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Singing Together – Active Aging: A Mixed-Methods Study of the Thời Hoa Đỏ Club in Hanoi

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Abstract

As Vietnam's population aged at one of the fastest rates in Southeast Asia, this study examined the impact of the Thời Hoa Đỏ Club—a self-governed community singing initiative in Hanoi—on the quality of life and mental wellbeing of older adults. Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combined repeated surveys with 25 regular members, semi-structured interviews, and ethnographic observations. Quantitative findings indicated statistically significant improvements in self-reported life satisfaction, emotional wellbeing, performance confidence, and engagement with audio-technical devices ($p < 0.001$). Thematic analysis of qualitative data underscored the importance of intergenerational space, emotional expression, and social recognition as mediating factors.

Anchored in theoretical frameworks of active aging, community music, and informal social care, the case of Thời Hoa Đỏ demonstrated how participatory arts could facilitate cost-effective and humane models of social support. The study contributed to a growing body of evidence that grassroots cultural initiatives, when flexibly organized, may serve as sustainable social-emotional care mechanisms in rapidly urbanizing contexts.

Keywords: active aging, community music, quality of life, older adults, Hanoi, grassroots cultural model

1. Introduction

Vietnam entered a phase of rapid and large-scale population aging, projected to become an aging society by 2036 (Nguyen, 2015). This demographic shift posed significant challenges not only to the national welfare and healthcare systems but also to the

maintenance of quality of life and mental well-being among the elderly. While healthcare policies had gradually improved, informal and culturally embedded forms of support—particularly

voluntary community-based cultural activities—remained underrecognized by both policymakers and academic research.

In this context, amateur arts initiatives for the elderly in urban Vietnam—rooted in socialist-era mass cultural movements—underwent notable transformations. Specifically, self-managed singing clubs emerged as dynamic spaces for social interaction, mutual support, and emotional care. Among them, the Thoi Hoa Do (Red Flower Times) Club, based in Hanoi and operating under the motto “singing for joy and health,” exemplified this model. Originating as a small interest group of older adults, the club evolved into an intergenerational community that combined musical training, technological assistance, and volunteer performances. Beyond recreation, its singing activities created a structure for social bonding, sustained optimism, and enabled older members to experience recognition and agency through active participation.

Despite the proliferation of such clubs, empirical research evaluating their actual impact remained scarce. This study addressed two interrelated questions: Did regular participation in community-based singing club activities lead to measurable improvements in older adults’ mental health, life satisfaction, and self-confidence? And what organizational, programmatic, and technological factors contributed to the success and sustainability of such models?

To explore these questions, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining survey data with field observations and semi-structured interviews at the Thoi Hoa Do Club. The findings not only assessed the impact of this model on participants but also examined the potential scalability of similar initiatives as forms of community-based social care—especially in Vietnam’s search for localized responses to population aging.

2. Literature Review

The evolving field of community music and aging has witnessed a gradual yet decisive turn from individualized therapeutic models toward more relational and culturally situated understandings of musical participation. Rather than framing music solely as a biomedical intervention to treat cognitive decline or emotional distress, recent scholarship has illuminated its role in reconstituting social worlds—enabling older adults to navigate transitions, express affect, and affirm social presence in aging societies. Group singing, in particular, has emerged as a powerful medium for fostering wellbeing and civic reengagement among older populations. Research has shown that participatory singing can contribute to improved self-perception, emotional resilience, and renewed forms of social connectedness, especially in environments marked by fragmentation or isolation (Clift & Morrison 2011; Clift et al. 2015; Creech et al. 2013).

Yet much of this work remains rooted in contexts where institutional support and structured interventions are readily available. In settings like Vietnam—where aging has outpaced the development of formal welfare systems—community-based musical practices have evolved outside professionalized care infrastructures. They are often shaped by remnants of collective culture, such as the mass performance traditions of the socialist era, and depend on endogenous creativity and informal organization. Domestic analyses have noted these shifts, highlighting the symbolic importance of cultural participation among older adults (Ha 2015; Hanh 2016; Nguyen 2015), but have rarely integrated them into larger theoretical discussions on aging and social care.

