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The Object Not of One's Desire: UK Service Club Membership Recruitment, Retention, and Public Image

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ABSTRACT

Membership organizations rely on maintaining and growing their membership base, both for financial stability and to allow them to increase their impact. UK service clubs are one such kind of membership organization that has suffered a decline in membership in more recent years and is seeking to address this to maintain their presence. However, membership recruitment and retention have proven problematic for these organizations, in particular, recruitment and retention of younger members to ensure the continuity of the organization. This paper utilizes a theoretical framework based on the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and contemporary philosopher Slavoj Zizek, in order to conceptualize the issues around membership and public image within the theoretical constructs of identity, ideology, and desire. This is combined with a qualitative methodological framework utilizing 42 semistructured interviews with service club members and external stakeholders (donors, beneficiaries, and local government representatives). The results of this research found that although current members profess to desire younger members to join, they are reluctant to change their organization to facilitate this. Instead, icons and rituals combine to form an image of the organization that is unappealing to younger prospective members, relegating their desire to join to an almost purely symbolic act. This, therefore, carries implications for service clubs and their membership, especially when considering the level of engagement that potential younger members would be prepared to offer in the future. The strong ideological forces at play within service clubs mean that they will continue to appeal to a relatively narrow membership profile (one that sees their current operation aligned to an organizational "ego ideal" that is symbolically constructed and maintained).

1 | Introduction

The maintenance and growth of membership is a critical success factor for third-sector organizations that rely on the membership model (commonly referred to as "membership organizations"). Maintaining membership allows for financial sustainability in terms of maintaining subscription levels and assists in increasing the magnitude and scope of impact that such organizations can have in their respective communities via the provision of increased volunteer resources and networks. However, issues associated with maintaining membership and participation have been noted in such organizations as a wider societal trend (Putnam 1995, 2000, 2002; Putnam and Feldstein 2003; Sckocpol 1997; Uslaner 1998, 1999) and one that warrants specific attention in the management of such organizations (Chamberlain and Yanus 2023).

Service clubs represent an example of membership organizations as detailed above, grounded within a notion of business networking outside of the previously dominant fraternal organizational forms such as Freemasonry (Charles 1993; Putney 1993). Service club members often hail from the local communities in which they are based and meet on a regular basis to network, socialize, and organize "service projects," for example (inter alia): the sponsoring and undertaking of small infrastructure projects, community event planning and execution, and maintenance of the local community area (Forward 2003). Service clubs will also often contribute toward a global fund for larger, often international, charitable projects (Donahue et al. 2006; Forward 2003; Hapgood 1989; Martin and Kleinfelder 2011; Minder 2005) as part of their affiliation and accountability to a wider "service organization" (Yates, Gebreiter, and Lowe 2019). Such charitable action serves to enhance the public image of service clubs first locally and then on a larger geographical scale (Tadajewski 2017). Soon following their inception, service organizations had multiple branches not only across the United States but also globally (Duncan 1976; Forward 2003; Keegan 2010; Martin and Kleinfelder 2011).

In recent times, maintaining membership and growing these organizations within Western regions have proved problematic, a trend that can be seen across membership organizations in more recent times (Hilton et al. 2012). New, younger members are considered a valuable commodity, and recruitment of these members is seen as a critical success factor in helping ensure the continuity of these organizations. Yet, despite accounts of significant efforts to recruit such members, they do not seem to be willing to join in the numbers required to sustain and grow membership in the United Kingdom.

Despite several studies into barriers to volunteering, especially with regard to younger individuals (Davies 2018; Dean 2013, 2014, 2016b; Gray, Khoo, and Reimondos 2012), and studies exploring identity perspectives in volunteering (Dean 2020; Gray and Stevenson 2020; van Ingen and Wilson 2017), the relationship between ideological influences and practices and how these impact organizational image and membership remains an area of underdevelopment. This piece of research explores this in the context of the ideological focus of service clubs (Cooper 1946; Errington and Gewertz 1997; Tamayo 2020; Wiesen 2009) and the public image implications of this raised by current members and external stakeholders (Yates et al. 2021). Through a theoretical framework based on the psychoanalytic construct of desire via Lacan (2013), along with a consideration of the sensemaking apparatus that ideology functions as (Žižek 1989) for current members already vested in their service club, this study contributes to the body of literature around influences on volunteerism, voluntary association membership, and organizational ideology (McEntee-Atalantis and Vessey 2020; Mikkelsen and Wahlin 2020; Ralph-Morrow 2022).

From this, three research questions are posed:

1. What are the current issues affecting the recruitment and retention of membership within UK service clubs?
2. What ideological forces within service clubs and service organizations influence the recruitment and retention of members drawn from certain demographical groups? In particular, younger prospective members?
3. How do such ideological forces combine and what are the effects on recruitment of younger members for UK service clubs?

Section 2 details the founding, expansion, and status of service clubs, with a focus at the latter end of this discussion on the geographical realm of the United Kingdom, along with a consideration of issues pertaining to membership and volunteering patterns. In Section 3, the Lacanian conceptualization of desire and Zizek's view on ideology are introduced, with an explanation of how these two views relate and their implications for subjectivity in contemporary society. Section 4 contains a detailed account of the research methods employed in the data collection and analysis. Section 5 outlines the main findings of the study, and Section 6 offers a discussion of such findings with respect to the theoretical framework employed, context, and extant literature, along with a conclusion for the paper.

2 | Service Clubs: Foundation, Growth, and Stagnation

Service clubs can be said to be grounded in the traditions of previously founded fraternal organizations, with popular examples including Freemasonry, the Oddfellows, the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes, and the Order of Knights of Pythias (Charles 1993; Putney 1993). Such fraternal orders can be dated back as early as 1717 with the formation of the first grand lodge (the Grand Lodge of England) by four masonic lodges in London (Dickie 2021; Prescott 2010). Prior to this, fraternal orders still existed, with Freemasons citing their links to stonemason's guilds during the Middle Ages and Jones (1967) recognizing the existence of Scottish lodges in both Edinburgh and Aberdeen in the 17th century. Similarities can also be drawn to the livery companies of London, who still maintain their trade associations via their respective names and stated objectives (Pullman 2017).

