An Inclusive Approach to Exploring Perceptions of Body Image, Self-Esteem, and Physical Activity among Black and African-American Girls: Smart Fit Girls Melanin Magic

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Executive Summary

Adolescent girls experience high rates of body dissatisfaction and poor self-esteem (SE), as well as low levels of participation in physical activity (PA). Outside of traditional sports, few recreation opportunities exist to promote physical, emotional and mental well-being in adolescent girls, particularly among Black and African-American (AA) girls. In order for parks and recreation organizations to provide programming in

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a culturally relevant way, it is critical to more deeply understand the lived experiences of Black and AA girls, specifically related to SE, body image (BI) and PA. Doing so will enable leisure professionals to better co-create opportunities to engage Black and AA adolescent girls in programming aimed to promote PA and positive BI and SE. In order to examine girls' lived experiences with an inclusive lens, Black and AA adolescent girls are considered the experts and should be included in all stages of the process. The purpose of this project was to engage in an inclusive formative evaluation in order to explore perceptions and experiences of PA, SE and BI among a group of Black and AA adolescent girls. Ten adolescent girls formed a leadership council (Smart Fit Girls Melanin Magic) and took the lead on culturally adapting the existing Smart Fit Girls (SFG) curriculum using Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). A first step, and the focus of this paper, was to explore unique experiences with SE, BI, and participation in PA. Principles of YPAR were utilized to empower the leadership council to participate in thematically coding the group discussion. Girls reported that PA provides positive mental health benefits to girls, and that they experience significant barriers, both internal and external, to being active. While girls self-reported experiencing depressive symptoms related to poor SE, and that being in predominantly white spaces leads to poor SE, they also noted the benefit of engaging in positive affirmations. Girls also reported that social comparison negatively affects their BI, and that hair is a salient factor in BI. Finally, results showed general negative BI among participants, which is compounded by girls' interactions with others. Results from this inclusive qualitative data analysis will inform the design of new programming within parks and recreation to uniquely support Black and AA girls' experiences with PA, SE and BI. Authors encourage reflection as a field on evaluation practices and suggest inclusive approaches to better facilitate programming and achieve the social justice and equity goals of parks and recreation.

Introduction

Adolescent girls have been shown to experience a number of psychosocial stressors at a significantly higher rate than adolescent boys, including low self-esteem (SE) and poor body image (BI) (Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009; Robbins et al., 2004; Schmalz et al., 2007). BI is defined as the "subjective sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's body or physical appearance" (Meland, Haugland, & Breidablik, 2007, p. 343). When defined globally, SE is "the level of global regard that one has for the self as a person" (Harter, 1993, p. 88). Physical activity (PA) has been associated with improved health outcomes including improved body composition, reduced risk of chronic disease, and benefits to psychosocial factors such as BI and SE (Sallis, Prochaska, & Taylor, 2000). A number of studies have focused on the relationship between PA and SE. McClure et al. (2010) demonstrated that participation in school sports decreased the likelihood of low SE among adolescents. Additionally, a literature review of 25 randomized controlled trials found that there was a significant positive relationship

between PA and SE, self-concept, and self-worth in youth (Liu, Wu, & Ming, 2015). The relationship between BI and PA is less clear due to the complex nature of BI potentially being dependent on sport type or motivation for PA (Liechty et al., 2015). However, Kantanista et al. (2015) found an overall positive relationship between BI and PA among adolescents. Despite the positive association between PA and psychosocial factors, girls aged 4-18 perform on average 17% less total daily PA as compared to boys (Tudor-Locke et al., 2006).

Importantly, differences have been shown in the way that Black and white adolescent girls experience PA, SE, and BI. Studies highlighting greater declines in PA among Black adolescent girls compared to their white counterparts show that the environmental and behavioral risk factors related to declines in PA differ, such as attitudes toward PA and cultural relevance (Kimm et al., 2002; Thompson, 2011). For instance, some research has shown that Black adolescent girls do not view weight as a health problem and have a different view of BI, making it less of a motivating factor to exercise as compared to white adolescent girls (Padgett & Biro, 2003). Additionally, Black adolescent girls have been seen to view PA as less feminine, and commonly rely strongly on their parents as role models for health behaviors (Thompson, 2011). Finally related to PA, some evidence suggests that Black girls perceive less social support for PA within their environments than do their white counterparts (Grieser et al., 2008). Additionally, there are differences in changes in SE based on racial identity, which some hypothesize are associated with racial differences in attitudes toward physical appearance (Brown et al., 1998). Patton (2006) suggests that media stereotypes play a significant role in the development of these attitudes, and that "rather than being fluid, identities become trapped in the marginalizing rhetoric that initially erected the boundary" (Patton, 2006, p. 42). To better understand these differences, research exploring BI among Black girls is identified as a priority among BI experts (Cash & Smolak, 2012).

Because of these examples highlighting differences in how Black and white adolescent girls experience PA, SE, and BI, it is clear that health promotion programs must be tailored to reflect salient cultural factors in order to improve their effectiveness and better meet the needs of communities (Kreuter et al., 2003). While some research has been conducted on the recreation interests of Black and African-American (AA) girls, few studies have explored the unique psychosocial factors affecting girls' experiences and perspectives, such as BI and SE, as well as taken a participatory approach (Burk & Shinew, 2013). In order to create programs that reflect the community being engaged, formative evaluations conducted to tailor and design programs must explore the unique experiences of those communities and involve the community members in the process.

Role of Parks and Recreation in Social Justice

Recreation centers act as a critical access point for youth to engage in programming, including PA specifically, because most neighborhoods have access to at least one public community recreation center. However, the quality of recreation centers differs according to socioeconomic status (Cohen et al., 2007; Giles-Corti & Donovan, 2002; McKenzie et al., 2013). Mowen et al. (2018) showed a clear disparity in how parks and recreation services are used and perceived. While parks and recreation centers have been shown to benefit people from privileged social, racial, and ethnic groups, individuals with less education and wealth reported lower levels of usage and community benefits (Mowen et al., 2018). Other evidence highlights the lack of benefit

for, and inclusion of groups experiencing marginalization, including Black and AA adolescent girls (Mowatt, French, & Malebranche, 2013). Others support the notion that it is discrimination itself that causes certain racial groups not to access recreation spaces (Stodolska et al., 2014). While many recreation center directors and staff report 1) meeting the needs of youth, 2) being inclusive of all cultures, and 3) including more girls in programming as central priorities, adolescent girls remain one of the most challenging populations for recreation centers to reach (Moody et al., 2004). Therefore, it is critical to employ new and inclusive methods of exploring the barriers and needs of Black and AA adolescent girls, in accessing and utilizing PA programming offered by recreation centers.

Improving and tailoring programs could fill the current gap in culturally responsive recreation programming opportunities for Black and AA adolescent girls and would further support equity and enhance social justice. An important step in doing so is to engage with Black and AA girls to better understand their experiences around PA, SE and BI. Therefore, purpose of this project was to engage in an inclusive formative evaluation to explore perceptions and experiences of PA, SE and BI among a group of Black and AA adolescent girls. The research question guiding this exploratory study was: What are the perceptions and experiences of a group of Black and AA adolescent girls related to PA, SE and BI?

Methods

Community and Academic Partners

This project began as a collaboration between The Fields Foundation (FF), a faculty member with Colorado School of Public Health at Colorado State University and Smart Fit Girls (SFG). The mission of FF, a nonprofit organization, is to ensure that all children from ages 0-24 have a fair, safe, and healthy head start toward a successful passage to adulthood. This mission is accomplished by providing access to culturally responsive, comprehensive, integrative health care and wraparound services at their community center. FF emphasizes self-sufficiency in their population, and offers opportunities for training, counseling, rehabilitation, after school programing and employment to reduce poverty and dependency among the community surrounding the center. The academic partner, a faculty member at the Colorado School of Public Health at Colorado State University, has vast experience implementing and evaluating SFG and other community-based participatory research projects.

Smart Fit Girls (SFG)

SFG is a program aimed at promoting the physical and emotional well-being of adolescent girls ("Smart Fit Girls™"). Commonly held at public community recreation centers, the program involves girls participating in activities specifically designed to improve BI, SE, and PA enjoyment (Walters, 2017). Rooted in self-determination theory, the program supports and builds on girls' sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. For example, to foster a sense of autonomy, over the course of the program girls gradually become more autonomous in deciding the design of activities and workouts. SFG aims to support equity by creating a program that benefits all adolescent girls, regardless of race, income, body size, athletic ability, and other social identities that have traditionally experienced marginalization. To do this properly, it

is necessary to understand the experiences of those participating in order to design a culturally responsive program that meets the needs of those it was created to serve.

Within the context of this project, partnership was defined as "a group of organizations with a common interest who agree to work together toward a common goal" (Snow, 2012, p. 8). This partnership was established around a common goal of eventually providing culturally adapted health and wellness programming for Black and AA adolescent girls served by the FF. Because neither the academic nor community partner identified with adolescents regarding age, nor did the primary academic partner identify racially with the girls served by the FF, the partners recognized the need to include Black and AA adolescent girls in the evaluation and decision-making process in order to create programming that reflects their experiences. Therefore, partners agreed to use a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) approach to culturally adapt SFG with adolescent girls who are part of the FF Community Center. To do so, a leadership council, Smart Fit Girls Melanin Magic (SFGMM) was formed, comprised of Black and AA adolescent girls from the FF and a partner organization who works closely with FF.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

One promising way of involving community members in the formative evaluation process is through YPAR. YPAR is a form of inquiry that serves to expand learning through youth-adult partnerships (Anyon et al., 2018; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). YPAR addresses and challenges youth oppression by engaging youth as partners throughout the programming and research process. YPAR includes three primary principles: 1) situation and inquiry-based, 2) participatory, and 3) transformative. First, YPAR is situation and inquiry based, meaning that the practice is dedicated to evaluating and learning from the topics that reflect the true lived experiences and needs of the youth participating in the research project (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Leisure research has a history of white hegemonic value orientation, making it important to identify value orientations in evaluation and integrate this type of social/cultural framework to enhance social justice (Stewart, 2014). YPAR is one approach to ensure sociocultural frameworks are centered and valued in the research process. Second, YPAR is participatory in that it places value on collaborations that recognize, validate, and build on the unique skills of youth researchers (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). Creating space for youth partnerships can provide young people the opportunity to develop knowledge for social action, strengthen their social development, and enable them to take action in society (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Lastly, YPAR is transformative. In general, the transformative principle of YPAR is the commitment to research and learning that aims to co-design interventions with young people, and transform research practices in a way that improves the lives of youth who experience marginalization (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). By using a transformative lens to seek insight into different experiences as reflected, for example, by gender, race and age, participants can influence power and control in an agenda for social change (Tolley et al., 2016). Combined, the three YPAR principles provided a framework for designing inclusive and equitable evaluation and programming in a way that promotes equity and social justice through the creation and work of SFGMM.

Smart Fit Girls Melanin Magic Leadership Council (SFGMM)

Ten Black and AA girls who are part of the FF and community partners (age range 10-17 years, median age 14 years) were recruited to be part of a year-long partnership

development project. FF was instrumental in recruiting participants, and relied heavily on their community connections to do so. Importantly, participants were compensated for their time working on this project. The overall aims of SFGMM, determined collaboratively with the community and academic partners, were to 1) establish a common agenda and action plan for the group, 2) identify and discuss participants' experiences related to being physically active and having positive SE and BI, 3) review and adapt the current SFG curriculum, and 4) begin work on a follow-up grant to offer the adapted SFG program to younger girls at the community center. The focus of this paper is on aim 2) to identify and discuss participants' experiences related to being physically active and having positive SE and BI. The Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University approved this study, and parental consent and child assent was obtained.

This group of 10 girls met approximately every three weeks to participate in various activities, including team building and a photovoice project, all revolving around exploring their experiences with PA, SE, and BI. Importantly, during the kickoff retreat, girls also explored what they wanted to call themselves, ultimately deciding on Smart Fit Girls Melanin Magic (SFGMM). One participant explains what the title means to her:

> Having this program named Melanin Magic, now there's something that specifically caters to me. Like this whole center point is African-American people and just the beauty of us and just how we're just like, great.

Research Design

The data used for this paper came from the year-long partnership development project, which was a cross-sectional, observational study with convenience sampling in which qualitative (i.e., guided discussion group and informal interviews) and quantitative (i.e., surveys) data were collected. The overarching project uses YPAR as the guiding framework. Specifically, YPAR's principle 1 (inquiry-based) is employed in the way girls' lived experiences were centered in all activities and discussions. Principle 2 of YPAR (participatory) was used in the qualitative data analysis (the focus of this paper), where youth and adults partnered together to identify themes within the data, and Principle 3 (transformative) will be the focus in future steps as we use these findings to co-design curricular adaptations. The focus of this paper is on the guided discussion group, during which the SFGMM leadership council explored their unique experiences with PA, SE and BI. These constructs were chosen because of the overarching goal of the partnership, which was to provide a culturally-tailored health and wellness program to Black and AA adolescent girls. We elected to take a qualitative approach in order to align closely with the first principle of YPAR (inquiry-based) (Anyon et al., 2018). This allows the findings to be truly reflective of the voices and rich lived experiences of this group of young women.

The guided discussion group lasted approximately 45 minutes, included all 10 participants, and was led by the first author, who has 11 years of focus group facilitation experience. An adapted version of the standard SFG focus group script was utilized. The SFG focus group script was initially designed and pre-tested with the help of adolescent girls prior to this study, who made various changes (e.g., reducing the number of questions and rewording and reordering for clarity). Questions asked were open-ended. After defining PA, SE, and BI, questions included, "How do you feel about

physical activity?," "How do you feel about your self-esteem," and "How do you feel about your body image?" The guided discussion group was then transcribed verbatim by a graduate research assistant and reviewed by the facilitator.

Data Analysis

Approximately three months after the initial guided discussion group was held with SFGMM, during one of the regularly scheduled meetings, SFGMM participated in an activity to explore the concept of coding qualitative data, and subsequently analyzed the discussion group data using an analysis process similar to open coding (Saldaña, 2016). This approach is based on the second principle of YPAR (youth as partners) (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009), and follows a youth participatory approach used by other YPAR experts (Kennedy et al., 2018). Specifically, participants began by participating in an activity using candy to discuss the concept of sorting and categorizing data. In randomly assigned small groups of 3-4, participants were asked to identify a way to sort their candy. Examples of ways the candy was sorted included by color, by shape, or by type (e.g., chocolate vs. fruit flavored). Girls then compared the various ways groups elected to sort, and discussed which way best represented the candy. The group then discussed how this applies to qualitative data.

Next, as a large group, girls were assigned a number and read aloud the discussion group transcript line by line. Names were removed from the transcript to provide anonymity, and girls were asked not to say aloud if they recalled a name associated with a comment. A reminder of the sensitive nature of the comments, as well as the need to be supportive of one another was provided prior to reading the transcript aloud. Interestingly, at various times when the transcript was being read aloud, girls would agree with what was being said, saying things such as "I don't know who said that, but I totally relate."

At the end of each of the three sections (i.e., PA, SE, BI), in their randomly assigned small groups, girls discussed themes that arose, and gave each theme a name. An inductive approach was used whereby the data guided the development of the thematic areas (Saldaña, 2016). Participants then identified quotes that supported each theme, and physically cut up the transcript to pull out quotes for each theme. Once themes were identified and named within the small groups, the girls came back together in a large group to discuss, and with the help of the first author, agreed on the final themes. At this time, one participant was responsible for typing out the themes and supporting quotes. The themes were then reviewed and discussed by the group until consensus was reached before moving onto the next section. This process was repeated for each of the three sections of the transcript (PA, SE, and BI). Next, the first author inputted the results section created by the girls, and returned at a subsequent meeting where member checks were used to review the results a final time with the group, as well as to review other sections of the manuscript, including the introduction, methods and discussion. Based on feedback from the participants, two additional salient themes were discussed and added at that time.

Results

During the guided discussion group, we (SFGMM and the academic and community partner) discussed three topics: PA, SE, and BI. Results from the content analysis resulted in multiple themes and sub-themes within each topic area. The results

section is written in the first person plural perspective, to represent the collective voice of the SFGMM leadership council. Importantly, SFGMM elected not to use pseudonyms in reporting the results.

Physical Activity

Participants reported positive and negative relationships to PA, highlighting the ways it can be beneficial, as well as the challenges faced in finding motivation to engage in PA. The following themes and sub-themes emerged:

1. The benefits of PA on mental health were obvious. We noted that PA results in improved mood. For example, one participant described, "Exercise makes me feel like I'm getting my life together. For some reason right after I exercise I'll be like okay this is it. I'll start doing that, start doing that…it makes me feel really good about myself." Another participant described, "I feel like it makes me feel more energized and makes me more hyped up and makes me feel good about myself."

2. While we acknowledged that PA makes us feel good, there were various barriers to being physically active that we discussed. Within this theme around barriers, we found three sub-themes, including a) participants feel they lack motivation and procrastinate, b) participants do not see results quickly enough, and c) there are external barriers that keep participants from being active. We include examples for each below:

    a) Participants felt they lacked motivation and procrastinate. "…it's hard to get yourself to do it because you don't like it all the time... I just wanna take a nap and I don't feel like doing this today". Another participant noted:

    > I'd tell myself that I'd need to get up and do something but then I'd see a new show on Netflix and … I'd keep procrastinating and before I knew it, it was time to do homework or go to bed or something.

    b) Some of why participants felt they lacked motivation was because of another barrier of participants not seeing results fast enough. "What's the point I'm trying to work out because it's like nothing's happening." Another participant noted:

    > I just feel like I want the end result faster like if I go to the gym I'm like I just did all this work and I don't see it on like the scale. I just want to see like what I put into it. I want to see like that work.

    c) While the previous two barriers were internal, we also noted external barriers that kept participants from being active. "My parents didn't think I'd go use my gym membership so they didn't get me one because they think I'm lazy. Well I am, but I wanted to go to the gym". Another participant stated:

    > At rec centers they usually don't let you go into the work out room unless you're 14 or older or 15 or older. I think that's like kind of a little too much but I guess they don't think that kids under 14 or 15 would be able to work out.

The third key theme we found within PA was that participants felt that their eating habits offset the benefits of PA, and that engaging in this behavior resulted in feeling less motivated to be active. One participant reported, "I'll just stop and eat a whole bunch of candy and not like take care of myself." Another participant said:

> I am motivated but um at the same time I like eating bad food, like I like fried foods. I'll just go home after working out and buy a bunch of French fries and eat them straight. Like I will buy like right after I'm done working out. Yeah I just love food.

Self-Esteem

Participants spent the greatest amount of time during the discussion talking about SE. We identified various experiences related to SE, both positive and negative, identifying three key themes from the data.

1. Interestingly, participants related experiences with low SE to feeling depressed. "On a regular basis [my self-esteem] fluctuates from um extremely low to low… also because I…continuously struggle with um like depression." Another participant noted, "Well, my self-esteem it was bad because… I was just like, I was depressed. I was like dang I need to get it together."

2. Participants quickly moved from discussing negative experiences with SE to a discussion of the effectiveness of positive affirmations and internal validation. "Well when I want to boost my confidence, I say, 'You're a beautiful black queen, and like you're here for a purpose, and God has a purpose for you.' Yeah, I say that to myself multiple times." Another participant noted:

> Write "I am" in a notebook. Like "I am" and something positive after it, so like "I am successful" "I am beautiful" and all that good stuff and then say your… like write it down and say it out loud, and like I've seen results. I'm not even gonna lie, I've seen results.

3. Importantly, many of the girls attend predominantly white schools. A critical theme that arose after reviewing results together the first time was the negative impact that being in predominantly white spaces has on SE. Specifically, participants report examples of ways we are discriminated against, or negatively stereotyped. For example, one participant noted:

> It could impact self-negativity in a sense, seeing nobody else that looks like you, teachers don't look like you, then no groups that you could go to to express yourself, being bullied about what you look like, how you have to keep on answering questions about your hair, teachers pushing you down and thinking that you're not as smart as other kids, not thinking that you live around here, around the school that you go to, just because of how you look.

Other stereotypes that girls reported experiencing included, "Being bad or slow readers," "That we can't swim," "That we're bad at math," and "That teachers expect we'll do worse." Participants also described the "system out there pushing you to not succeed."

Other participants described specific examples that happened to them at school:
(a) At school this [white] guy, he was talking about how he likes Black girls, but he was talking about how I wasn't Black, that I was something else, like that I'm purple, that's how Black I am, and how he's interested in Black girls but not girls as dark as me.
(b) So last year when I was in French, my French teacher accused me that I was smoking weed, that I always come in smelling like weed, and that I'm influencing the white kids, because I was the only Black kid taking French…I tried to tell her I'm not smoking weed. She said "I know you are, don't lie to me." I just felt violated.

Body Image

Some of why participants felt that SE was low related to the way participants felt about BI, which was clearly influenced by social media. Much of the discussion around BI related to social comparison. For example, we noted a very strong beauty ideal that feels out of reach:

1. Comparison to an unachievable beauty ideal. We saw many examples of girls comparing themselves negatively to the ideal body standard. Often, this ideal standard was what they saw on social media, stating, "When you're just like online or on Instagram and you see like oh she's slim thick and you know that kind of like inspires you but then you just look at them and go stuff your face some more." Notably, when asked about what the ideal beauty standard is, many participants discussed it being "slim thick" which they defined as "tiny waist, big butt" or "hourglass basically, enough curve at the top and the bottom to match perfectly, going from slim to thick, like big butt, big boobs but everything else is skinny."

Another participant stated:

> Because I feel that there is almost like a standard or a bar for how a girl's body is supposed to look like and I feel that every single time I try I'm like right below it, but I haven't met it. I don't fit the standard. I can't reach the bar no matter how many times I try. I get real close to it and then I end up not getting it, so I feel completely utterly terrible.

