

# Member identity in fitness centres and its consequences: an examination of members and managers' perspectives

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of member identity and its dimensions of power, urgency, external legitimacy, internal legitimacy and interest, on satisfaction and behavioural intentions in fitness centres.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Two studies were designed. In Study 1, data were collected from fitness centre members ( $n = 225$ ) and structural equation modelling used to examine the dimensions of fitness centre member identity and its subsequent effect on satisfaction and behavioural intentions. In Study 2, interviews exploring member identity were conducted with members ( $n = 9$ ) and managers ( $n = 7$ ) and a content analysis contrasted their perceptions of power, urgency, internal legitimacy, external legitimacy and interest.

**Findings** – The results of Study 1 support the multidimensional construct of member identity and its positive influence on both satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Satisfaction mediated the relationship between member identity and behavioural intentions. In Study 2, managers and members expressed similar perceptions of the member identity dimensions: low power; urgency is issue-dependent; external legitimacy is recognized; members are perceived as legitimate; and most members exhibit high interest in their membership.

**Originality/value** – This study provides a deeper understanding of how member identity contributes to long-term relationships between members and fitness centres. It extends the body of consumer behaviour literature in the context of fitness centres.

**Keywords** Fitness centres, Member identity, Stakeholders, Satisfaction, Behavioural intentions

**Paper type** Research paper



## Introduction

The fitness industry, with 184 million members, 205,000 gyms and €81.7 billion of annual global revenue reported in 2020, has experienced 3.8% growth over the last two years (IHSA, 2022). There is concomitant growth in research on member attraction and retention (García-Fernández *et al.*, 2016; Kim and Byon, 2022). To facilitate ongoing growth, fitness centres (FCs) should focus on member satisfaction given its link to developing long-term relationships (Ferrand *et al.*, 2010). One way to understand member satisfaction is to explore how individuals perceive their role as a member (i.e. member identity; Biscaia *et al.*, 2018;

Trail *et al.*, 2005), given that one's identity is developed over time through the interactions between the person and the context (Woolf and Lawrence, 2017).

Investigating the identity of members is important, because they are critical stakeholders of FCs through their direct (e.g. monthly fees) and indirect (i.e. word-of-mouth) contributions to overall revenues (Pedragosa *et al.*, 2015). As noted by Bryson (2004), organisational success largely depends on satisfying key stakeholders. Thus, understanding the meaning members associate with their role identity and how it affects satisfaction levels may be pivotal to strengthening their relationship with FCs over time. Role identity represents the characteristics attributed to oneself within various social roles ranging from being a parent to being a member of a FC (Wood and Roberts, 2006). Role choices reflect a person's identity at a given moment in time, and identities are organised within the "self" through a salience hierarchy (Stryker, 2007). As role identification intensifies, individuals increasingly act in accordance with role expectations (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Because individuals in their chosen role choose which action(s) to complete in order to enhance their experiences, and there are behavioural expectations associated with fitness members (Woolf and Lawrence, 2017), role identity likely contributes to satisfaction and behavioural intentions in FCs (e.g. membership renewal).

Biscaia *et al.* (2018) proposed a multidimensional conceptualisation of consumer role identity based on perceived levels of power, urgency and both external and internal legitimacy. While contributing to better understanding role identity, it is important to note that stakeholders have varying degrees of interest in sport organisations (e.g. attention to social media posts or queries) that are underpinned by past, present, or expected future activities (Clarkson, 1995). Interest manifests through a consumer's effort invested in a sport organisation (Funk *et al.*, 2001). Including interest within a conceptualisation of role identity (i.e. being a member of a group) will clarify how different stakeholders may affect the organisation (Bryson, 2004). That is, a person's interest in an organisation affects the evaluation of their service experiences and the likelihood of re-patronage (Yoshida *et al.*, 2015).

Given that members are among the most important stakeholders of sport and recreation organisations (McDonald and Sherry, 2010; Riseth *et al.*, 2019), their importance should be analysed. Nevertheless, extant studies have analysed stakeholders based on either managers' (e.g. Parent and Deephouse, 2007) or consumers' perspectives (e.g. Trail *et al.*, 2017). While pragmatic, a manager's perspective is subjective and only provides a partial understanding of stakeholders' importance (Senaux, 2008). On the other hand, an exclusive focus on stakeholders' own perspective is insufficient given their perceptions may not reflect their actual status with or in the organisation. Thus, it is important to consider simultaneously how FC members perceive themselves in relation to the centre and how managers perceive their importance. This will enable a more in-depth understanding of how to strengthen the relationship between members and their FCs.

This research incorporates two studies to better understanding member identity and its relationship with satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Study 1 is based on members' perceptions and examines the relationship between member identity (i.e. role), satisfaction and behavioural intentions. We propose and test a multidimensional construct of member identity based on five dimensions (i.e. power, urgency, external legitimacy, internal legitimacy and interest) and examine its relationship with satisfaction and behavioural intentions. This model extends previous literature (e.g. Biscaia *et al.*, 2018) by capturing the notion of interest in the conceptualisation of member identity and exploring the mediating role of satisfaction in the relationship between member identity and behavioural intentions. In Study 2, we interviewed both members and managers of FCs to explore the meaning and importance of member identity with the design serving as a complement to Study 1. This holistic approach is novel and necessary because stakeholder analysis must fit the situation for which it is to be used (Achterkamp and Vos, 2008) and gathering one side's perspective only allows partial understanding of stakeholders' importance (Senaux, 2008).

## Theoretical background

### *Members as stakeholders of fitness centres*

Stakeholders are people or groups that either affect or are affected by an organisation's actions (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). Primary stakeholders are those whose continued participation is necessary for the firm's survival (e.g. investors, employees, customers and suppliers), while secondary stakeholders are not essential for its survival (e.g. media) (Clarkson, 1995). In FCs, members are primary stakeholders because they are the end-consumers. They pay monthly fees to access the FC, purchase additional products and services, engage on social media and face-to-face, help attract new members and influence organisational decision-making (García and Welford, 2015; Pedragosa and Correia, 2009). Members are pivotal for service co-creation (e.g. group classes) and often recommend the FC to others (Foroughi *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, high member satisfaction should be a strategic imperative for FCs (Avourdiadou and Theodorakis, 2014; McDonald and Shaw, 2005).

The way in which a member engages with the FC reflects his/her role identity, because stakeholders express their identity through actions (Crane and Ruebottom, 2011). With this in mind, Biscaia *et al.* (2018) explored sport fan perceptions of their role identity. The authors presented a multidimensional identity construct capturing power, urgency and legitimacy (both internal and external) and explored dimension-level effects on fans' behavioural intentions. Despite the contribution of this study, the fan's interest in the sport organisation was not included in either conceptualisation or operationalisation of role identity. Indeed, the impact of one's interest in an organisation extends beyond transactions to all aspects that may offer consumer benefits (Brennan *et al.*, 2003), thereby offering the potential to shape stakeholders' actions towards an organisation (Bryson, 2004). It is also important to simultaneously recognise the importance of members to FCs and of FC to members (Woolf and Lawrence, 2017). Given the inherently interactive nature of FCs in which members and managers frequently interact (Behnam *et al.*, 2021), extending the work of Biscaia *et al.* (2018) to this context is appropriate. The current operationalisation of member identity therefore includes power, urgency, legitimacy as well as interest. Both member and manager perceptions of these dimensions are needed to fully capture the complexity of the construct.

