

Special Issue

# Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion Efforts of Public Park and Recreation Agencies

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## Executive Summary

People of color are less likely to use public parks and recreation programs compared to Whites. Communities of color tend to have less park areas, fewer recreation opportunities, or inferior quality of parks and recreation facilities. These disparities in public leisure service delivery run counter to the foundational philosophy of the field, which is an equal and fair distribution of social and health benefits to all citizens. How should public park and recreation agencies address these issues and make their services more equitable? To date, a relatively small number of studies have investigated what public recreation agencies are currently doing or can do to promote racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion within the organizations and user groups.

The purpose of this study is to add to the existing literature on the marketing of public leisure service delivery in two ways. First, the study uses a qualitative research method to explore organizational efforts of public parks and recreation agencies focus-

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ing on racial and ethnic inclusion. Second, the collected information is analyzed using a usage market segmentation approach, the escalator concept, to better understand if the organizational efforts meet varying usage levels.

A purposive sampling strategy recruited employees from eight agencies located in a large city or urban area with more racial and ethnic diversity than the U.S. national average. Those employees were directors, managers, or staff members primarily responsible for issues related to racial and ethnic inclusion. Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted during September and October of 2016. The participants were asked about their work responsibilities, as well as diversity and inclusion efforts of the agency. The collected data were analyzed with the five basic steps of qualitative data analysis method.

The study identified 38 organizational efforts for promoting racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion within the agencies and user groups. Those 38 organizational efforts were categorized into six major themes: (1) Specific programs for people of color, (2) Communication, (3) Financial aid, (4) Youth programs, (5) Internal administrative efforts, and (6) Research. The identified six themes were further distinguished based on the usage levels. The findings show that a majority of the programs and efforts specific to people of color are focused on non-users and light users. Other efforts focused on retention for medium to heavy users.

These findings suggested that the agencies might need to focus more on moving the existing user groups to higher usage levels so they would become repeat users. Thus, it is important that public park and recreation agencies segment their markets to increase program sustainability and make a long-term commitment to the existing programs or new strategic plans for promoting racial and ethnic inclusion. In any case, marketing and communication at all user levels to people of color is essential.

### Keywords

*Public parks and recreation, race and ethnicity, marketing, escalator concept*

## Introduction

Although the U.S. population is becoming more ethnically and racially diverse than at any other time in its history (Colby & Ortman, 2015), researchers have documented racial and ethnic disparities in the provision and usage of public leisure service. For example, African Americans, Hispanics, and Asians are less likely to use public parks and recreation programs compared to Whites (Byrne, Wolch, & Zhang, 2009; Scott & Lee, 2018; Weber & Sultana, 2013; Wilhelm-Stanis, Schneider, Chavez, & Shinew, 2009) and their neighborhoods tend to have fewer park areas, fewer recreation opportunities, or inferior quality of parks and recreation facilities (Dahmann, Wolch, Joassart-Marcelli, Reynolds, & Jerrett, 2010; Rigolon, 2016; Rigolon, Browning, & Jennings, 2018; Wolch, Wilson, & Fehrenbach, 2005). A national study also showed that non-White individuals were less likely to report that they gain personal and community benefits from local parks and recreation services (Mowen et al., 2018).

These disparities in public leisure service delivery run counter to the foundational philosophy of the field, which is to provide equal and fair distribution of social and

health benefits of recreation to all citizens (Allison, 2000; Crompton & West, 2008). Although public parks and recreation agencies are operating under a democratic mission to serve all constituents, people of color are less likely to gain benefits from the agencies or receive fair returns on their taxation. If the industry continues to fail in its social service mission and professional obligation, tax support provided to public leisure agencies will be increasingly challenged and become unjustifiable (Crompton, 2008; Wilkinson, 2000). This is a serious social justice issue that disenfranchises and marginalizes people of color (Allison, 2000).

How should public park and recreation agencies address these issues and make their services more equitable? To date, limited studies have investigated what public recreation agencies are currently doing or can actually do to promote racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion within the organizations and user groups (e.g., Schneider & Kivel, 2016; Schultz et al., 2019). More research on marketing for people of color can offer fresh insight into the literature and inform many recreation professionals. In fact, public leisure agencies could hardly make their facilities and services more attractive and relevant to increasing racial and ethnic minorities without implementing various marketing activities such as understanding their recreational needs, designing programs and events of their interests, advertising the benefits of public parks and recreation service, and building a loyal customer base.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the existing literature in two ways. First, the study uses a qualitative approach to explore organizational efforts (e.g., internal activities, services, and events) of public parks and recreation agencies focusing on racial and ethnic inclusion. Second, the collected information is analyzed with a usage market segmentation approach, the escalator concept (Mullin et al., 2007), to better understand if the organizational efforts meet varying levels of potential users (e.g., light users versus heavy users). Documenting the current diversity and inclusion efforts is important because it provides a critical baseline for future research. Moreover, understanding their market segmentation will provide guidelines for many agencies and contribute to their retention efforts for continued involvement.

