

An Exploration of the Meaning and Impact of Arts and Craft for Women 65+

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Abstract

This study aimed to identify the meaning of engaging in arts and crafts for women aged 65+ and its impact on their health and well-being. These activities are encouraged in occupational therapy to enable expression of feelings and development of imagination, skill, and dexterity. An interpretive paradigm using hermeneutic phenomenological research design was used. A purposive sample of five participants aged 65+ were recruited via Facebook and email. Semi-structured interviews using an interview guide were undertaken via Zoom. Data was analysed using thematic analysis. Findings illustrated that personal interests determined the type of activities participants engaged with to occupy and relax them. Participating in these creative activities also enabled them to provide their completed crafts for needy causes. This gave them a sense of achievement that enhanced their self-esteem and career opportunities. Further research is needed to explore the meaning of virtual craft for low functioning women aged 65+.

Keywords: Arts and Crafts; Creative Activities; Older Women; 65+; Occupational Therapy

Introduction

In occupational therapy, arts and crafts are used as a client-centred or community-based therapeutic intervention. This is because it impacts positively on self-esteem, occupational performance, and health and well-being (Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT), 2019; Ikiugu, 2018; Križaj, et. al., 2016; Müllersdorf and Ivarsson, 2016; Christiansen, et al., 2015; Harris, 2007; Wilcock, 2006; 1998). Jacquette (2014) described art as something created to express emotions and feelings for beauty. Craft is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as ‘... A branch of skilled work ... An art ... requiring special skill and knowledge; esp. a manual art ...’ (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 1104). This highlights that to do both arts and crafts, there is a need to have skills, tools, and materials (Robertson and Vinebaum, 2016; LaMore et al., 2013).

80% of occupational therapists in Mental Health use creative activities for service user therapy (Hansen, et al., 2020; Goods and Millsted, 2016; Müllersdorf and Ivarsson, 2016; Griffiths and Corr, 2007). A survey undertaken by Age UK (2018) with 13,467 respondents out of 15,000 United Kingdom residents, showed the significant impact arts and crafts had on both older men and women (Table 1). The United Nations (2019) considers people aged 65 and over as older people. The table below also illustrates that 46% of females in comparison to 25% of males aged 60+ engaged in arts and crafts.

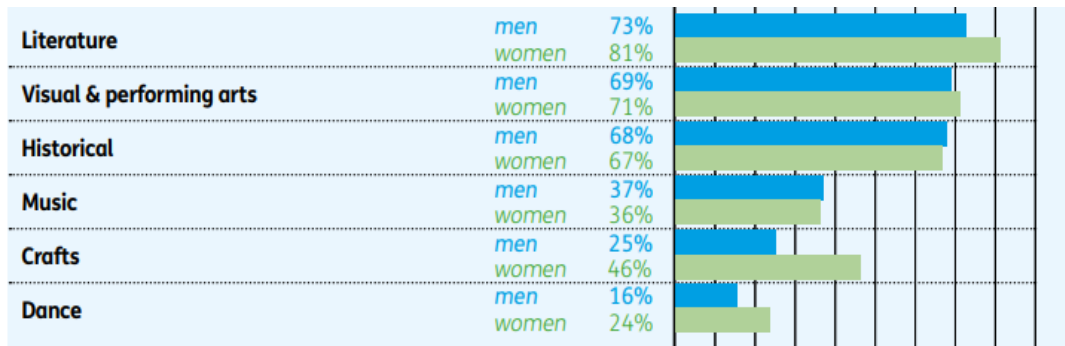
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Townsend and Niedderer (2020) and Gallagher, et al., (2015) stress that engaging in arts and crafts provide purpose, development of skills and self-expression that improves mental, physical, social, and emotional well-being. In Tzanidaki and Reynold's (2011) study, 12 older women who engaged with traditional arts and crafts revealed they found purpose, a sense of belonging, and personal, social, and spiritual meaning when they began to develop the younger generation (Crete). This was to ensure their traditions would be preserved and continued.

Table 1: Participation by category and gender



Source: Age UK Report: *Creative and Cultural activities and Wellbeing in later life April 2018*.