Recent perspectives have begun to reconsider participation not merely as a therapeutic outcome but as a socio-aesthetic process through which older individuals reposition themselves in changing social landscapes. In this view, singing becomes a means to negotiate generational belonging, challenge stigmas of decline, and articulate self-worth. Cross-cultural research has pointed to the ways in which older adults interpret, embody, and emotionally invest in singing practices differently across demographic contexts, underscoring the necessity of culturally grounded analyses (Allison et al. 2020; Galinha et al. 2022). This approach shifts the analytical gaze from measurable outcomes to lived meaning, from standardization to situated practices.

Technology, often viewed as a barrier for older users, has also emerged as a site of transformation. Studies on digital literacy and aging demonstrate that older adults, when supported appropriately, can adopt technological tools not only for functional purposes but also to expand their modes of expression and social engagement (Blažun et al. 2014; Gitlow 2014; Harris et al. 2022). Within the Vietnamese context, Hoàng (2022) revealed how seniors’ digital participation—especially when linked to cultural or artistic interests—offered unexpected pathways for autonomy and intergenerational connection.

Taken together, these bodies of work suggest that community music, particularly when adapted to local social ecologies, can serve as a generative space for older adults to remake identity, reconfigure relationships, and reassert agency. However, such possibilities remain underexplored in post-socialist urban contexts, where hybrid models like the Thòi Hoa Đò Club—blending self-management, intergenerational collaboration, and aesthetic participation—challenge conventional binaries between formal care and informal leisure. A more nuanced and interdisciplinary lens is therefore required to capture the emergent social functions of community music in societies facing demographic aging without the scaffolding of universal welfare.

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1. Theoretical Framework

The study drew on three interrelated theoretical foundations to analyze how the Thoi Hoa Do Club generated social impact in the context of urban population aging in Vietnam.

First, it adopted the concept of active aging (WHO, 2002), defined as the process of optimizing opportunities for health, participation, and security to enhance quality of life as people age. Unlike medicalized approaches that emphasized minimizing decline, active aging emphasized the elderly’s agency in social activities, including arts, volunteering, and lifelong learning. In this study, active aging provided a lens to understand how participating in a community singing club contributed not only to physical and psychological maintenance but also to social network expansion and a strengthened sense of usefulness among older members.

Second, the study focused on theories of community music, understood as democratic, informal, and participatory music-making rather than professional performance (Higgins, 2007; Creech et al., 2013). Community music functioned not only as entertainment or artistic output but as a collective creative space where individuals of diverse age, gender, and background co-created meaning, sustained social ties, and fostered emotional healing. Research by Bungay & Skingley (2010) and Clift &

Morrison (2011) showed that group singing played a crucial role in reducing isolation, enhancing confidence, and improving mental health—especially in fragmented urban settings.

Third, to situate the Thoi Hoa Do model within a broader social framework, the study engaged with the concept of informal social care, which emphasized the role of voluntary, non-state, community-based structures in providing material, emotional, and psychological support to vulnerable groups, including older adults (Newman et al., 2020; HelpAge Vietnam, 2024). Unlike formal care systems, models such as the Thoi Hoa Do Club operated through endogenous mechanisms, mobilizing voluntary engagement and leveraging existing social resources—thus forming a type of “cultural care” with local relevance and long-term sustainability.

Integrating these three theoretical pillars enabled an interdisciplinary framework, positioning the Thoi Hoa Do Club not merely as a cultural activity but as a form of social organization capable of restructuring intergenerational relationships, redistributing civic capacities, and generating new social values amid Vietnam’s urban aging transition.

3.2. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative analysis to simultaneously measure changes in participants’ quality of life and explore their lived experiences and the club’s underlying social mechanisms. This approach aligned with the multidimensional nature of community music practice, where emotions, social bonds, and identity transformation could not be fully captured through quantitative indicators alone. The integration of both methods allowed empirical hypothesis testing while expanding analytical depth through semantic interpretations and grounded field observations.

Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected using a two-point (pre/post) survey design involving 25 regular club members. The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale to measure four key domains: overall life satisfaction; mental wellbeing; confidence in group performance; and evaluation of sound equipment and technological support. All responses were anonymous, with informed voluntary consent obtained from participants.

Qualitative data were collected to contextualize social dynamics, explore emotional shifts, and examine bonding mechanisms within the club. Sources included five semi-structured interviews with core members and club coordinators, focusing on motivations for joining, perceived personal changes, and reflections on organizational structure; and six participant observation sessions during rehearsals, internal showcases, and community exchanges, documented in field journals that emphasized nonverbal behavior, interpersonal interaction, and collective atmosphere.

