

# Arts Engagement and Quality of Life

## A SKETCH arts-based research project

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### Introduction

SKETCH is a community arts development initiative creating equitable opportunities for diverse young people between the ages of 15-29, living homeless, street-involved and otherwise marginalized. At SKETCH, we firmly believe that being creative and making art in community makes us happier, healthier, more fulfilled, resilient and inspired people. We see this in action every day; we hear it from youth both formally (in evaluations, community gatherings, and program debriefs) and informally (in conversation or during program). We are not alone: more initiatives and programs are emerging which use the arts with marginalized populations. However, there is not always a widespread recognition of the profound impact this programming has on youths' lives, and its value beyond a recreational activity.

We wanted to investigate more about this impact: what benefits does artmaking and participation in creative community bring? How does it enhance youths' personal, social, artistic, and professional lives? Does it have impacts on their physical and emotional health, and their greater quality of life?

This project demonstrates, both quantitatively and qualitatively, that the arts increase youths' quality of life in substantial and meaningful ways. The survey findings reveal a clear, positive and compelling correlation between youths' degree of arts engagement and their quality of life (understood as their experiences of the physical, psychological, social, and environmental aspects of their lives). And in youths' own storytelling – their reflections on their own experiences – they speak convincingly about the role the arts play in their life satisfaction. Four major threads ran through the youths' responses: that artmaking opportunities profoundly increase their health and wellbeing; that it creates a space for them to reclaim their narrative and be an active agent in their story; that they build personal agency and self-direction through the arts; and that through the arts they individually and collectively mitigate the impacts of their experiences of marginalization.



### Background

Youth coming to SKETCH experience a range of forms of marginalization: homelessness, poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, institutionalization, traumatic histories, experiences with violence, criminalization and disproportionate police attention. These experiences often have significant and complex impacts on the youths' physical and mental health.

At SKETCH we see youth develop the skills, resources, supports and confidence needed to better navigate these experiences through participating in programs supporting creative self-expression, artistic skill-building, leadership development and building creative communities. We see youth build resilience, creative problem-solving, solidarity, self-compassion and confidence through the arts. We

*"A day is like a lump of clay, it's full of potential, what am I going to do with it, what do I want from it? There's no wasted days."*

*"Before, I was using my ears and hands, and had a vision. Now, I'm like a wheel – I have some direction, some focus, I've connected the dots."*

*"Sometimes... things aren't going well. Art can't remove that. But they'd be a million times worse without the arts. It's the only thing that seems natural. Life without it is unimaginable."*

found, though, that this is not always easy to quantify this growth or formally document its significance in youths' lives. This project was designed to analyze the ways in which youth use the arts to mitigate and cope with the impacts of their experiences of marginalization, while building a life that's meaningful and satisfying on their own terms.

## Method

The purpose of these consultations was twofold. First, we want to see if there is a correlation between youths' arts engagement and an improvement in their quality of life, including the social, psychological, physical and environmental aspects of their lives. Second, we wanted to hear from youth – in their own words and stories – about the value of being involved in SKETCH or other arts organizations. While SKETCH staff can speak to this based on our 17 years of popular and well-respected programming, this will be so much more powerful in youths' own words.

To investigate this, SKETCH led a series of focus groups with youth, consisting of a series of arts-based exercises and an Arts Engagement and Quality of Life survey. We used arts-based techniques because it was important that our research reflected our programming: we wanted these consultations to be a natural extension of how youth engage with SKETCH. As a community arts organization, we value arts-based evaluations and community-based research means to gain honest and evocative insight into communities' experiences, in their own words. It was also important that we engage in a process that was creative and asset-based, and which harnesses the power of storytelling and the imagination.

SKETCH led six focus groups with 39 youth between March and May 2013. They included youth who were new to SKETCH and those who had been coming for many years, including some who have "graduated" or "aged out" (i.e. are 30 or older). Some attend program several times a week; others come rarely. We spoke with youth who have participated in a wide range of programming, from those beginning to connect with early-entry programs to those participating in the deeper levels of leadership development. We spoke with youth with varying levels of literacy and English fluency. We spoke with youth from a broad range of communities, in terms of their gender, ethnicity, housing, 'economic' status and sexuality, and who are representative of the broader SKETCH community.

### Youth Focus Groups: Arts Engagement Activities

Each focus group engaged between three and eight youth, and was facilitated by the Program Administrator with a Community Artist Peer Leader. In exchange for their involvement, each youth received \$10, two TTC tokens and two free movie passes. The arts activities were as follows:

*Arts Activity 1:* Draw or write on the theme of "the role that art and creativity play in your life", followed by a group go-around in which each youth described what they had created and what it means to them, along with questions, reflection and discussion.

*Arts Activity 2:* Draw or write on the theme of "me before connecting with SKETCH and since" (For youth who were new to SKETCH, we offered up the alternative that they could speak to "me when I'm not making art, and me when I am."), followed by a group go-around.

*Arts Activity 3:* Draw or write on the theme of "where I want to take my artmaking in my future, or where I want my artmaking to take me", followed by a group go-around. After they presented their art reflections, we asked each youth "what can SKETCH do to help get you there?"