In 2009, Reynolds explored factors motivating twelve women aged sixty to eighty-six to engage in visual arts. Participants used artmaking to enrich their mental health through the enjoyment of visualising and touching the texture of different materials, promoting playful and fresh ambitions. Also, it enabled participants to connect with people outside their family. These women demonstrated a positive identity and sense of self. This was similar to Kirshbaum et al., (2017) longitudinal study where eight women (between the ages of 34 to 59) found engaging with visual art-making during and after cancer treatment (eight weeks) allowed them to socialise, and develop a sense of purpose, belonging, and positive identity.

Brooks et al., (2019) study on the relationship between occupational identity and health and well-being showed that despite their health issues, all twenty-one female participants found engaging with knitting a creative outlet and the opportunity for social interaction. This promoted their health and well-being. Szanton et al., (2015) and Liddle, et. al., (2013) agree craft-based occupations are key to connecting occupation and identity. Further, a survey conducted by Riley, et. al., (2013) showed that knitting relieved stress. It resonates with Reilly's (1962) belief that "*Man, through the use of his hands, as they are energized by mind and will, can influence the state of his own health*".

The relationship between creative craft hobbies and well-being among 55 women from a local quilting group was explored by Burt and Atkinson (2011). Data identified these women felt a sense of purpose, enhanced self-esteem, and the development of skills that contributed to their enhanced health and well-being. Similarly, a written narrative analysis by Pöllänen (2012) and updated by Pöllänen (2015b), with 15 Finnish female textile craft makers highlighted the pleasure, recreation, and satisfaction these activities provided. In addition, it promoted positive relationships and coping strategies. All these impacted positively on their health and well-being.

