



How Virtual Art Galleries Can Improve Self-Esteem and PTSD in Foster Youth

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates how virtual art galleries, which are online versions of physical galleries, can make art therapy more accessible. To explore this, we reviewed studies and reports from the past 15 years and examined examples of museum and online art programs. The findings show that virtual art galleries support foster youth in three main ways: they give youth visibility, let them have creative control, and provide positive feedback. These factors help build self-esteem, encourage resilience, and allow youth to process trauma in safe and supportive spaces. Overall, virtual art galleries expand the benefits of art therapy and could be a useful tool for improving mental health in foster youth.

INTRODUCTION

During Foster Care Month, over 1,700 children in foster care participated in a virtual art event hosted by iFoster, creating artwork that reflected their visions of community and self-expression. Their work was later showcased in a virtual art gallery, allowing the youth to share their creativity with a wider audience and experience a sense of participation, pride, and connection despite challenges like changing placements or limited access to in-person programs (1,700 Children in Foster Care Join iFoster Community Art Event, 2022). Children and adolescents in foster care also experience significant mental health challenges, with 15% suffering from PTSD, twice the rate of their peers, and nearly 74.5% reporting low self-esteem (McGuire et al., 2021; Mohamed et al., 2020). Research indicates that art therapy can effectively address these mental health needs, particularly by improving self-esteem and reducing PTSD symptoms. Art therapy is a mental health profession that utilizes the creative process of making art to improve and enhance the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of individuals of all ages (American Art Therapy Association, 2021). Traditionally, art therapy has been offered in schools, hospitals, and specialized centers, as well as incorporated into physical art galleries. However, sessions in these physical spaces often occur in person, limiting accessibility for foster youth due to factors such as distance, frequent changes in living arrangements, and inconsistent transportation. This raises an important question: how can art therapy resources become more accessible for foster youth? One promising solution is the use of virtual art galleries, digital versions of physical galleries accessible to visitors worldwide. Virtual galleries gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic because of their accessibility and ability to engage audiences online. In addition, they offer advantages that physical galleries cannot, including controlled environments, mental and personal space, and protection from physical damage to the artwork. Virtual art galleries can also integrate art therapy programs, providing creative tools and platforms that complement traditional supplies such as paints, brushes, pencils, or clay. Given the high rates of low self-esteem and PTSD, the accessibility and affordability of virtual art galleries are particularly valuable for supporting foster youth. Therefore, this research will explore how virtual art galleries can enhance the mental health of foster youth by improving self-esteem and alleviating PTSD symptoms through art, providing a roadmap for the paper that includes the background and literature review, findings and analysis, methods for reviewing sources and case studies, discussion and conclusions, and limitations with suggestions for future research.

BACKGROUND & LITERATURE REVIEW

Foster Youth & Mental Health

Children and adolescents in foster care face heightened vulnerability due to exposure to neglect, abuse, and unstable caregiving. These youth are placed in temporary living arrangements when parents or guardians are unable or unfit to care for them, as regulated by federal and state policies (Foster Care, n.d.). In the U.S., almost 700,000 children each year are confirmed victims of maltreatment, with millions more suspected victims or at risk (Font & Gershoff, 2020). In 2018, over 680,000 children spent time in foster care, with 62% entering due to neglect, 36% due to parental substance abuse, 14% due to parental inability to cope, and 13% because of physical abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Most foster youth require support for their physical and mental health, and many need temporary or permanent caregivers to ensure safety and well-being (Font & Gershoff, 2020). The instability of foster care, combined with these risk factors, further exposes youth to emotional and social difficulties.

Supporting Children in Foster Care.

In the U.S., over **680,000 children** spent time in foster care and almost **700,000 foster children** are confirmed victims of maltreatment with millions more at risk.



62% entered due to neglect



36% due to parental substance abuse



14% due to parental inability to cope



13% because of physical abuse



Every child deserves care and safety.

Figure 1 | Statistics on foster care and maltreatment faced by children. The visual provides statistics on how many children enter foster care and why, and also how many children face maltreatment. 62% of foster children entered foster care due to neglect. 36% entered foster care due to substance abuse by parents. 14% entered due to parents' inability to cope. 13% entered due to physical abuse from parents or guardians.¹⁸

Self-Esteem and PTSD

Mental health challenges for foster youth extend beyond clinical disorders such as anxiety and depression. Low self-esteem and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are particularly prevalent, with up to 80% of children in foster care experiencing significant mental health issues compared to 18–22% in the general population (Mental Health and Foster Care, 2019). Low self-esteem often develops when children internalize negative experiences, leaving them with diminished confidence and a poor sense of self-worth. PTSD reflects the lasting psychological impact of trauma, which can disrupt memory processing and trigger persistent emotional distress. These conditions underscore the need for interventions that support emotional regulation, resilience, and self-expression.