### Youth Focus Groups: Arts Engagement and Quality of Life Survey

The survey itself was a 5-page confidential questionnaire that youth filled in independently. The youth were asked demographic questions, including gender, ethnicity, housing circumstances, length of time attending SKETCH, and more. Then they were asked to fill in SKETCH's Arts Engagement survey, including the frequency with which they engage in different forms of artmaking and the



*"[Art] brings me peace of mind. It brings my spirits up and my stress down. It's an opportunity to express myself in different media, and find the one I'm most passionate about. There aren't a lot of opportunities to express yourself, so when you have the chance you have to get over the fear of it and just express yourself."*

degree to which they see artmaking increasing their quality of life, helping them cope with stress, helping their resilience, strengthening social bonds or community networks, increasing their skills, and bringing meaning and happiness to their lives. This was followed by the World Health Organization's Quality of Life assessment instrument, which "assesses the individual's perceptions in the context of their culture and value systems, and their personal goals, standards and concerns."<sup>1</sup>

The method of pairing these two assessment instruments cannot speak to causality; it does not definitively show that a change in one area causes a change in another. But it can glean results by looking at correlation: when the correlation is strong enough, meaningful patterns can emerge which can act as strong predictors. By comparing the two we can look for patterns that can help us answer the question: As marginalized youth become more arts-engaged, do we also find that there is a corresponding increase in their quality of life?

## Arts-Engagement and Quality of Life survey findings

The survey findings showed that there is *always* a positive relationship between youths' degree of arts engagement and their quality of life. This was true both in their overall quality of life and when looking at specific WHO QoL domains (physical, psychological, social relationships, environment). The pattern was clear: as youth are more arts-engaged, they score their quality of life higher.

**Arts engagement score and overall Quality of Life.** Youth's responses demonstrated a significant, positive, strong correlation between their arts engagement and their overall quality of life (the scores to all of their answers in the QoL assessment instrument). The correlation is strong enough that arts engagement *is* a significant predictor of overall quality of life. (See Figure 1.)

**Arts engagement and the Physical domain.** Youths' responses demonstrated a significant, positive strong relationship between arts engagement and the physical domain, which relates to physical health, absence of pain, energy, sleeping well, mobility, engaging in satisfying activities, access to medication, and capacity to work. The relationship is strong enough that arts engagement *is* a significant predictor of physical domain score. (See Figure 2.)

**Arts engagement and the Psychological domain.** Youths' responses demonstrated a significant, positive strong correlation between arts engagement and the psychological domain, which relates to positive feelings and thoughts, healthy self-esteem, body image, absence of negative feelings, and spirituality. The correlation is strong enough that

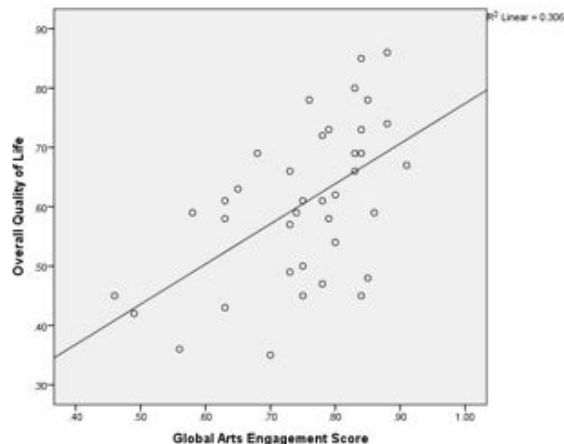


Figure 1: Arts Engagement and Quality of Life.

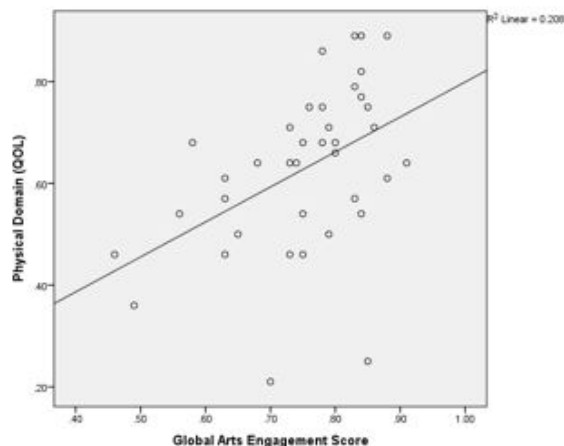


Figure 2: Arts Engagement and the Physical domain.

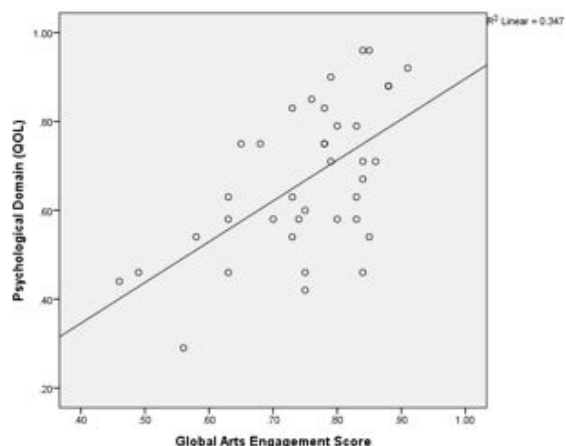


Figure 3: Arts Engagement and the Psychological domain.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, WHO Quality of Life-BREF [http://www.who.int/substance\\_abuse/research\\_tools/whoqolbref/en/](http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/research_tools/whoqolbref/en/).

arts engagement *is* a significant predictor of psychological domain score. (See Figure 3.)