In 1905, the first service club was founded, although the term "service club" was not applied to these organizations until later. Paul Harris, a Chicago attorney, realized that his business would not succeed unless he made contacts through the process of what is now known as business networking:

> "He conceived an idea for a club whose members would be businessmen in situations similar to his own. Gathering once a week for food and fellowship, these businessmen would also trade with one another, thus forming a ready-made social and business network."
>
> (Charles 1993, 9)

Initially, clubs sought entrepreneurs and those involved with small businesses as members, limiting their membership to one or two individuals from a particular profession. Examples of individuals included in the initial interest for the Dublin Rotary club included a representative each from a local grocery company, a jeweler, a tailor, an insurance company, a hotelier, linen and oil companies, and a drug company (Duncan 1976). Moffat (1947)

goes as far as describing a potential member as "successful, personally attractive and community conscious" (19), alluding to the ideal member desired by such organizations (the degree to which this has been updated for a more contemporary era remains open to question). Aside from the chance to network, members were attracted to Rotary (and other service clubs) by the prospect of freedom from restrictive practice and ritual (Walsh 1979), such as those carried out by their more fraternal counterparts.

By 1911, every major city in the United States had a Rotary club. Imitations of Harris' Rotary club soon began to emerge, with Kiwanis originally being founded as the "Supreme Lodge Benevolent Order of Brothers" in 1915 in Detroit, changing its name to Kiwanis a year later (Charles 1993). In 1917, the organization now known as "Lions Club International" was founded by another Chicago businessman, Melvin Jones (Charles 1993; Martin and Kleinfelder 2011). The organizations were all founded on similar motivations (Charles 1993), including:

- The development of fellowship between businessmen within the community
- Fraternity (in line with previous fraternal organizations)
- The undertaking of community projects such as the renovation of public spaces for example
- Betterment of the local community and promotion of economic growth within

Service clubs share several of their roles and motivations with other charitable and membership-based organizations with similar historical roots. For example, within the United Kingdom, fraternal organizations such as Freemasons, the worshipful companies of London, and London social clubs all have historical roles as membership-based vehicles for networking and capital building, with an additional role grounded in charity. The recognition of charitable service activities and their link to the reputation and legitimacy of both organizations and individuals has been noted within wider literature, adding a personal motivation for membership, charitable service, and philanthropy (Dean 2020; Jackson 2012; Yates et al. 2021). That said, membership numbers continue to stagnate, suggesting that such benefits of membership are outweighed by other issues potentially associated with lifestyles and other influences.

Membership numbers of UK membership-based organizations increased until they peaked in 1981, with approximately 1.65 million people belonging to such organizations within the United Kingdom. Since this point, membership has declined dramatically, with just under 600,000 UK members in 2009 (Hilton et al. 2012). This trend is in line with declining membership within both Church organizations and Women's organizations within the United Kingdom (Hilton et al. 2012). More specifically, the number of service club members in the British Isles is as follows: 35,000 (reported figure also includes the Republic of Ireland) members of Rotary clubs (Rotary Great Britain and Ireland 2024), approximately 12,000 members of Lions Clubs (Lions Giving 2024), and approximately 3000 members of Round Table International (Round Table Great Britain and Ireland 2024).[1]

Such issues of declining membership can be linked to Putnam's (1995) observations regarding (albeit American) society becoming more segregated, as members of the public chose to spend leisure time alone, or privately, as opposed to previous trends of joining various associations such as clubs, sports leagues, and so forth. Putnam's original assertion that a major contributory factor toward this outcome was the rising popularity of television has been contested (cf. Norris 1996; Uslaner 1998); however, with the rise of social media and different methods of both potentially building and decreasing social capital as lifestyles change, the decline in levels of connectedness in society (previously established via meeting face-to-face, e.g., via social clubs, public houses, religious organizations, etc.) has become a factor (Han 2016, 2020).

Younger people often face significant practical-based barriers to undertaking organized volunteerism, such as issues with time, working priorities, and childcare provision, and often have different motivations for volunteering and membership than those within other age brackets (Gillespie and King 1985; Gray, Khoo, and Reimondos 2012). At the same time, ideological issues associated with volunteerism have been identified, such as the stigmatization of volunteering (Davies 2018), instrumental approaches to volunteerism (Dean 2014, 2015; Giancaspro and Manuti 2021; Gillespie and King 1985), and ideological/identity issues between voluntary organizations and volunteers (Dean 2013, 2016a, 2022; Dewi, Manochin, and Belal 2018; Gray and Stevenson 2020; Grönlund 2011; Lansley 1996; Okonkwo Osili et al. 2016; van Ingen and Wilson 2017).

With the distinction between work and leisure time becoming increasingly blurred, the prospect of members of the public being able to dedicate time for leisure activities such as membership of a service club looks increasingly poor. Service clubs have attempted to tackle this phenomenon via the introduction of clubs that have more flexible meeting requirements from members, such as breakfast[2] clubs and "e-clubs."[3] Despite these innovations, declining membership is still an issue that plagues UK service clubs today. It appears that time-based flexibility is not the only issue that affects voluntary participation and the motivation to join and sustain service club membership. Thus, this study proposes to explore those deeper, underlying issues that seem to have been overlooked when attempting to manage the UK service club membership decline. In the next section, the theoretical framework that has allowed for these observations is outlined and explained.

3 | Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework in this study is based on the related philosophies of two theorists, Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Zizek. Zizek's theorizations are grounded in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and combined with Marxist stances on ideology and Hegelian dialectics, his philosophy can be considered a complex bricolage. First, this section sets out Lacan's thinking with regard to subjectivity through what many refer to as his "Graphs of Desire," or more simply his "Graphs." These graphs aim to explain (to a greater extent) Lacan's psychoanalytic theory of the subject.

In considering this perspective on ideology and desire, we must first turn to how the subject comes to the realization of its being.

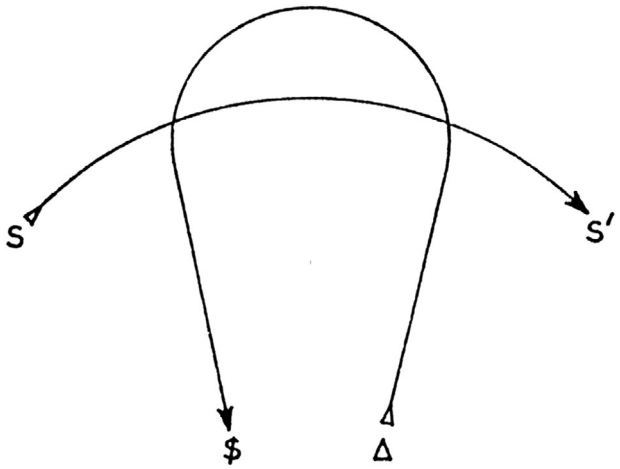

FIGURE 1 | Lacan's Graph I (Žižek 1989, 111).

