



## Reviewing the Variations of Art Therapy in Reducing Depression Among the Elderly: A Systematic Review

Fitratul Muthahharah<sup>1\*</sup>, Iswinarti<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> University of Muhammadiyah Malang

**Corresponding Author:** Fitratul Muthahharah [fitahara2505@gmail.com](mailto:fitahara2505@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

Depression in older adults is often triggered by social isolation, declining physical function, and changes in social roles. This systematic review aims to analyze the effectiveness of art therapy in reducing depressive symptoms in the elderly, based on 13 research articles. The findings indicate that art therapy consistently reduces symptoms of depression. The most common interventions include drawing and painting, followed by music, clay, collage, colouring, dance, drama, and poetry. Combined art forms, such as music and painting, provide additional benefits through enhanced self-expression, improved mood, and stress reduction. This study contributes to strengthening the scientific foundation for using art therapy as a holistic and non-pharmacological alternative intervention to improve the mental well-being of older adults.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In human life, aging is an inevitable part of the life journey. The term "elderly" refers to individuals who have reached the age of over 60 years, which marks the final stage of human development. Aging is a natural process that can lead to a decline in physical condition and affect social aspects. This may result in a deterioration of bodily functions and cognitive patterns in the elderly (Thong, 2011). In Indonesia, the number of elderly individuals is projected to continue increasing until 2045. According to data from Statistics Indonesia (BPS, 2024), the elderly population reached 22.6 million in 2023, accounting for approximately 11.75% of the total population. It is estimated that by 2045, this figure will rise to 65.8 million, which is equivalent to 20.5% of the total population.

During old age, individuals undergo various physical and mental changes. As they grow older, the elderly experiences a gradual decline in bodily functions. This is a common phenomenon, often accompanied by issues such as the loss of regular work, the absence of conversation partners, increased vulnerability to various illnesses, social isolation, and feelings of loneliness in old age. These conditions can trigger various mental health issues, with depression being one of the most common among the elderly (Sirojudin & Pratiwi, 2020). Furthermore, studies show that elderly individuals who experience loneliness and lack involvement in social activities are at a higher risk of developing depressive symptoms compared to those with sufficient social interaction. Therefore, efforts to enhance the emotional and social well-being of the elderly are crucial in preventing and reducing depression within this population (Santini et al., 2020).

Depression is one of the most common mental health issues experienced by the elderly, with a significant global prevalence. Contributing factors to depression in older adults include social isolation, decline in physical function, and changes in social roles. Depression in the elderly is often difficult to detect because its symptoms can overlap with the natural effects of aging or physical illnesses commonly experienced in later life. Elderly individuals with depression tend to show symptoms such as loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities, changes in sleep patterns and appetite, excessive fatigue, and feelings of worthlessness or hopelessness (Alexopoulos, 2019). Major risk factors contributing to depression in the elderly include the loss of a spouse or loved ones, physical limitations due to chronic illness, and reduced social participation (Kok & Reynolds, 2017). Unfortunately, the stigma surrounding mental health in older adults also serves as a barrier to seeking professional help, resulting in many elderly individuals not receiving the interventions they need. Therefore, a multidisciplinary approach involving social support, psychological therapy, and community-based interventions is essential to address depression in the elderly and improve their quality of life.

One non-pharmacological approach that is gaining increasing attention in addressing depression among the elderly is art therapy. Art therapy provides a space for older adults to express their emotions and life experiences through visual media such as drawing, painting, or crafting (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010). The

creative process in art therapy not only helps to express feelings that are difficult to verbalize but also creates enjoyable and meaningful experiences that can improve mood and reduce depressive symptoms (Ciasca et al., 2018). In addition, art therapy can enhance social engagement by enabling the elderly to participate in group activities, thereby helping to alleviate loneliness and increase the social support they receive. Studies have shown that elderly individuals who regularly engage in art therapy experience improved emotional well-being and lower stress levels compared to those who do not participate in artistic activities (Kim et al., 2021). With its various benefits, art therapy can serve as an effective alternative mental health intervention for elderly individuals experiencing depression.