**Arts engagement and the Social Relationships domain.** Youths' responses demonstrated a significant, positive moderate relationship between arts engagement and the social relationships domain, which relates to romantic relationships, sexual relationships, and social supports. This was the only domain in which arts engagement was not a significant predictor. (See Figure 4.)

*"Turn your scars into stars."*

**Arts engagement and the Environmental domain.** Youths' responses demonstrated a significant, positive strong relationship between arts engagement and the environmental domain, which relates to one's feeling of safety, housing, financial circumstances, access to services, access to information, leisure activities, physical environment and transportation. The relationship is strong enough that arts engagement *is* a significant predictor of environmental domain score. (See Figure 5.)

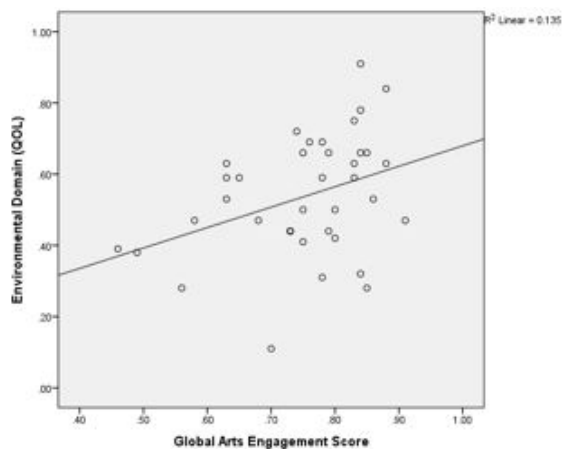


Figure 4: Arts Engagement and the Social Relationships domain.

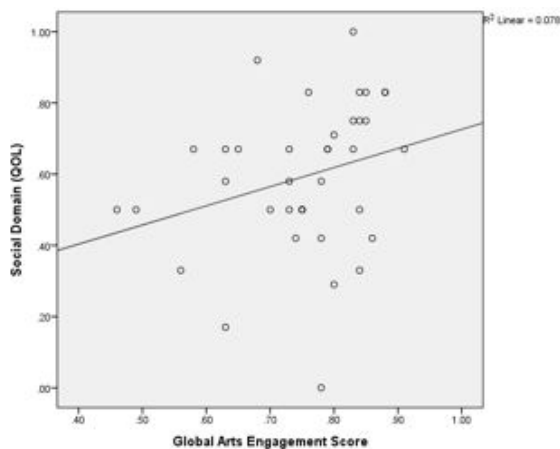


Figure 5: Arts Engagement and the Environmental domain.

## Arts-based and verbal findings

The focus groups proved to be a rich site for youth to share stories, argue for the importance of artmaking opportunities, speak eloquently about their personal values and goals, connect over shared experiences, and cheer each other on. Youth seemed eager to participate, and several expressed thanks for the opportunity to do so.

After the focus groups, the research team analyzed the youths' feedback, seeking significant themes, phrases, and visual or verbal metaphors. We noted which sentiments were expressed most frequently, with the most passion, or which inspired a strong response by other youth in that focus group. Here are the most significant themes that emerged:

### Artmaking is essential for well-being and personal growth

Youth spoke eloquently about the wellbeing, happiness, release or contentment that comes from making art. Unprompted, many youth contrasted what their lives would be like (or were) with and without opportunities for creative expression. A creative life was described as "vibrant", "fulfilled", "happy", and "joyful".

They also spoke about how artmaking helps them contend with a wide range of life stressors, including poverty, issues with mental health, physical health, addictions, and unemployment. Artmaking helps us "make sense of the madness", deal with "chaos", find a "release", "escape", and a "safe space", where "nothing else matters". It's a chance to "reflect or meditate on life", "process", or

*"It's a release, it's like my therapy. When I get angry, listening to or making music makes me calm down, helps me put things in perspective, stops me from blowing up. My anger causes me stress, and making music lowers it. So it makes me healthier."*

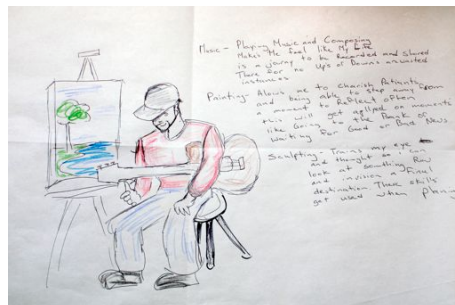
“gain perspective” to better understand ones’ experiences. It helps find balance, stability and grounding, experience “less anxiety” and “less sadness”. It’s “my therapy”, a way to “release my pain”, “move away from negativity”, and “decrease my anger”. It “keeps me sane and alive.” Without art, “something’s missing”, youth feel “suppressed, repressed and depressed”, “I don’t feel complete”, “I would go mental”, “I’d be angrier”, “I’d blend into gloomy society”, “I’d be a different kid on the block”, “I’d be in jail”, and “everyday life would be harder.”

