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PARTICIPATION OF OLDER WOMEN IN ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE

**Age is just a number:**

**Persistent participation in Electronic Dance Music by women over 40.**

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# PARTICIPATION OF OLDER WOMEN IN ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC CULTURE

## **Abstract**

Participation in electronic dance music events has a range of benefits for health and wellbeing and attracts a broad range of attendees, including those who no longer fit within the category of 'youth'. While a broadening demographic indicates growing diversification and inclusivity within club culture, experiences differ between groups and reveal socially constructed norms associated with age and gender. This study investigated older women's motivations for and experiences of participating in EDM and explored how this group sustains and maintains their involvement. One hundred and thirty-six female clubbers aged forty or over (age range 40-65 years) completed a survey. EDM participation played a central role in women's mental and physical health and provided them with social connectedness, an outlet for self-expression and a release from pressures of daily life. Despite these positive benefits, participation was not without challenges as women reported navigating other people's views on what was deemed to be 'appropriate' behaviour for older, female clubbers and highlighted grappling with their own prejudices about age. The research identified strategies they use to manage their continued participation in a music scene traditionally associated with youth and considered the extent to which their experiences of ageing impact and shape their involvement.

## **Keywords**

Electronic Dance Music, Participation, Older Women, Ageing, Wellbeing

## **Introduction**

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Electronic Dance Music (EDM) describes a broad range of electronic music styles that includes house, techno, trance, electro, jungle and drum 'n' bass. EDM is characterised by low-end sounds (e.g. bass) and a dominant 'four to the floor' beat, marked by the kick drum. Structurally, EDM comprises of loops, which are repeated to create a groove, and sampled sounds, such as vocals from disco, R&B, and soul (García, 2011). EDM is predominantly played at nightclubs, festivals and raves where people come together to dance. Whilst young people typically make up the largest percentage of attendees at EDM events, this music scene has seen a noticeable shift towards greater diversity and inclusion. A recent industry report describes 'a genre that transcends age, with young and older generations finding common ground' (NTIA, 2024 p.56). Although younger people attend more frequently (43% of 16-34 years old on a weekly basis), 41% of those aged 45 and over go clubbing at least once a month (NTIA x Audience Strategies: Electronic Pulse Survey, 2024). Given that EDM is a scene that has existed since the late 1980s, it is unsurprising that many of its participants are ageing too. Older people, either as long-standing participants or newcomers, are continuing to attend EDM events well into their middle age and beyond. With a few notable exceptions, this trend, and the implications it has for both clubbers and the industry, has received little scholarly attention. A small number of studies have explored the experiences of older EDM attendees (Gregory, 2009; Goulding & Shankar, 2004; O'Grady & Madill, 2019; Peter & Williams, 2019). Goulding and Shankar (2004) argued that lifestyles typically associated with youth are 'migrating up the age scale' (p. 647) and that clubbers are deferring traditional age-related commitments (e.g. marriage, children) to pursue a leisure-centred lifestyle. Whilst this deferral might be true for some, other research has shown that some individuals maintain their clubbing activities alongside family and professional commitments and develop strategies to help them do so (Bennett, 2012).

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In their survey study, Peter and Williams (2019) found that older people's main motivation for attending EDM events was the music and noted that those who continued to participate were less likely to be married or have children than the 'lapsed' clubbers. However, their data revealed gender differences and indicated that women are more likely to change their clubbing activity in line with parental responsibilities than their male counterparts. Studies have shown that older women experience intersectional discrimination at the nexus of ageism and sexism (Westwood, 2003). They experience greater socio-economic disadvantage in comparison to younger women and older men (Rochon et al., 2021) and are more likely to feel 'invisible' in social spaces (Chasin & Kramer, 2022). Given this context, it is therefore likely that older women's experience of participating in EDM is going to be impacted by cultural attitudes to both age and gender in ways that impact and shape participation. Understanding more about the experiences of older women who continue to engage in this musical scene may help address some of the barriers to inclusion that have caused others to withdraw.

In one of the few studies that focusses on older women's participation in club culture, Gregory (2009) explored why women might disengage from being 'active ravers'. She found that whilst initially the women had enjoyed feeling part of the EDM community, they felt that they should stop participating as they became older. Their accounts revealed that they felt raving was incongruous with parenthood (and other roles such as friend, daughter, employee), that participation should be considered a *phase*, and reported concerns about the effects of drug-taking on their physical health and appearance. The study highlighted the role of intersectionality in shaping perspectives (see also Rymajdo, 2021) and revealed that the women had 'internalised dominant discourses about what it means to be a "socially responsible" *adult*' (p.76). These views led to their withdrawal from the scene while their male counterparts continued to participate, often in roles such as DJ, promoter or venue manager, without any sense that this

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culture should be left behind due to age. Gregory's study focused on the experiences of women who have withdrawn from the EDM scene but argues that research should examine how older women who continue to participate, negotiate these socially constructed discourses. Our study aimed to address these concerns and to understand more about the intersection of age and gender in the context of a music scene where dance and vitality (Malbon, 1999), qualities conventionally associated with youth, are key components.

