

The Role of Visual Elements in Daily Journaling as An Effort to Reduce Anxiety Among College Students: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Mental disorders are conditions that can affect anyone, and college students are particularly vulnerable to them, especially anxiety disorders. Students experience anxiety due to several factors, including academic demands, economic conditions, and a lack of emotional support from those closest to them. The purpose of this study is to determine the condition of students when facing anxiety in the lecture process, the interventions used to reduce anxiety in students, the role of journaling in reducing anxiety, and the application of visual elements in journaling. This study uses the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method with the PRISMA approach, through the stages of identification, screening, and inclusion. The results of the study show that students experiencing anxiety need an intervention to reduce their anxiety levels. There are several interventions found, one of which is journaling. However, journaling is considered to provide insufficient motivation for students to do it consistently. Therefore, an additional approach is needed in the form of applying visual elements in journaling to increase motivation and the relaxation effect on students with anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

Mental disorders are a health issue that can affect anyone, including college students. In a study that was conducted by Zulfikar in 2021, it was mentioned that there were 35% of college students in North Sumatra had poor mental health (Aziz et al., 2021). The poor mental health among college students is due to the fact that the problems college students face today are not only about academic demands, but also about their own mental health (Febziantini et al., 2025). In addition, college students are also in a transitional period from adolescence to adulthood, where life challenges begin to arise, they must make decisions about their future and become independent, which has a significant impact on their mental health (Thaha & Jambi, 2025). Mental health is a state of well-being in which a person can cope with life's stresses, realize their potential, work productively, and contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2022). However, when an

individual is experiencing mental health disorders, they will lose motivation to do activities, have unstable emotions, experience prolonged stress, and even develop a condition called excessive anxiety (Vitoasmara, 2024).

Anxiety is a condition that makes a person to feel uncomfortable, afraid, fearful, worried, uneasy, and it may also appear together with various physical symptoms (Walean et al., 2021). The impact of anxiety on college students causes a decline in their ability to remember material, difficulty in adjusting to the college environment, poor academic performance, and even some college students choosing to drop out of college (Laely et al., 2022). Several factors contribute to anxiety among college students, including academic pressure, financial challenges, uncertainty about their future, and limited emotional support from the people around them (An Al Rivaldi, 2024). College students may also struggle with adapting to the campus setting,



adjusting to new social and cultural situations, interacting with peers, and coping with an environment that feels different from what they were used to before (Khoirunnisa et al., 2022). This anxiety can continue or even worsen if it does not receive immediate treatment or appropriate medication (Yudha., 2021).

College students with anxiety disorders know that the source of their anxiety stems from negative thoughts, but they do not know how to overcome their anxiety (Asrori et al., 2015). One way to overcome this is through treatment, which can be done formally through direct consultation with a psychologist (Heriyana, 2025). However, an intervention is needed to help optimize anxiety recovery (Amira et al., 2021). Intervention can be done using a cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) approach (Savitri & Swandi, 2023). The benefit to cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) is to encourage clients to challenge negative thoughts and emotions by presenting that substantiation their thoughts about the problems they are facing (Muryono et al., 2025). Examples of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) that can be performed include positive thinking training, thought stopping, virtual reality, breathing relaxation therapy, laughter therapy, journaling, and progressive relaxation therapy (Yuliyanawati et al., 2018).

Journaling is one sample of cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) that can be practiced by college students with anxiety disorders (Arini & Karnita, 2025). Journaling is an activity that can be carried out to express an individual's thoughts and feelings, and it can also help improve a person's emotional and physical health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). In journaling activity, college students use positive affirmations, which are very helpful in reducing anxiety levels (Husada et al., 2022). By journaling regularly, college students can reduce dispersed thoughts and manage emotions that cause anxiety (Ahmad et al., 2022). Journaling also provides a safe space to express emotions without the fear of being judged by others (Yap & Lin, 2025). Additionally, the use of visual designs that consider aspects of color, shape, and visual composition that convey a calm and comfortable impression can increase feelings

of relaxation for users (Kurniawan & Tamami, 2025).