*“I’ve taken the time to sidestep my music and ambitions before but it’s so depressing - when I did, I felt like something’s missing. I was still sad. I wasn’t doing what’s me. I’m just happier now.”*

Youth spoke of how, through creative engagement, they moved from having low self-esteem to feeling that “I am somebody I can love.” They spoke of previously being “not able to express myself in healthy ways” and being “poor in spirit” to feeling grateful and happier. Several youth spoke of how artmaking contributes to a sense of personal or spiritual fulfillment: it’s “good for the soul”, the “light of my life”, “lifts my spirits”. It’s “healing,” fosters a sense of hope, and leaves us feeling “nourished”. They described getting more enjoyment out of life, appreciating what they experience, feeling “free”, and being “broke but happy”.

When asked what they wish for their future, youth often spoke of wanting continued personal growth, joy, health and self-understanding. This was articulated in a wide variety of ways, but in every case youth spoke of artmaking as a way for them to identify their own life path: to seek their own personal development, and work toward it on their own terms. They spoke of seeking greater “self understanding” and a need to “stay true to who I am”. Many youth spoke of wanting to “grow” both emotionally and creatively. The metaphor of travel reappeared several times; both literally and as a metaphor for expanding their experiences and exposure to the world. Many youth spoke of wanting to reach their “full potential”, or expressed that they have “unlimited potential” or “the sky’s the limit”. This was very frequently expressed alongside the insistence that their path must self-determined: as one youth put it, “I’ll figure out my path once I’m on it.”

*“Before I was confused, negative, going in lots of different directions, going in circles. After - I have a clearer path, I’m more positive. Not like straight lines, but I have more direction.”*



### **Artmaking contributes to a sense of purpose, motivation or agency**

An overwhelming number of youth spoke of art as a great motivator in their lives: it’s “my drive”, it’s the “fuel for my engine”, it “keeps me going”. Youth argued strongly that creative activity is both a positive use of their time and an essential element in their overall life path. As one youth said, “when I wasn’t making art I was on the wrong path.”

*“I still have no money but now I’m not ashamed or embarrassed about it. Before I was in a community where people wouldn’t talk about poverty. Now, I’m surrounded by people who have the same experience and aren’t ashamed of it.”*

In particular in the “before and after” arts activity, youth often painted their “before” state as one of disengagement (with school, work, social participation), isolation, boredom and directionlessness. They spoke of being “stuck”, “going nowhere”, “passing the time”, “kicking around the streets”, and “slacking off.” They experienced “chaos”, “going in circles”, being in a “constant state of flux”, and “flailing aimlessly.” It was “boring”, they felt “unengaged in life”, or at a “dead end”.

Through artmaking, they described developing the crucial life skills to be able to undertake a project and see it through: the ability to “focus”, “manage time”, “concentrate,” envision a goal, and appreciate the “fruits of my labour.” Importantly, they also saw artmaking as a site for getting inspired about the future: through having projects and things to get inspired about, they were more likely to be hopeful and excited about their future. They had “direction” and “vision”; “something to look forward to”, “something to work towards”, a “purpose” or “clearer path”. They described artmaking as “good use

of my time” and an opportunity to “make positive changes in my life.” Thus, investment in ones’ creative projects and potential contributes to a greater sense of certainty, motivation and direction in their lives, which results in a feeling of deeper engagement with the world around them and a sense of personal agency. As one youth put it, they started to “give a shit.” Artmaking provides a sense of purpose, passion or motivation that’s energizing, self-determined and very deeply held.

*“I’ve decided to put my artistic expertise on high.”*

### **Artmaking fosters positive identity-formation**

Many youth spoke of how, through artmaking, they discovered, built, or better understood their identity through creative imagination, play and experimentation. It’s an active and self-directed way to develop self-understanding, and as such contributes to a deep feeling of wholeness. Many youth described the ways in which artmaking took their life from “scattered” to “whole” or “unformed” to “complete.” It’s a site for self-discovery through a certain freedom or play: a place where youth feel that they can “be myself” or “feel like myself” or “bring out my character.” They described experiencing “expansion” and “exposure to the world”, feeling more “passionate”, and opening themselves to “new experiences. As one youth said, “I’ve become myself – I’m the same person but in a different shape.”

*“Why music is important: so I could touch a generation... If it wasn’t for music I would be a different kid on the block. To talk about my problems, my ups and downs, my smile and frowns. Drawing a crowd and making them feel good or feel my emotion by voice or sound.”*

Many youth spoke of how the factors that contribute to their marginalization also mean that they have fewer opportunities for self-expression: because of poverty, discrimination, mental health issues or other kinds of marginalization they have limited access to resources and are dissuaded from making art. As a consequence, they said, the opportunities they do have are all the more critical as a means to process and express their experiences of marginalization. In dreaming of their future, a great number of youth spoke of the desire to have creativity and artmaking simply be a continuous feature of their lives: they spoke of the desire to “experiment”, develop “new forms of expression”, learn more arts media, and have the “freedom and resources to explore.” The desire to have “art in my everyday life” was a common sentiment.



### **Artmaking is a way to have a positive impact on the world and other people**

Youth spoke powerfully about the value of being seen, validated or appreciated by others for their contributions, and of using their artistic skill to have a positive impact on others. Many youth spoke of the desire to inspire others through their artwork, and inspiring those audiences, either through the high quality of their artwork, or because the audience admired or identified with the artist’s ability to deal with life’s challenges. This was a powerful sentiment, and was expressed several times. Many youth felt very strongly that if an artist can make artwork out of a negative experience, then they are changing the meaning of that experience.