Women can and do continue to participate in EDM, and there is some evidence that they are able to navigate these tensions successfully (Hutton, 2006; O'Grady & Madill, 2019). In her ethnographic work, Hutton (2006) mapped the experiences of female clubbers (age range 21-39 years) through observation and interviews. The women reported engaging in risky behaviours (e.g. drug-taking, sexual encounters) and felt that this challenged societal stereotypes in a 'safe' arena without being 'censored' or 'punished' (p. 5). The research provides insights into how women balance risk-taking and pleasure/fun whilst staying safe in club spaces, however there is little consideration of how age might influence experiences. O'Grady and Madill (2019) carried out in-depth interviews with four women (age range 52-67 years) involved in the psytrance scene. Results highlighted two overarching themes, *visibility* and *other-space*. With regards to visibility, women recounted occasions when younger clubbers had approached them and enquired about their age or made remarks that were either positive and fostered a sense of belonging or were derogatory, making them feel out of place. This heightened visibility had an impact on women's considerations of what to wear and concerns about their physical appearance. Emphasis was placed on 'getting it right' and dressing in an age-appropriate way for the specific context, underlining how women negotiate conflicting social norms to achieve an age-appropriate look (Heinrichsmeier, 2019). The second over-arching theme, *other-space*, highlighted the way women chose club contexts carefully to manage the increased visibility they

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felt as an older woman. This theme also referred to women's accounts of the club context as a wellbeing space which allowed them to escape the realities of everyday life, to recharge and reboot. The women emphasised the transformative nature of their participation, and opportunities to make friends and feel connected to likeminded others. O'Grady and Madill (2019) made no attempt to generalise from their data, seeing the study as a first step in understanding the experiences of older women in this context.

The current study builds on O'Grady and Madill (2019) to gain a better understanding of the experiences of a larger number of older, female clubbers involved in EDMC. 'Older' in this context means participants who identify as women who are 40 years old or over and was chosen to indicate a stage of life associated with middle age or beyond. Clubbing refers to the social and cultural practice centred on dancing to beat-based electronic music in a variety of settings such as clubs, free parties and festivals (*cf.* Rief, 2009), with 'clubber' referring to an individual who engages in this practice. The study considered the following questions: What motivates older women to engage in EDM? How do they feel about being an older woman in this space? What strategies do they use to navigate and manage their participation? What is the contribution of continued clubbing to their lives?

### **Method**

An online survey was designed to explore the core themes found in O'Grady and Madill (2019) in greater depth. Women were asked to rate agreement with statements derived from results of this earlier study to understand prevalence of experiences (descriptive, quantitative data). In

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addition, open-ended responses were included to allow women to tell us more about their experiences in their own words to provide further context and insights (qualitative data).

### *Participants*

136 respondents who self-identified as a female clubber  $\geq 40$  years old took part (age range 40-65 years, mean age=47.6, SD=5.9). Around two-thirds were in the 40-49 age category (40-49 years 64%, 50-59 years 34.5%, 60+ years 1.5%).

### *Materials*

An online survey was designed using Qualtrics which consisted of forced-choice and open-ended responses. The first section asked respondents to indicate how long they had been attending EDM events, and the frequency, type (e.g. club nights, festivals) and genre (e.g. house, techno) of events attended. The second section asked participants to rank a list of motivations for attending EDM events derived from prior literature (see Cannon & Theodore 2022), including the music/artist/DJ performing (e.g. Packer & Ballantyne, 2011), the opportunity to meet new people and socialise (e.g. Little et al., 2018; Newson et al., 2021), for a sense of community (e.g. Cannon & Greasley, 2021; Riley et al., 2010) and for the atmosphere (e.g. Packer & Ballantyne, 2011). The third section explored themes from O'Grady and Madill's study (2019). The first theme covered *sense of belonging* and determined the extent to which women felt at home in the club space, if they felt conspicuous because of their age and how others reacted to their presence. The second theme covered *appearance* and examined the choices and decisions women made about what to wear on a night out. Participants were asked to reflect on how they felt about their appearance as an older woman in the club space and how others perceived them. The third theme covered *safety and consent* and picked up on experiences women had described in the first study,



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including how they felt about unwanted attention, whether they had experienced harassment or received unsolicited comments about their age (both positive and negative). The fourth theme, *wellbeing*, asked about the positive and negative impacts of clubbing and investigated the role participating fulfilled in the women's lives (e.g. escapism, spirituality, pleasure). Finally, the fifth theme asked about the significance of *friendships* and how these figured within the clubbing experience of older women.