### *Member identity and its consequences*

Social identity theory is frequently used in studies of sport consumer behaviour to help explain how and why people connect with groups (Woolf and Lawrence, 2017). Despite the importance of group identity in sport contexts, most related research does not recognise that individuals have a personal identity in addition to their social identity (Lock and Heere, 2017). In fact, personal identity in sport can either be role-based (i.e. member identity) or category-based (i.e. FC identity) (Trail *et al.*, 2017). Social identity theory is used to frame the study of category-based identity (e.g. identification to a FC), while identity theory better aligns with role-based identity (i.e. importance of being a member of the FC) (Lock and Heere, 2017).

A primary tenet of identity theory is that role identities are guided by prior experiences and that identity helps predict future behaviours (Ervin and Stryker, 2001). Individuals can have many role identities, and each represents a set of beliefs about the importance of that role to the individual (Trail *et al.*, 2017). This is particularly important in fitness contexts because members often see FCs as a central part of their life and use their membership to express their identity (Behnam *et al.*, 2021). Also, identifying with the role of being a member of a FC has associated behavioural expectations (Woolf and Lawrence, 2017). In the current study, we explore the dimensions of FC member identity and its subsequent effect on satisfaction and behavioural intentions.

Building on Biscaia *et al.* (2018), member role-based identity in the fitness context can be understood as the meaning individuals attach to that role. This can be conceptualised using

perceived power (i.e. degree to which the member is capable of influencing the FC), urgency (i.e. extent to which the member expects immediate attention by FC staff), external legitimacy (i.e. extent to which a member's concerns are considered by staff to be appropriate according to social norms and values) and internal legitimacy (i.e. extent to which the individual sees him/herself as being a member of a particular FCs). Interest (i.e. the degree to which a member wants to know or learn about the FC) is needed to fully capture role identity in this context because it is an important aspect of a person's connection to an organisation (Inoue *et al.*, 2017).

Understanding role-based identity is important because of its influence on satisfaction. The identity of a consumer is cultivated over time through the interactions with an organisation (Matsuoka *et al.*, 2003). Satisfaction is a backward-looking concept (Wolter *et al.*, 2017) insofar as it captures a consumer's perception after the service encounters. Therefore, an individual's role identity is shaped by his/her experience and may contribute towards satisfaction with the organisation (Wann, 2006). Furthermore, Trail *et al.* (2005) suggested a positive link between identity, satisfaction and conative loyalty (i.e. behavioural intentions). This means that a member's role identity is likely shaped by an assessment of the experiences with a FC as it feeds the importance of that role. Following this rationale, we argue that as the member's role identity intensifies, the more likely he/she is to be satisfied with the FC. Additionally, FC members have more interaction with organisational personnel than most other services (Behnam *et al.*, 2021) and this may shape how that person identifies with the organisation. On this basis, we propose:

*H1. Fitness members' role identity positively impacts satisfaction.*

Role identity often influences behavioural intentions towards the organisation because of role expectations (Ervin and Stryker, 2001). A behavioural intention represents a motivational component reflecting an individual's willingness to engage in a behaviour (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996). Behavioural intentions are goal-oriented and can be either positive (e.g. repurchase or recommendations) or negative (e.g. complains or switching behaviours) for organisations. Following previous consumption-related literature in fitness (e.g. Avourdiadou and Theodorakis, 2014), in the current study, we define behavioural intentions as a member's intentions to make positive comments about the FC, recommend it to others, renew the membership fee and increase the frequency of their visits.

A fan's role identity positively influences his/her intentions to support the team and attend future games (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018). This is consistent with identity theory as the more salient an individual's role (e.g. member of a FC), the more likely he/she is to adopt behaviours related to the expectations of such identity (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Salient identities are those displayed routinely (Laverie and Arnett, 2000), such as visiting a FC. In addition, despite the common use of composite behavioural-intention measures (e.g. García-Fernández *et al.*, 2016), members often adopt a variety of "behaviours" towards the FCs. Fitness members can adopt "talk behaviours" (e.g. recommending the FC) and "doing behaviours" (e.g. renew membership) (Ferrand *et al.*, 2010) and these should be measured separately to establish a more nuanced understanding of their relationships with FCs. For example, while an individual may encourage friends to become members, he/she may or may not renew the membership because of internal or external constraints (Biscaia *et al.*, 2017). On this basis, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H2. Fitness members' identity positively impacts the intention to (a) renew membership, (b) increase weekly frequency and (c) recommend membership to others.*

Sport consumer studies report positive relationships between consumer satisfaction and behavioural intentions (e.g. Biscaia *et al.*, 2021). This is because an accumulation of satisfying experiences with a service provider generates conative (i.e. intentional) and behavioural loyalty for consumers (Oliver, 1999). In FCs, managers seek to facilitate positive experiences that satisfy members and lead to positive consumption behaviours (García-Fernández *et al.*, 2016).

While a positive satisfaction-behavioural intentions link has been widely reported, the mediating effect of satisfaction between role identity and behavioural intentions requires further empirical examination – particularly in inherently interactive FC contexts (Behnam *et al.*, 2021; Xu *et al.*, 2022). As noted by Behnam and colleagues, FC membership is often an expression of an individual's identity, shaped by his/her interaction with the FC and with an influence on subsequent evaluations of the service experiences (Laverie and Arnett, 2000; Wear and Heere, 2020). In addition, although studies have suggested that single measures of behavioural intentions are appropriate in consumer behaviour research (e.g. Kwon and Trail, 2005), multiple items will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationships among constructs. Considering that one's identity is shaped by interactions with the organisation (Lock and Heere, 2017) that affect service experience evaluations (Trail *et al.*, 2005), and that favourable evaluations of these experiences can generate increased willingness to support the organisation (Pedragosa and Correia, 2009), we propose that satisfaction partially mediates the effect of member's identity on various behavioural intentions:

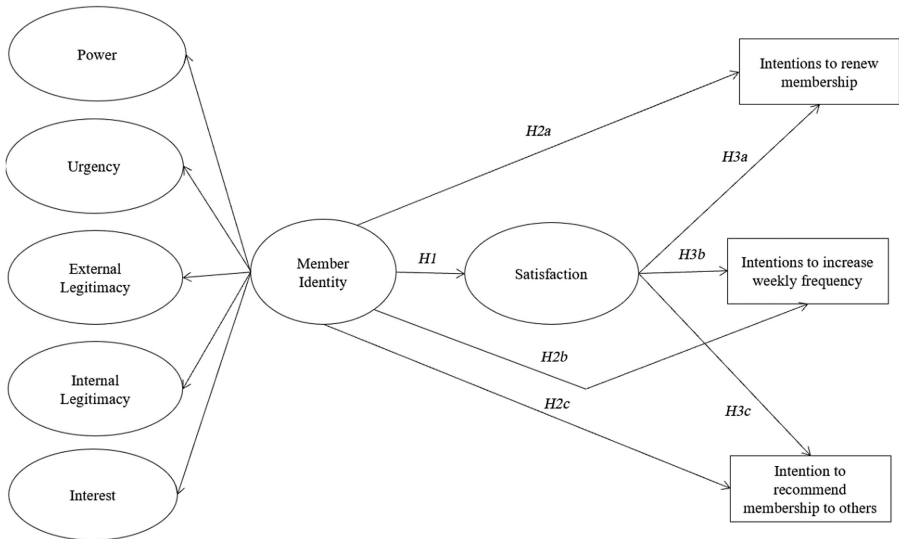
*H3.* Satisfaction mediates the relationship between member identity and the intention to (a) renew membership, (b) increase weekly frequency and (c) recommend membership to others.