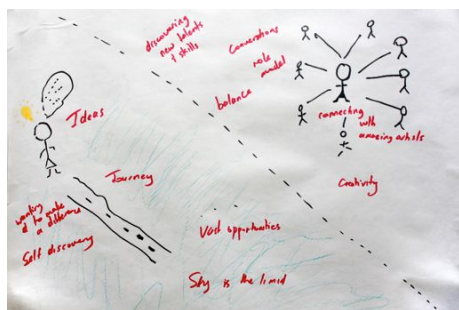
*“I can sit in the corner and do nothing and people will be all “who’s that disabled kid who sits in the corner and doesn’t talk to anyone?” But now I walk in and everyone’s like “Larry Byrdz!” [cheering] I’m in there like swim wear.”*

This sentiment of wanting to make a positive impact was often connected with an overall increased self-confidence in their skills, talents, role or impact. In the “before and after” arts exercise, youth contrasted the states of “fear” and “self-limiting beliefs” with images of having “self-confidence” and a “belief” in their own abilities. In this “after” phase, they depicted themselves as having substantial skills and expertise to share with others, a position they describe as “empowering”: to have a “voice”, to have an impact, and as a result to be seen as a mentor or “role model”. Sometimes it was art skill they could pass on; sometimes it was their personal resilience that they could model for others. In this

way, the youth were celebrating their own ability to make art despite their marginalization, by positioning themselves as models of the community because of their creative offerings.

This feeling of having ones' artistic skills be a defining characteristic of how others see them was a significant one. The pride of being known and appreciated for your creative talents is a huge part of youths' identities: in this way, they are known as a singer, writer, chef, painter or video artist rather than as any of the oppressive, dehumanizing, limiting labels that get applied to them.

Another recurring theme was the value of having an external creation (a song, painting, poem, etc.) that represented their thoughts and feelings to others. The externality of the work was significant; while some youth said that they just made work for themselves, most youth spoke of the importance of creating an art object that other people can experience independently of them, and that this was their way to leave a positive mark on the world. By contributing to other peoples' lives in this way, as one youth said, there are no "wasted" moments: every experience, no matter how negative, can be turned into something meaningful, positive and something others can identify with.



### Artmaking fosters meaningful community-building

Almost unanimously, youth spoke of the sense of support and social connection that emerged through their involvement in artmaking. This was almost always explicitly linked with their involvement with SKETCH. They emphasized how artmaking is not just an individual activity; it is part of a social act of fostering creative community. This community is marked by reciprocity – a constant giving and receiving of help, support, skills and respect, and youth spoke of benefitting both in the giving and in the receiving ends of the relationship. They spoke of their active co-creation rather than passive reception of this culture.

Youth also see this creative community as a site for deep and meaningful interpersonal support. This is decidedly mutual; they credited other youth artists with providing them with this support, and they also took pride in offering others. Youth described how, through engagement in artmaking, they are better able to communicate or are more easily understood. It was also a means through which to analyze and better understand relationships – interpersonal relationships, as well as broader societal relationships – and to critique them.

This community is described by some as "like-minded", while others emphasized a "diversity of ideas": "we may disagree but we are still a community". The community was often described as a "safe space" that's "non-judgmental": "It's a rare environment where you can be yourself with others." Youth spoke of how it is incredibly diverse, and this diversity is celebrated. This community combats frequent feelings of social isolation, loneliness, alienation and social anxiety; many youth spoke of feeling "alone". Many youth spoke of either feeling alienated by, or choosing to reject, mainstream society. Several youth spoke of the "solidarity" they had developed with other marginalized people. Artmaking was posited as a way to understand and critique that mainstream society and create something new in its place: a "community of outsiders".

In their desires for their futures. many youth spoke earnestly about the desire to share, with other individuals or with the broader community, the gains they've made through artmaking. Many spoke

*"When you make a song, it's there forever, it's timeless - you're expressing yourself and how you feel in that moment, and anyone else can listen to that song any time and feel your emotion, or be inspired by it."*

*"When I'm not making art, I'm living the norm like everyone else. I just blend in to gloomy society. When I'm making creating, I'm happier and more open. I can be myself."*

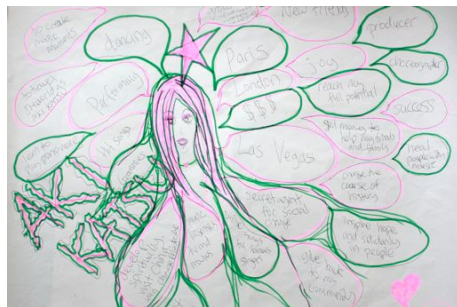
*"SKETCH... helps me see outside of everyday life.... We can form our own community and family, and have views different from the outside, share our views."*

of wanting to “touch lives”, “leave my mark”, act as a leader in the community, and develop initiatives to support emerging artists. Throughout, they spoke of wanting to spread the personal or social benefits that come from engaging in creative community: youth spoke of wanting to “inspire others”, foster “hope and solidarity”, or “change the course of history.” One identified themselves as a “secret agent for social change,” to great applause from the rest of the youth in that focus group.