## Literature Review

### Diversity and Inclusion in Public Parks and Recreation

Although leisure behaviors and preferences of racial and ethnic minorities have been a distinctive research area within leisure literature (Floyd, 2007; Floyd, Bocarro, & Thompson, 2008), only a handful of studies have focused on racial and ethnic diversity within recreation professions and leisure service delivery. Allison (1999) and Allison and Hibbler (2004) investigated organizational barriers in making public recreation programs more accessible to people of color. Those barriers included discontinuation of staff members and organizational policy/practices, most diversity efforts being symbolic rather than substantive, inequitable hiring and promotions practices, and negative attitudes and stereotypes held by some managers. Scott (2000) argued that traditional business models of public leisure service have been ineffective in catering to the needs of disenfranchised groups because of their entrepreneurial approaches, emphasis on maintaining a loyal customer base, workforces that do not resemble diverse constituents, and the optimistic belief that recreation resources are fairly distributed

to all constituents. These three studies suggested that some organizational barriers are deeply embedded in the everyday functioning of many leisure service agencies and continuously disenfranchise nontraditional user groups of public parks and recreation.

A few other studies have investigated how public leisure agencies can promote diversity and inclusion in their organization and user groups. For example, based on in-depth interviews with staff members of the National Park Service (NPS) and its partnering organizations, Stanfield McCown (2011) proposed a conceptual model of deep engagement which delineates six interconnected themes that are critical for the success of NPS diversity initiatives. The model emphasizes building a prolonged relationship between the agency and diverse communities and moving “beyond traditional forms of outreach and engagement that rely on one-time/one touch visits” (p. 67). Likewise, Schuett and Bowser (2006) interviewed NPS urban park managers and administrators to solicit recommendations for serving people of color. The collected information was organized into five themes: improving interactions with local communities, commitment to workforce diversity, recruitment and employment programs, identification of visitor needs/program delivery, and enhancement of current research endeavors. Santucci, Floyd, Bocarro, and Henderson (2014) interviewed NPS staff members in two urban national parks and examined their perceptions about NPS policies and practices for increasing racial and ethnic diversity within park visitors. The study participants mentioned the importance of long-term engagement with youth that leads to repeated visitations. They also mentioned that it is important to address a traditional or conservative culture that inhibits new managerial approaches, as well as lack of clear policies and support for diversity initiatives.

Despite the contribution of the reviewed studies above, it is noteworthy that marketing for racial and ethnic minorities has received limited scholarly attention. In fact, no leisure and recreation studies that we know of have explicitly focused on this topic even though marketing for people of color has been a distinctive area of research inquiry in other relevant fields such as sport management (Armstrong, 2002; Brown, Bennett, & Ballouli, 2016; Nadeau, Jones, Pegoraro, O’Reilly, & Carvalho, 2011). The omission is rather surprising given the growing number of non-White groups in the U.S. and the mission of public park and recreation to serve all constituents. More research on this area can not only shed fresh insight into the literature, but also inform many recreation professionals.

### **Marketing of Public Leisure Services**

Marketing principles were first introduced in leisure literature and public leisure service during the 1980s (Crompton, 1983a, 1983b; Howard, 1985). However, many scholars and professionals have expressed mixed opinions about the application of marketing principles in the public sector. Skeptics have commonly argued that integrating private sector business practices will decay the public sector’s fundamental philosophy of equal and fair allocation of resources and benefits (More, 2002; Parr & Lashua, 2004; Schultz, McAvoy, & Dustin, 1988). Scholars also argued that basing public recreation delivery on the marketplace of individual recreation preferences would undermine the role of public recreation managers as “facilitators” who do not impose professional values or judgment (McLean & Johnson, 1993, p. 259). However, other researchers contended that such concerns are unwarranted or based on misunderstanding of marketing principles (Havitz, 1988, 2000; Novatorov & Crompton, 2001). More-

over, supporters of marketing asserted that adaptation of marketing principles would be “a positive step forward for leisure service delivery” (Kaczynski, 2008, p. 259) and help many agencies to cope with shrinking tax support from their municipal government (Crompton, 2008; Havitz, 2000).