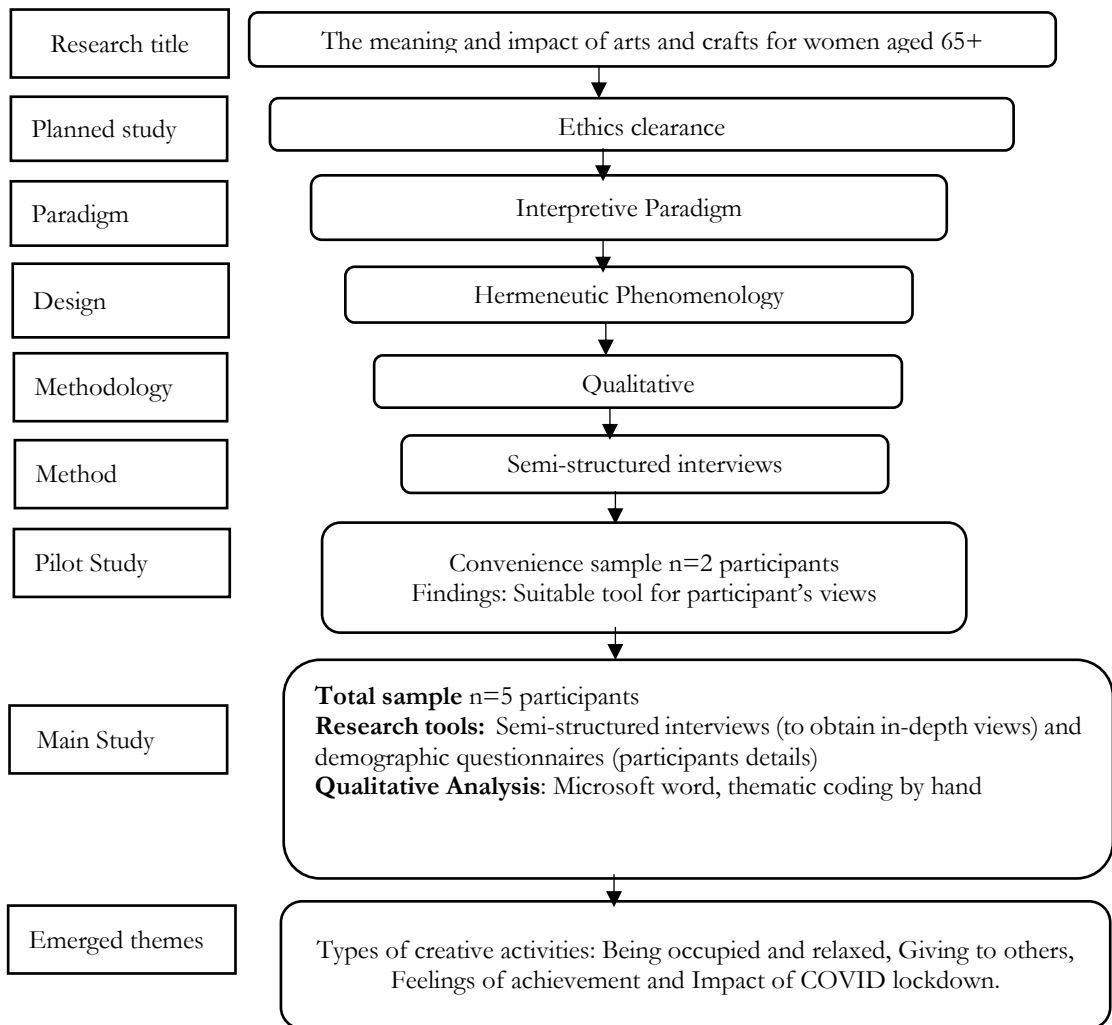


In 2014, Pöllänen and Hirsimäki also conducted a case study in Finland to explore the positive effects of craft as memory triggers in reminiscence as a health intervention. Three older women with dementia who enjoyed crafts in their earlier lives participated in the study. The videotaped findings showed triggers as non-verbal reactions to memory, verbal reactions, and the objects. It prompted participants to touch, smell, look, stretch, recall facts, and discuss.

This research aimed to explore the meaning of arts and crafts and its impact on health and well-being of women aged 65+. This is because there are limited studies on creative activities for older women, thus, identifying a gap.

Methodology

Figure 1. Outline of the research



The interpretive paradigm was chosen to explore the meaning and impact of arts and crafts on the health and well-being of women aged 65+. This paradigm allowed the researcher to

unravel and illuminate participants' perspectives to enable the reader of the text to understand their views (Polit and Beck, 2017). The hermeneutic phenomenological design allowed participants to reflect and describe their experiences and the researcher to use their reflexive thoughts to reveal insights for readers (van Manen, 2014).

Formal written approval was given by the Faculty of Health Research Ethics and Integrity Student Committee of the University of Plymouth (19/20-625). Cohen, et. al., (2017) stressed the researcher has a moral and intellectual responsibility to ensure the validity and reliability of their research. The pilot study conducted enabled the developed interview guide to be refined to improve responses. Also, it led to the creation of a demographic questionnaire to collect personal details. Interviews via Zoom were chosen as these interviews had to be conducted during the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. Polit and Beck (2017) stress on the usefulness of interviews to understand what people like/dislike, know, and experience on a one-to-one basis. A semi-structured approach was selected as it allowed the researcher to alter the sequence, phrase questions according to participants responses, stimulate conversation, probe responses for depth or clarity and aid recall of events and meanings of participants' experiences (Drever, 1995). A thirteen-question interview schedule was created to ensure the use of the same questions with all participants.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed for the main study to recruit participants (Table 2). A message via Facebook, emails (relevant local companies where gatekeepers informed potential members), and a poster inviting individuals engaged with arts and crafts to share their experiences was used to recruit participants. A purposive sample of six women (five from a quilting group and one from a knitting group) volunteered to participate in the study. Creswell (2013) maintains that a small sample size is sufficient for qualitative research as it aims to collect rich data.

Table 2: Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Women aged 65+.	Women aged <65
Engaged in arts and crafts.	Engaged in other creative activities.
Lived in the community.	Lived in residential or nursing homes.
Spoke fluent English.	Unable to speak fluent English.
Cognitively stable (Mental Capacity Act, 2005).	Cognitive impairment

The demographic questionnaire and the interview schedule were emailed to participants two weeks before the interviews. Upon completion of the interviews, participants completed and returned the demographic questionnaire via email to the researcher. One participant from the quilting group withdrew from the study. Five interviews were conducted in February 2021 via Zoom. The five interviews lasted between 90 -120 minutes.



