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What about the art? Interpreting creative outputs in arts-based youth mental health research: the RESPOND framework

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ABSTRACT

Background: Arts based research practices (ABRPs) are increasingly used to support children and young people (CYP) experiencing complex mental health challenges. Yet the artistic outputs generated within such research are rarely analysed, potentially limiting understanding of how creative artefacts can contribute to meaning making and programme evaluation. This study, part of the UKRI-funded CREATE project, addresses this methodological gap by examining how CYP, researchers and arts practitioners approach the interpretation of youth produced art within mental health research.

Methods: An initial scoping review identified existing approaches to analysing creative products in ABRP mental health studies. Guided by key questions emerging from the review, two interdisciplinary “living labs” (one using visual art and one using drama) were conducted with adolescent co-researchers, academic researchers, and arts facilitators. Data included group discussions, fieldnotes, creative artefacts and video recordings. A hybrid of framework and thematic analysis generated five analytical domains alongside overarching relational and ethical considerations.

Results: Participants preferred a sequenced, dialogic process beginning with art immanent observation and moving toward contextual calibration. Group interpretation broadened perspectives, while protected solo stages safeguarded individual voice. Interpretation shifted dynamically across affective and cognitive modes. These findings coalesced into the RESPOND framework, capturing how meaning can emerge through embodied response, pattern recognition, temporal reframing and dialogue.

Conclusions: RESPOND provides a flexible, practice-sensitive method for integrating creative outputs into mental health research. It strengthens interpretive rigour while preserving the relational, ethical and participatory values central to ABRP with young people.

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Background

Arts-based approaches are increasingly used in youth mental health research, generating a wide range of creative outputs including visual artworks, performances, films, music and creative writing (Arts, 2017; Lim et al., 2020). Evidence syntheses and large-scale surveys suggest that arts engagement can enhance wellbeing, reduce symptom burden, and improve social connection. These benefits are attributed to the distinctive affordances of creative engagement: multimodal vocabularies (visual, sonic, embodied and textual), opportunities for agency and play, community interaction, and the capacity to communicate complex emotions that may resist purely verbal articulation (Fancourt et al., 2019; Tymoszuk et al., 2020). In youth contexts, these affordances can be especially valuable, supporting forms of meaning-making that align with developmental and communicative needs.

Yet despite the centrality of creative activity to many projects, the artistic outputs they generate are rarely examined in a systematic way. As Cooke et al. (2020) observe, while art-making in adolescent mental health research contexts often motivates participation and engagement, analytical attention is typically directed towards interviews, discussions, process measures and psychosocial outcomes rather than the artworks themselves. This raises an important methodological question: what happens to the art? If creative outputs are capable of communicating experiences, relationships and forms of knowledge that may not be accessible through conventional research methods, how should they be interpreted within youth mental health research, whose perspectives should be prioritised in that interpretation, and what forms of knowledge might they produce?

These questions are particularly important within Arts-Based Research Practices (ABRP), where creative processes are used not simply as interventions or engagement strategies but as means of generating, exploring and communicating knowledge. The terminology surrounding such work is diverse and reflects a range of disciplinary traditions and methodological orientations (Williams et al., 2023). Terms such as arts-based research, arts-based interventions, participatory arts-based practices, applied arts (e.g. theatre, music and dance), and creative practice research are frequently used across health, community and research contexts. While these categories are not synonymous, they share an interest in the capacity of creative processes to generate insight, foster participation and produce knowledge. Within the arts and humanities, many of these developments are linked to the emergence of practice research, formerly referred to as Practice as Research (PaR), in which creative practice itself constitutes a mode of scholarly inquiry. In this paper, we use the term Arts-Based Research Practices (ABRP) to emphasise the research function of creative activity and our concern with how artistic outputs can contribute to knowledge production.

The present study emerged from CREATE, a methodology project funded within the second phase of UKRI's Adolescence, Mental Health and the Developing Mind programme (2022-2026). CREATE was established to investigate methodological challenges associated with the use of Arts-Based Research Practices in youth mental health research through interdisciplinary collaboration and participatory community research. Working alongside young people, the project focused on adolescent loneliness. However, the concern of the present paper is

methodological rather than substantive. Specifically, we address the challenge of how artistic outputs generated through Arts-Based Research Practices might be interpreted as research data.