Based on the literature reviewed in previous studies, there have not been many studies that specifically discuss the role of visual elements in journaling book design. Several studies discuss application-based journaling or conventional journaling but do not discuss the visual elements that can support the process of expressing feelings and the relaxing effect of reducing anxiety levels. Therefore, in this study, the author formulated several research questions:

RQ1: What conditions do college students when dealing with anxiety during the learning process?

RQ2: What interventions are used to reduce anxiety?

RQ3: How does journaling play a role in helping to reflect emotions and express thoughts as an effort to reduce anxiety?

RQ4: How can visual elements in journaling be applied to enhance users motivation and create a greater sense of relaxation?

METHOD

A systematic literature review (SLR) is a method used to collecting and assessing all studies that are relevant to particular research to a research question or topic area (Calderón & Ruiz, 2015). The purpose of a systematic literature review (SLR) is to provide specific answers to research questions by collecting available evidence (Harahap & Usiono, 2023). In this study, the systematic literature review SLR aims to identify and analyze the results of previous studies on the effectiveness of illustration-based journaling activities in reducing anxiety, as well as visual elements that can support the process of expressing feelings and relaxation in college students with anxiety disorders. This study aims to provide researchers with a strong theoretical basis for the role of visual elements in daily journaling as an effort to reduce anxiety among college students.

Data collection in this study followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework, which is a collection of evidence-based items that set minimum standards for

reporting in systematic reviews. Analyses (PRISMA), which is a collection of evidence based items that establish minimum standards for reporting in systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Page et al., 2021). By using PRISMA in systematic literature review (SLR) research, researchers can imagine how many articles were identified, screened, excluded, and finally analyzed (Muis, 2025). The purpose of using the PRISMA framework in this study was to review previous studies related to the role of visual elements in daily journaling as an effort to reduce anxiety among college students. The process of creating the PRISMA framework involves several stages, including identification, screening, and inclusion (Munawaroh et al., 2025). The following are the phases that have been carried out by the researchers.

Identification

At this phases, researchers conducted data mining using Publish or Perish from the Google Scholar database on September 17, 2025. The keywords used in the article search were "Anxiety Disorder" OR Overthinking AND "Writing Therapy" OR Journaling AND Illustration OR Visual with a range from 2015 to 2025. A unqualified of 968 articles were found after searching with these keywords. The articles were obtained from several sources, with the following percentages:

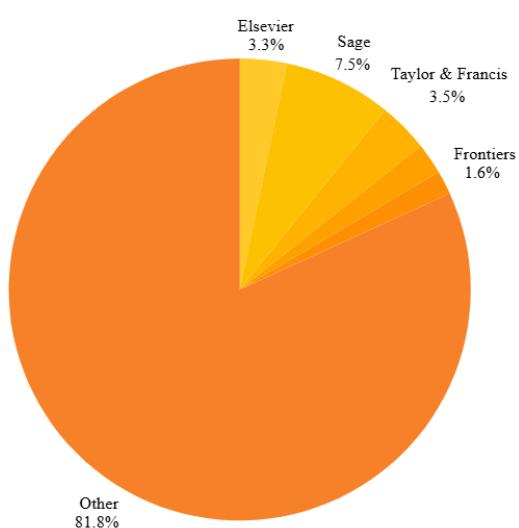


Figure 1. Percentage of Journal Article Sources

Screening

After collecting the journal articles, the next step was to screen them using specific inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria helped determine which subjects or studies were appropriate to be part of the review. The table below summarizes the criteria applied in this selection process.