Those mixed opinions have led several scholars to investigate how public leisure service can successfully adopt marketing strategies and reconcile the difference between the private and public sectors. For example, Cato and Kunstler (1988) proposed the humanistic marketing model that takes into account universal human needs and individual interests. Similarly, Bright (2000) and Kaczynski (2008) introduced the concept of social marketing in leisure literature which emphasizes both individual and social well-being. Novatorov and Crompton (2001) conducted a critical review on the conceptualization of public leisure marketing and proposed an alternative. The alternative conceptualization characterizes the industry as redistribution of taxes, closed-system operations via strong budget control, and service for the public interest.

Crompton (2008) reviewed previous studies on public leisure service marketing and asserted that the field needs “a paradigm shift” from the user benefit approach to the community benefit approach (p. 181). He explained that public leisure service in the U.S first adopted the user benefit marketing philosophy that focuses on profit generation during the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this profit-generation model, users of the agency’s service gain certain benefits and in turn continue to support the organization via taxation. However, Crompton argued that the model fails to address the notion of equity by neglecting the needs of non-users who also have to pay taxes to fund the service that does not benefit them. He asserted that this condition places the public leisure service in “a vulnerable position” because “it is not defensible” (p. 189). To make the field more equitable and sustainable, he suggested that the field needs to shift the business model from the user benefit approach to a community benefit approach that goes beyond responding to the demands of particular user groups, expands their marketing philosophy to embrace non-users, and demonstrates that their service can contribute to the community’s general welfare. For example, he stated that investment in “public transportation and hike/bike trails reduces automobile congestion and pollution which benefits those who do not use these amenities” (p. 192).

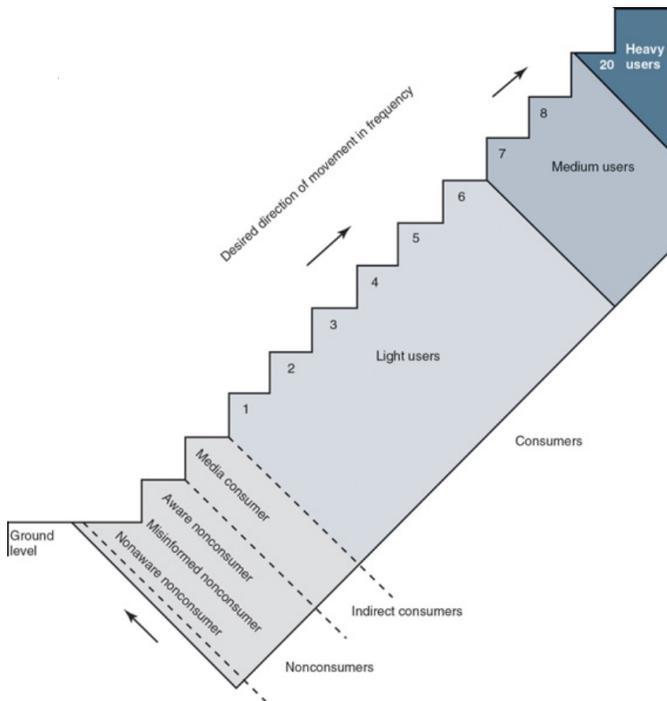
Although previous studies commonly emphasized the importance of equitable benefit distribution from public leisure service, many people of color reside in neighborhoods deprived of quality parks and recreation programs, and they are usually non-users of the service (Byrne et al., 2009; Dahmann et al., 2010; Rigolon, 2016; Rigolon et al., 2018; Wolch et al., 2005). This is particularly alarming given the social welfare ethic of public leisure provision and the increasing number of people of color in the U.S. How to provide more inclusive and equitable services is a serious concern for many recreation professionals.

Leisure studies have documented that people of color possess recreational needs and preferences that are significantly different from those of Whites (Cronan, Shinew, & Stodolska, 2008; Gobster, 2002; Lee & Scott, 2016; Shinew, Floyd, & Parry, 2003; Whiting et al., 2017). Similarly, marketing literature has shown that racial and ethnic groups differ in consumer motivation and behavior, media usage, and response to market services (Burton, 2002; Cui, 2001; Sierra, Hyman, & Heiser, 2012). These findings commonly suggested that public leisure agencies need to recognize people of color as a unique market segment. Although some agencies have offered programs tai-

lored toward specific racial and ethnic groups (Schultz et al., 2019; Schneider & Kivel, 2016), existing information in this area remains descriptive. Indeed, limited scholarly effort has been made to understand their characteristics in terms of a usage market segmentation approach. Thus, more research that identifies the current program offerings and their characteristics will not only provide critical baseline information for future research, but also help many agencies to better serve increasingly diverse American communities.

