

# Nourishing connections: An arts-informed approach to illuminating community food values

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## Abstract

This pilot study explores a novel arts-informed methodology to examine perceptions of nourishment and strategies for building a sustainable local food system. In collaboration with a food policy council and an art museum, researchers employed a hybrid “Draw and Reflect” method, combining visual art and verbal reflection. The approach allowed participants to express personal meaning through drawing in a low-stakes way, while their verbal reflection provided a deeper understanding of their artistic intentions and thoughts. Findings reveal that nourishment is a multifaceted concept encompassing not only food and drink, but also social, cultural, and environmental connections. Key

themes emerged around community cohesion, environmental stewardship, and local economic development—attributes that are essential to nourishment and to resilient food systems. This methodology offers valuable insights for research and for community organizations by engaging the public in discussions about complex issues, capturing collective visions and informing decision-making.

## Keywords

arts-informed research, draw and reflect, food systems, nourishment, resilience

## Study Background, Context, and Rationale

A food system is a range of processes involved in producing food for human consumption. The system includes growing, processing, distributing, eat-

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ing, and disposing of food, as well as the outcomes of these processes, such as food security and environmental impacts (Ericksen, 2008). Conventional food systems generate high volumes of food supplies and rely on large-scale agricultural production and industrial processing to distribute food through global networks and long-distance supply chains. Local food systems, however, typically operate at smaller local or regional scales, shortening the distance between the various system components (Hendrickson et al., 2022).

Although conventional food systems tend to produce higher quantities of food, evidence increasingly suggests that local and regional food systems play important roles in food security, economic health, and social connectedness (Blay-Palmer et al., 2020; Ruben et al., 2020). Shorter supply chains are integrated with community and economic development (Gillespie et al., 2007; Gross, 2011). Local and regional food systems cultivate civic agriculture by connecting consumers with their food sources, fostering knowledge and engagement in food production, and strengthening community resilience (Bellante, 2017; Lyson, 2005; Moore et al., 2015). Enhanced capacity for local processing and distribution contributes to rural economic development (Swenson, 2011). In addition, urban and community gardens (Mello et al., 2017), farm-to-school initiatives (Janssen, 2017), and protection of traditional foodways can help address local food insecurity and bolster agrobiodiversity and food justice (Coté, 2016; Reese, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic, with crises such as global supply chain disruptions (Mahmood et al., 2024), outbreaks in meatpacking plants (Taylor et al., 2020), and increased reliance on food assistance benefits (Wu et al., 2025), exposed serious weaknesses in conventional food systems. More local food systems contributed to relief and recovery efforts by connecting people to local producers, supporting farm-to-institution programs, and supporting community food banks and mutual aid operations (Bornstein et al., 2024). Due to factors like interpersonal relationships, short travel distances, and innovative distribution models, local food systems were sometimes able to quickly respond to rapidly changing political and social conditions caused by the pandemic (Owen et al.,

2021; Thilmany et al., 2021). As consumers and businesses show growing interest in local food systems, it is important to increase understanding of community priorities in building resilient local food systems.

Since 2021, researchers at the University of Arizona have collaborated with members of the Pima County Food Alliance (PCFA), a local food policy council in Tucson, Arizona, to develop community-based priorities for building a sustainable local food system that is resilient to future environmental and social risks (Bellante et al., 2022). Collaboration has involved multiple kinds of community engagement activities, most notably interviews and focus groups with 15 local organizations and over 100 individuals representing different parts of Tucson's food system (Bhakta et al., 2024; Gildersleeve et al., 2024). The council has sought additional ways to engage the broader community in conversations about the food system and gather insight into addressing issues such as food insecurity and food access. One idea that emerged was to incorporate art and artmaking into conversations to encourage more public engagement. PCFA invited us to develop an arts-informed research method to systematically engage the public in visioning components of a resilient local food system.

This paper reports on a pilot study in Tucson of a novel arts-informed research methodology to investigate perceptions of nourishment and how they might inform building a resilient food system. We chose to emphasize the concept of nourishment, rather than nutrition, food security, or food systems. Nourishment is one outcome of a well-functioning food system in which all people have access to food. However, while often tied to food, the concept and application of nourishment can extend beyond nutrients to include a wide range of things that are necessary for growth, health, and overall well-being. Because local food systems often extend beyond the basic provisioning of food, constructing prompts based on nourishment rather than nutrition offered a more flexible entry into people's visions of well-being.

Arts-informed research and collective artmaking practices can encourage broader public participation, evoke deep perspectives or emotions, and create a visible record of collective vision (Barone

& Eisner, 2011; Cole & Knowles, 2007; Dossa, 2019; Furman et al., 2019; MacGregor et al., 2022). Our findings suggest that this method is a promising avenue to engage the public in discussions of complex issues, to understand these issues from more holistic viewpoints, and point to future applications and approaches.

## Research Design and Development

### *Arts-Informed Research*

We employed an arts-informed methodology to enhance and expand our qualitative inquiry into perceptions of nourishment, as the arts offer a distinct way of seeing and knowing. Research using the arts intends to extend beyond conventional modes of communication and explore ambiguity and nuance through emotive and affective experiences as well as imagination and intellect (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Cole, 2015; Finley, 2007). Arts-informed research uses alternative creative processes or representational forms of inquiry to advance research and create new understandings of the complexity and diversity of human experience (Cole, 2015). While qualitative inquiry has traditionally favored verbal methods, the multisensory ways in which humans experience and know the world cannot be sufficiently communicated through a single modality. The arts offer ways to provoke and express that which may otherwise be implicit and ineffable (Barone & Eisner, 2011; Cole & Knowles, 2007). An arts-informed approach brings together the systematic rigor of conventional qualitative methods (e.g., interviews) with the creative and imaginative possibilities of art forms and processes (e.g., drawing) to create the potential for substantial new knowledge (Cole, 2015; Cole & Knowles, 2007).