Taken together, exploration of the three proposed hypotheses (Figure 1) will facilitate a better understanding of the relationship between member identity, satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Recognising the need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of FC member identity, this project aims to capture the perspective of both members and managers through two complementary studies. Study 1 features a traditional hypothesis testing approach, whereas the interviews in Study 2 enabled an exploration of the meaning and importance of member identity dimensions among both managers and members.

### Study 1 – Testing the hypothesized model

#### Study context

Data were collected from members of two FCs in Lisbon, Portugal. The European fitness industry in 2020 reported €28.2 billion in revenues, underpinned by approximately



**Figure 1.**  
Hypothesised model  
for study 1

63,000 FCs and 65 million members (EuropeActive, 2020). In Portugal, annual revenues are estimated at €289 million across 1,100 FCs, with 688,000 members (Pedragosa and Cardadeiro, 2020).

### Measures

The questionnaire included demographic questions and an initial pool of 32 items separated into three sections. The first section assessed member identity and included measures of power (5 items), urgency (5 items), external legitimacy (4 items) and internal legitimacy (5 items) adapted from Biscaia *et al.* (2018) for the fitness context. Items measuring interest (5 items) were specifically created for this study and based on Bryson (2004). All items were measured on a 10-point scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (10). The 4-item scale proposed by Pedragosa *et al.* (2015) was used to measure satisfaction, featuring a 10-point scale ranging from “Strongly Dissatisfied” (1) to “Strongly Satisfied” (10). Behavioural intentions were captured through four individual items, with three being adapted from Avourdiadou and Theodorakis (2014) and one created specifically for this study (increase weekly frequency). As we were capturing different “behaviours” (Hedlund, 2014), single items were used rather than a composite measure. This procedure has been successfully implemented in prior studies examining behavioural intentions (e.g. Arnold and Reynolds, 2009). These four items were measured on a 10-point scale, ranging from “Not Likely at All” (1) to “Extremely Likely” (10).

Five sport management academics then conducted a content analysis of the items. These researchers, all experienced in consumer behaviour research and from different countries, received details on the purpose of the study, a description of the constructs and expected data collection procedures. Based on their feedback, minor wording changes were adopted for six items. Also, seven items were removed to ensure the parsimony of the questionnaire without compromising each construct’s content. At this stage, the instrument was shortened to 25 items (power = 4; urgency = 4; external legitimacy = 4; internal legitimacy = 3; interest = 3; satisfaction = 4; behavioural intentions = 3). A back-translation process was undertaken (Douglas and Craig, 2007). After translation into Portuguese by two bilingual authors, and back-translating into English by a native of Portugal who is an academic with translation experience, the two versions were compared and we concluded that the instruments were equivalent.

### Pilot study

Pilot data were collected through an online survey during a one-month period. Participants were recruited using the Facebook page of a Portuguese FC. A total of 425 participants responded to the survey. After data screening (e.g. elimination of surveys by participants less than 16 years-old, incomplete surveys or surveys with one-third of consecutive answers in the same scale number), 151 surveys were deemed useable for data analysis. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 62 years-old ( $M = 35.8$ ,  $SD = 9.3$ ), and 38.8% were in the 36–45 age range. About two-thirds were female (68.3%) and 46.9% had finished an undergraduate degree. Almost half (47.7%) had been paid-members for more than 12 months, and 35.2% has membership tenure of 19–24 months.

The psychometric properties of the items were assessed using SPSS 24.0. All skewness values were less than 3.0, and kurtosis values were below 7.0 indicating that the items were appropriate for factor analysis (Kline, 2005). The item-to-total correlations for all items capturing member identity constructs and satisfaction were greater than the 0.50 threshold (Zaichkowsky, 1985). Furthermore, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for constructs were above 0.70, ranging from 0.86 to 0.93 and indicating good internal consistency (Nunnally and Berstein, 1994). This 25-item questionnaire was used for the main study.



*Main study*

Participants were recruited from a large FC that is integrated within an international chain operating in Lisbon. The FC manager sent an email to all active members explaining the study's purpose and asking them to participate. A total of 767 individuals started the survey and 225 were completed and deemed useable for data analysis. As noted by [Hulland et al. \(2018\)](#), low response rates do not necessarily represent a problem for theory testing and convenience samples are appropriate to test the veracity of proposed relationships. The data screening procedures from the pilot test were again utilised. Participant characteristics were similar to the pilot study. The age of participants ranged from 16 to 89 years-old ( $M = 44.0$ ,  $SD = 14.7$ ). About one-third (32.0%) were 36–45. More than half were female (55.6%) and had an undergraduate degree (55.4%). The majority (78.7%) were members for more than 12 months. The demographic characteristics of the participants corresponds to the typical profile of fitness members reported in the Portuguese Fitness Barometer ([Pedragosa and Cardadeiro, 2020](#)).

Prior to data analysis, we considered the four common criteria for determining reflective or formative dimensions (i.e. direction of causality, interchangeability of indicators, covariation among indicators and nomological net ([Finn and Wang, 2014](#); [Jarvis et al., 2003](#)). Given that power, urgency, internal legitimacy, internal legitimacy and interest are expected to reflect member identity, these five constructs were specified as reflective. Data were then analysed through SPSS 24.0, and a two-step maximum likelihood structural equation model (SEM) was performed. First, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted to assess the measurement model. Composite reliability ([Hair et al., 2009](#)) was calculated to assess the internal consistency of the constructs, while convergent validity was evaluated through the average variance extracted (AVE). Discriminant validity was assessed through AVE vs. squared correlations tests ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)). Second, SEM was used to test the hypotheses. The fit of the data to both the measurement and structural models were examined through the ratio of chi-square ( $\chi^2$ ) to its degrees of freedom, Tucker–Lewis index (TLI), comparative-of-fit index (CFI), goodness-of-fit index (GFI) and root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA).

Given that the study is cross-sectional featuring self-reported data, procedural remedies were adopted to alleviate concerns of common method variance bias. First, as noted above, the content and face validity of the items were analysed by an expert panel and the questionnaire was subsequently piloted prior to the main application ([Podsakoff et al., 2003](#)). Second, the items were randomized with a separation of dependent (satisfaction and behavioural intentions) and independent variables (member identity dimensions) into different sections of the questionnaire ([Hulland et al., 2018](#)).