Table 1. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication range from 2015 to 2025	Publications before 2015
Journal articles and conference proceedings	Review articles, books, book chapters, proceeding review papers, and these
Written in English	Publications in languages other than English
Contain the keyword "Journaling"	Use the keyword "Journaling" but not related to reflective writing
Specifically focused on mental health therapy	Topics unrelated to therapy or not relevant to mental health
Art therapy involving painting, coloring, and writing (journaling)	Art therapy forms excluding painting, coloring, or writing (journaling) such as music, dance, drama, sculpture, or other creative arts

After the early screening prosess, 942 articles remained, 26 articles were excluded because they were not written in English. In the next phases, an additional 706 items cosisting of review articles, books chapters, conference review papers, and theses were removed because they did not meet the requisite publication criteria. This left a unqualified of 236 articles qualifying for further analisys. 176 journal articles and 62 conference proceedings were indentified as suitable for further analysis.

The process then continued to the title-screening phases, where 171 articles were excluded because their titles did not align with the research focus. The remaining articles were examined further by reviewing their abstracts, which minimized the selection to 51 articles. These articles then pass through a full-text assessment to evaluate their relevance in greater depth. After this thorough review, 14 articles met all the inclusion criteria and were ultimately incorporated into the final analysis.

Included

After the screening phases, 51 articles were found to meet the inclusion criteria for research. Although these articles were relevant, the researchers considered the number to be insufficient for developing a comprehensive and well-supported analysis. To strengthen the evidence base, the snowballing method was applied, allowing the researchers to trace additional references cited within the previously selected articles. This approach made it possible to uncover studies that did not appear in the initial database search but were still highly relevant to the topic. Through this extended search process, 6 additional articles were identified and added to the dataset, bringing the final total to 60 articles used in this study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

After the process was completed, a number of selected articles were obtained to be analyzed to answer the research questions. The results of these findings are explained based on the researcher questions (RQ). Each article selected for research will be analyzed to identify patterns, themes, similarities, and differences between findings. This process is not only intended to organize data, but also to identify relationships between concepts in order to gain a deeper understanding. In addition, the ultimate goal of this process is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the topic being studied.

Based on the results of a review of 60 articles that have been analyzed, four main focuses related to this study were identified. The researchers wanted to know how students cope with anxiety during the lecture process. Second, the researchers wanted to know what interventions are used to reduce anxiety. The researchers also want to know about the role of journaling in reducing anxiety. Finally, the researchers want to know the effectiveness of journaling in helping to build motivation for students to journal.

The condition of college students when experiencing anxiety during the lecture process

Several studies mention that college students experience anxiety caused by academic demands. As found by Mishra et al, (2020), anxiety in college students is caused by high academic demands and the fear of failure. In addition, there are many factors that contribute to increased anxiety in students. Stress and anxiety in college students are influenced by structural factors such as distance from home, economic conditions, time management, and lack of emotional support from loved ones (Sanders et al., 2025). College students who receive support from the people closest to them tend to experience lower levels of anxiety compared to those who lack emotional support. This may be because emotional support from loved ones can provide a sense of security, greater confidence, and a more positive outlook on the problems

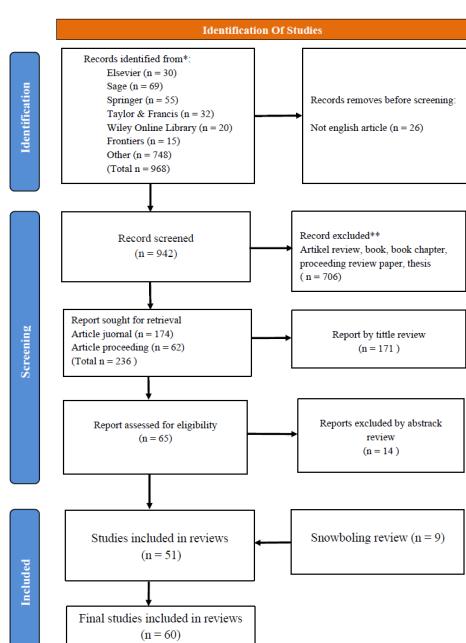


Figure 2. PRISMA Flow Diagram for Article Selection

faced in college. Confidence is important, as defined by Han et al, (2022) findings, that self-efficacy or confidence in managing emotions is important.