Data Analysis

Survey data were processed using SPSS 26.0. Paired-sample t-tests were used to determine statistically significant differences between the two time points (pre- and post-participation), with effect sizes calculated via Cohen’s d to assess the practical magnitude of changes beyond statistical significance.

Interview transcripts and observation journals were analyzed using interpretive content analysis, with thematic coding as the primary technique. Coding followed a two-phase process: open coding to identify meaningful units in raw data, followed by axial coding to construct thematic systems aligned with the three theoretical pillars—active aging, community music, and informal social care. Key themes included participation motivation, performance-related emotions, shifts in self-perception, and community bonding through music. These qualitative findings not only illustrated quantitative outcomes but also enriched the analysis by revealing the socio-cultural meaning structures embedded in participants’ narratives.

4. Findings

4.1. Quantitative Results: Multidimensional Improvements in Quality of Life and Participation

Quantitative survey data from 25 regular members of the Thoi Hoa Do Singing Club revealed significant improvements across four key indicators after one year of participation. Statistical analyses indicated highly significant changes ($p < 0.01$) with medium to large effect sizes (Cohen’s d), reflecting the practical impact of the model on older adults’ quality of life.

Specifically, the “overall quality of life” score increased from a baseline mean of 3.1 to 4.6 ($SD = 0.7$), with $t(24) = 3.82$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.88$. Up to 92% of participants reported feeling happier, more proactive, and less lonely than before joining the club. The indicator for “mental health and emotional well-being” also showed substantial improvement, with a mean score of 4.5 ($SD = 0.9$), $t(24) = 3.47$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.81$. These changes reflect deep emotional and psychological enhancements, supported by participant feedback such as feeling “less negative” or having “something to look forward to every week.”

Notably, self-confidence in performance—often considered difficult to improve in older adults—also increased significantly, with a mean of 4.3 ($SD = 0.8$), $t(24) = 2.95$, $p < 0.01$, Cohen’s $d = 0.67$. Members who were initially hesitant became comfortable performing solos or group songs in front of large audiences after one year. The highest-rated factor was satisfaction with sound equipment and technology: $M = 4.7$ ($SD = 0.6$), $t(24) = 4.01$, $p < 0.001$, Cohen’s $d = 0.94$. This finding underscores the role of technical support—from wireless microphones to recording apps—in reducing psychological barriers and enhancing older adults’ participation, particularly among those with limited prior exposure to digital technology.

Table 1. Summary of Pre- and Post-Participation Statistical Results

Indicator	Improvement Rate (%)	M (Mean)	SD	t (t-test)	p-value	Cohen’s d
Overall quality of life	92%	4.6	0.7	3.82	< 0.001	0.88
Mental health and emotional well-being	88%	4.5	0.9	3.47	< 0.001	0.81
Self-confidence in performance	80%	4.3	0.8	2.95	< 0.01	0.67
Satisfaction with technology	90%	4.7	0.6	4.01	< 0.001	0.94

These findings demonstrate the model's multidimensional impact on older adults, reflecting a synergy of supportive environments, professional organization, and accessible technology.

4.2. Qualitative Results: Emotions, Identity, and Connection in a Community Music Space

Qualitative data from five semi-structured interviews and six participant observation sessions revealed four key socio-emotional dimensions that characterized the lived experiences of participants engaged with the Thoi Hoa Do Singing Club.

First, the act of performing—even in small, familiar venues—produced a strong emotional effect that helped older adults reconnect with their communities. One elderly participant reflected, *“I feel young again every time I'm on stage. I used to talk only to the TV at home, but now I get to sing every week, wear my ao dai, and hear people applaud”* (P04, interview 17/04/2024). The sense of being “seen” and “heard” was described by many as a turning point in their post-retirement social lives. Singing was not just about performing, but a mode of fully existing—as emotional, historical, and vocal beings embedded in community.

Second, club participation enabled members to reconstruct their personal identities and social roles. Before joining, several participants described themselves as “marginalized,” “directionless,” or “caught up in medications.” But after a year, they identified as “community artists,” “torchbearers,” or “emotional anchors” within their ensembles. As one retired teacher explained, *“I used to think my time had passed. But every time I sing and see the audience's eyes, I know I still matter”* (P01, interview 10/04/2024). These shifts reflect not only psychological transformation but a reassertion of civic presence through music.

