

# THE EMERGENCE OF MAGAZINE MEMBERSHIP MODELS

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## Abstract

This article undertakes a comparative analysis of three special interest magazines, *Women's Running*, *Vegan Food* and *Country Walking*, to determine how each title has developed and implemented a membership model. It explores if and how the model has impacted revenue and the audiences while looking for reoccurring themes and examining services. Semi-structured interviews were deemed to be the most appropriate methods by which to conduct this qualitative investigation. Thus, interviews were undertaken with editors and publishers to explore how membership has been established and ascertain the potential impact on revenue and audience engagement. Furthermore, the study reviews key literature themes around servitisation, including work by Viljakainen and Toivonen (2014) and Fließ and Hagenhoff's (2016) study of membership to establish if the magazines have achieved financial stability and a deeper engagement with their audience.

**Keywords:** membership, specialist magazine publishing, revenue, services, audiences

## Introduction

As a magazine scholar and consultant, I have observed how decreases in circulation and advertising revenue continue to disrupt the sustainability of magazine publishing. Magazine sales remain in decline, as illustrated by the latest UK ABC circulation figures showing an 11% drop in 2022, while global average magazine circulation fell from 26.8 million to 24 million (Majid, 2023). Although scholarly and industry-led research has yet to determine what could enable magazines to be sustainably profitable in this post-pandemic era, two themes have emerged as potential solutions – membership and servitisation (Viljakainen & Toivonen, 2014; Fließ & Hagenhoff, 2016; Media Futures, 2023). Could a membership strategy that provides services to members counteract falling circulation and advertising revenue? Possibly, scholars agree that by including a range of services and offerings to derive additional income, a membership strategy will “extend the brand” (Das et al., 2021, p.57-58; Stam & Scott, 2014). Yet, it is also vital to recognise that an audience-centric approach is a critical component of publishing business models (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008). Galbi (2001) further endorsed such an approach, proposing it should be a core part of a magazine’s value proposition. Johnston et al. (2007, p.55), however, take this approach a stage further, observing that the key to developing a strong customer value proposition “is to think about the four most common barriers keeping people from getting particular jobs done: insufficient wealth, access, skill, or time”. This reader-centric approach is conducive to developing a membership provision, reinforcing the scholarly perspective that membership programmes with benefits or services are emerging as a potentially viable proposition for magazines.

Before exploring membership and innovation in publishing further, it is first critical to examine the extent of digital disruption. Scholars and publishers alike agree that technology has substantially disrupted the long-established publishing model, concurring that prior to the millennium, most magazine

revenues came from advertising sales, which, to some extent, subsidised newsstand sales (Sannusi et al., 2015; Johnson & Prijatelj, 2006; Morrish, 2003). Prior to the disruption era, magazines were likely to succeed if publishers concentrated on aligning their editorial, circulation, and advertising revenue (Daly et al., 1997). Although technology evolved substantially pre-noughties, its impact began to gather momentum some 20 years after internet inventor Berners-Lee developed the first web server in 1990, with the invention of applications or apps taking hold in publishing (Cantoni & Tardini, 2006; Picard, 2011). The emergence of smartphones, beginning with the iPhone in 2007 and followed by the iPad and Android tablets in 2010 (Arthur, 2012), further disrupted the industry by expanding the digitalisation process, enabling digital editions to evolve from PDF page-turners into an immersive multimedia format (Oliver, 2018). Such was the impact that media organizations (from TV companies to publishers) had to reconfigure their businesses to keep pace with emerging markets. Subsequently, scholars observed a shift from traditional business methods as publishers focussed on producing content in a digital format (BarNir et al., 2003, p.792; Oliver, 2018). For scholars such as Slywotzky and Morrison (2000, p.7), moving from printed matter to online content delivery demonstrated that digitisation could be viewed as “a disruptive, creative force” in publishing, “revolutionizing how people work, play, communicate, buy, sell and live”.