Anxiety experienced by college students has a negative impact on the academic process in higher education. College students with high levels of anxiety can influence their mindset (MacLellan & Derakshan, 2021). Collage students who experience anxiety incline to be more closed off to social interaction, which can affect their anxiety levels. Individuals are prone to social isolation and increased anxiety if they suppress their emotional expression (McBride et al., 2022). This occurs because college students who experience often struggle with low self-confidence and a deficiency of self-compassion (McBride et al., 2022). This is because college students with anxiety have low self-confidence and lack self-love. Anxiety in college students can be influenced not only by external factors, but also by internal factors such as managing emotions (Bates et al., 2021). Efforts to resolve this condition can begin with actions taken by the collage students themselves.

One thing that can be done is to enhance self-compassion, which makes a person more accepting of themselves as they are and better able to manage their emotions. Practicing self-compassion has been shown to lessen negative thinking patterns while also improving self-confidence (Blackie & Kocovski, 2018). The findings of Bates et al, (2021) also explain that students with high levels of self-compassion have lower social anxiety and are able to face the academic process more calmly. To increase self-compassion, students need to get used to being more accepting, not judging themselves, and being able to deal with problems more positively. However, this is certainly difficult for some students, especially those who do not have emotional support from their loved ones, as explained in the findings (Sanders et al., 2025). Therefore, an intervention is needed to increase self-compassion so that collage students anxiety levels can decrease and they can undergo the academic process well.

Interventions used to reduce anxiety in college students

From the journal articles that passed the screening process, 20 studies specifically examined interventions aimed at reducing anxiety. The interventions carried out by researchers are expected to be an effective solution to reduce anxiety. From the interventions carried out by the research, most researchers developed digital interventions such as mobile applications, chatbots, game-based therapeutics, and even AI-based devices. The use of digital interventions in the form of mobile applications for mental health has shown effective results in improving emotional well-being and reducing anxiety symptoms in young people (Horwitz et al., 2024). Some findings from app-based interventions by several researchers include Intellicare, Paradym, Headspace, and Silvercloud (Solomon et al., 2024; Metaxa et al., 2025; Horwitz et al., 2024). The interventions were found to be effective in reducing anxiety and depression levels, especially among individuals experiencing medium to severe symptoms (Wilt et al., 2024).

In addition to mobile applications, there are also several digital interventions in the form of EmotionFrame and Chatbot using a user experience-based approach. In addition, there are VR, AR, and LLM-based technology interventions that can be used effectively to train self-care skills, as well as a means of relieving stress in everyday life (Fang et al., 2025). The development of digital interventions that include user experience can improve user engagement in the long term (Kowalski et al., 2025). The use of features in digital-based interventions such as journaling, gamification, and self-reflection can be personalized according to the needs of each individual, thereby effectively reducing anxiety levels. Mental health mobile applications have great potential as a complement to conventional therapy due to their ease of access, flexibility, and high level of user engagement (Metaxa et al., 2025).

Although app-based digital interventions have been proven effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression and improving users

mental well-being, researchers have found weaknesses. Patients tend to use the mobile application less frequently after a few weeks, and low digital literacy levels pose a barrier to the effectiveness of mobile application use, preventing users from reaping its benefits (Solomon et al., 2024). Meanwhile, VR, AR, and LLM-based technology interventions carry the risk of causing trauma to individuals due to overly realistic simulations. Overall, digital and technological interventions that offer personalization, engagement, and interactive experiences face challenges in terms of user consistency, psychological risks, technology accessibility, and privacy security. Therefore, an alternative intervention that is easily accessible and more personalized is needed to encourage users to be more open in expressing their emotions, thereby effectively reducing anxiety levels among college students.

