

Exploring Emotional Regulation through Eco Art Therapy: A Phenomenological Study of College Students

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ABSTRACT

University students in early adulthood face increasing academic, social, and existential pressures that intensify emotional vulnerability. While emotional distress among students is widely documented, limited research has explored integrative counseling approaches that simultaneously address expressive, ecological, and reflective dimensions of emotional regulation. This study investigates how students experience and interpret eco art therapy as they engage in emotional regulation within a prophetic counseling framework. Employing a qualitative phenomenological design, in-depth interviews were conducted with five undergraduate students who participated in eco art therapy sessions integrating creative art-making, interaction with natural elements, and reflective dialogue. Thematic analysis revealed three transformative stages: (1) humanization of emotion through the creation of a psychologically safe space for authentic emotional expression, (2) psychological liberation marked by the release of accumulated emotional tension, and (3) emotional transcendence characterized by increased reflective awareness and adaptive emotional response. The findings propose a data-supported conceptual model demonstrating that eco art therapy functions not merely as an expressive technique but as a transformative process linking aesthetic experience, ecological engagement, and reflective meaning-making. This study's novelty lies in integrating expressive art therapy, nature-based intervention, and prophetic counseling (humanization–liberation–transcendence) into a unified framework for emotional regulation in higher education. This integrative model contributes theoretically to contemporary emotional regulation discourse and offers a contextualized counseling innovation relevant to Islamic higher education institutions.

Keywords: *Eco Art Therapy, Emotional Regulation, Perspective Counseling, Phenomenology, University Students*

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INTRODUCTION

Students in the phase of mature beginning is at in period full development with academic, social, and existential demands. Transition to independence, pressure for academic, expectations family and the search for self-identity form complex emotions. Various studies continue to show an increasing prevalence of anxiety, academic stress, and emotional exhaustion among students. This phenomenon is not just sporadic, but has become a consistent global trend in recent years, in line with the increasing complexity of higher education demands. The increasingly competitive academic environment places pressure on students to consistently achieve optimal performance across cognitive, affective, and academic productivity. (Stallman, 2021; Xiao et al., 2022; Mirza et al., 2024). This condition not only impacts students' psychological well-being but also significantly impacts their ability to optimally perform academic roles. Students experiencing emotional distress tend to experience decreased concentration, learning motivation, and academic decision-making abilities. In the long term, this can lead to decreased academic achievement, engagement in the learning process, and the quality of social interactions on campus. In this context, the primary problem lies not solely in the emergence of negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, or emotional exhaustion, but rather in the individual's limited ability to manage and interpret these emotional experiences adaptively. The inability to manage emotions can lead to disproportionate responses to stress, such as withdrawal, aggressive behavior, or even the emergence of symptoms of academic burnout. Emotional regulation, in this context, is understood as an individual's ability to recognize, understand, and effectively manage emotional responses so that they align with the needs of the situation and the long-term goals they wish to achieve. (Gross, 2015; Ahmad, 2025).

Perspective contemporary emphasize that regulations emotion is not effort pressing emotions, but rather a dynamic process involving awareness, cognitive evaluation, and meaning-making through repeated affective experiences (Ford & Gross, 2022). Thus, in framework counseling, regulation emotion interpreted as developing reflective awareness that allows individuals to respond to emotions in a more mature and focused way. Thus, the approach to counseling that relies on verbal dialogue often faces limitations when faced with experiences of an emotional nature implicit and symbolic. Students No always own capacity narrative For explain complexity his emotions in a way direct experience affective certain tend stored in form sensation, image, or difficult symbols articulated in a way rational. Therefore, it is necessary to explore more alternative expressive and reflective For bridge experience emotional yet spoken.

Art therapy has been recognized as an effective approach in helping individuals express emotion through symbolic media. Recent studies show that intervention-based art can increase emotional awareness, lower stress levels, as well as strengthen self-regulation capacity (Haeyen et al., 2021; Malchiodi, 2020; Salisa, 2024). In the context of students, approaching creative art allows for the externalization of previously buried emotions, so that individuals can observe and interpret it in a more objective way (Salisanasti et al., 2025; Sinthia et al., 2025).