The integration of art into community-based participatory research offers a host of advantages, including broadening participation (Collier & Perry, 2023; Furman et al., 2019), evoking nuanced perspectives and feelings around challenging topics (Dickson, 2021; Mantler et al., 2024), inviting a broad spectrum of knowledges and experiences (Dossa, 2019; Drolet et al., 2018), and collaborating and co-creating a community vision (MacGregor et al., 2022; Trout et al., 2022). Accordingly, this

approach recognizes the breadth of varied, complicated, and subtle knowledges held by individuals and communities and attempts to more authentically represent and reflect lived experiences. Overall, as Cole states, arts-informed research is an “explicit attempt to make a difference through research” (2015, p. 22), connecting people through accessible, evocative, embodied, and empathetic means.

Moreover, arts-informed methods can aid in enlarging the social imagination, which has been described as the sharing of stories within a community (Greene, 1995). Asserting that all people possess the ability to tell stories of the human condition, Greene suggests that many sorts of dialogue are key to reshaping our imaginations toward a “more fulfilling social order” (p. 5). Stories give voice to personal perspectives and the particularities of the everyday, or the community “local knowledge” (p. 68). Similarly, Arendt proposes understanding of the evolution of people’s objective and worldly interests toward the subjective in-between that she calls the intangible but no less real “‘web’ of human relationships” (1958/2018, p. 183), a web which produces stories, a “living reality” (p. 184) revealing the nature of both its subjects and their greater contexts. Arendt suggests that artworks are one way these stories may be made visible or tangible, and in doing so reveal more about the ever-changing social and political networks that shaped them.

An arts-informed approach also aligns with other epistemologies that emphasize relationality and inspire alternative perspectives of knowing beyond cognition. For example, an Indigenous research paradigm recognizes knowledge as situated within relationships, including “interpersonal, intrapersonal, environmental and spiritual relationships, and relationships with ideas” (Wilson, 2008, p. 74). An East Asian perspective offers a holistic understanding of the elements of everyday life and belief systems as deeply interconnected (Yigang & Qianli, 2011), and the African philosophical worldview of *Ubuntu* centers the essence of being human with our connections to the natural environment and spiritual worlds (Ewuoso & Hall, 2019; Seehawer, 2018). Other cultural art practices similarly resonate with place- and food-based

knowledges, communal memory, and aesthetic symbolism, such as Indigenous storywork (Archibald, 2008), Southeast Asian performance rituals of Wayang Kulit and Ramayana (Richman & Bharucha, 2021; Yousof & Khor, 2017), and Afro-Caribbean muralism (Braziel, 2022). As further evidenced by rich traditions and emerging practices of artmaking and craft within non-Western cultures and diasporic communities, such as muralism (Braziel, 2022; Healey, 2024; Latorre, 2018), dance (Kabir, 2014; Mabingo, 2019), ceramics (Arnold, 2018; Zhou & Sangiamvibool, 2025), weaving (Ariss, 2023), and many others, the affective, creative, and multimodal possibilities of artistic expression and representation lend themselves readily to ways of knowing that prioritize the relational dimensions of people's experiences and that include emotional, embodied, and cognitive aspects of meaning-making and knowledge.

### *A Method of Draw and Reflect*

While drawing is a common research method for investigating the perceptions of children (Agarwal et al., 2021; Bland, 2018; Literat, 2013; Nomakhwezi Mayaba & Wood, 2015; Tatham-Fashanu, 2023), it is infrequently used with adults, despite the process offering the same valuable data, such as nonlinear conceptualization, access to memories, thoughts, and feelings, reflexivity, and creative non-verbal expression (Luraschi, 2020; Odhiambo, 2020; Reason, 2018). As a flexible mode of communication that generates countless ways of expression, drawing provides an approachable entry point into artmaking, even among those who do not consider themselves to be artists or artistic. Following a collaborative drawing activity with an invitation to participate in a semi-structured interview allows participants to reflect on their creative process, verbally clarify their intentions, and explain their drawings in relation to prompts. This approach echoes other arts-informed methods that involve drawing, such as Draw and Write (MacGregor et al., 1998), Draw, Write, Tell (Angell & Angell, 2013; Angell et al., 2015), and Draw, Write, Reflect (Sharafizad et al., 2020).

The procedural order of visual and verbal methods matters. A study of women in academic

careers concluded that conducting an artmaking activity first is “more likely to result in an authentic representation of the topic of investigation” (Sharafizad et al., 2020, p. 449). Drawing first and interviewing second emphasizes art as both a process and a catalyst toward deeper understanding. As a study on emotional impact amid organizational change found, this sequence affords participants opportunities to capture their raw, initial thoughts and frame their own experiences uninfluenced by further dialogue with researchers (Kearney & Hyle, 2004). Because images are open to interpretation (Weber, 2014), participants' verbal clarification minimizes researcher subjectivity. In terms of validity and reliability, the combination of methods produces multiple data streams that can reinforce one another. However, just as art can transform understanding, research rooted in art must also be appraised differently than traditional qualitative research methods. Barone and Eisner (2011) proposed that the success of research involving the arts is to be found not in systematic validation, but in persuading others to look again at the world and experience it differently.