Each participant together with the interviewer chose pseudonyms (names) to ensure anonymity and protection of their data (Data Protection Act, 2018). The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim. The demographic data was uploaded to the computer. After this, the only link between the demographic and interview data was the pseudonym participants chose for themselves. All data held on the computer was password protected. The demographic questionnaire and consent forms were stored in a locked drawer. Participants were informed that the data stored would be destroyed at the end of the study. The researcher typed their journal entries directly into a computer file. Transcripts were returned to interviewees to verify the accuracy of the interview dialogue and to ensure rigour.

The demographic data was analysed using an Excel spreadsheet. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and the data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) and coded by hand. Thematic analysis allows flexibility in interpretation of meaning through the narratives of each participant.

Findings

The demographic questionnaire illustrated that all five female participants chose to engage with creative activities. The age of participants ranged between 65 - 80 years. All participants were white British, married (two were now widows), and were from charitable organisations. They self-volunteered to participate in the study in line with the inclusion and exclusion criteria for the purposive sampling method of recruitment. These participants had retired between 5-17 years (Table 2) and had worked in different roles such as secondary school teacher, paediatric doctor, nurse, property developer, and office administrator.

Table 3. Number of years retired

Name (pseudonyms)	Molly	Rose	Susan	Peggy	Lydia
Number of years retired	15 years	17 years	17 years	5 years	7 years

The data on gender, age, and number of years retired confirm the relationship identified in the literature with engaging in creative activities. The data on the type of creative activities and the meaning and impact of these on interviewees' health and well-being will be shared next.

Personal Interest

The five participants outlined how their interest in arts and crafts led them to engage with painting, quilting, knitting, sewing, glass equipment, patchwork, crotchet, pottery, upholstery, basketwork, and designing knitting patterns. Rose (65 years); Peggy (51 years); Lydia (60 years) stated they began to engage in creative activities when they were very young. Peggy summed up their reasons: *“When I was growing up knitting and sewing clothes was cheaper than buying them. So, I am talking about the 1960s ..., ... that was just what everybody did when I was growing up. I still don’t buy things unless I have to, if I can make them, that’s what I’ll do.”*

Five participants voiced that initially, they had engaged in different creative activities but later focused only on certain activities. Lydia said: *"I can knit, crochet, pottery, upholstery, basket work just about anything else. ... I love colour, I love design, fabric, textures, it kind of grew ... to quilting"*.

Participants believed engaging in arts and crafts enabled them to continue learning and developing, Molly stated: *"You are never too old to learn anything, you can learn new skills at the age of 60, or 70. And if you have a piece of fabric, you can use the machine and sew in a straight line and make a quilt!"* Lydia said: *"Sometimes it stretches you but it is good to develop your skills, stretch your skills! If I am stressed, I do small repetitive tasks but when I am calm, I can come up with new designs and be very creative so you can balance your moments."* Hansen, et. al., (2020) believe that imagination and self-expression is released when attention is on the task at hand and results in something tangible.

On retiring, Molly re-engaged with crafts and Susan pursued a new interest: *"My mother was a knitter and sewer, so I probably learned from her. I have always knitted and sewed. When I retired at 60, I have always been interested in quilting, I pursued it"*. The participants views are in line with Tomlinson, et al., (2020) that retirement is a challenging phase that also provides opportunities to engage in creative activities and develop new interests.

Being occupied, reduces anxiety and relaxes

Participants felt that engaging in their chosen creative activities gave them a purpose and kept them occupied. Susan stated: *"... if I am sitting watching the tele at night I like my hands to be doing something ... like some quilting or knitting."* However, Rose said: *"I've always knitted for pleasure. I enjoy creating things. I love knitting, it is my pleasure and it is my leisure."* This aligns with Dowling's (2021) belief that some women do creative activities because they hate to have a pair of idle hands. Also, Flood and Phillip's (2007) view that it is a leisure activity.

Molly said: *"... you have to concentrate on what you are doing so you don't worry about anything else. ... very good for concentrating your mind."* Lydia believed, *"I go into that space and I am focused on the creative process so that I am away from everything else."* Lydia explains, *"I have been doing it for so long; it's now just an addiction or passion. I've always enjoyed crafts, and it is now just a big part of my life. It gives me a reason to get up in the morning and do something. It is peaceful and balances my emotional wellbeing"*. Horghagen, et. al., (2013) stressed engaging in crafts reduces anxiety. Rose stated: *"I am currently healthy, and I do not know if without knitting I would be."* Susan said: *"It loosens my mood, sometimes when I'm a bit ... I think I would be very lost if I couldn't go to a sewing machine and pick up a needle, then I might be going into a depression"*.