This challenge was also evident across the wider Adolescence, Mental Health and the Developing Mind programme. The work reported here draws primarily on CREATE but also engages with ATTUNE (2021–2025), a sister project that used Arts-Based Research Practices to explore the mental health experiences of young people affected by Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). In both projects, creative practices played a central role in generating and communicating knowledge about young people's lived experiences. Yet questions remained about how the resulting artworks, performances and other creative artefacts might be approached analytically.

Our recent scoping review (currently under review) found that, of 7,281 screened studies, only 161 engaged directly to any extent with young people's artistic outputs. Art interpretation is further complicated by the convergence of disciplinary perspectives that often characterises such work, bringing differing assumptions about what constitutes valid data and appropriate forms of analysis (Williams et al., 2023; Zarobe & Bungay, 2017). Standardised mental health measures and positivist evidence hierarchies, particularly the dominance of randomised controlled trials, often shape what counts as evidence in this field (Clift et al., 2021; Daykin et al., 2017). Arts practitioners have long questioned this primacy, arguing that such approaches may conflict with arts epistemologies and obscure experiential, relational and emergent forms of knowledge (Heinemeyer, 2020). Without shared vocabularies or practice-sensitive frameworks (Daykin et al., 2017; Kwan & Rickwood, 2015), learning from creative outputs remains underdeveloped.

Building on findings from our scoping review of artwork interpretation methods, we explored these questions through a series of interdisciplinary living labs. Living labs are real-world, participatory environments where people with lived experience collaborate with researchers and stakeholders to co-create knowledge through iterative, interdisciplinary practice (Compagnucci et al., 2021). Through these living labs, young people, researchers and arts practitioners collaboratively explored challenges and opportunities associated with interpreting artistic outputs within youth mental health research. Drawing on these findings, we introduce the RESPOND framework: a flexible tool designed to support interdisciplinary approaches to interpreting creative outputs within youth mental health research.

Research approach and methodology

The methodology is presented in four stages: participant recruitment, the structure and activities of the living labs, data-collection processes, and our analytic approach.

This study built on findings from our scoping review, which examined how the small number of ABRP mental health studies that analyse creative products approach this work and why. Despite variation across studies, the review identified three common question that helped to structure our approach:

- (1) How are the art products being interpreted?
- (2) Who is doing the interpretation?
- (3) Why is the art product being interpreted?

Further, the scoping review revealed substantial methodological variation, including whether interpretation occurred individually or collaboratively, whether analysis focused on formal properties or contextual information, and whether affective responses or structured analytic frameworks were used. These contrasts informed the design of the living labs. Rather than adopting a single method, activities undertaken enabled participants to move between modes – for example, interpreting artworks individually before discussing them collectively, or examining artworks without context before later adding in this dimension. This allowed observation of how different interpretive configurations shaped meaning-making.

These questions and approaches structured two living labs. The first, in Leeds, drew on paintings created by the CREATE Young People's Advisory Board (YPAG) during explorations of adolescent loneliness, alongside artworks from the ATTUNE project. ATTUNE, similarly funded by UKRI's *Adolescence, Mental Health and the Developing Mind* Initiative and involving many of the young people involved in CREATE, utilised ABRP to explore how the mental health of young people exposed to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) had been affected and how ABRPs can support new mental health understanding and development of public health resources to mitigate their impact. The second, in London, focused solely on CREATE and centred on drama.

Participants and co-research practices

Participants included CREATE YPAG members (as co-researchers), academic researchers, and arts facilitators. In Leeds: 16 YPAG members (15–20y, 12F, 4 M); 8 academic researchers (6F, 2 M) from Psychology, Music, Arts-based practice, Drama, Film, and Public Health; and 2 arts facilitators (2F). In London: 9 young people (19–24y, 8F, 1 M) and 3 researchers from Psychology and Drama (2F, 1 M).