Girls also reported negatively comparing themselves to other girls and women, which frequently happened in gym settings, thereby also impacting their motivation to engage in PA:

When you go into the gym and you see all of these girls with really good bodies, I know it feels for me like internally, and I know it's really not in reality, but internally it feels like a competition kind of.

Another participant noted:

…it's just like their bodies are so fit and I feel like the girls like they just walk around with like their sports bras and like their pants and the guys look at them staring at them with their mouth open and I'm just there with a holey t-shirt and some joggers…it just makes you feel worse.

An important aspect of this unachievable beauty ideal that we noted was that it caused participants to participate in body altering. Girls reported doing things to try and change the way their bodies look, stating, "I'd wear like a regular bra then a sports bra under so it looked like I had bigger boobs," and "I'd just try everything to make my body look like how I wanted, but like it would never happen."

2. A salient theme that arose from participants was the importance of hair. Hair plays a central role in Black and AA culture. Girls reported various ways this impacts BI: "Black people's hair, like that's where our pride is, you know we always have like five different hairstyles. And you know when our hair looks good we feel good." Another participant stated:

The fact that Black girls want to fit into white standards so like a smaller nose or straighter hair, and not really embracing ourselves. Self-esteem really plays into this, like not like loving yourself where you are, you know your hair, the way you look.

Finally, related to hair, we noted the ways we see cultural appropriation happening, and the negative impacts of this:

When white people try to take our styles and they try to wear it off and pass it off as their own, I get kind of annoyed because it's like…you've already damaged our self-esteem clearly, you've already taken away the want to voice our opinion, so you're already taking things away from us, and it just feels like they're trying to take more.

3. The last theme within BI related to the impact of comments from others, which affected girls in different ways. Two related subthemes arose from this theme: a) participants questioned compliments from friends or family on physical appearance and b) the impact of comments from strangers differ. Examples for each are included below:
   a) Specifically, participants dismiss compliments made by family and friends: "when my sister says [a compliment] to me, or like my mom, I'm just like ok I'm like are you biased? I ask sometimes, 'Are you for sure, for sure? Like how does this look on me?'"

Another participant noted a similar feeling:

> …especially like my best friends, especially like [name], they'll be trying to boost my confidence and they'll get irritated with me, because they're like trying to boost my confidence and I'm I just keep on denying… yeah dismissing.

b) Girls also reported that the impact of comments from strangers can be positive. For example, "When someone random comes up to you and compliments you it has like a whole different meaning to you because you don't even know them and they are coming up to you." Alternatively, comments from others can also have negative effects:

> They're not really focused on you as a person and what's on the inside, like your personality and how you are, but they're only focused on you being slim thick or something so it kind of, it does the opposite for me…my self-esteem gets bumped whereas you know if a guy complements you, usually a girl like her self-esteem goes way high, but mine goes really low beause I'm like oh that's all you care about.

Discussion

This study explored Black and AA adolescent girls' experiences with PA, SE, and BI using a participatory approach. This research is particularly timely as it explores the unique experiences of Black and AA girls through providing a platform for the participants themselves to eventually guide what recreational programming should look like (Mowen et al., 2018). By doing so, some of the inequities that exist within the parks and recreation field, particularly when it comes to engaging with Black and AA girls may be addressed (Mowen et al., 2018).

While the young women in this study recognized the benefits of being active, it was clear that the most common reasons, and barriers, to exercise revolved around physical appearance, or seeing "results." Notably, previous research suggests that AA women may have been protected against the thin ideal through differences in cultural expectations of the woman's body (Brown et al., 1998; Molloy & Herzberger, 1998; Parker et al., 1995; Rucker III & Cash, 1992). However, evidence from more recent studies support the findings from this study in suggesting that the unachievable body ideal is very salient, but simply looks different from the white thin ideal (Capodilupo, 2015; Cash & Smolak, 2012). Girls reference the body type "slim-thick" as a prominent theme in how Black and AA girls view the ideal body. Given that the most common reasons and barriers for exercise reported in this study revolve around physical appearance, programming that supports girls in focusing on what their bodies can do, rather than on appearance, may be a beneficial strategy for pushing back against the body ideal (Franzoi, 1995). For example, by connecting the role of physical strength to athletic performance, girls may be more inclined to view their bodies through the lens of function rather than appearance (Abbott & Barber, 2011).

Previous research suggests that AA women are disconnected from the influence of the media, and protected against beauty ideals (Hesse-Biber et al., 2004) given that

the media has not historically been inclusive of diversity (Duke, 2000; Jefferson & Stake, 2009). This is in contrast to our finding around the importance girls place on physical appearance, and the beauty ideal they are confronted with on social media. More recent research supports our findings. For example, in one study conducted with college-aged women, those who were AA showed greater orientation toward physical appearance compared to white women (Gillen & Lefkowitz, 2012). It is possible that the recent proliferation of social media is changing the way girls relate to the media, and subsequently negatively impacting the way they see themselves (Tiggemann et al., 2018). As of 2018, 72% of teens were using Instagram, versus just 51% in 2014-2015 (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Lenhart et al., 2015). Adolescent girls are high social comparers (Kenny et al., 2017) and their frequent social comparison and appearance conversations have been shown to significantly predict body dissatisfaction (Jones, Vigfusdottir, & Lee, 2004). The proliferation of social media use during a period of high social comparison is important and should be addressed when considering health and wellness programming for adolescents. This may be done by including curriculum that encourages girls to reflect on the social media accounts they follow, and to consider identifying more body positive and inclusive accounts to follow.

Importantly, the role that race, racism and discrimination play in the lives of this group of Black and AA girls is evident, and it was important to SFGMM that this was communicated in the results. Different from their white peers, Black and AA girls are not only dealing with the types of BI struggles that all adolescents face, but also are dealing with the impacts of racism and discrimination. This was particularly evident in participants' descriptions of the stereotypes they experience. This intersection of marginalized identities, originally conceptualized by Kimberlé Crenshaw, creates unique compounding and reinforcing experiences not easily understood by people who do not hold these multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989). Critical work on the invisibility of Black women specifically in leisure from Mowatt et al. (2013) states, "Leisure studies would benefit by solely exploring the lived realities of Black women and complexities of intersecting identities within Black women" (p. 652). We propose taking this a step further and including Black and AA girls, as adolescents have unique and important perspectives that differ from adults (Anyon et al., 2018). Importantly, this must be done using Black feminist methodologies and by including Black women and girls as researchers (Mowatt et al., 2013). We therefore cannot overstate the importance of elevating the voices of these young women and considering them as experts in the design of programming. Examples of ways this may be done include parks and recreation professionals adopting youth participatory approaches to work alongside adolescents to tailor health and wellness programming, through the creation and support of youth advisory boards or other youth-led efforts.

Limitations, Strengths and Future Directions

Limitations

This study has various limitations worth noting. One limitation involves the design of the discussion group questions. True community-based participatory research involves the participants as researchers at every step of the way, including in the design of evaluation measures. This group of girls was not directly involved in the design of

the focus group script. However, the standard script from which these questions were adapted was designed and pre-tested with the help of adolescent girls, and questions were designed to be broad, general inquiries about their experiences with PA, SE, and BI. Therefore, we believe questions resonated with this group. Importantly, we began each question by asking about a definition of each term (i.e., PA, SE, and BI), and then decided on a working definition before moving into further exploring their experiences with each. A final and critical limitation of this work involves the social identities held by the primary academic partner. Her various social group memberships, including being white, afford her a great deal of privilege. Therefore, she brings a lens to this work that differs in important ways from the girls with whom she is working closely. This means she must take a critically reflective and humble approach to the work being done together (Muhammad et al., 2015). This can be seen in the ongoing conversations happening between her and the primary community partner, a Black woman, as well as with SFGMM to explore her power and privilege and discuss openly how that may play into the work being done.

Strengths

To our knowledge, this is the first study whereby Black and AA girls participated in the qualitative analysis of data, taking an inclusive evaluation approach to explore themes related to PA, SE and BI. In so doing, we set the stage that this is a valuable and feasible way to collect and analyze qualitative data with adolescents. By having the girls themselves code the qualitative data, we ensured that the themes described truly reflected their lived experiences. Contrary to quantitative methodologies, the qualitative approach also allows for depth and richness of experiences to be shared, which is critical regarding topics as sensitive and nuanced as PA, SE, and BI. In addition, girls are authors on this manuscript, given the significant role they played in drafting the results section, as well as their input into various other portions of the paper. This approach fills an important gap not only in programming, but also in research methodologies that engage young people as partners. An additional strength of this work relates directly to the limitation above related to social identities. By engaging in deep reflexivity as part of the project, the academic partner has been able to unpack implicit biases, and explore (with the goal of minimizing) the role that power and privilege play in the interactions with the girls (Arai & Kivel, 2009).

Future Directions

Importantly, this qualitative analysis represents a first step in a very iterative process. As a follow up to this work, girls who were part of this experience will soon learn focus group facilitation and will conduct similar focus groups with additional girls in their community in order to increase the sample size. Upon gaining greater insight into more girls' experiences with PA, SE, and BI, SFGMM will then adapt the standard SFG curriculum in order to create more inclusive and culturally relevant health and wellness programming. Examples of adaptations include highlighting a Melanin Magic "superhero", so girls may see examples of Black and AA women and girls either locally, nationally or internationally who are working in health and wellness arenas. Girls will then serve as leaders to deliver the adapted curriculum to younger girls in the community.

Implications for Practice

Clearly, there is a critical need to better understand the lived experiences of Black and AA girls when it comes to PA, SE, and BI, not only because their perceptions are unique and differ from other groups (i.e., white adolescent girls and Black adult women), but also to avoid assumptions or stereotyping. Because of the position of parks and recreation professionals, and the unique ways they support youth, an opportunity exists to engage in participatory approaches to work alongside young people and co-create health and wellness programming, such as a tailored SFG curriculum that is relevant to their lives.

This work has important implications for parks and recreation in two primary ways. First, it is a model for how to engage in an inclusive, equitable way with young people as partners in the research process. Parks and recreation is the ideal space in which to engage in inclusive evaluation. With its long-standing history of offering programming aimed at meeting the needs of specific communities, parks and recreation centers serve as community hubs, and often have established trust and relationships among their communities. NRPA summarizes their philosophy, saying

> True to the very philosophy of public parks and recreation is the idea that all people—no matter the color of their skin, age, income level, or ability—have access to programs, facilities, places, and spaces that make their lives and communities great. Parks and recreation truly build communities—communities for all ("Social Equity," 2019).

As Mowatt et al. (2013) state, "leisure studies is in a rich position to advance the field and offer important contributions to exploring the context, behavior, and motivations of Black women's participation in leisure" (p. 654). This study provides a model for doing so with Black and AA adolescent girls. Because of the strong relationships parks and recreation has with its communities, it is well-suited to adopt youth participatory approaches to co-create relevant, tailored programming for young people. Specifically, for example, parks and recreation spaces may consider creating and compensating youth advisory boards or supporting other youth-led efforts whereby young people can review and adapt programming to fit their needs.

Second, the study provides insights into the unique experiences of Black and AA girls that may be the foundation of culturally adapted health and wellness programming. For example, PA programming such as SFG that highlights what the body can do, over physical appearance may be one solution to supporting Black and AA girls in engaging in PA. More specifically, once a culturally adapted SFG program is fully co-created with the leadership of SFGMM, it may eventually serve as a culturally responsive program that may be further tailored and offered across various communities in parks and recreation settings. Other important aspects to consider in developing and offering culturally responsive programming include naming the program in a way that honors girls' identities (e.g., Melanin Magic), having AA women serve as coaches for the program, and creating space for open discussions around the unique ways participants experience BI and SE.

Conclusion

This study used a participatory approach to explore perceptions and experiences of PA, SE, and BI among a group of Black and AA adolescent girls. When provided a platform to participate in the evaluation process through YPAR principles, participants reported a strong orientation toward appearance in ways unique to their lived experience as Black and AA adolescent girls, which should be considered when designing health and wellness programming. This research is particularly timely as it provides a framework, through youth participatory approaches, for participants themselves to eventually guide what health and wellness programming may look like. Youth participatory approaches are an important way by which parks and recreation professionals may meaningfully engage with young people, in order to co-create programming tailored to their lived experiences. In so doing, we may address some of the inequities that exist within parks and recreation, specifically related to engaging with Black and AA girls to fill the gap in programming for this demographic, thereby supporting health equity and enhancing social justice. NPRA reminds us that "on any given day, someone is being positively affected through parks and recreation" (Our Three Pillars, 2019). It is our hope that as a field, we critically reflect on the ways we are engaging with our communities, to ensure that all people continue to be positively affected by parks and recreation.

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Regular Paper

Promoting Team Sport Participation among Older Women

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Executive Summary

Sport and other leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) can provide meaningful opportunities to promote health and wellness in later life. For women specifically, sport provides opportunities to improve physical and mental health, increase social support, and experience empowerment as they resist stereotypes about age and gender. Unfortunately, compared to men or younger women, older women generally participate in lower rates and face increased constraints to participation in sport. The purpose of this study was therefore to identify programmatic strategies that parks and recreation (P&R) agencies might pursue for promoting and facilitating team sports as a means of encouraging older women to remain physically active. In this qualitative study, researchers conducted six focus groups with 64 women, aged 55-85 who were currently participating in softball as part of the Senior Games program. Focus group interviews lasting 50-70 minutes were conducted by two researchers at locations chosen by the participants. Focus groups were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed thematically.

Six themes emerged related to ways P&R professionals can facilitate sport participation for older women: 1) tailored rules, 2) team organization and development, 3) player recruitment, 4) promotion outlets, 5) facilities and resources available, and 6)

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community and organizational support. Rule modifications were perceived as a way to help older women remain safe and free from sport-related injuries. In terms of team organization and development, P&R professionals need to educate seniors and provide opportunities for sport programs. For example, a brochure or pamphlet could illustrate the competitive and noncompetitive sports programs available for older adults and the benefits of maintaining LTPA in old age. Additionally, P&R professionals can provide opportunities for seniors to engage in competitive team sports by hosting meetings, socials or off-season and foul-weather practices. Most respondents had been personally recruited by someone else, but they recognized the limits of their social networks. As such, some respondents indicated it would be helpful if P&R professionals offered community interest meetings to allow potential participants opportunities to ask questions, meet other players or learn if this is the right activity for them. In terms of promotion, findings suggest that P&R agencies should utilize social media, local newspapers and print flyers. P&R professionals may also need to help teams get started with using social media. For example, they could provide instructional classes to teach teams how to set up their own social media sites, or how to incorporate team info into departmental social media sites, such as Facebook groups, or how to increase web traffic. Regarding facilities and resources, communities were seen as favoring youth sports in terms of funding, equipment, and access to facilities. P&R agencies are therefore recommended to provide a more equitable balance. Supporting and promoting opportunities for older adults to engage in sport within local communities supports the model of successful aging and promotes LTPA benefits for seniors.

Keywords

Competition, older adults, physical activity, recreation programs, Senior Games, softball, sport

Introduction

Adults over the age of 65 are expected to constitute nearly a quarter of the U.S. population by 2050 (Ortman, Velkoff, & Hogan, 2014). As the population ages, more research is needed to understand how to improve quality of life for older adults. Research suggests leisure, and specifically physically active leisure, can play an important role in adapting to age-related changes (e.g., retirement, widowhood, disability) and in overall health and well-being in later life (Kelley, Little, Lee, Birendra, & Henderson, 2014). Sport, as a means of leisure-time physical activity (LTPA), has the opportunity to positively impact the overall health and well-being of individuals and prevent declines associated with physical functioning in later life (Baker, Meisner, Logan, Kungl, & Weir, 2009). For older women, in particular, sport provides opportunities to experience social connectedness, enjoyment, and feelings of empowerment as they resist stereotypes about age and gender (Dionigi, 2005; Litchfield & Dionigi, 2012).

Opportunities to participate in sport and other types of LTPA are often provided to older adults by local parks and recreation (P&R) departments and senior recreation centers (Bedimo-Rung, Mowen, & Cohen, 2005; Hickerson et al., 2008; Hutchinson, & Warner, 2014; Kelley et al., 2014). Burns and Robinson (2017) argue that P&R managers will need to increase their facilities and services to meet the needs of the aging

population. While there is a general understanding of the value of LTPA and leisure for older women, little research has addressed their experiences in playing team sports. In addition, limited research exists exploring programmatic strategies for effectively facilitating such opportunities. This research therefore aimed to identify programmatic strategies that P&R agencies might pursue for promoting and facilitating team sports as a means for encouraging older women to remain physically active in later life.

Leisure-Time Physical Activity and Successful Aging

A large body of literature has studied and documented the benefits of participation in LTPA in later life, including benefits to physical health and reduced risk for all-cause mortality (e.g., Sun, Norman, & While, 2013; Talbot, Morrell, Fleg, & Metter, 2007). LTPA has been found to predict positive emotions, such as optimism, life satisfaction, and psychological well-being along older adults with loneliness (Kim, Lee, Chun, Han, & Heo, 2017). Additionally, LTPA participation can improve older adults' likelihood of successful aging (Baker et al., 2009). Successful aging takes a positive approach and defines the aging process as maintaining physical and mental health by delaying the declines often associated with aging (Meisner, Weir, & Baker, 2013). The concept of successful aging suggests LTPA participation can aid in reducing declines associated with aging, maintaining cognitive functioning, promoting social interactions, and improving emotional gains. Physically active older adults are independent, engaged socially, and maintain cognitive abilities, and therefore considered to be aging successfully (Meisner et al., 2013). The successful aging concept has received some critique, however, related to its narrow definition and potential to marginalize those seen as not aging well (e.g., those with disability or chronic illness) (Martinson & Berridge, 2015). Therefore, as suggested by Rowe and Kahn (2015), the purpose of this study is not to blame or stigmatize individuals based on their health but rather to identify programmatic strategies that institutions (e.g., through policies or facilities) might embrace to promote sport as a means to facilitate LTPA and successful aging.

Despite numerous documented LTPA benefits in later life, most research findings report that LTPA and recreational sport participation decline with age (Pike, 2015; Rice, 2015). Similarly, research suggests most older adults do not meet minimum guidelines for PA to provide health benefits (Azagba & Sharaf, 2014). These statistics are particularly problematic for older women, as they are less likely than older men or younger women to achieve regular LTPA (Sun et al., 2013). Constraints to older adults' LTPA participation include poor health, lack of companions with whom to participate, and lack of interest (Moschny, Platen, Klaaßen-Mielke, Trampisch, & Hinrichs, 2011). In addition, perceptions of aging and ageism can affect LTPA participation among older adults (Massie & Meisner, 2019). Constraints more prevalent for older women than older men include lack of opportunities for sports or leisure and lack of transport (Moschny, Platen, Klaaßen-Mielke, Trampisch, & Hinrichs, 2011).

Physical Activity and Sport among Older Women

For older women, organized programs that facilitate participation in sport or LTPA can increase participation and enjoyment (Theriault, Shores, West, & Naar, 2010). For example, in an exergaming study of older women in a Nintendo Wii Sports program, participation "deepened social connections within the group and provided a basis for shared experiences with younger aged family members" as well as "an improved sense of physical, social and psychological well-being" (Wollersheim et al., 2010). Similarly,

an experimental study of older women in a Pilates program found participants' risk of falls was reduced through improvements in dynamic balance, flexibility, reaction time, and muscle strength (Irez, Ozdemir, Evin, Irez, & Korkusuz, 2011). Organized sport also provides older women with opportunities to manage their identity, experience community, and experience empowerment (Litchfield & Dionigi, 2011). While sport may not be ideal for all older adults, it may provide a unique opportunity for older women to enjoy a range of benefits and fulfill a range of motivations beyond simply exercise, including hedonic enjoyment, social interaction, and psychological benefits (Liechty, Genoe, & Marston, 2017). A study by Berlin, Kruger, and Klenosky (2018) found older women involved in exercise-based activities highlighted fitness outcomes, whereas those involved in sports were motivated more by social and psychological benefits. This suggests sport programs may facilitate LTPA engagement for older women beyond what more traditional forms of PA are capable of doing.

Meanwhile, other research documents how older women have lower rates of participation in sport and LTPA and face increased barriers to participation (Van Tuyckom, Scheerder, & Bracke, 2010). One strategy for increasing older women's participation in LTPA may be to facilitate organized sport participation. Currently, limited research has explored programmatic strategies for facilitating such participation, and research exploring the facilitation of older women's team sport is even more limited.

Purpose

P&R agencies provide a variety of services for older adults to participate in LTPA, including sports programs through local recreation facilities, senior centers, or Senior Games (Cardenas, Henderson, & Wilson, 2009). P&R agencies are especially important for providing easily accessible and affordable local programs for older adults (Cochran, Rothschadl & Rudick, 2009). P&R facilities, particularly in rural areas, are often the primary source for providing older adults with opportunities, services, and programs to participate in and maintain PA (Henderson, Casper, Wilson, & Dern, 2012). The purpose of this research is to identify programmatic strategies P&R agencies might pursue for promoting and facilitating team sports as a means for encouraging older women to remain physically active.

Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

Participants included 64 women, ages 55-85 (mean = 69.3), currently participating in softball with the North Carolina Senior Games program. Participants were recruited through emails to team captains and coaches, who arranged with the researchers the time and place of the focus group for the team. Participants did not receive incentives for their involvement, but expressed enthusiasm to participate in order to share their stories and advocate for older women's sport. Researchers held focus groups for six teams with five to 16 participants in each. Participants were asked to complete a form collecting socioeconomic and demographic information, however, only 42 of the 64 women completed it (See Table 1). While participants were proud of their softball involvement and wanted to have their real names used in the paper, they did not want disparaging remarks to be associated with their identities for fear of damaging their

relationships with these agencies. As such, players' names have occasionally been withheld.