As technology progressed, further disruption followed for print publishers and broadcast organizations worldwide as the focus shifted to digital. However, not all scholars considered this to be negative. Oliver (2018) and Tomas (2013) concluded that disruption has facilitated innovation across the media by creating a rich user experience. This evolution also contributed to a change in the role of websites; instead of being a signpost or advert for magazines, websites have become an extension of titles, a channel for delivering additional content and services. This shift is reinforced by an empirical study of anonymized Scandinavian women’s magazine, which examined consumer behaviour patterns on the

publication's website and found that with regard to magazine publishing, a website's potential to offer additional value was limited (Ellonen et al., 2015). These findings challenge the taxonomy of magazine websites, suggesting they could be little more than an extension of editorial content to enhance audience engagement yet unable to offer value in terms of revenue unless they offer additional benefits or services with a tangible worth. Therefore, this paper will explore how publishers are developing membership models with added benefits to retain and engage their readerships.

## A contextual review

As documented in the introduction, magazine publishing has undergone a turbulent transitional period, which has revolutionised how the industry connects to its audiences and has seen revenues decrease while expenditure to service online infrastructure has increased (Holmes & Nice, 2012; McKay, 2019; Morrish & Bradshaw, 2012). Indeed, between 2011 and 2018, the number of print magazines sold in the UK fell from 820.1m to 373.8m (Statista, 2019), a sharp decline in magazine circulation. Moreover, magazine advertising revenue has fallen from £935.9m in 2012 to £472.9m in 2021, with a further decline predicted to fall to £393.5m by 2027 (Statista, 2022). Such sharp declines in copy sales and advertising yields suggest that the conventional magazine business model of copy sales and advertising must be revolutionised to negate disruptive technology (Das et al., 2021; Karimi et al., 2015; McKay, 2019; Stam & Scott, 2014). This has been further compounded by technological changes that continue to impact how magazines are produced and consumed as the disruption progresses. Hence, publishers are taking more innovative approaches to revenue, as acknowledged by scholars who have found the continual disruption to be a fundamental driver of the need to expand revenue streams and rethink traditional business models as advertisers and audiences move away from traditional print products (BarNir et al., 2003; Holmes, 2019;

Karim et al., 2015; Oliver, 2018). Sannusi et al. (2015) also agree that disruption is at the heart of magazine publishers' challenges, with publishers having to reconsider their business model.

As digital technology evolved, print publishers and broadcast organizations worldwide have experienced further disruption as the focus shifted to digital. To lessen the impact of digital disruption, Guenther (2011) suggested publishers must control access to their magazines and exclusive content by implementing a membership strategy or selling their digital editions through core platforms. Indeed, some publishers have adopted a Netflix or Spotify approach by developing membership schemes to build reader loyalty and deepen audience engagement (Rashidian et al., 2020; Tobitt, 2021). The rationale for taking a Netflix approach is supported by Fagerjord and Kueng's (2019, p. 169) study of Netflix, from which they determined "access to exclusive content and ease of use as prime reasons for subscribing to streaming services". According to Phillips (2013), membership packages began to emerge in journal publishing, while Baker (2018) points out membership also extended to book publishing as general interest publishers expanded their subscription provision, repackaging them as memberships. Moreover, newspaper publishers have also diversified to incorporate membership models, e-commerce, and events into their business models (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2020).

However, it is crucial to understand what a membership model looks like in publishing. Vara-Miguel et al. (2023, p.6) see membership as including "defined benefits" in the package, suggesting the relationship is based on members paying because they support the publisher's stance of not developing paywalled content; under that business model, non-members can still access the editorial offering without restriction. This perspective is reinforced by Cook and Bakker (2019), who determined that membership models provided an opportunity for publishers to convert their

readership community into revenue. The study, which cited *The Bristol Cable* as an example, documented that the publication, which runs as a cooperative where members were involved in the publication's decision-making, was able to generate around €1,000 per month in revenue through their membership scheme (Cook & Bakker, 2019, p.41). A study of European native media by Pérez-Seijo et al. (2020) suggests that the role the readers play is changing from passive to active as those readers who have become members are becoming participants. They cite three reasons for this change: "Members pay a membership, so they contribute financially to the survival of the project; they can participate and contribute with their personal opinions—depending on the case, through comments, discussions, meetings, and posts on a blog; and sometimes, they even can collaborate as expert sources, according to their field of knowledge, as in the case of *De Correspondent*" (Pérez-Seijo et al., 2020, p. 88).