CREATE followed a participatory community research approach in which young people were involved across the full research cycle rather than solely as consultees. Building on our practice in ATTUNE and other participatory community research projects (Shaughnessy et al., 2024), participatory community research may range from advisory involvement to full co-production, including participation in design, data generation, analysis and dissemination, with lived experience recognised as a knowledge base in its own right. CREATE adopted the more fully participatory end of this spectrum: young people contributed to shaping the project, taking part in the living labs, interpreting the materials, and informing the development of the RESPOND framework. Some young people brought prior experience from related projects, including ATTUNE, while others were new to this mode of working (Shaughnessy et al., 2024).

Central to the CREATE ethos was that all activities were framed as an invitation rather than requirement to take part. This allowed the young people, who were at different stages in their life, with different levels of other commitments (school, part-time jobs, other interests), with different levels of prior experience and/or self-confidence, to set their own terms of engagement and ensure that the project met each young person where they were at, rather than imposing a uniform approach to their engagement. Under the auspices of the project young engagement officer, the project was careful to ensure the centrality of our YPAG's perspective in every key decision made during project delivery. The youth engagement officer was a crucial role within the project team, ensuring that each member of the YPAG had access

to all the activities they wanted to take part in, and that adequate time was set aside at each living lab for meaningful training and reflection on the methods they were looking to use.

Related to our approach to youth engagement and training was our approach to ethics and safeguarding. The invitation to engage was continually renewed, ensuring that the project was structured around a genuine form of informed consent that was never taken for granted by adult participants. Great care, and time was taken to engage all young people involved in discussion of their rights within the project and the process of disclosure should they wish to raise any concerns they had at any point in their participation. Along side a very experience member of the team with over 30 years of experience working in youth safeguarding, the project youth engagement officer also worked as a second point of contact, to ensure that participants had more than one pathway to disclosure. This was supported by a set of materials still available on the project website (Participant Safeguarding Information Sheet) (For further discussion of the approach to working with young people from which we built CREATE see Pavarini et al., [2021](#)).

Living labs

The Leeds living lab, a two-day residential (3–4 February 2024 at Eiger Studios), involved a series of art-interpretation exercises using artworks produced within CREATE and ATTUNE. Participants considered individual versus collaborative interpretation, the role of contextual information, the use of particular analytic “lenses,” and ethical implications when working in adolescent mental health contexts. The London living lab (8 June 2024, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama) took place over one intensive day. Participants devised two short dramas on adolescent mental health and loneliness, which were then analysed either with knowledge of their impetus or as if encountering them as independent audience members.

Youth participants were supported to fully engage at every stage by the project’s youth engagement officer, as outlined above. Small-group discussions were facilitated and documented by young co-researchers themselves, with all members of the team capturing their own further reflections on living lab activities at regular planned moments in the timetable.

Data collection

Both living labs centred on group discussions addressing the interpretive questions and approaches emerging from the scoping review. All discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Artworks from Leeds and video recordings of the London dramas were retained to support interpretation. Leeds data also included five sets of fieldnotes from researchers and arts practitioners. London participants additionally contributed reflections via Mentimeter.

Data preparation and analysis

Data were analysed using a hybrid framework and thematic analysis approach (Gale et al., [2013](#)). Two researchers first scoped the dataset to identify an organising framework, refined through team discussion into five overarching analytical domains: (1) immanent vs contextual interpretation; (2) individual vs group analysis; (3) affective vs solution-

focused analysis; (4) use of interpretive lenses; and (5) whose perspective is foregrounded? Analysts applied these domains during line-by-line coding across the corpus. Iterative team comparison generated more narrowly-focussed themes within each domain, alongside additional cross-domain themes that addressed the questions of relationality and ethical practices.

Results

Domain one: immanent versus contextual interpretation

This domain focussed on the different ways that participants initially responded to artworks. The *art immanent* theme captures the way participants first analyse a piece of art according to its own internal logic without any reference to external criteria. This “art immanent” approach to interpretation, as conceptualised in literary studies, is common across arts and humanities disciplines, and generally involves the nuanced “close reading” of a piece of art that attends in particular to its formal linguistic or visual composition (Finlayson, 2014; Larsen, 2013). This contrasts with our second theme (“contextual” approaches), which captures approaches that focus more on contextual materials (title, context of the art’s creation- including details of the project it was part of- artist age, production notes etc.). Participants instinctively tended to begin by examining the formal composition of an art work, considering issues such as the use of space:

Looking at density and spacing; absence of people; is there no-one to connect to? (Youth participant reported in field notes)

However, participants quickly began to make connections between the various pictures they were discussing, highlighting formal cues that, while still textually immanent, supported more relational approaches to interpretation across the body of work produced:

A lot of the art shows windows, and people separated by a pane of glass. (Youth participant reported in field notes)

This led to participants starting to request more context, largely as a way of sense-checking their original interpretation:

Young people wanted to know if [the work was] commissioned; know [the artist’s] age; consider time taken. (Field notes)

Because it is such sensitive material, having the option to know why and how you made it is critical. (Group discussion transcript)

Indeed, participants often revised their view through context checking. This was particularly noticeable with regard to some of the formal aspects of the art, such as the use of colour and its symbolic meaning:

A drawing with a large pool of red looked like bleeding out, but meant love. (Youth participant’s observation reported in field notes)

Over the course of both labs a sequence began to emerge, with participants beginning with the art itself, and then seeking contextual information. However, the more contextual reading did not necessarily supersede their immanent approach:

We didn't like not knowing ... but we liked that we didn't know because we were able to make our own conclusions ... but now we want to know. (Group discussion transcript)

I always want to know the answer ... but I don't want to know it before. I just wanted to compare my ideas with the director's after. (Group discussion transcript)

As we shall see, this dialogical approach, which moves between different perspectives, can be found across the analytical domains and speaks to both of the overarching themes that demand a relational and ethically cautious approach to the analysis of art in the context of mental health research (discussed further below).

Domain two: individual versus group analysis

Participants strongly valued group discussion, suggesting that this both deepened and broadened the interpretive process, helping them to see more in an individual piece of art and also to draw broader thematic inferences:

Some of us viewed the performance on a micro scale, looking at characters and what they represented vs. macro scale, the overarching themes and environment. (Workshop participant response)

It was also seen as an enjoyable process and less like work they would normally undertake in school or university:

[It was] surprisingly collaborative and easy-going ... one of the few times we're not working on a graded project, so there was ease and fun. (Workshop participant response)

Group discussion could also cause anxiety, either making people feel like they were getting the analysis wrong or that they had to conform with the group interpretation:

Everyone said 'brilliant' ... I think it's pretty good – does that mean I'm stupid? Did I just not get it? (Group discussion transcript)

Consequently, despite the strong overall preference for group interpretation, participants repeatedly requested approaches that also protected individual opinions in order to ensure that any collective view of the art was genuinely inclusive of all people's voices:

I prefer the chance to write my own ideas before the group ... easier to start the conversation when everyone has something. (Group discussion transcript)

I just felt that my kind of statement actually became more in the discussion because yes, then I got to hear different, ... I just kind of, yes, got pieces and got thoughts from them and got to build it up (Group discussion transcript)

Mirroring the previous domain, the most common procedural preference observed was for a process that moved from solo interpretation to group work and back to solo interpretation, allowing them to re-reflect upon the art in the light of other people's opinions.

Domain three: affective versus solution-focussed analysis

Here the group explored whether the art called for affective engagement or a more cognitive form of inquiry, whether the “point” of the art was to *feel* something or to *solve* a puzzle. Most participants considered an integrated approach the best way to approach art, focussing both on the way the art makes one feel and what it is trying to communicate cognitively. Affective engagement provoked responses which emphasised a range of emotions, including intimacy and comfort, as well as vulnerability and unease:

We all spoke really quietly ... as if it was secretive or an intimate/personal discussion.
(Workshop participant response)

Discomfort [felt] when you don't understand or relate immediately. (Field notes)

Comfort demonstrated [in the picture] through relatability, predictability, calming colours.
(Field notes)

This was also an aspect that the young people felt that they were perhaps better at than previous generations, even if they were not always given credit for this:

So we're the 'snowflake' generation because we are sensitive about mental health ... but we said we're one of the first generations able to talk about it. (Workshop participant response)

Participants often started by feeling and noticing before invoking broader frames. The value of not *knowing* is repeatedly affirmed as a way of opening up interpretive space, which again resonates with quotations discussed in Domain One:

We didn't like not knowing ... but we liked that we didn't know because we were able to make our own conclusions ... but now we want to know. (Group discussion transcript)

I always want to know the answer ... but I don't want to know it before. I just wanted to compare my ideas with the director's after. (Group discussion transcript)

The quotations also suggest that the role of affect was frequently seen as not enough. Once again, the personal, immediate response was considered to be more valuable if it was integrated with broader consideration of what the arts was “about”, a dimension that came from considering the context of its production and also what other people in the group thought:

I focused on what emotions the characters made me feel. [After the group discussion]
I considered more than just my feelings ... the context. (Group discussion transcript)

By bringing temporal elements, you're bringing individual and group experiences, you're bringing the feeling aspect of others and yours, and as if all of them are in layers of different depths, but coming together to give a whole picture. (Group discussion transcript)

A degree of anxiety also appeared to drive this move, with participants keen not to get their response “wrong”, even if it is not always clear what they didn't know, or what the “right” response would look like:

If we knew ... [what this might be, we are not told] would we think about it more correctly?
(Youth participant reported in field notes)

Ultimately, many participants saw affective and cognitive approaches as interlinked and best approached as a layered process in which emotional responses are respected and

heard but are considered in dialogue with other approaches rooted in external contexts or perspectives, including that of the original creator of the art. Moreover, participants articulated what might be called interpretive humility, resisting definitive access to authorial intent:

You cannot concretely say what the artist meant. (Youth participant reported in field notes)

We can never understand each other fully – but we can attempt. (Interview transcript)

Domain four: using different interpretive lenses

The group explored the impact of using specific interpretive lenses to analyse the art. These could be generated externally (e.g. adopting theoretical approaches such as a feminist, post-colonial or psychologically informed approach), by participants themselves or through a combination of both. The participant lens category appears most frequently. Here groups of participants typically generated and applied their own interpretive lenses. In the Leeds living lab, participants created thematic lenses they could “test out” to interpret the art. These lenses emerged from their initial, affective, responses (“seeking comfort”, “isolation”, “relationships”, “cloudedness”). Participants valued the sense of ownership their own lenses gave them:

Each person played into their interests and strengths [which] led their own ideas. (Workshop participant response)

At the same time, the results also show a recurrent risk of lens “stickiness” once categories were named:

Once we had a [lens], we felt obliged to keep wearing it . . . needed instruction to take it off. (Field notes)

In response, the group suggested a process of rotation of lenses, interspersed with “lens-off” moments, enabling phenomenological openness (seeing without a theoretical tint) before, between, or after lens-based work. Hybrid lenses (where participants could nuance theoretical approaches suggested by the academic researchers (e.g. articulating a feminist approach with their individual experience of being neurodivergent) were also judged potentially effective, if they were seen as non-constraining and removable, helping scaffold exploration without overriding the lived experience of either the viewer or the artist (Field notes).

Domain five: whose perspective are we trying to identify?

Here we return to a fundamental question about the role of art in AB mental-health research and to the cross-cutting dimensions in our results, namely relationality and ethics. How does the viewer’s interpretation relate to other perspectives, not least that of its creator, and what is at stake ethically in prioritising one perspective over another? In both CREATE and ATTUNE, the art was created for young people to explore and surface their experiences of loneliness and ACEs respectively. Thus, it was felt that the fundamental approach was to uncover what its creator meant to say. This is strongly reflected in the data that discussed taking an art-immanent approach, focussing on a work’s formal

elements. For example, in one artwork already discussed (painting of a red case) the group thought that “a large pool of red looked like bleeding out.” However, in conversation with the artist it became clear it “meant love” (Field notes):

Treat colour symbolism as tentative; seek explanation before coding. (Field notes)

On the one hand it was felt that there was an ethical responsibility to understand where the art came from and what the artist was hoping to communicate:

Like if you go to a gallery and you see like an abstract thing [and say] that’s the sky, it doesn’t matter if you aren’t quite right, but if you’re linking it to mental health, especially when you have stuff like safeguarding part of that, I think misinterpretation can cause like maybe an issue. (Group discussion transcript)

Because it is such sensitive material, having the option to know why and how you made it is critical. (Group discussion transcript)