Table 1
Socioeconomic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants

Variable	N
Age (Mean Age = 69.3)	
50-54	1
60-64	18
55-59	3
65-69	14
70-74	16
75-79	8
80-84	1
Missing	4
Age Started Playing Softball:	
Under 20	17
20s	6
30s	1
40s	0
50s	2
60s	7
70s	1
Missing	30
Marital Status:	
Married or Living with Partner	22
Divorced	6
Widowed	11
Never married	3
Missing	22
Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaska Native	1
African American or Black	1
White or Caucasian	40
Missing	22
Highest Level of Education Completed	
8th grade or less	2
High School	13
Some college or Associate's Degree	12
Bachelor's Degree	7
Graduate or Professional Degree	8
Missing	22
Work Status	
Full-Time	9
Part-Time	5
Retired	28
Missing	22
Economic Status	
My finances are adequate most of the time	9
My finances are usually adequate	10
My finances are always adequate	22
Missing	23

Focus group interviews lasting 50-70 minutes were conducted by two researchers, one to moderate and the other to take notes, at locations chosen by the participants (e.g., local restaurant, public park). Focus groups followed a predetermined set of questions, however, researchers encouraged flexibility to maintain a conversational tone and to allow participants to broach topics they deemed meaningful. Examples of questions included, "In what ways does your age present opportunities or barriers to playing softball?", "Which community organizations help you play softball and how?", "Which community organizations hinder your ability to play softball and how?" Participants were given time to answer as a team, as well as to individually share personal stories and responses. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

To allow findings to be grounded in the data, analysis was approached without a specific theory in mind. Two researchers performed qualitative data analysis through inductive coding of focus group transcripts and notes taken by the researchers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). First, researchers read and re-read the transcripts for an overall picture of the data. Then they individually open coded the data and combined those codes into categories. To facilitate analysis, each researcher also wrote analytic memos to capture important emerging information. Next, researchers met to discuss the application of codes, compare coding systems, and refine categories into overarching themes. Researcher agreement on the coding of the transcripts was greater than 80%, the cut-off recommended by Creswell (2013), and any discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached. To improve trustworthiness, researchers used note-taking during data collection and memo-writing during data analysis. In addition, member checks were conducted in which a summary of the findings was shared with participants to allow them to confirm that they were accurately represented.

Results

In the focus groups, participants provided numerous insights into what programmatic elements of their softball experiences hindered and facilitated their participation. Six themes emerged related to programmatic strategies for promoting sport participation among older women: tailored rules, team organization and development, player recruitment, promotion, facilities and resources available, and community and organizational support.

Tailored Rules

During the focus groups, participants frequently discussed rule modifications made for Senior Games softball, which they felt helped facilitate their participation. Some players highlighted their value by saying, "There's [...] an extra player, there's [...] extra bases, there's [...] extra rules to provide for the safety and the protection of the athletes." (Frank, Why Nots). "We can have five in the outfield, we play with 11." (Becky, Golden Girls). Participants suggested the special rules allowed teams to play competitively while adjusting for their reduced speed. Additionally, players run through bases, which players felt provided a sense of ease and promoted safety. Participants were aware they might be injured while playing and agreed modifications helped them remain safe and prevent serious injury. While team members recognized the risks they took, they continued to play anyway, due to the love and passion they have for softball, acknowledging that modifications helped reduce their expectations of

injury. As Freida explained, "...when people ask about aren't you scared you're going to get hurt? You're going to get hurt in just about anything you do. But after you explain to them, there are rules on this league to help you not to get hurt. It makes it a lot safer to play at this age." (Wanna Bees). Participants overwhelmingly emphasized that modifications were implemented for safety and injury prevention; they found them to be fair and appreciated them.

Community Support

When asked what support respondents felt the teams received from their local communities, some teams reported both financial support and general encouragement. Pitt County players indicated their team remains stable and consistent due primarily to support they receive from local schools and recreation agencies. For example, Andrea stated, "We wouldn't have a team without community schools and recreation groups" (Pitt County). She went on to explain the community pays nearly all of the Pitt County teams' fees to compete at the state and national championship games. Team members from the Wanna Bees also recognized community support that helps them pay for game and tournament fees. "I worked for [local grocery store]. They would give us donations. $500 a year."

Afterburners team members also reported feeling supported and encouraged by local agencies, including the use of local recreational facilities. "There's a lot of support from the recreational facilities." (Melody, Afterburners). Golden Girls' players reported that their senior center promotes participation in Senior Games and the Senior Games program and contributes to the success of the team by helping to fund games and tournaments throughout the year. "The senior center...the senior games. Softball is one of the senior games" (Several team members, Golden Girls). Although many teams felt supported by their senior center or recreation agencies, there was an overall sense community and organizational support could be improved.

Participants reported feeling as though local senior centers should financially support their teams because of the recognition and pride they provide the community after winning. "We all are senior citizens, and we all are on a fixed income. It all comes out of our pocket: balls, bats, our entry fee." (Name withheld). "They do not have any connections. They don't sponsor us. We do this at our own expense." (Name withheld). On the other hand, participants often reported that players may not engage with the community enough to gain the support necessary to maintain the team throughout the year. Participants indicated how some players do not take advantage of community resources or actively seek community support. "It's out there. They just don't take advantage of it." (Name withheld). Members from one team reported they had been successful when they actively sought monetary support for game and tournament fees. "And there's sponsors when we're going to the senior games or playing the games." (Name withheld). The team also noted others may not be as fortunate to have support from their community. "...a lot of counties are not near as fortunate as we are...(Name withheld). This player also recognized that the size of the team may contribute to the support available. "[In other communities,] there wasn't enough people to have anything."

Player Recruitment

To understand how players were recruited, researchers specifically asked how they had come to play on their respective teams. Most respondents reported being personally

asked by another player or coach to join the team. In addition to being invited, others indicated they had seen team advertisements or articles in the newspaper. Betty recalled, "I saw an advertisement in the paper and I came and played. I called, and they said, 'Oh, yeah! Come on!'" (Afterburners). Trish read a local newspaper article, "It said Senior Games were looking for players and had a meeting at the community center. I came down here and that's how I started." (Wanna Bees). Some players wanted other communities to promote the sport in those areas to increase their available opponents. One recruitment method frequently utilized and suggested was to have community meetings involving existing players. Margaret suggested, "I guess they could have an open meeting…We want all of you to invite one person to come who may be interested in participating in some type of senior activity... If you're trying to get the word out, we're probably the best resource that they've got because we're already committed." (Afterburners). Meetings could raise awareness and promote the benefits of competitive sport participation for older adults, while easing fears about injury by describing available safety precautions.

Though participants recognized personal invitations as the most frequent recruitment method, many reported difficulty in recruiting others who feared being injured or were disinterested in being physically active. As Margaret explained, "You know, when you say you're playing ball, the perception of that is, oh wow, you're gonna get out there and get hurt." (Afterburners). Respondents suggested this proves the need for community support and for improved awareness of opportunities for older adults. Margaret offered one solution. "If we could portray the fact that it's healthy and it's fun. That what we do is healthy and fun." Participants emphasized the need to explain the benefits of playing softball and how it can be a safe, enjoyable, and healthy way to remain active in later life. While participants reported they were thankful for local P&R departments, they wanted enhanced promotion of sport opportunities as an option for older adults. Linda explained it as, "I don't think people know that there is a group of women who is 65 years old and we play softball, and we are very competitive, and we are in Senior Games." (Golden Girls).

Promotion

Based upon previous comments, researchers asked follow-up questions on the promotional methods players would recommend, beyond word of mouth, to promote softball among older women. Some participants felt promotion should begin with increasing recognition and awareness of existing teams and opportunities. Margaret (Afterburners) suggested increasing the awareness of local teams would be the best resource for promoting the sport, improving the value of the senior center and promoting overall LTPA benefits for seniors. Several teams suggested churches and Senior Centers would be good resources for spreading information, engaging seniors and recruiting players. Carol stated, "I think the Senior Center should definitely [be a place to recruit potential players], and I think the city park should also." (Silver Belles). Additionally, many women felt that local papers should be used. For instance, Margaret (Afterburners) stated that creating an ad in the local paper would be a good way to reach seniors in her community.

All women agreed social media should be used to share information about upcoming events and recruit additional players. For example, Dee said, "Create Linkedin groups, create Facebook groups that are Masters sports interest groups or

something. Create event pages on Facebook." (Why Nots) and Debbie added, "We all use Facebook to update our fans, and they love it. If P&R department would use Facebook to show games, have live feeds for games. And if they could actually watch that would help get the word out." (Why Nots). More than half of respondents reported using Facebook, more than two-thirds used email, all reported reading their local newspaper, and almost 75% owned and used smartphones. One team even reported using social media to connect with their fan base. Participants suggested that improved promotion could facilitate both player recruitment and community support.

Team Organization

In addition to promoting and supporting existing teams, participants discussed the need to increase opportunities for participation and competition by organizing new teams. Most teams reported they started based on the interest and desire of a single participant or core group of participants who loved to play softball. "I saw Judy one day…she said, 'We're having a meeting. You come, we need you.' I got there and they said, 'You're too young. You can't play with us [in the 65 and over league] but we'll get you started on a team.' I started calling people, and I got the Silver Belles started up." (Beth, Golden Girls). Several participants shared similar stories of team development. Betty reported, "We started it. Not this whole group started the team, but we came to play with them." (Silver Belles). Another less reported method of team development and organization was recruiting players of another sport. Some respondents indicated members of their team had been part of a basketball team or another competitive sport. "[I got involved] with the Senior Games [by] throwing ball. [Note: The softball throw is an activity in Senior Games similar to the shot put.]…[For me, softball] started co-ed, but there is nothing in the state for the Senior Games co-ed, so it went to just women and men teams." (Peggy, Wanna Bees). Participants frequently reported they desired a sport that better suited their history of playing recreational or church softball and desired support in starting up new teams for those without access.

Facilities and Resources Available

Next, participants discussed their access to facilities, fields, and available resources needed to play softball. Several teams reported having to use personal connections in the community or the parks department to schedule fields. "We have a contact person that we go to, and we contact, and they take care of the field for us, makes sure the door is open, makes sure of the time" (Name withheld). Another team indicated, "We are fortunate to have our own field." (Name withheld). However, the gratitude and fortune of teams were not equally shared among participants. Although one team reported having consistent access to a field, overall participants felt that younger teams and men's sports teams had greater access to facilities and resources. "We have even tried to get a field at the city park, and they say, 'No. We have too many other teams practicing.' The youth. We are way in the background. They're not concerned with Senior Centers playing softball." (Name withheld). Lack of support and access to resources and facilities was mentioned often. "One thing about our age group, is that you can hardly get fields. It's an interest. They look at our age and they discriminate against us." (Name withheld). From another player, "Our biggest challenge has been to find fields to practice on." Women from a fourth team reported having access to a field. However, they were concerned with the quality and lack of care provided by the community to maintain the field. "The city…[goes] around and take[s] care of all

the other fields but not this one." (Name withheld). When asked if there was another field they would like to use, another player reported, "The fields with the lights, but we would definitely have to pay for those." (Name withheld). Payment for fields and access was a concern that resonated throughout interviews. "We all are senior citizens and we all are on a fixed income. It all comes out of our pocket: balls, bats, our entry fee. It all comes out of our pocket." (Name withheld). Participants explained that because taxes pay for the fields, they felt entitled to fair and equal access. "We pay taxes. My tax money went to that." (Name withheld).

Management Implications

The findings provide insight into strategies P&R departments available to promote team sports among older women including mitigating constraints faced. Although theory was not applied initially, it became clear when analyzing the data that the Hierarchical Leisure Constraints Theory (HLCT) was relevant. Scholars use HLCT as a lens to understand the factors that prevent participation, the formation of personal leisure preferences, enjoyment of activities, and engagement level (Godbey, Crawford, & Shen, 2010; Jackson, 2005). Leisure constraints have been studied to understand leisure among older adults (Son, Kerstetter, & Mowen, 2009). Within the HLCT, there are three leisure constraint categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. HLCT considers ways individuals negotiate constraints in order to participate. This section will discuss the findings in light of HLCT, connect to existing literature, and provide recommendations to professionals for mitigating constraints and promoting sport opportunities for older women.

Intrapersonal Constraints

Intrapersonal constraints are individually based factors inhibiting leisure participation or enjoyment, such as fear or lacking self-confidence (Godbey, Crawford, & Shen, 2010). Study participants described fear of injury as a potential constraint to playing sport, and viewed rule modifications as critical to remaining safe and free from sport-related injuries while maintaining the pace of the game. For instance, rule modifications have reduced the need to slide into a base, where injuries are much more likely to happen (Janda, Wojyts, Hankin, Benedict, & Hesinger, 1990). While having an 11th player on the field may not directly reduce injuries, it recognizes that older adults are likely to be slower and cover less ground. Having a fifth player in the outfield reduces the need to sprint quickly or dive to the ground to make a play on the ball, both of which might lead to injury. Findings also suggest implications related to rules modifications. First, professionals should evaluate whether they can modify rules, facilities, or equipment in a given sport, to promote safety and encourage participation throughout the lifespan. Second, P&R professionals should highlight the use of modified rules when recruiting new participants in order to alleviate concerns about safety and ability.

Another potential intrapersonal constraint from the findings was a sense that older women's sport did not receive support from the community or P&R agencies. Although the interaction with others may also be considered an interpersonal constraint, some participants suggested that a lack of support may be internalized to reduce an individual's preference to participate. Previous research suggests that negative societal attitudes toward aging can create constraints to participation in sport or other LTPA

for older adults (Dionigi, 2006; Grant, 2012). Given that many respondents identified a lack of community and organizational support, P&R agencies should evaluate how supportive their policies and actions are related to programs for older adults. While most professionals would likely report they value older adults, many agencies lack intentionality in how they allocate fields, equipment and other resources (Belza, B. and the PRC-HAN Physical Activity Conference Planning Workgroup, 2007). Without a conscious effort to evaluate practices in place, P&R professionals may be unintentionally discouraging older adults from participating. In addition to analyzing how resources are allocated, agencies are encouraged to have an open discussion as to how resources should be allocated.

To increase encouragement and support for older women's sport, P&R professionals are encouraged to develop relationships with community newspapers and other outlets. Promotion should also extend beyond the department to community news outlets by sending in press releases to share game times and results. To make games more newsworthy, press releases could highlight players or team successes, capture pictures of big plays, create and recognize MVPs or Rookies of the Year. While practitioners might feel they are unable to heavily promote all programs and events, opportunities for seniors might be given priority due to the decrease in LTPA associated with aging (Dionigi, 2006; Meisner et al., 2013).

Interpersonal Constraints

Most participants reported having been invited to join a team by another member or coach, suggesting that the lack of such an invitation might create an interpersonal constraint to participation. Interpersonal constraints refer to issues related to other people such as lack of a companion with whom to recreate or disapproval of a given activity by family members (Shaw & Henderson, 2005). For women, social relationships may serve as both an enabler and a constraint as women are less likely than men to lack social leisure. Therefore, P&R professionals might help facilitate participation by ensuring invitations are available widely. Senior Center employees might ask about past team sport participation in initial conversations with new participants, while other P&R professionals might reach out to large employers to promote programs and recruit sponsors. To increase the network of players, agencies need to consider who might be attracted to a sport and who would be engaged by promotional efforts (Young & Callary, 2018). In this study, respondents' suggestions that residents are often unaware opportunities for competitive softball exist for older women and support Young and Callary's assertion that information needs to be shared with potential participants so they can better understand the potential the "richness of experience [sport] may offer" (p. 264).

Because respondents highlighted that one of the most enjoyable things about playing competitive softball was the social support they received from participation (see Choi, 2018), this could also be provided as a benefit in marketing materials or recruitment efforts. Previous research shows many older adults currently suffer from social isolation. The chance to be part of a team may be especially attractive to them (Baker, Fraser-Thomas, Dionigi & Horton, 2010). Additionally, because some respondents had others indicate they were "too old" to play softball, P&R professionals should invest effort into promoting softball, or team sport participation in general, as a viable opportunity for older adult women. To do this, promotion efforts should include pictures of older adult women playing softball, not just within their marketing

efforts targeting seniors. Lastly, some respondents indicated it could be helpful if P&R professionals offer and promote community interest meetings to allow interested participants opportunities to ask questions, meet other players or learn if this is the right activity and social environment for them.

Interview responses suggest the need for local P&R agencies to collaborate with senior centers in order to engage local seniors and promote social interaction related to sports programs. In terms of media outlets, results from this research suggest P&R agencies should utilize social media, local newspapers, and print flyers. Approximately 34% of Americans ages 65 and up say they use social networking sites such as Facebook or Twitter (Pew Research Center, 2017). While several of the teams interviewed currently use social media to post updates on games and share their achievements with the local community, P&R professionals may need to help other teams get started with using social media. For example, they could provide instructional classes to teach teams how to set up their own social media sites, how to incorporate team info into departmental social media sites, such as Facebook groups, or how to increase web traffic. In order to encourage the social aspect of social media, thereby capturing the attention of other seniors, P&R professionals might encourage participants to post pictures of their participation by having a photo contest, asking them to tag their friends, creating a hashtag to use with their posts, for example, #NeverTooOld.

Structural Constraints

Finally, numerous participation reported structural leisure constraints, which refer to non-human factors such as lack of money, time, or opportunities (Jackson, 2005). Since research has suggested that older women have limited opportunities to participate in sport and LTPA (Van Tuyckom, Scheerder, & Bracke, 2010), it is important for P&R professionals to organize teams and leagues targeted at this population. Participants in the current study provided insight for doing so. While previous research by Young and Callary (2014) emphasizes potential differences for coaching older adults, they do not go so far as to identify steps that P&R professionals might take in terms of team organization and development. Unlike their youth counterparts, teams in the current study were primarily developed based on the interest and desire of the women who have organized them, rather than by P&R professionals. However, because P&R agencies are responsible to educate seniors of the benefits of PA in old age (Grove et al., 2016) P&R professionals should engage in promoting team sports for older adults. Given that past research indicates P&R agencies often provide support and maintenance for senior sports programs, the participants using these facilities are a good place to start when developing new opportunities (Henderson et al., 2012). In order to ensure access to enough potential participants, smaller communities may need to work together on a regional level.

Specific recommendations for developing teams include raising awareness of LTPA benefits among participants of local P&R programs and senior centers, with competitive team sports as one of many opportunities for being active. Respondents indicated the people they attempted to recruit to their teams were often previously unaware of resources and activities available for older adults or how those activities might benefit them. This suggests P&R professionals need to provide additional LTPA opportunities, competitive and noncompetitive, better promote existing programs or both. For example, a brochure or pamphlet could illustrate the competitive and noncompetitive

sports programs available for older adults and the benefits of maintaining LTPA in old age. P&R professionals might promote team sport participation among older adults through more intentional programming, such as hosting interest meetings, socials or off-season and foul-weather practices. For example, a special event targeted at older adults, "Picnic and Play Ball—no previous experience needed" might help identify potential players. Health care personnel and facilities could also work together to promote LTPA opportunities. For example, when educating patients of the benefits of maintaining PA throughout the lifespan, local doctors might promote team sports as one of many opportunities available to older adults.

Finally, participants commonly described structural leisure constraints related to financial support and resources, suggesting their communities seemed to prioritize providing fields for youth sports while older adult teams often lacked access to quality fields. This can have a negative effect on the players' ability to maintain play and continue participation (Young, 2011). Because P&R agencies are often responsible for organizing and maintaining senior sports programs (Grove et al., 2016), it falls on P&R practitioners to ensure recreation and LTPA opportunities available to older adults are affordable and accessible. Due to financial concerns among many older adults, researchers suggest financial support from P&R agencies may help promote participation (Belza et al., 2007). For instance, they could provide a policy that reduces the participation fees for older adults. In the current system, an overwhelming amount of the burden falls on individuals. As such, team sports may appeal more strongly to those from the middle and upper class who can afford the travel or equipment costs (Carr, Smith, Weir, & Horton, 2018). One way to navigate the financial constraint related to equipment would be for previous players to pass down needed sports and personal equipment (in the case of softball: gloves, cleats, bats, balls, and sports clothing). Alternatively, local recreational leagues or community agencies might donate or even rent the equipment.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study explores the implications of how P&R professionals might promote older adult LTPA through team sports programs. Several study limitations warrant discussion. First, participants were predominantly Caucasian, middle-class women. Cultural and regional factors might account for the community and organizational support reported by participants. Furthermore, participants in this study all played on women-only teams. Promotional strategies may appear different for LTPA and sports programs for co-ed or older adult men. Additionally, a potential problem of promoting sports among older adults is that individuals may need to be assessed for physical fitness and health prior to beginning a sport, to ensure there are no adverse health events during the activity. Doctors and hospitals may therefore be reluctant to advise or promote sports among older adults due to greater risks for this population. As such, walking has been proposed as one of the best activities to promote LTPA among this population. However, research from this study (presented elsewhere, see Liechty, West, Son, & Naar, 2017; Naar et al., 2017; Wong, Son, West, Naar, Liechty, 2018 and Choi et al., 2018) suggests social and emotional benefits may be substantial and provide sufficient justification for consideration in recommendations made for continuing participation into later adulthood.

Future research should continue to explore team sport among a diverse range of older adult populations in a variety of settings. Previous research on competitive sports is often on white, middle-class participants because that is who is currently participating. Considering diversity among those aging is increasing, it is important for future research to incorporate more diverse (e.g., racial/ethnic, socioeconomic status) individuals across different regions. As such, authors recommend looking for other ways in which older racial/ethnic minorities and low-income individuals are participating in team sports, such as with churches, local clubs, or businesses that support community activities.

Additionally, research on males found that participation in LTPA in later life was correlated with sport participation earlier in the life course, leading authors to conclude that promoting LTPA in later life might be best achieved by promoting sport participation earlier in the life course (Aggio et al., 2017). It would therefore be helpful to know if women's sport participation earlier in the life course is more strongly associated with LTPA than other activity domains. Similarly, the influence of Title IX has led to more women participating in sports as young girls. Is sport participation earlier in life now associated with greater sport participation later in life? If so, a similar conclusion could be drawn to suggest promoting sport participation earlier in the life course might help lead to healthier aging among women. Does sport involvement later in the life course, perhaps 60s or 70s, also correlate more strongly with LTPA or ability among adult women when they reach their 70s, 80s or even 90s? An important aspect how sport might impede aging is whether it unintentionally leads to a social disconnect among individuals who keep active and those who do not (Dionigi, 2017). Dionigi warns readers of the potential for a society that values LTPA and productivity in later life at the expense of devaluing other, more passive pursuits, such as playing a musical instrument, playing cards, or watching television. The problem with this type of thought is that sports disproportionately serve the middle class. Thus, P&R professionals are cautioned to consider "finding ways to make sport more appealing and accessible" (p. 159).