*Results*

*Main study.* Measurement model. The CFA results for the first-order measurement model (i.e. all 5 member identity dimensions) indicated an acceptable fit to the data [ $\chi^2(194) = 415.74$  ( $p < 0.001$ ),  $\chi^2/df = 2.14$ , TLI = 0.95, CFI = 0.96, GFI = 0.86, RMSEA = 0.07 (CI = 0.062–0.081)]. The ratio of the  $\chi^2$  to its degrees of freedom was below 3.0 ([Kline, 2005](#)). The GFI was below 0.90, but TLI, CFI were both greater than this recommended criterion for good fit. In addition, the RMSEA was within the 0.07 criterion for acceptable fit ([Hair et al., 2009](#)). As shown in [Table 1](#), composite reliability (0.84–0.96) indicated good internal consistency of the constructs ([Hair et al., 2009](#)). Convergent validity was acceptable with all AVE values greater than the 0.50 standard ( $0.63 \leq AVE \leq 0.85$ ) ([Fornell and Larcker, 1981](#)). In addition, the squared correlations ranged from 0.03 to 0.72. Discriminant validity results are reported in [Table 2](#). Except for the correlation between interest and internal legitimacy ( $\varphi = 0.72$ ) which are equal to one another, the AVE values were greater than the squared correlations between

| Constructs   | Items   | First-order<br>Loading | Z-value | Second-order |         |
|--|---|------------------------|---------|--------------|---------|
|  |   |                        |         | Loading      | Z-value |
| <b>Member Identity</b> ( $CR = 0.81$ ; $AVE = 0.48$ )        |   |                        |         |              |         |
| <b>Power</b> ( $CR = 0.93$ ;<br>$AVE = 0.78$ )               | I can exert power within <FC>                                     | 0.93                   | 18.27   | 0.77         | 12.15   |
|  | I can influence <FC>  | 0.85                   | 15.65   |              |         |
|  | I can impose my will to <FC>                                      | 0.81                   | 14.60   |              |         |
|  | I can impact the direction of <FC>                                | 0.93                   | 18.11   |              |         |
| <b>Urgency</b> ( $CR = 0.87$ ;<br>$AVE = 0.63$ )             | I urgently communicate my concerns to <FC>                        | 0.81                   | 14.30   | 0.40         | 5.41    |
|  | I express my opinion to <FC> without delay                        | 0.89                   | 16.25   |              |         |
|  | I communicate my requests to <FC> promptly                        | 0.78                   | 13.31   |              |         |
|  | I actively seek to have attention of <FC> regarding my concerns   | 0.69                   | 11.34   |              |         |
| <b>External Legitimacy</b><br>( $CR = 0.96$ ; $AVE = 0.85$ ) | My claims are viewed by <FC> as legitimate                        | 0.91                   | 17.76   | 0.96         | 15.07   |
|  | <FC> considers me a legitimate stakeholder                        | 0.89                   | 16.90   |              |         |
|  | My concerns are viewed by <FC> as appropriate                     | 0.95                   | 19.20   |              |         |
|  | <FC> listens to me when I express my opinion                      | 0.95                   | 18.91   |              |         |
| <b>Internal Legitimacy</b><br>( $CR = 0.84$ ; $AVE = 0.64$ ) | I consider myself to be a member of <FC>                          | 0.80                   | 14.10   | 0.68         | 9.10    |
|  | I would experience a loss if I had to stop being a member of <FC> | 0.78                   | 13.43   |              |         |
|  | Being a member of <FC> is very important to me                    | 0.82                   | 14.42   |              |         |
|  | I pay attention to what is happening at <FC>                      | 0.86                   | 15.58   | 0.53         | 7.31    |
| <b>Interest</b> ( $CR = 0.88$ ;<br>$AVE = 0.72$ )            | I want to learn more about <FC>                                   | 0.82                   | 14.47   |              |         |
|  | I take an interest in <FC>  | 0.87                   | 15.84   |              |         |
| <b>Satisfaction</b> ( $CR = 0.96$ ;<br>$AVE = 0.85$ )        | I am fully satisfied with <FC>                                    | 0.97                   | 15.95   |              |         |
|  | <FC> always fulfils my expectations                               | 0.96                   | 17.43   |              |         |
|  | My experiences with <FC> are excellent                            | 0.90                   | 19.51   |              |         |
|  | <FC> has never disappointed me so far                             | 0.85                   | 19.85   |              |         |

**Note(s):** CR=Composite reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted; FC=Fitness Centre

**Table 1.**  
Psychometric  
properties of the  
variables in study 1

all remaining constructs. Still, the correlation between these constructs was below the suggested 0.85 criterion (Kline, 2005). Also, the comparison of the  $\chi^2$  statistics when the correlation between the two constructs was free versus constrained to one (Anderson and Gerbing, 1988) show a statistically significant decrease ( $\Delta\chi^2 = 44.30$ ;  $\Delta df = 1$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting evidence of discriminant validity among these constructs.

Subsequently, the analysis of the second-order measurement model also indicated an acceptable fit to the data [ $\chi^2(200) = 475.13$  ( $p < 0.001$ ),  $\chi^2/df = 2.38$  TLI = 0.94, CFI = 0.94, GFI = 0.85, RMSEA = 0.08 (CI = 0.069–0.087)]. Factor loadings from the member identity construct to the five proposed dimensions were all were significant at  $p < 0.001$ . External legitimacy (0.96) was the variable that better reflected member identity, followed by power (0.77),

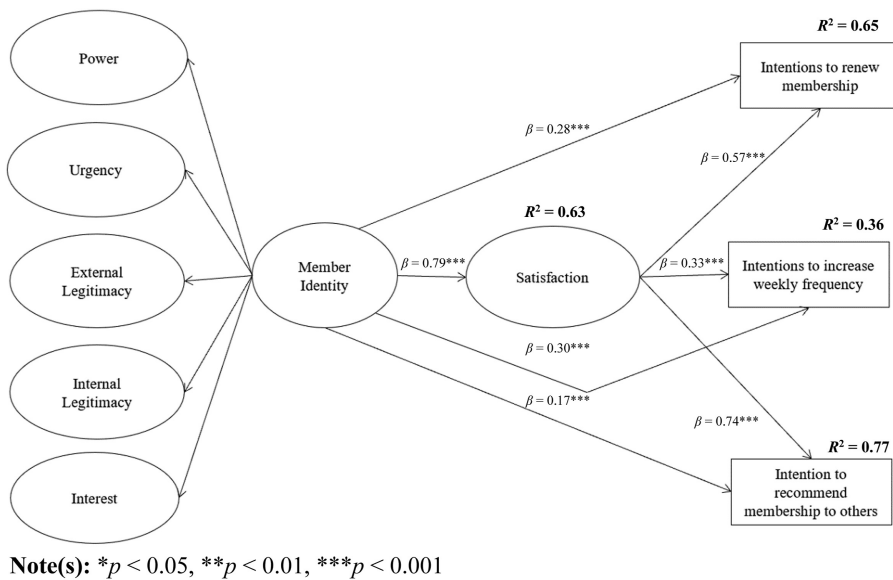


The results of Study 1 indicated good psychometric properties of the multidimensional construct of member identity and provided evidence of its positive direct effect on satisfaction and an indirect effect on all behavioural intention measures (via satisfaction). Therefore, all hypotheses were supported. Study 2 was implemented next to explore the more nuanced aspects of member identity as a construct. Member and manager perceptions of the meaning