### *Procedure*

The study was approved by the University of Leeds Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee [Ethics Reference FAHC-21-007]. The survey was advertised on local mailing lists, social media channels and through word of mouth via authors' contacts. Participants were required to read the information at the start and give informed consent before completing the survey. Due to the nature of the topic, it was possible that participants may have disclosed potentially sensitive material when reporting on their experiences of clubbing, including illegal drug use, sexual behaviour and negative experiences such as sexual harassment, verbal/physical abuse, and wellbeing issues. Participants were assured that responses would not be attributable. Participants could complete the survey anonymously or leave contact details if they were willing to take part in future studies.

### *Analysis*

Quantitative data including Likert scale agreement were analysed using descriptive statistics (all rated statements are within the Tables below). Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analysed thematically within each of the five topic areas (e.g. sense of belonging, appearance, safety and consent, wellbeing, friendships). An inductive analytical approach was

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taken, following Braun and Clarke's (2021) principles of thematic analysis: reading and re-reading the written responses, generating initial codes, generating and reviewing themes. This process was first carried out by the third author who generated the list of themes. After this, the first and second authors read the written responses individually, and then all authors discussed and reviewed themes together. This included identification of themes that went beyond the original topic areas (e.g. the impact of Covid on participation) as well as consideration of our interpretation of what the women were recalling. All three authors have participated in the EDM scene and therefore have a degree of 'insider' knowledge. However, they represent three different age brackets, have knowledge of different musical subgenres, and have adopted varying roles within the scene (e.g. audience member, DJ, event organiser). This diversity of experience ensured that the team was open to multiple perspectives emerging from the data. Quotations are included below to illustrate themes.

### **Results**

#### **Attendance, types of events and motivations**

Most participants (81.6%) had been attending EDM events for over 20 years, with a smaller number attending for 11-20 years (10.3%), 6-10 years (3.7%) and 1-5 years (4.4%). Participants mainly attended club nights (84.5% at least sometimes), festivals (81.6%) and house parties (72.8%) whilst they attended free parties and illegal raves to a lesser degree (52.9% and 25.7% respectively). 91.2% attended EDM events at least sometimes (defined as 4-6 times per year) and around 20% reported that they attended EDM events more than once a month. Participants attended mainly techno and house club nights (82.4% and 81.6% at least sometimes). Other frequently attended genres included electro (71.2%), drum and bass (50.7%), bass (46.2%), dub (44.8%) and psytrance (36% at least sometimes).

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We asked participants to rank their motivations for attending EDM events in order of importance (see Table 1). Data show that the most important motivation for attending EDM events was the music/artist/DJ, with over half (56.6%) ranking this as the most important reason. Socialising with existing friends was the second most important reason for attending with nearly a third (30.9%) indicating this was their main motivation. Other highly ranked motivations included atmosphere/environment and sense of community. Sexual encounters were reported to be the least important reason for attending EDM events with 94.1% ranking this the lowest.

Table 1 about here

### **Experiences of attending EDM events as an older woman**

#### *Sense of Belonging*

Participants were asked a series of questions about how they feel as an older, female clubber and how people respond to them in this context (see Table 2). Positively, 92.1% agreed that they felt at home at EDM events with 58.1% agreeing that they had received positive comments from other clubbers about their age. Whilst only 7.3% reported experiencing negative comments about

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their age from others, 21% felt they should not participate in EDM because of their age and agreed they felt conspicuous at club nights because of being older.

The open-ended responses revealed four themes related to participants' sense of belonging: *irrelevance of age, sticking together, importance of context, and sense of acceptance.*

Table 2 about here

Reflecting the quantitative findings, *irrelevance of age* theme captures the extent to which the women felt that they belonged within the EDM scene, irrespective of their age. As the following quotes highlight, sense of belonging emerges primarily from a shared love of music:

*“There's just an acceptance and understanding between people with likeminded musical and recreational drug taking experience that negates the whole age thing. There's a connection with people around you through dance, the bass, the rhythm, and a warmth of empathic body language that oozes that sense of belonging.” (53 years)*

*“I have never felt out of place going to a club or party, I have met people of all ages, and become friends with them, I have grown up children who often come out dancing with me, on the dance floor age is just a number and music brings us all together.” (56 years)*

However, several women did not share this view, reporting that they sometimes felt uncomfortable or out of place, and this sense of unease was attributed not only to age, but also to gender and, more specifically, to being a lone, female clubber.

*“In regular club nights, I feel uncomfortable. Being a single female older clubber seems to make other people feel uncomfortable. Some people can't get their heads round why I'm there and struggle to accept me.” (43 years)*

Age was an important factor in determining which events to attend:

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*“I tend to attend events where other clubbers are in a similar age bracket to me.” (41 years)*

*“I do tend to be with fellow older people or a mixed night. I tend to avoid the clubs which attract solely a younger crowd.” (53 years)*

By gravitating towards members of their own age group, these participants demonstrated that, for them, age did play a role in establishing a sense of belonging, alongside other contextual factors including the type of event, venue, crowd or location.

Participants did not feel welcome at 'regular' or mainstream nightclubs, which were perceived as being dominated by drinking culture and attracting younger people. Here, women reported feeling more conspicuous. Consequently, some preferred festivals or raves/free parties which tended to attract a wider demographic.

