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Research on the Psychological Cost of Completion Requirements in Mandala Painting and the Healing Independence of Circular Forms

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Abstract

Mandala painting has a healing effect in fields such as art therapy, which alleviates anxiety and improves emotional well-being. However, in practice, individuals often believe that a work can be considered completed only when it is fully filled in, thinking that only then will their psychological anxiety cease. This notion transforms a mode of free expression into a task governed by explicit evaluative standards, generating pressure in an activity intended for relaxation and healing. This article first discusses the intensification of pressure due to the pursuit of "completion" from three perspectives: altered time perception, perfectionism, and intrinsic motivation. It then draws on empirical evidence to argue that the therapeutic effects derive from the circular form and the drawing process themselves, and that "completion" is not a necessary condition. Taken together, these six lines of argument show that "completion" is not a prerequisite for mandala painting; rather, it can even hinder art therapy. When the pursuit of "completion" is relinquished, control over the painting returns to the participants themselves, allowing inner peace to emerge gradually.

Keywords: Mandala Painting; Experience of Completion; Circular Form; Anxiety

1. Introduction

Mandala painting is a method of psychological regulation, widely utilized in the fields of psychological counseling and clinical psychology. Its effects are primarily attributed to the psychological symbolism inherent in its circular form, which allows the individual to become fully engaged in the painting process. Carl Jung regarded mandalas as symbols of the Self, representing the completeness and order of the psyche, and art therapy theory posits that painting within circle aids in integrating a disordered mind. However, in practical application, an implicit requirement has gradually taken hold: a mandala must be completely filled with color before it can be considered complete and therefore capable of soothing emotions. Although this condition is not explicitly stated in therapeutic guidelines, it significantly influences individuals' understanding of the method

during actual practice. Once completion is viewed as a goal, coloring ceases to be an experience of free expression and transforms into a task aimed at producing standardized results. For individuals with a high susceptibility to anxiety, this can exacerbate psychological stress and undermine the intended relaxation effect. This article aims to elucidate that the soothing of individual emotions through mandalas relies on their circular form and the painting process itself, and does not require the entire image to be completed. Therefore, the notion of "completion" is fundamentally an unnecessary additional requirement. Centered around this core idea, the article will argue from two angles: firstly, that the demand for "completion" induces time pressure, leading to intrinsic evaluative anxiety, which diminishes the internal motivation to engage in the task and amplifies the psychological burden for anxious populations; secondly, supported by empirical evidence, that therapeutic effects can be achieved solely through the circular form and the painting process, without the need for "completion". These two aspects, one negating and one affirming, jointly demonstrate that "completion" should not be a rigid requirement for mandala painting. Based on the aforementioned misconceptions, this study's central research question is: Does the therapeutic effect of mandala drawing depend on the complete coloring of the artwork? What psychological burdens does the "completion requirement" impose on participants, and does the circular form itself possess independent healing value? Theoretically, this study clarifies the mechanism of mandala therapy from multiple perspectives—including time perception, perfectionism, and self-determination theory—correcting the mistaken belief that therapeutic outcomes are contingent upon completing the drawing. It enriches discussions in art therapy regarding the relationship between the creative process and its outcomes. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for clinical psychologists and art therapists, suggesting that rigid demands for visual completion should be relaxed during mandala therapy to preserve clients' autonomy and maximize the emotional regulation benefits of mandala drawing.

2. Completion Requirements and their Impact on the Psychological Burden of Individuals with Anxiety

According to the introduction, the issue this paper aims to address is whether the concept of "completion" in mandala painting is a necessary condition for the healing attributed to mandala painting, and how mandala painting achieves its effects on psychological healing and alleviation of anxiety. The next question we will argue is whether "completion" is indeed a necessary condition.

2.1. Time Perception and the Anxiety of the Countdown

If painting is viewed as a task that must be "completed", then individuals' perception of time will change. The perception of time shifts from a concept of natural passage to one where time is continuously counting down towards a defined "endpoint" in individuals' minds. Consequently, this subconscious alteration of the concept will exacerbate the pressure on individuals and continuously deplete their energy. Numerous studies have demonstrated that individuals prone to anxiety exhibit inaccuracies in their perception and judgment of time duration under stress.