It is also crucial to consider the element of servitisation with regard to membership strategies, as services are likely to be a fundamental part of the overall package to increase the value to the end user – in this case, the audience. Many publishers offer a range of reader services such as events, courses and travel packages as part of their value proposition. Viljakainen and Toivonen (2014) identified an increasing emphasis on service-based offerings in the magazine sector while outlining the importance of understanding the audience to develop services that will offer value to the reader. Thus, an audience-centric approach is vital to publishing models and should be a core part of a magazine's value proposition (McPhillips & Merlo, 2008; Galbi, 2001). Johnston et al. (2007, p. 55) took this perspective a stage further, observing that the key to developing a strong customer value proposition "is to think about the four most common barriers keeping people from getting particular jobs done: insufficient wealth, access, skill, or time". It is, therefore, feasible to suggest that developing a membership strategy that is reader-centric (and

extends existing services that have a clear value to the audience) could, for some publishers, be a viable option to counteract falling circulation and advertising revenue. But caution is urged as there is currently insufficient data to support this preface notion; although scholars concur publishers need to explore alternative revenue opportunities, few have investigated the potential of membership at this time. However, scholars agree that it is feasible that by offering a range of services to derive additional income, a membership strategy could "extend the brand" (Das et al., 2021, pp. 57-58; Stam & Scott, 2014).

Despite membership models becoming more common in publishing, with many titles setting up schemes and tempting existing subscribers to become members, the literature on this topic is relatively scarce at this point. Thus, there is sufficient scope to further investigate the viability of membership provisions to determine if they could be a viable proposition for magazines. Moreover, there is an additional opportunity for study by delving deeper into the servitisation aspect of magazines because a range of benefits or services is a fundamental element of memberships.

## Methodology

A case study was determined to be the most suitable methodological approach to investigate the emergence of membership models in specialist magazine publishing, as it allows for a practical, adaptable perspective, enabling the investigator to encompass the real-world context and take a more flexible approach (Howe, 2012). This point is substantiated by Crowe et al. (2011, p.1), who also argue that case studies are "used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context". Harrison et al. (2017) also reinforce this perspective, thus underpinning the suitability of a case study methodology when investigating membership models in magazine publishing. Thus, the case study offers a practical and flexible research approach.

## The case study framework

Drawing from her experience as a consultant, the researcher has found specialist publishing to be the most successful area when developing memberships. Indeed, specialist magazines attract niche audiences; thus, it was determined to be an appropriate area of study. Moreover, the researcher selected the health and fitness genre because it was deemed an area more likely to attract a like-minded readership, which is critical when developing membership models. Furthermore, well-being is a growing and robust market which is thriving post-pandemic and, according to Statista, is projected to achieve a 3.8% annual growth rate, predicted to be worth £1.862.00m by 2028. Such figures indicate this is a market which has a strong community potential that is ripe for exploration by publishers.

Initially, this investigation sought to examine two cases in the well-being genre for the membership study: *Vegan Food & Living* and *Women's Running*. Both titles were selected because they were prominent in this sector and had developed then implemented membership models simultaneously. However, despite numerous approaches and requests, the researcher was unable to obtain an interview with the Editor of *Vegan Food & Living*, nor was she able to obtain confirmation of the magazine's circulation data. Consequently, the methodological decision to include a third case was made to complement the collected data on these two cases and add further insight to this study. Therefore, *Country Walking Magazine* was chosen as the third case as the title also had a well-being focus and had implemented a membership model around the same time.