|                        | AVE  | 1    | 2    | 3    | 4    | 5    | 6    |
|------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| 1. Power               | 0.78 | 1.00 |      |      |      |      |      |
| 2. Urgency             | 0.63 | 0.18 | 1.00 |      |      |      |      |
| 3. External Legitimacy | 0.85 | 0.57 | 0.14 | 1.00 |      |      |      |
| 4. Internal Legitimacy | 0.64 | 0.28 | 0.32 | 0.36 | 1.00 |      |      |
| 5. Interest            | 0.72 | 0.14 | 0.37 | 0.21 | 0.72 | 1.00 |      |
| 6. Satisfaction        | 0.85 | 0.24 | 0.03 | 0.57 | 0.47 | 0.22 | 1.00 |

**Note(s):** 1 = Power; 2 = Urgency; 3 = External legitimacy; 4 = Internal legitimacy; 5 = Interest; 6 = Satisfaction

**Table 2.**  
Discriminant validity  
results for the first-  
order constructs  
(study 1)



**Figure 2.** Standardised estimates of the second-order structural model

and importance of members and their identity were captured through semi-structured interviews.

## Study 2 – Understanding member’s role identity: member and manager perspectives

### *Participants and procedures*

A purposive sampling approach was employed (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015). Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with members and seven with managers of the FC chain (all face-to-face) from Study 1. Interviewing is among the most used qualitative techniques, with the semi-structured format the most predominant (Creswell, 2007), allowing interviewees to freely describe and explain circumstances and experiences (Qu and Dumay, 2011). Data were collected during a one-month period prior to onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. The inclusion criteria for managers were having experience as section coordinators or being director of the FC. For members, they had to have at least 6 months of membership. The managers’ ages ranged from 27 to 47 years-old ( $M = 35.29$ ;  $SD = 6.68$ ) and their work experience in the FC ranged from 3 to 21 years (female = 2; male = 5) [2]. The age of members ranged from 19 to 65 years-old ( $M = 38.56$ ;  $SD = 17.50$ ), with 55.6% having an active membership for over 37 months (female = 5; male = 4). All interviewees attended their FC at least 3 times per week, and 78% followed the centre’s social media (i.e. Facebook, Instagram) or App. Interviews were held in a private room of the FC and lasted 15–30 min. All interviews were conducted by the study’s first author. Only the interviewer and interviewee were present in the room.

Interview questions were derived from previous literature about identity and stakeholders (Biscaia *et al.*, 2018; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997) and captured managers and members’ perceptions of power, urgency, internal legitimacy, external legitimacy and interest [3]. Data collection ceased when no new and relevant information was emerging from the interviews (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

**Table 3.**  
Direct, indirect and total effects for the hypothesized model using bootstrapping procedures (study 1)

| Hypothesis/Effect/Path   | Path coefficient       | SE          | Bootstrap estimate | 95% confidence interval |              |
|--|------------------------|-------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------|
|  |                        |             |                    | Lower                   | Upper        |
| H1: Direct Effect(MID→SAT)   | 0.79***                | 0.12        |                    | 0.72                    | 0.90         |
| H2a: Direct Effect(MID→RENMEM)   | 0.28***                | 0.15        |                    | 0.07                    | 0.94         |
| H2b: Direct Effect(MID→WEEKFREQ)   | 0.30***                | 0.21        |                    | 0.09                    | 0.69         |
| H2c: Direct Effect(MID→RECOMMEND)  | 0.17***                | 0.12        |                    | 0.04                    | 0.64         |
| H3a: Direct Effect(SAT→RENMEM)   | 0.57***                | 0.09        |                    | 0.05                    | 0.76         |
| H3b: Direct Effect(SAT→WEEKFREQ)   | 0.33***                | 0.12        |                    | 0.05                    | 0.54         |
| H3c: Direct Effect(SAT→RECOMMEND)  | 0.74***                | 0.07        |                    | 0.30                    | 0.88         |
| Indirect(Mediated) Effect(MID→SAT→RENMEM)  | 0.45***                | 0.27        |                    | 0.05                    | 0.60         |
| Indirect(Mediated) Effect(MID→SAT→WEEKFREQ)  | 0.26***                | 0.17        |                    | 0.04                    | 0.42         |
| Indirect(Mediated) Effect(MID→SAT→RECOMMEND)   | 0.58***                | 0.15        |                    | 0.27                    | 0.70         |
| Total Effect(MID→SAT + SAT→RENMEM + MID→SAT→RENMEM)  | 0.72***                | 0.08        |                    | 0.62                    | 0.88         |
| Total Effect(MID→SAT + MID→WEEKFREQ + MID→SAT→WEEKFREQ)  | 0.56***                | 0.07        |                    | 0.45                    | 0.68         |
| Total Effect(MID→SAT + MID→RECOMMEND + MID→SAT→RECOMMEND)  | 0.76***                | 0.07        |                    | 0.66                    | 0.90         |
| Model fit (SEM)  | $\chi^2(df) \chi^2/df$ | $p$         | CFI                | GFI                     | TLI          |
| 662.61 (263)   | 2.52                   | $p < 0.001$ | 0.93               | 0.82                    | 0.92         |
| Explained variance   |                        |             |                    |                         | RMSEA        |
| Satisfaction   |                        |             |                    |                         |              |
| RENMEM   |                        |             |                    |                         | $R^2 = 0.63$ |
| WEEKFREQ   |                        |             |                    |                         | $R^2 = 0.65$ |
| RECOMMEND  |                        |             |                    |                         | $R^2 = 0.36$ |
| <b>Note(s):</b> MID = Member Identify, SAT=Satisfaction, RENMEM = Intention to Renew Membership, WEEKFREQ=Intention to Increase Weekly Frequency, RECOMMEND = Intention to Recommend, SE= Standard Error, 500 Bootstrapping Re-samples, * $p < 0.05$ , ** $p < 0.01$ , *** $p < 0.001$ |                        |             |                    |                         |              |

### *Data analysis*

Interview data were analysed using MAXQDA.12 and according to [Graneheim and Lundman \(2004\)](#). The analysis started immediately after the data was gathered, with the lead author listening to the recorded interviews, transcribing and reading them several times. Next, all transcriptions were given to the other authors. These were evaluated both on an individual and collective basis ([Gratton and Jones, 2010](#)) to better understand the quotes in relation to the member identity attributes under investigation: power; external legitimacy; urgency; internal legitimacy; and interest. Then, quotes were organised into three levels of importance: high, neutral and low ([Stieler et al., 2014](#)). This was based on the frequency that each interviewee described each theme.