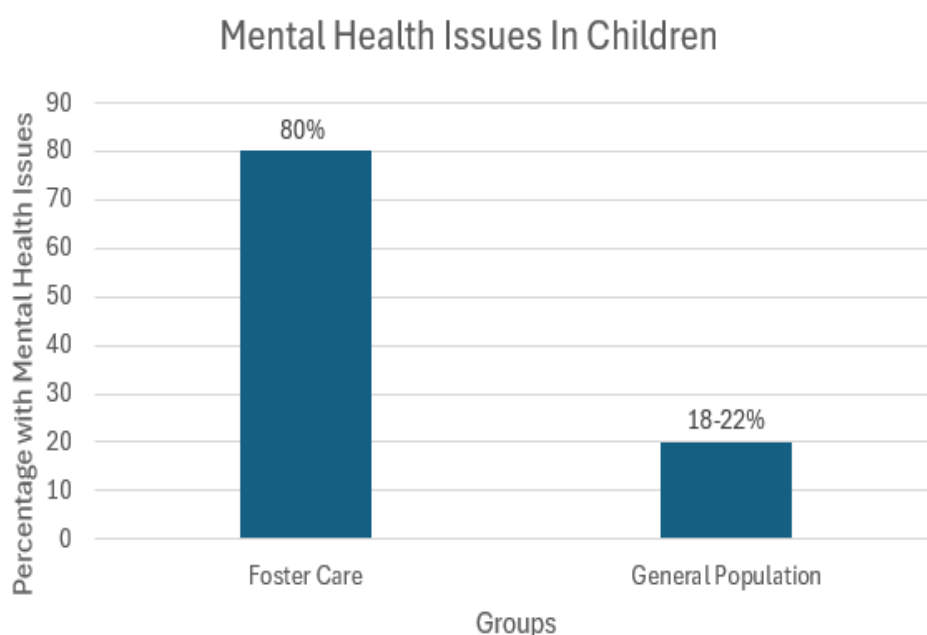


Figure 2 | Frequency of mental health issues in children. The bar graph shows the rates of mental health issues in foster children compared to children in the general population. It exhibits higher rates of mental health issues in foster care (80%) and lower rates of mental health issues in children in the general population (18-22%).¹¹

Barriers to Art Therapy Access

Art therapy is an evidence-based intervention that uses media such as painting, drawing, and sculpting to help individuals process emotions and experiences nonverbally (American Art Therapy Association, 2021). Trauma often impairs verbal communication, making it difficult for foster youth to express their feelings, which can exacerbate low self-esteem and PTSD. Traditional art therapy programs are frequently offered in schools, hospitals, and specialized centers, as well as physical art galleries. However, foster youth face numerous barriers to access, including distance, unstable living arrangements, inconsistent transportation, and limited safe spaces. These obstacles reduce opportunities for participation, limiting the potential benefits of art therapy.

Art therapy remains effective because it provides a nonverbal outlet for expression and fosters a sense of control and mastery. Through a collaborative, client-centered approach, youth gain agency and empowerment, which helps rebuild self-esteem and strengthens psychological resilience (Gantt & Tinnin, 2009; Gong & Santoso, 2025).

Virtual Art Galleries as Tools

Virtual art galleries build on the principles of traditional art therapy while addressing accessibility challenges. These digital platforms replicate physical galleries, allowing users to create, view, and share artwork while receiving feedback, engaging in social interaction, and accessing educational opportunities (Bosgraaf et al., 2020; Nwankwo, 2024). Accessibility for foster youth depends on reliable technology, flexible participation options, safe environments, and the option to remain anonymous (A Systematic Review of ICT Use by Youth in Foster Care, 2021). Virtual art galleries overcome barriers inherent in traditional programs, providing structured guidance, creative control, and positive feedback. They foster agency, empowerment, and resilience while enabling youth to process trauma nonverbally and build confidence (Gantt & Tinnin, 2009; Gong & Santoso, 2025). Despite these benefits, few studies specifically examine the impact of virtual art galleries on foster youth, highlighting a gap that targeted digital art therapy could address (Font & Gershoff, 2020; Patel, 2024).