A previous study by Haryati (2024) showed that the interactive art therapy approach is effective in helping students express emotions and manage academic stress. The study confirms that the creative process provide room safe for student For articulate difficult emotions expressed verbally, at the same time build awareness reflective to dynamics affective. However, the approach the Still focus on dimensions interactive based on art without in a way explicit integrate element ecological as part of the therapeutic process. In development latest, eco-therapy or nature-based intervention approaches show that interaction with environment experience own effect restorative to welfare psychological. Exposure to natural proven to correlate with reduced stress,

increased focus and attention, and repair regulations emotions (Bratman et al., 2019; Pritchard et al., 2020; Mulyaningtyas et al., 2023). Recent studies also show that connectedness with nature (nature connectedness) plays a role significant in increase welfare emotional and meaningful life (Richardson et al., 2021). Thus, integrating art and nature in one framework intervention own potential synergy that has not been fully explored in the context of counseling students.

Eco art therapy is an integrative approach that combines expressive art with interaction direct with element experience like soil, leaves, rocks, and open space. In this approach, nature is not just a background activity, but rather functions as a restorative and reflective experience that supports the psychological recovery process (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2019). Interaction ecology in the creative process allows students to experience more connectedness with self and environment, so that deepen experience regulations emotion. Although international research regarding eco-therapy is developing rapidly, its integration in context education high Islam and framework counseling prophetic still very limited. Counseling prophetic carries a paradigm of humanization, liberation, and transcendence as an orientation for individuals in a way intact. Humanization emphasizes confession, dignity, humanity, and validation of emotions; liberation is oriented from psychological and structural pressure; whereas transcendence leads to meaning self and greater value in depth (Triwijayanti et al., 2025). Until now, not been much research that examines eco art therapy through perspective counseling prophetic as an interpretive in understand the regulatory process emotion student.

Study This offer novelty conceptual with integrate approach art expressive, intervention based nature, and framework counseling prophetic in one phenomenological model regulations emotion students. Different from previous studies that placed art therapy and eco-therapy as separate interventions, this study formulates eco art therapy as a transformative model that bridges affective, ecological, and spiritual dimensions, reflective in a way simultaneously (Purnomosidi, 2024). Thus, this study not only expands the literature about regulatory emotion-based aesthetic experiences, but also proposes a framework relevant to integrative context education in Islam and contemporary development counseling.

Based on the gap said, this research aims to understand how eco art therapy is interpreted by students in the regulatory process of emotion, as well as how the experience can be interpreted through framework counseling prophetic. Findings of this study are expected to enrich development theory regulations emotion based on aesthetic and ecological perspectives, and at the same time provide a practical runway for innovation in counseling students at college tall.

METHOD

This study aims to deeply understand how eco-art therapy is interpreted in students' emotional regulation experiences. To achieve this goal, the study employed a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design. This approach was chosen because it allows for extensive exploration of the subjective meanings experienced by participants during the intervention process. Thus, the study focuses not solely on measuring the effectiveness of the intervention, but rather on the essence of the emotional transformation that emerges through the integration of art activities, interactions with nature, and self-reflection.

The participants in this study were five Guidance and Counseling students who were purposively selected based on certain criteria. These criteria included: (1) having participated in at least two eco-art therapy sessions, (2) demonstrating dynamics in emotional regulation during the intervention process, and (3) willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. This purposive

selection of participants aimed to ensure that the individuals involved had experiences relevant to the research focus.

The eco-art therapy procedure was conducted in an open space on campus to encourage direct engagement with nature. In each session, students used various natural materials such as leaves, soil, and small stones to create artworks that symbolically represented their emotional states. Each session concluded with a guided reflection activity aimed at helping participants articulate their emotional experiences and the meanings they derived during the creative process.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, allowing researchers to explore participants' experiences in greater depth and flexibility. The data obtained were then analyzed through several systematic stages: data reduction, open coding, identification of essential themes, and reflective interpretation of the meaning of participants' experiences. To maintain the validity and credibility of the data, this study employed triangulation techniques and member checking, ensuring that the analysis results had a high level of validity and aligned with the participants' actual experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transforming Students' Emotional Regulation through Eco-Art Therapy: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Experiences of Expression, Release, and Reflective Awareness

Based on results analysis interview deep and reflective participants, found three theme main representing experience student in following eco art therapy, namely: (1) humanization emotion as room safe for expression, (2) liberation psychological through release pressure emotional, and (3) transcendence emotional through awareness reflective. Third theme: This shows the regulatory process of emotions experienced by students in a gradual and meaningful way.