Avoid partial/cropped views; seek clarification when stakes are high. (Field notes)

On the other, there was a need to acknowledge limitations:

You cannot concretely say what the artist meant. (Field notes)

We can never understand each other fully – but we can attempt to. (Interview transcript)

At the same time, participants also felt there might be more to the art than what was originally intended, or more to uncover about the artist’s intention than they explicitly articulated. Thus, exploration of the art not only allowed further reflection on the artist’s intention but also the viewer’s experience and attitude. As some young people observed through using different lenses:

‘We’re learning about ourselves’; lens choice [generates] alternative ideas that might be missed otherwise. (Field notes)

I’m thinking about the way we might use the art. If somebody’s dark and they can, when they get that reflection back where they reveal something they hadn’t thought about themselves or the way they look at stuff. (Group discussion transcript)

Consequently, the art can become a stimulus for further reflection and greater insight:

Without the art we wouldn’t have come up with as much as we did. (Field notes)

And the more time spent with the art the more one can see. This seems valuable in understanding how the viewer values the art, rather than solely what the artist meant:

Their own relationship to the piece changed over the 15 minutes. (Field notes)

We did spend a lot of time on one of these. And then as time went on, we kind of saw different things in it. (Group discussion transcript)

In sum, the results show that the young people saw interpretation of art works as a sequenced, collaborative practice grounded in art-first noticing, tempered by context-embedded calibration, and consolidated through dialogic synthesis. Participants preferred group dialogue for breadth and perspective-shifting, but repeatedly requested protected solo stages to maintain individual agency and diversity of

readings. Most interpretive acts moved between approaches focused more on “feeling” or “solving”, with a strong sense of the limitations of finding the “truth” behind a piece of art. Participant-led lenses were seen as particularly valuable, provided that rotation and removal were encouraged to avoid rigidity and to maintain an ethical responsibility regarding the sensitivity of the material and to understand whose perspective one is looking to explore: that of the producer of the art or the person interpreting it.

Finally, there did not have to be an end point in this process, other than that determined pragmatically by available time. The affordances of the artwork began to grow and evolve as people felt more connected to it, more comfortable, and enjoying the pursuit of understanding in collaboration with others. Our Results suggest it is in the slow, immersive, collective pursuit of understanding (with cognitive and affective dimensions) that the value of artwork interpretation lies for mental health research. It is in the pursuit that participants encounter their own assumptions, blind spots, misunderstandings and, at times, the importance of not being able to understand everything.

Discussion: the RESPOND framework

These results collectively describe a working ecology of practice: accountable openness to plural meanings, structured protection of solo voice within collective sense making, and careful attention to the material, social, and temporal conditions under which youth art works are seen, felt, and understood. What became visible in the living labs was not simply how participants preferred to interpret art, but how thinking itself unfolded in relation to art works, other people, and the research environment.

This observation also closely echoes, it can be noted, findings from the ATTUNE study of adolescent mental health and ACES (our sister project) where creative practices were identified as protective because they enabled young people to experience validation, belonging, safety, self-expression, and being heard within relational and sensory environments. Analysis of ATTUNE data demonstrated that mental health outcomes are shaped through an ecology of interpersonal, environmental, and intrapersonal mechanisms rather than by adversity alone. The living labs suggest that these same mechanisms are activated not only in the making of art, but in the *encounter* with it. RESPOND provides a way of understanding how this encounter supports the processes of expression, recognition, regulation, agency, and dialogue that both CREATE and ATTUNE showed to be central to young people’s mental health. Moreover, it can also support researchers engaging with creative practices to inform their analysis of youth art works. It can be used individually and in dialogue with participants as part of a data triangulation whereby the researcher’s interpretation of the art is sense checked with the producer.

In both projects, arts-based practices were central to data generation. However, as discussed, in particular, in Domain Five, above, when an art work moves into a shared space, its meaning is shaped not only by the artist’s intention, but by what happens in the encounter between art work and viewer. This encounter is influenced by personal experience, context, environment, and embodied, affective response. Despite its importance for understanding how art generates insight and impact, this dimension of the encounter has received little methodological attention in arts-based mental health research. The CREATE living labs addressed this knowledge gap. Stimulated by the

findings of the living labs, we co-created with young people, a resource to support the interpretation of art works in mental health research: RESPOND.

