicating psychological efforts to adapt to and make sense of distressing experiences. This theme highlights the nuanced ways in which trauma is expressed through non-verbal mediums. Finally, developmental resilience emerged as a cross-cutting theme across all drawing components. Evidence from the house, tree and person drawings collectively pointed to shared indicators of psychological growth and adaptive functioning despite adversity. This suggests that, although participants may differ in their experiences, they demonstrate common developmental trajectories characterised by resilience and ongoing adjustment. Overall, the cross-case analysis

underscores the value of integrating multiple ADHTP components to capture both individual and shared patterns, providing a comprehensive understanding of adolescents' emotional, relational and developmental experiences

Figure 1. Thematic Map of Expressive Patterns in ADHTP Drawing



Thematic Map Interpretation of ADHTP Drawings

Figure 1 illustrates the thematic map of the core expressive patterns emerging from the ADHTP drawings, centring on adolescents' lived experiences in relation to identity, emotion and interpersonal relationships. Overall, the findings indicate that participants' expressions are shaped not only by trauma-related experiences but also by ongoing developmental processes characteristic of adolescence. On the left side of the map, the theme of trauma adaptation is more prominently associated with the non-consensual group. This theme encompasses boundary awareness and emotional distress, suggesting that these participants demonstrate heightened sensitivity toward personal safety and emotional experiences. Such patterns reflect psychological efforts to adapt to and process distressing experiences.

In contrast, the right side of the map highlights developmental exploration, which is more evident among the consensual group. This includes identity formation and emotional growth, indicating that participants in this group tend to engage in normative developmental processes, using drawing as a medium for self-exploration and personal meaning-making. At the lower left section, emotional resilience is reflected through tree and house representations, capturing themes of coping, adaptation and responses to life challenges. Although expressed differently across groups, both demonstrate the presence of adaptive capacities and psychological resilience. At the lower right section, relational strengths emerge consistently across all participants, particularly through person drawings. These include empathy, support and prosocial orientation, suggesting a shared capacity for interpersonal awareness and connection regardless of differing experiences. All themes converge at the centre of the map, representing the adolescent survivors' experience, which integrates identity, emotional processes and relational dynamics. The directional arrows indicate that these domains are interconnected and dynamically influence one another, rather than operating in isolation.

Finally, the base of the map emphasises shared processes of identity and emotional regulation, highlighting that despite differences in background and experiences, all participants demonstrate common developmental

trajectories related to self-concept formation and emotional regulation. This underscores the importance of viewing ADHTP expressions within both trauma-informed and developmental frameworks.

Table 6. Integrated Descriptive and Thematic Quantification of Participant Characteristics and ADHTP Findings (n = 6)

Domain	Variable / Theme	Non-Consensual Group (n=3)	Consensual Group (n=3)	Overall % / TSI	M	SD
Background	Family Structure (Intact = 1)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	50%	0.50	0.55
	Self-Harm (Yes = 1)	2 (66.7%)	0 (0%)	33.3%	0.33	0.52
	Gender (Female)	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100%	1.00	0.00
	Birth Order (Not first-born)	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100%	1.00	0.00
House (ADHTP)	Emotional Safety / Boundaries	3 (100%)	2 (66.7%)	83.3%	—	—
	Identity Development	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100%	—	—
Tree (ADHTP)	Emotional Regulation / Coping	2 (66.7%)	3 (100%)	83.3%	—	—
	Resilience / Growth	2 (66.7%)	3 (100%)	83.3%	—	—
Person (ADHTP)	Relational Strengths	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100%	—	—
	Prosocial Orientation	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100%	—	—
Emergent Themes	Identity Formation	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100% (TSI=1.00)	—	—
	Emotional Regulation	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100% (TSI=1.00)	—	—
	Relational Strengths	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100% (TSI=1.00)	—	—
	Trauma Adaptation (NC only)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	50% (TSI=0.50)	—	—
	Developmental Resilience	3 (100%)	3 (100%)	100% (TSI=1.00)	—	—

Table 6 presents an integrated overview of participants' background characteristics alongside the quantified thematic patterns derived from the ADHTP drawings. From a descriptive perspective, the sample was evenly divided between the non-consensual group and the consensual group, each representing 50% of the total participants (n = 6). All participants were female adolescents aged between 13 and 15 years and were not first-born children, indicating a homogeneous demographic profile across gender and birth order (100%). In terms of family structure, all participants in the non-consensual group were living with intact biological families (100%), whereas none of the participants in the consensual group reported intact family structures (0%), resulting in an overall mean of $M = 0.50$ ($SD = 0.55$). A notable difference was observed in self-harm behaviour.

Within the non-consensual group, 66.7% of participants reported engaging in self-harm, compared to 0% in the consensual group. Overall, 33.3% of participants reported self-harm behaviour ($M = 0.33$, $SD = 0.52$), indicating a higher concentration of psychological distress within the non-consensual group. Thematic quantification of the ADHTP components further revealed distinct yet overlapping patterns across groups. For the house drawings,

themes related to emotional safety and boundary awareness were present in all participants within the non-consensual group (100%) and in 66.7% of the consensual group, resulting in an overall prevalence of 83.3%. Themes of identity development were consistently observed across all participants (100%), suggesting an ongoing process of self-concept formation during adolescence. For the tree drawings, themes reflecting emotional regulation and coping were identified in 66.7% of the non-consensual group and 100% of the consensual group, with an overall prevalence of 83.3%. Similarly, indicators of resilience and growth were present in both groups, though more consistently observed in the consensual group. These findings suggest that while emotional vulnerability was more evident among the non-consensual group, adaptive coping processes were present across participants. In the person drawings, relational strengths and prosocial orientation were consistently identified across all participants (100%), indicating a shared capacity for interpersonal awareness and social connectedness regardless of trauma background. At the level of emergent themes, identity formation, emotional regulation, relational strengths and developmental resilience were observed across all participants (Thematic Strength Index, TSI = 1.00). In contrast, trauma adaptation was uniquely associated with the non-consensual group (TSI = 0.50), reflecting heightened boundary awareness and emotional sensitivity specific to this subgroup.