Art therapy has emerged as a promising intervention for reducing depressive symptoms in the elderly. A study by Ching et al. (2019) found that art therapy not only reduced depression levels but also improved self-esteem among nursing home residents. Research conducted by Yulissusanti (2017) in her thesis examined the effects of drawing art therapy on depression levels in the elderly. Her findings showed that drawing art therapy significantly reduced depression levels among elderly residents in nursing homes. Art therapy provides a space for older adults to express their emotions creatively—something that is often difficult to convey in words. Additionally, engaging in artistic activities can enhance a sense of social connectedness through group interaction, thereby reducing the loneliness that many elderly individuals experience. Moreover, research suggests that using art as a therapeutic medium can stimulate brain activity and promote better cognitive function, helping older adults remain mentally and emotionally active (Kim et al., 2021). Other benefits include cognitive stimulation and improved emotional well-being, all of which contribute to a better overall quality of life (Stuckey & Nobel, 2010).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The mechanism behind the effectiveness of art therapy in addressing depression in the elderly involves several aspects. According to a systematic review by Blomdahl et al. (2018), the creative process in art therapy enhances self-expression, provides a sense of achievement, and strengthens social interactions—all of which contribute to a reduction in depressive symptoms. Additionally, art therapy can stimulate cognitive function and offer opportunities for older adults to engage in meaningful activities that are essential for their psychological well-being. This process also helps the elderly cope with feelings of loss—such as the loss of social roles or emotional support—by providing an alternative medium to channel their emotions. Art therapy creates a safe and supportive environment where the elderly can feel accepted and valued. Artistic activities can also trigger the release of happiness hormones, such as endorphins, which improve mood and reduce anxiety. Thus, art therapy serves not only as a therapeutic tool but also as a means of enhancing overall quality of life.

Although existing evidence shows the great potential of art therapy in addressing depression among the elderly, further research is still needed to

understand the underlying mechanisms and to determine the most effective intervention protocols. This systematic review aims to analyze recent literature on the effectiveness of art therapy in reducing depressive symptoms in the elderly, as well as to further identify which types of art therapy are most effective for this population.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses the systematic review research method, where this method aims to identify and review journals systematically by following the procedures determined. In conducting a systematic review, there are several stages that can be followed: planning, execution, and report writing (Kitchenham, 2004). In the planning stage of the review, the process began by formulating the research question using the PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome). The research questions in this review are: How effective is art therapy in reducing depressive symptoms in older adults, and what types of art therapy can reduce depressive symptoms in this population? The next step involved determining the keywords and designing a search protocol. After deriving terms from the research questions, they were expanded to create a more comprehensive list of search terms. The keywords used were:

1. Art Therapy = Therapeutic Art, Visual Arts Therapy, Creative Therapy, Arts-Based Therapy, Expressive Therapy.
2. Older Adults = Elderly, Older Person, Aging Adult, Geriatric Population, Mature Adult, Older Generation.
3. Depression

These keywords were used to search for articles in the Publish or Perish and Scopus databases. The next stage involved importing all retrieved articles into Rayyan.ai to check for duplicates and to conduct a screening process based on titles and abstracts. After this initial screening, the selected articles were reviewed in full to ensure relevance and quality. From a total of 769 articles screened, 13 articles were found to be eligible for inclusion, specifically addressing the impact of art therapy on depression in older adults. The selection process followed specific inclusion criteria to define the boundaries of the review: 1) Articles that discussed art therapy in older adults experiencing depression. 2) Research subjects aged 60 and above. 3) Both quantitative and qualitative research designs. 4) Articles published in English. 5) Studies conducted within the last ten years (2014–2024). Articles were excluded if they: 1) Discussed art therapy but not in the context of elderly individuals with depression. 2) Were published in languages other than English. 3) Were in the form of books,

literature reviews, reports, surveys, or studies that lacked clear research descriptions.