### **Methods**

This pilot study occurred at a free, public event hosted by an art museum in May 2024 in Tucson, Arizona. On the third Thursday of each month, the museum opens in the evening and invites the public to enjoy music, food, and art, and learn about community organizations. PCFA was invited to this event to share information about the organization's work and to conduct the pilot study in conjunction with University of Arizona researchers.

Inspired by the potential of arts-informed research to elucidate individual and community values around sustainable food systems, we engaged participants through a hybrid method of Draw and Reflect, consisting of a collaborative art activity and a semi-structured interview. Participants were asked to draw in response to two prompts about nourishment on a shared canvas: (1) What nourishes you? (2) What nourishes our community? As participants drew their responses to either or both prompts, their contributions filled small portions of a larger canvas to eventually yield a colorful, collaborative envisioning of individual and community

nourishment. After drawing, participants were invited to answer questions about their artwork, nourishment, community, and the local food system.

The drawing prompts and interview questions were collaboratively developed between University researchers and members of PCFA. Overall, 16 people participated in the pilot study. Two opted to write their answers to the interview questions after drawing, while the other 14 agreed to a recorded interview. Written answers and interviews were transcribed for analysis, and digital photos of each individual artwork were attached to the corresponding transcript. Interviews and artworks were compiled into Atlas.ti for analysis. Text and imagery of the drawings—most drawings (75%) included text as part of the response—were visually analyzed using an inductive coding approach; that is, the codes and findings emerged from the dataset. We (the authors) iteratively developed the codebook through dialogue about emerging themes and concepts. We both coded the entire dataset and resolved any analytic discrepancies through discussion.

After data analysis, we presented initial findings to members of PCFA to solicit additional feedback about the process and findings. We inquired about how this kind of public engagement activity could support PCFA's efforts to connect with the community and how the information acquired through the study might inform their work in the local food system.

## Findings

In the following section, we discuss the methodological and thematic findings of the visual and verbal data. Methodological findings reveal differences in representation when expressed through visual and verbal modalities, while thematic findings emphasize the complexity in perceptions of nourishment.

### *Demographics*

Of the 16 people who participated in the study, ages ranged from 10 to 72 years, with a median age of 43.5. All were current Tucson residents, with residency ranging from 2 to 42 years, with a median residence time of 11 years.

### *Visual Analysis*

When people think about nourishment and what nourishes them, it is clear that the concept of nourishment expands beyond food and beverages. While food and nutrients represented a common theme, other themes of nourishment arose, including nature and the environment, people and society, spirit and emotion, and connections to place. Images of food and drinking water appeared in 37.5% of drawings, represented by fruits, vegetables, and food crops. Nature or environmental themes appeared in most of the drawings (81.3%), represented by plants, animals, weather, and natural landscapes. Themes involving people and society appeared in 62.5% of drawings and were represented through depictions of relationships, connection, and cooperation. Emotions appeared in 50% of drawings and were represented through hearts, smiley faces, and compassion imagery. Place-based markers appeared in 37.5% of drawings such as desert plants or local landmarks. Place-based images were double-coded, meaning that they were coded for one other theme as well. For example, a saguaro cactus—an iconic Sonoran Desert plant—was coded as a place-based marker and as nature or environment.

### *Interview Analysis*

In interviews, participants were asked to describe their drawing and what it meant to them. By comparing the above visual analysis to what participants expressed, we can assess how closely our interpretations as researchers align with participant intentions. Food and drinking water appeared in 37.5% of participant interviews, the same percent as the visual analysis. Nature or environmental themes were discussed in only 56% of descriptions, as compared to 81.3% in the visual analysis. People and society-related themes were discussed in 68.7% of descriptions, compared to 62.5% of drawings. Spirit and emotion only arose in 31.3% of descriptions, compared to 50% in the visual analysis. One reason for this outcome was that a smiley face was interpreted as happiness (an emotion) when participants attached the image to society or people, rather than as an emotion. Place-based markers increased to 50% in people's descriptions, from 37.5% of drawings. Some

people referenced local organizations or community groups in their description that were not apparent in the drawing.

Figure 1 shows the comparative frequency of themes as they arose in visual and verbal analyses. The illustrative imagery for each theme was drawn from exemplars of participants' drawings and use of visual symbols and corresponds to the categorization of the visual expression or verbal description; for example, hearts for spirit and emotion, and mountains and storm clouds for nature and environment.

### *Describing Nourishment*

After describing their artworks, participants were asked questions about nourishment as a concept, personal forms of nourishment, and community forms of nourishment. Because the art activity contained two prompts, many people's responses reflected notions that combined personal and community nourishment. In describing nourishment, people articulated its interconnectedness and multifaceted qualities, strongly emphasized relationships with people, places, and things, and described natural and local elements as significant sources of nourishment.