### Usage Segmentation

To provide a more nuanced understanding of organizational efforts targeting people of color, this study examined usage segmentation as a way to examine whether organizational efforts relate to varying levels of usage groups (e.g., non-participants versus frequent participants). Usage segmentation can be depicted and explained using the escalator concept (Mullin, 1978; Figure 1). The concept suggests that marketers should understand various consumer segments and differentiate their organizational efforts to “satisfy the needs of various consumer clusters and thereby move user groups up the escalator” (Mullin et al., 2007, p. 42). The idea is “not only to attract new consumers so that they get on the escalator, but also to get consumers already on the escalator to move up by increasing their [consumption level]” (p. 270). In this regard, Mullin et al. (2007) emphasized that organizations need to market differently based on the type of users by capitalizing on existing consumers, while also attracting new consumers. The escalator concept emerged from the field of sport business, it still has a strong implication for public leisure service because it provides a succinct yet effective market segmentation method and outlines what organizations should do to be inclu-



**Figure 1.** Escalator concept

sive of different user groups.

In sum, the purpose of this study is to explore the existing programs and organizational efforts of public leisure agencies to enhance racial and ethnic inclusion within their organization and clientele. Two specific research objectives are:

1. To identify organizational efforts used by public leisure agencies to promote racial and ethnic diversity among their clientele.
2. To use the escalator concept as a theoretical framework to assess the characteristics of the identified organizational efforts.

## Methods

This study employed qualitative research methods to investigate organizational efforts and program offerings of public leisure agencies to promote racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion.

### Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling method was used to identify public parks and recreation agencies that have been active or successful in enhancing racial and ethnic diversity within the organization and among its user groups. First, in the summer of 2016, an email announcement was sent out to the listserv of Academy of Leisure Sciences and requested leisure researchers and practitioners to provide information regarding public recreation agencies considered to be active or successful in enhancing racial and ethnic diversity within the organization and its user groups. Second, National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and NRPA Ethnic Minority Society were also contacted for the same purpose. Finally, the first author sought input from his professional network.

The sampling strategy identified 18 public park and recreation agencies in the U.S. and Canada. The first author contacted them and requested a telephone interview to gain more information about their organizational efforts and programs. However, 10 agencies did not respond to the requests or stopped communicating before the interview. Eventually, eight agencies participated in the study: California State Parks, Durham Parks and Recreation, Las Vegas Parks and Recreation, Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, Oakland Parks, Recreation and Youth Development, Parks Canada, San Francisco Recreation and Parks, and Seattle Parks and Recreation. The selected agencies were located in a large city or urban area with more racial and ethnic diversity than the U.S. national average. For example, in 2016, 33.9% of San Francisco residents were Asians and Las Vegas and Durham had a high concentration of Hispanics (32.2%) and African Americans (40%), respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017a). The population statistics showed that African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics respectively constituted 12.7%, 5.4%, and 17.8% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

To gather more information about the specific activities and management approaches of the identified agencies, semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with one or two individuals from each of the eight agencies. Those individuals were directors, managers, or staff members primarily responsible for issues related to racial and ethnic inclusion. Two trained research assistants conducted the interviews during September and October of 2016. The interviews consisted of three sections. First, an interviewer briefly introduced himself and explained the purpose of the research. Sec-

ond, the interviewer asked some background information about the interviewee such as title, employment history, and work responsibilities. Third, the interviewer asked about the diversity and inclusion efforts of the agency. Some examples of those questions were, “I heard from XXX that your agency is doing YYY. We would love to know more about that,” “Are there any other activities or organizational effort to promote racial and ethnic diversity within your organization or user groups? If so, can you tell me more about that?,” and “Do you think your organizational efforts or programs have been successful? Why or why not?” The interviews ranged from 40 minutes to one hour. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed.

### **Data Analysis**

The collected data were analyzed with the five basic steps of qualitative data analysis method described by Creswell (2013). First, the transcribed data were organized based on the interviewed agencies. Second, the first author read the transcribed data several times to be immersed in the details and familiar with the type of organizational efforts and program offerings from the eight agencies. Third, the data were categorized into several codes and some major themes were identified. Fourth, those themes were categorized and assigned based on the Escalator usage levels (non-, light, medium, and heavy). Finally, the results of the analysis were summarized and represented in Table 1 and Figure 2. To enhance the trustworthiness of our data and findings, we clearly explained to the research participants the purpose of this study and addressed any questions about the research or researchers’ backgrounds (Shenton, 2004). Furthermore, member checks were conducted to bolster the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## **Findings**

The results of the data analysis identified 38 organizational efforts for promoting racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion within the agencies and user groups. The 38 organizational efforts were categorized into six major themes based on their characteristics: (1) Specific programs for people of color, (2) Communication, (3) Financial aid, (4) Youth programs, (5) Internal administrative efforts, and (6) Research. These six themes and associated activities were briefly summarized in Table 1. It is noteworthy that some activities were designed to serve both people of color and lower income communities. This was due to the presence of disproportionately high poverty rates within the communities of color. Although race and ethnicity are the primary focus of this study, understanding their interconnections with other social inequalities such as poverty is important to gain a nuanced understanding of our findings (see Watson & Scraton, 2013).