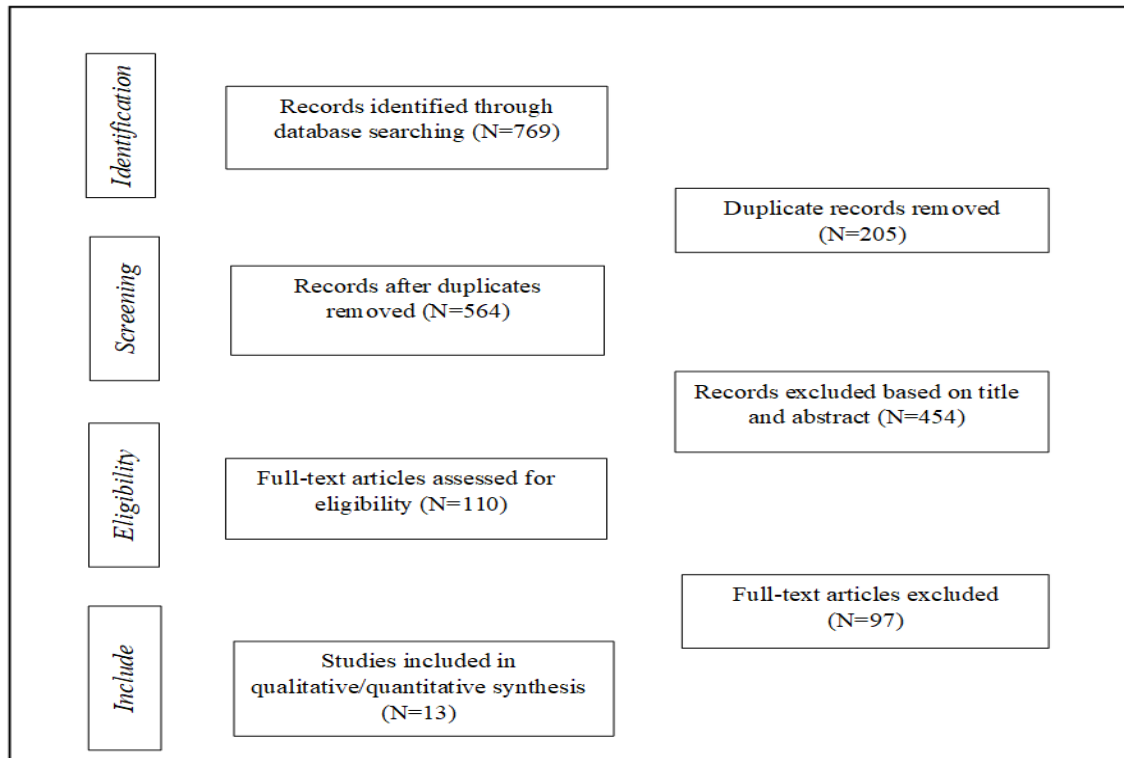


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Journal Selection Process

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Depression in older adults tends to be high, often caused by feelings of loss of attention and support from the social environment, particularly from family (Suardiman, 2016). In some cases, the depression experienced by older adults can even drive them to contemplate suicide. To address this condition, various therapies can be applied, including activities that are positive, engaging, and enjoyable. One effective form of therapy is art therapy. According to Malchiodi (2013), art therapy is an expressive therapy that utilizes artistic media, such as painting, music, dance, and writing, to help individuals express themselves, improve coping skills, manage stress, and enhance self-confidence.

Art therapy can also be defined as an activity of creating artwork aimed at fulfilling the psychological and emotional needs of individuals, whether they have artistic abilities or not. This process provides individuals with a space to express feelings and experiences that might be difficult to communicate verbally. By engaging all aspects or functions within themselves, individuals can discover new ways to understand and manage emotions, ultimately supporting their mental and emotional balance. Additionally, art therapy serves as an effective complementary method to reduce stress, alleviate depression, and improve quality of life. Through art, individuals can find new meaning and purpose in life, even when facing significant challenges. This therapy also helps enhance self-esteem, improve interpersonal relationships, and provide a sense of control over situations that may feel uncontrollable.

Studies show that art therapy has broad benefits for various mental and physical health conditions, such as anxiety, trauma, and chronic diseases. This creative interaction focuses not only on the final outcome of the artwork but also on the process itself, which can provide a sense of comfort, relaxation, and freedom. Thus, art therapy becomes a holistic approach that touches various dimensions of an individual's well-being (Khairan, 2016).

