

Feel the beat: intergenerational silent disco parties for radical leisure in long-term care

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Abstract

Pleasure in later life is too often treated as incidental – an accidental by-product of health-focused interventions – rather than a legitimate and vital aspect of human flourishing. This paper challenges dominant bio-medical and neoliberal narratives of aging by exploring the radical potential of intergenerational silent disco headphone parties as a source of immersive, playful, and socially inclusive leisure in three Canadian long-term care (LTC) homes. Drawing on video recordings, interviews, observations, and focus groups, we examine the experiences of a group of 180 participants, including older adults living with and without dementia, family partners, and interdisciplinary staff members who participated in our disco parties. Thematic analysis revealed three key themes: (1) sharing intergenerational joy, (2) creating welcoming aesthetic spaces, and (3) embracing spontaneity and playfulness. Rather than serving as a therapeutic intervention to manage decline, these disco parties centered pleasure for its own sake, resisting dominant tropes of aging as loss. We argue that

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reclaiming leisure as joyous, relational, sensorial, and embodied is a radical act, one that affirms older adults' right to delight, dance, and be with others, while advancing culture change in dementia care toward more relational and pleasure-centered ways of living.

Keywords: aging, embodiment, leisure, pleasure.

Introduction

Pleasure in later life should be a legitimate and vital aspect of human flourishing. Yet long-term care (LTC) environments often lack opportunities for pleasure and joy (Braedley et al. 2023). In a North American context, dominant biomedical and neoliberal narratives of aging characterize successful aging as defined by ideals of productivity, independence, and physical health. Leisure, in such conceptions, becomes primarily an instrumental tool for mitigating decline (Calasanti 2020; Liddle et al. 2013; Lloyd et al. 2014; Stončikaitė 2024), and is associated with prescribed activities, such as exercise and cognitive stimulation, to promote aging "successfully." Not only do such definitions discount the intrinsic value of pleasure, creativity, and play inherent in many leisure activities (Adams et al. 2011; Breheny & Stephens 2017; Stončikaitė 2024), they are also incompatible with LTC settings, where traditional notions of productivity and independence are not the goal for most older adult residents. Although such narrow definitions of leisure are a poor fit with LTC, Fortune and Dupuis (2018) argue that leisure holds great potential to support the quality of life for both residents and care team members and contribute to the broader movement of "cultural change" in LTC (p. 340). This requires new ways of defining leisure and its relationship to pleasure and joy – a more sustained, enduring experience than pleasure, according to Braedley et al. (2023). In this qualitative study, we explore the radical potential of intergenerational silent disco headphone parties as leisure activities in LTC settings. These parties, which involve LTC residents, staff, and student and faculty research team members, represent a form of immersive, playful, and socially inclusive leisure. They resist medicalized models of care and are radical in their potential to cultivate spaces of joy in LTC settings. Rather than serving as therapeutic interventions aimed at cognitive or behavioral management, the silent disco parties center pleasure for its

own sake and cultivate the conditions through which joy can emerge over time, through repeated moments of sensory pleasure, relational connection, and shared participation.

Literature Review

Evidence across LTC settings shows that LTC residents often have limited opportunities to engage in meaningful activities and social relationships. The 2023 Report “Every Voice Counts” by the Office of the Seniors Advocate (2023) in British Columbia, Canada, found that of 28,000 LTC residents surveyed, almost two-thirds only “sometimes,” “rarely” or “never” found enjoyable things to do on evenings and weekends, or found opportunities to explore new skills or interests; 61% only “sometimes,” “rarely” or “never” participated in meaningful activities; and 70% of residents “sometimes,” “rarely” or “never” found other people to do things with (pp. 44–46). Opportunities for pleasure, let alone joy, then, were inconsistent at best. Such critiques of LTC are not isolated to this geographic region. Drawing on research by Andersson et al. (2007) and Theurer et al. (2015), Fortune and Dupuis (2022) also report that “specific to LTC ... residents have limited choice in their day-to-day lives, with many recreation programmes being task-oriented, routinized, monotonous, and often inappropriate or inaccessible to most residents living in LTC, especially residents living with dementia” (p. 126).