### **Specific Programs for People of Color**

The most salient theme was providing specific facilities, events, or programs for certain racial and ethnic groups. The theme entailed 16 different activities and the majority of them were targeted programming to provide recreation activities more popular among certain racial or ethnic groups and celebrating specific ethnic heritage. For example, Minneapolis provided free ESL classes, purchased swimsuits specifically designed for Muslim women because they are “too expensive for many families”, included Spanish and French subtitles at an outdoor movie event during summer, and created the Owámmni Falling Water Festival and Monarch Festival to celebrate Native American

**Table 1**  
*Identified Activities for Promoting Racial and Ethnic Diversity and Inclusion*

Agency	Specific Programs for People of Color	Communication	Financial Aid	Youth Programs	Within the organization	Research
Minneapolis Park & Recreation Board	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Muslim women's expensive swimwear</li> <li>2. Owamni festival for indigenous people of Minnesota</li> <li>3. Monarch festival for Hispanic people</li> <li>4. Free ESL camps</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Spanish and French subtitles to Movies and Music in the Park event</li> <li>2. Spanish Radio shows and Mosque Television stations for advertising</li> </ol>			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Created an Outreach Department</li> <li>2. Implicit Bias Training</li> <li>3. Community Racial Equity Steering Committee</li> <li>4. Racial Equity Action Plan</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Collect survey data for park usage of people of color</li> </ol>
San Francisco Recreation & Parks Department	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Equity vs. Equality approach</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Language Access Line</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Scholarship for recreation programs</li> </ol>			<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Opened a recreation center completely free for 8 months and investigated community use</li> </ol>
Durham Parks and Recreation Department (NC)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Planning to renovate a little league field into football court</li> <li>7. Three trails strategically built in African American communities</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Added 2 Spanish speaking staff for translation and outreach to growing Latino population in the community</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Sliding fee scale</li> <li>3. Program fee waiver</li> </ol>			
Oakland Park & Recreation Department (CA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>8. Learn to Swim Classes</li> <li>9. ESL classes in each recreation center</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Distributed English, Spanish, and Mandarin flyers</li> </ol>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lifeguard Program</li> </ol>		
California State Parks		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Held at least five public meetings for new park development</li> </ol>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Outdoor Youth Connection Program</li> <li>3. Outdoor Recreation Leadership Program (or Fam Camp)</li> </ol>		
Rouge National Urban Park, Parks Canada	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10. Learn to Camp Program</li> <li>11. English and French classes</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>7. Print materials in various languages including their annual review</li> <li>8. six outreach staff</li> </ol>				
Seattle (WA)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>12. Arts in Parks</li> <li>13. Recreation for All</li> </ol>		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Scholarship program</li> <li>5. Get Moving Fund</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Youth Engaged in Service</li> </ol>		
Las Vegas (NV)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>14. Created a boxing program in East Las Vegas Recreation facility</li> <li>15. ESL classes</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>9. A community outreach staff who visit Urban Core</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. \$100,000 of Financial Aid per year for summer camps and other programs</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Batteries included Youth Initiative</li> </ol>		

and Hispanic culture, respectively.

Similarly, Durham built a few trails in predominantly African American communities “to connect with local schools” and renovated a little league field into a football field because the sport had a higher demand within the community. Similarly, they indicated that they are considering adding a five-on-five soccer field if the Latino community continues to grow because the sport is more popular among Latinos. Oakland offered the Learn to Swim classes for African American children in conjunction with Lifeguard Program to alleviate the disproportionately high rate of drowning among African American youth. Las Vegas developed a boxing program in the East Las Vegas region because “that was what kids were asking for... We wanted to help them learn respect and responsibility. So our staff investigated that, found some instructors, brought them in, and we got a really robust boxing program.” The Arts and Park program in Seattle provided funding for individual artists or organizations representing people of color and other underserved communities to host arts and cultural events. Similarly, the agency’s Recreation for All program offered funding for local nonprofit organizations or community groups to create programs and events for communities of color or other under-served communities.