This case study is a qualitative study based on three semi-structured interviews conducted with respondents from Anthem Publishing and Bauer Media Group, all in management roles, enabling them to talk with authority about their titles' membership strategies. The interviews were carried out using pre-determined questions, which were given to the interviewees in

advance of the interview. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and was conducted online using Zoom's video conferencing software. Although all three respondents were each offered anonymity, they agreed that their identity could be revealed as it would enhance the value of this investigation. The interviewees were Esther Newman, Editor of *Women's Running*, Cara Northcott, Marketing Manager at Anthem Publishing, and Guy Procter, Editor of *Country Walking Magazine*.

In addition, some desk-based research was also undertaken, examining each magazine's value proposition, their brand extensions, and audience engagement figures using information obtained from each title's social media following, their media kit, and data provided by the publisher. Where possible, data has also been collected from independent circulation sources such as the Audit Bureau of Circulation, with the researcher also evaluating each title's following across their social feeds. The results are detailed in each of the three cases outlined below.

### Case one: An insight into *Women's Running*

The magazine initially developed its membership scheme in 2021 during the pandemic to increase engagement and revenue and has become a digital-first title. This is a radical shift from being a sustainable, print-centric title following its launch in 2010 by Wild Bunch Media Ltd. According to figures from 2010 to 2016 obtained from the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), circulation peaked just three years after the launch before taking a downward trajectory. Between 1 July 2010 and 31 December 2010, the magazine achieved a total circulation of 21,242, with 17,178 single copies sold and 4,064 subscription sales. By 2013, sales had peaked, with the title achieving a total circulation of 25,842, 10,088 of whom were subscribers. Shortly after its inception, the title received the first of two PPA accolades, becoming Consumer Magazine of the Year in 2011 and then achieving Consumer Media Brand in 2015. By 2016, copy sales had dropped to 20,529 per

month, but subscription sales held firm at 9,530. However, in recent years, circulation has radically dropped, and at the time of writing the title's 2023 total circulation was approximately 8,000 per month, with only around 2,000 coming from newsstand sales, according to the editor Esther Newman (2023). There has been a significant shift in the landscape during the past five years, stating: "We were definitely magazine first in 2018/2019 and we are now definitely digital-first in terms of content" (Newman, 2023).

Despite the dwindling circulation, *Women's Running* remains a well-established and respected brand in the running world and is currently the only magazine dedicated to helping women achieve their running goals. In 2018, the magazine was acquired by Anthem Publishing (InPublishing, 2018); since then, it has been shortlisted for the Podcast of the Year Award and won the Diversity and Inclusion Award in the British Society of Magazine Editors Talent Awards in 2022. Like many print titles, there have been significant challenges following digital disruption. One such challenge is that *Women's Running* readers have become more youthful and tech-savvy, wanting information quickly. Newman (2023) admits that they have had to rethink their content provision as "some things still do work in print, but quick read stuff needs to be available on a smartphone on a digital platform". Yet, according to Newman (2023), *Women's Running* magazine is central to revenue generation but not the audience.

In 2020, Anthem Publishing began to explore moving from a subscription-based model to a membership provision to increase the brand's value proposition and offer more perceived value to readers. Newman (2023) explains this initiative transpired because some of the team had attended a publishing conference where the emphasis for moving forward focused on developing membership provisions.

The team wanted to try and create something that also offered a number of other benefits. Something that we could

then package up as membership, which felt much more kind of inclusive had a feeling of dialogue and community than subscription, which felt very transactional (Newman, 2023).

Newman also discloses she was part of "very successful PPA panel discussions about memberships," where publishers gave examples of their achievements and recalled the impact on the conversation when someone offered a gin membership.

We were all like, that's great because that meant she could offer customers the gin, the tonic, the flavour notes – there is so much wrapped up in that. And we were we were trying to emulate those sort of membership models – and it's quite difficult to do from a content perspective when you are still with the mindset of selling a magazine (Newman, 2023).