Limited opportunities for meaningful activity engagement, social relationships, and pleasure and joy extend beyond just LTC residents, affecting others on the care team. For LTC staff, working conditions that require routinized, task-based approaches to care, afford insufficient time and offer inadequate support, exclude care workers’ voices, and require documentation procedures that result in excessive paperwork are pervasive and can be considered forms of structural (Banerjee et al. 2012) and epistemic (Banerjee et al. 2015) violence that preclude conditions for joy. According to Banerjee et al. (2012), in a qualitative study comparing Canadian and Scandinavian frontline residential care workers, Canadian care workers expressed feelings of being “mad,” “stressed,” “sad,” “angry,” “pissed off,” and “demoralized” as a result of such working conditions (Banerjee 2012: 13). Family care partners of adults in LTC, too, have

expressed feelings of frustration, uncertainty, and burnout related to the conditions of LTC, and sought out small joys, cherished memories, and intergenerational connection with their loved one as a way to cope with emotional burden during the COVID-19 pandemic (Boamah et al. 2023). Braedley et al. (2023) posit that LTC quality improvement processes limit opportunities for joy in LTC settings for residents, care staff, and family care partners alike. Emphasis on accreditation or certification results in LTC organizations prioritizing action that focuses narrowly on individual medical care issues, reinforces a medicalized model of care, and “requires a kind of data collection that not only is incapable of capturing the conditions for joy but shifts organizational priorities away from those conditions” (Braedley et al. 2023: 155). This leaves little room for practices of leisure that center relationship building between residents, family members, and staff for the purpose of cultivating experiences of mutual pleasure and joy.

In such LTC settings, a medicalized, “narrow rehabilitative and instrumental view of leisure as therapy can overlook the contribution that leisure experiences more generally make to quality of life and supporting living” (Fortune & Dupuis 2018: 326). However, when resituated within a paradigmatic approach of cultural change, leisure becomes one of the strongest contributors to quality of life for individuals living in LTC homes (Dupuis et al. 2012; Fortune & Dupuis 2018). Cultural change refers to “an innovative model of person-directed living and relationship-based practice” (Elliott et al. 2025: 1) that represents “a move away from the medical model toward social and relational care ethics” (Fortune & Dupuis 2022: 127). According to Goonasekera et al. (2025), it “requires a fundamental transformation in both the philosophy and practice of LTC, emphasizing health improvements and quality of life that are driven by and centered around the person receiving the care” (p. 167). Commonly agreed upon principles of culture change in LTC have been outlined by Fortune and Dupuis (2018) and include: “knowing each person; providing opportunities for choice and self-determination; treating each person with dignity and respect; cultivating close interdependent relationships; creating home-like physical environments, and collaborating on decisions being made” (p. 324). While critiques of the culture change movement include its slow and inconsistent implementation (Lima et al. 2020), and the fact that marketing of culture change models (both for-profit and charitable organizations) has become

an industry (Braedley et al. 2023: 157), still, well-executed culture change models “make it possible to develop methods to plan, cultivate, and assess the conditions of joy in care homes” (Braedley et al. 2023: 159). Here, leisure can play a strong role. Intentionally planned leisure programs that foster collaboration, choice, citizenship, and relationship building can make key contributions to promoting culture change and creating conditions for experiences of pleasure and joy in LTC.

Intrinsic pleasure is often overlooked in considerations of leisure, as many studies measure its value as a mechanism for health improvement. However, centering intrinsic pleasure offers a perspective that highlights leisure’s potential to support more expansive considerations of human flourishing. Leisure has been shown to provide opportunities for people, including those with physical, sensory, and cognitive differences, to experience pleasure, purpose, and freedom in ways that are realized through the body (Kontos et al. 2020; Phoenix & Orr 2014; Throsby 2013). While many older adults experience diminishing opportunities to participate in leisure as they age (Kay & Jackson 1991; Massie & Meisner 2019), leisure continues to be viewed by older adults (including those in LTC) as an important source of resilience, pleasure, and self-expression (Allain 2020; Kontos et al. 2020; Nimrod & Shrira 2016). Specifically, Phoenix and Orr (2014) highlight the continued value of pleasure in later-life leisure by showing how older adults, including those with “non-elite aging bodies,” can experience embodied and relational pleasure through physical activity (p. 44). Beyond physically active forms of leisure, creative forms of leisure, such as arts and crafts, have also been found to be a valuable source of pleasure and purpose in later life, enabling people to explore their identities through creative self-expression, develop connections with others, and contribute to their communities in ways that bring joy (Liddle et al. 2013). Overall, prioritizing pleasure in leisure can be an important way of resisting and redefining traditional healthy aging interventions to better embrace the complexity and diversity of aging experiences and can create the conditions for more enduring experiences of joy.