To address trustworthiness, member checking was implemented. Participants were invited to review and comment on their quotes and how these reflect each of the attributes under investigation. We also engaged in peer debriefing during and after interviews to discuss findings with colleagues not involved in this study ([Lincoln and Guba, 1985](#)). Credibility was enhanced by interviewing participants with prolonged engagement in the research setting.

### *Results*

The findings indicate a degree of consistency between members and managers' views about power, urgency, external legitimacy, internal legitimacy and interest. The main findings of the interviews and related quotes are presented in [Table 4](#).

*Power.* Managers perceive that members often have low power in FCs and that member influence depends on what they want to influence. For example, if the member has a request related to non-core aspects of the service (e.g. changing music type in the exercise room, television channels or even cleaning some parts of the FC), they have the power to influence it. Relatedly, MGR6 mentioned "there are situations that members can influence, for instance, the type of music in the fitness centre." These are aspects the gym instructor can change, but structural aspects linked to gym management are less likely to be influenced by members (e.g. acquisition of equipment). Also, most managers agree that if the request goes against the FC policy, strategy, rules and regulations, the power of the member is lower. MGR6 said that "changing class schedules is not always possible because we have to keep in mind the professional agenda and the club's strategy to make the changes. When I deny it, I always justify it." Regardless of power levels by members, managers highlight the importance of explaining their actions. Members' power is also conditioned by the opinion of the majority (i.e. in situations when managers ask members' opinion, the final decision depends on the opinion of most) and by the financial availability of the FC.

Members reported that their power to influence the FC was limited or even non-existent. The majority feel they have the power to complain but not to influence decisions, which is aligned with what managers conveyed. MEM2 said "we do not have the capacity to influence, but we can always complain if the service delivered to us is bad." The findings also indicate that when acting in group, they perceive more power. MEM1 said "I feel I don't have power, but I don't remember any good example to demonstrate it", while MEM2 noted that "alone I have no power but when many of us complain we have power to influence." Occasional situations such as music and television channels are easily changed after members' suggestions as also noted by managers. However, aspects related to organisational, structural and strategic situations of the FC are under the control of managers ("we don't feel real and concrete actions from the gym regarding our claims"; MEM6).

*Urgency.* Managers noted that when members express urgency it is because something is wrong or needs to be improved immediately. Most managers note that members exhibit urgency regarding services they use in a day-to-day basis, such as machines in the exercise

| Themes                                | Importance(n)                       | Example quote  |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Power(managers)</i>                | High(0)<br>Neutral(1)<br>Low(6)     | N/A<br>“I haven’t had a case like that. Members are very calm.” (MGR3)<br>“Members don’t have power and the final decision belongs to the fitness centre, director, coordinator based on our vision.” (MGR4)   |
| <i>Power (members)</i>                | High(2)<br><br>Neutral(0)<br>Low(7) | “I think I have power regarding cleaning in the changing rooms. I have complained before and <fitness centre> improved.” (MEM8)<br>N/A<br>“The maximum I can do is to make a suggestion about what I think needs to be repaired and improved. Still, I don’t have the power to change. I try to influence <fitness centre>, but the final decision belongs to them.” (MEM4)  |
| <i>Urgency (managers)</i>             | High(5)<br><br>Neutral(0)<br>Low(2) | “The member has urgency ‘for yesterday’. The jacuzzi is not working for one week. The piece takes a long time to be sent by the supplier. They complain quickly..” (MGR2)<br>N/A<br>“Urgency is only for some members. Most do it at the reception and wait. A few want the director to solve the problems immediately. Members are generally peaceful.” (MGR7)  |
| <i>Urgency (members)</i>              | High(4)<br><br>Neutral(0)<br>Low(5) | “I think we have. I complain and the next time I come to the fitness centre, I want that problem to have been solved.” (MEM2)<br>N/A<br>“I want them to solve the issue of funny smell in some parts of the gym, but I know it is not easy to solve it.” (MEM9)  |
| <i>External legitimacy (manager)</i>  | High(7)<br><br>Neutral(0)<br>Low(0) | “Members have the right to complain and suggest. Just yesterday, some members suggested removing the treadmills from that area and were heard. I recognise they have the legitimacy to make suggestions and complain, but not to impose anything.” (MGR6)<br>N/A<br>N/A  |
| <i>External legitimacy (members)</i>  | High(9)<br><br>Neutral(0)<br>Low(0) | “Managers consider we have the right to suggest and complain. I feel very comfortable here. If I have a problem, if something is wrong, I tell it to the instructor. I believe they listen to us.” (MEM7)<br>N/A<br>N/A  |
| <i>Internal legitimacy (managers)</i> | High(6)<br><br>Neutral(0)<br>Low(1) | “Members have. Older people who have been around longer make more suggestions. People who are here for less time make less suggestions but complain more.” (MGR7)<br>N/A<br>“I don’t think so. I have the idea that older members impose less than the recent members. In my opinion, it is all about trust. I’ve always been here, and the old members have a different tone of criticism, they are more comprehensive” (MGR6)                      |
| <i>Internal legitimacy (members)</i>  | High(7)<br><br>Neutral(0)<br>Low(2) | “I am the client and of course I have the right to complain and make suggestions. Even today I said there is a funny smell in the corridor next to the changing rooms.” (MEM9)<br>N/A<br>“Not everyone felt they have the right to make suggestions. It depends on one’s personality. Those members who are here for less time do not suggest so much and are more shy. There are some people who do not feel comfortable to share thoughts.” (MEM5) |

**Table 4.**  
Themes, its importance  
and frequency (n) and  
example responses  
(study 2)

(continued)

Table 4.

| Themes                     | Importance(n) | Example quote  |
|----------------------------|---------------|--|
| <i>Interest (managers)</i> | High(6)       | "Members look very often if the map of classes is updated on the app, website, Facebook and Instagram. They pay attention to day-to-day activities." (MGR2)  |
|                            | Neutral(0)    | N/A  |
|                            | Low(1)        | "This activity is new in the <fitness centre > because we only had 35 registrations with the last group-class over a period of 2 years. Some members show low interest in everything." (MGR3)  |
| <i>Interest (members)</i>  | High(7)       | "I'm very interested and curious about training. I love sports. <Fitness centre> gives us lots of information." (MEM4)   |
|                            | Neutral(0)    | N/A  |
|                            | Low(2)        | "I'm not curious. I see it in the newsfeed on Instagram, but I don't look for information. Before, when I took group classes, I used to look for information. Now, as I only go to the exercise room and pool, I don't look any information." (MEM8) |

room or cleanliness of the SPA. MGR4 mentioned that "maintenance of exercise room equipment is very urgent for members." Managers reported that solutions often depend on third parties like their superiors or external suppliers. It is therefore sometimes challenging to address members' requests quickly. MGR5 said that "the exercise room has been filthy for 3 days, and the outsourced company should handle the situation. This delay is on the suppliers." At least one manager conveyed that in response to a volume of complaints, more substantial changes are possible (shifting to alternate external suppliers) but this was often stressful for management. MGR4 articulated the sequence in response to escalating complaints. "It reaches a point that is not viable. Suggestion, then complaint and then imposition." Managers noted that proper communication of the challenges to members is vital, especially when the response time is slow and not under their control. MGR7 suggested that "communication makes members more calmly wait for the solution". It was noted by managers that long-term members are usually more patient, while more recent members often convey more urgency in their requests.