The publishing team began researching their membership provision by envisaging what the membership package could look like. They reached out to other brands and partners for potential collaborations so that the provision would encompass additional benefits for readers. The team were inundated with brands that wanted to work with *Women's Running* and were able to set up the membership package offering "a huge list of additional benefits" members would get while existing subscribers would be able to transfer on to membership at no extra cost (Newman, 2023). Unfortunately, the strategy was unsuccessful, uptake was low, and only a few subscribers converted their subscriptions. As a result, in the spring of 2023, the team decided to drop the word membership from the website and go back to subscriptions because the provision appeared (to readers) to be more akin to a subscription with add-ons Newman (2023). As Newman (2023) explains, "People understand what a membership is, but in the context of a print magazine that is offering additional benefits alongside that magazine – that isn't a membership".

In this case, *Women's Running* did not successfully implement a membership strategy to counteract the effects of digital

disruption and falling copy sales, as the audience didn't see the magazine in that context. So, what went wrong? According to Newman (2023), the fundamental flaw was the lack of a community, which became apparent when the team started a podcast. With the value of hindsight, Newman (2023) admits that having a community sphere "would have created a space through which the members could talk or meet," which she feels is a fundamental membership strategy.

### Case study two: *VeganFood & Living*

Launched at the end of 2015 by Anthem Publishing, *Vegan Food & Living* is a monthly title and, like its sister publication, has received awards in recognition of excellence. These accolades include the PPA (Professional Publishers Association) Independent Publisher Subscription Magazine of the Year and Consumer Magazine of the Year in 2017. The title was highly commended in The Drum B2C Brand of the Year Award the following year and achieved Favourite Vegan Magazine at the VegFest UK Awards in 2021 (*Vegan Food & Living*, 2023) – all indicators of a well-respected, reader-centric, and popular magazine. Indeed, when the UK went into lockdown in 2020, subscriptions began to rise, prompting the publisher to consider implementing a membership programme, which was launched in early 2021 (Northcott, 2023). Anthem's marketing manager, Cara Northcott (2023), explains the membership strategy was carefully researched and designed prior to implementation, admitting it was a "balance between what we were capable of offering as well as listening to our audience's needs," meaning it took a reader-centric approach. However, there was also a practical element to the membership following distribution problems as a result of lockdown.

We had a basic concept of wanting a digital element to the memberships as the post for the print mag became more

unreliable. We also wanted to increase our audience's access to the community through trying zoom colour-alongs<sup>1</sup>, to giving access a digital archive with every issue of the magazine available to read online (Northcott, 2023).

Yet despite the prior research and reader-centric approach, the membership model, like *Women's Running*, also proved to be unsustainable due to a lack of uptake, and the publisher has reverted to a subscription-based model. Part of the problem was the audience's grasp of membership, as "it took quite a bit of education around what 'membership' meant whereas 'subscribe' was a language that readers were familiar with and converted well" (Northcott, 2023).

As with many lifestyle magazines, the title's audience is believed to have declined, but unfortunately, the publisher has not shared any circulation figures for *Vegan Food & Living*, and a search revealed that no records had been documented online. Nevertheless, it is understood that its current circulation is under 10,000 copies per month, akin to its sister publication, *Women's Running* (Northcott, 2023). This is surprising, given it is such a well-respected magazine. However, the market for vegan titles has shrunk significantly in recent years, with titles merging or closing down. *Vegan Living*, launched by Select Publisher Services in October 2016, closed after only 37 issues in December 2019 (Tobitt, 2020). Then, in 2022, Anthem reached a deal with Prime Impact, acquiring *PlantBased* and *Vegan Life* to merge with *Vegan Food & Living* (*InPublishing*, 2022). Despite a growing interest in vegan foods, only two titles, *Vegan Food & Living* and *Simply Vegan* (both published by Anthem), remain on the newsstands.

Notwithstanding a decrease in publications, key factors indicate that veganism continues on an upward trajectory. The Vegan Society, for example, has registered more than 65,000 products through its Vegan Trademark (introduced by

<sup>1</sup> Zoom colour-alongs is an example of an effort that the team tried on the brand Colouring Heaven, where the Editor coloured the magazine with subscribers once a month on the video conference platform Zoom.

the Society in 1990 to authenticate vegan products). Moreover, according to YouGov statistics, the number of vegans equates to approximately five per cent of the UK's population (YouGov, 2023). These factors highlight a substantial growth in the vegan market while also supporting the sustainability of The Vegan Society's quarterly members' magazine, *The Vegan*. These statistics indicate growth in the retail sector, suggesting a potential market for vegan publications. According to Newman (2023), the community aspect was the missing link with *Women's Running*, which, if present, was likely to make membership a potentially viable proposition. Therefore, it is surprising that implementing a membership strategy did not increase engagement or help make this magazine a more sustainable title.