METHODS

This study is a combination of a literature review and case study analysis to explore how virtual art galleries can support foster youth mental health, improve self-esteem, and reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The literature review involved searching academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, PsycINFO, and ERIC. Keywords used in the search included foster youth, foster care, mental health, trauma, PTSD, low self-esteem, art therapy, museum programs, virtual art gallery, digital art therapy, and creative expression. Sources were included if they were peer-reviewed studies, systematic reviews, or reputable reports published in the last 15 years and focused on children or adolescents. Sources were excluded if they were blogs, opinion pieces, or studies that did not address art-based interventions, mental health, or digital creative programs. To organize the research, the findings were grouped into themes: the mental health challenges faced by foster youth, the effects of art therapy on self-esteem and trauma, and the benefits of virtual or digital art galleries. Case examples, such as museum-based art therapy programs and online exhibits, were selected to illustrate how structured, supportive creative spaces positively impact youth outcomes. Findings across sources were compared to identify common mechanisms, such as creative control, safe spaces, visibility, and supportive feedback, which contribute to self-esteem and resilience. This study is exploratory and does not include experimental data. It synthesizes existing research and case examples to conclude about the best practices and potential benefits of virtual art galleries for foster youth. Future research could expand on these findings using interviews, surveys, or experimental studies to measure the direct impact of digital art programs on mental health outcomes.

FINDINGS

The Intersection: Virtual Art Galleries and Foster Youth

Virtual art galleries can significantly boost the confidence of foster youth by providing a safe platform to showcase their artwork, receive constructive feedback, and develop a sense of ownership over their creations. Foster youth often face instability, trauma, and limited opportunities for recognition, all of which can negatively impact self-esteem and self-efficacy. By offering a controlled environment for sharing art, virtual galleries help address these challenges and provide youth with visibility and validation. Research shows that art therapy fosters self-esteem and resilience in adolescents by providing a nonverbal avenue for emotional



expression and healing (Bosgraaf et al., 2020). Sharing artwork in a supportive environment allows foster youth, particularly those who have experienced neglect or verbal abuse, to feel seen and appreciated. Validation from others reinforces self-confidence and encourages further creative expression. Virtual art galleries capitalize on this by enabling youth to share their work with supportive audiences and fellow artists, strengthening both their sense of agency and self-worth.

Control and Receiving Feedback

A critical component of this process is creative control. Being able to decide what to create and how to represent personal experiences allows foster youth to reclaim a sense of personal power, which is often lacking in other areas of their lives. This autonomy in art-making not only fosters self-expression but also reinforces confidence and ownership over one's work. Studies highlight how the creative process can identify factors contributing to low self-esteem and show how artistic expression can strengthen self-worth (Schott, 2020). Receiving feedback further supports self-esteem. Positive reinforcement and constructive feedback validate effort, bolster self-belief, and encourage continued creative engagement (Vezmar et al., 2024). For foster youth, who often experience instability or limited agency, feedback affirms that their perspectives and emotions are valuable. Participation in supportive virtual communities reduces the risk of discouragement while promoting resilience, motivation, and personal agency. Together, sharing artwork, exercising creative control, and receiving feedback create an empowering environment that enhances self-worth, validation, and confidence.

Digital environments, such as virtual art galleries, provide additional benefits that are often unavailable in physical spaces. Foster youth who have experienced trauma or instability may find traditional settings overwhelming or unpredictable (Font & Gershoff, 2020). Virtual spaces offer controlled interactions, clear boundaries, and flexible engagement, allowing youth to participate without fear of judgment or external pressures (Sage & Jackson, 2021). Research indicates that online platforms enable youth to manage the visibility of their work and maintain anonymity if desired, promoting a sense of safety and comfort (Sheriff et al., 2023). Studies on digital art therapy further suggest that engaging in art in secure virtual spaces helps youth reframe traumatic experiences, transforming feelings of helplessness into mastery and agency (Gantt & Tinnin, 2009; Gong & Santoso, 2025). By combining safety, creative expression, and supportive feedback, virtual art galleries help foster youth process trauma, build confidence, and cultivate resilience, ultimately supporting emotional growth and psychological healing.

CASE STUDIES

Art Gallery for Foster Youth

The From Trauma to Hope: Stories of Foster Care exhibit, organized by CASA of Santa Barbara County, is displayed at the Santa Ynez Valley Historical Museum as an immersive, two-room gallery. It features eight former foster youth and includes a mix of memorabilia, art, poetry, letters, and photographs. The exhibit primarily serves three purposes: to highlight the experience of foster youth, to educate the public, and to involve visitors. For the foster youth featured, the exhibit provides a powerful platform to share their own stories in their own voices. Through art, writing, and photography, they gain narrative control and a chance to express experiences that are often overlooked or misunderstood. This process also serves as a form of healing, allowing them to reflect and find strength in self-expression. For the public and