Conclusion

Older adults are encouraged to engage in LTPA across the lifespan to promote successful aging. Findings highlight the usefulness of the Hierarchical Leisure Constraints theory for understanding factors that inhibit leisure participation, as well as practical strategies for mitigating constraints. Findings also contribute to the discussion of leisure constraints and the difficulty in viewing them as distinct categories. Some scholars have questioned whether intrapersonal constraints can be located within the individual if they are largely influenced by societal and cultural factors (Godbey et al., 2010). In the current study, participants indicated that lack of validation or support from local P&R agencies or communities may have contributed to intrapersonal constraints. This finding suggests intrapersonal constraints are not exclusively to be overcome on an individual level but might also be addressed by communities and P&R professionals. Findings also suggest practical strategies for P&R professionals to reach and engage older adults in LTPA and team sports. Additional research from this study (presented elsewhere, see Choi et al., 2018) and others suggests sport enjoyment may be more likely to persist into old age than preferences for other activity types (Aggio

et al., 2017). Supporting and promoting community-based sport opportunities for older adults promotes LTPA and supports the model of successful aging. Readers are encouraged to be cautious with results, however, as sport among older adults is not a panacea to address aging related issues. Instead, sport is one alternative available to promote successful aging and meet community needs.

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Public Perceptions of Local Parks and Recreation as an Essential Community Service During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant economic challenges to state and local governments, resulting in funding cuts for many government services, including parks and recreation (Young, 2020). As park and recreation agencies work to sustain and increase funding during and beyond the pandemic, it is important to understand the perceptions of key decision-making stakeholders and document the contributions of parks and recreation during the pandemic. Local residents are a primary stakeholder for municipal parks and recreation who have the potential to influence funding and policy through their participation, voting, and advocacy. Research has suggested that individuals are more likely to support parks and recreation and view them as essential when they perceive they provide benefits that address their own as well as broader community needs. Parks and recreation have previously been identified as valuable contributors to health, and as such, these services may have provided essential benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. This panel study investigated Pennsylvania residents and the extent they considered parks and recreation an essential community service during the COVID-19 pandemic. It further assessed the rationale for why parks and recreation were considered either essential or non-essential during this time period. A majority of respondents (54%) felt local parks and recreation were an essential service in their community during the pandemic. People who recently used parks and people with higher incomes and levels of education perceived parks and recreation to be more essential during COVID-19. When asked why they considered parks and recreation to be essential, respondents discussed contributions to physical health, mental health and well-being, the safe provision of recreation opportunities, and social and community connectedness. Conversely, parks and recreation were considered non-essential when they had been closed, when individuals were unsure of what services were actually provided during the pandemic, or they were perceived as unsafe or unsanitary given the presence of COVID-19. Findings provide evidence of the contributions provided by local parks and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic and suggest influenceable factors associated with perceptions of whether parks and recreation are an essential community service.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-reaching impacts on the recreation industry. Municipal park and recreation agencies have had to cancel or modify programming, layoff or furlough staff, delay capital expenditures, and manage their services in the face of increasingly large budget cuts (National Recreation and Park Association, 2020a; Roth, 2020a). Facilities have been closed, reopened, and in some cases, closed again. Communities have implemented new health and safety practices based on local, state, and national guidelines, many of which have impacted the operations of park and recreation facilities and the amenities offered within them. Keeping park and recreation spaces open and accessible to communities has been a key priority for many park and recreation agencies, particularly given the physical health, mental health, and quality of life benefits they are known to provide.

Despite their documented benefits, evidence suggests local policymakers often perceive parks and recreation as discretionary services less important than other public services like police, fire, health, or education (Mowen et al., 2017). Within this context, budgetary allocations for parks and recreation typically expand in times of economic prosperity but decline in times of economic hardship (Barrett et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic brought significant economic challenges to state and local governments, who were often faced with increased spending in certain areas (i.e., public health, education) to adapt to the pandemic and decreased tax revenues, ultimately leading to funding cuts for many government services (Sager, 2021). Regarding sources of revenue, income taxes and sales taxes were particularly impacted. For example, many areas experienced less income tax revenue associated with higher rates of unemployment and thus less taxable income (Sheiner & Campbell, 2020). As for sales tax, changes in consumer spending and behavior corresponded to decreased revenue, especially from the tourism and hospitality sectors (e.g., restaurants, hotels), and thus states and local municipalities more reliant on these industries generally experienced stronger negative economic impacts (Sager, 2021; Sheiner & Campbell, 2020). Although long-term impacts have yet to be seen, Sheiner and Campbell (2020) estimated a sales tax revenue decline of approximately $49 billion in 2020 and projected a decline of $45 billion in 2021.

Given the sharp declines in state and local tax revenues associated with the pandemic, a main source of funding for municipal services, parks and recreation have faced decreases in funding allocations (Dolesh, 2020; Roth, 2020b, 2020a). As of June 2020, nearly 70% of park and recreation agencies had already experienced operational budget cuts, with a median reduction of 10 to 19 percent and nearly 60% had experienced capital budget cuts, with a median reduction of 50 to 59% (Roth, 2020b). These trends continued throughout the calendar year, with about half of park and recreation agencies reporting a median cut of 20% to operational budgets beginning in January 2021 (Roth, 2020c). Park and recreation agencies are expected to continue facing these financial challenges (Dolesh, 2020).

Maintaining and increasing funding allocations toward parks and recreation, especially in times of economic hardship, relies in part on two key decision-making stakeholder groups: residents and local officials (Kaczynski & Crompton, 2004). Stakeholder theory suggests that organizations make decisions by balancing the interests of various groups that affect and are affected by their services (Freeman, 2010; Reynolds et al., 2006). Even by the narrowest definitions (Bryson, 2004), residents and local officials are influential stakeholders with decision-making roles. It has been suggested that if residents and local officials perceive parks and recreation as contributing to important community needs, they may view these services as more essential, and in turn, provide them with greater support (Pitas, Mowen, Taff et al., 2019; Powers, Pitas et al., 2020). While local officials can support parks and recreation through direct funding allocation decisions, residents can influence funding in other ways including voting in favor of increased funding or new policies, advocating to local officials, and making donations to their park and recreation agency's non-profit partners (Pitas et al., 2021). Moreover, local officials are accountable to the public and ideally should work to represent their views and be sensitive to their needs and preferences (Pitas, Mowen, Taff, et al., 2019). Such activities may help to stimulate increased funding and support for local park and recreation services. Given their role as a key stakeholder and potential to influence both funding and policy, the perspectives of residents warrant attention.

While residents' perceptions of local park and recreation services have previously been documented, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed individuals' everyday lives in many ways. Concerns about physical health, mental health, and overall well-being have transformed during the pandemic and reflect increasing challenges for public health and quality of life. Studies have reported decreases in physical activity, increases in anxiety, and increases in depression, factors known to have adverse effects on overall health (Tison, 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). Parks and recreation have previously been identified as valuable contributors to health and an essential part of the healthcare system (Han et al., 2013; Mowen, Barrett, Graefe, Kraschnewski et al., 2017), and as such, these services may have provided essential benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic. If support for parks and recreation is influenced by their perceived contributions to important community issues (Powers, Pitas et al., 2020), it is important to understand individuals' perceptions of the contributions of parks and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, documenting the value and contributions of parks and recreation is critical, especially with looming financial challenges. As policymakers work to allocate limited resources across an array of municipal services, such evidence could inform both funding and policy. Additionally, knowledge about parks and recreation as an essential service could help advocates actively work to reposition park and recreation services among elected and appointed officials.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent residents considered parks and recreation to be an essential community service during the COVID-19 pandemic and assess the rationale for why they have been considered either essential or non-essential.

1. To what extent have residents considered parks and recreation to be an essential community service during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. Why have they considered parks and recreation to be an essential or non-essential community service during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Methods

Sample

Data for this study were part of a larger effort to assess use, perceptions, and expectations of local parks and recreation in Pennsylvania during the COVID-19 pandemic. This cross-sectional study included an approximately 15-minute, online survey of 611 adults (18+) residing in Pennsylvania via a Qualtrics panel sample. Qualtrics does not provide information on response rate, but rather provides a completed dataset with the desired number of participants (in this case, 611 completed responses). Survey respondents were intentionally balanced across urban, suburban, and rural areas of Pennsylvania. Urban, suburban, and rural classifications were derived from ZIP codes based on the National Center for Education Statistics locale framework (see Geverdt, 2017 for more information). Qualtrics provided respondents with a small compensation in the format of their choosing upon their completion of the survey (e.g., gift cards).

Data collection occurred from August 21st to September 17, 2020, reflecting the end of the summer, Labor Day weekend, and the start of the school year. Across the data collection period, Pennsylvania had an average of 760 new COVID-19 cases per day (Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2020). The number of new COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania during this time was consistent with estimates from July and early August 2020 which were notably lower than the initial surge in March, April, and May of that year. Post data collection, daily new cases in Pennsylvania steadily increased in the fall (Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2020). Thus, the data collection period reflects the summer months in terms of both season and COVID-19 cases in Pennsylvania.

Measures

We asked respondents to rate their level of disagreement or agreement that parks and recreation have been an essential service in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic. This item was measured on a scale where 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree. For respondents who either agreed (i.e., Agree or Strongly Agree) or disagreed (i.e., Disagree or Strongly Disagree) with this statement, we asked a follow-up open-ended question about why they felt parks and recreation were (if they agreed) or were not (if they disagreed) an essential service in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Those who responded with "Neither Agree nor Disagree " were not asked a follow-up question. At the beginning of the survey, we provided the following information to participants about the local park and recreation context: "The following survey is about local parks and recreation and the COVID-19 pandemic. Local parks can include community or neighborhood parks as well as local trails and outdoor recreation areas." Demographic questions included ZIP code, gender, age, race, ethnicity, income, and education. Race and ethnicity were asked as two separate questions, consistent with U.S. Census Bureau measurement (Jones et al., 2021). We also assessed whether respondents had visited any local parks (e.g., neighborhood parks, community parks, or playgrounds) or trails within their community during the 12 months prior to the survey. This dichotomous variable was used to segment park users (visited in the 12 months prior to the survey) from non-users (had not visited in the prior 12 months).

Analysis

Descriptive analysis was performed in SPSS Version 26. We conducted one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine perceptions of parks and recreation as an

essential service by a variety of sociodemographic variables (e.g., residential location, race, income). We conducted eight individual ANOVAs, and to minimize type 1 error, we applied a Bonferroni correction which adjusted our statistical significance level from .05 to .00625. Where applicable, we conducted Scheffe's post host analysis to example significant differences among groups. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data from the open-ended comments (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014). Comments for those who felt parks were an essential service were coded and analyzed separately from those who felt parks were not an essential service. The researchers descriptively coded the comments independently, then came together to discuss perceptions and generate a shared codebook (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The constant comparison method was used to continually reevaluate and update the codebook throughout the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). After finalizing the codebook, codes were grouped into themes and subthemes as they emerged.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Respondents were equally balanced by place of residence, with approximately one-third of respondents residing in urban, suburban, and rural areas. Regarding race, twenty percent of respondents were non-white. As for ethnicity, 8% identified as being of Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin. Gender was evenly balanced between male and female respondents, and there was an even distribution of household incomes across the sample. The sample had a mean age of 49 years, with ages of respondents ranging from 18 to 88. A majority of respondents had some form of higher education (Table 1). Demographics of the sample for race, ethnicity, gender, and household income closely resemble the demographics of Pennsylvania, but the sample was slightly older and more highly educated that the state as a whole (United States Census Bureau, 2019).

Parks and Recreation as an Essential Community Service

A majority (54%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that local parks and recreation have been an essential service in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic (M=3.5, SD = 1.09). Seventeen percent disagreed or strongly disagreed and 29% reported that they neither agreed nor disagreed that parks and recreation have been an essential service in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic (Table 2).

We conducted one-way analyses of variance on the essential service question with a variety of sociodemographic characteristics including user/non-user status, residential location, race, ethnicity, gender, age, income, and education. To allow for more evenly balanced categories for ANOVA, some variables were collapsed into fewer categories than those measured directly in the survey (e.g., white and non-white for race). Findings indicated statistically significant differences in perceptions of parks and recreation as an essential service by user/non-user status, $F(609)$=33.400, p<.001, income, $F(607)$=6.838, p<.001, and education, $F(607)$=11.072, p<.001. Parks and recreation were considered more essential among users compared to non-users (M=3.6 and M=3.0, respectively), people with a college degree or higher compared to those without a college degree (M=3.6 and M=3.3, respectively), and people with household incomes between $80,001 and $120,000 ($M$=3.8) compared to those with household incomes below $40,000 ($M$=3.2) and between $40,000 to $80,000 ($M$=3.4). In other words, respondents who used parks in the 12 months prior, had a college education or

Table 1
Sample Demographics

Demographics	N (%)
User Status	
User	307 (77.3)
Non-User	68 (22.7)
Residential Location	
Urban	199 (32.7)
Suburban	205 (33.7)
Rural	205 (33.7)
Race	
American Indian or Alaskan Native	7 (1.2)
Asian	27 (4.4)
Black or African American	70 (11.5)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	3 (0.5)
White	484 (79.7)
Other	16 (2.6)
Ethnicity	
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	48 (7.9)
Non-Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish origin	563 (92.1)
Gender	
Female	310 (50.7)
Male	299 (48.9)
Non-binary	2 (0.3)
Age	$M = 49.3$ ($SD = 17.2$)
18-35	150 (24.5)
36-50	177 (29.0)
51-64	120 (19.6)
65 and older	164 (26.8)
Household Income	
$20,000 or less	87 (14.8)
$20,001 to $40,000	104 (17.7)
$40,001 to $60,000	92 (15.7)
$60,001 to $80,000	87 (14.8)
$80,001 to $100,000	62 (10.6)
$100,001 to $120,000	48 (8.2)
$120,001 to $140,000	27 (4.6)
Over $140,000	79 (13.5)
Education	
Some high school	10 (1.6)
High school diploma or GED	131 (21.5)
Some college	93 (15.3)
Associate's or bachelor's degree	208 (34.2)
Graduate or professional degree	167 (27.4)

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

higher, and had incomes between $80,001and $120,000 (compared to those with lower incomes) perceived parks and recreation to be more essential during the pandemic. No statistically significant differences were found with regard to residential location, race, ethnicity, gender, or age. Table 3 provides full details of these analyses.

Table 2
Parks and Recreation as an Essential Service

Parks and Recreation Have Been as Essential Service in My Community During the COVID-19 Pandemic	n	%
Strongly Disagree	43	7.0
Disagree	61	10.0
Neither Agree nor Disagree	176	28.8
Agree	236	38.6
Strongly Agree	95	15.5

Table 3
One-Way ANOVA for Parks and Recreation as an Essential Service by Sociodemographic Variables

	M	SD	% Agree or Strongly Agree	F(p)
User/Non-User	-	-	-	33.400 (p<.001)*
User	3.6	1.0	61.0%	
Non-User	3.0	1.1	30.9%	
Residential Location	-	-	-	2.023 (p=.133)
Urban	3.4	1.2	53.8%	
Suburban	3.6	1.1	60.5%	
Rural	3.4	1.1	48.3%	
Race	-	-	-	6.233 (p<.05)
White	3.5	1.1	57.4%	
Non-White	3.2	1.1	42.3%	
Ethnicity	-	-	-	3.201 (p=.074)
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin	3.2	1.2	47.9%	
Not Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin	3.5	1.1	54.7%	
Gender	-	-	-	4.547 (p<.05)
Female	3.4	1.1	51.3%	
Male	3.6	1.1	57.5%	
Age	-	-	-	1.801 (p=.146)
18-35	3.5	1.0	56.0%	
36-50	3.6	1.2	61.6%	
51-64	3.4	1.2	50.0%	
65 and older	3.3	1.0	47.6%	
Income	-	-	-	6.838 (p<.001)*
Under $40,000[a]	3.2	1.1	43.5%	
$40,000 to $80,000[a]	3.4	1.0	52.0%	
$80,001 to $120,000[b]	3.8	1.0	70.0%	
Over $120,000[ab]	3.6	1.1	59.5%	
Education	-	-	-	11.072 (p<.001)*
No College Degree	3.3	1.1	47.0%	
College Degree or Higher	3.6	1.1	58.9%	

* Indicates statistical significance with Bonferroni corrected alpha.
[a,b] Different superscripts indicate significant differences among groups as determined through Scheffe's post hoc analysis.

Why Was Parks and Recreation Considered an Essential Community Service?

Of the 54% of respondents (n=331) who indicated "agree" or "strongly agree, 304 provided a response. Essential service comments (n=304) centered around four main

themes: physical health, mental health and well-being, recreation opportunities, and social and community connectedness.

Physical Health

Respondents identified a variety of physical health benefits from parks and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic including opportunities for exercise, physical activity, and getting fresh air. For example, one respondent noted, "During this time of health restrictions, any and every chance to get outside to get some fresh air and activity and exercise has been and will continue to be very important." The importance of fresh air and opportunities to get outside for exercise were prevalent across many comments. In another instance, a responded said: "[Local parks] have provided a place for people to get fresh air, walk outdoors, jog, etc. Some people can't stand to be closed in, so this is essential for them." Another emphasized the importance of parks, stating that "When people are stuck inside it lowers their immune system making them more prone to COVID when they do eventually go out." Especially with gyms closed (or individuals feeling unsafe visiting them when they reopened), parks provided alternative options for physical activity during the pandemic. As one participant described, "I don't feel safe going to a gym, so I have used my local jogging trail every other day to stay in shape since March 2020." Respondents often connected both physical and mental health when describing why parks and recreation were essential in their community. For example, as one person noted, "They give people the opportunity to exercise and maintain a healthy mind and body."

Mental Health and Well-Being

An abundance of comments related to the connection between parks and recreation and mental health and well-being. For example, one respondent said, "They promote a general feeling of well-being by exposure to sunlight." Others echoed their mental health benefits, for instance, "Being one of the few services available during lockdown, [parks and recreation] provide mental health to an otherwise closed off world." More specifically, respondents discussed how local parks have given people in their community a place to go or something to do, which provided them with a reason and opportunity to leave their homes. For example, one person noted, "There isn't much to do and people need to get out of their houses. Parks are somewhere for people to go." Having a place to go helped people to fill their free time and have something to look forward to; this was especially important for people who were unable to work because of COVID-19. For instance, one participant noted, "Being able to go to the park every day when I was out of work gave me something to look forward to and occupy my time, which I think contributed greatly to my overall well-being during quarantine." For many, parks were one of the only places they could go to recreate and doing so helped with their sanity and peace of mind. For example, one person noted, "[Parks] have been the only opportunity for people to get out. Hiking is important in my community and to me. It helped me keep my sanity." Visiting parks was often connected to broader mental health outcomes related to relieving stress and boredom. For example, one participant stated, "It has taken a lot of stress away from this situation. And it has kept everyone from going crazy." Comments also referred to specific benefits for individuals with depression and anxiety, such as, "It is extremely helpful for individuals that may have depression to get out into nature to clear their heads." Furthermore, others described how parks and recreation provide some normalcy in

these stressful times. For example, "In this time of uncertainty, the parks and things give a small sense of normalcy."

Recreation Opportunities

In terms of recreation opportunities, respondents described how local parks and recreation have been widely used in their communities during COVID-19, noting, for example, how "Outdoor recreation use has increased dramatically since the pandemic" or how "the parks have been flooded with people now more than ever." Others described how parks provided much needed access to outdoor space to experience nature or engage in recreation activities. For example, one person noted how "[Parks] provide people with the opportunities to get out and enjoy the beauty and the peace of the outdoors, seeing trees, flowers, birds, and animals is breathtaking." Respondents commonly emphasized how access to parks was particularly important for individuals living in urban areas or without private greenspaces like yards or patios, who otherwise would not have the opportunity to spend time outdoors. This was often discussed with regard to recreation opportunities for youth and families. For example, as one respondent noted, "[Parks and recreation] have provided a safe opportunity for families to participate in healthy, outdoor activities- especially families who otherwise would not have an outdoor space available in which to participate in recreational activities." Others echoed these sentiments, for example:

> Due to schools being closed, kids need places to play and be active especially if they don't have areas at home to play. It's important to be able to go outside and be active but also it needs to be safe to do so and I feel my local parks and recreation centers have done the necessary steps to make these places safe, but more could always be done.

Others expressed similar sentiments, noting that "Local parks are the safest option to being outside and around people rather than people being inside, in an enclosed space" and that parks are "One of the only places where you can create social distancing space required to be outside." Some people also expressed their appreciation for how their local park and recreation staff were cleaning and sanitizing facilities within the parks; as one person noted, "They did the best they could to keep [the parks] safe and clean." Across respondents who felt parks were an essential service, there was a consensus that the parks provide opportunities for relatively safe recreation; for example, one respondent's comment captures this sentiment well: "If you wear a mask and follow social distancing [the parks are] a safe way to get out."