The RESPOND framework offers a structured way of approaching the encounter with creative artefacts in mental health research. It provides a sequence of prompts through which meaning is constructed in relation to an art work, producing what might be described as aesthetic knowledge:

- **React:** capturing immediate impressions
- **Engage:** looking again and reflecting more deeply
- **Sensing:** attending to embodied and sensory responses
- **Pattern :** noticing structure, rhythm, tone, mood, colour
- **Observe:** stepping back to describe the work more objectively
- **Novelty:** recognising shifts in understanding over time
- **Dialogue:** entering into conversation with the work

RESPOND does not impose an interpretive model; it names and scaffolds a process of encounter that young people and researchers demonstrated was organic and helpful for meaningful engagement with creative outputs in sensitive mental health studies.

Each stage of RESPOND maps directly onto the analytical domains identified in the data. React and Engage reflect participants' preferences to begin with the artwork itself, without contextual framing. Young people valued "not knowing" so they could form their own impressions before background information shaped their responses. Immediate affective reactions were followed by deeper re-looking, after which context was welcomed as a way of sense-checking rather than replacing first impressions.

Sensing and Pattern capture the embodied and formal ways participants approached the art works. Young people described physical and emotional sensations, noticed recurring motifs across images, and commented on density, spacing, rhythm, and colour. These perceptual modes of noticing are associated with arts and humanities analytic practices. RESPOND legitimises these sensory and formal entry points as valid ways of knowing.

Observe is an invitation to step back, look again through a particular lens and establish an independent commentary on the art work, an act of authorship that establishes the art as other to the spectator. Our CREATE co-researchers valued space to articulate their own responses before entering into collective dialogue, preserving individual voice within collaborative meaning-making.

Novelty reflects both the transformative potential and temporal dimensions of interpretation that emerged strongly across the living labs. Participants repeatedly reported seeing new things and shifting perspectives over time, particularly after discussion or contextual reframing, and recognised that interpretation evolves and that art-based practices are a means of shifting perspectives, enabling us to perceive differently.

Finally, Dialogue captures the most significant shift observed: art works became catalysts for conversation about loneliness, mental health, relationships, and self-understanding. Participants began to "talk with" the art rather than about it, and sense making was co-constructed through discussion.

Taken together, this sequence describes more than a preferred way of interpreting art. It describes a pattern of thinking distributed across people, artefacts, space, time, and

dialogue. Participants were thinking *with* the art work, *with* each other, and *within* the environment of the Living lab. This closely resembles what might be described as a cognitive ecology, in which cognition emerges through interaction between bodies, materials, and environmental contexts (Hutchins, 2010). It also mirrors typical contexts of many AB mental health research studies.

When considered alongside the scoping review that informed this work, these findings reveal a striking methodological contrast. The review showed that few studies analysing creative outputs in youth mental health research attended closely to artworks' formal properties, with most foregrounding narrative content or thematic explanation. This should not be taken to suggest that formal analysis is absent from creative and visual inquiry more broadly. Visual methodologies have long attended to compositional features, material qualities and interpretive contexts (Rose, 2023). Rather, our review suggests that such approaches have been less visible within youth mental health research, where creative outputs are often treated primarily as prompts for discussion or illustration of participant narratives. In the living labs, however, participants, particularly the young co-researchers, began by engaging with artworks on their own terms. Initial interpretation centred on visual features such as colour, spatial arrangement, density and recurring motifs before any contextual information about the artwork's creation was introduced.

More significantly, the living labs highlighted the inherently relational nature of interpretation. Participants repeatedly moved between attention to the artwork itself, consideration of the artist's intentions, and reflection on their own responses as viewers. This echoes wider debates within visual and arts-based inquiry concerning the relationship between creator, artwork and audience (Mannay, 2010; Rose, 2023). While participants often felt an ethical responsibility to understand what an artist intended to communicate, they also recognised that meaning could not be reduced to authorial intention alone. As Mannay (2010) notes, visual artefacts do not provide transparent access to meaning, and interpretations generated by viewers may diverge from those of creators. Rather than treating such divergence as a methodological problem to be eliminated, participants frequently experienced it as a source of dialogue, reflection and new insight.