Innovative arts-based and creative programs within LTC offer examples that re-imagine leisure as collaborative and relational, that center pleasure and creativity for their own sake, and that support culture change in LTC. Programs such as *Dancer not Dementia* (Dancer Not Dementia | Canada’s National Ballet School, n.d.; Kontos et al. 2024), *The Penelope*

Project (Basting et al. 2016), and *Raising the Curtain on the Lived Experience of Dementia* (Henderson et al. 2022; Reid et al. 2023, 2025) have all employed collaborative creative arts, including music and dance, in community and LTC spaces in ways that support citizenship and contribute to culture change. By combining music with physical movement, dance offers a particularly powerful site for resisting neoliberal scripts of aging by fostering embodied self-expression, creativity, and relational joy (de Araujo & da Rocha 2019; Kontos et al. 2020; Roberson & Pelclova 2014; Siltainsuu & Peltola 2024). Importantly, embodied self-expression through dance movement promotes agency and connection, especially for individuals with barriers to verbal communication (Hydén 2013; Kontos et al. 2020). Dance “embraces non-verbal communication, intersubjectivity, affect, and embodied expression” (Kontos & Grigorovich 2018: 717). Studies on the impact of musical engagement in later life suggest that music enables well-being by facilitating social connectedness, supporting meaning-making, and enhancing mood (de Araujo & da Rocha 2019; Lindblad 2021; Siltainsuu & Peltola 2024). Listening to music has been reported as a pleasurable and creative leisure activity that plays a meaningful role in supporting psychological and emotional well-being, hedonism, and social engagement in later life (Creech et al. 2013; Laukka 2007). Similarly, active engagement of older adults through social and participatory music-related activities offers an inclusive source of leisure that supports meaning-making and emotional well-being in later life (Creech et al. 2013; de Araujo & da Rocha 2019). Kontos and Grigorovich (2018) argue that, beyond therapeutic benefits, dance “confirms vitality through intercorporeal, creative, and expressive engagement” and contributes to individual flourishing for individuals living with dementia in LTC (p. 721).

This study situates the silent disco within the broader landscape of dance practices in LTC that seek to reimagine leisure and contribute to culture change. Diverse forms of dance events, including initiatives such as care-home raves (Pestell 2025), have been introduced in institutional contexts to disrupt biomedical risk management cultures and promote embodied expression, joy, and connection. The silent disco format was selected for its distinctive advantages: it allowed participants to enjoy music without creating disruptive noise in the care environment, supported individualized musical preferences while enabling collective participation, and provided flexibility for those who preferred to observe rather

than actively dance. At the same time, we acknowledge the trade-offs of this format. While the option of multiple playlists may limit the collective “shared beat” of communal dancing, it also affirms personhood and accommodates diverse musical tastes, an especially important consideration in dementia care. Silent disco therefore represents one of several innovative approaches to dance and leisure in LTC, aligning with literature that emphasizes the role of embodied practices in fostering inclusion, pleasure, and connection.

Despite this growing literature, pleasure continues to be treated as incidental in studies of leisure and physical activity (Phoenix & Orr 2014), and joy is rarely employed as a critical concept in LTC research. Moreover, while research shows the potential benefits of musical engagement and dance in older adulthood, few studies have examined silent disco headphone parties as an inclusive, playful, and immersive leisure practice for older adults, particularly in LTC (Kaldy 2019), including their potential to support culture change. Even fewer studies have explored the radical potential of intergenerational musical engagement in these contexts as a means of sharing with others and cultivating belonging to create conditions for experiences of joy. This paper addresses these gaps by exploring how intergenerational disco parties can illuminate the radical potential of joy in LTC settings, not only for older adult residents but also for all team members. Guided by Collaborative Action Research (CAR), we examine the experiences of 180 participants, including older adults living with and without dementia ($n = 100$), family partners ($n = 20$), and interdisciplinary staff members ($n = 60$), who participated in silent disco parties facilitated by 25 university student researchers across three Canadian LTC homes. Based on our findings, we argue that silent disco parties in LTC settings have radical potential to support culture change by offering a form of leisure that centers pleasure for its own sake and that cultivates experiences of joy through embodied musical expression and intergenerational relational connection.

Method

Study Design

This qualitative study utilized a CAR approach to explore experiences of silent disco parties in LTC. CAR was a fitting methodological approach for

this study, given its emphasis on participation, co-creation, and change from within (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller 2014). Rooted in principles of equity, relational ethics, and shared inquiry, CAR centers individuals traditionally marginalized in research, notably older adults living in LTC and the staff who support them, as active contributors to the knowledge-generation process. Rather than studying residents as passive subjects, this approach emphasizes collaborative meaning-making, foregrounding the lived experiences, preferences, and creative expressions of participants throughout the research cycle.

