Stakeholders in Sports: Examining Fitness Club Members

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Relevance/significance of the topic to sport management According to the Sport Business Research Network (2016), more than 37.8 million Americans (11.7% of the US population) work out at fitness clubs. In 2015, nearly 37,000 US-based fitness clubs generated estimated revenues of USD$27.6 billion, with 57.3 million of members (IHRSA, 2016). Worldwide, fitness club revenues topped USD$83 billion, with 162.1 million members at over 200,000 locations (IHRSA, 2016; Statista, 2016). As noted by Jay Ablondi, IHRSA’s Executive Vice-President of Global Products, “total health club visits annually in the United States increased by 25% since 2009” (IHRSA, 2016).

Organizations need to allocate resources to advance the interests those that are connected including various types of stakeholders (Zagnoli & Racichi, 2010). Members and clients are examples of fitness clubs’ stakeholders, because they frequently care about the organization and may be willing to assist with finding and recruiting new members while also utilizing the services offered by the organization (MacIntosh, Doherty, & Walker, 2010). Moreover, because increasing the number of members and clients is central to the business model of fitness clubs, building deeper connections with these consumers is essential. One way in which deeper connections can be developed is through helping members and clients feel as though they are stakeholders in the success of their fitness club.

Review of relevant literature In the sport and fitness industry, scant research has been conducted on examining the notion of “members as stakeholders.” While previous studies on members and clients of sport and fitness clubs have examined aspects such as consumption-related emotions, expectations, service quality or satisfaction to predict behaviors (e.g., Pedragosa, Biscaia, & Correia, 2015), little research has been conducted on their relationships with the fitness clubs they use. Due to the financial importance of having and improving the relationship between fitness clubs and their members and clients, undertaking research on how to positively affect these relationships are essential. As a result, the overarching purpose of this research is to propose and test a model of “members as stakeholders” in a fitness club context. Over the last decade, a growing number of international studies have investigated fitness club customers’ intentions to join, extend or renew their membership, increase their frequency of attendance, and tell others about their fitness experiences (i.e. word-of-mouth communication) (Ferrand, Robinson, & Valette-Florence, 2010; Gonçalves, Biscaia, Correia, & Diniz, 2014; Pedragosa & Correia, 2009; Wei, Hung, Yang, & Ma, 2010). Research has also been conducted on fitness members and their communities (i.e., brand communities, tribes and cults) and the unique ways in which their members co-create and co-consume good service offerings (Dawson, 2017; Filo, Funk, & Alexandris, 2008; Fournier & Lee, 2009). Research in which sport fans are conceptualized as stakeholders of a sport organization has also been undertaken (Woratschek, Horbel, & Popp, 2014). Stakeholders are defined as those that have a concern or interest in the potential success of an organization or business (Zagnoli & Radicchi, 2010). As shown by Mainardes, Alves, and Raposo (2012), when members develop a stronger relationship with an organization, they are likely to allocate more time, energy and financial resources to the organization. In the case of fitness clubs, members may become stakeholders if they feel like they can contribute something to the organization and/or take a strong interest in its future success (De Lyon, Neville, & Armour, 2017). Mitchell, Agle, and Wood’s (1997) model of stakeholder salience is one of the most commonly used frameworks to identify which people are stakeholders of a particular organization. The basic premise of the model is that salience is a function of a stakeholder’s power, urgency and legitimacy. In brief, power is the degree to which a member is capable of influencing the organization, urgency is the degree to which a member claims call for immediate attention by the organization, and legitimacy is the extent to which a member sees him/herself as a “real” member. In addition to Mitchell et al.’s three dimension, Bryson (2004) has also argued that a potential stakeholder’s level of interest in the organization may also impact their salience. Interest refers to the degree to which a stakeholder wants to know or learn about the organization. Combined together, a sport and fitness based model of...
stakeholders' salience may be composed of and measured with an individual's perception of their power, urgency, legitimacy and interest in an organization such as a fitness club or other membership-oriented group.

Clarity of purpose/objectives of the study/timeliness
Due to limited existing research on “members-as-stakeholders” in sports and fitness contexts, there are two main purposes of this research. The first purpose is to establish and test a multidimensional scale of the degree to which an individual feels like a stakeholder in the organization. Assuming a reliable and valid scale is found, the second purpose is to take the scale and test the predictive validity through analysis of the relationships of the scale with important outcome variables.

Appropriate methodology and data analysis
Data will be collected from fitness club members and clients. First, semi-structured interviews will be undertaken to identify whether or not and the degree to which participants feel like stakeholders of the fitness club. Interview questions will focus on identifying if constructs such as members and clients’ power, urgency, legitimacy, and interest exist toward the fitness club. Attention will also be paid to attempting to identify ways in which researchers could measure power, urgency, legitimacy, and interest, in addition to any additional dimensions that are identified through the interview process. After the completion of the semi-structured interviews, analysis of the interview results, and identification of any potential dimensions of members and clients’ feelings of being a stakeholder (e.g., exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis), the questionnaire will be developed and given to a random set of fitness club consumers (see Churchill, 1979 for a full list of the scale development steps). It is expected that the items on the questionnaire will measure the constructs of power, urgency, legitimacy, interest and any other identified constructs. In addition, items measuring the satisfaction members and clients have with the fitness club, past behaviors (e.g., how frequently they visit, how long they have been a member, how much they spend on their membership, and the services they typically utilize during their visit), and behavioral intentions toward the fitness club (e.g., word of mouth, membership renewal, visit frequency) will also be measured. Using confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling, the predictive validity of the scale related to behavioral intentions will be tested.

As of this moment in time, the data collections are not yet complete. Having said that, we expect the results of this research will help to establish a scale which can be used to measure whether or not and to what degree fitness club members and clients feel like stakeholders in the success of the organization. In addition, we hope to find evidence that fitness clubs’ members and clients’ feelings of being a stakeholder are positively related to important outcomes such as how frequently they go to the center, how much they spend on their membership and related offerings, and how strongly they promote the fitness club to others.

Discussion/implications/applications
Fitness clubs are always looking for ways to develop better relationships with their members and clients. In the past, research has often focused on topics such as participation, involvement and identification with the organization. In this research, we are attempting to take a different approach and identify ways in which organizations can motivate their members to take a more active interest and stake in the success of the organization. If members and clients take an active interest and stake in the success of an organization, then in this case, fitness clubs can allocate more resources toward providing the best possible offerings, as opposed to focusing primarily on finding and enrolling new members and clients.

Contribution to the body of knowledge
Many organizations do not currently offer consumers with ways to “buy-in” to the organization (with the notable exception being if the organization is publicly traded). In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to fitness clubs and sport organizations that offer membership opportunities to consumers. When consumers have a membership stake in the success of the organization, it is more likely that these individuals will allocate and devote more resources to the success of the organization. Thus, if organizations like fitness clubs and sports teams can provide opportunities for consumers to feel like a stakeholder in the success of the organization, then organizations can focus on improving their offerings as opposed to constantly searching for new consumers.