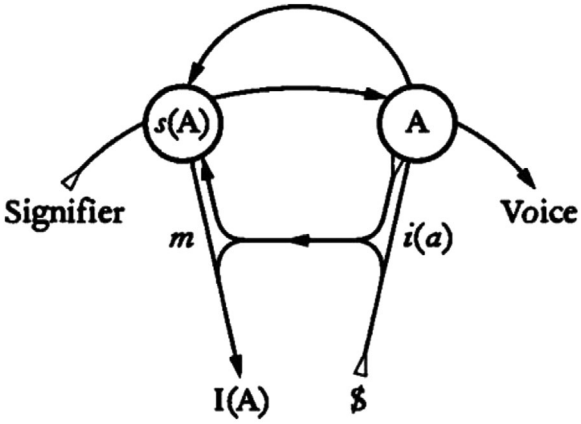

FIGURE 2 | Lacan's Graph II (Neill 2011, 34).

Lacan explains this through a basic graph, where the previously unconscious subject is drawn into consciousness through the interaction with the symbolic (language) (Figure 1).

The delta figure on the bottom right of the graph represents the unconscious subject, one who is drawn into language represented by the initial crossover point with the horizontal line on the graph, showing the signifier and signified. Following the initial crossing point, the subject questions oneself through this encounter with language, measuring themselves against the standards that they encounter within symbolic order (Soler 2003; Yates and Al Mahameed 2023; Žižek 1992). This is represented by the arc in the graph that crosses the (relatively) vertical line for the second time and results in the product of this interaction—namely, the barred subject, or conscious subject, represented by the barred "s" on the bottom left of the graph. The subject can be said to have "fallen into language," with no possible return to the position of the unconscious subject (delta) position (Žižek 1989). The second graph takes this formation of the barred subject and develops a position in understanding the construction of desire (Figure 2).

This graph develops from Graph I, where the previously resident delta term for the unconscious subject is displaced, and instead, the barred, conscious subject established through the fall into language becomes the starting point in the bottom right-hand corner, forming the origin of this graph. Other additions are the narrative explanation of "signifier" and "voice," which represent components of the symbolic order, referred to in Graph 1. The top arc, in a similar fashion to before, represents the constant respeaking of the self, forming "truths" that shape the relationship between the subject and the symbolic order (Letiche and De loo 2022).

The ego-ideal, or "I(A)" as displayed on the graph, represents the final destination following passing through the function "*s*(A)" on the graph, one that posits the big Other as the signifier for the subject, creating a reality formed of symbolic elements (i.e., semiotically). The lowermost vector of the graph—that is, the barred "S," *i*(*a*), *m*, and I(A) form a representation of the imaginary order. This therefore permits a bypass of the symbolic order represented by the previously explained vector. The development of an aspect of the graph has been represented in the accounting and accountability literature through the description of the formation of the ego offered by (inter alia) Roberts (1991, 1996, 2001, 2012), through the process of what Lacan refers to as "the mirror stage."

The significance of this bottom portion of Graph II is the construction of the ideal ego: *i*(*a*) and its relationship with the subjective ego, signified by "*m*." The relationship between the subjective ego and the ideal ego results in an establishment of desire, that is, the desire of the subject to associate with the objects (small other) that they believe to fit with an ideal notion of self. Therefore, the self is a combination of these two elements: that which is internally imposed through the small other (a), and the previously discussed big Other (A) that is part of the symbolic order. In the next subsection, this is brought to life via reference to the role of ideology within this theoretical construction of the self.

3.1 | Zizek's Perspective on Ideology and Desire

Žižek (1989) fuses Lacanian psychoanalysis such as that discussed in the previous subsection, with a Marxist critique of ideology, along with Hegelian dialectics, to produce a theory of subjectivity. Although a complex and sometimes contradictory theoretical "bricolage" (see, e.g., Gendron 2018), the fundamentals of how the individual interacts with ideology can be drawn mainly from Lacanian psychoanalysis, emphasizing the ideological influence within the symbolic order of language. This theoretical positioning also allows for potentially new insights into accounting and accountability of the subject, opening a deeper understanding of how the desiring subject interacts with ideological forces and the implications this has for action, ethics, and accountability.

In Graph II in the previous subsection, Lacan (1977, 2013) outlines how the now-barred subject establishes ego ideal I(A) through interaction with the symbolic and imaginary orders. Žižek (1989) takes this and supplants ideology into the symbolic order, with ideological signifiers "quilting" to be brought together under a master signifier. Žižek (1989, 113) gives the following example:

> "To grasp this fully, we have only to remember the above-mentioned example of ideological quilting: in the ideological space float signifiers like 'freedom',

> 'state', 'justice', 'peace' … and then their chain is supplemented with some master-signifier ('Communism') which retroactively determines their ('Communist') meaning: freedom is effective through only through surmounting bourgeois formal freedom, which is merely a form of slavery; the 'state' is the means by which the ruling class guarantees the conditions of its rule; market exchange cannot be 'just and equitable', because from the very form of equivalent exchange between labor and capital implies exploitation; 'war' is inherent to class society as such; only the socialist revolution can bring about lasting 'peace' and so forth. (Liberal-democratic quilting would produce quite a different articulation of meaning; conservative 'quilting' a meaning opposed to both previous fields and so on)"

Thus, we can observe how signifiers chained together under a master signifier can "quilt" together to give meaning. Žižek (1989) therefore counters the traditional political ideology critique with one informed by his reading of Lacan (despite the example of a communistic ideological "quilt" as described above). As opposed to viewing ideology as a constraining force, in the Marxist sense, Zizek views ideology as a means by which the subject makes sense of the world (Tweedie 2023). This grounds ideology thoroughly within the realm of what Lacan (1977) calls the symbolic order. Put succinctly, this order encapsulates the rules by which one has been brought up in the world and is a modification of Freud's (1962) concept of the superego. The rules that one learns as a child, often from one's parents, form themselves into a governing force for what is appropriate and what is not in terms of actions of the subject. The position that ideology occupies is therefore extremely important when considering how the individual accounts for the world around them, how the individual as a subject views self and others (Yates, Difrancesco, and O'Leary 2023), and, also, how desire within the subject is constituted (i.e., based on the recognition of what the subject perceives themselves to lack).

It is with this theoretical framework that we consider the issues associated with UK service club membership and the desire for new, younger members, as well as how such desires are represented and mobilized within UK service clubs and how ideology influences and shapes the forms that such desires take in practice.