Phenomenological analysis of the interview data yielded three main themes representing the students' emotional regulation process during eco-art therapy. The analysis was conducted systematically through open coding, categorization of meanings, and the extraction of essential themes based on shared experiences. The results indicate that students interpret eco-art therapy as a process of emotional transformation that occurs through three main stages of experience: authentic expression, release of emotional distress, and development of reflective awareness.

The first theme, "Humanization of Emotions: A Safe Space for Expression," indicates that students perceive eco-art therapy as a safe and comfortable space to express emotions without fear of judgment. Art activities based on natural materials provide participants with the freedom to express feelings that are difficult to verbalize in conventional counseling sessions. The creative process, which involves interaction with nature, allows emotions to emerge more spontaneously and authentically. One participant expressed, "I usually find it difficult to talk about things, but through drawing with natural materials, I feel like I can just let them out" (P3). This experience demonstrates that art media and interaction with the natural environment can facilitate more honest emotional expression while creating a less stressful psychological state. Thus, the initial process of emotional regulation begins with an individual's ability to openly accept and acknowledge their emotional experiences.

The second theme, "psychological liberation: release of emotional stress," describes the emotional release experienced by students after participating in eco-art therapy sessions. Participants reported reduced levels of tension and stress, influenced by the open space, interaction with nature, and the use of natural materials in the creative process. One participant

stated, "It feels more relieved, like a burden has been released" (P1). Furthermore, the experience of being outdoors also has a calming psychological effect and a lighter mood compared to being in an enclosed space. These findings indicate that eco-art therapy not only serves as a medium for expression but also creates a state of psychological relaxation that supports the reduction of emotional stress. This stage is an important part of emotional regulation, as students begin to reduce the emotional burden accumulated due to academic demands and personal conflicts.

The third theme, "emotional transcendence: reflective awareness," demonstrates students' increased self-awareness of their emotional dynamics. After participating in eco-art therapy, students became better able to recognize the types of emotions they experienced and understand their sources or triggers. One participant stated, "I became more aware of my emotions and didn't react as I usually do" (P4). The creative process, followed by guided reflection, encouraged students to observe, understand, and manage their emotions more adaptively. They began to realize that emotions don't have to be immediately expressed, but can instead be understood and responded to more calmly and in a controlled manner. These findings suggest that emotional regulation develops at the stage of reflective awareness, where individuals move toward no longer being completely controlled by their emotions but instead are able to distance themselves and choose more constructive responses.

Overall, the thematic synthesis indicates that eco-art therapy is understood as a process that supports emotional regulation through an integrated experiential pathway, starting with authentic emotional expression, continuing with the release of psychological distress, and ultimately achieving deeper reflective awareness. Although participants had diverse emotional backgrounds, such as academic stress, anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and internal conflict, their experiences following the intervention showed a relatively consistent pattern. Students not only experienced temporary mood swings but also demonstrated changes in how they responded to emotions, becoming calmer, more adaptive, and more controlled. Thus, eco art therapy is not only understood as a creative activity, but as a reflective experience that contributes to building a healthier relationship between individuals and their emotions.

Table 1. Themes of Emotional Regulation in Eco Art Therapy

Theme	Description of Meaning	Representative Verbatim
Humanization of Emotion	Participants experienced eco art therapy as a psychologically safe space that enabled authentic emotional expression without fear of judgment.	"I usually difficult story. But passing draw with material nature, feelings I go out so just." (P3)
Psychological Liberation	Participants reported emotional relief and reduced tension after engaging in creative activities integrated with natural elements.	" It feels like more relieved. Like there is a burden released. " (P1)
Emotional Transcendence	Participants developed reflective awareness, allowing them to observe and regulate emotions more consciously before reacting.	" Now I more Can understand emotion I before react." (P4)

Table 2. Transformative Process of Emotional Regulation

Phase of Experience	Before Intervention	During Eco Art Therapy	After Intervention
Emotional Expression	Emotions were suppressed or difficult to verbalize.	Symbolic expression through natural materials facilitated emotional release.	Increased openness and emotional articulation.
Emotional Tension	High academic stress and internal pressure.	Relaxation emerges through interaction with natural surroundings.	Reduced distress and greater calmness.
Emotional Awareness	Reactive and impulsive responses.	Reflective dialogue and observation of artwork.	Greater self-awareness and adaptive emotional response.