### A comparison with *Country Walking Magazine*

Like the aforementioned specialist titles, readers of *Country Walking* magazine, published by Bauer Media Group, are linked by their shared interest in walking. Yet this is where the similarities end, as this title is indeed thriving. *Country Walking's* current total ABC circulation is 42,000 combined, with its circulation trajectory enjoying year-on-year growth following its annual #Walk1000miles campaign initiated by editor Guy Proctor in 2017. The campaign is attributed to developing a community of loyal readers, indicating that print can prosper with the right audience. In 2021, the title, which had 37,651 print subscribers, became part of a pilot scheme where Bauer trialled a membership strategy. However, unlike the other two magazines, *Country Walking's* membership strategy has been hugely successful, with the team managing to convert 35,000 of its subscribers to members in just two years, with only 20 per cent consuming the magazine in its digital format (Proctor, 2023).

It is an encouraging success story, but what critical factors have enabled Bauer to achieve where others have failed? According to Proctor (2023), treating the readers as members

of their club as opposed to customers has proved to be a key element in the successful transition from subscription to membership. He has found that readers "respond brilliantly to the special messages we target just to them, like the member-exclusive email we send augmenting each issue with extra behind-the-scenes content". Furthermore, Proctor (2023) found that "it is easier to retain members than it was subscribers", attributing their success to readers being treated as members of the club as opposed to customers. Indeed, part of the team's strategy is to be audience-centric, ensuring their members feel "better-appreciated and benefitted". These targeted member benefits include a 50% discount on OS Maps' digital subscription, and the brand has plans to further expand the membership offering, "as always deep, well-targeted benefits perform much better than a broad array of shallow, more general-market ones" (Proctor 2023).

Analysing Proctor's assessment of the membership strategy, we can determine that much research has gone into evaluating which aspects of membership benefits work best, as well as the importance of distinguishing the differentials between subscriptions and membership. Proctor (2023) cites that one of the team's most important lessons was the community aspect: "people love being treated as members of our club rather than customers of our business". However, developing a membership provision is a lot of work for a magazine team and needs careful planning, with Proctor urging publishers not to "underestimate the time it takes to curate member benefits and exclusive content" and suggests it would be prudent to undertake "an audit of activities to see what the team can stop doing to give them more time".

Drawing from *Country Walking's* experience when moving from subscriptions to a membership strategy, it is feasible to suggest that having already established a strong community from the #Walk1000miles campaigns played a vital role in that transition. While the value of additional member-exclusive content cannot be overlooked, the community

created by the magazine has certainly contributed towards this thriving membership title. Prior to launching the campaign in 2018, figures obtained from the Audit Bureau of Circulation show that the magazine's circulation had dwindled to 23,489 by 2015, indicating that the readership was in decline, but by 2020, its circulation had increased to 37,972 (ABC, 2023). Therefore, it is likely that had the magazine not been as active in its reader community with the #Walk1000miles campaign, the membership strategy might not have been successful.

## Findings

An investigation of these three case studies has determined that all three magazines had actively researched membership propositions and engaged with their audiences, but only *Country Walking* managed to develop a successful membership provision. Indeed, there are some similarities between all three titles, including low copy sales, with *Country Walking* selling around 7,000 copies per month on the newsstands, while *Women's Running* sells approximately 2,000 copies. This similarity is indicative of a shift in consumption habits, with readers seemingly preferring to subscribe rather than buy their magazines from retail outlets. Moreover, a review of the findings documented in Table 1 signifies that *Country Walking Magazine* has achieved greater success with converting audience engagement into copy sales and membership, resulting in the magazine achieving more than five times the circulation of the other two titles. This is despite *Women's Running* and *VeganFood & Living* achieving significantly higher engagement across the socials, which suggests that there is unrealised potential that could be converted into readers.