### **Artmaking is a means to access opportunities, despite real and continuing systemic barriers**

Throughout the focus groups, youth spoke powerfully about the ways in which having access to artmaking opportunities helped them navigate real systemic barriers, and mitigate the impact of their marginalization.

Youth described the ways in which their various forms of marginalization prevented them from exploring their creative sides. In the “before” exercise, youth detailed the ways in which they had limited access to artmaking opportunities (no space or materials; no encouragement or support; mental or physical health issues that prevented them from engaging in mainstream activities), or had to pass them up in order to focus on more immediate needs (such as finding shelter or an income). As one youth said, “I put my art on pause because of lack of funds.” Another left art school because of the challenges of coping with physical or mental health issues. Many spoke of having a “suppressed creativity,” a “yearning for creativity,” of “yearning for something” or “seeking more from life.” This was very common – a sense of “something missing,” or being “tied, like handcuffs,” either by poverty or by social expectations that other pursuits were more valuable uses of their time. As one youth said, “You start out with all this potential, and society just robs you of it.”



Importantly, most youth did not see SKETCH as their artistic genesis; instead, SKETCH is the launching pad for their pre-existing creative potential. The youths’ “after” images detailed great personal, social and professional growth: having increased access to the tools, supplies and materials to make their art; increased access to appropriate employment resources; leadership training and employment opportunities; increased income through selling their work or being involved in paid projects; access to housing information (through SKETCH networks); appropriate formal and informal educational opportunities; guidance and a support network. This support network was both a way to connect with practical resources and as a source of solidarity and emotional support. Some youth spoke of feeling “challenged” or invited to “take a chance”: a healthy and creative risk-taking that motivates their personal and professional development.

Rarely did youth say that their connection with SKETCH completely eliminated these barriers; many spoke of still being poor, unemployed, having trouble in formal education systems, or having tenuous housing. SKETCH was instead credited with supporting them with the professional skills, life skills, networks, materials, and emotional support to better move through the systemic barriers they continue to face, or to simply be happier as they do so.

An overwhelming majority of youth spoke of wanting a professional future connected with the arts: of being a professional musician, filmmaker, jewelry-maker, gallery owner, or painter. Youth spoke of wanting to sell crafts online; show their work in youth art showcases; access stages, audiences or opportunities to perform; tour internationally; and generally get their work “out there”. For some

*“My art comes from my home and I’m using it to reconnect to my lost culture.”*

*“Before, I was in constant flux of “what am I doing with my life?” I was working, but something was missing, I had a hole in my soul... Now my pockets are empty but a smile is on my face. You can be broke and happy.”*

*“It allows me to ponder the bigger questions in life, and make sense of the madness. It’s like my narration – understanding better why things are happening in my life.”*



youth this was motivated by a desire to “share my art with others” so they can “see and relate to” it: to have their ideas, opinions and experiences reflected in the public discourse. Other youth emphasized the desire for high-profile exhibits (such as at the AGO), worldwide music distribution, a vision of themselves on stage with hundreds of fans, being on TV, having their songs on the radio, receiving Grammys, or having their films at Cannes or TIFF. Two youth put it simply, saying that what they wanted for their future was “glory” or “fame!”

Quite a few spoke of developing their “professionalism” and capacity for entrepreneurship. They spoke of their involvement in this community as one of professional “networking”: building up a network of people they could learn from, and seek advice and creative support from. They spoke of beginning to vend or exhibit their work, applying for arts grants, collaborating on projects, assisting other artists as a way to gain skills, have other artists assist them in seeing through larger-scale productions, and so on. As such, community spaces like SKETCH are seen not just as a social network, but as a professional network that can benefit their future goals and development.

Throughout, youth spoke of desiring a future without poverty, economic hardship and lack of access. This often took the form of dreams about being either self-sustaining or outright wealthy, often through their art: they wanted a future that’s “profitable”, where they can “be rich for my art.” More frequently, though, they spoke of more modest financial goals: about the desire to be “self-sustaining”, to be able to “afford to live well”, to be financially “carefree.” As such, most youth did not see their artmaking as a road to fame and fortune; most saw it as a way to sustain themselves, and spoke of it in a way that reflects their experiences with homelessness, poverty, and lack of economic opportunity. As one youth said, “Wealth is being able to eat properly.”



### Youths’ requests of SKETCH

Youth were invited to speak to what they wish for from SKETCH in the future. Most of their feedback has been incorporated into the above categories, but they also spoke of the need for SKETCH to deepen our organizational accessibility. Some youth advocated for greater physical accessibility, such as a programming space that’s accessible to people with disabilities and mobility issues, a convenient location, and more TTC support. One youth requested meals that don’t conflict with their food restrictions. Several youth advocated for better outreach, in particular through street walks and other ways of directly connecting with the most marginalized of youth. Other youth spoke of the need for greater “in-reach”: spreading the word about particular opportunities among youth who are already connected with SKETCH. In addition, youth echoed numerous times the desire that SKETCH continue to provide a “safe space to connect” with staff supports and with other youth. A few youth explicitly insisted on the importance of being an anti-oppressive space. SKETCH was continuously described as a “safe space”, but one youth argued that we could do more to be LGBTQ-inclusive. While they felt SKETCH still had some work to do in this regard, they clearly saw SKETCH as supportive enough that they could advocate for this.