The role of journaling in reducing anxiety

Other alternative psychological interventions are needed to make them more attainable to users and more personalized so that they can helpfully for individuals express their emotions openly and reduce anxiety in a better way, one of which is journaling. Writing about an experience or feeling is an activity that individuals can do when they are feeling worried. Writing constructively about emotional experiences has been substantiated to reduce stress, improve emotional regulation, and enhance mental well-being (Hoyt et al., 2016). This is in line with psychological theory, which states that expressing emotions through writing can be an activity for processing emotions and reducing psychological unease. These results are also supported by findings from Suhr et al. (2017) and Dimenichi et al., (2018), which state that positive writing activities or writing about past failures can effectively reduce symptoms of depression, stabilize emotions, improve focus, and allow individuals to cope with stress well.

Journaling can help college students reduce anxiety levels when facing academic pressure in college. As explained in the findings of Hakim & Rajan (2025), expressive writing or journaling

can effectively improve emotional regulation and sleep quality in students facing academic pressure. The study explains that journaling can be a medium that students can use to channel their emotions, reduce self-judgment, improve adaptive coping skills, and increase self-compassion. In addition, the study also found that journaling can help students recognize negative thought patterns that arise from the pressures they face in college. Journaling can improve positive emotions, thereby reducing psychological stress (Richelle & Alea, 2024). By including journaling into their daily routines, students are expected to better manage their anxiety and adapt more effectively to the pressures and challenges of campus life.

Although journaling is deemed effective in reducing anxiety levels, several researchers have identified some weaknesses. As found by Koziol (2021), some students actually feel frustrated, angry, or sad when writing about personal experiences, especially on traumatic topics. Deep reflection can bring up buried negative feelings, leading to discomfort (Arslanbek, 2021). In addition, other findings mention that journaling is not effective because students are not consistent in doing journaling activities. As explained by Wallengren-Lynch et al. (2024), not all students have high discipline and commitment in doing journaling so that the results can be optimal. Therefore, while journaling has great potential as a self-directed psychological intervention, low college student motivation poses a challenge. The lack of visually appealing elements makes the journaling process feel monotonous and less emotionally engaging for the writer. Therefore, to increase college student motivation in journaling, a supportive approach in the form of visually appealing elements is needed.

The application of visual elements in journaling

One way to increase user motivation in journaling is to use attractive visual elements. In addition to using attractive visual elements, journaling involves the use of visual elements that can provide a relaxing effect and help users reflect on themselves. This is supported by Doherty

(2024) findings, these studies indicate that visual elements in creative journals help individuals reflect on and manage their emotions. Therefore, the function of visual elements applied in journaling is not only to add aesthetic value, but also to serve as a medium for reflection for users, thereby reducing anxiety levels. Visual elements serve to increase motivation, user engagement, and build a positive atmosphere in journaling activities, thereby fostering a sense of productivity and improving psychological well-being (Avrahami et al., 2020).

One use of visual elements in the form of image is found in Karaturhan et al, (2022), these findings suggest that visual elements, such as personal images, can evoke sensory, emotional, and cognitive memories, enabling users to engage in deeper self-reflection compared to journaling with text alone. Visual elements that must be considered in their application in journaling are color, illustration or image and layout (Akram & Cob, 2020). Visual elements that are aesthetically pleasing, soft in color, and calming can encourage users to engage in journaling while supporting emotional expression and self-reflection (PARAMITA & Tjandrawibawa, 2022). All visual elements used in journaling must have meaning in accordance with the emotional condition and self-reflection goals of the user. Visual elements used in journaling play a role in helping to express trauma in a safe, reflective manner that supports the emotional recovery process (Mims, 2015). Several visual elements need to be carefully considered when designing a journaling experience.