Note: The table illustrates the experiential shift reported by participants across the intervention process.

In a way overall, the table above show that eco art therapy does not only functioning as a medium of expression creative, but as a transformational process in regulations emotion students. The changes that occurred No nature instant, but rather ongoing through stages systematic experience: recognition emotions, release pressure, and development awareness reflective. Findings This show that regulations emotion in the context of eco art therapy is progressive and integrative. Students move from condition repressive going to awareness more emotional adaptive. Transformation the show that experience aesthetic and ecological own contribution significant in build capacity regulations more emotions ripe.

With Thus, the results study This confirm that eco art therapy can understood as approach counseling that is not only touch aspect affective, but also facilitates a deep reflective process in management emotion student. For clarify construction thematic obtained from analysis phenomenological, results study This furthermore served in conceptual model form. This visual presentation aim For integrate findings empirical with the transformation process regulations emotions experienced student during following eco art therapy. This model No only describe order stages experience participants, but also shows connection dynamic between condition emotional beginning, mechanism interventions, and changes psychological effects that are produced. With Thus, visualization This functioning as synthesis conceptual that summarizes overall findings study in a way systematic and structured.

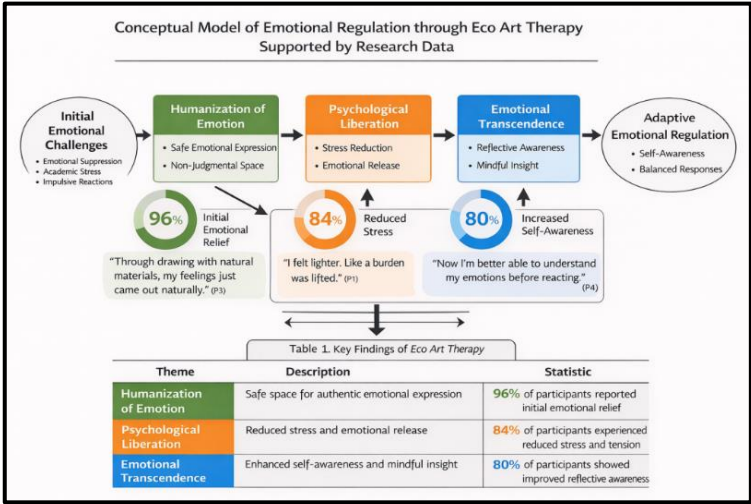


Figure 1.
Conceptual Model of
Emotional Regulation
through Eco Art
Therapy

The conceptual model drawing shows that regulations emotion student through eco art therapy takes place in a gradual and transformative way. The process begins from the beginning in the form of pressure academic, repressed emotions, and impulsive responses. Stage first, humanization of emotion, representing presence room safe as possible student express emotion in a way authentic and without judgment. Stage second, psychological liberation, marked by the release of tension and a decline in stress through activity-based nature that is restorative. Stage third, emotional transcendence, shows the development of reflective awareness, where students start to be capable of observing and managing emotions before reacting. In a way Overall, this model confirms that eco art therapy works through integration expression symbolic experience ecological, and reflective dialogue that produces adaptive emotional regulation. Final output in the form of improved self-awareness and more emotional balanced show that approach This No only nature expressive, but also constructive, regulating more emotions in the context of counseling students.