### Prominent Metaphors and Imagery in the Arts-Based and Verbal Feedback

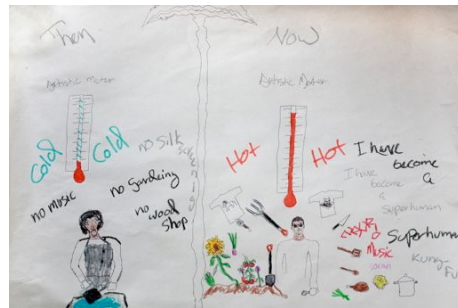
Because this was arts-based research, the process inherently encouraged youth to express in metaphor, narrative and imagery. Several common metaphors emerged, both visual and verbal. Some recurred in response to a particular activity, especially the “before and after” activity. Youth often

*“It’s so easy to get caught up in just living – but then things can either work out or you can also lose everything. Art is the one thing that you can really have for yourself.”*

*“[The] ‘before’ [image] has some colours, but I stand alone. I’m struggling by myself and with my kids. I couldn’t handle it. Now, I’m happier, it’s more colourful and I’m surrounded by lots of people. We might disagree sometimes but we’re a community.”*

used poetic language to describe the shift they underwent as they became connected with SKETCH. These included “connecting the dots”; moving from being formless, vague or empty (“Dust”, “Empty shell”, body with only partial features) to completion or fullness; moving from angular to curvy; moving from colourless or black and white to colourful; moving from darkness to brightness or lightness (so for example, contrasting a dark, sparse landscape in their “before” image to a bright, colourful, sun-lit landscape in their “after” image); moving from cool or cold to warm or hot; and an image of a person crawling out of, or being pulled from, a hole or crevasse. Often these images were not absolutely bleak in the “before” image: they might include an illustration of one arts medium they worked with, or draw a portrait with some facial features, or show themselves connecting with a small community of friends, and then expand on these in the “after” image. In doing so, youth are expressing how they were not “blank canvases” awaiting intervention; before SKETCH they had potential, interests, inspiration and creative drive, but until they could access the support, training and creative community they found at SKETCH, this was left unfulfilled.

*“My life with music, you can see this big smile. My life without music, it's just dust, it's just there, you're not sure you're alive.”*



Some other metaphors reappeared throughout the focus groups.

*Garden imagery* – trees, plants, and references to “growth” – arose several times, sometimes in reference to SKETCH’s community garden program, but also as a metaphor for personal growth, especially the growth that results from creative exploration and discovery. As one youth said, “I am a seed, and SKETCH is the sun, wind and soil”. This is a lovely and appropriate metaphor for the role that an organization such as SKETCH can play in youths’ lives: when connected with an organization that provides mentorship, community connections, skills, and inspiration, youth develop and thrive.

*“I’m still incomplete, but there’s more there. A community, more tools and resources to do something with. The ‘before’ [image] is all about potential, and the ‘after’ [image] shows the stuff I can work with now.”*

*Houses, buildings and physical spaces* often appeared in youths’ drawings. Sometimes it was an alleyway or jail, illustrating them “before” connecting with SKETCH. Sometimes it was a dream of what the new SKETCH space will look like in the future. But houses and buildings emerged most often when youth imagined their own future, in the third question: they illustrated simple houses, home art galleries, kitchens, livingrooms and other domestic spaces. This is quite telling, and demonstrates that one of their desires is for stable housing, a “room of one’s own”: this is an implicit expression of the fact that many of them still struggle to find and keep affordable, appropriate, stable housing. They desire this for their future because many of them do not have it now.

*“Art brought my life from scattered to whole.”*

*Food and nourishment, cooking and eating* was another theme that recurred in response to each question: youth spoke of not eating healthy food when not at SKETCH, and of eating great food at SKETCH; they spoke of art as something that “nourishes” the soul; of cooking for others as an expression of love, a way to share your art with others, and as therapeutic; and of healthy food as a desire for their future, as a symbol of wealth. Much as how they used imagery around housing, the way they spoke of food (both literally and metaphorically) implicitly speaks to the fact that many youth still struggle with food insecurity.

*Travel* emerged several times, in particular in the third question, as youth envisioned their ideal futures. Youth spoke of travel as a way to share their art or creative initiatives more broadly: of wanting to tour their band, show internationally, participate in international residencies, and start a youth-based organization in another country. They also spoke of wanting to travel simply for the sake

of exploring, learning, and connecting with a broader international community. As such, they see it as an opportunity for personal growth and expansion. Travel thus becomes a metaphor for one's creative potential and life possibilities.

As we can see, these metaphors tell us much about youths' desires, and also about their current life circumstances. In particular when used in response to the third question, these metaphors often speak to what youth have difficulty accessing: a steady income, stable and appropriate housing, a supportive community, and the encouragement and skills to grow and develop as an artist and as a person. These metaphors are a statement of desire that also reveals much about their current marginalization and poverty.