All five participants engaged in creative activities by themselves *"Sitting knitting on your own is necessary, it might be comforting, I can use all the colours under the sun, and I can create."* Engaging with an activity group was also important as *"we are friends"*, *"we can socialise"*, *"we can voice our feelings"*, *"laugh together"*, and *"see each other through divorce, bereavement, and things like that"*.

Feelings of achievement and fulfilment

Participants expressed a sense of achievement in engaging with crafts, Peggy emphasised: *The feeling of accomplishment that you get when it is done is good for you"*. Molly stressed, *"I make the quilts but I also help Dora (pseudonym) take them in and deliver them out. I've got contact with the organisers of the group I give to. So that has given me another sort of sense of wellbeing"*.

The sense of accomplishment promoted health and well-being. Rose said: *"It is a physical skill that doesn't go even if the other of your mental faculties are gone."* Peggy said, *"Quilting has impact on my*



health and wellbeing as it links me to the past. I still got patterns that were my mum's. It links me to the future because I've just been asked for a knitting pattern to make socks. ... About any craft, you are engaging your fingers. Your brain and your hands are working together. There is evidence that it is a good thing.

Participants shared that engaging in creative activities of their interest and the opportunity to give their creations away to a useful or needy cause enhanced their sense of fulfilment. Rose said: *"I enjoy my knitting, making lots of garments for lots of people not very often for myself. I enjoy giving; it is an aspect of loving someone..., it is fulfilling."* Molly found: *"It motivates me to think I can take a piece of fabric, use the machine, and sew in a straight line. Then I have a quilt that comforts a child who needs an extra hug."*

Participants' creative activities

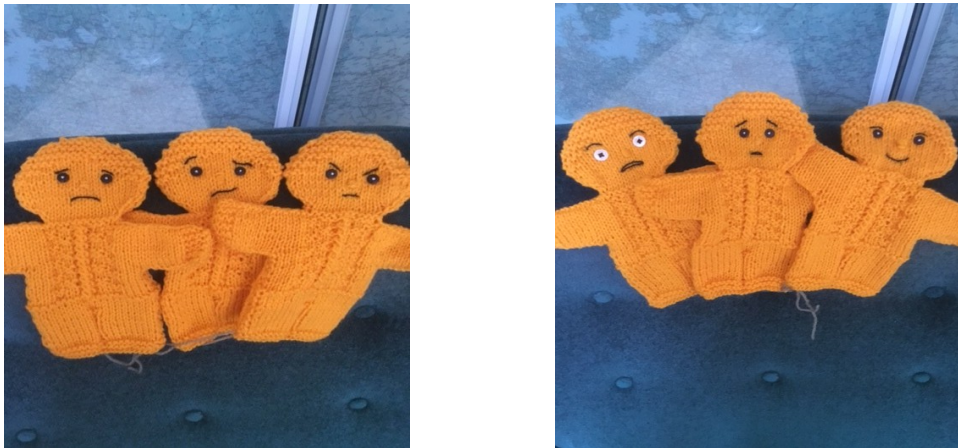


Figure 2. Emotiknit to show sad or happy faces, etc.



