

Case Study: Engagement and Retention in Social Dance Clubs among Older Adults

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Context

I noticed that the older dancers often switch dance clubs, sometimes only after their first visit, while some stayed in one club as a regular. I focus on the questions of engagement and retention from the perspective of social dance clubs as a service and draw key insights that are applicable to design and UX choices.

Research Questions

1. What motivates older adults to return regularly to a shared leisure space?
2. Why do older adults stop attending certain social dance clubs after their first visit?

Participants & Methods

- Participants: Recruited via physical outreach and snowball sampling. Three men and three women (ages 60–80) in Seoul with varying levels of experience (6 months–2 years)
- Methods: Semi-structured 1:1 interview focused on daily life, meaning of social dance, and emotional drivers of user engagement. Fieldnotes were taken during participant observation over a 2-week period at the dance clubs and café they frequented after dancing
- Tools: Recorded interviews were transcribed with NVivo. Combined with fieldnotes, the transcriptions were interpreted using thematic analysis and affinity mapping

Key Insights

1. First visits often feel alienating due to ambiguous social cues, which vary between each dance club. However, familiar music and presence of known peers helped restore emotional onboarding/user retention
2. Peer presence acts as both a motivator and a barrier. Some participants moved to different venues simply to follow their social group, even if the music quality was higher elsewhere
3. Environmental cues such as lighting, dance floor size, and seating availability shaped participants' perception of safety and respect, influencing whether the space felt welcoming or exclusionary

Product Relevance for Club Owners

1. Use visible, friendly signage to explain unwritten rules and basic etiquette
2. Encourage social behaviors with light incentives like referrals rewards or group discounts
3. Designate staff to welcome and guide new attendees, creating low-pressure entry points
4. Curate the environment to signal inclusivity. Avoid harsh lighting, reinforce warm colors, provide sufficient comfortable chairs, and messaging that reinforce psychological safety

Summary

This research explored how older adults in urban South Korea engage with social dance clubs, focusing on what drives retention and what causes disengagement. The study uncovered that ambiguous social norms, lack of onboarding, and inconsistent environmental cues often led first-time attendees to feel excluded or overwhelmed. On the other hand, familiar music, peer presence, and emotionally safe physical environments helped reinforce a sense of belonging and routine. These insights offer practical guidance for club owners seeking to increase repeat attendance, emphasizing the importance of structured onboarding, consistent sensory cues, and light-touch social scaffolding to foster trust and community. I anticipate these insights can extend to onboarding flows in social media services serving older users, where unclear etiquette and inconsistent interfaces can lead to early drop-off.