Settings and Participants

The study took place across three large, publicly funded LTC homes in British Columbia, Canada. These settings were selected to capture the experiences of residents living with a variety of age-related conditions, including dementia, sensory impairments, and mobility challenges. Participants included older adults living with and without dementia, family partners who visited the homes, and interdisciplinary staff members such as nurses, care aides, recreation staff, and volunteers. Residents were invited by recreation staff, and no exclusion criteria were applied apart from the inability to provide consent or assent with substitute decision-maker support. This inclusive approach ensured participation regardless of mobility, communication, or cognitive abilities, and required careful attention to safety and comfort. Staff and students collaborated to mitigate risks by ensuring a safe space for movement, supporting residents who preferred to observe, and encouraging a range of participation modes. This inclusive approach reflected the study's commitment to dismantling barriers to leisure and centering pleasure as a right for all older adults, regardless of health status. In total, 180 older adults participated across 36 sessions delivered over 1 year, along with approximately ten family partners, 60 interdisciplinary staff members (nurses, care aides, recreation staff, and volunteers), and 25 university students from diverse disciplines.

Silent Disco Parties

Each silent disco session lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a three-part structure:

- Preparation – co-planned with recreation staff, including setup of wireless headphone equipment and invitations extended to all residents;
- Delivery – a student DJ facilitated the event by welcoming participants, introducing songs, and inviting residents to dance freely to the music. Students encouraged individual expression and social interaction, with no expectations of “right” or “wrong” participation;
- Follow-up – residents were invited to conversational interviews to share their reflections and experiences.

Silent disco headphone parties combine personalized music listening with social free dancing for fun engagement. The parties were co-designed and facilitated with the active involvement of residents, families, and staff. Playlists were collaboratively developed with residents, families, and recreation staff to reflect diverse musical preferences and meaningful songs. Students received orientation in dementia care, communication strategies, and technical operation of the headphone system before facilitating the events. Rather than imposing a prescriptive structure, the parties evolved iteratively in response to participant feedback. Weekly sessions were held over a 1 year, each lasting approximately an hour. During these sessions, participants wore wireless headphones through which personalized playlists, curated based on residents’ musical preferences, were broadcast. Challenges in early sessions included residents’ unfamiliarity with the headphones, staff concerns about equipment, and technical issues with setup. These barriers were collaboratively addressed: for example, students demonstrated use of the headphones, staff helped ensure safe movement spaces, and sessions were adapted based on resident feedback. Over time, participants grew more comfortable, and the events evolved into anticipated social gatherings that fostered spontaneity and moments of pleasure. The parties were intentionally crafted as welcoming spaces intended to foster inclusion and comfort for all participants. Disco balls, colorful lights, and playful props (e.g., teddy bears, scarves) contributed to an aesthetic atmosphere that emphasized fun and creativity. Residents could participate in whatever way they chose – dancing, swaying, singing, or simply observing.

Intergenerationality in Leisure

In this study, we define intergenerationality in the context of leisure as opportunities for reciprocal engagement, shared enjoyment, and mutual learning with shared purpose between people of different age groups, rather than only the co-presence of younger and older participants. “Generations” in this study referred specifically to university students (aged late teens to mid-20s) and older adults residing in LTC, including those living with dementia. This pairing was intentional: students brought energy, curiosity, and openness, while older adults contributed rich life stories, lived experiences, and wisdom. Together, the shared activity of music and dance provided a common ground for exchange. Intergenerationality in this project was more than symbolic; it involved intentional opportunities for interaction. Students were not only present but actively facilitated the events – welcoming residents, introducing music, and inviting them into conversations and movement. These roles created space for mutual engagement rather than passive coexistence. When younger participants interacted with older adults, sharing conversations and musical experiences, both groups learned from one another, reshaping their attitudes, fostering mutual appreciation, and cultivating a deeper sense of connection. We argue that intergenerationality matters in this context because it counters age segregation, fosters meaningful connections across the life course, and situates leisure as a relational practice rather than a unidirectional “intervention.” As conceptualized here, intergenerationality is a process of relational exchange that fosters appreciation, connection, and transformation for both younger and older participants.

Data Collection

Data collection was multi-modal to capture the complexity of participants’ experiences. In total, ten silent disco sessions were video recorded, generating over 10 hours of footage. We conducted 20 semi-structured interviews (eight with residents ranging in age from 82 to 98, two with family partners, and ten with staff), each lasting between 10 and 30 minutes and focusing on participants’ experiences of the events, perceived impacts, and reflections on intergenerational interaction. Video recordings

documented the parties themselves, capturing facial expressions, gestures, movements, and interactions between residents, families, and staff. Conversational interviews with participating residents and family partners offered personal narratives and reflections on the significance of the events. In keeping with CAR principles, participant observation was also integral to the study. Researchers did not remain detached observers but instead immersed themselves fully in the silent disco sessions: sitting where residents sat, dancing with them, singing along to familiar songs, and sharing the emotional atmosphere of the parties. This approach was informed by DeWalt and DeWalt's (2002) articulation of participant observation as an embodied, sensory engagement – one that requires attentiveness to visual, auditory, tactile, and emotional cues. By participating alongside residents, researchers were able to access rich, affective dimensions of the experience that might not surface through interviews alone. Participant observation took place across all sessions, with researchers immersing themselves in the parties by dancing, singing, and engaging alongside residents. Field notes documented atmosphere, participation patterns, and the researchers' own reflections. In addition, four focus groups with staff were held, each lasting approximately 60 minutes, exploring challenges and benefits of implementation, perceptions of pleasure and play in LTC, and inter-generational learning.