Figure 3. Family set puppets



Figure 4. Teachers, social workers and policemen from the professional set

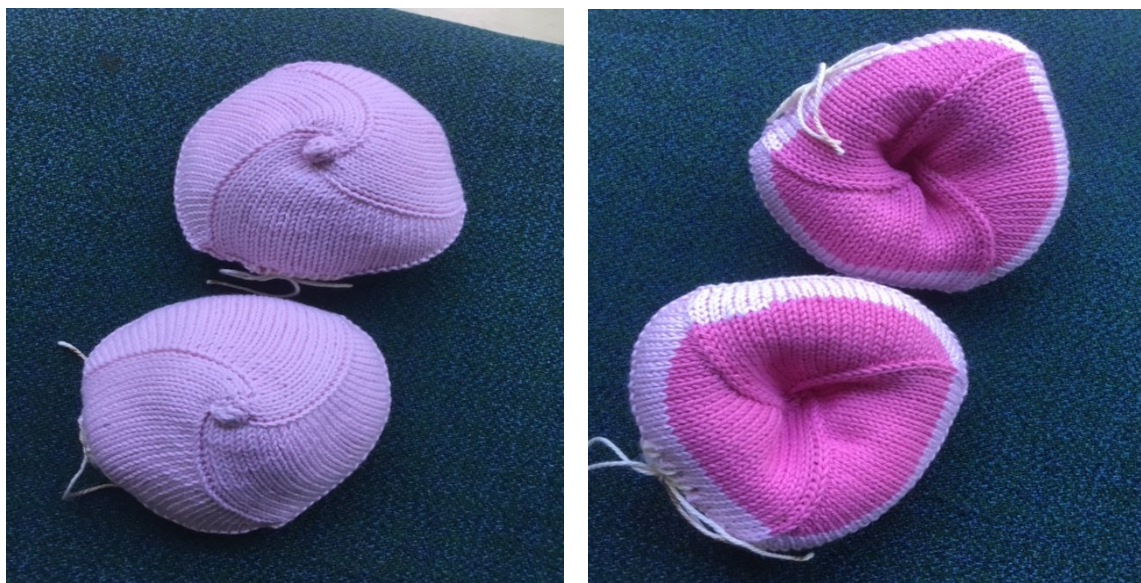


Figure 5. Made-to-order prosthetics for breast cancer patients.



Figure 6. Quilts

The findings confirm that arts and crafts can be pursued as a hobby, volunteer, and as an occupation. Individuals determine their level of engagement with it and whether they prefer to do it by themselves or with a group. All participants stated that engaging in creative activities occupied their time, reduced their anxiety and relaxed them as it allowed them to express their thoughts and feelings and challenged their thinking. In addition, it gave them a sense of purpose and belonging that enhanced their confidence and self-esteem.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the meaning and impact of arts and crafts on the health and well-being of women aged 65+. Four of the interviewees enjoyed quilting and one enjoyed knitting. In occupational therapy, Langhorne and Baylan (2017), Leenerts, et al., (2016), and Fraser, et al., (2015) emphasise that crafts such as crocheting, sewing, knitting, and quilting amongst other types are creative activities that are suitable and useful for older people. Participants outlined their reasons for engaging in creative activities to occupy their time, personal interest, enjoyment, hobby, self-expression of thoughts and emotions and the opportunity to give to useful and needy causes. It gave them a sense of purpose and fulfilment, boosted their self-esteem, and allowed them to contribute to their community. This aligns with research (Križaj et al., 2019; Brooks et al., 2019; Liddle, et al., 2013; Tzanidaki and Reynolds 2011; Reynolds,

2009; Bedding and Sadlo, 2008). It also resonates with the Activity theory of Aging (Havighurst, 1961) that arts and crafts enable older women develop their sense of self, productivity, give to others and acquire creative roles (RCOT, 2019; Tzanidaki and Reynolds, 2011;).

All participants expressed how relaxed, happy and satisfied they felt when they engaged in creative activities which corroborated with Brooks et al., (2019) findings that arts and crafts enable expression of emotions and identity in older people. Townsend and Niedderer (2020), Kim et al. (2013) and Reynolds (2009) stress that purpose is connected to satisfaction and reduces disease, improves functioning in daily activities and shapes individuals sense of happiness. Further, engagement in crafts determine an individual's life satisfaction and promotes health and well-being (Brooks et al., 2019).

Previous studies show a link between purpose in life of older people and engagement in creative activities (Bedding and Sadlo, 2008; Burt and Akinson 2011; Kirshbaum *et al.*, 2017). In this study, for three participants, it also enabled them to acquire work after retirement. This aligns with Age UK (2018) research that engaging in creative activities also enables acquiring skills and gaining opportunities, and self-esteem (Pöllänen, 2015a). Also, it showed that despite all interviewees were doing crafts for voluntary organisations, there was a varied level of engagement. All participants were educated and engaged with crafts they enjoyed which depicts occupational identity (Taylor and Kay 2013; Reynolds, 2009). This raised a question about occupational identity as people who are less educated and of a lower class might be limited in their choice of occupation. This contradicts with the concept of occupational identity.