Other programs focused on providing more recreational opportunities in general rather than specific cultural activities. For example, San Francisco was implementing the “Equity versus Equality” approach in its programming. The idea was to provide more recreational opportunities within “equity zones” in the city, the districts with “fewer resources and higher diversity.” One strategy to accomplish this goal was utilizing Mobile Recreation Program which brings mobile rock-climbing walls, skateboarding/BMX parks, and disc golf and kayaking equipment to the equity zones during the weekend. Another example was the “Learn to Camp” program from Rough National Urban Park in Toronto, Canada. Since the park is located in the biggest and most diverse city in the nation that receives immigrants from all over the world, the Learn to Camp program specifically targets “people that are new to Canada.” The agency staff made the following comment:

People spend 24 hours in the park. For a lot of folks, it’s the first time they camp in a tent. They learn the basics of how to set up a tent, how to cook around a campfire. We do some hiking, hiking 101, and we have an evening program that we sing songs around the campfire and have storytellers come in. It’s a great way to introduce [visitors] to the outdoors and the world of camping which is a longstanding Canadian pastime. It is a very, very rewarding program.

## **Communication**

The second theme captures various efforts to communicate with people of color. Those efforts were usually coupled with the programs and events mentioned in the first theme. For example, several agencies translated program information in multiple languages such as Arabic, Spanish, Mandarin, etc. Minneapolis used Spanish Radio shows and Mosque Television stations to advertise its programs to Spanish- and Arabic-speaking populations, respectively. San Francisco created the Language Access Line, a multi-language telephone service. Thus, the main purpose of these services was

to remove language barriers for people who do not speak English fluently.

Some agencies had designated staff for communicating with communities of color. Las Vegas had community outreach staff who visit the Urban Core community where a disproportionately large number of people of color and low-income families reside. Those staff “act as field workers who meet with community members to listen to their needs, wants, and concerns.” Similarly, the RNUP in Toronto had “six full-time staff members in charge of outreach to minorities and low to middle-income families.” They visit community centers adjacent to the park to advertise the RNUP and its programming.

Efforts at improving communication were also integrated into the planning process. California State Parks stated that the agency held “at least five public meetings in certain park areas to give a chance for community members to voice what they want.” The idea was to encourage local communities to “design parks with limited government engagement” because the agency believes people will use the parks more “if they can tailor it to their personal needs.”

### **Financial Aid**

Another distinctive theme was providing financial support for economically disadvantaged communities of color to encourage more participation in programs. San Francisco created a scholarship for residents of the equity zones which can be used to pay for recreation programs from the agency. The agency raised “\$1.2 million for the scholarships in 2015” via annual budget and fundraising. Similarly, Durham created a Sliding Fee Scale that determines the amount of discount for the participants of school-age care programs. The scale is based on income, household size, and special circumstances affecting the applicants’ ability to pay for the program. According to the agency staff, “the highest discount rate is 90% which provides one week of camp or 20 days of after-school program for about \$13. Nearly 86% of program participants, 906 children, received some level of discounts” in 2015. The agency also worked with a local social service department to provide a program fee waiver which allows free access to various programs. Seattle and Las Vegas also provided similar financial aid.

### **Youth Programs**

Several agencies provided youth programs for leadership and job skill training. Although those programs were open to individuals of any race or ethnic group, the agencies had a strong interest in serving racial and ethnic minorities and participants have been predominantly teenagers of color. For instance, the Batteries Included Youth Initiative Programs from Las Vegas was created to help teenagers in “distressed areas to be more involved in their community and help academically succeed.” The city, local university, and police department were also involved in the program to provide community service programs and help participants to develop leadership skills. Similarly, Seattle offered the Youth Engaged in Service program that provides a broad range of service and training opportunities for teenagers. It focuses on “cultivating job readiness and leadership skills among participants” while they work on important community issues such as restoration of local watershed and salmon habitats, recycling, and maintaining parks and recreation facilities. Youths who complete the program will receive a stipend and their participation hours can be used toward the high school graduation requirement for service learning/community service.

The Office of Community Involvement at California State Parks collaborated with the California State Parks Foundation and offered the Outdoor Youth Connection Program that invites 80 teenagers from “the most disadvantaged communities of color for a leadership camp in the woods.” The camp assigns certain responsibilities to each participant and focuses on developing problem-solving and communication skills. The staff mentioned that “through the positive experience in nature, the program offers opportunities for personal discovery, as well as [better understanding of] nature.” Moreover, alumni of the program go back to their community and are required to organize public service projects and lead their peers in outdoor adventure trips as peer mentors. The agency staff informed that the program has been running for more than a decade and approximately 2,600 youths have been trained since 2006.

### **Internal Administrative Efforts**

One agency also made diversity and inclusion effort internally. Although previous themes all focused on service and program for constituencies, Minneapolis created an outreach department within the organization to “specifically focus on issues pertaining to inclusion and equity.” They also established a Racial Equity Steering Committee consisting of community members and started the Racial Equity Action Plan in November 2016. The plan is an internal working document that guides the organization’s racial equity agenda and is updated every two years. Along with these additions, the agency implemented an implicit bias training to diversify staff hiring. Thus, these organizational efforts aimed to build an inclusive culture and ensure that managerial decisions and hiring procedures are non-discriminatory.