The goal of art therapy is not only to produce artwork with a certain aesthetic value but also to provide individuals with the freedom to communicate through forms of art. Through this process, individuals can explore their feelings, reduce stress, and enhance emotional well-being. Art therapy also helps individuals develop the ability to cope with life's challenges, including in the context of managing chronic illnesses. Its effectiveness is not only evident in emotional aspects but also in supporting physical recovery and improving the overall quality of life of patients

Table 1. List of Art Therapy Types Applied to Older Adults with Depression

No	Author(s)	Subjects	Art Therapy	Depression	Research Setting
1.	Kim, et al, (2016)	28 older adults (14 females & 14 males)	The therapy used was Structured Mandala Coloring (SMC), which included activities such as making dolls, clay modeling, photo frame crafting, and painting a tree of hope.	Depression was measured using the Short Geriatric Depression Scale (S-GDS).	A nursing home in Seoul, South Korea
2.	Gok, et al (2017)	64 older adults (24 females & 40 males)	Music therapy involving the listening of traditional Turkish and Sufi music.	Depression was measured using the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS).	Nursing home in Ordu, Turkey
3.	Ching, et al (2019)	55 older adults (29 females)	There were 12 art activities designed based on the	Depression was measured using the Geriatric Depression	Two nursing homes in Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

		& 26 males)	Media Dimension Variables (MDVs) theory and the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC)	Scale - Short Form (GDS-SF).	
4.	Aydin & Kutlu (2021)	60 older adults (47 females & 13 males)	The art therapy used was clay therapy	Depression was measured using the Beck Depression Scale	Senior Assistance Center in Trabzon, Turki
5.	Ciasca et al (2018)	66 older adults (only females)	The art therapy used included painting, drawing, clay sculpting, and collage	Depression in older adults was diagnosed as Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), measured using the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS) and the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI)	Instituto de Psiquiatria, Hospital das Clínicas da Faculdade de Medicina da Universidade de São Paulo (IPq-HCFMUSP), Brasil
6.	Rawtaer et al (2015)	101 older adults (76 females & 25 males)	The art therapy used involved creating artwork in the form of paintings or drawings	Depression was measured using the Zung Self-Rating Depression Scale (SDS)	A community in the western region of Singapore
7.	Jia & Tung (2024)	31 older adults (26 females)	The art therapy used included coloring and music	Depression was measured using the Geriatric	Two community care centers in Northern Taiwan

		& 5 males)		Depression Scale (GDS-15)	
8.	Yao, (2024)	82 older adults (51 females & 37 males)	The art therapy used was Expressive Arts Therapy, which involved various art activities, including painting, drawing, creating collages, and molding clay	Depression was measured using the Geriatric Depression Scale	Day care centers in Southern Taiwan
9.	Ilali et al (2018)	54 older adults (16 females & 11 males)	The art therapy used was drawing based on life review	Depression was measured using the Geriatric Depression Scale Short	Kheradwarzan Day Care Center in Ghaemshahr, Iran
10.	Miloš & Katušić (2021)	26 older adults (21 females & 5 males)	The art therapy used was music	Depression was measured using the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale (HADS	Nursing home in Poreč City, Croatia
11.	Malaka et al (2024)	102 older adults (61 females & 41 males)	The art therapy used includes dance therapy, drama, collage, poetry, and music	Depression was measured using the Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS)	Community-dwelling older people in Amman, Yordania
12.	Werner et al (2015)	117 older adults (80 females	The art therapy used is Interactive Group Music Therapy	Depression was measured using the Montgomery-Åsberg Depression	Two nursing homes in Germany

		& 37 males)		Rating Scale (MADRS)	
13	Masika et al (2020)	39 older adults (34 females & 5 males)	The art therapy used is Visual Art Therapy (VAT)	Depression is measured using the Geriatric Depression Scale - Short Form (GDS-SF)	An elderly community in Hong Kong

Table 1 presents various types of art therapy used to reduce depressive symptoms in the elderly. The most commonly used type of art therapy was drawing-based therapy, which appeared in six out of eleven research articles. Art therapy involving drawing, painting, or colouring was utilized by several studies (Ching et al., 2019; Ciasca et al., 2018; Rawtaer et al., 2015; Jia & Tung, 2024; Yao, 2024; Ilali et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2016; Masika et al., 2020). Music therapy was also widely used (Werner et al., 2015; Gok et al., 2017; Jia & Tung, 2024; Miloš & Katušić, 2021; Malak et al., 2024), as well as clay therapy (Aydin & Kutlu, 2021; Ciasca et al., 2018; Yao, 2024).