Data Analysis

All data were transcribed by hand and analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's approach (2022): familiarization, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The process was iterative and collaborative, allowing patterns to emerge inductively while remaining attentive to the study's guiding question. Analysis began with repeated readings of the video transcripts, interview data, focus group transcripts, and field notes to ensure familiarity with the richness of the data. Each member of the research team, including student researchers, staff champions, and older adult and caregiver partners, generated preliminary codes. These codes highlighted recurring patterns related to emotional responses, intergenerational interactions, barriers and facilitators to participation, and the broader meaning of pleasure in LTC. Semi-structured interviews and

focus group guides were designed to explore participants' experiences of the silent disco parties, perceptions of pleasure and play in LTC, intergenerational interaction, and feasibility of implementation. These topics informed the coding but did not constrain it; the team remained open to unexpected insights and emergent meanings. The aim of the analysis was to understand how participants made sense of the disco events and the meanings they attached to them. Our guiding research question was:

How do intergenerational silent disco parties create experiences of pleasure and connection in LTC?

Coding was then compared and refined through iterative cycles of team reflection and discussion. This process was deliberately inclusive, ensuring that multiple perspectives, including lived experience voices, shaped interpretation. Codes were collated into candidate themes, which were reviewed for coherence within the data set and across different participant groups. Particular attention was paid to capturing intergenerational perspectives, as well as moments of tension, resistance, or ambivalence, alongside more positive accounts.

Ethical Consideration

The study received ethics approval from the University Research Ethics Board (H23-00634). Written informed consent was obtained from all participants or their legal representatives. All participant names presented in this paper are pseudonyms, selected to protect individual privacy and ensure confidentiality in accordance with ethical research practices.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed three key themes that illuminate the radical potential of pleasure in later life through the experiences of intergenerational silent disco parties: (1) sharing intergenerational joy, (2) creating welcoming aesthetic spaces, and (3) embracing spontaneity and playfulness. Across these themes, the parties emerged not as health interventions or therapeutic tools, but as immersive, socially inclusive leisure experiences that centered pleasure as a legitimate and vital aspect of human flourishing. By bringing together older adults with and without dementia, family partners, and interdisciplinary staff, the parties challenged

dominant biomedical and neoliberal narratives of aging and experienced leisure as pleasurable, relational, sensorial, and embodied.

Sharing Intergenerational Joy

The first key theme to emerge was the intergenerational moments of pleasure experienced by both residents and student facilitators during the silent disco parties. These encounters were not casual or superficial; they created relational moments that challenged assumptions about aging, dependency, and disengagement. Many residents, particularly those who were less verbally expressive, beamed when students invited them to dance. As one resident described through tears of happiness, "It's so nice when someone asks you to dance. It makes you feel... like you are wanted and important."

Students also described the sessions as meaningful and joyful. One student reflected, "Dancing with the residents was the highlight of my week. I never realized how much fun we could have together." Another explained how her perspective on aging shifted: "I came in nervous, but seeing residents laugh and move with us changed the way I think about nursing homes. It's not just about decline; there's so much joy here." These accounts highlight that joy was not unidirectional but reciprocal, reshaping attitudes and fostering mutual appreciation across generations through bonded relationship.

The sensory experience of touch, hands held lightly, arms linked in gentle sway, a reassuring hand on the shoulder, brought its own kind of magic. A recreational staff member poignantly reflected, "Our residents are deprived of touch. In daily care, the only touch many experiences is clinical, being washed, changed, turned in bed. To be touched for the sake of pleasure, for the sake of connection, is rare. These parties changed that."

During one party, a student gently took Mrs. Pan's hand, helping her to stand and sway carefully to the sound of Nat King Cole's "Unforgettable." Mrs. Pan smiled widely, clutching the student's hand with surprising strength, her feet tapping rhythmically. As they danced, the soft glimmer of the disco lights played across their clasped hands, a visible symbol of the emotional and embodied intimacy unfolding between them. These encounters created accumulative emotional shifts, where

repeated moments of shared pleasure, being invited to dance, touched with care, and seen by others, contributed to a sense of joy. Residents who often appeared withdrawn during daily routines became animated, smiling and laughing as they twirled, tapped, or simply rocked in place. Mr. Solomon, who usually remained silent throughout the day, surprised everyone when, mid-dance, he exclaimed, "I haven't danced like this since my wedding!" His voice cracked slightly with emotion, and a small group of residents and students around him cheered and clapped in celebration. Students, in turn, described feeling delighted and even transformed by these reactions, with one commenting: "When he said that, I almost cried. It made me realize how powerful these small moments can be."