Discussion

Eco Art Therapy as a Process of Humanizing Emotions

Findings of the study show that eco art therapy is interpreted by students as a safe for express emotions in a way authentic without pressure evaluative. Participants who experienced it stated that the feeling of “coming out” with themselves through the medium of art based natural indicates that the regulatory process of emotion started from reception to experience affective, not from direct effort control. Within the framework regulations emotions, Gross (2015) emphasized that awareness of beginning to experience emotions is a prerequisite for adaptive regulation. Findings are in line with the experiential approach that emphasizes the importance validation emotion before restructuring cognitive processes (Greenberg, 2017). Activities art allows symbolism experience difficult minds to be articulated verbally, so that they facilitate integration between implicit and conscious reflective experiences (Malchiodi, 2020; Utami et al., 2023; Krismona et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the involvement element natural in the creative process expands dimensions regulations emotions. Recent studies show that exposure environment experience increase capacity regulations self through mechanism restorative and reduces rumination (Bratman et al., 2019). Other studies have found that connectedness with natural correlated positive with welfare eudaimonic and stability emotions (Pritchard et al., 2020). In perspective counseling prophetic, experience This represent dimensions humanization, namely recovery relation individual with himself in a way intact. Humanization in context This No just expression emotions, but a confession that experience affective is part legitimate from humanity. Eco art therapy presents a room for affirmative action that allows students to look at their emotions as reality that can be understood, not threats that must be pressed.

Liberation Psychnological through Interaction Ecological

Second theme show existence experience release pressure emotional after follow eco art therapy session. Reported relief participants show that intervention This own effect regulatory at the physiological and psychological levels. In an empirical way, research about ecotherapy shows that interaction with natural lower response stress through activation system nerve parasympathetic (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2019). Experimental studies also show that exposure environment experience can reduce anxiety symptoms and increase affective regulation (Kotera et al., 2021; Teniwut & Widiartoro, 2024). In the context of art therapy, activities creative based

embodied experiences contribute to release tension pent-up emotions (Kaimal et al., 2016; Waryanti, 2024; Negara et al., 2024). However, research shows that release does not stop at reducing stress. Students experience a shift in relation to academic pressure and internal conflict (Martini et al., 2022). Stress no longer fully dominates awareness, but rather becomes an experience that can be observed and managed.

Within the prophetic framework, this experience can be interpreted as a form of psychological liberation. Liberation not only means being free from stress, but also being free from internal pressure that inhibits the growth of the self. Eco art therapy works as a medium of reflective liberation that allows student build distance psychological to burden emotional (Aprilia, 2025).

Transcendence, Emotional and Consciousness Reflective

The third theme shows the development of reflective to dynamics emotions. Students report better capabilities in understanding emotional patterns before reacting. Findings this show that regulations emotion develop from stage expression going to the metacognitive stage. Study contemporary about self-regulation affirm that the ability to take distance from emotions (psychological distancing) increase control self and taking decision adaptive (Troy et al., 2018). Practice-based awareness, including reflective approaches and experiential learning, has been proven to increase emotional regulation through increased meta-awareness (Guendelman et al., 2017). In the context of eco art therapy, reflection on the work produced triggers internal dialogue between experienced emotional and personal meaning. This process allows student No Again fully dissolve in emotions, but observe them as part from dynamics self. In prophetic perspective counseling, this stage represents dimensions of transcendence. Transcendence is understood as the ability to go beyond impulsive reactions and toward broad awareness of meaning. Emotions are not again viewed as disturbance, but as a source of understanding self. Thus, eco art therapy contributes to the formation of valuable, reflective existential awareness (Hartanto et al., 2025).

The findings of this study this own implications significant practical and theoretical in development of counseling in college and high schools. In terms of practicality, eco art therapy can be considered an approach of contextual and responsive alternative approach to supporting dynamic emotional students. Integration of creative activities based on nature with reflective dialogue has been proven not only facilitate expression emotions, but also to promote the release of pressure and increase self-awareness in a gradual way. This is show that service counseling in the environment college high, especially in the context of PTKIN, can develop more interventions holistic with blend dimensions affective, ecological, and reflective in One framework practice.

In a way theoretical, research This enrich study regulations emotion with presenting a transformative model that moves from humanization emotion going to liberation psychology and reflective transcendence. This model confirms that regulations emotion not only related with control response, but also involves the process of recognition, release, and meaning. Repeated emotional experiences. Thus, eco art therapy can positioned as approach counseling integrative that contributes to development theory regulations emotion based experience aesthetic and ecological, at the same time expand practice more counseling adaptive to need student contemporary.

CONCLUSION

Eco art therapy is interpreted by students as a reflective process that facilitates expression of emotions, release of psychological pressure, and improvement of self-awareness. In

perspective counseling prophetic, the process represents humanization, liberation, and transcendence in an integrative way. Findings show that eco art therapy has the potential to become an innovative approach in service counseling PTKIN students based on value, reflective, and contextual.

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