Third, intergenerational technical support—especially from student volunteers—proved crucial in helping older adults overcome digital anxiety while fostering strong interpersonal bonds. *“At first I was scared to touch the device, worried I'd break something. The young ones held my hand and walked me through every step. After a few weeks, I was recording my songs on my phone”* (P03, interview 14/04/2024). These interactions were not one-directional assistance but reciprocal learning and care, aligned with the ideals of informal social care as discussed in our theoretical framework.

Finally, many participants described performing at hospitals, elder care centers, or schools as some of the most moving experiences of the year. One member recalled, *“When I sang at the veterans' care center, one man—paralyzed—smiled through tears. He told me he hadn't heard that song since the war. I broke down in tears. That moment, I knew I wasn't just singing—I was giving something sacred”* (P02, interview 12/04/2024). In such contexts, social participation becomes a form of intersubjective connection through memory, emotion, and meaningful action.

The club's socio-cultural impact is further evidenced by a series of public performance videos available on YouTube. For instance, a community music exchange at the Dong Da Cultural Center captured the lively atmosphere, stage confidence, and enthusiastic audience engagement (Thoi Hoa Do Official, 2024a). A district-level showcase in Ba Dinh featured intergenerational choreography, elaborate staging, and positive online reception, underscoring the model's outreach beyond the club itself (Thoi Hoa Do Official, 2024b). Another moving video from a performance at the Veterans' Rehabilitation Center documented moments of singing, gift-giving, and heartfelt interaction with

disabled soldiers, affirming the club's ethical and societal contribution (Thoi Hoa Do Official, 2024c). Meanwhile, footage from the “March of the Elderly” concert in Kim Lien demonstrated how modern audio equipment and confident, natural performances came together—an outcome many members had previously thought “unimaginable at our age” (Thoi Hoa Do Official, 2024d).

Taken together, the qualitative findings paint an emotionally rich and dynamic portrait of how older adults reimagined identity, sustained social bonds, and experienced a renewed sense of purpose through community music participation. The interplay of shared space, intergenerational environments, and flexible organizational structure created an “emotional infrastructure” deep enough to position Thoi Hoa Do as a model of grassroots cultural practice for an aging society.

5. Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative findings of this study clearly demonstrate that the Thoi Hoa Do Singing Club is not merely a musical activity group for older adults, but rather a vibrant socio-cultural practice space where personal identity is reconstructed, community relationships are revitalized, and civic agency is reasserted through the arts. These findings carry substantial theoretical and practical implications, enriching and extending current frameworks on active aging, community music, and informal social care in the post-industrial and post-socialist context of Vietnam.

First, the results strongly affirm the central tenet of the active aging framework (WHO, 2002): that sustained social participation can be just as—if not more—important than medical or physical indicators. In a Vietnamese society undergoing rapid demographic and intergenerational restructuring, the Thoi Hoa Do model illustrates that older adults can remain active, creative, and self-directed, provided they are offered space, opportunity, and belief in their capacity. Rather than engaging older people as passive recipients in biomedicalized programs focused on burden reduction, the club positions them as expressive, connected, and value-generating agents—thus deepening our understanding of aging as a socio-cultural process rather than a purely biological decline.

Second, this model contributes to and expands the concept of community music as a meaningful form of social participation. While numerous international studies (Clift & Morrison, 2011; Creech et al., 2013; Galinha et al., 2022) have documented the benefits of group singing for mental health, confidence, and belonging, these models are often embedded within well-funded formal care systems where music is integrated into therapy or continuing education. In contrast, Thoi Hoa Do emerged from grassroots initiatives, continuing the ethos of socialist-era popular culture, but now “reassembled” under urbanized, technologized conditions. This locally grounded difference—no state funding, no professional therapists, no fixed curriculum—yet consistently maintained activities—epitomizes Higgins' (2007) argument that community music is not about high-quality output but about creating space for presence, experimentation, and co-creation among marginalized groups.

Importantly, the study highlights a rarely emphasized dimension in existing literature: the pivotal role of intergenerational engagement in sustaining participation and emotional transformation among older adults. Unlike “seniors serving seniors” models prevalent in the Global North, Thoi Hoa Do operates as an interwoven

generational structure: young volunteers provide tech support, perform alongside older members, and co-manage logistics; elders share life stories, inspire others, and act as emotional anchors. These reciprocal ties form a kind of “soft emotional infrastructure”—at once technical and affective—that helps overcome skill gaps, dispel age-related shame, and revitalize life energy. This element is rarely foregrounded as a key design principle in global models, yet proves critical in this case.