The degree to which women feel accepted within a club setting depended on a set of interconnected factors that were positioned as being both external (e.g. sexist or ageist remarks from others) and internal (e.g. levels of self-esteem and confidence).

*“There are some comments and not all of them are kind, but there were always comments. If it's not about your age, it's about something else.” (57 years)*

*“More and more I am feeling as if I don't fit but that may come from within rather than anything anyone has ever said to me.” (51 years)*

While there was significant variance in how the women expressed their sense of belonging, this section of the survey elicited the largest set of open-ended responses (over 100 commented), indicating a high level of engagement with this issue for older women.

### *Clothing and Appearance*

Around two thirds agreed that they wear what they want when they go clubbing and do not worry about what other people think. While 67.4% agreed that comfort was the main

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consideration, 43.7% agreed that they enjoyed having the opportunity to dress extravagantly when they went out. 39.3% said that they were conscious about the way they look and 23% made an intentional choice to dress down (see Table 3).

Table 3 about here

Open-ended responses about appearance highlighted three themes: *comfort, dressing up/dressing down* and *age-appropriate dressing*.

Common to 36 responses, *comfort* was the most prevalent theme. Participants emphasised this above all else when choosing their clubbing outfits:

*“Since the beginning, I’ve dressed more for comfort. So even in the 90s I wore comfy pants, tanks, and sneakers.” (44 years)*

*“Comfort is king, but I also want to look decent. But I always wear trainers to dance properly, I don’t know how women can dance in heels!” (45 years)*

Having the ability to dance in comfort and for prolonged periods was a priority. Repeated use of phrases such as “since the beginning” and “always” imply that the decision to dress for comfort may not be age related, but something that had been consistently important to these women in their younger years.

Some women enjoyed dressing up for club nights, whereas others specifically chose to dress down, with a roughly equal split between these two categories. Participants described how dressing up allowed them to express themselves, to make a statement and set themselves apart from the crowd. Choosing fun, outrageous or flamboyant clothing was ‘playful’ and an

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opportunity to dress differently from daily life. Importantly, these women explained they dressed up for themselves, and that they felt confident doing so:

*“I feel on fire. I love dressing up, I have a party clothes box of sequined second-hand numbers that are just fabulous. I’m confident in my skin, in my body.” (53 years)*

*“I love to play dress up. Going out I feel I can express myself more freely and openly than I would in the usual day to day situations. Clothes are an expression, a form of art.” (40 years)*

For the participants who dressed down, they often did so to blend in. They reported being less confident about how they looked, often comparing themselves to younger female clubbers and preferring to remain inconspicuous:

*“I don't really know what to wear and find that I'm very concerned with fitting in with what I wear, which is probably impossible to achieve (I don't have the body of a 20-year-old) and frustrating as I don't think fitting in is what clubbing should be about, but I also don't want to feel self-conscious.”(42 years)*

The importance of dressing in an age-appropriate manner was emphasised by some of the women:

*“I still want to look nice and ideally somewhat relevant but without dressing too young.” (57 years)*

*“I used to be really dressed up but now I am horrified at the thought of looking like mutton dressed as lamb.” (48 years)*

Dressing in a way that was deemed to be ‘too young’ could lead to standing out or drawing attention to themselves which was perceived negatively.

### *Safety and Consent*

Most participants (73.9%) agreed that they felt safe when attending EDM events. Although 28.3% agreed that they received unwanted attention at club nights, only a small percentage

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(3.7%) reported that they did not feel safe. Notably, however, when asked if they had been groped (or worse) at a club night, nearly half (44%) confirmed that they had (see Table 4).

Table 4 about here

The open-ended responses revealed four themes related to safety and consent: *environment*, *safety in numbers* and *safety precautions*.

For some women, the extent to which they felt safe when clubbing often depended on environmental factors such as the type of event, its associated ethos and the nature of the crowd. There was a consensus among participants that alternative or underground venues and events were safer due to the type of people that attended. The women said they were less likely to experience harassment in these spaces compared to mainstream clubs.

*“I have always had a preference for the underground music scene where, I believe, there is much more awareness of consent and inappropriate behaviours are generally less accepted.” (42 years)*

In order to feel safer and avoid unwanted attention, participants described how they often attended EDM events in groups or with others. They reported building relationships with regular attendees and staff at the events and outlined how familiarity and sense of community contributed to their feelings of safety.

*“I generally go out in a mixed group of friends. Very often I know the DJ, promoter, door staff & many other clubbers. These factors help me to feel much safer on a night out than in my 20s or 30s.” (42 years)*

*“[Experiencing unwanted attention has] made me more aware of trying to stay around friends and also trying to be around groups where I feel comfortable.” (42 years)*



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Women reported taking specific safety precautions or adopting strategies to prevent negative situations from occurring.