**Figure 1. Illustrated Bar Chart Comparing the Frequency of Themes in Visual and Verbal Analyses**

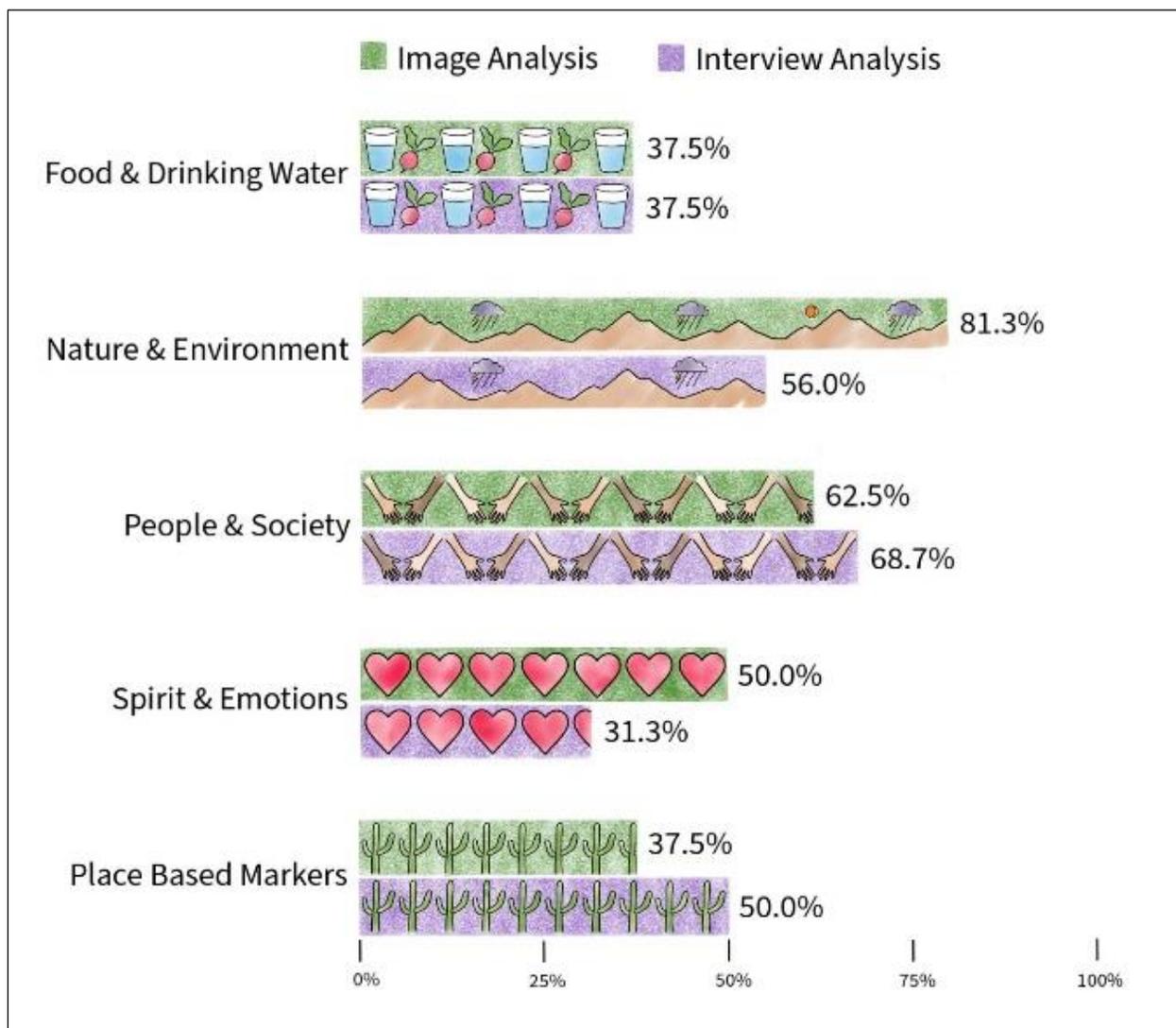


Image by the authors.

### *Connection as a Means of Nourishment*

Participants described bonds or relationships with other people, places, plants, and animals as integral to feeling nourished. This type of connection can be cultivated by partaking in community activities, engaging in formal and informal learning opportunities, and sharing mutual experiences. For example, participants described joining organized activities such as dance classes and cultural events, volunteering with community gardens, food banks, or other social organizations, and learning through museum visits, attending seminars, and other educational programs. Others identified experiencing connection through events or moments shared with others, such as savoring the distinct aroma of the summer monsoon. One participant (B), who drew blue raindrops falling on soil, discussed her lifelong experience anticipating and experiencing the monsoon: “The smell of the rain in the desert, it’s something that really stays with you. It connects people ... and everything comes to life” (Figure 2).

The theme of connection was often described as a sense of belonging or identifying as part of something larger. Nearly half (7) the participants noted the significance of community for nurturing this sense. When asked what community means or feels like, one participant (J) responded, “It makes

me feel like I’m part of something and not just part of myself.” Other descriptions of belonging included feeling at home, feeling validated and supported, learning to move collectively, sharing experiences, setting roots in place, and having the ability to rest. Being part of something larger also meant making space for others and providing support. As one participant (G) shared, the importance of community is “finding a place where you can feel at home and where you can make others feel at home.”

Another form of connection was described as reciprocity. Closely linked to belonging, participants described how relationships were nourished through giving and receiving and how investing in care and support for others was also a way to nourish oneself. Reciprocity was described as trusting in community support. As Participant B shared, reciprocity was “being able to take a break and come back knowing that others are going to carry it on while you’re resting.” Self-awareness, communication, and cooperation were crucial aspects of reciprocity.