community, the exhibit raises awareness about the unique challenges faced by foster youth. By presenting their experiences through creative storytelling, they humanize foster care and move beyond statistics to show the resilience, struggles, and hopes of real individuals. This fosters greater empathy and understanding within the community. The exhibit also features an interactive engagement element, with its “Take Action” wall, which encourages visitors to transition from awareness to involvement. Opportunities for volunteering, donations, and advocacy are highlighted, encouraging spectators to become active supporters. In this way, the exhibit bridges storytelling with concrete community action. The exhibit demonstrates the transformative power of creative expression by showing how foster youth can transition from trauma to hope within a structured environment. Through paintings, poetry, and personal narratives, art becomes a powerful medium for reframing painful experiences into sources of strength and meaning. It also models the importance of a safe and supportive space. The curated setting enables youth to maintain control over how their stories are shared, ensuring their voices remain centered. By guiding the audience’s experience, the exhibit protects participants from judgment or retraumatization. The exhibit highlights empowerment through storytelling. Sharing creative work fosters resilience and a sense of self-confidence for former foster youth while also building empathy among the public. In doing so, it creates a bridge of understanding and invites stronger community support.

Creative expression can be a powerful tool for transformation, and virtual art galleries offer a safe and supportive environment for this process. Much like physical exhibits, online spaces enable foster youth to share their stories through controlled storytelling, allowing them to choose the level of anonymity or visibility they prefer. This flexibility gives them a sense of agency while still connecting with audiences who want to listen and learn. In virtual spaces, creative works such as art, poetry, and personal narratives can be shared through multimedia formats that enhance accessibility and engagement. Interactive features such as comment sections or “Take Action” walls can replicate the sense of community involvement found in physical exhibits, providing viewers with opportunities to respond and support. These elements make the digital environment not just a display, but a participatory experience. Curated storytelling in virtual art galleries also reframes trauma into empowerment by giving youth a platform to control how their experiences are presented. Because virtual art galleries can be accessed worldwide, they open up opportunities for a wider audience to engage with these stories. This broader reach helps raise awareness, foster empathy, and encourage community support in meaningful ways. The From Trauma to Hope: Stories of Foster Care exhibit demonstrates how structured, creative, and safe spaces can transform trauma into resilience. Extending these principles into virtual art galleries has the potential to amplify accessibility and healing opportunities for foster youth.

Art Therapy for Adolescents

The systematic narrative review *Art Therapy for Psychosocial Problems in Children and Adolescents* (Bosgraaf et al., 2020) examines how structured and flexible art therapy opportunities can support emotional, social, and psychological well-being in youth with psychosocial difficulties. The review highlights that interventions using directive, non-directive, or various approaches, like painting, drawing, or sculpting, improve self-esteem, resilience, and an individual’s ability to socialize with others. “... flexibility in approach and responsiveness to the child’s preferences is key to achieving positive psychosocial outcomes” (Bosgraaf et al,

2020). In this case study, foster youth participated in an art-based program designed with these principles in mind: participants could choose their medium, decide whether to follow structured prompts, and control the pace of creation. Observations indicated that the youth who engaged with the art activities demonstrated increased confidence, a stronger sense of agency, and improved emotional regulation. The ability to make choices about media, guidance, and sharing helped foster youth express emotions safely and process past trauma. Key lessons from this case study include the importance of offering flexibility, providing opportunities for both private and public sharing, and authority over what happens with their art. These lessons are directly applicable to a virtual art gallery setting: platforms that offer multiple digital media options, optional guidance, and privacy control that can replicate the supportive and empowering nature of traditional art therapy. By applying these lessons, virtual art spaces can create safe environments where foster youth can process trauma, build resilience, and strengthen self-esteem, demonstrating the value of adaptive creative interventions in digital contexts.