*“Because I AM LOW-INCOME & have mental health & addictions, not only can I not access teachers, friends & art supplies, etc. & because society alienates me I can not express myself, my dreams, my goals & my identity in a health way. Throw the use of color, images & various mediums, I can express my-self in a way that I otherwise could not in my day-to-day life.”*

## Discussion and Implications

The survey findings demonstrated a clear and meaningful relationship between youths' arts engagement and their quality of life, both overall and in each specific aspect of their lives (the physical, psychological, social and environmental domains). What we can't tell from the surveys alone is whether the increase in arts engagement contributes to greater quality of life, vice versa, or both. In the focus groups, youth spoke and made art which eloquently demonstrated that opportunities for artmaking help make them happier, healthier, more fulfilled, confident, resilient, socially-connected and talented people, who are more motivated to pursue creative and life goals. By looking at both sets of findings side by side, we hear very clearly from youth that *they feel* that this correlation is a causal one: that opportunities for artmaking increase their quality of life in myriad ways.

**Artmaking opportunities profoundly increase youths' broader health and wellbeing.** Youth expressed – explicitly, repeatedly, and unprompted – that artmaking contributes to improved mental health: some spoke of experiencing depression, anxiety, anger, sadness and other mental health challenges, and called artmaking their therapy. Other youth spoke of the arts helping them cope with life stresses; others described how it helped them heal. The creative community they build through artmaking also improves their wellness by providing them with increased social connectedness and a strong personal support network. And their increased drive and sense of purpose motivates them and infuses them with a deep – and for many, newfound – investment in their own future.

### **Artmaking creates a space for youth to reclaim their narrative.**

Many of youths' statements showed them reclaiming the mainstream narrative usually applied to marginalized youth, and telling their story on their own terms. One youth spoke of no longer being “ashamed” of their poverty. Many youth spoke of developing an identity as an artist or skilled creator rather than any of the labels or stereotypes that others could place on them. Several spoke of the creative discovery process as them developing their own “story,” while others spoke of identity development through self-expression as “communicating with yourself.” Youth see their artmaking as a way to have a positive impact in the world; they see themselves as mentors and leaders. In each instance, they are creating a new narrative of themselves and their social role, often in contrast with oppressive, discriminatory alternatives based in “lack” (of housing, employment, schooling, etc). The narrative is positive, affirming, and also motivating: through it, they engage in a feedback loop that further spurs them to learn, build, develop, connect and grow.

*“Art is a way that your feelings and expressions become permanent things in the universe.”*

**Through artmaking, youth build personal agency and strong self-direction.** Both verbally and visually, youth described how artmaking was a means for them to become inspired, enrich their identity, build a sense a direction and purpose, identify creative goals, and feel the sense of their own ability to see them through. Youth described moving from being “stuck,” “lost” or “formless” to feeling whole, purposeful and driven. They feel that they have skills and wisdom to share with the broader world, and meaningful contributions to make. This indicates an important shift into a greater sense of their own personal agency, which not only fundamentally enriches their lives, but also helps them successfully navigate the systemic discrimination they face.

*“We wouldn't be here without the fucked up stuff. We're survivors. Cheers to everyone here. We kept all of our hearts, we didn't get cold.”*

**Through the arts, youth individually and collectively mitigate the impacts of marginalization.** All of the positive impacts that artmaking has on youths' lives help the youth navigate or cope with their experiences of marginalization. Through the arts they can explore, learn, build skills and community. On an individual level, they can develop a new identity based in their gifts and talents. On a group level, they can build solidarity and a “community of outsiders,” lessening alienation and isolation. Together, they can build personal agency and a “movement.” And as one youth put it, “art is one of the only things you can control”: they feel powerless in so many facets of their lives, but the arts is a site where they do have power, skill and agency.

## Recommendations

While the messages from youth were loud and clear – that arts engagement has a significant positive impact on their quality of life – some important questions remain.

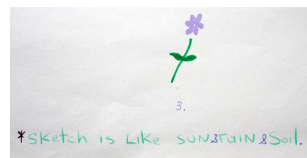
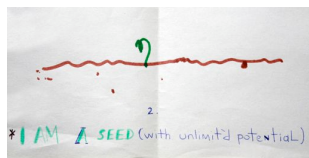
**How exactly does the community arts process have this impact on youths' lives?** Which particular programs, projects, arts media, or modes of engaging youth have these different impacts? What are the essential elements in SKETCH's program philosophy and practice that foster this change? These questions could be answered by doing more intensive research, including one-to-one interviews, to look at individual youths' storytelling about their creative and personal development, and probe further how this change happens.

*“I remember I joined SKETCH and did the gender-based analysis workshops. I started believing in my skills, people started looking at me as a role model. Now I have an impact.”*

**Why is the social domain less impacted by arts engagement than the other domains?** Youth spoke convincingly about the ways in which the arts increases their participation in healthy community; clearly youth see that their social networks are enriched through artmaking. This question begs more investigation.

**How does this change over time?** This was a one-off project: it caught a “snapshot” of these youth at a particular moment, and engaged them in storytelling to explore shifts over time. A follow-up project could reveal much by speaking with some of the same youth, a year later, to see how their arts-based and survey responses change over time, and with extended involvement.

**How much of these findings are unique to SKETCH?** What can also be applied in other initiatives doing community arts programming with marginalized youth? By conducting similar research projects in other agency contexts, we could come to understand more about the effects of different programming styles, arts media, and methods for engaging youth.



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