Others emphasized that connection is about having a relationship that, as Participant J explained, “goes beyond ... the immediate human to human relationships. ... It’s about thinking of

**Figure 2. Participant B’s Drawing of Monsoon Rain in the Desert**



yourself in relation to others including the more than human.” Participant M described her drawing of an avocado seedling, sun, and phoenix as representing a long-term, more than human relationship with the exchange of multiple benefits (Figure 3):

I have this avocado plant that I’ve been growing for a few years. It doesn’t really nourish me right now but one day it will. And it also nourishes my soul. So I take care of him, I talk to him. His name’s Buddy. Then I drew a sun, giving him life and warmth. And then in the sun, I drew a phoenix to symbolize the circle of life and death, kind of. That sort of spiritual energy nourishes me.

Overall, meaningful connections between participants and elements and entities within their communities played a key role in feelings of nourishment. As participant K summed up, community meant a “feeling of belonging, a feeling of camaraderie, fulfillment, elements of giving and taking, and being concerned with the betterment of others, and not just myself.” Another participant (L) reflected on the tendency of contemporary habits to distance and isolate people, explaining that his

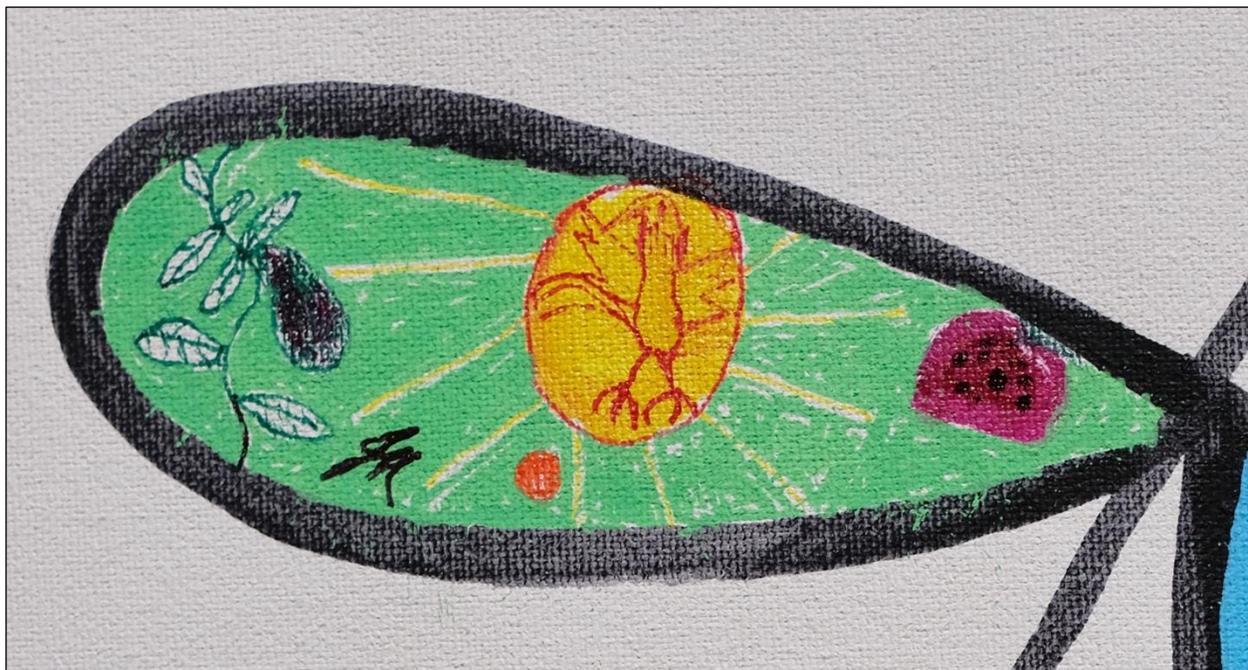
drawing of interlocking rings and a series of hearts intended to show that, for him, connection was synonymous with nourishment.

#### *Nourishment as Holistic, Diverse, and Multifaceted*

Participants described nourishment as encompassing more than the intake of food and water. While nutrients were acknowledged as basic needs and were popular in visual depictions, participants’ discussions and artworks indicated that nourishment is more multifaceted, complex, and holistic. Participant N stated that nourishment “can be social, spiritual, financial, physical, within food, but also finding the things that make you feel happy, feel joyful, and bring a net positive energy.” Another participant (B) described nourishment as “an extra layer” on top of food, one tied to “community and tradition” and “pleasure and joy,” but stressed that it is nevertheless a basic need. Participant M felt that nourishment is “not only something that’s good for my body, but something that’s good for my soul.”

Key feelings of nourishment included a sense of joy or happiness, fulfillment, and deep satisfaction. Participant A shared that while her initial sense of nourishment was a literal, food-based

**Figure 3. Participant M’s Drawing of Her Avocado Plant, Sun, and Phoenix**



experience, upon reflection through her artmaking she felt her creativity and connection to the community to be essential to her overall fulfillment and happiness. Others similarly noted that feeling satisfied, whole, or complete was derived from a variety of sources that extend beyond the physical domain. Participant K, in sharing the components of her artwork, explained that nourishment is made up of “things that make me feel full, whether it’s in my heart, or my belly, or my head, things that make me feel both at once settled, and also very vibrant and alive.”

A final feature that emerged from participant descriptions was the continuous and cumulative nature of nourishment. Insights underscored the significance of enduring interactions, connections, and community in providing nourishment. Participant D explained:

When I think about nourishment and community, [I think of] cumulative things, of doing ... things that make me feel connected that are not necessarily, like, a one-off festival, but [that] there’s a continuity that I really value.

In this sense, nourishment was described as enduring traditions of community, culture, and place.