Social and Community Connectedness

Respondents also discussed how local parks and recreation have provided opportunities for social and community connectedness during COVID-19 and how such connections have been a benefit for individuals who are lonely or isolated, echoing connections to mental health and well-being discussed above. They noted how parks and recreation "Help people overcome loneliness" and "Allow [people] the opportunity to see strangers and feel like [they are] not alone." Another respondent noted, "Camping at a state park was really the only social interaction I had during lockdown. It was a lifesaver." Furthermore, respondents commonly discussed how local parks and recre-

ation have provided spaces for social gatherings in recreation settings while complying with COVID-19 guidelines including avoiding indoor spaces, social distancing, mask-wearing, and sanitation procedures. For instance, parks and recreation have provided opportunities for people to see their friends and families and also connect with others in their neighborhood or community. One person described, "It is a place where families can see one another." Regarding neighborhood interactions, another noted, "They have been essential in having a clean COVID-free safe space to get out of the house and actually interact and talk with people in my neighborhood." Another respondent echoed this sentiment, saying, "With everyone out of work and school, there was a need for recreation and an outlet for safely gathering. The parks in the area have taken the place of the shore, the movies, bars and restaurants and everything else."

Why Was Parks and Recreation Considered a Non-Essential Community Service?

Of the 17% of respondents (*n*=104) who indicated "disagree" or "strongly disagree," 86 provided a response. Non-essential service comments (*n*=86) centered around several themes including non-use and lack of interest in parks, access to parks during COVID-19, management of parks during COVID-19, and safety concerns regarding COVID-19. A few respondents did not know or were unsure why they felt parks and recreation were non-essential.

Non-Use and Lack of Interest in Parks

This theme encompassed comments from individuals who felt parks were non-essential because they were either not interested in parks or did not use them before or during COVID-19. For instance, one respondent stated, "I was at home for like 5 months in the COVID-19 pandemic and I did not go to any park or recreation center during that time." A few comments also mentioned how individuals are using other outdoor spaces in their communities instead of parks. For example, one person noted: "In my community, people have been taking more walks, but they have been doing it in their own neighborhoods."

Access to Parks During COVID-19

A number of comments reflected a lack of access to parks as the reason respondents felt parks and recreation were not essential in their community. Responses reflected both a general lack of access such as not having park and recreation facilities in their neighborhood or community and a lack of access due to the parks (and their facilities) being closed during the pandemic. Regarding the later topic, respondents shared examples of how their local parks and recreation "Have been, for the most part, closed during the whole pandemic." When discussing how park and recreation facilities were shut down, one participant specifically said: "It was determined by officials that they were not essential." Others noted how specific facilities, (e.g., basketball courts) were closed.

Management of Parks during COVID-19

Respondents also discussed issues with the management of parks and recreation during the pandemic related to cleanliness, visitor management, and communication. Respondents noted concerns about a lack of cleanliness or sanitation of public structures, voicing concerns such as "The parks are not safe or sanitized." For example, one

person noted, "The items at the parks are constantly being touched. In my parks near my home, the parks do NOT get cleaned at all." Furthermore, others noted a lack of enforcement of mask wearing and social distancing among visitors as reasons they felt parks and recreation were not an essential service during the pandemic. For instance, one respondent said, "No one I know of has done any cleaning or surveillance to make sure people are wearing masks, and are social distancing." In a few cases, respondents felt that their park and recreation agency may not have the resources to effectively manage their facilities for safe visitor experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, one respondent stated, "I doubt they have the money to keep things clean, and since they have not done anything to mandate mask wearing or social distancing, they are not doing as needed."

Respondents also reported a lack of information or communication from local parks and recreation about their operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. Comments reflected a lack of communication about whether park and recreation facilities were open and what services were being provided. For example, one person said, "I don't think enough information has been provided by them as to what services were and are available during the pandemic." Another person noted that their "Local recreation center has been closed since March with no communication as to when it will reopen, or the plan to ensure all visitors' health and safety." Furthermore, respondents described a lack of communication as to what agencies were doing to make park and recreation spaces safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, as one person described, "Not enough information [has been] provided as to what they are doing during the pandemic to make the parks safe."

COVID-19 Safety Concerns

Finally, some respondents discussed broader COVID-19 safety concerns (not specific to the management of parks and recreation) related to their own personal safety as well as their perceptions of appropriate behavior during the pandemic. Respondents discussed being less "Comfortable being outside as [they were] pre COVID-19," and some noted they felt unsafe using parks or trails when there were a lot of other visitors, social distancing was not being practiced, or visitors were not wearing masks. For instance, one person noted:

> There have been so many people at my local park and on my usual walking trail that it isn't safe to use them. Many, many more people than usual, congregating in large groups, very few wearing masks. I used to walk on the trail four times a week, but I haven't been able to do so since early May, because I can't walk without mask-less people approaching me much too close.

Others discussed broader opinions about appropriate behavior during the pandemic. For example, one respondent stated: "At this time we all should stay at home to be safe." Respondents also noted concerns that parks could be associated with higher COVID-19 risk and were therefore "Not essential right now." For example, one person noted, "I think they should close all parks because it's a higher risk of getting COVID-19."

Discussion

In a climate of municipal budget cuts, continued financial hardships, and public health crises, making the case for the essential nature of park and recreation services

is more critical than ever. As park and recreation agencies compete with other municipal services for funding allocations in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to provide evidence of the essential contributions of parks and recreation relative to the pressing needs of individuals and communities. The pandemic has brought heightened attention to physical and mental health as well as the importance of safe recreation opportunities; such attention may have elevated their importance as community priorities. Findings of this study suggest important contributions of parks and recreation in all of these areas. The more key decision-making stakeholders (i.e., residents, local officials) perceive parks and recreation as contributing to community priorities, the more they may view these services as essential (Powers, Pitas et al., 2020). In turn, evidence suggests that greater perceived importance among key stakeholder groups is linked to support for greater funding allocations (Pitas, Mowen, Taff et al., 2019). Conversely, when parks and recreation are considered non-essential or less essential than other public services, they may be more vulnerable to economic decline. As such, it is important to understand the extent to which parks and recreation are perceived as essential, and the reasoning behind such perceptions.

Findings of the current study suggest that a majority of individuals believe local parks and recreation have been an essential service in their communities during the pandemic. While some recent data also indicates high public perception of local parks as essential during the pandemic (National Recreation and Park Association, 2020b; Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 2021), this study provides a unique and valuable contribution of comparative quantitative analyses and qualitative evidence documenting why parks have been considered essential or non-essential. Although we observed majority agreement, it was only a slight majority, and a sizable portion of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed that parks and recreation were an essential service. We found that people who used parks during and prior to the pandemic (in the 12 months prior to the survey), and people with higher incomes and education perceived parks and recreation to be more essential during the pandemic. The benefits of parks and recreation identified in the qualitative data were very user-oriented, as opposed to other more general benefits of parks identified in prior studies such as attracting or retaining businesses or economic development (Kaczynski & Crompton, 2004). Therefore, it is not surprising that parks and recreation were considered more essential among users, given that users would have been more likely to experience the physical health, mental health, and social connectedness benefits of parks during the pandemic.

Coupled with differences in perceptions of parks as an essential service observed by user status and multiple demographic variables, the only slight majority agreement that parks and recreation have been an essential service may be reflective of inequities in access to parks and recreation during the pandemic. Having parks in walking distance (a factor known to be associated with both income and education; Powers, Lee, et al., 2020) or having a personal vehicle to access them were likely important factors, given fears of contracting COVID-19 via public transportation and the shutdown or significantly reduced service of many public transportation networks. It is also possible that respondents with higher education and incomes (factors often connected) were employed in sectors that transitioned from in person to remote work during the pandemic (Parker et al., 2020). Conversely, those with lower levels of education and lower incomes may have been more likely to continue working in-person in service-oriented jobs, and thus their day-to-day schedules may have remained more consistent

than those transitioning to remote work (Parker et al., 2020). For those experiencing significant changes in work location, parks may have represented an escape from otherwise being relatively isolated in their homes, and thus may have been used more or perceived as more important during the pandemic.

Contribution of Parks and Recreation

During the pandemic, local parks and recreation have provided important contributions to physical health, mental health, and social connectedness. Parks have long provided opportunities for physical activity, but during the pandemic, for many people, they have taken the place of gyms and indoor fitness centers as places of exercise. While overall levels of physical activity have decreased during the pandemic (Tison, 2020), findings of the current study suggest that parks continue to serve as spaces of physical activity, and such evidence underscores the need to keep parks open and accessible for safe and healthy recreation.

COVID-19 has resulted in increases in social isolation, anxiety, and depression (Brooks et al., 2020; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020). The anticipated lasting efforts of the pandemic on mental health have even been termed "a second pandemic" (Choi et al., 2020). As such, much attention has been given to the importance of mental health. Regarding the role of parks, researchers have suggested that when individuals are isolated from others, time spent in parks and greenspaces is even more crucial to psychological well-being than usual (Burtscher et al., 2020; Stieger et al., 2020). Results of this study echo these sentiments, suggesting parks and recreation have provided critical contributions to mental health during the pandemic, offering much needed opportunities for people to get outside, escape social isolation, and connect with others in relatively safe ways. These findings are corroborated by recent studies in other countries emphasizing the contributions of parks and greenspaces to mental health and psychological well-being during COVID-19 (Lades et al., 2020; Stieger et al., 2020).

Moreover, findings demonstrate that parks were perceived to have helped individuals to cope with stress, anxiety, and isolation associated with the pandemic. They have been spaces for neighbors and community members to reconnect and parks have represented a sense of normalcy in uncertain times. In this study, parks were often discussed as a place to go for various social reasons, echoing the role of parks as key "third places" in communities during the pandemic. The term "third place" refers to public spaces outside of the home and workplace (the first and second places, respectively), which provide opportunities for socialization and engagement within one's community (Oldenburg, 1999). Third places including parks can support quality of life and the development of weak social ties, an especially relevant facet of social capital commonly linked with social cohesion and access to community resources (Gómez et al., 2018; Jeffres et al., 2009; Mowen & Rung, 2016). During times of social isolation, parks as third places may help to sustain and encourage social connections and social capital, which are especially critical given anticipated social capital declines during the pandemic (Pitas & Ehmer, 2020).

Furthermore, prior research provides evidence of the important role of parks within communities recovering from traumatic events like natural disasters (Rung et al., 2011). For example, research conducted in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina indicated that parks serve an important role in disaster recovery, providing an escape outlet for individuals to get away from the stress and concerns of life after a disaster (Rung et al., 2011). Rung and colleagues argued that parks may provide a positive dis-

traction to "buffer the impact of negative life events" (p. 398). Research in non-disaster contexts has also documented the role of parks and greenspaces in coping, stress relief, and overall mental health (e.g., Hansmann et al., 2007). Albeit a public health disaster rather than a natural one, parks appear to have provided an escape outlet for many during the pandemic, while also contributing to mental health more broadly. Furthermore, as Lopez and colleagues (2020) suggest, insights about the essential role of parks during the pandemic "may play a key role in informing planning and park design for building resilience to current and future extreme events" (p. 2). Given concerns about future COVID-19 outbreaks or other pandemics, coupled with evidence to suggest the value of parks in other disaster contexts, parks are an important consideration in planning for community psychological resilience. For example, when/if there are regional or local outbreaks of COVID-19, or if there is a need to impose stricter lockdown or distancing protocols on a seasonal basis, parks would be an important community resource to support physical health, mental health, and social well-being. Overall, evidence on the contributions of parks and recreation during the pandemic and reasons why they have been considered essential or non-essential lay the framework for practical implications to increase perceptions of parks and recreation as essential services.

Management Implications

Importance and Communication of COVID-19 Practices

Results indicate several reasons why parks were considered non-essential services during the pandemic. Although only 17% of respondents perceived parks to be non-essential, results indicate that parks and recreation were perceived as non-essential primarily when individuals lacked access to parks or had concerns about the management and safety of parks in the context of COVID-19. Concerns of access, either in general or related to COVID-19 closures, underscore the need to keep parks open and to systematically address gaps in park access. Prior research has demonstrated disparities in park access on the basis of various demographic attributes like race, income, and place of residence (Mowen et al., 2018; Powers, Lee et al., 2020), and such disparities have become increasingly evident during the pandemic (Lu et al., 2020; Rowland-Shea et al., 2020). Access concerns during the pandemic mirror perceptions of access during "normal times," as people of color are generally less likely to have access to park and recreation services (Pitas, Mowen, Graefe et al., 2019); in a sense the pandemic didn't change anything, it just exacerbated what was already the case. Lack of use or interest in parks and recreation were also reasons cited as to why these services were perceived as non-essential. Use and interest in parks could be associated with the extent that parks are perceived as safe and welcoming spaces, factors known to be associated with demographic factors like race and ethnicity (Powers, 2021).

Furthermore, many who felt parks and recreation were non-essential cited concerns about a lack of cleanliness and a lack of encouragement and monitoring of both mask-wearing and social distancing. Recent research corroborates these findings, documenting park users' concerns about the behavior of other visitors (e.g., mask-wearing, social distancing) and a lack of sanitation practices as deterrents to use (Lopez et al., 2020). Additionally, a recent stated choice analysis revealed that when forced to accept tradeoffs, people generally prioritize mask and sanitation-related practices over park management practices concerning social distancing, installation of hand sanitizer stations, or limiting access (Powers et al., in review). In this study, concerns about masks,

sanitation, and social distancing practices were often coupled with frustrations about a lack of communication or information about what actions were being taken to increase safety from COVID-19 in the parks.

To address concerns about cleanliness and visitor behavior in potential future waves of the COVID-19 virus, park agencies should consider adopting new policies and protocols and ensure broad communication of them to the public. While cleaning and sanitation of high touch surfaces may be valued and important to the public, evidence suggests minimal COVID-19 risk from surfaces (Goldman, 2020). While sanitation may help individuals to perceive the parks as safer, it may have less of an impact on actual safety from COVID-19 than initially thought. If sanitation procedures are employed to increase perceptions of safety, their benefit relies on widespread public knowledge of these procedures. Park and recreation agencies should work to communicate sanitation and cleaning procedures to a broad public audience beyond just current park users (who may already feel comfortable using the parks during the pandemic). Agencies could use social media, signage, and partnerships with other organizations to increase messaging and communication. Communication about safety practices and the extent to which facilities are open to the public is an important strategy that could impact the extent to which parks and recreation are perceived as an essential community service.

Leveraging the Contributions of Parks and Recreation

Agencies should leverage data on the essential role of parks and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic when communicating with decision-making stakeholders like residents and policymakers. In this study, park and recreation users were much more likely than non-users to agree that parks and recreation were an essential service in their community during the pandemic, and thus collecting data from users may help agencies to document evidence of the contributions of parks and recreation in their own communities. Effective communication of the contributions of parks and recreation during the pandemic, particularly relative to the pressing issues of physical and mental health, could help agencies make the case for more consistent or increased funding allocations. While the contributions of parks to physical health are more widely recognized, park and recreation agencies have an opportunity to better position themselves as contributors to mental health. A position refers to the place a service or organization occupies in the mind of decision-makers relative to other services (Ries & Trout, 1986). Park and recreation agencies could use both real and psychological positioning to influence decision-makers' perceptions of their contribution to mental health. For instance, agencies should consider sharing personal stories from park users in advocacy campaigns or creating specific mental health focused initiatives.

In communities where park use has increased during the pandemic, so has the number of potential park advocates who may be willing to share their stories, volunteer, and advocate for additional funding to parks and recreation. Park and recreation agencies should work to connect with new and existing users and engage them in stewardship initiatives. Prior research has indicated a connection between volunteering in local parks and community civic engagement behaviors, such as contacting policymakers about environmental issues (Dresner et al., 2015). Engaging new users in volunteer efforts may provide a dual benefit to park and recreation agencies- volunteers to assist with park maintenance and individuals serving as political advocates for parks. It may also be prudent to educate new users on what it takes to fund, run, and maintain high-

quality parks to stimulate increased stewardship. Finally, it is important to consider how increases in park use will require an increase in various management practices, especially more frequent park maintenance and facility renovations/rehabilitations.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides important evidence about public perceptions of parks and recreation during the pandemic, it has several limitations that must be acknowledged. This cross-sectional study reflects public perceptions at only one point in time during the pandemic. Given the ever-changing knowledge on COVID-19 transmission and public health guidelines, it is possible that perceptions of parks and recreation relative to COVID-19 may vary temporally. Factors including seasonality, weather, and current COVID-19 caseload or positivity rate in one's area may impact perceptions of safety and comfort within parks and other public spaces. It would be valuable for future research to compare perceptions of the contributions of parks and recreation at various stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this study was conducted in one state, and given varying COVID-19 restrictions, cases, and transmission rates across the country, this analysis may yield different findings in different locations. While access was an important topic referenced in qualitative comments, we did not collect quantitative data on access to parks and recreation. Future research should explore the connections between multiple domains of access, including proximity as well as perceived safety and sense of welcome and belonging in parks, and perceptions of parks and recreation as an essential service. Finally, this study examined the perceptions of only one stakeholder group. While residents are an important stakeholder, there are other decision-making stakeholders whose perceptions of parks and recreation as an essential service warrant attention. For instance, given that local officials make many of the funding allocation decisions at the municipal level, it is important to understand and document how they have viewed parks and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in turn, investigate the extent to which these perceptions influence their funding allocations to parks and recreation.

Conclusion

Findings of this study suggest a majority believe parks and recreation have been an essential service in their communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, this study provides qualitative evidence as to why parks and recreation have been considered essential or non-essential. The contributions of parks and recreation to physical health, mental health, and and social and community connectedness contributed to overall well-being contributed to their perception as an essential service. Conversely, parks were considered non-essential among individuals who lacked access to parks (generally or due to COVID-19 closures) and had concerns about management and safety of parks relative to COVID-19 (e.g., lack of masks or sanitation). Park and recreation agencies can use this information to inform COVID-19 policies and procedures in parks and communication of these procedures to the public. Furthermore, agencies can leverage the contributions of parks and recreation to health and social connectedness in the aftermath of the pandemic to help elevate perceptions of parks and recreation as an essential community service, and in turn, increase support from decision-making stakeholders.

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Programs that Work

Smart Fit Girls: A Novel Program for Adolescent Girls Improves Body Image

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Executive Summary

Body dissatisfaction in girls increases throughout adolescent years and is associated with the development of eating disorders, obesity, and physical inactivity. Adolescent girls often define health in relation to their body size and/or body shape, and these culturally determined expectations of a woman's body often constrain them from participating in healthy behaviors, including physical activity. Adolescent girls are less likely to engage in, and enjoy, physical activity compared to adolescent boys. As a result of this health disparity, the Smart Fit Girls (SFG) program was developed to address the unique health concerns of middle school girls. SFG was developed using Self-Determination Theory as a theoretical framework, with a focus on fostering the participants' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. During the program, girls participate in activities specifically designed to improve body image. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the potential impact of SFG, a novel weight training and psychosocial health program, on middle school girls' body image. Adolescent girls ($N = 45$) in sixth to eighth grades in South Carolina and Colorado participated in this study. A qualitative design utilizing focus groups was used to explore the lived experiences of participants as it related to their body image. Six focus groups were used to assess the influence of SFG on participants' body image. Participating in SFG resulted in improved body image which was due to a change in the girls' perspective of what it

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meant to be a "perfect girl," a shift in body judgement, focusing more on body utility, and realizing they were not alone in experiencing body image concerns.

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study examining the impact of a combined physical and psychosocial intervention on adolescent girls that focuses on weight training. Results provide information about how body image can be improved in adolescent girls and supports the adoption of SFG for communities interested in improving girls' body image. If organizations want to improve the health of adolescent girls in their communities, they should consider including activities geared toward improving their psychosocial health as well. This study contributes to the current body of literature by providing avenues through which an intentionally designed program improves body image in adolescent girls and supports the use of research to avoid the "black box" of programming.

Introduction

Adolescent girls experience physical and emotional health challenges more so than their male counterparts (Abbott et al., 2012; Mojtabai et al., 2016; Ogden et al., 2014; Petroni et al., 2015; Tudor-Locke et al., 2006). For example, over a 10-year period, the prevalence of yearly major depressive episodes (MDEs) increased by 4.2% for girls compared to 1.2% for boys (Mojtabai et al., 2016) and suicidal deaths are now the leading cause of mortality for girls 15-19 years old (Petroni et al., 2015). As a result, health discussions and research pertaining to adolescents have expanded past physical inactivity and obesity to include psychosocial outcomes such as body image (Markey, 2010). Body image is a multidimensional construct made up of how one perceives and acts toward their body and can be positive, negative, or somewhere between (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Body dissatisfaction increases throughout adolescent years, particularly for young girls (Abbott et al., 2012) and has been associated with the development of eating disorders, obesity, and physical inactivity in youth (Harriger & Thompson, 2012). In addition to suffering from body dissatisfaction more commonly than adolescent boys, adolescent girls are more sedentary (Tudor-Locke et al., 2006) and suffer from greater psychosocial distress (anxiety, depression, and poor self-esteem (Kantanista et al., 2015). Therefore, creating and studying the impact of programs tailored towards adolescent girls' physical and emotional health is imperative in addressing this health disparity. This study does this by evaluating the efficacy of the Smart Fit Girls (SFG) program, a novel girls' empowerment program that aims to improve the physical and emotional health of adolescent girls.

Body Image

Among adolescent girls, poor body image is associated with many mental and physical health problems including depression, low self-esteem, increased likelihood of eating disorders, and low physical activity (Byely et al., 2000; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001). Adolescent girls are more likely to experience body image concerns compared to boys, most likely due to an increased cultural emphasis on

their appearance (McKinley, 1999). Adolescent girls often define health in relation to their body size and/or body shape and these culturally determined expectations of a woman's body often constrain them from participating in health behaviors, including physical activity (Witmer, Bocarro, & Henderson, 2011). This is particularly problematic due to the strong correlation between physical activity and body image (Campbell & Hausenblas, 2009), where engaging in physical activity can improve one's body image.