*“I usually go out to a place where I know people. If I do not know people I make sure that I speak to security so they will make sure that I am ok.”(42 years)*

*“I can usually spot the danger signs and I don’t put myself in places that would put me at risk. If I go clubbing on my own, I don’t drink alcohol.”(45 years)*

Women adopting methods to mitigate risk, suggests a degree of awareness that clubs can be unsafe environments. Despite this, the majority agreed that they felt safe when attending EDM events, citing the prevalence of alcohol as being the primary cause of inappropriate or abusive behaviour from male clubbers.

### *Friendships*

87.5% agreed that clubbing was a way of connecting with themselves and others. 82.9% reported that they had made long-lasting friendships in this context and 76.6% had made friends of all ages through clubbing (see Table 5).

Table 5 about here.

The open-ended responses about friendships can be divided into four themes: *longevity, extent of friendship, friendship defies age* and *making friends becomes less important with age*.

The most prominent theme was *longevity* which captures the permanency of the friendships women formed through clubbing, specifically whether they developed into long term relationships or existed merely for the duration of the night. Many women described long-term and short-term friendships, valuing them both as an important part of the clubbing experience:

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*“I have made some beautiful friends who I believe will be life-long friends. I have also made friendships that only last the night, or for a short while, but were still special.” (42 years)*

Associated with this is the *extent of friendship* which explores the scope of participants’ friendships and whether they exist within EDM events only or extend beyond the clubbing context:

*“I have made some good friends through clubbing that I see outside of club nights and have some long-term friendships from first starting clubbing when we were 16-17... I have some superficial friends I see at club nights, but I don't think this is an issue, good to see them and have that shared experience, but don't necessarily need to have a relationship outside of clubbing.” (42 years)*

Many women reported forming friendships with clubbers across a variety of age groups, captured in the theme *friendship defies age* which reflects the quantitative results that indicate that meaningful friendships were not contingent on age:

*“Although friends I have met at the club and festivals are a lot younger than me, they are strong friendships and I love seeing these people at continued events. I don't feel like the "old lady" of the group- although sometimes it's clear we are in different life cycles due to the things they do together outside of the club or festival scene when I am not invited. They don't have kids or a family.” (48 years)*

In some instances, forming friendships with younger clubbers was a necessity that facilitated their ongoing participation in club culture:

*“Most of my friends of similar age don't want to go clubbing or are intimidated by what they think the clubbing scene is. I'm therefore reliant on younger friends to have company to attend events.” (42 years)*

10 women revealed that forming new friendships became a less crucial part of the clubbing experience as they got older:

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*“When younger I’d always make friends with people at clubs but now I can’t be bothered to chat with somebody I’m never going to see again and who is two decades younger than me. I’d rather spend time chatting to my friends.” (44 years)*

Responses suggest that forming and maintaining friendships required a certain amount of effort that participants were no longer able to prioritise. Overall, friendships were a key motivator for the women surveyed and provided a direct link to their sense of wellbeing.

### *Wellbeing*

Almost all participants agreed that clubbing contributed positively to their sense of wellbeing (91%). 65.9% agreed that, for them, clubbing was a spiritual experience and 62.9% revealed they go clubbing to escape the realities of life. In addition, 58.3% said they could be a different version of themselves in the club environment. Two thirds (65.2%) said they use drugs to enhance their experience. A small percentage (10.6%) said they were concerned about the negative impact of clubbing on their wellbeing (see Table 6).

Table 6 about here

Several themes relating to wellbeing were identified. These included *impact on mental health, impact on physical health, positive benefits outweigh the negative, impact intensifies with age, drugs enhance experience and harm reduction.*

Participants described both positive and negative impacts that clubbing can have on wellbeing and split these into two categories - physical and mental. The positive benefits were considered to outweigh the negative:

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*“The joy and elation of enjoying music and dancing with like-minded people is wonderful. I can dance all night, nothing comes close to a positive club experience. Despite the hangover/comedown it can energise me for days afterwards.” (42 years)*

*“When I go to events, I see it as a reset. I might feel ropery for a day afterwards, but the dancing, music and community help me to face the challenges that life brings.” (46 years)*

Most participants described how clubbing improved their mental health:

*“Dancing has always been a form of therapy to me, losing myself to hours on a dance floor definitely helps me manage stress.” (47 years)*

*“I feel that dancing and clubbing in general is a major contributor to my overall wellbeing. When I miss a month or two of clubbing, I feel lethargic and depressed and I find myself seeking opportunities to make plans to get back on the dance floor. I feel energized and recharged after a night of clubbing.” (41 years)*

Participants reported attending EDM events to combat stress, to escape the realities of everyday life, and to access spiritual experiences. Five participants chose to expand on the spiritual aspect of EDM in the open-ended responses, explaining how the music, people and atmosphere in combination provide access to “a feeling of happiness and a high that’s hard to find elsewhere” (42 years). For overall wellbeing, several responses emphasised the importance of balance. Here, there was a sense that, whilst clubbing generally had a beneficial impact, wellbeing could begin to suffer if clubbing or its associated activities (e.g. drinking/drug taking) were done to excess:

*“I suffer with depression so I am very aware that what I take on a night out can impact me after the event for the following weeks. Being in a decent club with amazing music is one of the best feelings ever.” (42 years)*

*“It’s great, as long as I don’t overdo things, and as long as I look after myself and get enough sleep etc. I generally do do this, and so the overall experience has a positive impact on my wellbeing. But of course, I occasionally don’t get the balance right, and in these instances, I would say that this has a negative impact on my wellbeing.” (42 years)*

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As the survey was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, respondents were given the unique opportunity to reflect on how the absence of clubbing, and lack of access to that community and culture, impacted their wellbeing:

*“Disastrous. Because I was unable to go out I suffered mental issues, received zero help for this. The inability to dance affected me as it's something I've done for over 33 years!” (51 years)*

*“It was very difficult, felt like a large part of the way I connect with people was cut away and it led to struggles with my identity as an LGBT person, and depression and lethargy.” (42 years)*

Alongside a decrease in physical activity, the most common consequence of not being able to dance were depression and loss of identity, highlighting the centrality of attending EDM events to these women’s lives, their sense of self and general feelings of wellbeing.

Fourteen responses outlined how clubbing had both a positive and negative *impact on physical health*. In order to sustain their participation and to manage any toll on the body, the notion of ‘balance’ was significant.

*“It's part of my life and my fitness regime too so when I can't go clubbing (e.g. during covid restrictions) I felt awful mentally and physically. I need the release of dancing and being in that environment to truly feel balanced and happy.” (53 years)*

*“Tends to make me tired for the rest of the week, can give me positive energy as well. The balance is for me to find.” (40 years)*

Five participants felt that the negative consequences of clubbing became more prominent and difficult to cope with as they aged:

*“It's a mixed bag. I love going and enjoy the experience but the recovery gets harder as I get older.” (57 years)*

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*“The buzz of clubbing may be slightly dimmed overall because I get tired more easily at 57 than when I was younger. I need to schedule in recovery the next day if I'm up really late, or it goes on for a long time.” (57years)*

Some women reported using drugs to enhance their clubbing experience. Although two thirds of participants reported using drugs in the survey, only seven discussed their experiences in the open-ended responses and reported positive benefits:

*“Dancing keeps me fit, meeting friends new and old spending time with like-minded people is good for letting off some steam, taking drugs is good for tapping into your creative side (safely) music/ singing is good for the soul.” (56 years)*

*“MDMA removes the barriers of age.” (48 years)*

*“Listening to the music I love & dancing, especially when on a bit of MDMA or similar, is probably my favourite things to do. I don't think it's bad for me, in fact not doing it during the pandemic was very, very hard and detrimental to my mental health.” (45 years)*

Common to eight accounts was the theme of *harm reduction*. Participants reported how they adopted strategies to reduce the negative impact that clubbing had on their mental/physical health and to enable them to manage their increased work and family commitments:

*“I am mindful of not overdoing it! I like to make it a treat so probably go for a big night out every three to four weeks. Looking after myself, my mental health, my family and being able to perform well at work is very important to me. If I go out on a Saturday, I always take the Monday off work.” (53 years)*

*“As you get older, you start to question the value of staying up super late to attend such events, so you become more selective in what you attend and for how long (and how hard). Moderation becomes vital and only attending what you think will be the most fun.” (40 years)*

These strategies not only protected their wellbeing but were also designed to prolong their clubbing activity. The responses indicate that participants had begun to implement these methods in recent years, reflecting the notion that the impact of clubbing intensifies when older and requires some adjustments to behaviour.

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### **Discussion**

This study investigated older women's motivations for and experiences of participating in EDM and explored how this group sustains and maintains their involvement. The women reported that music was their primary motivation for attending EDM events, confirming results of one of the few studies on older clubbers' participation (Peter & Williams, 2019). However, qualitative responses suggested that it was the music in combination with other elements (e.g. venue, lighting, physical movement, opportunity to meet friends) that attracted and sustained them. Their experience of EDM was contextual. Their motivation to attend was deeply connected to their sense of belonging and was contingent on friendships, social connections, community and inclusive values. Another key driver was the positive impact on physical and mental health and wellbeing. EDM affords opportunities to dance and maintain physical fitness, energise and recharge bodies, helping women to manage stress and face challenges in their everyday lives. In many ways, their motivations for attending corresponded to those identified in other studies including connectedness with others (Little et al., 2018; Riley et al., 2010), developing friendships (Cannon & Greasley, 2021; Newson et al., 2021), self-expression and identity work (Northcote, 2006; Phillips, 2021) and wellbeing (Redfield, 2017). However, even though motivations for attending might be similar amongst clubbers irrespective of age, the implications of participating are different for 'older women' (as opposed to younger women and/or men of a similar age) because of the cultural codes associated with ageing female bodies and what is deemed 'age-appropriate' behaviour, style or dress for women of 'a certain age'.