4 | Methods

All data collection was conducted in the United Kingdom, with a total of 42 semistructured interviews being conducted in various areas of the country, determined by access and a consideration for representative sampling. The benefit of the relatively flexible format of the interviews allowed for an exploration of different issues and topics and can be said to have facilitated the development of a theoretical contribution (see Horton et al. 2008).

An initial pilot interview was undertaken with a service club member to establish the relevance of questions and to identify potentially pertinent issues. Forty-two interviews were conducted in total. Twenty-seven of these were with members of service organizations. The remaining 15 interviews were conducted with external stakeholders of service clubs, in order to get an external perspective of the accountability relationship between them and the service club(s) with which they were involved. Access to interviewees was obtained via initial approaches to service clubs via email communication and then through snowball sampling, capitalizing on contacts made through initial meetings and access (see Baxter and Chua 1998), but also navigating the trust structures that have been previously observed between members and other stakeholders in UK service clubs (Yates et al. 2021; Yates, Gebreiter, and Lowe 2019). In addition to the 27 interviews conducted with members of service clubs and an additional 15 interviews with stakeholder representatives, documents played a key supporting role, with insight gained from a number of documentary sources, produced by the service organizations that the clubs in the study were affiliated to, along with documents produced internally within the service clubs that volunteered to participate. These documents served a number of purposes in the overall enhancement of the findings of the study. Initially, the documents were used in order to help gain knowledge as to the culture and imbedded norms and values of the respective service organization they related to. This assisted in the formulation of interview questions and helped the researcher build rapport with participants, providing a level of 'specialist knowledge' that is normally only available to those inside these particular organizations and assisting with sense-making processes on the part of the researcher during observations sessions (see Howitt 2016). From a more practical research perspective, the documents helped to establish the wider issues and messages that the respective service organizations faced, and how this was discharged down the organizational hierarchy to members, along with external beneficiary activities that clubs undertook. Finally, documents produced within the individual clubs assisted again in forming interview questions and identifying artifacts that may have influenced accountability both within the club and externally to other stakeholders.

Documents used in the analysis included:

- Members' magazines from the central (national/international) level of the organization, containing articles/stories about that respective service organization's activity and messages from senior individuals to members (e.g., RIBI[4] president's message). These magazines were obtained from members and dated from October/November 2016 to June/July 2017.
- Members' magazines from the district level of the organization. These were quarterly publications that dated from Autumn 2013 to Summer 2016. They follow a similar format to the magazines from national/international levels of the organization but naturally focus on the district where clubs were based.
- Various documents from online sources and from participants, which detailed content such as appropriate codes of conduct for members, club constitutions, guidance for starting new clubs, and so forth. A guide for newly elected presidents of clubs was also included in the sample of documents. Some of these documents were publicly available and some were obtained with permission from participants. These documents helped to establish an understanding regarding

the internal aspects of responsibly and accountability, which members may feel they have a duty to fulfill, for example, a code of ethics for members to follow as part of being a member of a service organization.

- Documents produced internally within service clubs. These documents include club newsletters and event flyers, along with more official documents such as statements of accounts and meeting agendas that gave insight into notions of accountability associated with the club level of the organization.

Initial data reduction techniques (O'Dwyer 2008) were utilized prior to formally coding the interviews. This process included relistening the tape recordings alongside the respective transcript and comparing them to notes made during the interview, which were labeled at the approximate time they occurred on the recording. Additional notes and reflections from the interview date were also reflected upon. This initial stage allowed the researcher to re-familiarize themselves with the data and reflect on initial themes present, without entering the process of coding, enabling the researcher to get a general "feel" of the data and begin the process regarding findings (Layder 1998; O'Dwyer 2008; Rapley 2011). Documentary evidence provided a supporting "scaffold" for the initial sensemaking of terms and symbolic elements that were specific to the context studied.

Data sources were then subjected to a four-stage thematic (Boyatzis 1998; Braun and Clarke 2021) coding process (Lee and Lings 2008; Miles and Huberman 1994), including organizational, open/descriptive, interpretive, and pattern levels of coding. Organizational codes were assigned based on the service club that the interviewee represented, their position within the organization, and any previous positions held within the organization. This assisted in the organization of the data but did not necessarily influence the findings (e.g., no comparisons were sought between more experienced and less experienced member responses). Open and descriptive codes (Gibbs 2018) allowed for these that described aspects and perceptions of service clubs to be observed, while interpretive an pattern codes were applied respectively, both offering potential explanations for the data, while connecting elements identified within the data also, as part of what (Strauss and Corbin 1998) refer to as "axial" and "selective" coding levels (Dey 2007; Gibbs 2018; Miles and Huberman 1994). From these levels, themes emerged associated with the operation and ideological influences within service clubs, along with perceptions of key issues associated with the operation and continuity of these organizations. These are outlined in the following section, with a discussion of the findings with respect to the theoretical framework employed contained within Section 6.

5 | Findings

When asked about problems within the current management and operation of service clubs, two broad examples of key issues were frequently cited by interviewees:

1. Inability to attract and retain new, younger members
2. Negative and nonexistent public image/promotion of service organizations

Before jumping straight into these issues, the mode of operation of UK service clubs should be considered, as it is likely to bear a significant influence on the impressions of such organizations for current and prospective members. Therefore, the next subsection covers these issues within the context of ideology, considering this a highly influential force for sensemaking and subjectivity for the service club member (Žižek 1989).

5.1 | Prevailing Ideological Influences on Service Clubs and Organizations

Establishing the underlying ideological foundations on which service clubs rest would be a key source of information for this study. Having spent a total of 2.5 years within service clubs, the underlying ideology governing them could be considered as having strong conservative, royalist, and loyalist tendencies, combined with the need and acceptance of discipline. These were represented by ritual action within service club meetings such as:

- The ringing of a bell to call meetings to order and the appointment of a sergeant at arms in some clubs, whose responsibility was to ensure that the meeting ran smoothly
- The saying of grace, usually in a format that reflected a monotheistic, masculine notion of God (e.g., beginning "Dear Lord")
- The "loyal toast" where all members were expected to stand and toast the monarch (at the time of observation, Queen Elizabeth II)
- Final toasts often to the organization and its message, for example, "Rotary and Peace the World Over"
- The closing of the meeting with the ringing of a bell

Such practices effectively formed the structure of meetings where food was taken, while others (such as Lions) would share some practices in their meetings and reserve others for events where dining was part of the agenda (e.g., charity fundraising dinners). Such actions contribute to the account of the organization that is not only felt and interpreted by members but also constructed by them, through sustained practice and action over time (Parker 2014). Within meetings, artifacts/icons would also be displayed, as often the bell used would be adorned with the logo of the overarching service club (Lions clubs international, Rotary International, etc.), and other items such as charters and pennants also contributed to the establishment of the authority of the club space. The regular and ritualistic practices within the club environment serve to reinforce and legitimize the symbolic order of what constitutes the signifier of "service," that is, the practice of being a service club member, while the objects and imagery also tap into imaginary elements and integrate these with the desire of the subject.[5]