Color

The colors chosen for journaling serve to bring up moods or convey meaning. The use of soft, neutral colors such as light blue, beige, and peach creates a calm and user-friendly atmosphere that is helpful for self-reflection (PARAMITA & Tjandrawibawa, 2022). The colors used in journaling use dark and dissimilar colors to express emotions such as anger, fear, and trauma, while light colors are used to describe hope and recovery (Mims, 2015). Colors are used to express users perceptions of confusion about

the future, such as green, which signifies hope and growth, while grey or black depict anxiety. The symbolism of these colors is a visual element used to express the users emotions. Therefore, when choosing colors for journaling, it is important to consider their symbolic meaning and not just their aesthetic attractiveness. The meaning of colors based on psychology also allows users to create a more personal and meaningful journaling experience. Therefore, the use of colors based on psychology can serve as a visual element that strengthens the process of self-reflection and emotional recovery.

Picture

Pictures are important visual element. In addition to their aesthetic function, pictures are also used as a medium for expression and psychological reflection. Visualization in the form of photographs help users remember the past, triggering emotional, sensory, and intellectual reflections (Karaturhan et al., 2022). Pictures are used to convey complex emotions such as depression, anxiety, and exhaustion (Akram & Cob, 2020). Visuals in the form of pictures play a role in helping individuals who have difficulty expressing themselves through words (Mims, 2015). Through the process of drawing or simply looking at visual pictures, users can get to know themselves better, improve their memory, and process their emotions more deeply than just by writing. The use of pictures must also depend on the condition of each user, not just choosing pictures that are considered aesthetic. Therefore, the selection of visual pictures needs to consider the emotional context and personal experiences of users so as not to cause negative interpretations. The pictures can then function optimally as visual element that support the process of self-exploration and emotional well-being.

Typography

Typography is not only used as a design element for aesthetic purposes, but can also serve as a form of visual emotional communication. The fonts used in journaling are chosen for their

softness and legibility, creating a friendly, comfortable, and non-intimidating atmosphere (PARAMITA & Tjandrawibawa, 2022). The use of personal writing styles or handwriting is part of authentic self-expression, reflecting the personality and emotions of the participant (Wallengren-Lynch et al., 2024). The use of neutral fonts can help users focus more on the content of their journaling for self-reflections, rather than just a visual (Asbury et al., 2018). The use of fonts in journaling can affect user comfort and can also help create a deeper sense of relaxation. In addition, choosing the right font can also give an authentic feel to the process of self-expression. Therefore, the right typography choices can significantly support the self-reflections process and enhance the journaling experience.

The visual elements used in journaling must consider the mental state of the user so that they are not merely aesthetic, but are actually designed with the aim of making users feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves through journaling. Although some findings contain criticism and feedback from respondents regarding the use of visual elements in journaling. As in the findings of Cormier et al. (2024), who found that several improvements could be made in the design of journaling, including improvements in its design such as font, amount of text, and aesthetics that are not user-friendly. This shows that the effectiveness of journaling does not only depend on the writing activity itself, but also on the quality of visual elements that can support the motivation, emotions, focus, and comfort of users in the process of self-reflection through journaling. Thus, the anxiety levels of students can decrease.

CONCLUSION

This study explains the important role of visual elements in providing a sense of relaxation and helping to reflect emotions and feelings through psychological intervention in the form of journaling, which is used to reduce anxiety in students. Anxiety in students is a condition that must be addressed, as it affects the academic process in higher education. Several interventions have been discovered by

researchers, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. According to several studies, journaling is an intervention that is more accessible and personal. However, there are shortcomings in terms of motivation, namely the internal drive of students to consistently journal. Therefore, a form of encouragement is needed in the form of visual elements, which not only serve as aesthetics but also provide emotional stimulation.

Although the author reviewed many sources in this study, the evidence presented may be weak or may not fully represent all of the findings. This is due to the lack of empirical articles supporting this article. Some findings in this study still show that there are students who journal but are unable to fully express their emotions or feelings through words alone. To date, no research has been found that specifically combines the principles of art therapy with visual elements in the form of illustrations in the design of daily journaling books as a medium for expressing emotions and feelings. Therefore, for future research, it may be worth considering the development of interventions that combine the principles of art therapy with visual elements in the design of journaling books, so that the journaling experience becomes more interesting, meaningful, and effective in reducing student anxiety.

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