Physical Activity

Although there are many developmental changes that occur during adolescence, one of the most impactful components is one's identity. During this period of life, individuals are seeking to understand who they are in relation to the world around them. A common social identity adolescents are drawn to is athletic identity; the extent to which an individual identifies and seeks affirmation as an athlete or one who participates in athletic movements (Doubt & McColl, 2003). For many girls, physical activity is particularly beneficial as it leads to collective and personal empowerment (Henderson, 1996; Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Using a Feminist Theory lens, Henderson and Gibson argue that resisting traditional gender norms (e.g., weight training) may be the contributing factor in experiencing empowerment during physical activity (Henderson & Gibson, 2013). However, despite numerous efforts to increase national physical activity levels in adolescent girls, they are estimated to fall below the recommended physical activity threshold (60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per day) approximately 1.5 years earlier than their male counterparts (13.1 years old versus 14.7 years old, respectively) (Nader et al., 2008). This health disparity has led many researchers to explore constraints to physical activity participation for adolescent girls, including intrapersonal barriers. Perceived physical activity barriers include energy and time (due to competing leisure activities), low confidence (Eime et al., 2014), not wanting to be physically active in front of boys, and concern with appearances (Witmer et al., 2011). Conversely, research suggests that girls are likely to be positively influenced by physical activity and sport when the activity is fun (Witmer et al., 2011), involves friends (Camacho-Minano et al., 2011), and provides them the opportunity to behave autonomously (Schmalz et al., 2011). While many health-related programs have been developed to help overcome such barriers, the gender gap in physical activity remains (The Lancet Public, 2019).

Health Programs for Adolescent Girls

As a result of the poor physical and mental state of many adolescent girls, a few programs have been developed to improve the health of this population (e.g., Girls Get Going [GGG] and Girls on The Run, [GOTR]). GGG is a school- and community-based physical activity program that incorporates the expertise of physical education teachers as well as community trainers and coaches. While GGG is one of the few empirically studied girls' health programs, the focus was primarily on physical activity without any insight into the impact GGG may have had on the participants' mental health. Another more well-known health program for adolescent girls is GOTR (a program aimed at improving girls' emotional, social, mental, and physical wellbeing). Only a few studies have examined the impact of GOTR, but most evidence suggests that participating in GOTR leads to greater self-esteem, more body size satisfaction,

and healthier eating attitudes/behaviors (DeBate & Thompson, 2005; Martin, 2009). While there is some research to suggest longitudinal impacts of GOTR, (Pettee Gabriel et al., 2011), more data are necessary to corroborate such findings. Due to continued differences in adolescent boys' and girls' health, adolescent girls have been identified as a priority population for health promotion programs with a call for interventions that are specifically designed to address the unique needs of this population (Camacho-Minano et al., 2011).

Smart Fit Girls (SFG) Program

In an effort to protect the intellectual property of SFG, the founders and board of directors have limited the information available to the public, including academic press, about the SFG program. However, a logic model depicting the program's structure is outlined in Table 1 and a brief description of the program and its theoretical basis is described below.

SFG is a program aimed at promoting the physical and psychosocial (e.g., body image) health of middle school girls. Research has found that adolescent girls associate health primarily with physical activity and diet and become increasingly self-conscious about their health as they age (Witmer et al., 2011). Witmer et al. also found that the adolescent girls report changing their diet and physical activity behaviors only to stay in shape or lose weight, rather than doing so to be "healthy" (Witmer et al., 2011). Therefore, the SFG program was purposefully designed to teach adolescent girls that health is not about having an ideal body size/shape. Rather, health is appreciating the diversity and unique strengths of one's body and engaging in health behaviors (i.e., physical activity) as a means to supporting those strengths.

SFG was developed using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework, with a focus on fostering the participants' autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is a theory of motivation that emphasizes the extent to which humans behave autonomously (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Behaviors move along a motivational continuum; the more autonomous the behavior, the more internalized and sustainable that behavior becomes. The most influential factors that determine internalization include autonomy (desire for control), competence (desire to be effective/skilled), and relatedness (desire for relationships with others) (Deci et al., 1994), all of which are addressed during SFG. Additionally, the SFG coaches are trained on how to best use the SDT in their coaching practices, including ways to enhance 1) the girls' sense of control/involvement with SFG, 2) feelings of skill development, and 3) a sense of community.

Example activities within the SFG curriculum include lessons on media manipulation (e.g., photoshop), positive self-talk, communication strategies, and importance of life-long physical activity habits. Participants also learned about anatomy and nutrition and are taught how to lift weights (i.e., weight training). Previously held fears of adolescents participating in weight training (e.g., that weight training will stunt growth) have been replaced by reports demonstrating how adolescence may be the most opportune time to do (Hind & Burrows, 2007; Lloyd et al., 2014). Weight training has been shown to improve body composition (Schwingshandl et al., 1999), decrease the risk of developing type II diabetes (Shaibi et al., 2006), and enhance cardiovascular function in overweight or obese adolescents (Dias et al., 2015). There is also a strong, positive association between weight training and improved psychosocial health (Lubans et al.,

Table 1

Logic Model of the SFG Program

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
• Volunteer coaches • Weightlifting equipment • Food for nutrition 101 • Plates, napkins, cups, & cutlery • Awards • Computer • Music • Internet access for videos • Art supplies (markers, glue, pens, scissors, tape, paper, etc.) • Old magazines • Journals • Lesson plan • Program binder • Registration forms, pre and post questionnaires • T-shirts	• Coaches teach basic anatomy & nutrition • Coaches teach different weightlifting exercises • Girls watch videos about media manipulation, body image, & anti-bullying • Girls strength train using weights • Guest instructors teach yoga and dance • Teachers/staff attend workout night • Families attend workout graduation	• 18 workouts • 18 self-esteem, body image, and physical activity motivating activities and discussions • 15 journal entries	• % of girls who significantly improve body image, self-esteem, and physical activity enjoyment markers by the end of the program • % of girls who meet and maintain their SMART goal(s) by the end of the program • % of the girls who decrease the level of social comparison by the end of the program	• Girls will experience improved psychosocial and physical health • Girls will feel more comfortable using positive self-talk and lifting weights • The girls will feel more comfortable talking with her parents about physical activity, nutrition, body image, and self-esteem • The girls will grow up to be strong, empowered women

Note. Developed using the guidance of the MacDonald, G. (2018). Checklist of key considerations for development of program logic models. Retrieved from https://wmich.edu/evaluation/checklists

2010). The novelty of including weight training in conjunction with psychosocial activities is what makes SFG unique. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study examining the impact of a combined physical and psychosocial intervention on adolescent girls that focuses on weight training. The purpose of this study was to explore the potential impact of SFG on participants' body image.

Methods

Participants

Girls ($N = 45$) in sixth, seventh, and eighth grades were recruited from one school in South Carolina (Middle School A) and two schools in Northern Colorado (Middle Schools B and C) via program flyers and school announcements. All middle school girls attending each of the schools were invited to participate in the 10-week after-

school SFG program and the sample size for each focus group was determined by the number of SFG participants at each school. A greater proportion of focus groups were conducted at Middle School A due to program implementation limitations (SFG started at Middle School A and expanded to Middle School B and Middle School C during the study timeframe). To participate in the focus groups, girls must have attended 75% of the Smart Fit Girls programming. Participant demographic information for all three locations can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2
Site Demographic Information

School	School A	School B	School C
Location	South Carolina	Colorado	Colorado
Number of Participants	$N = 7$[a], 5[b], 11[c]	$N = 9$	$N = 6$
Eligible for Free or Reduced Lunch	53%	32%	39%
Student-to-Teacher Ratio	15:1	16:1	17:1

Note. Data was retrieved from public-schools.startclass.com (2016, November 6).
[a] Mean number of participants at Middle School A in the spring and fall of 2015
[b] Mean number of participants at Middle School A in the spring of 2016.
[c] Mean number of participants at Middle School A in the fall of 2016.

Measures

Six focus groups were used to assess the influence of SFG on participants' body image. Focus groups were conducted at three different schools over the course of a year and a half. At Middle School A, focus groups were conducted four times: spring 2015 ($n = 7$), fall 2015 ($n = 7$), spring 2016 ($n = 5$), and fall 2016 ($n = 11$). The focus groups for Middle School B ($n = 9$) and Middle School C ($n = 6$) were offered in the spring of 2015. The use of focus groups with adolescents enabled the researchers to gain in-depth, valuable insight into the experiences of participants from a developmental perspective (Kennedy et al., 2001). Focus group questions were written by the first author and approved by authors two and three, both of whom have extensive experience in focus group administration. In addition to the focus group questions (Table 3) and per recommendations in the literature (Kennedy et al., 2001), further discussion was encouraged through supplementary probing or clarifying questions. Pilot interviews were conducted with seven adolescent girls from Middle School A, all of whom participated in SFG before data collection for this study began. These interviews were used to determine the appropriateness of questions, order of question administration, and approximate time needed to complete the focus group.

Procedure

A qualitative design utilizing focus groups was used to explore the lived experiences of participants as it related to their body image. Child assent and parental consent were received prior to collecting data, and all methods were approved by the primary and secondary authors' Institutional Review Board and associated school districts. Data were collected at the location of SFG at the end of each session over the course of two years (spring 2015–fall 2016). Before collecting data, all research staff were trained on the qualitative processes used in this study to ensure method reliability. Each focus

Table 3

Focus Group Questions

1. What were some of your favorite moments at Smart Fit Girls and what made them your favorite?
2. How do you think Smart Fit Girls has impacted you as a person?
3. Have you spoken to your friends or family about Smart Fit Girls? If so, what have you told them?
4. Has the way you looked or thought about yourself changed during SFG? Why or why not?
5. During Smart Fit Girls did you ever feel a sense of connection with the coaches or the other girls? If so, please describe.
6. Has SFG sparked your interest in participating in any other leisure activities (e.g., trying out for a school sport)? Why or why not?
7. Do you think the amount that girls compare themselves to other girls impacts whether or not she participates in physical activity? Why or why not?

group was audio recorded, administered by an experienced qualitative researcher, and detailed notes were taken by a trained notetaker. A standard note taking form was used to assist with data interpretation during analysis (Kennedy et al., 2001). The focus groups were conducted in empty classrooms and each focus group lasted approximately 30-45 minutes.

Data Analysis

The Framework Analysis (Rabiee, 2004) was used to analyze the focus groups. Three of the four authors completed each step, including 1) familiarization of data, 2) thematic framework identification, 3) indexing data, 4) data organization, and 5) data interpretation. As part of step one, three of the authors listened to the audio files and read the transcripts and focus group notes until they felt familiar with the data. To complete step two, the same authors wrote codes, phrases, and notes in the margins of each transcription and subsequently sorted the data to make comparisons among the focus groups. After steps one and two were completed independently, the first three authors met to complete step 3: to compare identified codes, which were collapsed into one primary theme and four subthemes. Researchers then completed step 4 by organizing quotes under themes they had previously developed. Lastly, the authors completed step 5 by developing links amongst the whole data set and finalizing interpretations of themes. Steps one and two were completed independently by the first three authors who subsequently met to compare identified themes. A similar, iterative process was used for steps three and four, resulting in a set of agreed-upon themes. Trustworthiness was addressed by reviewing focus group notes alongside any notes taken by the researchers during the focus group process (Creswell, 2009). Intercoder reliability was addressed using an iterative coding process (initial coding, code modification, recoding) where three of the authors developed and agreed upon codes and themes.

Results

The primary theme from this study is that participating in SFG resulted in improved body image for participants, which was due to a change in their perspective of

what it meant to be a "perfect girl" (subtheme 1), a shift in body judgement (subtheme 2), focusing more on body utility (subtheme 3), and realizing they were not alone in experiencing body image concerns (subtheme 4). When asked about the impact of SFG, participants said "SFG helped me change what I thought in my head about my appearance" (Middle School A, Spring 2016, Participant 2) and "I didn't think good of myself but now I think…I'm pretty and I think I'm strong" (Middle School A, Fall 2016, Participant 2). The girls acknowledged that learning about body image helped them view their own body image differently. One participant said she "liked learning about [her] body [and] learning the different parts and not to be ashamed of it" (Middle School A, Fall 2016, Participant 3). Participating in SFG taught the girls that body image is a perception of oneself, which can be altered with positive thinking. One participant said that before SFG, "I couldn't think of a lot of things I liked about myself…and now I can think of like eighteen" (Middle School C, Spring 2015, Participant 2).

Subtheme 1: The "Perfect Girl"

Improvements in body image seemed to be partially due to a change in how the girls viewed the "perfect girl." Participants said, "I thought before [there was such a thing as a] perfect girl…now I realize that the perfect girl is like inner beauty" (Middle School A, Spring 2016, Participant 4). Many of the girls discussed the photoshop SFG activity, referencing the societal expectations placed on girls to look a certain way. When asked why this activity stood out, participants said, "it was interesting [to]…see someone go from themselves to like this Barbie doll…why would you want to be someone else instead of yourself?" (Middle School A, Fall 2015, Participant 4). Similarly, another participant said, "Whenever I looked at magazines…I wished I could be like them…and then like after you know what they go through it's like, oh, they can look exactly like me but they go through a bunch of stuff just to…change" (Middle School A, Fall 2015, Participant 2).

Additional comments were made that indicated acknowledgement of beauty and health beyond aesthetics. One girl said, "Since I've joined Smart Fit Girls I've realized that everyone is beautiful in their own way…I've embraced it" (Middle School B, Spring 2015, Participant 3). Other participants said, "I thought that having big thighs was a bad thing and like having curves and all and having big arms I thought that was a bad thing and that I should be ashamed of it," and then later stated, "and then at SFG, I was taught 'oh, you are pretty inside and out and you don't have to worry about what people think about you'" (Middle School A, Fall 2015, Participant 1). A different participant said that SFG "really does show girls that…you can be as skinny as you want to…you can put on as much makeup on as you want to but just because you have those things on doesn't show your real beauty and…real self" (Middle School A, Spring 2016, Participant 2).

Subtheme 2: A Shift in Judgement

Another reason for participants' improved body image was a shift in how they judged bodies, an intentional component of the SFG curriculum. One of the core values taught throughout SFG is celebrating differences, including body diversity. This, along with other activities such as the anti-bullying activity (which encouraged the girls to think about a time when they were bullied for how they are different and how that made them feel), likely contributed to the girls' change in how they perceive others. One participant said, "In here, no one teases you and they see you different be-

cause you are different from them, but they like don't really judge you on how you look or what you do or how you do stuff" (Middle School A, Fall 2016, Participant 4). Not only did the girls report caring less about how others viewed them ("[SFG] made me a little happier and I'm starting to block out all the hatred from other people about me and starting to feel more comfortable wearing what I want and doing what I want with my hair" (Middle School C, Spring 2015, Participant 2)), the girls also reported being less critical of bodies in general ("I think it impacted me by not like looking at other girls um and thinking something non-positive and like, I noticed I've been more not judging girls by the way they look" (Middle School B, Spring 2015, Participant 4)). One girl even mentioned "sticking up for more people" (Middle School A, Spring 2015, Participant 4), when she noticed they were being criticized for their appearance: "I often see a lot of people making fun of other people and I kind of just stayed quiet because I didn't want to get involved" but after going to SFG, " I started…complimenting the person saying that…the other person was wrong" (Middle School A, Spring 2015, Participant 4).

Subtheme 3: Body Utility

A third reason participants reported experiencing improvements in their body image was due to a shift toward body utility (focusing more on what their bodies can do rather than what they look like). Participants referenced knowledge gained from SFG anatomy lessons and workouts saying, "When I first came here, I was really insecure about my thighs…but [now I know] they actually have a lot of muscle and if I didn't have that I would be like a stick that couldn't move" (Middle School B, Spring 2015, Participant 2). Similarly, another girl said, "I've started recognizing how…I look at all the negative about me…but there is a lot of good stuff about me like I'm able to walk, I'm able to do sports…" (Middle School A, Fall 2016, Participant 2).

A shift toward body utility rather than aesthetics also revolved around an increased awareness of the importance of health. One participant said, "Both of my parents are sort of like overweight and I read somewhere online that like their children sort of grow up like how they look now…and that sort of scared me so I strived to do better…". She followed by saying "Smart Fit Girls has really like impacted me and I'm more confident about my body so I don't really care how I grow up as long as I'm healthy" (Middle School A, Fall 2015, Participant 6). Similarly, another participant said "the summer before Smart Fit Girls…I didn't really feel that proud of myself…I had a little more fat on me." She then stated that she "thought that being skinny was kind of healthy but …when I got to Smart Fit Girls…it helped me even more because I heard that it's not just about working out but about building more self-confidence and your self-esteem" (Middle School A, Fall 2015, Participant 3).

Subtheme 4: Not Alone in Experiencing Body Image Concerns

Another potential reason the girls' body image improved is due to the realization that other girls had similar experiences. When referencing a video shown in SFG that includes a poem "about how much [the poet] loved her body," one girl said "it really stuck out to me because like I never really notice some of the things she said" (Middle School A, Fall 2015, Participant 1), indicating an understanding of shared experiences. A different participant said, "I felt like I was the only girl that was always being called names and being called fat…and then after [SFG]…I just realized that there is a lot more people that get called names, that are beautiful inside and out" (Middle School A, Spring 2015, Participant 2).

An additional SFG activity that helped the girls realize that other girls worried about their self-image as well was the "sticky note" activity. One girl stated that she enjoyed when they "put comments [on]…a piece of paper and you put 'take what you need' and we put it…on the door that goes into the girls locker room". She reported that "it was full at first but a few days later it was like almost gone…[and] once you see like how many people took stuff, it gives you a different perspective" (Middle School A, Fall 2015, Participant 3). When the interviewer followed up with this participant by asking, "What do you mean by most of the girls here?" another girl answered that the girls at their school "might feel bad or…have a problem with the way they look…[even if] they don't really say that to you" (Middle School A, Fall 2015, Participant 4). These quotes highlight the girls' understanding that they were not alone in their body image concerns.

Discussion

The current study was designed to explore the impact of SFG on middle school girls' body image. Due to the strong correlation between positive body image and re-duced likelihood of obesity, depression, and psychological distress (Byely et al., 2000; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001), the overall result of improved body image supports previous findings that intentionally designed programs can im-prove adolescent girls' health (Gabriel et al., 2011). There are multiple implications from this study that can be of use for practitioners in the parks and recreation field. These implications range from specific recommendations for organizations working with adolescent girls to more broad suggestions regarding program implementation, development, and evaluation. For example, Healthy People 2020 added an additional topic area, adolescent health, that focuses on the goal of improving the healthy devel-opment and well-being (including mental & emotional health) of adolescents (Koh, 2010). While there are plenty of programs that focus on the physical health of adoles-cent girls, very few programs include a psychosocial component as well. If organiza-tions want to improve the health of adolescent girls' in their communities, they should consider including activities geared towards improving their psychosocial health as well.

Adolescent girls grow up learning that one's worth stems from one's physical ap-pearance and if someone does not fit within society's narrow definition of beauty, they are judged negatively (Chan et al., 2012). Adolescents who are stigmatized based on their body appearance may experience adverse health outcomes, including poor psy-chosocial health (depression, anxiety, poor body image, low self-esteem, suicide ide-ation) and declined academic performance (Puhl & King, 2013). The self-realization that they were judging people based on body differences is a critical outcome of SFG as it influences not only the girls' own body image but other girls' (whom they interact with) body image as well. As described in the "cycle of socialization," in order for one to move toward liberation from familial, institutional, and cultural socializations (in this case, body dissatisfaction as a result of beauty idealization), we must first recog-nize the dissonance that exists between what we are told about ourselves versus what is true about ourselves (Bobbie & Maurianne, 2000). By learning that others experienced similar body image concerns, SFG participants were able to better understand their part of the beauty "system" and make an educated, informed decision to continue or

discontinue their role in that system. Additionally, this sense of camaraderie through shared experiences also provided the girls with a sense of relatedness; being valued by others and having a sense of belonging (Deci et al., 1994).

This study contributes to the current body of literature by providing avenues through which an intentionally designed program improves body image in adolescent girls and supports the use of research to avoid the "black box" of programming. The "black box" of programming is a process when "research identifies the outcomes of a program without investigating what aspects of the program contribute to those outcomes"(Mainieri & Anderson, 2015). Results from this study provide evidence (each subtheme is linked to one or more SFG activity) that SFG program outcomes are a result of the program itself rather than external factors influencing the participants. Additionally, this research contributes to existing literature by exploring why and how body image can be improved in adolescent girls. Results from this study demonstrate that SFG was successful in providing a source of positive body image development and deconstructing previously developed body image ideals. SFG was also able to teach the girls about body utility, reframing their thoughts from "what does my body look like" to "what can my body do". Teaching the girls about body utility is in line with expert recommendations (Neumark-Sztainer, 2005; Toselli & Spiga, 2017), which suggests that doing so will help them achieve a healthy weight status and achieve a positive body image.

Study limitations should be mentioned. Three of the focus groups were administered by researchers who were also coaches of the program, which may have increased social desirability bias. However, researchers were trained in qualitative methods and the data collection scripts included reminders to the girls that their responses were confidential and that questions should be answered honestly. The use of focus groups has inherent limitations as well, including the possibility that some participants dominated the conversation. Future research should corroborate findings from this study using multiple sites and a longitudinal design.

Adolescence is a transitional period with a great deal of growth and development. The high prevalence of body dissatisfaction (Abbott et al., 2012), low levels of physical activity (Tudor-Locke et al., 2006), and associated physical and mental health consequences in adolescent girls (e.g., depression, increased likelihood of eating disorders) (Byely et al., 2000; Johnson & Wardle, 2005; McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2001), provide justification for the implementation and study of programs geared toward improving adolescent girls' health. Results from this study support adoption of SFG for communities and recreation organizations interested in improving adolescent girls' body image.