In addition to the differentials in consumption, two themes have emerged from this cases study – the community aspect and servitisation, whereby publishers develop services for their audience to add value to the membership provision.

As illustrated in Table 1, while all three titles include some service provisions for their readers and have similar price points, the two independent titles could not successfully convert audience engagement across the socials. When comparing the three titles evaluated, it is prudent to consider the resources available to the publishers. For example, *Women's Running* and *VeganFood & Living* are owned by Anthem, a relatively small publisher with a stable of six magazines. In contrast, *Country Walking* is published by Bauer Media Group, which has a brand reach of 25 million consumers (Bauer 2023). Therefore, Bauer is likely to have an infinitely larger budget and far more audience development and conversion resources, which could account for the difference in circulation figures.

Overall, from the findings of this study, it is feasible to suggest that membership can work well for some titles but not others. Certainly, *Country Walking* has managed to establish a robust membership provision by learning what works and what doesn't and by building a vibrant, engaged community of actual readers before implementing a membership provision, resulting in a successful membership conversion. Proctor (2023) acknowledges that membership has been a learning curve, with one of the critical lessons being that "people love being treated as members of our club rather than customers or our business". Moreover, all three interviewees concur that publications must include relevant services in the provision. For example, in the case of *Country Walking*, their member-exclusive email with behind-the-scenes content helped members "feel better appreciated and benefitted" (Proctor, 2023). However, findings also indicate that readers struggle to understand what membership actually means (Newman, 2023; Northcott, 2023), suggesting that it would be feasible for publishers to invest in educating readers so that they can differentiate between membership and subscription and the value attached to each. Finally, this aspect draws a connection to the importance of relationship-building with the audience by ensuring continual dialogue using tools such as reader surveys, as indicated by Northcott (2023) and Newman (2023).

Table 1 Comparison of engagement and value proposition<sup>2</sup>

Cases	Case 1: <i>Women's Running</i> (Anthem Publishing)	Case 2: <i>VeganFood &amp; Living</i> (Anthem Publishing)	Case 3: <i>Country Walking</i> (Bauer Media Group)
USP	<i>A community for women who love to run</i>	<i>The UK's only dedicated vegan magazine</i>	<i>The UK's best-selling walking magazine</i>
Audience demographic	<p><b>Core profile:</b> ABC1</p> <p><b>The readers:</b> 90% are runners, predominately aged between 35 and 50 and do not have a running coach. The majority of readers run 1-3 times per week but also participate in a range of fitness activities.</p>	<p><b>Core profile:</b> ABC 1</p> <p><b>The readers:</b> 67% are vegans and spend more than £35 per week on vegan products. The readership is predominantly female with an average age of 35, with 16% interested in becoming strictly vegan, while 8% are vegetarian.</p>	<p><b>Core profile:</b> ABC1</p> <p><b>The readers:</b> Readership ratio is 56% female and 43% male, all of whom are walkers of all ages and abilities.</p>
Circulation and engagement	<p><b>Circulation/readership:</b> <sup>1</sup>approximately 8,000 and a 19,325 monthly readership</p> <p><b>Core social platforms:</b> Facebook 220k   Instagram 55.8k</p> <p><b>E-newsletters:</b> 32k opt-in subscribers</p> <p><b>Website:</b> 100k+ per month</p>	<p><b>Circulation/readership:</b> Not available but estimated to be similar to <i>Women's Running</i>, according to marketing manager Cara Northcott.</p> <p><b>Core social platforms:</b> Facebook 388k   Instagram 80.8k</p> <p><b>E-newsletters:</b> Not available</p> <p><b>Website:</b> Not available</p>	<p><b>Circulation/readership:</b> 42,445, of which 35,000 are members.</p> <p><b>Core social platforms:</b> Facebook 40k   Instagram 24.3k</p> <p><b>E-newsletters:</b> Live for the Outdoors 15,654 and #Walk1000miles 25,972</p> <p><b>Website:</b> 190K per month</p>
Pricing	<p><b>Single issue print:</b> £5.99</p> <p><b>Single issue digital:</b> £4.99</p> <p><b>Membership/subscription:</b> Ceased promoting memberships and has gone back to selling subscriptions offering a print and digital package for £49.99 for 12 months and digital only at £3 per month.</p>	<p><b>Single issue print:</b> £5.99</p> <p><b>Single issue digital:</b> £4.99</p> <p><b>Membership/subscription:</b> Ceased promoting memberships but offers <i>VeganFood &amp; Living Plus+</i> offering a print and digital package for £49.99 for 12 months or digital only at £2.99 per month.</p>	<p><b>Single issue print:</b> £5.20</p> <p><b>Single issue digital:</b> £4.99</p> <p><b>Subscription:</b> £54.99 print, digital £44.99 and print plus (combined) £59.99</p> <p><b>Membership:</b> £5.20 for print plus membership and £3.99 for digital membership</p>
Brand extensions and services	<p>Weekly podcast</p> <p>Weekly e-newsletter</p> <p>Competitions</p> <p><b>Subscribers' benefits:</b> <i>The Edit</i> (a weekly e-newsletter) plus exclusive gym, training, and kit discounts</p>	<p>Simply Vegan Podcast (weekly)</p> <p>Weekly e-newsletter</p> <p>Competitions</p> <p><b>Subscribers' benefits:</b> free newsletter, access to additional plant-based recipes and perks for plant-based partners.</p>	<p>#Walk1000miles extension, which includes retail merchandise and offers from partners</p> <p><b>Subscribers' benefits:</b> Unlimited access to CW's digital library, including back issues, a monthly Editor's Email, plus a customisable reading experience with audio, night mode and adjustable text.</p> <p><b>Members' benefits:</b> a member-only app and website, past editions archive, members-only rewards, discounts and prizes, monthly Editor's e-newsletter and 50% off OS Maps Premium Membership.</p>