### *Nourishment from and for Nature*

Images of nature and natural elements were the most common visual elements depicted (81.3%), and participants often mentioned nature in interviews (50%). Analysis revealed that when people discussed nature and environmental elements, they often described personal or cultural relationships with nature. Two distinctions emerged in the ways participants portrayed nature in terms of nourishment: as a resource for humans, and as a collective of more-than-human entities that have purposes beyond human interests.

For some participants, nature provided a space for interpersonal connection. Participant H, discussing her drawing of water and fish, remarked, “I feel outdoors and nature is really helpful not only to yourself, but to our community as well ... it gets people out there and talking to each other and talking about things and building friendships and connections.” Participant E expressed a similar senti-

ment: “You can’t be in this place and not really think about the natural beauty of it, and I think that brings a lot of people together.” Participant I, who identified as a recent transplant to the area, shared his observation that efforts to protect land and wildlife bring people together in ways that are nourishing for all species.

Others considered natural resources in relation to sustainability and conservation efforts. For example, Participant G drew a prickly pear cactus to symbolize the desert scenery and its role as an Indigenous food source, centering local natural resources and resilience in an arid climate. Participant N drew a faucet, glass of water, and a water molecule-turned-heart to express her concern with access to clean water for all people, explaining that “it’s really important for everyone to have access to something that sustains and nourishes all of us.” Others expressed concern for dwindling or mismanaged water supplies and the subsequent impacts on plant and animal life. A participant mentioned gardening as a sustainable way of connecting to the earth and people. Sustainable practices were also described as having value beyond human well-being. As Participant I emphasized:

There are so many different ways to use food that do nourish the life around us. ... Just the practice of general recycling. And I don’t mean the recycling for the bin, I mean recycling for life, to keep the plants growing and keep the ecosystem healthy.

These responses demonstrate how participants viewed nourishment as deeply intertwined with environmental stewardship and care for the broader ecosystem.

Native plants and animals were central to some participant descriptions of nourishment. Participant A, who drew blooming saguaro cacti, explained, “I do love local plant life, not so much as food for me but as food for animals. I love saguaros ... and it’s saguaro blooming season right now. So watching the bees and the birds, that’s nourishment to them.” Participant J, who drew laurels of mesquite tree branches, pods, and pollen, described her daily relationship with the mesquite trees in her yard, observing their seasonal changes

and the animals that visit them. “I kind of gravitated toward my mesquite. ... If I’m thinking of nature, like who is my teacher right now, it’s the mesquite” (Figure 4).

Others described how weather patterns were important for nourishing the local environment. Participant L shared:

My mind immediately goes to the monsoon or weather. I think of this type of nourishment as the monsoon season coming to ultimately a pretty dry place. My mind just kind of went to the weather ... that’s interesting. Yeah, nourishment *of* nature.

Similarly, Participant B described the annual arrival of the monsoon as “celebratory” and as an event that connects all desert dwelling life.

#### *Nourishment and Connections to Place*

Beyond local flora, fauna, and weather, participants frequently referenced other local elements in relation to nourishment, including landmarks, commu-

nity organizations, local restaurants, traditional foods, and long-standing cultural practices. These place-based elements were described as assets, and participants intimated their own connections to these elements. For example, Participant E shared how the “sense of the city and its energy and its sense of community” was a source of nourishment.

Participants emphasized the importance of diversity within their community, recognizing representation of different backgrounds, perspectives, and epistemologies as an overall strength. Participant B explained how she felt connection:

People coming together in interdisciplinary ways, each bringing their own strengths to things, and creating something much more rich and diverse than you would get if you’re more siloed. Tucson is really good at that, at really bringing multigenerational and people from all kinds of backgrounds.

Similarly, participant N credited the city of Tucson for teaching her about community: “It has shown me how so many different types of people can come together and show their strengths and provide for each other, support one another, and bring about community betterment.”

Several participants identified themselves as recent transplants or short-term residents, and learning about the local natural environment and community. Participant D, for example, admitted feeling culture shock upon arrival but learning more about the weather, land use, and gardening has helped her feel more comfortable and to appreciate the area. Participant G attributed the desert environment as stimulating her awareness of place in a way she had not previously felt:

I came from a very green, wet, moist place when I moved here. And then I was suddenly faced with a totally different way of living, and having to get used to all sorts of different environmental factors. I think that tied me a lot more to place than I may originally have been, because I was forced to have such a drastic shift in my environment and community. So thinking in that way, a place can kind of impact how you see yourself and how you see the world.

**Figure 4. Participant J’s Drawing of a Mesquite Tree**



Others spoke of their realization and appreciation that the specific conditions of place engender different kinds of knowledge, approaches, and forms of conservation for natural resources, wildlife, and cultural practices.

## Discussion

Our findings contribute to a growing body of research that shows how arts-informed and creative research approaches allow people to express their experiences and perspectives in new ways and contribute greater understanding of complex problems (Dickson, 2021; Drolet et al., 2018; Furman et al., 2019; Mantler et al., 2024). The art activity discussed in this pilot study afforded an opportunity to test combined methods of inquiry about nourishment within a community-based research approach. Findings point to two main areas with implications for conducting arts-informed research and supporting local food policy.

### *Arts-Informed Research*

An arts-informed approach offers the potential to engage participants through multiple modalities and advance research in new ways. This section discusses findings and considerations for instrumentalizing art as a method of engagement.