Engagement with creative activities as an intervention in occupational therapy, improves cognitive function (Leenerts, et al., 2016; Pöllänen, 2015a; Pöllänen and Hirsimäki, 2014; Horghagen, et al., 2013) and occupational performance abilities (Hansen, et al., 2020; Park et al., 2019; Petersen et al., 2019; Langhorne and Baylan, 2017). Creative activities predicted cognitive function for the educated and less for those with low education. This means leisure activities and cognition might vary based on choice of activity and level of education.

Studies by Dawson-Townsend, 2019; Kirshbaum et al., 2017; Pöllänen 2015b; Corkhill and Morris, 2013; Tzanidaki and Reynolds 2011) illustrate that crafts can be used as a coping strategy in times of change, pain, bereavement, divorce, and reducing the risk of adverse health conditions. It is also worth noting that since the 19th century, crafts have been used as a curative intervention for older people (Bathie, 2012). In this study, each participant had an underlying condition, like arthritis, needing a knee replacement, sore thumb, or visual deficit. Participants did not allow their conditions to hinder their engagement with crafts, instead they used coping and compensatory strategies to continue doing their crafts. This resonates with the shift towards a social model which incorporated arts and crafts in favour of a medical model (Christiansen, et al., 2015).

All participants in this study were white British, thus, limiting its representation only to this community. Participants shared how engaging with crafts improved their mental, emotional, social and physical and spiritual health and well-being. This is supported by Cantu and Fleuriet's (2017) and Hammell's (2017) research. The concept of continuity in this study findings appeared to link to health and wellbeing where a participant stated she had shared



the knitting patterns that were handed down by her mother with others to make socks for others.

Creative activities whether done by an individual by themselves or in a group setting are meaningful and have beneficial effects on health and wellbeing. It gives them purpose, satisfaction, confidence, stress relief, occupational identity, learning and acquisition of career opportunities (Winstead et al., 2014; Tzanidaki and Reynolds, 2011). Engaging in group activities, enables them to socialise, have a sense of belonging, inspiration, opportunities to learn from and encourage others (Burt and Akinson 2011; Bedding and Sadlo 2008). Similarly, laughter (Brooks et al., 2019) is viewed as happiness (Riley, et al., 2013) and promotes health and wellbeing. The impact of all these benefits can be conveyed into other sectors of life to enhance active ageing and health promotion.

Conclusion

This research illustrated the meaning and impact of creative activities on health and well-being of women 65+. Participants shared how it gave them a sense of purpose, occupied their time, challenged their thinking, enhanced their self-esteem and confidence, and impacted significantly on their health and well-being. The findings resonate with Reilly's (1962), Yerxa's (1990), and Wilcock's (2006) perspectives on the benefits of engaging with arts and crafts and the positive impact it had on health and well-being. Yerxa (1990) and Wilcock (2006) link humans as occupational beings to health and wellbeing. These findings add to the theory of valuing occupations as central to occupational therapy and human life.

The limitation of this study was that some participants found being interviewed via Zoom a challenge as they were not used to using this platform or had internet connection issues. This also affected the researcher-participant relationship. It will be useful to conduct further research with a heterogeneous sample of 65+ who are low functioning and less educated to identify their perspectives. This is because all the participants in this study were female, 65+, educated and generally in good health.

The implication in practice based on the study findings is that creative activities are a useful occupational therapy intervention for individuals 65+. Occupational therapists could focus on enabling these individuals to relearn any previous arts and crafts interests and skills. This is due to the data showing that older peoples creative skills were developed when they were younger. As such, retraining rather than engaging the individual with new arts and crafts might assist them to maintain some level of cognition and occupational performance. Park et al., (2019) stressed that this promotes active ageing, leads to individuals attaining person-centred goals and enhances their health and well-being. In addition, this also help them to self-manage their medical conditions. Also, the interviewees were educated and from a middle social class. Hence, it is necessary to consider craft intervention aspects where cognition needs to be assessed (Pöllänen, 2015b; Taylor and Ray, 2013). This will enhance person-centred care in practice.

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