RESPOND can be understood as scaffolding this movement between interpretive positions. Rather than privileging formal observation, contextual explanation, artist intention or audience response, the framework supports movement between these perspectives as part of a layered process of meaning-making. In doing so, it adapts concerns long present within visual and humanities-based traditions of interpretation (Rose, 2023) to the ethical and participatory contexts of youth mental health research.

By encouraging an initial phase of art-immanent noticing before contextual dialogue, the framework legitimises attention to formal properties as an important starting point for analysis. In doing so, it reconnects arts-based mental health research with interpretive traditions in the humanities while still recognising the ethical importance of contextual understanding and collaborative meaning-making in participatory research settings.

RESPOND supports a cognitive ecology whereby each stage scaffolds a different aspect of distributed cognition: embodied response, formal noticing, individual articulation, social dialogue, and temporal reframing. The art work becomes an active component in a shared thinking system rather than a static artefact examined retrospectively.

Potentials and possibilities

While developed within youth mental health research, RESPOND may have wider applications wherever creative works are used to generate reflection, dialogue and understanding. In arts-based research, the framework offers a structured approach to the collaborative interpretation of creative outputs as research data. Beyond research contexts, it may also support engagement with exhibitions, performances, films and other forms of public dissemination in which creative works function as modes of knowledge exchange in their own right. In such settings, RESPOND provides prompts for sustained encounters with creative work while preserving openness to multiple interpretations. The framework may also have potential within professional education. For example, colleagues in medical education have expressed interest in its use as a reflective tool to support students' engagement with artworks, narratives and lived experience. Future research should therefore explore how RESPOND functions across different settings and art forms, and whether its emphasis on observation, reflection, dialogue and interpretive humility can support learning, public engagement and interdisciplinary knowledge exchange beyond youth mental health research.

Conclusion

RESPOND addresses a key methodological gap identified in our review: the absence in mental-health research of practice-sensitive approaches for engaging with artistic outputs as data. Central to our approach was working equitably and ethically with all team members to develop findings via our living labs. Our youth co-researchers were central to this process and to the learning and output, although a limitation of this paper is that they were not able to be part of the final writing-up process. A recent CREATE paper was cowritten with young people in this way (Batool et al., 2026). However, our youth co-researchers did not have capacity to be involved at the point of writing due to other commitments on and beyond CREATE. That said, alongside contributing to the intellectual development of the RESPOND framework, they were also central to producing RESPOND as a tool, which we are now looking to trial with colleagues interested in exploring further the potential of art as data in mental-health research. Other limitations include the fact that all participants were familiar with using ABRP in this context and largely supportive of its value; it would be useful to explore how more sceptical colleagues might respond to the tool. We also only explored a limited number of art forms, and future work might consider RESPOND across a more diverse range of practices. Finally, while our youth co-researchers were relatively diverse, some identities and perspectives are undoubtedly missing. More work is required. In undertaking this study, we hope to generate further data on the extent to which RESPOND offers a structured yet flexible method that preserves participant agency, protects ethical interpretation in sensitive contexts, and enables artworks to be integrated meaningfully into research analysis. In doing so, we respond to critiques that arts-based research lacks transparency or rigour by demonstrating how interpretive processes can be systematically scaffolded without undermining the values of arts practice.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Paul Cooke:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Nicola Shaughnessy:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Raginie Duara:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing; **Ruth Herbert:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing; **Emma Williams:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – review & editing; **Siobhan Hugh-Jones:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing; **Luke Alder:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

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Consent for publication

Informed consent for publication of anonymised data was provided by the participant(s) or a legally authorized representative.

Data availability statement

Individual anonymised transcripts can be made available on request. The RESPOND Toolkit can be downloaded for free at: <https://create.leeds.ac.uk/resources/>.

Ethical consideration

Ethical approval was obtained from the Arts, Humanities and Cultures Ethics Committee at University of Leeds, UK (ethics no. FAHC 22–057). Consent to participate: Written consent was taken from all participants and where participants are 16 years or below, written consent was obtained from their legal representative.

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