Members are almost certain to complain when they perceive something is wrong. However, they also recognise it may be more difficult for managers to respond quickly in certain situations. This aligns with the stories that managers told. For day-to-day situations, such as cleanliness, music, television channels, members feel they are entitled to an immediate response from managers. MEM8 said that the urgency "depends on the situation. For example, hygiene needs to be resolved quickly." For issues related to equipment and machine malfunctioning, maintenance and funky smell, urgency is also expected but to a somewhat lesser extent. They want a quick response by the FC, but accept that the resolution of these issues may take time. This view is also expressed by MEM2 who refer that "there are loads of damaged machines, but we have to accept because it may not depend on them but on the supplier."

*External legitimacy.* Managers noted that members have external legitimacy in the sense they can make suggestions and complaints, but not the right to "impose" anything. Most managers do not accept the imposition by the members because it could go against the FC strategy. While acknowledging members' legitimacy, managers consider members do not drive the way the FC is managed. Recognising the external legitimacy of members is important as it helps managing the business and this can be accomplished by graciously receiving suggestions or complaints – formally if necessary. MGR2 indicated that members "have the legitimacy to make suggestions but not to impose a will. Normally, members report their concerns to gym instructors and these report to the coordinator. We have many weekly suggestions, and some complaints too. Some members also leave papers at the reception,



speak to the receptionists and sometimes directly to me.” A similar view was expressed by MGR1 (“members have the legitimacy to make suggestions and complain but not impose their will”).

For members, there was unanimous agreement that the FC recognises their right to complain and make suggestions. As noted by MEM4, “in general, members are taken into account in some way. They recognize our importance even if they don’t solve our problems. At least, that’s my perception.” For instance, MEM2 referred “managers recognise our importance”, while MEM3 said “managers are open to accept our suggestions. For example, this weekend we were in a competition and they gave us the floor to speak openly. We have an open group and talk about how to improve the training sessions.” Consistently, MEM9 noted that “I never had many situations to complain but I think they recognise that we are clients and as such we have that right.”

*Internal legitimacy.* Most managers acknowledge that members feel they have the legitimacy and feel good about being members. By in large, the managers interviewed in this study noted that longer tenured members are more involved with FCs and provide more constructive suggestions. Members who are in the FC for a lesser amount of time complain more. MGR5 said that some “members feel the legitimacy to send messages to my cell phone, and I’m fine with them feeling the freedom to do it.”, which would not happen if the FC was not important for them. MGR1 further noted that “members feel they have the right to make suggestions and claims, and that is good.” Despite that, it is worth noting that “the final decision is to be made by the director” (MGR4).

It was evident that members see themselves as an important part of the FC community, exhibiting the confidence to make suggestions and complaints, but not impositions. However, two members made the point that related expertise and socio-economic profile often influence members’ perceptions of having the right to complain or suggest anything to the FC. For example, people with little knowledge of exercise and health do not feel the legitimacy to question the type of training they are doing (“technical knowledge of members to complain or suggest”). On the other hand, most members consider that being part of the FC is important for them. As such, if the FC offers a service, members have the legitimacy to suggest and complain about that when appropriate. This was articulated by MEM6: “I think I have the right to claim because I’m an older member and realise that the gym cannot respond to the individual interests of all.” She further added in relation to the cleanliness of the rooms and group class equipment that “I have enough experience to realise that there are situations that affect everyone, and I should complain if it is for the interest of all.”

*Interest.* In general, the managers perceived that members have high levels of interest in the FC, and this is reflected through interest shown in the schedule of group classes and the desire to know more about training sessions, instructors and future events. Managers found that more experienced members (i.e. knowledgeable of other gyms and/or long tenure of membership), the more they want to know about what happens in the FC. MGR6 adds that some “members are very curious with the training sessions, and their interest tends to increase with time. Some of them search the internet for information about exercises to then discuss with the instructors.” MGR7 further highlights how members show interest in the events organised by the FC (“In our events, we always have lots of participation, so it is something that moves them”).

The interviews with members indicate that most are curious and interested in FC activities: individual training sessions; new instructors and health professionals; supplementary events; official social network sites (e.g. Facebook, Instagram), appearance of the staff in TV shows and magazines. MEM7 mentioned “I love to see when the FC appears on TV and I love to attend the events they organise. They are effective at communicating on social network sites, and we have a WhatsApp group that posts updates in a daily basis.” This interest in the FC is shared by other members. For example, MEM 3 noted his

enthusiasm to learn more about CrossFit sessions (“I am reading and studying about it”), while MEM 4 noted that “the Gym give us information but could give more. I often search on their website or other places when they provide me with all I want.”

The results of Study 2 indicate that managers and members have similar perceptions of member power, urgency, internal legitimacy, external legitimacy and interest. Both managers and members recognise that members’ power is often low; urgency depends on the situation and whether it is easy or difficult to solve; the FC recognises members’ external legitimacy; members feel themselves as legitimate members of the FC; and most members exhibit high interest in the FC services.

## Overall discussion

The first study quantitatively examined the relationships between member identity (power, urgency, external legitimacy, internal legitimacy and interest), satisfaction and behavioural intentions in FCs. The second study qualitatively explored how members and managers perceive member’s role identity. In doing so, the two studies extend previous literature that has typically focused on either managers or consumers, conceptualises and measures role identity to the fitness context and provides a deeper understanding of the how members’ identity contribute to the development of long-term relationships between members and FCs.

The results of Study 1 provide evidence that member identity plays an important role increasing both satisfaction and favourable behavioural intentions towards the FC (Trail *et al.*, 2005). This means that the more meaning individuals attach to their role of being members, the more satisfied they will be and more likely to favour the organisation. The impact of members’ identity on behavioural intentions that emerged here supports previous sport consumer behaviour studies (e.g. Biscaia *et al.*, 2018) suggesting that high salience of role identity influences behavioural choices (Stryker and Burke, 2000). These findings further reinforce that members are primary stakeholders of FCs (Pedragosa and Correia, 2009), indicating that the five dimensions of member identity come together to increase the likelihood of members renewing a membership, recommending the FC to others and increasing weekly visits. It is also worth noting that satisfaction mediates the relationship between member identity and all behavioural intentions. This adds to the literature by providing empirical support to the idea that one’s identity shape how individuals evaluate their experiences (Wear and Heere, 2020) and that these experiences are vital to generate positive outcomes (Behnam *et al.*, 2021). Also, it extends sport consumer identity literature (e.g. Biscaia *et al.*, 2018; Lock and Heere, 2017) into the fitness arena, which is of particular relevance because member experiences often feature high levels of interaction at the intersection of the service provider, member and built environment (Pizzo *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, the evaluation of FC experiences is influenced by the meaning a person attaches to the role of being a member of that FC and can act as a driver of FCs’ success.