Whilst women reported a strong sense of belonging in EDM, and many reported that they felt their age was irrelevant (they did not want to be defined by their age), it was apparent that participation in the scene was not without its challenges. Some of our respondents described

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having to navigate other people's views on what behaviours, styles or activities were deemed appropriate, or not, for older women to be engaged with. For example, fielding negative comments about their age on the dancefloor, which resonates with reactions to women's participation found in O'Grady and Madill's (2019) interview study ('whose mum are you?') or being made to feel self-conscious about what they are wearing. In addition, they mentioned grappling with their own prejudices about age and some went as far as expressing doubt and concern over whether they were becoming too old to participate. Even with the strong positive bias, many women reported negative experiences revealing the tension between persistence and desistence.

To persist in a scene where the prevailing demographic is younger, might indicate our respondents demonstrated a particular orientation, attitude or personality type. For example, as evidenced in the quantitative and qualitative data, many came across as being confident individuals who were comfortable in their own skin, less likely to care about the opinions of others and, generally, had a young outlook on life where age was not regarded as a barrier. Others found confidence and assurance by virtue of their status in the club environment. They were well-networked, recognised as part of an established community, or a veteran clubber with 80% reporting involvement spanning two decades. They had many positive reasons to continue attending EDM and were able to articulate these.

We investigated what strategies women use to navigate and manage their participation. Our results show that women adopt intentional strategies to manage other commitments (including family and work), to mitigate negative impacts (e.g. substance use and fatigue), and to ensure their own safety (e.g. choice of venue, attending with friends). In addition, they think carefully about how to present themselves in the club environment to fit the aesthetic of the club space and music genre. They use dress intentionally to hide or downplay their age, to blend in, to



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celebrate their allegiance to the scene or as a means by which to express themselves. However, the way in which they construct their self-image is often conflicted and reveals concerns about age-appropriateness within this context.

Women's successful participation in EDM is dependent on contextual factors. Women are highly selective in choosing which events to attend. Contextual factors are likely to be localised with different genres, locations and venues having different attitudes to older women's participation. The survey does not fully capture these local differences although it does suggest a marked split between mainstream and underground clubs/festivals. This supports Hutton (2006) who found that underground clubs were more welcoming than mainstream clubs for females.

Intersectionality is a significant factor in shaping experiences and perspectives and more work is needed to investigate the extent to which being both female and over forty shapes the ways in which people feel they belong and whether their participation is appropriate, acceptable and/or desirable in comparison with their male counterparts. How ethnicity, class and sexuality intersect has not yet been considered in detail and should be the subject of future research. What the current research does not capture, is the perspectives of women who have withdrawn from the scene due to personal concerns about their age being a barrier to participation or from the fear and/or lived experience of receiving negative comments from other people. Future work might explore these perspectives more fully to identify and address barriers to participation, thereby developing inclusive practices. Mobilisation of this data back into the industry will provide evidence of the positive impact on wellbeing that can be attributed to participation in EDM which, in turn, can inform the funding and policy landscape of the nighttime economy.

### **Conclusion**

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This study explored older women's motivations for and experiences of participating in EDMC. Understanding more about older women's experiences in this context has revealed that whilst music and the positive physical and mental impacts of dancing are key motivators, their participation in club culture is contingent on a range of environmental, social and cultural factors. It provides insights into how participation in EDM is influenced by the intersection of age and gender and reveals how the women themselves manage their persistent participation in night life even when it seems to be at odds with normative constructions of femininity and ageing. The research highlights the significance of clubbing to a group who are not commonly considered to be the target demographic for EDM and, in a drive towards inclusivity, provides industry stakeholders with the evidence base required to address structural and cultural barriers that exist within the nighttime economy, for this group and others.

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**Table 1:** Percentage of participants ranking each motivation for attending EDM events where 1st is most important and 8th is least important motivation (N=136)

Motivation	Rank							
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Chance to meet new people	2.2	2.9	4.4	17.7	17.7	30.1	25	0
Socialising with existing friends	30.9	28.7	17.7	5.1	11	5.9	0.7	0
Sense of community	3.7	10.3	27.2	20.6	24.3	8.8	4.4	0.7
Music/artist/DJ	56.6	24.3	8.1	5.1	2.2	2.2	1.5	0
Drugs and alcohol	0.7	2.9	8.1	13.2	14.7	20.6	35.4	4.4
Atmosphere/environment	2.2	25	20.6	19.8	14.7	11.8	5.9	0
Escape from the everyday	2.9	5.9	14	18.4	15.4	20.6	22.1	0.7
Sexual encounters	0.7	0	0	0	0	0	5.2	94.1

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**Table 2.** Participants' rated agreement with statements about a *Sense of Belonging* within EDM events (N=136)