### *Necessity of Multiple Forms of Inquiry*

A method that combined artmaking with interviews revealed important distinctions regarding creative expression and modalities of communication. Comparative analyses of visual and verbal data suggest variations in the content represented and the frequency of thematic topics. In visual analysis of the artwork, researchers did not always interpret meaning or representation in the drawings as intended by participants. Therefore, the post-drawing interview is a necessary component to arts-informed inquiry in order to clearly understand participants' meanings in their drawings. For example, images depicting nature appeared in 81.3% of drawings but were mentioned in only 50% of verbal descriptions. Similarly, symbols of emotion appeared in 50% of drawings but were only mentioned in 31.3% of verbal descriptions. One explanation for this difference may be the use of iconic and symbolic imagery, such as

saguaro cacti, landmarks, smiley faces, or hearts. Icons and symbols are shorthand for concepts, ideas, or feelings (Geertz, 2000). While they generally do not hold inherent meaning, they can be used to communicate broadly held notions or feelings such as connection to place, happiness, love, and so forth. When asked to elaborate upon their perspectives, some participants may have found it unnecessary to fully describe the iconic or symbolic meaning embedded in their artwork, presuming these to be self-evident and commonly understood. However, a large percentage of the drawings (75%) also included text, which suggests that many participants wanted to clarify the intention of their imagery, or felt that the combination of image and text more closely communicated their aims.

Variations in the visual and verbal data, stemming from different modalities, may offer distinct benefits to both the participant and the researcher. For the participants, the familiarity and flexibility of drawing means that the activity can feel low-stakes and enjoyable, allowing them to express themselves with personal style and meaning. Speaking about their drawing allows the participant to clarify their intentions and elaborate on elements or thoughts that may not be immediately apparent. For instance, Participant A noted that she had conceived of creativity as part of what nourishes her but felt that this was not obvious in her drawing. Talking about her art assured her that this important aspect was communicated and recorded, similar to ways that many participants incorporated writing into their drawings.

For the researcher, drawing opens a pathway for connecting with the participants, as their drawing becomes a starting point for a conversation. A participant's explanation minimizes researcher bias in interpreting the drawing and positions the researcher as a listener to their creative process and perspective. Deployed in combination, drawing and verbal reflection cross-validate the salience of the findings and together illuminate subtleties and nuances that would likely be overlooked by one method alone.

### *Art Informs Interview, Interview Informs Art*

The act of drawing may influence how a person

responds to a research prompt. Converting thought into image uses different cognitive processes than verbalizing a response. Allowing research participants time on their own to draw freely in response to a prompt may encourage them to think more deeply about the research topic. Likewise, following the drawing activity with an interview suggests an important aspect about the artmaking process. While interview questions probed further and more pointedly than the art prompts—asking participants about community, place, and the local food system in addition to explaining their art—it is possible that talking about their drawings helped participants generate deeper insights into what they drew and why. When given guiding questions to reflect upon and verbalize their intentions, participants may realize more about the roots of their artmaking than they would through drawing alone. Participant L illustrated this connection, by drawing an interlocking chain and hearts to symbolize interpersonal relationships, later recognizing through his verbal reflection that the monsoon, as the “nourishment of nature,” was also central to his understanding of nourishment. This points to the value of the creative process and the role of multimodal communication in unlocking implicit knowledge.

### *Creating a Collective Artwork*

Finally, we found that integrating an art process into qualitative inquiry yielded more than a visual catalog of participants’ drawings or an enhancement of interview data. Rather, the activity of making art together initiated an intersubjective process, or dialogue, among participants as well as with the researchers. During the public event at the museum, we observed people engaging not only with the prompts, but with each other and each other’s expressive contributions on the canvas. People appeared to enjoy and take inspiration from other drawings, at times even echoing compositions and representations of ideas or elements in creating their own visual expression (Figure 5). The shared canvas became a site for dialogue that occurred person to person, person to artwork, and artwork to person, across time. In this sense, the medium and the outcome of the work is the collective conversation that emerged from the interactiv-

ity of making art together. The iterative process allowed ideas to build on one another, creating a richer, more layered representation of collective knowledge and priorities, reflecting what Greene (1995) described as the social imagination. While our data collection and analysis focused on individual contributions and perspectives, we contend that the data were shaped by the intersubjectivity of the art process and reflect otherwise intangible connections of human relationships (Arendt, 1958/2018). Measuring the precise significance of such an effect is difficult, if not impossible, and would otherwise contradict the point of involving an art process in the study.

### *Informing Food Policy and Community Programs*

The ongoing collaboration between PCFA and University researchers has centered on understanding local priorities for building a sustainable local food system that is resilient to forms of environmental and societal risk. This section describes potential applications of our research to inform local food system development.

Several of the main characteristics of nourishment that emerged from our dataset also point to key characteristics of resilience, or the ability to withstand and recover from shocks and stressors, such as natural disasters, economic downturns, and political unrest. For example, participants’ descriptions about connection as a form of nourishment, exemplified by a strong sense of social cohesion, inclusion, and community, are also important components of a resilient society (Aldrich, 2017; Matthews et al., 2020). A sense of belonging, reciprocity, and trust can serve to facilitate cooperation and collective problem solving (Arana & Wittek, 2016).

Another significant theme of nourishment focused on the health and well-being of the natural environment, and the ecosystem services that nature provides for human society. Participants discussed the need to use environmental resources sustainably, to help maintain ecosystem function for human and nonhuman life. Resilient practices also tend to conserve resources and consider environmental and ecosystem health, including water and air quality, soil health, and biodiversity (Mallick et al., 2025).