Vignaud, Brunelin, Galia, et al. (2025) confirm that individuals tend to overestimate time in the face of sudden stress, perceiving time as having lengthened or slowed down. This study involved a

total of 871 participants, with 437 subjected to stress and 434 serving as a normal control group. The conclusion drawn from this research indicates that individuals, when confronted with high-pressure environments, experience a distortion in their perception of time, feeling as though time is stretched; thus, anxious individuals become increasingly anxious. The outcomes of this study reflect in mandala painting, suggesting that if a requirement for "completion" is imposed, it effectively establishes a fixed temporal boundary. Consequently, anxious individuals may "automatically" transform mandala painting into a timed task, diverting it from its original purpose of relaxation and stress relief into a source of agony awaiting the task's completion. Additionally, Sarigiannidis, Kieslich, Grillon, et al. (2026) provide an explanation from a brain function perspective, indicating that anxiety consumes the brain's limited processing capacity, thus affecting the temporal perception influenced by emotion. Heavy burdens modify an individual's perception of time influenced by emotion. This series of experiments induced anxiety through specialized methods, coupled with time judgment tests, revealing that the brain regions involved in processing anxiety and time perception activate simultaneously in the insula and the anterior cingulate cortex.

These studies indicate that once we demand "completion" and impose a time limit on mandala painting, individuals experiencing anxiety will transform the painting process into a countdown task. What should be a pleasurable coloring process becomes an agonizing wait, contradicting the very purpose of mandala painting. Users of mandala painting no longer engage with the comfort provided by the colors and lines; instead, they are preoccupied with the anxiety of how much remains incomplete, and the constant focus on the passage of time adds a burden to the mind.

2.2. The Activation of Perfectionism and the Implicit Evaluation Framework

"Completion" not only brings the side effects mentioned above but also gives rise to another side effect: an internal scoring standard. That is, even in the absence of judgment by others, those who pursue perfection and are prone to anxiety will still experience pressure.

Frost and Marten (1990) conducted a representative study, demonstrating that once individuals are in a judgment environment, those with perfectionism exhibit a more pronounced increase in anxiety. This anxiety persists regardless of whether external evaluations are positive or negative. The results of this experiment led to a conclusion contrary to common belief: the anxiety induced by evaluations is unrelated to the positivity or negativity of external assessments; as long as individuals find themselves in a potential judgment environment, anxiety will arise. Rassaby, Cassiello-Robbins, et al. (2021) found that the key element in perfectionism is the discrepancy between the ideal self and the real self, and this gap can elevate an individual's level of anxiety. Individuals with severe perfectionism experience heightened anxiety when engaged in tasks associated with learning.

The aforementioned studies provide evidence that, under the condition of "completion" individuals who pursue perfectionism and are prone to anxiety will automatically begin to self-criticize, even in the absence of any external comments or critiques. The mere mention of the term "completion" inherently conveys the expectation of "doing well". This is sufficient to activate an implicit evaluation standard within these perfectionistic and anxious individuals.

Although painting is intrinsically non-critical, their transformation of the implicit standard of

"completion" leads to an iterative self-interrogation by the creator. During the coloring process, they may no longer genuinely enjoy the relaxation that the act of painting brings; instead, they become preoccupied with questions regarding the quality of their artwork and whether it meets certain standards that do not actually exist. Continuous self-criticism undermines the healing efficacy of painting as a medium for emotional expression. It is also noteworthy that therapists do not need to explicitly state that the artwork should be aesthetically pleasing or highly complete; merely mentioning the term "completion" is sufficient to trigger this psychological response, as the reference to "completion" is typically understood to imply that the work must undergo evaluation.

2.3. Self-Determination Theory and the Transition from Executor to Object

From the perspective of psychological motivation, if coloring is viewed as a task that requires completion, the mindset of the painter will undergo a transformation, shifting from a spontaneous and proactive creative act to a passive state awaiting evaluation. Consequently, the intrinsic motivation for engaging in this activity and the experience of psychological healing will be significantly diminished.

The core assertion of Self-Determination Theory is that external demands or rewards can erode an individual's intrinsic motivation to act. This is because individuals perceive their current behaviors as not originating from their own intentions, but rather as being compelled and driven by external forces. Once this perception arises, the state of autonomy substantially declines. Murayama, Matsumoto, et al. (2010), involving neurobiological experiments, confirms this notion: if participants feel their actions are self-directed, their intrinsic motivation to perform tasks intensifies; however, if individuals are constrained by controlling demands, the opposite effect occurs. When these findings are applied to mandala painting, if there is a requirement to "complete" the work, the painter's inner experience shifts from expressing feelings and emotions through the circular structure of the mandala to focusing on producing a "perfect" piece. This shift in mindset directly replaces the ease and joy typically derived from mandala painting with demands imposed by external factors and one's own expectations, thus diminishing the effectiveness of art therapy.