In addition to these ritualistic elements of service club operation, the documentary analysis revealed that the term "service" functioned as a key (master) signifier (Žižek 1989) that represented all service club activities, but in particular, charitable activities undertaken by members when acting on behalf of the club. This would include philanthropic grant-making activity (Yates et al. 2021), as well as more hands-on, often community-based

projects. Members would also wear tabards with the insignia of the service organization printed on them, emphasizing the symbolic presence of the overarching service organization and the importance of "uniform" in the act of service, again contributing toward the disciplinary ideological elements (and resultant obligations [Roberts 1991, 1996]) present within the context of undertaking action as a service club member. This uniformity could also be observed to impose an "organizational sameness" onto members, emphasizing conformity, discipline, and the unquestionable nature of the symbolic and how this forces the subject into questioning one's self instead (Lacan 1977, 2013). Throughout the member magazines and other publications, photographs of members wearing items of regalia such as chains, badges, and sashes were also very common. The effect of this imposed uniformity and sameness onto the membership base implies that a force that seeks to quash otherness and diversity (Han 2016, 2017; Roberts 2001, 2012; Yates and Difrancesco 2024) is contained within the strong symbolic ideology that constitutes (and is embodied by the signifier of) "service" in this case.

One interpretation from some of the documents was a link toward monarchism in the stories featured. For example, the recognition of members who had been awarded honors such as "OBE" or "MBE" was prevalent. At the same time, stories would feature militaristic imagery also, with strong support for poppy appeals and other military-themed events, for example, the local regional military tattoo. Images of the monarch or members of the royal family conducting service with a (sometimes quite far removed) connection to the service club were also reported. Similarities were also observed in how the term "service" was used, as well as in the similarities drawn between "Royal service" and the discussion earlier in this subsection. In addition, conservative politicians were also featured, with William Hague and George H. W. Bush present in the sample of magazines that formed a component of the data for this study. With such conservative and royalist ideological links observed, we can consider how the imaginary order is constructed within service clubs, with such images and the aforementioned artifacts as key ideological objects that signify service clubs and function as objects of desire in club operation (see Žižek 1989). It was clear that Royal endorsement was a desired aspect of the operation of service, with references to letters from the monarch and invitations to a prominent local conservative politician forming elements of a district-level event (see Yates, Gebreiter, and Lowe 2019).

5.2 | Membership Decline

Declining membership numbers was considered to be one of the biggest issues that service organizations currently face by almost all interview participants, and it also featured as a conversation topic during some of the meetings observed. This followed the trend observed in the United Kingdom, with civic participation and volunteerism declining (Hilton et al. 2012). Awareness that action was required to combat this issue, as it threatened the service organization as a whole, was a consistent theme:

> "at District Assembly I emphasized the need to increase membership, but also retain Existing Membership, not an easy task I know. Every year we hear this message and we need to hear it again as I believe Membership has never been more important that it is now, not just for (the local level) but for (service organization) worldwide… we are losing members faster than we are recruiting."
>
> (Service Organization District Magazine, District Governor's Opening—Autumn 2014)

> "That's the big issue. (Membership) is dwindling, there's no question. Everyone you talk to, different charters, different, they've all got the same problem. All trying different ways of attracting members to them you know. That's the biggest problem you'll realize of course, if you haven't got the members the organization dies. It'll die from the grassroots."
>
> (CM13)

The awareness of this as an issue exhibited by both district-level (see Yates, Gebreiter, and Lowe 2019) members and "rank and file" members of the organization implies that the communication of this issue down the organization is present, whether this be by official means or by more informal talk and word of mouth between members of different levels and clubs. The weaving of this into the experience of service as part of the symbolic order of language meant that the issue was often spoken about and debated among members and higher officials. The declining membership issue was described as being a combination of two factors: the loss of current members, and the failure to attract new, younger members to replace them. Reasons for losing current members were varied; however, often interviewees cited the aging nature of membership as the main contributory factor:

> "Dying out. Literally dying out. We're all getting very old. We don't blow our trumpet loud enough or long enough, we don't recruit hard enough, and if we don't, we're going to die out. If you look at the general age of us now, we're mostly above retirement age now. It's sad."
>
> (CM5)

> "our average is over sixty and with an average age of over sixty people are going to fall out, people are going to die. People are going to be incapacitated. They cannot go and sit down in meetings for hours."
>
> (FDR4)

The aging profile of membership could be said to be having a threefold effect on the membership decline: through deaths; lower social impact and chances to discharge accountability, leading to missed opportunities to foster positive public image and relations; and lower appeal to younger members who may feel they have less in common with the club due to the age profile of membership. Links to the organization being attractive to individuals who had similar interests and demographics (in this instance age) could be observed in interviewee responses. One interviewee summed this up, citing that they did not necessarily see this as a problem for the organization moving forward:

> "Well firstly there's nothing wrong in some ways of recruiting in your own self-image. Because early retired people in their late 50s early 60s who have a lot to offer, there's no reason why you shouldn't see that as your primary focus."
>
> (CM6)

The above quote raises an interesting point as to recruitment strategy for service organizations and their sustainability in terms of maintaining and renewing their membership. From a practical point of view, older members who are retired (in theory) have more time for the undertaking of voluntary activities such as service club membership (Gillespie and King 1985) and therefore may seem like ideal candidates, not having to endure the increasingly long workdays and commutes that those in employment face. They may also share interests with the current membership profile, therefore fitting in better and promoting bonding between members within the club, a key aspect of the concept of "fellowship" within clubs (Barty-King 1977; Charles 1993).

However, this attitude in terms of member recruitment may have negative implications for service clubs in terms of their development and continuity. By naturally recruiting from similar demographics as they currently have, the diversity of membership has the potential to be reduced and, in turn, so does the overall social capital and outreach of a particular club, given that the members who are recruited move in similar social circles and have similar access to resources as their fellow members. At the same time, this prompts questions as to how recruitment is grounded within the concepts of ideal ego and ego ideal, with the small other (Lacan 1977) in this instance possessing qualities that members already saw and desired in their conception of selves, promoting a recruitment model grounded in the narcissistic form (see Roberts 2001) and determined heavily by the fixation of current members on elements residing within the imaginary order (Lacan 1977). In turn, the valuation of such element is governed by the symbolic order determined by extant practices within club life (see also Cooper and Johnston 2012; Yates and Al Mahameed 2023) and their connection to the master signifier of "service" as explained in Section 5.1, providing a powerful combination of symbolic and imaginary order influences (Žižek 1989, 1992, 2016a) on how subjects account for (interpret) service organizations and their form.