### **Research**

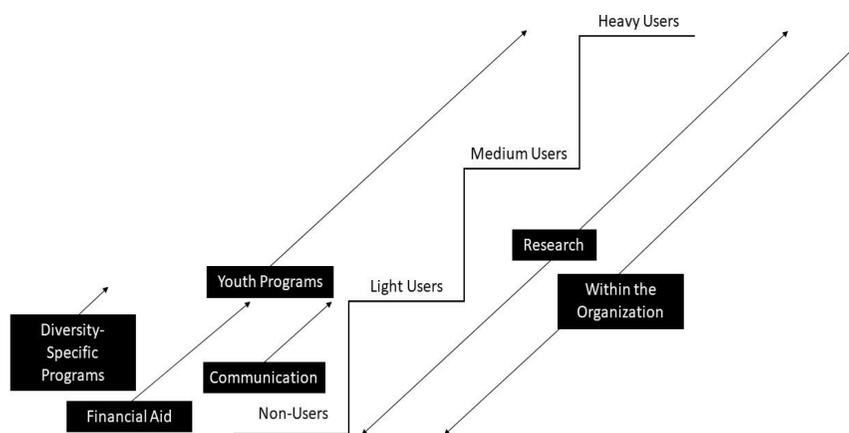
A few agencies attempted to conduct more research and collect data to better understand how people of color use their facilities and recreation programs. For example, Durham was “in the process of operating one recreation center for eight months without charging any fees for any programs with the exception of athletic leagues and child-care programs.” The center is located in the middle of “one of the most economically challenged Census block codes in the city.” An agency staff member explained their research efforts initiated by the city manager:

We’re pulling our data and see what impact it has had operationally, whether or not participants were overwhelmed, if we had more people attending programs or not, that type of thing. Our city manager wants us to do the research and be able to project, to see what it would be if we make all of our programs free, which would be very interesting. We see a lot of pros and cons to that. One of them is the value of the program. Oftentimes, if you don’t charge anything, there is a perception of very little value, and people don’t utilize the program. So it’s an interesting situation to be in. We are very honored to be asked to look at this. Certainly, there is a whole bunch of people that, even with our discount, cannot afford the program. So it’s a very exciting time.

Minneapolis also made an effort to investigate the recreation needs of people of color. The agency collected survey data to research park usage by people of color. The data would be utilized to learn more about marginalized population groups such as “African-American, foreign-born residents, low-income groups, and households of working single parents.”

## Usage Segmentation

For the second research objective, we used the escalator concept to further examine if the organizational efforts are targeting four different levels of users: 1) non-users who may be unaware or aware of public leisure agencies' organizational efforts and have never participated in a program or event, 2) light users who are aware of public leisure agencies' organizational efforts and have actively participated in a program or event at least one time, 3) medium users who have participated in a program or event more than one time, and 4) heavy users who are frequent users of programs or events. Categorizing and assigning the efforts to usage levels was conducted based on details about the objective, purpose, and rationale for the effort and how it best fits with the Escalator usage levels. The findings show that a majority of the programs and efforts specific to people of color are focused on the lower end of the Escalator targeting none- and light users, yet there are some examples of efforts focused on retention for medium to heavy users as well (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Segmentation of the Six Themes using the Escalator Concept

At the lowest level of the escalator are non-users of public leisure services who may be aware of the agency or in some cases unaware. The marketing challenges for this group relate to increasing awareness and getting potential users to attend/participate/visit at least once. The findings show that many of the programs specific to people of color do just that. For example, ESL classes offer an opportunity (or entryway) for more awareness of the public park services that go beyond the class, therefore increasing usage and moving them up the escalator. The classes serve as a way to increase comfort with the park as users learn more about the facilities, transportation, etc. Hosting new programming and festivals was another common marketing effort that helps with awareness and initial usage. The findings showed that agencies have incentivized programs that offer reduced rates, a sliding scale fee structure, or financial aid that may be effective at activating a non-user to make the decision to try out a program.

Other organizational efforts appeared to be focusing on moving users further up the escalator to higher usage levels, promoting more frequent usage, and aiding

in retention. First, rather than customizing or creating programming, five agencies translated their communication and marketing materials into non-English languages. This included general information (i.e., translated websites) to specific programs (i.e., program-specific flyers), and television/radio advertising. Second, three agencies have hired park outreach staff. The addition of staff for diversity efforts is a financial commitment by the agencies and a key to continued engagement with higher-level users. Finally, three of the agencies had programming that focuses on youth leadership (e.g., Leaders of Tomorrow). Developing youth leaders serves as an effort that creates life-long heavy users that also become advocates for the agency.