Museum-Based Art Therapy

Museum-based art therapy programs provide a structured and supportive environment where participants can safely explore and express their emotions, offering a model for how creative spaces can promote healing and resilience. In her study *Cultivating Emotional Wellbeing: Museums & Art Therapy*, Jenna Green (2019) looked at three art therapy programs that took place inside museums. Each program allowed people to view art in the galleries and then create their own artwork during the session. These activities had several purposes: to give participants a safe way to express emotions, to help them connect with others, and to create a sense of acceptance. For those involved, the museum became more than just a place to see art; it became a space for reflection, creativity, and healing. Green observed that many participants used art-making to express feelings that were difficult to put into words, showing how creativity can provide an outlet when language falls short. This process gave participants a way to work through difficult emotions while also building confidence in their own abilities. The study also showed that museums can support mental health, not only through education or exhibitions, but also by creating programs designed to improve well-being. By combining the experience of looking at art with the act of making it, the sessions encouraged both personal growth and social connection, helping people feel less isolated. The museum setting provided structure and safety to the process, guiding participants to feel supported, respected, and valued. Green's research demonstrates that creative expression in a safe and supportive environment can help people reframe emotional struggles into opportunities for resilience. It also highlights the important role museums can play in promoting mental health and reminds us that galleries, whether physical or virtual, have the potential to serve as powerful spaces for healing and connection. This is particularly relevant for foster youth, who often face trauma and emotional challenges, as virtual art galleries can extend these therapeutic opportunities into controlled, accessible environments where they can safely express themselves and build self-esteem. By applying the lessons from museum-based art therapy programs to virtual art galleries, foster youth can access similar opportunities for creative expression, emotional processing, and resilience-building in safe, flexible, and widely accessible environments.

DISCUSSION

Virtual art galleries provide foster youth with safe and empowering environments that support self-expression, confidence, and emotional resilience. This is particularly important because

youth in foster care often experience trauma, instability, and limited opportunities for recognition, which increase their risk for low self-esteem and PTSD (Font & Gershoff, 2020). One mechanism through which these platforms promote well-being is creative expression, which allows youth to process trauma nonverbally, rebuild self-worth, and regain a sense of control over their lives (Gantt & Tinnin, 2009). Significantly, virtual art galleries extend these therapeutic benefits by offering controlled online spaces where youth can share their artwork. Public presentation or participation in moderated communities provides visibility that reinforces self-esteem and affirms the value of their experiences, which is especially meaningful for those who have faced neglect or abuse (Bosgraaf et al., 2020). In addition, creative control, such as selecting media, subject matter, and presentation, supports personal agency and helps youth reclaim a sense of power that may have been diminished by past trauma (Gong & Santoso, 2025). Constructive feedback from peers or facilitators further enhances this process by validating effort, motivating continued engagement, and helping youth reframe traumatic experiences in more empowering ways.

Moreover, integrating virtual art galleries into structured therapeutic or mentorship programs can amplify these positive effects. Moderated spaces, technology workshops, and flexible options for privacy and feedback create supportive conditions that foster emotional growth and resilience. Beyond facilitating artistic expression, these programs reduce isolation, strengthen social connections, and reinforce a sense of community (A Systematic Review of Internet Communication Technology Use by Youth in Foster Care, 2021). Despite these advantages, important gaps remain. Current research is limited by small sample sizes, minimal demographic-specific analysis, and few comparisons between physical and digital programs. These limitations highlight the need for continued investigation into how virtual galleries can be refined and sustained as effective mental health interventions, ensuring that foster youth can fully benefit from the psychological and social advantages these platforms offer.

CONCLUSION

Taken together, the evidence suggests that virtual art galleries offer foster youth accessible and empowering opportunities to heal and grow through creative expression, thereby supporting their self-esteem and resilience in the face of trauma. The synthesis of insights from the literature review, methods, and case studies shows how digital platforms can replicate and expand the benefits of traditional art therapy. By bringing these findings together, the research highlights both what is already known and where gaps remain, underscoring the need for continued exploration of virtual art galleries as mental health interventions. First, sharing artwork allows youth to gain visibility and validation, reinforcing self-worth and countering the neglect or marginalization often experienced in foster care. Second, creative control over media, subject matter, and presentation fosters personal agency and identity, giving youth a sense of mastery and autonomy that can mitigate the helplessness associated with traumatic experiences. Third, supportive feedback from peers, mentors, or facilitators strengthens confidence, motivates continued engagement, and helps youth reframe traumatic events in empowering ways, contributing to emotional resilience and improved coping. Collectively, these mechanisms are particularly meaningful for foster youth, who often lack consistent recognition and safe spaces for expression. Moreover, the effectiveness of virtual galleries depends on key digital features. Platforms that incorporate moderated spaces, options for anonymity, flexible participation, interactive tools, and accessible design can maximize engagement, safety, and psychological



benefits. Significantly, these features ensure that youth feel secure, supported, and able to fully express themselves while receiving constructive feedback.

Future Research

In conclusion, visibility, creative control, and constructive feedback create environments that promote psychological empowerment and self-worth. Expanding virtual art galleries represents a promising, inclusive, and accessible intervention for addressing the mental health needs of foster youth. Future research should examine long-term effects, compare virtual and in-person programs, and identify which digital features most effectively support emotional growth and resilience, ensuring that these platforms continue to meet the unique needs of this vulnerable population.

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