This somewhat self-referential nature was reinforced in the language used by members, as shown in the below example from a district-level member magazine:

> "We often talk about (service organization) as an extended family, with all its branches and generations."
>
> (Service Organization District Magazine, District Governor's Opening–Spring 2014)

The closeness of members to one another, under the term "fellowship," is summed up in the above statement. This suggests particularly strong social bonds between members (Yates, Gebreiter, and Lowe 2019), with a comparison to those shared by members of a family. However, in context, this can also be taken to reflect the exclusivity of membership and also how difficult it can be to recruit new members, with similar difficulties in the process of joining and being accepted into a family (such as through adoption or marriage). The use of this metaphor for a description of the membership profile of the organization embodies both the common characteristics that members share and the tight bonds that exist between them (Yates, Gebreiter, and Lowe 2019), as well as the representative barriers to those outside joining and being accepted.

The recruitment process for members of service clubs was for the prospective member to be the recipient of a personal recommendation by a current member. This alludes back to the "invitation only" nature of service club membership, taken from the early days of their existence. A typical experience in this regard was recalled by one interviewee on how they became involved with their respective club:

> "I suppose really the thing started off along the lines of a business acquaintance who was quite a good friend, it was in a sense of, I wouldn't say doing him a favor, that's probably too strong a word, but because of the link with him personally I went along to that very first meeting and then I became a member so many months thereafter."
>
> (CM7)

This brings additional issues for service clubs regarding their recruitment. By relying on the personal relationships of the members, reliance is placed on members having levels of social capital sufficient enough both in terms of how many contacts lie within their network (how developed it is) and the adequate level of confidence and trust (Coleman 1990) between the member(s) and prospective member to actually take up the invitation. One interviewee who donated to a service club expressed the perceived "closed shop" of joining:

> "They tend to be quite a closed community. If you don't know them, it's difficult to get in."
>
> (D3)

This point links to the perceived image of service clubs being exclusive in terms of should a member of the public wish to join. With declining social capital cited as an issue with Western societies (Putnam 1995, 2000), the scope for individual networks to provide future membership growth is significantly reduced and could be considered one of the causes of declining membership. However, the implications for the diversity of the membership base should also be recognized as an issue, as relying on previous relationships also depends on the individual member's perception of the prospective member (a particularized other—see Lacan 1977) and the prerequisite friendship and appreciation of values that have resulted from recognition of one another's desirable characteristics within that relationship (Lacan 1977, 2013).

The rising age of membership was a prevalent theme in interviewee responses, and the need to recruit and retain younger members was clearly on the agenda. The following quote was

taken from a district governor in one of the member's magazines included in the documents utilized in this study:

> "We've spent a lot of time talking about how to attract younger members to (service organization)–but perhaps we haven't talked enough about why they don't stay."
>
> (Service Organization District Magazine, District Governor's Opening–Spring 2014)

This quote demonstrates that failing to recruit and retain younger members is considered a significant issue for service organizations. At the same time, the instruction from more senior members at the "district level" (see Yates, Gebreiter, and Lowe 2019) locates the membership issue within the realms of symbolic instruction (Lacan 1977, 2013)—the district governor forming part of the symbolic parent, administering language to their children: in this case, members (Letiche and De loo 2022). Indeed, during time spent in these organizations, statements regarding the difficulty in attracting younger members were frequently heard. The recognition of why younger members who join also leave service clubs is also interesting, suggesting a disconnect between the initial image and othering of service clubs by such members and the lived experience that they gain while bing a member.

Interviewees also reflected on changing societal demands in terms of increasing work commitments with a general opinion that busier lifestyles were one of the causes of the failure to attract new members (see Section 2). However, one interviewee refused to accept that busier lifestyles were an unsurmountable obstacle in attracting new members, instead focussing on the nature of the organization, and how this was unlikely to appeal to a younger demographic:

> "Some people would say young people these days have got too many things to do, they're not interested in (service organization). I would disagree with that. I think that younger people are interested in (service organization), they're just not interested in our version of it."
>
> (CM6)

The recognition that the current model of service may not be desirable to younger members and the appreciation that the meanings were contained within the practice of "service" as opposed to a more general notion of organizational incongruence show how the club-level practices and influences are contributing toward member decline or, at least, creating an undesirable image of the organization for potential members to join, that is, one that they do not see as desirable for their own identity (Lacan 1977, 2013). Attempts to combat membership decline and foster younger people joining service organizations were often confined to the affiliated young person's clubs that each service organization had founded. One interviewee who had had a large amount of involvement at the district level regarding the development of these affiliated young person's clubs highlighted how they felt that their respective effectiveness at developing full-service organization members of the future was limited:

> "the whole point of setting up those lower clubs and younger clubs is so they will hopefully filter through to (service organization). That's not happened, they've dropped off at school age, they've dropped off at young professional age, because of the aging population of (service organization) is increasing, you've got this probably about three decades difference between those that are coming out of (affiliated young person's service organization) and those people that are in (service organization), and if you think about going to the club you think 'do I have much in common with them? Do I really have to make an effort to be there? Do they actually make me feel welcome, do I actually want to be there?'"
>
> (DR2)

This account of nontransition between the younger person's clubs and the senior service clubs shows the difference in operation between these two aspects of the organization and their relative detachment. With the differences between these two varieties of service organization membership being so great,[6] younger people who had previously held membership to these young person's clubs would not wish to progress onto the senior clubs as intended, as the relative appeal was small. This was summed up in a statement by an interviewee, who highlighted the precarious balancing act between attracting new, younger members and satisfying what the present membership profile expected from the organization:

> I think there's a whole raft of them (clubs) that have reached the tipping point. That's because for your club to recruit new, younger members, you have to compromise on the traditions of the club. The basic question is, now make a big note of this; "are (service organization) clubs run primarily for the benefit of their existing members, or should they take more credence in the idea that they should be thinking of running themselves for the benefit of potential new members?". And the two don't sit easy together do they?
>
> (CM6)

This highlights the clash between what the interviewee refers to as "the traditions of the club," that is, symbolic and imaginary elements as previously described, and potential detractions from these that may make the club more appealing to prospective members. Addressing this issue will be key to sustaining service clubs and service organizations into the future, maintaining membership subscriptions and ensuring the organization has the relative capital in its membership to carry out socially good works and charitable projects, and preserving this socially legitimizing aspect of their existence (Wikle 2009). However, severing links to such symbolic elements is traumatic for the subject, as the loss of the sensemaking ideological functions (Tweedie 2023; Žižek 1989) of both symbolic and imaginary elements leads to greater exposure of what Lacan refers to as "the Real"—an uncomfortable, primordial, and unsustainable remainder (Letiche and De loo

2022; Yates and Al Mahameed 2023; Žižek 1989, 2016b) stemming from the unconscious subject as referred to in figure 1. The next section considers how the issues identified in the research findings interrelate and form the basis for the sustained threats to continuity that UK service clubs face.