Mandala painting is inherently a method used to alleviate one's emotions; however, under the demand for "completion", it transforms into a task that must meet certain standards. The relationship between the individual and the painting shifts from a fully immersive process to one that must produce qualified outcomes, a change that fundamentally contradicts the original intention of Art Therapy. The sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness described in Self-Determination Theory are negatively impacted in this process. When external goals are imposed for completion, individuals lose their sense of autonomy; moreover, in the process of painting, the expression of subjective emotions does not inherently possess categories of superiority or inferiority; therefore, the difficulty for participants to achieve a sense of competence increases. Focused entirely on producing a finished product leads to a diminished attention to one's internal feelings, consequently weakening the sense of relatedness. The failure to satisfy these three psychological needs serves as a fundamental reason for the reduced effectiveness of mandala healing, particularly at the motivational level.

3. The Circular form and the Drawing Process as Independent Sources of Healing

3.1. The Healing Value of the Circle Itself

In contrast to the pressure mechanisms proposed above, the circular form of the mandala itself possesses inherent healing value, which transcends the state of "completion". In simple terms, mandala painting does not require the individual wielding the brush to achieve completion; it does not impose demands on the participants. Rather, as long as participants subjectively wish to engage in the act of painting, they have already entered the circular form of the mandala, thereby attaining the healing effect. Jung posits that the mandala symbolizes the Self, which represents the most complete and authentic version of oneself. Even when one harbors numerous thoughts internally, these thoughts merely represent "fragments" of oneself, not the whole. The Self encompasses everything, positive and negative alike, and constitutes the center that sustains our psychological functioning. In the order-art-therapy account, the mandala's circular structure symbolizes this ordering center, and the act of painting enacts the gradual convergence of scattered "fragments" toward the center — a process that helps unify and organize a disordered mind. The circular structure of mandala painting symbolizes the maintenance of order, and the process of painting reflects the gradual convergence of those "fragments" towards the center, which is quite beneficial for unifying and organizing a disordered mind. However, most individuals default to the notion that mandala paintings are only considered qualified works once they are completely colored; they believe that only by filling in all the blank spaces can they attain the corresponding psychological comfort. This perspective conceals a logic that directly links the physical completeness of the artwork to the psychological healing effect, yet whether this logic holds true requires further validation through empirical research.

Babouchkina and Robbins (2015) provided answers to the research question. They established four experimental groups in their randomized controlled trial: one group colored a blank circle while expressing emotions as required; another group colored a blank circle and engaged in free drawing; a third group colored a square while expressing emotions as required; and the fourth group colored a square while engaging in free drawing. The results indicated that the emotional improvement in the two circle experimental groups was significantly higher than that in the two square groups. Therefore, we can draw a conclusion that engaging in coloring activities featuring circular patterns can better alleviate patients' anxiety, implying that the circular form of the mandala plays a primary role. Notably, in this experiment, participants were not instructed to fill in all the spaces of the mandala, yet the outcomes reflected that they still experienced positive emotional healing. Practice is the sole criterion for testing truth; this experimental result raises a critical theory that the degree of completion on paper does not equate to the level of healing felt by the participants internally. The emotional alleviation produced by mandala painting relies upon the circular form and the process of participants coloring. Thus, we can verify the aforementioned assertion: the key aspect of mandala painting lies in its circular form, which is an undeniable fact that supersedes the notion of "completion". Consistent evidence comes from Chinese researchers. Lu and Li (2022) randomly assigned 75 adolescents with depression to a circle-trajectory group, a straight-line-trajectory group, or a control group. After one month of intervention, the pre–post difference in depression scores was significantly larger in the circle-trajectory group than in either of the other

two groups, further demonstrating that the circular form itself possesses therapeutic effects on the psyche. This therapeutic effect is already at play when one selects a drawing method, independent of whether it is “completed”.

From the results of the two experiments mentioned above, we can draw a more comprehensive conclusion: the circular form inherent in mandala painting possesses a healing effect; it represents the Self, which is capable of embracing chaotic and anxious emotions and gradually transforming them into a calm and orderly core. This healing effect not only derives from the circular form itself but also from the creative process of painting, rather than the completeness of the artwork. Even if the painting is unfinished, one can still attain a psychological healing effect; maintaining relaxation and returning to a state of calmness is the true core of what makes mandala painting worthy of attention.

3.2. Healing Comes from Process Rather than Result

Let us further discuss the process of mandala painting; the true healing occurs during the drawing process, not in the final “product”. The healing of art therapy takes place within the actions of painting, drawing, kneading, and tearing, which themselves serve to release and organize emotions such as anxiety. Mandala painting is a form of art therapy that employs the creative process of circular forms to restore inner tranquility.