Statement	Frequency (%) of responses				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I feel conspicuous at club nights due to my age	20 (14.7)	52 (38.3)	35 (25.7)	21 (15.4)	8 (5.9)
I have experienced negative comments from other clubbers about my age	47 (34.6)	66 (48.5)	13 (9.6)	9 (6.6)	1 (0.7)
I have experienced positive comments from other clubbers about my age	5 (3.7)	11 (8.1)	41 (30.1)	57 (41.9)	22 (16.2)
I sometimes feel that I shouldn't be there because of my age	48 (35.3)	40 (29.4)	20 (14.7)	27 (19.9)	1 (0.7)
I feel at home in the club	3 (2.2)	9 (6.6)	26 (19.1)	70 (51.5)	28 (20.6)

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**Table 3:** Participants' rated agreement with statements about *Appearance* when attending EDM events (N=135)

Statement	Frequency (%) of responses				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
As an older woman, I am conscious about the way I look when I am clubbing.	19 (14.1)	29 (21.5)	34 (25.2)	41 (30.5)	12 (8.8)
As an older woman, I worry about how to dress/what to wear.	20 (14.8)	40 (29.6)	35 (25.9)	29 (21.6)	11 (8.1)
I wear what I want when I go clubbing and do not worry about what others think.	4 (2.9)	22 (16.3)	24 (17.8)	51 (37.8)	34 (25.2)
Comfort is the main consideration when I am choosing an outfit for clubbing.	3 (2.2)	10 (7.4)	31 (23.0)	64 (47.4)	27 (20.0)
I tend to dress down when I go to club nights.	14 (10.3)	51 (37.8)	39 (28.9)	27 (20.0)	4 (3.0)
I enjoy having the opportunity to dress up/dress extravagantly when I go out.	5 (3.7)	28 (20.7)	43 (31.9)	39 (28.9)	20 (14.8)



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**Table 4:** Participants' rated agreement with statements regarding *Safety and consent* when attending EDM events (N=134)

Statement	Frequency (%) of responses				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I get unwanted attention when I am out at club nights.	15 (11.2)	51 (38.1)	30 (22.4)	37 (27.6)	1 (0.7)
I have been groped (or worse) without my consent at club nights.	23 (17.2)	39 (29.1)	13 (9.7)	43 (32.1)	16 (11.9)
I am flattered when I get chatted up by younger clubbers.	6 (4.5)	24 (17.9)	51 (38.1)	46 (34.3)	7 (5.2)
I wouldn't go to a club night on my own in case of unwanted attention.	24 (17.9)	41 (30.6)	31 (23.1)	28 (20.9)	10 (7.5)
I feel safe when I go clubbing.	2 (1.5)	3 (2.2)	30 (22.4)	75 (56.0)	24 (17.9)

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**Table 5:** Participants' rated agreement with statements about *Friendships and socialising* at EDM events (N=128)

Statement	Frequency (%) of responses				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Socialising is a main motivation for going to club nights.	5 (3.9)	17 (13.2)	34 (26.6)	55 (43.0)	17 (13.3)
I have friends of all ages as a result of going clubbing.	1 (0.7)	21 (16.4)	8 (6.3)	65 (50.8)	33 (25.8)
I have made long-lasting friendships through club nights.	4 (3.1)	11 (8.5)	7 (5.5)	50 (39.1)	56 (43.8)
I find clubbing is a way of connecting with myself and others.	2 (1.6))	4 (3.1)	10 (7.8)	80 (62.5)	32 (25.0)
Friendships I make at clubs are often superficial.	10 (7.8)	49 (38.3)	42 (32.8)	23 (18.0)	4 (3.1)
Most friends who are of a similar age are not involved in the clubbing scene.	8 (6.3)	41 (32.0)	24 (18.8)	41 (32.0)	14 (10.9)

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**Table 6:** Participants' rated agreement with statements about *Wellbeing* (N=132)

Statement	Frequency (%) of responses				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I can be a different version of myself when I'm out clubbing.	7 (5.3)	18 (13.7)	30 (22.7)	54 (40.9)	23 (17.4)
I find clubbing to be a spiritual experience.	3 (2.3)	11 (8.3)	31 (23.5)	52 (39.4)	35 (26.5)
I go clubbing to escape the mundane realities of everyday life.	4 (3.0)	12 (9.1)	33 (25.0)	49 (37.1)	34 (25.8)
The 'buzz' of clubbing is not as strong as it used to be.	10 (7.6)	44 (33.3)	35 (26.5)	34 (25.8)	9 (6.8)
I find drug-taking enhances my experiences at club nights.	12 (9.1)	9 (6.8)	25 (18.9)	57 (43.2)	29 (22.0)
I avoid taking drugs when I go to club nights.	36 (27.3)	48 (36.4)	19 (14.4)	18 (13.6)	11 (8.3)
I feel clubbing contributes positively to my wellbeing.	1 (0.7)	1 (0.7)	10 (7.6)	67 (50.8)	53 (40.2)
I am concerned about the impact of clubbing on my wellbeing.	40 (30.3)	57 (43.2)	21 (15.9)	13 (9.9)	1 (0.7)