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Today's Older Adults: Strategies of Facilitating Sport Participation

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Executive Summary

As the U.S. population ages, park and recreation (P&R) professionals face increasing demand to provide age-appropriate and health-promoting programming for older adults. Recent qualitative research suggests older adults are interested in participating in sport programs tailored to their age group. Using socioecological theory as the guiding framework, and leisure constraint theory specifically, the current study explored participation and interest in recreational sport among older adults across the U.S. and their perceptions of how local P&R agencies currently meet, or fail to meet, their needs. Data, collected in 2019 via a nationwide online survey completed by 1,203 adults aged 50 and over, provided insights into the current population of older adults who are diverse in terms of health status, amount of discretionary time, and interest/experience with sport. Although most participants suggested they do not regularly participate in recreational sport, approximately half indicated they would be interested to try a new sport if opportunities were available, and they are motivated by health benefits, social opportunities, and enjoyment of recreational sport. Sports with the most interest were golf, pickleball, and softball. Additionally, participants expressed interest in bowling, hiking, tennis, volleyball, and swimming. Unfortunately, less than 20% of participants indicated they were satisfied or highly satisfied with the sport opportunities for older adults available through their local P&R department. Related to constraints, participants reported that constraints hindering their participation in recreational sport include physical or health-related factors (e.g., not being in good enough shape, not having the sport-related skills), lack of companions with whom to participate, lack of awareness of opportunities, lack of access to fields/facilities, and cost. The findings also relate to leisure facilitators within the constraint negotiation model, and suggests P&R agencies can facilitate sport participation among older adults by promoting the health, social, and fun

aspects of participation; offering opportunities targeted at beginners with no skill/experience required; ensuring programs are age-specific and modified to reduce risk of injury; facilitating introductions among players or providing opportunities for individuals to join teams; ensuring that low-cost options exist, and increasing awareness among older adults through channels effective for this age group (e.g., personal invitation, Facebook). The findings highlight the importance of making older adults a priority when planning sport opportunities and understanding their sport-related interests and unique needs.

Introduction

As the population continues to age in North America, it is increasingly important to explore strategies to address health, well-being, and quality of life during this life stage (Ferraro & Carr, 2021; Gibson & Singleton, 2012). Participation in leisure-time physical activity (LTPA) is a key factor in older adults' overall quality of life as well as numerous aspects of health (Jantunen et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2019). Some benefits of LTPA in later life include increased functional independence, physical stamina, and psychological well-being, along with the reduced likelihood of falls, chronic conditions, depression, and all-cause mortality (Keadle et al., 2016; Kim et al., 2017). Additionally, LTPA has been linked with social and psychological benefits, spiritual engagement, self-perceptions of aging, and enhanced positive emotions (Kim et al., 2017; Liechty et al., 2019). Recent research has also highlighted the importance of LTPA for older adults in coping with stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic; rates of LTPA have been linked to higher resilience, reduced depressive symptoms, and life satisfaction (Eek et al., 2021; Son et al., 2021; Zach et al., 2021). Unfortunately, most older adults do not meet the minimum physical activity guidelines recommended for health benefits (150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per week) and some sub-groups (e.g., women, those with low income, people with disabilities, racial minorities) engage in less LTPA on average than other adults their age (Keadle et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2013).

Recent scholars have argued recreational sport provides an effective vehicle for facilitating LTPA in later life because it provides a fun, social, and relaxed experience (Jenkin et al., 2017; Patelia et al., 2023). Specifically, research suggests that compared to exercise-based programs, recreational sport may be a more attractive LTPA option for older adults who are motivated by factors such as social interaction or being part of a team, mental health or psychological benefits, and joy in competition or love of the game (Berlin et al., 2018; Stenner et al., 2020). For example, in a study of older women who played softball, Choi et al. (2022) found that friendships and social support were important motivators for participants to join a team and continue playing. If designed appropriately, recreational sport programs can also be an ideal source of LTPA for relative beginners who may not have high levels of skill and fitness (Kirby & Kluge, 2013). In a systematic review of research on the health benefits of recreational soccer, Luo et

al. (2018) found that it can provide a valuable alternative modality for maintaining an active lifestyle among diverse older adults who are sedentary and untrained.

As the unique hedonic experience of recreational sport encourages LTPA engagement, older adults realize physical, cognitive, emotional, and social benefits (Gayman et al., 2017; Jenkin et al., 2018). Research suggests playing sport in later life can foster a sense of pride, competence, and resistance to age-related stereotypes (Dionigi, 2006; Kirby & Kluge, 2021; Liechty et al., 2017). Further, recreational sport participation provides opportunities for intergenerational interaction, promotes physical health, and facilitates healthy aging (Jenkin et al., 2018; Stenner et al., 2020). To recognize these benefits, increasing numbers of older adults, in recent years, have expressed interest in participating in recreational sport, leading to it becoming more socially normalized (Gard et al., 2017; Jenkin et al., 2017).

Despite potential benefits and increasing interest, older adults face many constraints to recreational sport participation. Historically, stereotypes of aging as a time of frailty and decline have constrained LTPA and sport participation among older adults. These stereotypes might take the form of limited opportunities being provided, direct negative interpersonal interactions, and internalized ageism (e.g., Gullette, 2004; Massie & Meisner, 2019; West et al., 2019). Physical health limitations might also constrain the type or level of sport older adults are able to engage in (Jenkin et al., 2017). Relatedly, many older adults feel their sport engagement is constrained by community sport organizations that do not provide age-appropriate opportunities and/or do not prioritize their needs compared to younger age groups (Jenkin et al., 2021; West et al., 2019). Similarly, an overemphasis on elite competition within many sport systems has hindered opportunities for older adults (particularly those at the beginner level), who are less likely to be motivated by high levels of competition.

Community-based sport leagues and programs can be a site for overcoming constraints to provide meaningful and highly valued leisure opportunities for older adults. To do so, recreation managers and programmers need to better understand the unique needs of older adults. For example, using the leisure constraints model (Crawford et al., 1991), West et al. (2019) identified practical ways organizations could facilitate sport participation for older women: age-appropriate rules of play (e.g., designed to reduce injury), targeted player recruitment to ensure a critical mass of participants in the league, public promotion of the opportunities for and benefits of senior sport, and committed allocation of resources (e.g., facilities, social media, coaching). Similarly, Kelley et al. (2014) highlighted the importance of providing a range of competition levels, focusing on the social aspects of sport, and facilitating lifelong physical activity as important strategies for successful senior sport programs.

Scholars have long theorized that public P&R organizations can provide an ideal setting for facilitating participation in LTPA generally, and recreational sport specifically, for older adults (Hutchinson et al., 2014; Liechty et al., 2019); yet limited research has explored how P&R agencies can best facilitate participation in recreational sport for this group by mitigating constraints, facilitating participation, and fostering inclusion. Additionally, qualitative research that has been published (Kirby & Kluge, 2021; West et al., 2019) is based on small samples of participants in a few sports (i.e., softball, volleyball). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to quantitatively apply leisure constraints theory, including the little researched concept of leisure facilitators (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Raymore, 2002), to investigate participation and interest in a wide

array of recreational sports among older adults across the U.S. and their perceptions of how local P&R agencies currently meet their needs.

Theoretical Framework

The overarching framework for this study is rooted in the socioecological framework. The socioecological framework proposes that individuals do not exist in a vacuum (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Instead, it focuses on the human's interaction with both immediate settings and broader social contexts (Sallis et al., 2015). Due to its value in explaining individuals' behaviors and interactions with their environments, the socioecological framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner was adapted by McLeroy et al. (1988) to be used in health promotion, and later used to investigate leisure participation (e.g., Crawford et al., 1991; Raymore, 2002). Specifically, building upon the original idea of the socioecological framework, scholars in the leisure field have conceptualized leisure constraints into three types: (1) intrapersonal constraints, wherein individuals' personal characteristics and psychological states pose a barrier to leisure participation; (2) interpersonal constraints, wherein barriers to leisure participation exist in the interaction with others; and (3) structural constraints, which result from limiting factors that operate independently of individuals in the external environment, such as a lack of access to leisure facilities, undesirable weather conditions, or season (Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford et al., 1991). Similarly, in conceptualizing factors that encourage or enhance leisure participation, Raymore (2002) introduced the term "leisure facilitators" and categorized them into intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural facilitators.

Over the last two decades, scholars in the leisure and gerontology fields have also applied the socioecological framework to understand the factors and constraints affecting older adults' leisure as well as strategies to promote older adults' participation in LTPA (e.g., Fisher et al., 2018; King & King, 2009; Son et al., 2021). Importantly, some scholars acknowledged the impact of time (e.g., life stage or past sport participation) on older adults' LTPA and added time effects into their studies (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Jenkin et al., 2017). Specifically, in their examination of constraints to older adults' LTPA, Jenkin et al. (2016, 2017) noted that interpersonal barriers, organizational barriers, policy barriers, and past LTPA experience play a role in older adults' current participation. To develop effective interventions for promoting an active lifestyle, King and King (2009) proposed a socioecological framework specific to older adults' physical activity. This framework focuses on the impact of personal characteristics, individual behavior, social/cultural factors, environment/policy, and life course.

More recently, Naar et al. (2017) and Chen et al. (2023) have qualitatively and quantitatively tested the framework proposed by King and King (2009) among older adults. Both empirical studies advocated for the value of using the socioecological framework in understanding factors influencing older adults' recreational sport participation and in developing recommendations for P&R agencies to facilitate participation in recreational sport for this group. Therefore, in the current study, we used the socioecological framework - and specifically the attendant leisure constraint (Crawford et al., 1991) and leisure facilitator (Raymore, 2002) conceptual models—to help us organize the data, interpret the findings, and elaborate on management implications.

Methods

Data for this study were collected in 2019 through an online questionnaire. Participants included 1,203 adults aged 50 and older (M age = 63.38, SD = 8.25). Participants were recruited through a third-party company that invited individuals aged 50 and over across the U.S. to participate via email requests. Invitations were sent to people previously verified using third-party sources who had agreed to complete online surveys for a small incentive. The invitation process included efforts to yield a nationally representative sample by increasing invitations to demographics with lower response rates. When the goal number of participants was reached, the survey was closed to further participation, thus no traditional response rate is available.

The final sample included 552 men (45.9%) and 651 women (54.1%). The majority of participants were married (55.1%) or living with a partner (4.8%), with 16.3% divorced, 13% never married, and 9.6% widowed. When asked about their highest educational degree completed, 27.2% reported having a high school degree or less, 33.9% reported having a 2-year college degree or less, and 38.9% reported a 4-year degree or more. Finally, regarding race, the vast majority were White (87.2%), with 6.6% identifying as Black or African American, 2.5% as Asian or Asian American, and 2.3% as Hispanic or Latino.

The questionnaire included contextual items to understand the sample, asking for demographic information (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, level of education), items related to self-reported health (e.g., general health, chronic health conditions experienced in the past year, degree to which health limits activities daily activities), information related to time commitments (e.g., obligations for paid or volunteer work, caregiving), and questions related to their past sport participation (whether they had participated ever, since age 50, in the past year, in the past week). The questionnaire also asked more specific questions related to their experiences with recreational sport including what factors hinder their participation, what factors would encourage them to participate more, what sports they played most often, and what new sports they would like to play if given the opportunity. Finally, participants responded to items related to their satisfaction with available opportunities to play sport through local P&R organizations, and P&R-based factors that could facilitate their participation (e.g., program design, marketing strategies).

Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and Pearson correlations using SPSS 25 software. All statistically significant results were determined at the $p < .05$ level. Results are presented below to describe contextual factors relevant to older adults, their interests and preferences related to recreational sport, and factors that hinder or encourage their participation.

Results and Discussion

Who Are They?

Health Characteristics of Older Adults

The data suggested that older adults' health characteristics are complex and diverse. The majority of participants reported that they were in excellent (14%), good (46%), or average (19%) health. Yet, most respondents also reported having a limiting health condition (illness or injury) in the past twelve months. The most commonly reported health condition was high blood pressure/hypertension (52%), but approximately

three in 10 reported having arthritis, rheumatism, or other bone or joint diseases (31%) and/or other chronic conditions (e.g., cancer, hemorrhoids, skin trouble, etc.; 28%). Survey respondents also reported respiratory issues (26%); emotional disorders (20%); diabetes/high blood sugar (18%); gastrointestinal issues (14%); chronic sleep problems (13%); thyroid issues (13%); other cardiovascular disease and conditions (13%); urinary/bladder problems (12%); and sciatica, lumbago or a recurring backache (10%). Approximately one-fifth of respondents reported being somewhat or very limited in their ability to participate in even relatively common physically active behaviors (e.g., climbing stairs, household chores). Additionally, almost half of respondents reported being somewhat or very limited in being able to participate in vigorous activities, such as running or lifting heavy objects. These health conditions are likely to play a role in older adults' approach to and level of involvement in certain physical activities (Jenkin et al., 2018). It is important to avoid stereotyping older adults as physically unable to participate in LTPA, and instead recognize the complexity of health conditions that sport programs should be tailored to accommodate.

Time Commitments of Older Adults

Despite common assumptions that older adults have abundant free time, data suggested that participants had complex demands on their time. Although nearly half (48%) of respondents were retired, more than 20% were still working full-time. The remaining respondents were either permanently disabled (9%), working part-time (8%), self-employed (6%), housework (5%), unemployed (3%), or temporarily disabled (1%). In addition to work commitments, many older adults reported caregiving responsibilities. During the past 12 months, 39% of respondents had provided personal care to a family member or friend for 6 to 12 months because of a physical or mental condition, illness, or disability. Approximately 30% of respondents had provided caregiving to a family member or friend for longer than 1 year. Finally, approximately 24% of participants reported that they engage in volunteering one day per week or more. Minimizing time commitments needs to be considered when scheduling older adult sport programs.

LTPA Participation Among Older Adults

Overall, participants reported low levels of recent sport or recreational activity participation. While most participants (71%) reported playing sports in the past, only about half of the respondents (50%) reported having played a sport within the past year. Even fewer participants reported having participated in the past week. The majority of survey respondents (80%) reported no participation in light sport or recreational activities in the last 7 days, followed by 14% who participated 1-2 days per week (Figure 1). Only 4% of respondents participated in light sport or recreational activities 3-4 days per week. When asked about participation in moderate and strenuous sport or recreational activities, results were similar with 86% and 80% of the sample reporting no participation, respectively (Figure 2). These findings support existing research on the lack of LTPA participation among older adults (Keadle et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2013).

What Sports Do They Want?

Despite generally low rates of participation, results suggest older adults are interested in and motivated to participate in sports. First, a large portion of respondents expressed interest in engaging in various sports. When asked if there were sports in which they had not participated, but would try if given the chance, 44% expressed clear

Figure 1
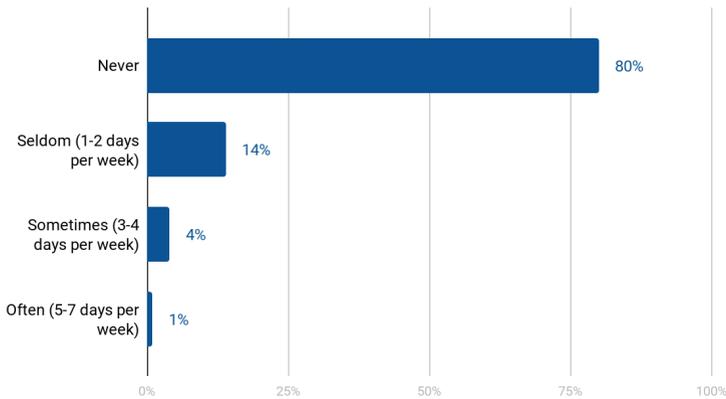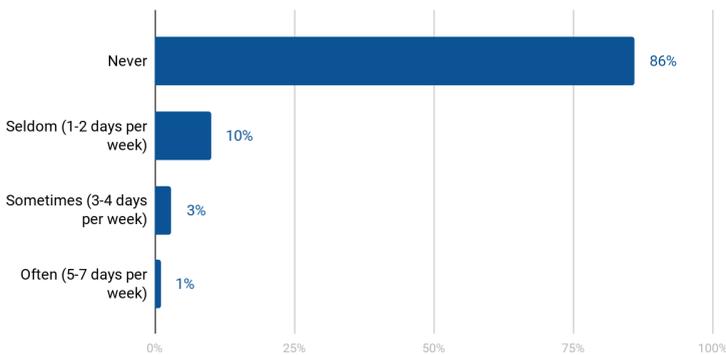*Frequency of Participation in Light Sport/Recreational Activities*

Figure 2
Frequency of Participation in Moderate Sport/Recreational Activities in Last Seven Days

interest in a specific new sport or activity while 8% reported were unsure of their desire or activity interest. Those sports with the most interest included golf (10%), pickleball (8%), and softball (6%). Golf was not only ranked as the most desired sport for older adults but also reported to be the second most popular sport (21%) respondents had participated in during the past year (after walking). Softball also had a high level of interest and was listed as the most common sport participated in after the age of 50 (30% reported they had played softball since turning 50). These findings support literature on the recent trend of increased demand for and benefits of pickleball (Casper et al., 2023; Ryu et al., 2018), but also suggest that older adults are interested in other sports that also need further research. In addition to the top three sports, many respondents reported they were interested in trying bowling (4%), hiking (3%), tennis (3%), walking (3%), volleyball (2%), and swimming (2%). While the percentages may seem small, it is important to put them into perspective. Given that respondents represent a cross-section of older adults, theoretically, a community of approximately 50,000 with about 20,000 adults over the age of 50, might find that as many as 400 older adults are interested in playing volleyball.

Why Don't Older Adults Participate in Sports?

Ascribing to both Brofenbrenner's socioecological framework (1977) and work in the area of constraints by Crawford and Godbey (1987), Crawford et al. (1991), and later revised by Godbey et al. (2010), the findings from this study support an interest in sport activities among older adults, yet many respondents reported low or no recent sports participation. One major finding of our study was the discontinuity and infrequency of sport participation among older adults. Additional survey findings indicated several factors might contribute to older adults' lack of engagement in sports.

Individual Constraints

First, findings indicated various individual constraints to older adults' sport participation. Some of the most commonly reported individual constraints hindering older adults from participating in sports were related to health status. Though prevalence of illness or injury varied significantly, most respondents reported having had some sort of limiting health condition (illness or injury) in the past 12 months. The impact of health conditions on their sport participation was further reiterated when respondents were asked about reasons why they do not participate in the sport they desire. Thirty-five percent agreed or strongly agreed that their body being "not in good enough shape" was a reason for lower-than-desired sport participation. Almost 30% of respondents reported that their fear of getting hurt limited their sports participation. Findings provide further support that physical health is a key determinant of older adults' sport participation (Jenkin et al., 2017; West et al., 2019). Concerns about health may not only impact older adults' initiation of sport engagement but also their continuity of participation (Yamada & Heo, 2016). According to Jenkin et al. (2016), over one-fourth of adults had discontinued a sport club membership due to their physical health.

Also, related to individual physicality, 31% of the sample listed "don't have the required skill" as a constraint to sport participation. This constraint is particularly relevant for older women who may have had fewer opportunities to develop sport skills in their younger years (Wong et al., 2019). Another individual constraint reported by 34% of the sample was "lack of money." Given that 48% of respondents were retired and only 22% were still working full time, it is not surprising that money was among older adults' biggest constraints to sport participation. In their study on barriers and benefits of older adults' sports participation, Jenkin et al. (2018) found that the cost of playing sport was a common barrier to participation by older adults. Another study by Jenkin et al. (2016) reported that older adults often prioritized other spending over sports. The current study yielded similar results with approximately one-fifth of respondents indicating they had found it difficult to prioritize sports, deterring them from engaging in sports.

Interpersonal Constraints

Study findings suggest that constraints related to social relationships often prevented participants from engaging in sports. More specifically, when asked why they do not participate in sports they enjoy, some of the most common reasons included: "I don't have people my age with whom to participate" (40%), "I don't have friends or family with whom to participate" (39%), and "people I know don't have time to participate with me" (35%). The findings were consistent with past research showing that many older adults stop playing sport with age because their friends and family members also stopped playing (Jenkin et al., 2016; Jenkin et al., 2021). Perhaps more
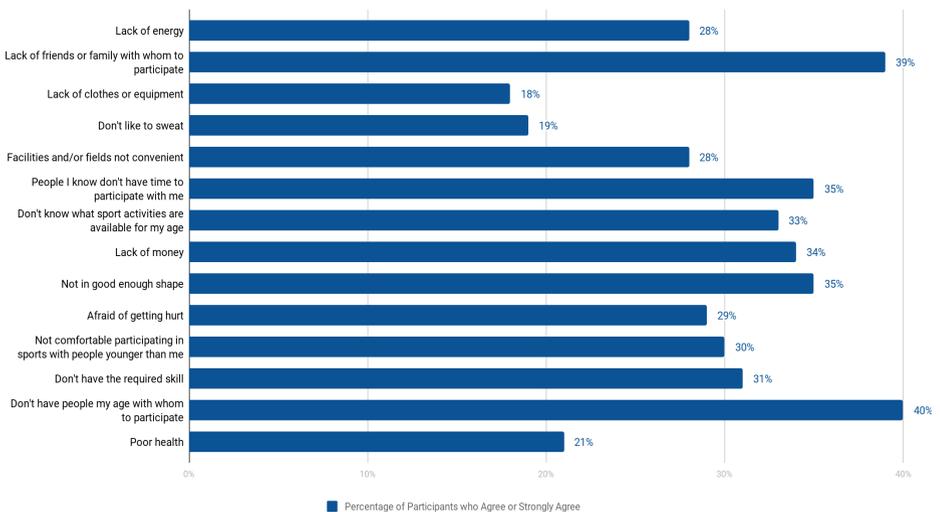
importantly, abundant research has indicated that sports participation can be used by older adults as a tool to develop social/community connections (e.g., Leipert et al., 2011; Lyons & Dionigi, 2007; Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003). Thus, missing out on the opportunity to participate in sports may negatively impact their overall quality of life, which can be enhanced through strong social and community connections.