<sup>2</sup> Data for Table 1 obtained from each publication's website, media kit and The Audit Bureau of Circulation.

<sup>3</sup> Circulation figures for *Women's Running* obtained from the editor, Esther Newman.

## Conclusion

While this study can only provide a comparative overview rather than an in-depth analysis of the three cases, findings indicate that a robust community of readers and a relevant service provision are fundamental requirements for a successful membership strategy. Moreover, findings also suggest that membership should be developed individually instead of using a standardised strategy across all titles. Membership should not be a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, in Case Study One, Newman (2023) discovered that a community aspect to the *Women's Running* membership was more valuable to the audience while "perks like extra discounts with other companies were of low priority". On the other hand, with Case Study Three, Protector (2023) stated that relevant discounts were a core part of the *Country Walking* members' package alongside the community aspect, both being a crucial factor in the success of the membership.

Thus, we can determine that publishers should take a more tailored approach with careful research, planning and testing. As illustrated by the first two case studies, while readers of some titles might value additional aspects to their subscription or membership, these were often of little or no importance unless directly relevant. In contrast, members embraced the opportunity to be part of an interactive community reinforced with merchandise. Indeed, these factors were vital components of *Country Walking's* success, signifying that membership can be an effective strategy in the right circumstances, particularly given the recent shift in consumption habits, with readers preferring to subscribe rather than buy magazines from retailers.

To conclude, we can draw two critical lessons from this paper. First, publishers need to develop a deeper understanding of how memberships work, together with a realistic grasp of the timeframe needed to curate a membership package.

Secondly, it is critical to understand what value looks like from the audience's perspective, meaning publishers should adopt a reader-centric approach when curating and developing value-added services for membership packages. As the first two case studies illustrate, a membership is unlikely to be successful without critical attention to detail.

## Further research and study limitations

This study is limited as it doesn't include audience data. Therefore, further research could include a comparative study of two contrasting magazine audiences to establish their perspective on membership. Moreover, methods, such as surveys or focus groups, could be employed to gain insight into the audiences' viewpoint and examine the publisher-audience relationship.

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