Some studies implemented combinations of therapies, such as music and colouring (Jia & Tung, 2024), art therapy designed using Media Dimension Variables (MDVs) and the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) (Ching et al., 2019), a combination of painting, clay modelling, and collage (Ciasca et al., 2018), painting with collage and clay (Yao, 2024), and a combination of dance, drama, collage, poetry, and music (Malak et al., 2024).

Drawing or painting-based art therapy is believed to have significant therapeutic effects, as these activities stimulate self-expression, reduce stress, and improve mood. According to Ching et al. (2019), painting allows individuals to shift their focus from negative thoughts to enjoyable creative activities. Moreover, Yao (2024) found that the act of drawing or colouring can increase a sense of control and achievement in elderly individuals who often feel a loss of control in their lives. Kim et al. (2016) highlighted the benefits of structured mandala colouring in art therapy for older adults, showing that it significantly reduced levels of depression. This technique helped the elderly regulate their emotions more effectively while providing a sense of accomplishment through the artistic patterns they created.

In various studies exploring the effectiveness of art therapy in the elderly, the combination of several types of art therapy has been increasingly used to maximize psychological and cognitive benefits. As mentioned earlier, the study by Jia and Tung (2024) showed that integrating different art forms, such as music and painting, creates a more comprehensive experience and stimulates multiple emotional and cognitive dimensions. This is supported by Miloš and Katušić (2021), who found that music therapy in nursing homes enhanced subjective well-being and reduced anxiety and stress levels among elderly individuals. Therefore, combining therapies that involve music can provide stronger synergistic effects compared to single-type therapies.

Furthermore, the study by Rawtaer et al. (2015), which focused on community-based art interventions, revealed that art-based therapy conducted in a social group setting has additional benefits in enhancing social interaction and reducing the feelings of loneliness often experienced by older adults. This social factor is a crucial element in art therapy, as participating in group activities fosters a sense of belonging and emotional connection with others. This finding is consistent with Gök's (2017) research, which showed that group-based music therapy not only reduced depressive symptoms but also improved overall quality of life. Werner et al. (2015) further emphasized that group-based music therapy can enhance social engagement and reduce levels of isolation among nursing home residents. Their study showed that older adults who actively participated in music sessions were more motivated to interact with others, which positively impacted their mental health.

On the other hand, the effectiveness of art therapy can also be influenced by the design of the intervention itself. Ching et al. (2019) highlighted the use of Media Dimension Variables (MDVs) and the Expressive Therapy Continuum (ETC) as a multidimensional approach that allows therapy to be tailored according to individual needs. This approach is particularly beneficial in the context of elderly individuals, given the diverse preferences and psychological conditions among therapy participants. The study emphasized that a flexible structure grounded in individuals' unique needs can enhance the effectiveness of the intervention.

In addition to drawing and painting, art therapy involving three-dimensional media such as clay has also shown promising results. Ciasca et al. (2018) and Aydin & Kutlu (2024) highlighted that clay therapy provides a deeper sensory experience, which contributes to improved fine motor skills and a stronger sense of accomplishment. Older adults who engaged in clay-based activities reported an increased sense of control over their environment and a reduction in stress. In another study, Ilahi et al. (2019) found that engaging in reflective art, such as life review-based art therapy, helped older adults reconstruct their past experiences in a more positive light, ultimately improving their mood and emotional well-being. Masika et al. (2020) demonstrated that using Zentangle (a drawing technique involving structured, repetitive patterns) in art therapy helped older adults manage anxiety and enhance focus, which in turn reduced depression levels. This repetitive pattern drawing activity produced a calming effect and promoted self-awareness among elderly participants.