Far from being incidental or therapeutic in the narrow sense, these acts of intergenerational joy asserted older adults' ongoing capacity for relational life, sensual experience, and mutual delight. During one session, a resident named Mr. Chan, who often remained quiet during daily routines, broke into a wide grin as a student approached him with a glowing neon bracelet and gently invited him to dance. Holding hands lightly, they swayed to the beat of Elvis Presley's "Can't Help Falling in Love," surrounded by the soft flicker of colorful disco lights. After the song ended, Mr. Chan chuckled and said, "You young folks sure know how to have a good time. Makes me feel young again." Another resident, Mrs. Fong, spoke movingly of her joy: "When the younger people come to hang out with us, I am very happy. It feels like we matter." The students, many of whom had never danced with older adults before, reciprocated this feeling, often describing the sessions as "the highlight of their week." By bringing generations together in playful, emotionally meaningful ways, the disco parties challenged the cultural separation of old and young, affirming that the capacity for connection, fun, and joy does not diminish with age. Rather than being viewed through a lens of frailty or decline, residents were seen and celebrated as vibrant partners in creating shared pleasure.

Creating Welcoming Aesthetic Spaces

The silent disco parties were crafted as welcoming spaces intended to foster inclusion and comfort for all participants. The aesthetic design of the space did more than enhance atmosphere; it created conditions for sensory

pleasure through light, sound, touch, and familiarity that enabled participants to enter moments of connection. These moments of pleasure, when repeated across sessions, became the foundation through which joy was cultivated. From the moment participants entered the activity room, the setting signaled that something special was unfolding. Staff and students handed out sparkling necklaces, feather boas, and LED-lit bracelets, inviting residents to dress up in party gear if they wished. Shining disco balls spun gently overhead, scattering light across the walls and ceilings, while vibrant scarves and soft teddy bears were placed on chairs and tables for residents to pick up and incorporate into their dancing or simply to hold.

Importantly, the silent disco format allowed individualized experiences. Residents wore wireless headphones set to their preferred volume, and the music, which spanned genres from 1950s rock-and-roll to 1970s disco, was curated based on residents' favorite songs and cultural backgrounds. For Mrs. Lee, who was living with advanced dementia, the familiar strains of "Que Sera, Sera" brought a visible softening to her face. She closed her eyes, held the hand of a nearby student, and gently moved her body in small, rhythmic sways.

One staff member described the impact of this personalization: "You could tell when she recognized songs, just by her facial expressions. Even if she couldn't say it, she absolutely loved every second of it." Another resident, Tina, who communicated non-verbally, was observed tapping her toes in response to a facilitator guiding her hand in rhythmic movements. These subtle, embodied responses were understood not as minor or incidental, but as profound expressions of pleasure and engagement. In the disco parties, participation required no complex choreography, no demands for verbal conversation, and no pressure to perform. Residents could sway in their chairs, clap their hands, sing along, or simply sit and listen. In this space, difference was embraced, and every form of participation was honored, resisting ableist assumptions that only certain bodies or capacities could access joy. These moments of pleasure illustrate that joy can be cultivated through conditions of belonging and sharing, where participants felt invited, recognized, and able to engage in small interactions such as holding hands, swaying together, and laughing.

At the same time, joy was not universal nor uncomplicated. Some residents were confused about how to use headphones, others chose to observe rather than engage, and unfamiliar songs occasionally

created disinterest. Staff raised concerns about the safety of equipment, particularly in early sessions, and students sometimes expressed uncertainty about how to engage residents who were more disabled or less responsive. One student admitted, "At first, I felt awkward when a resident didn't respond, worried I was doing something wrong. But then I realized just being there, holding their hand, was meaningful too." Others noted feeling sadness alongside joy, reflecting on the visible disabilities of residents and the realities of life in LTC.

These complexities show that intergenerational joy was not automatic or effortless. It emerged in negotiation with barriers, hesitations, and emotional ambivalence. Far from diminishing the significance of the events, these tensions underscored the relational depth of the encounters. They challenged both students and residents to adapt, listen, and find new ways of connecting, affirming that the capacity for joy, solidarity, and transformation persists across generations, even in contexts often framed by loss.

These moments of shared touch, movement, and laughter defied the clinical gaze that often dominates perceptions of older adults in care. They challenged the notion that older bodies are merely sites of management or decline. Instead, the parties illuminated how the simple pleasure of being invited, touched, and seen could reaffirm personhood, ignite emotional vitality, and create intergenerational solidarity through the embodied language of dance.