6 | Discussion and Conclusion

This section offers an interpretation of the findings outlined in the previous section, primarily based on the theoretical framework outlined in Section 3, but with due reference to the literature review contained within Section 2.

6.1 | Ideological Chains and Glasses: Making Sense of the Service Club Environment and Practices

From both the data and the experiences of the principal researcher with service clubs, it can be established that largely conservative ideological influences that are present within service clubs tap into the master signifiers that Žižek (1989) details with respect to ideological influences present within wider society. Royalism, loyalism, monarchism, and conservatism all could be cited here as examples. This forms a strong sense of organizational identity through regular practices and member engagement. Essentially, this symbolic order that functions as a governing dynamic for service clubs also engulfs the members themselves, through practices of ritual and unquestioning that were identified in the empirics (see also Letiche and De loo 2022). Providing a basis for judging what is valuable, and what is not, essentially, the symbolic order that is present within service club membership is one that values ritual, loyalism, conservatism, and monarchism. All of these signifiers of ideological influence, however, quilt (Žižek 1989) to take their place in the formation of what is acceptable and not acceptable within service club membership, practice, and, consequently, experience. The master signifier of what "service" (in itself) represents could be considered the master signifier for ideological influences within service clubs, reversing the signifier/master signifier relationship and displacing previously master signifiers of ideology within the signifier that is "service"—essentially a "meta ideology."[7] This is reflective of other observations regarding Lacan's conception of his symbolic, imaginary, and "the Real," where instability is noted as a key component of how these elements relate within the subject (Letiche and De loo 2022). This constitutes one of the main theoretical contributions of this study. Utilizing the theoretical framework as outlined in Section 4, this shows how ideological signifiers form the symbolic reasoning for forms that the operation of service clubs takes, effectively forming a strong, almost unquestionable[8] system of symbolic meaning, or "ideology of service," that asserts itself strongly through the activities, ritual practices, and logics of service club operation and administration and threatens the current member with the prospect of discomfort and trauma associated with regime change and the loss of language that otherwise works as a sensemaking apparatus for their mode of subjectivity (Tweedie 2023; Žižek 1989).

From the imaginary order, the visual identity of the service club—continually presented through internal media (such as the magazines utilized as data for this study)—and the imagery contained within club ritual and practice also contributed toward an image of "service," cementing such practices as desirable objects within the current membership base. These were represented by objects that contribute toward the realization of the master signifier of "service." For example, the bell that is rung at the start of meetings implies a call to order, which carries disciplinary implications akin to the militaristic influences—and resultant modes of unquestioning accountability from members (Hoskin and Macve 1986, 1988; Roberts 1991, 1996). The ritual act of the loyal toast cements the ideological value of loyalism into service club operation, similar to the monotheistic influence exerted by the (often Christian) form of grace that is said before a meeting containing a meal.

The combination of symbolic (language) ideology and that categorized by imagery (i.e., residing within the imaginary order under Lacan) shuts out the difference that is represented in younger prospective members and the general public, as such systems of meaning (Tweedie 2023; Žižek 1989) that are created through mobilization and enactment of the quilted ideology of service (as constructed earlier in this paper) exert significant strength and durability in the face of suggested change. To be a member of such organizations implies that one is subject to the ideological influences contained within the quilt of signifiers as Žižek (1989) describes them, as well as complies with this mode of being, as service club membership is voluntary, capturing the subject in the process. Such ideology acts as not only a potential constraint (as per the Marxist view) but also an irresistible and comforting force that allows one to make sense of the world that they inhabit (Fiennes 2012; Hoskin and Macve 1986, 1988; Roberts 1991, 1996; Žižek 1989).

6.2 | Younger Members and Desire: A Two-Way Mirror

The desire to attract and retain younger members is one that can be explained with reference to the theoretical framework outlined in Section 3 with reference to the organizational level of ego ideal and ideal ego. The ideological big Other that is discussed in Section 6.1 forms a component of the ego ideal of service organizations that is sustained. This also captures the member perspective as their ego ideal (see figure 2), through their (presumably) voluntary membership of such organizations, is governed too by this symbolic influence.

As already emphasized in the empirical sections, breaking with imaginary and symbolic orders is something impossible for the subject to achieve entirely (Lacan 1977). Instead, we must settle for temporary "fissures" or "kernels" of the Real to appear through the established and intertwined symbolic and imaginary orders that determine the limits of our interpretation and yet provide an enabling role as a sensemaking apparatus (Fisher 2009; Yates and Al Mahameed 2023; Žižek 2016b, 2020). The maintenance of ego ideal therefore, via desire, is one that can be viewed from (at least) two perspectives within this study: that of the current membership and service clubs and that of prospective members. Revisiting Lacan's second graph, the ideal ego is made up of objects that the individual perceives will satisfy their desire, residing within the imaginary order as Lacan

conceptualizes it. Such objects are particularized, small others (as opposed to the symbolic big Other) and therefore represent the aspiration of the member to fulfill their lack that they feel through their subjectivity. Such objects may be the traits of service club members that were discussed in Section 2, for example, the image of success, business-like, and even the assertion of attractiveness as referred to by Moffat (1947) as the traits of an ideal member (cf. Parsons and Mills 2012).

From the internal, service club member perspective, younger members are positioned as objects of desire in themselves, that is, with their age functioning as their defining characteristic. This is emphasized by the interrelated nature of the symbolically based inclination (Lacan 1977, 2013) to attract younger members, administered often from above in service organizations (e.g., from the district level) and as reasserted through the language ritually practiced within clubs. What is lacking, however, is a comprehensive view of the younger member as a subject, as effectively, they are fetishized based upon their defining characteristic of age profile. This explains the desire to recruit younger members but ignores other aspects of the younger member as a subject that resides outside of the fetishized, particularized image based on age. Effectively, this functions as one side of a two-way mirror, which is normally presented to the individual or group in a way that prevents them from seeing through to the other side. Other aspects that are desired within the prospective younger member are those already present within the service club, ones that are a reflection of the current ideological signifiers and practices that are considered "normal" and "sensible" perspectives to hold on everyday life.