Although less common compared to drawing therapy, clay therapy has shown promising results. Aydin and Kutlu (2021) reported that this type of therapy provides a pleasant sensory experience and encourages older adults to engage more actively with their environment. Similarly, Ciasca et al. (2018) found that the use of clay in therapy improved fine motor skills while providing a deep sense of accomplishment for the elderly.

However, it is important to recognize that the effectiveness of various types of art therapy is also influenced by cultural context and individual preferences. Miloš and Katušić (2021) noted that certain types of music used in

therapy may be more effective for older adults who have an interest in that particular genre. Therefore, therapy approaches must be tailored to the unique needs and backgrounds of individuals to ensure optimal outcomes.

Most studies employed a quasi-experimental design with an average intervention duration of 6 to 12 weeks, as seen in Rawtaer et al. (2015). However, some studies extended the duration to 20–52 weeks. Studies with longer durations tend to show more stable effects, particularly in cognitive functions and psychological well-being. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of art therapy is also influenced by individual characteristics such as the severity of depression, previous experience with art, and personal preferences for certain types of therapy. Older adults who have prior experience with art may adapt more quickly to therapy, while those new to it may require more time to experience its benefits.

In another study, Aydın and Kutlu (2024) found that art-based therapy involving a combination of painting, drawing, and music significantly enhanced social interaction among older adults in group settings. Elderly individuals who previously experienced high levels of social isolation showed notable improvements in social engagement after participating in art therapy sessions. This social factor plays a crucial role in enhancing the effectiveness of therapy, especially for older adults living in nursing homes or environments with limited social interaction. Taking these various factors into account, it can be concluded that a multidimensional approach in art therapy holds significant potential for improving the well-being of the elderly.

The studied population generally consisted of adults aged 60 and above with mild to moderate depressive symptoms. Some studies also explored additional variables beyond depression, such as quality of life, anxiety, cognitive functioning, and others, making the results not fully generalizable. Furthermore, most studies did not consider individual factors such as depression severity, preferences for specific types of art therapy, or prior art experience. For example, older adults who are already familiar with certain art activities may respond differently compared to those encountering art therapy for the first time. This could influence research outcomes and result in more complex data interpretation.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Art therapy shows great potential as an effective intervention method for reducing depressive symptoms in older adults. Artistic activities such as painting, drawing, listening to music, or clay not only offer emotional benefits but also enhance social connection, cognitive well-being, and overall quality of life. The creative process in art therapy serves as a bridge for older adults to express difficult emotions, boost self-confidence, and cultivate a sense of achievement that is essential in the later stages of life.

The effectiveness of art therapy can be influenced by various factors, including individual preferences, the severity of depression, and cultural context. Therefore, a personalized approach is necessary to ensure optimal outcomes. Additionally, combining different forms of art, such as painting and music, or

painting and dance, has been shown to provide added benefits by creating a deeper and more holistic therapeutic experience. Research shows that older adults who participate in group-based art therapy experience a significant increase in social interaction, which contributes to a reduction in social isolation and loneliness commonly experienced in old age.

Beyond psychological and social benefits, art therapy also positively impacts physical health in older adults. Activities such as drawing and working with clay help improve fine motor skills, while music therapy can help lower blood pressure and reduce anxiety levels. Studies have also shown that engaging in artistic activities can stimulate the brain and slow down age-related cognitive decline. Therefore, art therapy functions not only as a psychological intervention but also as a preventive strategy for maintaining mental and physical health in older adults.

Despite the growing body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of art therapy, there are still limitations in its implementation, particularly regarding accessibility and institutional support. Not all older adults have access to structured art therapy programs, and in some cases, there remains a perception that art therapy is merely recreational rather than a science-based intervention. Thus, further research and advocacy are needed to emphasize the importance of art therapy in elderly healthcare so that it may be more widely integrated into mental health and well-being services for older adults.

Considering the proven benefits, art therapy has the potential to be a promising approach for improving the overall quality of life in older adults. With more personalized approaches, the integration of various art forms, and adequate institutional support, art therapy can serve as a key solution for promoting mental, cognitive, and social health among the elderly in the future.

#### **FURTHER STUDY**

This study still has limitations so that further research is still needed on the topic “Reviewing the Variations of Art Therapy in Reducing Depression Among the Elderly: A Systematic Review”.

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