Embracing Spontaneity and Playfulness

The third theme, embracing spontaneity and playfulness, was evident in the way the disco parties transformed the typically structured environment of LTC into a vibrant, unpredictable playground of music, movement, and laughter. The weekly parties became highly anticipated events, creating a new communal rhythm of joy.

As one resident exclaimed excitedly before a session, "It's party day! I've got my dancing shoes on!" Another resident, Mr. Jerry, known for his reserved demeanor, was seen grinning mischievously as he spun his wheelchair in slow circles to the sound of ABBA's "Dancing Queen," a sparkling necklace swinging loosely from his neck.

Playfulness created opportunities for meaning and shared pleasure, where participants were not passive recipients of care but active

contributors to a collective experience. Residents and students engaged in spontaneous dance contests, trying to outdo each other's moves with exaggerated twirls, goofy facial expressions, and dramatic hat tips. Giggly remarks and light teasing abounded. During one particularly lively session, a resident jokingly declared, "I'm going to steal your dance partner!" as she swung into a new group of students, prompting cheers and laughter. Through these playful exchanges, joy emerged as an ongoing process, built through repeated moments of pleasure with laughter, improvisation, and mutual recognition.

Students reflected that these playful exchanges reshaped their own comfort levels. One shared, "At first I worried about being silly in front of the residents, but once they started joking with me, I realized play is ageless." Another explained, "It surprised me how much fun they had teasing us; it felt like we were equals on the dance floor."

The presence of props such as teddy bears and glowing toys further encouraged creative improvisation. Some residents hugged teddy bears as dance partners; others tossed feather boas back and forth across the room, turning the dance floor into a fun, kinetic tapestry of interaction.

The inclusive and playful atmosphere meant that there was no right or wrong way to participate. Mistakes, missed steps, or moments of stillness were simply folded into the celebration. These spontaneous acts of relational play countered institutional norms of passivity and dependence, showing that older adults are not only capable of participating in communal life but also of leading it with creativity, humor, and vitality. The silent disco parties cultivated a collective space of aesthetic beauty and social belonging, where pleasure was not incidental or secondary, but the very heart of the experience. The freedom to dance, play, laugh, and connect affirmed older adults' identities, histories, and enduring capacity for relational flourishing.

Discussion

This study highlights the potential of claiming leisure as joyous, relational, sensorial, and embodied in LTC through intergenerational silent disco parties. The findings advance a conceptual shift from viewing joy as an outcome to understanding it as a relational process cultivated

through conditions that sustain ongoing opportunities for pleasure. Drawing on Braedley et al.'s (2023) framework, our findings demonstrate that joy is not produced through isolated events, but through the repeated experience of small, embodied pleasures such as touch, music, movement, and laughter that are shared with others. These moments accumulate over time, generating a sense of belonging, meaning, and relational connection that constitutes joy. The silent disco parties created immersive, playful, and socially inclusive spaces that reasserted older adults' capacity for embodied joy, relational vitality, and creative self-expression. Consistent with critiques of normative models of "successful aging" (Adams et al. 2011; Breheny & Stephens 2017), our findings illustrate how leisure experiences rooted in pleasure, spontaneity, and play offer an important pathway to well-being that is often overlooked. Rather than focusing on leisure as a form of productivity or health maintenance, disco parties emphasized being together, feeling music, and moving freely, challenging the notion that older adults must engage in leisure solely to forestall decline. This supports arguments that centering pleasure can resist stigma surrounding aging, promoting experiences of resilience, relationality, and flourishing that extend beyond narrow health-related ideals.

A contribution of this study lies in demonstrating how creating inclusive aesthetic spaces can foster a sense of belonging among diverse participants in LTC. The parties provided residents with repeated opportunities to experience pleasure in connection with others through music, touch, and movement, thereby cultivating joy as an ongoing relational process. Through personalized playlists, embodied engagement, and warm intergenerational encounters, the parties nurtured a communal atmosphere where older adults could participate fully on their own terms. Our findings also challenge dominant notions of "healthy aging," which are often colonized by ideals of successful aging, optimization, and restoration and, in LTC, are frequently reduced to risk management and safety. Rather than framing health narrowly as the prevention of decline, the parties illuminate a more expansive, life-affirming understanding of health as relational, affective, and grounded in joy, connection, and meaningful participation.

These findings resonate with previous research emphasizing the role of music in fostering social connectedness, identity, and belonging in later life. Schlorff et al. (2022) found that intergenerational music programs in LTC, such as “Fountains of Uke,” created spaces for mutual joy and meaningful engagement between generations. Similarly, Hays and Minichiello (2005) and Laukka (2007) identified music listening as an important source of self-identity, agency, and social belonging among older adults. De Araujo and da Rocha (2019) further highlighted how musical gatherings promoted nostalgia and social connectedness through shared joyous experiences. These convergent findings affirm that music-based leisure activities – especially when conducted in inclusive, participant-driven ways – hold significant potential for countering isolation and fostering relational flourishing in later life.