Pitak-Davis (1992) records that a book written by Fincher, S. F. explicitly points out that there is fundamentally no right or wrong in mandala painting; it cannot be judged by correctness or incorrectness, as the focus lies on the process of expression rather than the pursuit of a perfect product. This argument emphasizes the intrinsic value of the creative process. This shifts the evaluative criteria for healing to the internal experience of the self. Campenni and Hartman (2020) also illustrate more interesting results from their randomized controlled trial, further confirming that healing arises from the process rather than the outcome. They selected 69 college students, dividing them into two dimensions: the first dimension differentiating between structured and unstructured approaches, characterized by coloring versus free creation; the second dimension distinguishing directed expression from free expression, where the core difference lies in one group deliberately expressing anxiety during the painting process, while the other group creates freely without imposed requirements. The results indicate that all four groups effectively reduced anxiety levels, with no significant differences observed, demonstrating comparable efficacy. This indicates that participants do not need to be preoccupied with whether the artwork meets a standard; rather, as long as they engage in painting, anxiety can be alleviated. Furthermore, it was found that individuals involved in unstructured mandala creation, or free creation, tend to articulate more emotionally resonant vocabulary in their reflections upon completion. This suggests that different forms of mandala painting serve distinct roles in therapy, each possessing unique advantages, yet they share the commonality that the therapeutic effect is not reflected by the completeness of the artwork. The experiences gained during the drawing process are the true components that render healing effective.

From the experiential perspective, when individuals immerse themselves in the process of painting, their attention becomes focused on the selection of colors, the direction of lines, and the

gradual emergence of shapes. This natural concentration of attention itself bears similarities to the effects of mindfulness. What, then, is mindfulness? It is the conscious and non-judgmental awareness of one's present self. In mandala painting, this is manifested by directing attention to the act of drawing, accepting the imperfections of the artwork, ceasing self-criticism, and concentrating on the experience of creation with the pen. Regardless of how one paints, as long as one begins to draw, mindfulness is enhanced, and anxiety decreases. Simultaneously, whether or not completion occurs does not enter the individual's conscious awareness during this painting process, as the characteristic of this immersive experience lies precisely in the temporary forgetfulness of events and goals. Once the mind contemplates "completion", the individual's attention shifts from enjoying the process of drawing to evaluating the progress of "task completion". This shift in state disrupts the immersive experience and diminishes the healing effects. Therefore, the assertion that healing derives from the process rather than the result is not only empirically supported but also aligns with the psychological mechanisms of immersive experiences.

3.3. Indirect Evidence that Completion is not Necessary

Even without a direct comparison of the effects of completion versus non-completion, existing research has provided ample indirect support indicating that completion is not essential. Curry and Kasser (2005) discovered that coloring mandalas or patterned grids is more effective in reducing anxiety than free coloring on plain paper. This suggests that the essence of healing lies in the structured nature of the shapes themselves, rather than the act of completing the coloring. The underlying mechanism may guide individuals into a focused state similar to flow. This process, characterized by structured shapes, immerses individuals to the extent that they even forget about "mindfulness". This state arises from the immersive experience of the process and is unrelated to whether or not completion occurs. The significance of this finding is that it indicates the efficacy of structured shapes in alleviating anxiety does not depend on the specific content of the shapes, nor on the degree of completion of the coloring, but solely on the characteristic of being structured. Thus, utilizing a structured pattern to lead individuals into an immersive flow state can effectively alleviate anxiety. Campenni and Hartman (2020) also corroborates this: all results from this experiment indicate that the anxiety-reducing effect of mandala painting is not contingent upon the completion of the artwork; the mere act of engaging in the creation of mandala paintings can reduce anxiety.

These studies all arrive at the same conclusion: the ability of mandala painting to soothe emotions relies on the orderly circular patterns themselves, as well as the individual's state of deep immersion during the creative process. This psychological regulation effect does not predicate on whether the image is completely filled in; incomplete coloring can also yield psychological regulation effects. "Completion" is not a rigid requirement, but rather an additional condition. More crucially, these studies have uncovered a deeper understanding: the healing effects do not manifest only upon reaching the stage of completion, but rather occur continuously throughout each phase of the painting process.

4. Discussion

Setting "completion" as a rigid requirement for mandala painting essentially obscures the experiential process with a task-oriented mindset, replacing genuine internal feelings with external evaluative criteria. For individuals with a tendency towards anxiety, this approach not only fails to facilitate relaxation effects but can additionally exacerbate psychological pressure from the dimensions of time constraints, internal evaluations, and passive execution motivation.