The conceptualization and measurement of member identity here has facilitated a nuanced understanding of the importance of each identity dimension (power, urgency, internal legitimacy, external legitimacy and interest). Empirical evidence has helped to address concerns about the distinction of these dimensions in different contexts (Currie *et al.*, 2008). External legitimacy emerged as the most important attribute reflecting member identity in Study 1, which supports the idea that role identities must be socially recognised (Ervin and Stryker, 2001). The second most important attribute is power reflecting the influence of members on organisational decisions (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997). Power is followed by internal legitimacy, which helps understand the way a person sees him/herself in the role of a member (Trail *et al.*, 2017). Additionally, evidence here related to interest and urgency as identity dimensions supports the idea that stakeholder interest may shape the organisation (Bryson, 2004), especially when seeking immediate attention (Senaux, 2008).

Collectively, knowing that member identity is dependent on the relative importance of external legitimacy, power, internal legitimacy, interest and urgency is an important contribution to the literature, given that membership in FCs often represents a central part on individuals' life and is an expression of their identity (Behnam *et al.*, 2021).

Findings from Study 2 indicate that perceptions of members and managers are similar regarding the respective importance of power, urgency, external legitimacy, internal legitimacy and interest. These findings complement Study 1 allowing a holistic understanding of members' importance to FCs and filling blind spots from previous stakeholder research based on either consumers' or managers' perspectives alone (Neville *et al.*, 2011). Both parties recognized that members have the right to suggest and complain according to the norms, rules and values of the FC (external legitimacy). This is paramount because the actions of members are important to help drive organisational strategy improvements (Parent and Deephouse, 2007). Furthermore, despite limited ability to exert power related to a wider organisational strategy, results from both Studies 1 and 2 confirm the importance of power as a central attribute of stakeholders (i.e. members) (Bryson, 2004), which can manifest in various ways (e.g. changing music channel). The importance of internal legitimacy was also acknowledged by members and managers and insights from Study 2 indicate that the length of membership, academic background and socio-economic status of the members seem to influence perceptions of internal legitimacy. This finding empirically supports the notion that one's role identity accommodates the social nature of past experiences (Ervin and Stryker, 2001) and that identification with the organisation is important to increase self-esteem (Trail *et al.*, 2005).

Interest in the FC and its activities (e.g. schedule of group classes, social media) was also highlighted by both members and managers. We note that interest seems to increase with the length of membership (i.e. more knowledgeable of fitness services), suggesting that the interaction with the service provider and other members likely generates benefits for the FCs (Behnam *et al.*, 2021). In addition, both members and managers recognized that members request immediate attention (urgency) regardless of the situation. This is important because even short-term interactions with the FC may trigger identity developments (Woolf and Lawrence, 2017). Nonetheless, insights from Study 2 indicate that not all issues raised are treated equally. For example, claims related to day-to-day operations (e.g. cleanliness) are easier to solve than those related to organisational decisions (e.g. changes of gym equipment). The findings also suggest that urgency is a catalyst to initiate members' actions in relation to the organisation (Mitchell *et al.*, 1997), and that consumers use a range of platforms to request the attention of organisations (Ferreira Barbosa *et al.*, 2022). Given the importance of examining holistically how members and FCs affect each other, findings from studies 1 and 2 extend previous literature by providing empirical evidence that member's perception of their importance align with those emanating from managers. Relatedly, capturing the views of managers and members is strategic and can add value to a FC (Priem, 2007).

### *Managerial implications*

The results from the current study have implications for FCs and other sport and recreation providers. As organisational success often depends on identifying and satisfying stakeholders (Neville *et al.*, 2011), FC managers should nurture the five dimensions of member identity. For example, power and external legitimacy can be addressed through clear communication about contracts and codes of behaviour in the FCs and through digital platforms. In addition, technology (e.g. Apps) can ensure that urgent requests are addressed quickly (Gómez-Ruiz *et al.*, 2022). Increased competition (e.g. rewards and physical challenges), social interactions (e.g. supplementary events) and wearable technology (Pizzo *et al.*, 2020) can help nurture the internal legitimacy dimension. Furthermore, members'

interest could be increased through regular micro-communications (i.e. service updates) and macro-communications (e.g. promoting supplementary events) using different platforms (e.g. website, WhatsApp). In addition, gamification through digital platforms (e.g. acquiring points based on actions over time) can help foster member identity and its associated dimensions. By nurturing these five dimensions, managers will also likely enhance members' perceptions of overall service quality, a known precursor to satisfaction in fitness (e.g. [García-Fernández et al., 2016](#); [Xu et al., 2022](#)). For example, the exertion of power by an individual to change the music in a FC may affect how others assess the centre's ambience ([García-Fernández et al., 2018](#)). Similarly, the urgency regarding equipment maintenance of, interest in official social network sites or schedule of group classes could shape both core and ancillary aspects of service delivery.

Members should also be encouraged to experience the variety of available services (e.g. group classes, swimming pool) to increase the number of touchpoints. This could be done through regular vouchers to the service offerings. As a member's identity can be dynamic ([Katz and Heere, 2016](#)) and there is a subjective evaluation of service encounters ([Bodet, 2008](#)), periodic assessments of member identity perceptions and satisfaction will provide useful insights and ultimately foster desired behaviours (e.g. membership renewal and recommendations, more frequent visitation). The five dimensions should be front of mind when customising member relations, simultaneously helping to reduce member rotation ([Pedragosa and Cardadeiro, 2020](#)) and retention levels in a competitive market ([Kim and Byon, 2021, 2022](#)).

### *Limitations and future research*

There are limitations in this study that should be acknowledged. First, data from the main study were from a single FC located in one city, which may limit generalisability of study findings. Second, member identity was measured at a single moment of time and previous research has noted that role identity is not static ([Stryker, 2007](#)). Thus, longitudinal studies are welcome to provide deeper insights on role identity and its impact on subsequent outcomes towards FCs. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to change physical activity patterns among individuals ([Ferreira Barbosa et al., 2022](#)). Additional research could thus assess whether these changes affected member identity.

Additional research may focus on examining other outcomes of role identity. A specific suggestion is the impact of member identity on customer lifetime value (i.e. present value of a predicted net profit attributed to the future relationship with a consumer; [Wang et al., 2012](#)). Furthermore, the increased importance of technology and digital transformation of fitness environments (i.e. Apps, wearable technology, virtual-classes, on-demand) has changed the experience of many FC members ([García-Fernández et al., 2022](#); [Pizzo et al., 2020](#)). Measuring how technology and digital interactions shapes FC member identity is a promising research avenue.

Collectively, the findings from this study indicate that power, urgency, external legitimacy, internal legitimacy and interest are salient aspects of member identity. For FC members, these contribute to satisfaction and behavioural intentions. Members and managers hold similar perceptions of the importance of member's role identity attributes. These two findings should be considered by academics and practitioners concerned with optimising the experiences of FC members.

### **Notes**

1. Descriptive statistics, CFA item statistics and correlation matrix of the variables are available for consultation upon request.
2. Sample characteristics of all interviewees available for consultation upon request.
3. Interview questions available for consultation upon request.

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