**Figure 5. The Collective Artwork Composed of Participants' Drawings**



A third key theme of nourishment described people's connection to place through public involvement, attending community events, and supporting locally owned businesses, all of which are also important characteristics of resilience. Joining local initiatives through volunteering and attending festivals and other cultural events can help build relationships and increase feelings of well-being (Coren et al., 2021). Small businesses and locally owned operations can support community resilience through creating jobs, circulating wealth within the community, and fostering a sense of place (Adekola & Clelland, 2020; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). As participant K noted, "It makes sense for us to invest in the place that we live. And so that means eating things that are grown by people here and trying to support their livelihood as they support us and having delicious things that are nourishing for us."

When applied to building a local food system, these themes of nourishment and resilience might take the form of (a) strengthening local food economies through farmers' markets, food cooperatives, and local farms, as well as businesses and restaurants that source locally grown food; (b) supporting community-led initiatives like community gardens and home gardens; (c) attending festivals and events, often tied to the unique qualities of a place and its cultural traditions; (d) implementing sustainable farming practices that promote biodiversity, soil health, and water conservation; (e) reducing food waste and promoting resource recovery through composting, anaerobic digestion, and other innovative approaches; and (f) promoting overall community well-being through access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, safe housing, recreational opportunities, and social support.

### *PCFA Reflections on the Method and Applications for Use*

In March 2025, the authors presented findings from this pilot study to three PCFA steering committee members. We sought their feedback on our methodology and analysis, and explored potential future applications of this arts-informed approach within the organization.

PCFA members discussed how this method facilitated collective meaning-making and exchange. Unlike survey or interview research methods that prioritize individual responses, they thought this arts-informed approach encouraged participants to see and respond to others' contributions. One member reflected on how the art fostered dialogue and collective effect: "If what we're talking about is collective action and advocacy, there's something to that in how people's ideas converge and influence each other" (R. Leih). The interactive component of this method helps surface not just individual perspectives but also shared visions for the future.

Because the approach captures collective visions as well as individual perspectives, it can serve as a strategic planning tool for organizations seeking to align their work with community priorities. One clear application is the potential for gathering broad community insights and translating them into PCFA priorities and action items. As an organization serving Pima County, PCFA strives to be responsive to community needs. Members viewed this method as a creative and structured way to capture shared experiences, concerns, and aspirations about food, agriculture, and sustainability. One member noted how the study "expands our minds about different ways that we can engage people. It moves in the direction we want to go, in terms of more equitable community engagement" (S. Thompson). PCFA members shared their plans to implement a variation of this method at an upcoming community event.

Another application identified by PCFA members was to gather public sentiment on current issues and communicate it to local policymakers. As one member noted, "People talk about how a lot of elected officials want to hear stories and not necessarily see graphs" (R. Leih). PCFA members discussed how installations that combine audio or

written statements from the artists with their drawings could create compelling stories for policy advocacy, observing that "one of our roles could be to make the connection between the stories that are emerging from this and connect it to policy decisions" (S. Thompson).

PCFA members brainstormed ways to present this work to policymakers, suggesting displays in city or county buildings. One member offered, "We could do a focused presentation where we pull individual images and corresponding text from the interviews to make a case for different policies that we're trying to push forward" (S. Thompson). Another member proposed using the canvas's imagery to create a community-based "mural project based off of this research" and "make it a permanent item at a park." She explained that a mural could help bridge the community with policymakers "by inviting folks who represent a district or neighborhood [and] bringing leadership or decision makers to a community event" to create the mural (B. Fealk).

Beyond policymaking, PCFA members emphasized how the visual nature of this work makes findings easily shareable with wider audiences, including the public and other community organizers. One member suggested using the visual output of this work for PCFA's social media campaigns. Another member noted that "social media is often a huge entry point for people to engage in policy advocacy," adding that this strategy could grow membership and "broaden the engagement of people...[who] see themselves as potentially part of PCFA moving forward" (R. Leih).

A final application involved the idea of translating community voices into artistic representations. PCFA members recognized the canvas itself as a valuable collection of community insights, but noted how the overall visual richness of the "canvas alone could be overwhelming" (R. Leih). Just as verbal data needs analysis and synthesis, they thought that creating a visual summary of the canvas would help communicate its key messages. PCFA members noted that these summarized visuals could be used to spark further discussions about food system policy and local programs to address community needs.

## Conclusion

This study was an exploration of a novel arts-informed method to evoke and capture people's perspectives of nourishment in relation to food systems. The artistic process, facilitated by drawing and a community event, permitted people to express themselves creatively, while the interview portion provided opportunities for reflection and clarification. The combination of visual and verbal responses from participants suggested that nourishment encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of people's lives, and pointed to the need for food advocacy and policy to attend to more than simply the provision of nutrients and to support social, cultural, and ecological relationships. Overall, the arts-informed research process demonstrated promising accessibility and applicability for investigating complex topics through community engagement.

The outcomes of this pilot study suggest there

is further opportunity to advance the utility of arts-informed methods in the service of building a resilient local food system and beyond. Future research could explore the impact of incorporating art processes in qualitative methods and comparatively examine differences in engagement with complex topics such as nourishment and food system values through conventional, creative, or hybrid modalities. Additionally, developing questions or prompts focused on specific food- or place-related issues could provide greater insights to local policymakers and advocacy organizations working to shape more effective food system programs and policies. It should be noted that a larger sample size involving a broader diversity of community members could reveal a clearer picture of people's perspectives, as well as a more granular understanding of the effects of current food policy and issues on people's lives.

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