Research related to the perception of time indicates that individuals experiencing anxiety within a task-oriented mindset perceive the time spent on drawing as a mentally depleting countdown. Studies on perfectionism similarly reveal that reliance solely on the term "completion" activates an individual's intrinsic self-evaluation mechanism. Self-Determination Theory further elucidates that externally set goals can erode an individual's intrinsic motivation, resulting in a shift from a subject who enjoys drawing and expresses emotions through it to an object awaiting judgment based on the submission of satisfactory outcomes. By integrating the aforementioned three mechanisms, it can be observed that the demand for "completion" gradually undermines the psychological guiding role that the mandala is supposed to serve.

From another perspective, multiple related studies consistently confirm that the mere presence of circle patterns and the painting process itself possess the effect of psychological regulation. The psychological implications carried by circles and the relevant experimental results indicate that the healing effect begins to take effect when individuals perceive circle patterns. The field of art therapy also places importance on the value of the process, asserting that emotional expression behavior itself constitutes the healing process. The effect of this structured form in alleviating anxiety is not related to whether the entire image is fully colored. The aforementioned evidence demonstrates that the emotional regulation function of mandalas relies on the circle styles and the experiences during the painting process; even without the demand for the "completion" of the work, it can still be effective. "Completion" is not an essential condition for healing and should not be regarded as a compulsory standard.

The two perspectives mentioned above do not constitute independent parallel discourses but instead form a mutually corroborative logical relationship. The former argues from the contrary, demonstrating that the mandatory requirement for the completeness of works can disrupt the conditions for healing through task-oriented approaches and self-assessment. The latter positively illustrates that the circle symbol carrier and the painting experience itself are sufficient to fulfill the role of psychological guidance. It is precisely because the healing effect is inherently contained within the patterns and the painting process that the insistence on the completion of artworks is not only a redundant requirement but also generates negative intervention effects.

For example, if the effects of mandala painting must be based on coloring the entire image, then the requirement for "completion" is reasonable. However, actual research has found that individuals begin to experience healing once they focus on the circular patterns and the painting process. Therefore, it is evident that making "completion" a rigid requirement lacks theoretical support. By synthesizing the aforementioned arguments both for and against, the same conclusion can be drawn: it is unnecessary to treat "completion" as a mandatory regulation.

This conclusion also has practical reference value for the implementation of art therapy. When mental health workers guide participants in mandala painting activities, they should downplay expressions such as “completion” and shift the focus of the intervention to the painting experience and the free expression of emotions. Participants need not color every blank space nor pursue the superficial integrity of the artwork; healing occurs when they focus on the circle and engage in the act of painting. Therapists can inform participants that they may terminate the painting when they feel comfortable, and “completion” need not serve as the criterion for ending the activity.

This seemingly minor adjustment can fundamentally alter participants’ perceptions of the activity, preserve the mandala’s inherent psychological regulation capacity and prevent task-oriented thinking from diminishing it. By relinquishing the fixation on the degree of completion of the artwork and restoring the authority of the drawing back to the participants themselves, individuals can engage effortlessly while interacting with the circular form, progressively achieving inner tranquility throughout the painting process.

5. Conclusion

The healing mechanism of mandala painting should not be simplified to a task that needs to be completed. This paper begins from two contrasting arguments, demonstrating that the countdown of time perception can suddenly transform naturally flowing time into a countdown with a definitive requirement for “completion”, thus increasing individual anxiety and psychological burden. It also argues that the structural form of the circular design possesses an independent healing effect during the drawing process itself, independent of the act of filling it. The existence of this additional condition of “completion” not only fails to produce a healing effect but may also undermine the psychological comfort that mandala painting is supposed to provide. In this sense, relinquishing completion may indeed mark the beginning of returning to the authentic healing power of the mandala. Future research could further directly compare the differences in the healing effects of mandala painting under conditions of completion versus incompletion, thereby more accurately testing the theoretical conclusions posited in this paper and offering more specific operational guidelines for art therapy practice.

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Conceptualization, Y.S. and Y.H.; methodology, Y.H.; validation Y.H., Y.S., and J.W.; investigation, Y.H.; resources, Y.H.; writing—original draft preparation, Y.S.; writing—review and editing, Y.H. and J.W.; visualization, Y.H. and J.W.; supervision, Y.S.; project administration, Y.S.; funding acquisition, Y.S. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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