From the other side of this two-way mirror, however, the prospective member can view their counterpart—or, at least, the account the club gives, which is visible to the outside gaze of the Other (Roberts 2001). In this respect, this would imply that whatever image of service clubs is presented to the prospective younger member, this is neither desired nor pursued. In other words, the image presented by the club does not form a component of the ideal ego perceived by the member, and therefore, it is not evaluated to be a desirable aspect of their ego ideal, based on their symbolic value system (Lacan 1977, 2013; Žižek 1992). For those who joined the younger person's affiliated clubs, this was too reflected in the differences that were observable in how they were run, despite being essentially part of the same overarching organization.

7 | Conclusion

Referring back to the research questions considered in Section 1, this paper has sought to uncover ideological influences in UK service clubs and their operations, finding that traditionally conservative values and ideological influences are a key force in the formation of the ideological big Other and symbolic order that governs service clubs and their members. It is key to recognize the relative limitations of this study and the conclusions derived below. First, the study bears the consequences of adopting an exclusively qualitative methodological approach, in terms of the perceived generalizability of finings. Second, the theoretical framework means that the ontological approach is highly subject orientated, meaning that the identification of objects and ideological influences is always viewed from the subject's perception of such objects and that the subject gives said objects meaning through (in this case) their desire through the imaginary order (Lacan 1977, 2013) and their valuation methods through the influence of the symbolic order (Scott 1986). This has the potential to cause issues when compared to more object-orientated approaches (e.g., Harman 2002, 2016) or, at least, approaches that give greater agency to nonhuman actants, such as actor–network theory (Latour 1993, 2005). However, through Žižek (1989), it is observable that the master signifier of "service" and the ideological influences that make up this signifier allow for consideration of how this symbolic aspect of service club membership carries knock-on effects for the recruitment and retention of primarily younger members. Concerns were expressed about the difficulty in attracting and retaining younger members, the disconnect between the symbolic and imaginary aspects (Lacan 1977) of service club membership, and how younger people, in general, expose this issue as one that is destined to be subject to Lacanian repetition, that is, self-sustaining and unwavering.

From a theoretical perspective, this paper has contributed to understanding how ideological influences, which were previously considered master signifiers for the ideology that they are considered to represent, can actually combine under a different master signifier (in this case "service") and can be brought into view through their interaction and combination in the formation and maintenance of the symbolic order (Žižek 1989). The reversal of the signifier/master signifier relationship represents the volatility within symbolic modes of meaning that are held by the subject, which constitute how objects are valued and resultantly desired. The findings indicate that service clubs represent a highly ideologically charged organizational "object," which is represented not only through their image but also through their actions, as well as the accounts that are given via both of these elements (Parker 2014; Roberts 2001, 2009, 2012). At the same time, the imaginary elements of desire are considered a "two-way mirror," one that constructs prospective younger members within a tightly bound ideological image associated with current membership and yet encourages fetishization of younger members based on their age. Prospective younger members, observing little desirable aspects to service club membership and the potential of having to compromise on their own symbolic and ideological modes of being[9] in order to do so, do not join service clubs. Essentially, the organizationally imposed sameness onto the identity of members prevents the mirror becoming two way for them also and results in a reflection of self onto the other, resulting in disappointment, as the desirable image of the younger member turns out to be bundled with incongruent and unbearable (within the context of the club and "service") difference and otherness (Han 2016; Messner 2009; Roberts 2001, 2009; Yates and Difrancesco 2024; Žižek 2020).

Practically, this paper recommends that service clubs, if serious regarding membership development and diversity, should undertake an audit of their activities in detail and perhaps identify strong ideological influences that their current membership may indeed identify with but that act as prohibitive forces in attracting new members. Such a process, however, is one that is painful (Fiennes 2012; Žižek 2016a) and unattractive to us as subjects, as the cutting of the Borromean knot of symbolic, Real, and imaginary orders brings violence (Yates and Al Mahameed

2023), effectively tearing the sense-making perspective offered by ideology away from those who hold it dear (i.e., many current members), forcing them to question and requestion their own subjectivity, with no guarantee of success or change (Tweedie 2023). Further research into ideological influences on organizational life, particularly in voluntary organizations, is encouraged, not only to identify otherwise hidden, or at least ignored (Tweedie 2023), areas of symbolic violence (Žižek 2009) that affect public perception of such organizations but also to establish potentially hindering practices with regard to innovation, change, and creating conditions for membership growth. However, identification of such influences may be relatively straightforward, but instigating practical change and fostering engagement with organizations (such as service clubs for example) may be a whole different story.

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Data Availability Statement

Research data are not shared.

Endnotes

[1] Kiwanis Members were fewer than 100 (Kiwanis International, 2024).

[2] Rotary in particular has sought to become more flexible. Previously a lunchtime organization, most Rotary clubs meet during the evening, after regular daytime working hours. However, a minority meet for breakfast once a week, so people who work the "traditional" 9:00 a.m. start can attend prior to the working day. These are termed "breakfast clubs."

[3] Clubs that meet via the internet, to allow for flexibility for members who are travelling with work or cannot make a "physical" meeting.

[4] RIBI: "Rotary International Britain and Ireland."

[5] On joining a service club, a member will be "pinned" by their sponsor (another member), who attached a badge denoting the service organization logo to them. This application of the insignia of the organization to the individual not only serves to represent them joining the club but also could be argued to act as a desirable object for those wanting to join, symbolizing the act of membership as a desirable component of the ego.

[6] During their time as a member of service clubs, the author attended one of the derivative clubs aimed at younger age profiles. The operation of this club was markedly different, with none of the ritual practices as described earlier in this paper. Instead, the club met in a coffee shop, and much greater emphasis was placed on planning charitable activity during their meetings.

[7] Of the four service organizations studied, the term "Lionism" was often observed to be considered to be synonymous with the idealized and therefore desirable behaviors of members of Lions Clubs International. Thus, the establishment of a master signifier in terms of ideological influences can be said to be observable, and too (in this case) specific to the service organization in question.

[8] Drawing from the author's personal experience of questioning such logics, this was met with varying degrees of hostility, jest, and formal complaint.

[9] Lee, Yates and Lieberman (2024) explicitly consider this issue with respect to the experience of studying for a doctoral degree, detailing the ideologically adopted ontological positions and tensions that they experienced.

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