## Discussion

Using an exploratory approach, this study is one of the first attempts to understand the organizational efforts from public parks and recreation agencies in promoting racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion. The findings showed that there were 38 specific organizational efforts implemented by the eight agencies and those activities could be categorized into six themes. Although these findings are not exhaustive or representative of all park and recreation agencies, they provide valuable insights into the status and characteristics of the agencies' inclusion and diversity efforts.

The escalator concept shows that the organizations in this study have programs and services catered to multiple levels of the escalator, but most relate to the lower levels (non-users and light users). The marketing challenges for lower level users relate to creating awareness of the programs and services and triggering enough desire to take action. To do this, park and recreation departments must have offerings that related to the specific needs of people and communities of color. Advertising and communication should be conducted with appropriate outlets where potential users are identifiable, assessable, and receptive (Mullin et al., 2007). Consistent with these marketing principles, the findings showed that the agencies created programs and events that are specific to certain racial and ethnic minorities and advertised them through multi-language services and specific radio and television stations.

The location of the six agencies that implemented the lower-level activities is worthy of further elaboration. As mentioned earlier, these agencies were situated in a large city or urban areas with more racial and ethnic diversity than the U.S. national average. Thus, one reason for the agencies being active in diversity and inclusion activities might be due to the demographics of their jurisdictions. However, population projections showed that the share of racial and ethnic minorities is gradually increasing in rural communities in the U.S. (Van Hook & Lee, 2017). This demographic trend suggests that public leisure agencies in rural areas might have to emulate the identified activities in this study and should be prepared for years to come.

Another noticeable finding is that there are fewer programs and services at higher escalator levels. Although eight agencies diversified their offerings and organizational efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, the concentration of the existing programs at the lower levels of escalator suggested that they might need to focus more on moving the existing user groups to the higher levels to cultivate continuous users. Developing services that meet the specific needs of the various segments improves customer acquisition and retention (Mullin et al., 2007). In fact, several researchers commonly emphasized that diversity and inclusion initiatives from the agencies should be geared

toward nurturing enduring relationships with communities of color and go beyond providing one-time events that do not result in repeated engagement or visitation (Santucci et al., 2014; Schuett & Bowser, 2006; Stanfield McCown, 2011). Thus, it is important that public park and recreation agencies examine or account for a variety of segmentation types (e.g., county of origin, language proficiency, social economic status, etc.) to increase program sustainability and make a long-term commitment to the existing programs or new strategic plans.

Moreover, the escalator concept suggested that the marketing challenge for high-level users should focus on differentiation, providing quality and strong customer service (Mullin et al., 2007). While there still may be a need to provide unique services to different customer segments, the aim is adding value and building loyalty. To do this, organizations need to have employees who have knowledge of and experience with communities of color by hiring people of color or conducting diversity training with current employees. Additionally, more nuanced organizational efforts related to retention and value building require justification, and justification comes from research (McDonald & Bass, 2003). Thus, investing in marketing research, as some of the agencies are doing in this study, may play a key role in retention. In any case, marketing and communication to people of color at all user levels are essential.

This study has some limitations. First, it used a purposive sampling method and relied on referrals from leisure researchers and park and recreation practitioners to identify the agencies that are active or successful in promoting racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion. Although input from individuals who have experience and knowledge in the field can provide valuable information, they do not provide exhaustive or representative information. Follow-up studies can employ systematic sampling approaches to gather more complete information about the status of diversity and inclusion activities. Second, the study findings are based on interviews with one or two employees from each agency at particular moments. In-depth case studies or longitudinal investigations might provide richer information about diversity and inclusion efforts and their long-term effects. Third, interpretation of usage segmentation was assigned based on researchers' judgment and descriptions provided by interviewees, therefore more data and information related to organizational efforts are warranted. Finally, this study employed a usage segmentation concept. Applying added segmentation approaches may provide further insight to promote and retain people of color in public leisure services.

Public leisure service is built upon the democratic principle that social and health benefits of parks and recreation should be available to all citizens regardless of their identities and backgrounds. However, many communities of color are still deprived of quality parks and recreation opportunities, and the racial and ethnic disparities in provisions of public parks and recreation continue to be a serious social justice issue. Furthermore, the increasing number of people of color in the U.S. demands that park and recreation departments be responsive to changing local demographics. To address these pressing issues and guide public parks and recreation professionals, the present study explored existing service and organizational effort for promoting racial and ethnic diversity and examined how they meet varying types of user segments. Although it might be a small addition to on-going efforts, we believe that continuous commitment from researchers and practitioners will come to satisfying fruition.

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