Importantly, the music parties reaffirmed older adults’ right to dance, play, and experience pleasure. They did not position dance as a tool for health management but embraced it as a medium for immersive and sensorial pleasure, where residents could express themselves bodily, emotionally, and relationally. This emphasis on sensory immersion is similar to Throsby’s (2013) analysis of marathon swimming as an act of reclaiming bodily agency and belonging. Like Throsby’s swimmers, the older adults in this study reclaimed space with their bodies, asserting their presence through movement, touch, and aesthetic participation. Dancing in the silent disco was not about competence or performance; it was about the shared experience of pleasure and belonging.

This focus on embodied self-expression echoes findings from Kontos et al. (2020) who argued that bodily gestures and non-verbal communication remain crucial means of selfhood and relational engagement among people living with dementia. It also parallels Lindblad’s (2021) study of a music-listening group involving older men, where participants described their experiences as “uplifting, stimulating, and meaningful,” affirming the emotional and social power of aesthetic leisure. Laukka (2007) similarly emphasized that music listening in later life enhanced pleasure, belonging, agency, and continuity of identity.

In sum, the disco parties illuminated how it is possible to foster a space for joy, creativity, and sensorial belonging, offering a radical

counter-narrative to dominant constructions of aging as loss and nursing homes as warehouses of the dying. As such, the silent disco parties offer strong potential to advance culture change in LTC. These findings contribute to broader calls for leisure studies and aging research to move beyond deficit-focused paradigms and embrace relational, aesthetic, and participatory frameworks that honor the complexities and possibilities of later life.

This study holds several important implications for practice and policy in LTC settings. First, it underscores the importance of embedding pleasure-centered, participatory leisure activities into everyday life in LTC, not merely as occasional entertainment but as essential to relational well-being and human flourishing. Policymakers and administrators should recognize that inclusive, aesthetic leisure interventions can significantly enhance community life, reduce isolation, and support emotional resilience among residents. Second, LTC programs should foster intergenerational connections, recognizing that bridging generational divides through shared play, music, and movement can revitalize relational networks within institutional environments. Training recreation staff and student facilitators to emphasize spontaneity, improvisation, inclusivity, and aesthetic engagement – rather than only health-related outcomes – can support a broader, more humane vision of later life. Third, attention should be given to the design of leisure spaces to ensure accessibility for people with diverse sensory, cognitive, and physical abilities. Personalized engagement (e.g., individual music choices, adjustable headphone volumes) and flexibility in participation (e.g., dancing, swaying, singing, or listening) are crucial to fostering environments where all residents feel welcome. All of these recommended shifts in practice and policy offer feasible ways to support culture change in LTC.

Finally, much of the existing music and dance research excludes individuals with dementia and with mobility difficulties; this risks reproducing prejudicial representations of aging that fail to reflect the diversity of older populations, especially those in LTC settings. Extending music-related activities into more everyday social and living environments – beyond the confines of structured choirs, bands, or highly homogenous groups – can create a more representative understanding of older adults' leisure experiences, and a more effective approach to leisure in LTC. Moreover, attending to sociodemographic

factors such as language, culture, and socioeconomic status is crucial to avoid reinforcing exclusionary patterns in leisure research. Diversifying study populations and research contexts, including through international and cross-cultural collaboration, is essential for ensuring that pleasure, agency, and relational belonging is made accessible to all older adults, not just those already privileged by health, mobility, or opportunity (Hallam & Creech 2016). It is essential that we also include older adults in LTC in these experiences because while disability and health challenges are part of their everyday lived experiences, it should not exclude them from experiencing joy through leisure (Hallam & Creech 2016).

Conclusion

This study highlights the radical potential of reclaiming leisure as a space for pleasure, relational connection, and embodied self-expression in later life, and as a conduit for culture change in LTC. Through intergenerational silent disco headphone parties, older adults in LTC experience inclusive, joyous, and sensorial leisure that challenges dominant narratives of aging as decline or withdrawal, and LTC settings as forced relocation where residents lack agency and choice. By centering pleasure as a necessary condition for human flourishing, the parties demonstrated how joy can be cultivated through repeated moments of embodied, relational connection. These findings underscore the importance of designing leisure interventions that are accessible, relational, and rooted in aesthetic engagement. Future research must prioritize inclusion, ensuring that diverse older adults in LTC can access, experience, and express joy, creativity, and belonging. Recognizing pleasure as central to human flourishing is essential to reimagining aging as a vibrant and relational process, and in contributing to culture change in LTC.

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