Compared to other senior clubs in Vietnam—such as the tai chi groups in Can Tho, poetry circles in Hue, or embroidery collectives in Ho Chi Minh City—Thoi Hoa Do stands out not for any singular activity, but for its integration of arts, technology, and community autonomy. Its organizational structure is both flexible and professional—there are assigned roles and long-term plans, yet members retain individual autonomy. This hybrid model avoids the common pitfalls of either excessive spontaneity (leading to disbandment) or bureaucratization (resulting in disengagement). It combines grassroots cultural traditions with contemporary management skills—an outcome not of happenstance but of a bottom-up institutionalization driven by intrinsic motivation and Hanoi’s specific socio-cultural context.

At the international level, Thoi Hoa Do can be compared to initiatives such as the UK’s “Silver Song Clubs” (Bungay & Skingley, 2010), Portugal’s “Sing4Health” (Galinha et al., 2022), or intergenerational choirs in the U.S. (Darrow & Johnson, 1994). However, the key distinction lies not in scale or methods, but in how this Vietnamese model redefines the social role of aging in contexts with limited formal care infrastructure. It exemplifies a form of “informal social care” (Newman et al., 2020), where culture is not a consumable good, but a means for sustaining social life under conditions of systemic constraint.

In short, the case of Thoi Hoa Do demonstrates that community music initiatives can generate deep impacts that surpass the usual expectations of leisure or group bonding. When structured around meaningful participation, intergenerational exchange, technical support, and community autonomy, such models function as informal institutions capable of transforming older adults’ lived realities. This insight is valuable for policymakers, civil society actors, and all those seeking cultural strategies to address aging in the 21st century.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive empirical examination of how a community music model impacts the well-being of older adults in rapidly aging urban Vietnam. Using a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys with in-depth qualitative analysis, the paper demonstrates that the Thoi Hoa Do Singing Club significantly enhances quality of life, mental health, and self-confidence, while also functioning as a semi-institutional space where personal identity is restructured, social roles are reestablished, and intergenerational ties are forged through arts and technology.

One of the most important findings is the model’s capacity to evolve from spontaneous musical activity into a socially embedded practice—where older adults not only “participate,” but actively “reshape” themselves and their communities. Through the lenses of active aging, community music, and informal social care, this research shows that singing is not merely a mood booster or performance outlet, but a culturally grounded tool for meaning-making in constrained contexts—marked by limited welfare

infrastructure and shifting social status of the elderly. Furthermore, the integration of intergenerational support and technology is not simply instrumental, but constitutive of a “soft emotional infrastructure” that underpins the model’s sustainability—an aspect underexplored in prior research.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the global discourse on aging and community arts by foregrounding a case from Southeast Asia’s post-socialist, post-industrial urban context—where formal care systems remain underdeveloped, but cultural self-organization remains strong. It highlights not just the role of arts in social care, but reverses the equation: can semi-institutional cultural spaces like Thoi Hoa Do be recognized as policy-relevant equivalents to public health programs in the Global South?

Practically, this study offers specific recommendations for aging policy in Vietnam and similar contexts. First, community-based cultural models should be recognized and supported as low-cost, scalable, and sustainable forms of social care. Second, intergenerational and technological dimensions should be integrated not just as assistance tools but as strategies for social capacity building. Third, rather than imposing standardized programs, policy should focus on bottom-up support—tailored to the flexible, culturally embedded nature of local initiatives.

For international readers—particularly those interested in community music education, public health, or aging studies—this research provides a vivid, culturally rich case study of how communities improvise alternative care models under policy scarcity. In this light, Thoi Hoa Do is not merely a local initiative, but a meaningful contribution to global conversations about how diverse, localized, and artistic approaches can creatively address the universal challenge of aging.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. The study did not involve humans or animals.

Ethics Statement

This study did not involve any medical intervention, clinical testing, or the collection of sensitive personal data. However, the research protocol was reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee of Hanoi Metropolitan University, in accordance with current Vietnamese regulations on non-biomedical research. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

Informed Consent Statement

Not applicable. No personal or sensitive data requiring consent were collected.

Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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