Overall, these findings demonstrate that while certain risk indicators, such as self-harm and emotional vulnerability, were more prominent in the non-consensual group, all participants exhibited evidence of developmental resilience, adaptive coping and relational strengths. The integration of descriptive statistics with thematic analysis provides a more nuanced understanding of participants' psychological experiences, supporting the use of ADHTP as a participant-centred exploratory tool in trauma-informed counselling contexts.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes to the growing body of research on expressive approaches in trauma-informed counselling by demonstrating how the adapted House–Tree–Person (ADHTP) drawing activity can function as a supportive medium for non-verbal expression among adolescent sexual assault survivors. The findings highlight that art-based drawing tasks can facilitate the expression of emotional experiences that may be difficult to communicate verbally, particularly among adolescents who are navigating both developmental transitions and traumatic life events. The analysis revealed shared expressive patterns across participants in the house, tree and person drawing components. These patterns provide insight into themes related to identity development, emotional processing, coping experiences and relational awareness. The findings therefore extend disciplinary understanding of how expressive arts activities can support therapeutic exploration in counselling settings involving trauma-affected adolescents.

The findings generally support previous research suggesting that art-based methods provide a safe and indirect channel for emotional expression among individuals who have experienced trauma. Prior studies have indicated that drawing activities can facilitate self-exploration and emotional communication among adolescents who may find direct verbal disclosure challenging. The house component findings, which frequently reflected uncertainty or developing identity formation, are consistent with research suggesting that traumatic experiences during adolescence may disrupt self-concept development. Similarly, the tree component findings, which reflected life challenges, resilience and aspirations, align with previous studies that describe expressive drawings as a reflection of individuals' coping processes and psychological growth. The person drawings revealed a strong pattern of relational awareness and helping orientation across participants. This finding supports research indicating that adolescents who experience adversity may still retain prosocial tendencies and interpersonal strengths that contribute to resilience.

While these findings largely support previous literature on expressive therapies and trauma-informed counselling, the present study also extends existing research by highlighting how similar expressive patterns can emerge among adolescents with different trauma contexts, including both non-consensual sexual assault and consensual sexual experiences. Although the expressive patterns observed in the drawings were interpreted in relation to participants' emotional experiences, alternative explanations should also be considered. For example, some drawing characteristics may reflect developmental drawing styles or individual artistic preferences rather than psychological meaning. Additionally, participants' reflections were shaped within a counselling environment,

which may have influenced the way they described their drawings. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as contextual insights rather than definitive psychological indicators.

Strengths and Limitations

One strength of this study lies in the use of a structured yet flexible art-based activity that allowed adolescents to express experiences in a non-threatening format. The integration of drawings, verbal reflections and observational notes also strengthened the analysis through data triangulation. However, several limitations should be acknowledged. The study involved a small sample of six participants from a specific geographical region, which limits the generalisability of the findings. Additionally, the analysis focused on shared expressive patterns rather than in-depth case comparisons, which may limit the exploration of individual variation.

Another limitation is that the findings are based on a single expressive activity conducted during one counselling session. Longer-term observation or repeated sessions may provide deeper insight into changes in expressive patterns over time. The findings of this study are not intended to be generalised to all adolescent sexual assault survivors. Instead, they offer contextual insights that may be transferable to similar counselling settings involving trauma-affected adolescents. Readers should therefore consider the specific context of the study, including the counselling environment, cultural background and age group of participants when interpreting the applicability of the findings.

Research involving adolescent survivors of sexual assault presents important ethical considerations. Ensuring emotional safety, maintaining confidentiality and avoiding re-traumatisation were central priorities throughout the study. The use of an expressive drawing activity required careful facilitation to ensure that participants did not feel pressured to disclose distressing experiences. The non-pathologising framework adopted in this study helped reduce the risk of interpretive harm by emphasising participant-led meaning-making rather than symbolic diagnosis. Future researchers working with vulnerable populations should continue to prioritise trauma-informed procedures and flexible data-collection strategies that allow participants to maintain control over their level of disclosure.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings of this study suggest several implications for future research and counselling practice. First, art-based drawing activities such as ADHTP may be useful as supportive tools in counselling sessions involving adolescents who have experienced trauma. These activities can create opportunities for emotional exploration without requiring immediate verbal disclosure. Second, future studies may explore larger and more diverse samples to further examine expressive patterns among adolescents from different cultural or social contexts. Longitudinal research could also examine how expressive patterns evolve during the recovery process. Finally, future research may investigate the integration of structured art-based interventions within trauma-informed counselling frameworks to better support emotional expression and psychological recovery among adolescent survivors.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the value of the ADHTP drawing activity as a participant-centred, non-verbal expressive tool within trauma-informed counselling for adolescent survivors. Distinct background differences were observed between the non-consensual and consensual groups, particularly in relation to emotional distress and self-harm indicators. However, shared expressive patterns emerged across both groups, including identity formation, emotional regulation, relational strengths and developmental resilience. These findings suggest that expressive drawing can support emotional exploration and self-concept development while preserving adolescents' sense of safety and autonomy. The results contribute to evidence supporting art-based approaches as complementary strategies in counselling practice and underscore the importance of integrating developmental and trauma-informed perspectives when working with adolescents

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