Findings also suggested another interpersonal constraint that might be unique to older adults. That is, many respondents (30%) noted they do not feel comfortable participating in sports with people younger than them. Although the use of surveys for data collection did not afford an opportunity for further explanation, an overemphasis on sport participation among youth and young adults may have added extra stress on older adults' perception of playing sports in recreation spaces shared with younger people. Research has shown that lack of social support, as well as discomfort about competing with younger players, can deter older adults from participating in sport (Jenkin et al., 2016). Meanwhile, research also suggests older adults usually prefer to play with their own peers rather than compete with younger people in a shared recreation space. Thus, the lack of age-appropriate opportunities in their communities may further constrain their sport participation (Jenkin et al., 2016; 2021).
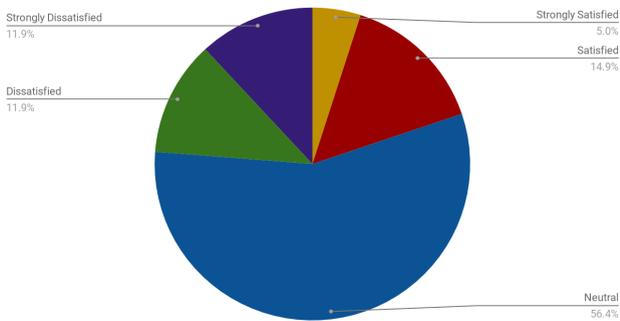
Community-Based Constraints

The data identified several environmental and organizational constraints related to low sport participation among older adults (Figure 3). Only 8% of participants reported they often or very often go to their local P&R departments to find out what is available. Similarly, fewer than one-fifth (19%) reported they were satisfied (agreed or strongly agreed) with the sports programs provided for older adults by their local P&R departments (Figure 4). Interestingly, 58% of respondents reported that they were nei-

Figure 3
Reasons for Lower than Desired Participation in Sport

Lack of energy — 28%
Lack of friends or family with whom to participate — 39%
Lack of clothes or equipment — 18%
Don't like to sweat — 19%
Facilities and/or fields not convenient — 28%
People I know don't have time to participate with me — 35%
Don't know what sport activities are available for my age — 33%
Lack of money — 34%
Not in good enough shape — 35%
Afraid of getting hurt — 29%
Not comfortable participating in sports with people younger than me — 30%
Don't have the required skill — 31%
Don't have people my age with whom to participate — 40%
Poor health — 21%

■ Percentage of Participants who Agree or Strongly Agree

ther satisfied nor dissatisfied with the sports programs offered to older adults by their local P&R agencies, implying that a large number of older adults might never or rarely participate in those programs. Findings from this study are consistent with previous studies in which organizational barriers, such as a lack of tailored programs and access to facilities, played a critical role in the low participation rate of sport among older adults (e.g., Jenkin et al., 2016; West et al., 2019). Another important finding was that levels of satisfaction with sport were significantly lower among women (χ^2 = 30.30, p < .01), those with lower levels of education (χ^2 = 20.52, p < .01), and those with lower self-reported health (χ^2 = 61.55, p < .01). This finding is at least partially supported by other research in which older women had lower rates of participation in sport and encountered more barriers (e.g., Eime et al., 2016; Van Tuyckom et al., 2010).

Figure 4
Satisfaction with Local P & R's Recreation Programs for Older Adults

Strongly Dissatisfied 11.9%
Dissatisfied 11.9%
Strongly Satisfied 5.0%
Satisfied 14.9%
Neutral 56.4%

Lack of Awareness

Findings indicated that older adults' low sports participation may be partially due to a lack of awareness and/or effective marketing by local P&R agencies. More than one-third of respondents reported they did not know which sport activities are available for people their age. It is noteworthy that older adults' unfamiliarity with available sport programs may be caused by an organizational barrier, such as the lack of programs designed for older adults, or an individual barrier, such as the lack of means to receive information about existing programs (e.g., lack of email, social media accounts). Low awareness is often cited as a reason that people of all ages do not attend sport and recreation programs offered by local P&R agencies (Mowen et al., 2005; Mowen & Baker, 2009). The lack of awareness of sport opportunities may be particularly salient among older adults (Jenkin et al., 2018), however, further hindering participation.

To determine strategies to communicate with older adults, respondents were also asked about the social media platforms they used regularly (defined as reading/checking at least once per week). The most noted social media platform was Facebook, with greater than 64% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they used Facebook regularly. This level of use was significantly higher than Instagram (14%), Twitter (16%), and even their local newspaper (54%). These findings are consistent with a Pew Research Center's report (2021) that about 50% of U.S. older adults use Facebook regularly. Furthermore, social media was used across the sample, while participants with higher levels of education and higher levels of self-reported health were significantly

more likely to read their local newspaper regularly. Even though this survey did not specifically address how P&R agencies promote sports programs and deliver information to local communities, the study findings suggest the need for more demographic-appropriate marketing strategies to promote older adults' sports.

What Would Encourage and Facilitate More Sport Participation?

It is important for P&R agencies to understand what facilitates older adults participation in recreational sport and how community-based organizations can facilitate increased participation. When asked about facilitators for their current participation, unsurprisingly, the top one was "to have good health" (79%). Other factors such as "to be active" (77%), "having good weather" (72%), "to have fun" (69%), and "because it's enjoyable" (65%) were also highly rated for sport participation. These findings suggest that most respondents recognize the benefits of sport participation and highlight the viability of utilizing sports engagement as a health promotion tool for older adults. Abundant research supports the potential for older adults to gain physical, mental, and social health benefits by engaging in physical activity (Bishop et al., 2010; Paterson et al., 2007; Sirven & Debrand, 2008; also see Jenkin et al., 2017). Dionigi's (2016) systematic review also identified numerous psychosocial benefits for older adults who play sports. Furthermore, the health benefits of sports participation among older adults in some specific activities, such as golfing (e.g., Siegenthaler & O'Dell, 2003), pickleball (e.g., Heo et al., 2018), bowling (e.g., Heuser., 2005), curling (e.g., Leipert et al., 2011), and softball (e.g., Choi et al., 2022) are also well-documented. Thus, findings highlight the importance of promoting and facilitating the health benefits, as well as the fun/enjoyment benefits, when marketing sports for older adults (Kelley et al., 2014; Liechty et al., 2017).

Participants were also asked about facilitators that would encourage them to start, continue, or increase sport involvement in the future. The highest reported items were related to interpersonal relationships including: "to spend time with friends or acquaintances" (64%), "to have the opportunity to make friends" (58%), "to meet new people" (53%), and "playing with others my same age" (53%). These findings support research that suggests older adults are particularly interested to participate in LTPA for social and interpersonal factors (Choi et al., 2021; Liechty et al., 2019) compared to factors such as appearance, elite competition, or social status. The findings also underscore the importance of recreational facilities and programs to promote and facilitate both enjoyment and opportunities for social interaction when marketing older adult sport programs (Choi et al., 2022; Liechty et al., 2017).

In addition to general facilitators of sport, participants were asked what specific ways P&R departments might encourage them to start, continue, or increase sport involvement. The most commonly reported factors (participants indicated they agreed or strongly agreed) include "access to activities that are offered at a low cost" (61%), "safe facilities and fields to use" (58%), "access to necessary facilities or fields" (55%), "access to information about available opportunities" (55%), "the opportunity to participate in activities that have been modified for my age group" (54%), and "access to programs with modifications to prevent injury" (51%). These findings support existing qualitative research which suggests older adults need additional access to fields and facilities, increased communication of available opportunities, and affordable programming tailored for their age group (Kelly et al., 2014; West et al., 2019). Furthermore, almost half (49%) of respondents indicated they would be more likely to play sports if personally invited by other players. The percentage of respondents influenced by an

invitation from a coach or instructor and the percentage of respondents influenced by an invitation from a P&R staff member was approximately one-third for each. This supports research suggesting that personal invitations, especially from other players, are a particularly salient recruitment tool for older adult sport (West et al., 2019).

A few considerations should be noted when interpreting the study findings. The decision to leverage online data collection in this study was made after careful consideration of the strengths and limitations of this methodological approach. While online data collection can be more cost-effective, convenient, and less disruptive than other methods (e.g., face-to-face interview, telephone interview; Wright, 2005), they also reach individuals who are hesitant to meet face-to-face or disclose personal information over the phone (Wright, 2005; see Wu et al., 2022 for a review). Though a limitation to the use of online surveys can be the exclusion of those who do not have any electronic device and internet access, libraries and community centers offer alternatives for electronic device usage and internet access. In an investigation conducted in 2005, researchers found that free public access to computers and the Internet are offered in 98.9% of all public libraries in the United States (Bertot & Palmer, 2005).

Alternatively, we considered the use of telephone interviews; however, approximately 73% of adults in the United States reside in a household without a landline (Van Dam, 2023). The work of the National Center for Health Statistics and National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago found that landlines are less common in rural, mountainous Western States (e.g., Idaho) and more common in dense Northeastern states (e.g., New York, Maryland), which would reduce the sample representativeness (Van Dam, 2023). Mailed paper surveys also have their own challenges with whether individuals complete and return the survey. Given the drawbacks of the different data collection methods, the use of electronic survey data collection was the most appropriate for this study.

Another study consideration regards the representativeness of the study sample. Data collection for this study was supported by a third-party research organization (www.leftbrainconcepts.com). Although the use of a third-party research organization to assist in the collection of a large sample size is not uncommon, we compared the demographic characteristics of our study sample with the Midlife in the United States Survey (MIDUS; https://midus.wisc.edu/). In the field of gerontology, MIDUS is a well-known national, longitudinal probability survey of the psychological well-being and physical health of adults in the United States (https://midus.wisc.edu/scopeof-study.php).

For the comparison, we utilized the third wave of MIDUS because the data collection dates (2013-2017) aligned the closest with our study collection period (2019). The demographic characteristics, specifically age, sex, and education, of our study sample are similar to the MIDUS Wave 3 samples. As for marital status, our study sample has a higher percentage of never married individuals, higher percentage of divorcees, and lower percentage of widows as compared to the MIDUS samples. In the examination of race, the percentage of Whites in this study is comparable to the MIDUS Main Sample and the percentage of Blacks and/or African Americans in our study is higher than the MIDUS Main Sample. As expected, our study sample has a lower percentage of Blacks and/or African Americans when compared to the MIDUS Main plus Milwaukee sample. It is important to note that MIDUS utilized different data collection methods (a combination of telephone interview and mailed, self-administered questionnaire) than our study; however, the demographic characteristics, with the exception of marital sta-

tus, of our study sample align closely with the MIDUS samples despite the methodological differences.

Management Implications

The purpose of the following section is to interpret findings and provide suggestions on the application of this study to practice, offering specific management and programming implications for P&R agencies.

Recognize the Need to Provide Sports for Older Adults

The findings suggest that P&R agencies need to increasingly prioritize recreational sport opportunities for older adults because there is strong interest among this population. Many community-based programs assume older adults are not interested in sport or that sport is mainly for children and youth (Berg et al., 2015), yet older adults are increasingly participating and expressing interest in recreational sport (Stone et al., 2018). Our findings suggest older adults are interested in a variety of sports. Additionally, participants reported a wide range of health conditions and physical ability levels. For example, approximately half of older adults felt capable of being vigorously active, yet the majority also reported they experience one or more chronic conditions. P&R agencies are, therefore, encouraged to offer a breadth of levels of sport opportunities for older adults, including those that include vigorous activity (Kelly et al., 2014). Furthermore, agencies should explore ways to ensure sport leagues and programs are accessible to people with a wide range of physical ability levels, by diversifying options and ensuring that staff are trained to accommodate various disabilities. If looking to create an older adult sport program, P&R agencies should consider offering the most popular sports of softball, golf, and pickleball. If trying to expand existing offerings for older adults, agencies should consider adding other popular sports such as bowling, hiking, tennis, walking, volleyball, and swimming among their activity choices, because these were activities in which older adults were either currently engaged or most interested in trying.

Ensure Equity, Access, and Inclusion

In addition to improved offerings, P&R agencies should evaluate whether their policies reflect the interests and needs of their community, such as who gets priority on days, times, and locations when fields/facilities are scheduled. Although older adults did not appear to favor policies that subsidize older adult activity or sport participation, they also did not feel youth activities and sports should receive priority when scheduling facilities. It is therefore critical for P&R agencies to schedule youth and older adults' programs in a similar fashion, without favoring or prioritizing based on age.

To ensure equity for older adults, P&R administrators should consider age within their organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives or plans. Further, when considering older adults specifically, it is important to consider diversity within the older adult sub-group. Specifically, P&R agencies should acknowledge the working status of older adults residing in their communities. As results indicate, a fair number of older adults are currently working either full-time or part-time. In this sense, traditional ways of scheduling and programming sport activities during the day might not be able to meet these older adults' needs. If multiple age groups are interested in using facilities at the same time of day, perhaps it would be possible to hold seasons for older adults on a different schedule than youth. Additionally, older adults who are in marginalized groups (e.g., women, those with lower levels of education or income)

may need additional attention to ensure equitable engagement. Unfortunately, due to the low participation in various racial categories, we were unable to compare rates of satisfaction among groups, however, past research suggests race is an important factor to consider in connection with aging as well (Lee et al., 2020; Powers et al., 2020).

Reduce Social and Economic Barriers Faced by Older Adults

The biggest limitations faced by older adults who desire to play sports are related to health/fear of injury, having people their age with whom to participate, cost, and knowledge of what is available for older adults. P&R agencies can help older adults navigate these constraints through programming decisions. For example, adopting rules designed for older adults, like restricting sliding in softball, or ability to borrow safety equipment can help reduce constraints related to fear of injury. Similarly, facilitating ways individuals can connect with teams or other older adults with whom to participate can help reduce social constraints.

As findings indicated cost is a significant constraint to older adults' sport participation, it is not enough for P&R agencies to provide and market appropriate activities. Instead, they must offer programs, specifically designed for older adults, which are low cost, convenient, and do not require expensive specialized equipment. Furthermore, P&R agencies should consider exploring different approaches to alleviating older adults' financial burden. For example, P&R agencies might diversify membership fees and offer a one-week day pass or morning pass at a lower price since other patrons may not be able to use the facility during those periods of time when they are working. Given that up to 40% of adults 50+ may be working full-time or involved with significant caregiving, childcare or volunteer responsibilities, P&R agencies should also consider reducing the time commitment needed for their sport programs.

Offer Trial Opportunities that Do Not Require a Commitment

Approximately one-half of older adults from this survey indicated they were interested in trying a new sport, yet a notable number also indicated that lack of sport skills or other responsibilities (e.g., caregiving, volunteering, work) were constraints. P&R agencies are, thus, encouraged to offer opportunities for older adults to try new sports without committing to a league or tournament where one is expected to have existing skills or significant amounts of time to commit. Sports "sampler" mini-camps might be offered with three or four different sports offered via short, half-day lessons over a week. During those "sampler" events, staff members of the agencies should pair up potential participants and highlight the social elements of sport engagement, increasing the possibility of returning participants.

Actively Promote Sport Participation among Older Adults

One of the first steps in getting anyone to participate in a recreation activity is to make them aware of the program. P&R agencies are encouraged to increase marketing of programs to older adults through means they use (e.g., Facebook) by highlighting them as opportunities to be active, enjoy themselves, and improve health. In addition, survey respondents reported personal invitations from other players, coaches and P&R agency staff were highly effective in promoting involvement. P&R agencies should therefore adopt and encourage a word-of-mouth approach to recruit more older adults to participate. Agencies can promote peer-to-peer invitations, requesting that current program participants invite their friends by offering events with a social focus, providing financial incentives for those that do so (e.g., a credit toward the agency's program) or social incentives (e.g., thank you or more public forms of recognition). As such,

P&R agencies should also consider public relations opportunities as a valuable recruitment method for participants.

Additionally, given that the vast majority of older adults consider health benefits as an important motivation for sport participation, P&R agencies should offer evidence-based programs, like NRPA's Healthy Aging in Parks with Walk with Ease, Fit & Strong. As well, agencies should highlight the health benefits for older adults when designing and promoting sport participation (e.g., participating in physical activity can help lower blood pressure and hypertension or participating in aqua-aerobics has been found to reduce the effects of arthritis). With half of older adults reporting having high blood pressure or hypertension and one-third reporting a form of arthritis or joint pain, P&R agencies should include the physical benefits of exercise in their marketing of activity and sport programs for older adults. Meanwhile, professionals also need to target market population sub-groups (e.g., women, low SES) that are most vulnerable to physical inactivity, providing demographic-appropriate sport and other LTPA opportunities.

Using frequent posts on social media and in local agency's brochures to share scientific research data related to health benefits of participating in sports might be an effective way to promote sports to older adults. Meanwhile, P&R agencies can consider partnering with public health professionals and experts (e.g., department of community/public health and sport and recreation in local universities) to design and promote learn-to-play clinics for various sports to help older adults develop skills and knowledge of health benefits. Utilizing a university's Cooperative Extension Services to conduct community outreach allows P&R agencies to advertise the health benefits of sport participation, increasing the awareness among older adults.

Solicit Their Input

Lastly, it is also important for professionals to consult with older adults in their communities. Upon completion of the survey, participants were asked for additional comments. Without a prompt, almost one-fourth (24%) of participants left a comment along the lines of "Thanks for asking!" suggesting that despite the potential burden, participants appreciated the opportunity to share their thoughts. If P&R professionals are going to best serve older adults, it is vital that they take the time to find out those needs directly, both informally through observation and personal contact and formally through town hall meetings, surveys and focus groups of participants and non-participants, or potential participants.

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Regular Paper

"We Try [to] Take the Barriers Away For You to Come in": Active Recreation Contexts as Leisure Facilitators

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Executive Summary

Active recreation spaces provide important contexts for physical activity that can contribute to positive physical and mental health outcomes. However, individuals often face constraints which can limit their participation in active recreation. Although some constraints can be negotiated at the individual level, organizations may also take actions to facilitate participation. Extensive research has examined individual constraints to active recreation and constraint negotiation strategies, but there is a lack of research on how recreation agencies and organizations work to facilitate participation in active recreation. Recognizing this gap, we sought to understand facilitators of physically active recreation at the contextual level, with a larger goal of identifying the organizational facilitators that recreation providers use to encourage participation.

This qualitative study of recreation providers included semi-structured focus groups conducted online with staff and program leaders at recreation organizations providing physically active programming in a college town in the northeastern United States. Focus groups were transcribed verbatim, coded both deductively and inductively using thematic analysis, and validated with qualitative techniques (e.g., consensus across coders). Results aligned with four themes: philosophy/culture, staff/volunteers, marketing, and program actions. These themes illustrate the actions taken by providers to encourage and support participation across various levels of their organizational operations.

Our data provide evidence of specific facilitation strategies used by recreation providers, aligning with constraints and constraint negotiation strategies identified in previous research, as well as with business practices not typically viewed through this lens. The present study highlights the need for better integration of individual- and organizational-level research. By better understanding constraints faced by current and potential participants, providers can be more intentional in

aligning their practices with the facilitation of participation. Recreation providers can use the facilitation strategies identified in this study to support constraint negotiation and better enable engagement in active recreation.

Introduction

Engagement in recreational physical activity is beneficial to health and well-being (Wiese et al., 2018). However, there are widespread disparities in availability and use of leisure time for physical activity (López & Yamashita, 2018; Pearl et al., 2021; Saffer et al., 2013) raising questions for recreation scholars and service providers about how to facilitate participation. At its most basic level, participation in recreational activities requires two components: an individual and a recreation context. For the individual component, there is a considerable body of literature on factors influencing participation, including research on constraints (e.g., Crawford et al., 1991; Godbey et al., 2010; Stodolska et al., 2019) and facilitators of leisure (e.g., Oncescu et al., 2021; Raymore, 2002; Son et al., 2022). There is also research on the influence of the social context in which recreation takes place, such as studies of race-based discrimination (Harrison, 2013; Sharaievska et al., 2010), gendered recreation experiences (Maclean, 2019; Mayoh et al., 2020), and weight stigma (Pearl et al., 2021). However, less research has been conducted at the organizational level about how recreation programs may facilitate active recreation. The present study was designed to address this gap and improve understanding of how recreation contexts serve as facilitators of active recreation. Acknowledging that recreation contexts are designed to engage people in recreation, examining how contextual efforts to support participation may align with existing individual-level theories expands the existing literature and could enable the recreation industry to better facilitate participation.

Individual-Level Theories Relevant to Active Recreation Facilitation

Leisure constraints theory has been widely utilized to examine individuals' (non) participation in recreation activities. Leisure constraints are factors that may inhibit participation, and have been conceptualized as involving three levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural (Crawford et al., 1991; Crawford & Godbey, 1985). Constraints refer to a person's perceptions including intrapersonal constraints related to ability and skill level, interpersonal constraints related to other participants, and structural constraints related to factors such as cost, access to facilities, and time (Crawford et al., 1991). Although Crawford and colleagues (1991) have asserted that these constraints are experienced hierarchically (i.e., more intrapersonal constraints must be negotiated before engaging with more distal constraints), recent empirical research has suggested that some constraints domains appear to be interconnected and mutually inclusive (as opposed to mutually exclusive). For example, health can be both an intrapersonal and structural constraint (Son et al., 2022) and culture may be a superseding factor across the domains of constraints (e.g., Dorwart et al., 2022; Stodolska et al., 2019).

In addition to the potential interrelations among constraints, individuals can also negotiate constraints in several ways, including financial, interpersonal, skill acquisition, and time management negotiations (Jackson et al., 1993). As Hubbard and Mannell (2001) noted, the presence of constraints may increase negotiation efforts to either mitigate or overcome them. In addition, researchers have examined the effects of culture and context on leisure constraint negotiation (Jun & Kyle, 2011; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004), highlighting the heterogeneity of constraint negotiation experiences. However, research on constraints and negotiation typically has not included factors that may promote or facilitate participation (as a recent exception, see Son et al., 2022).

Leisure facilitators, as conceptualized by Raymore (2002), are conditions that enable leisure participation. This concept draws from Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory, positing that leisure behavior is influenced by factors at different levels of the social environment, including the microsystem (e.g., particular recreation contexts, peer groups), mesosystem (interactions among microsystems), exosystem (e.g., influences from media, local community), macrosystem (e.g., social perspectives of gender and age), and chronosystem (changes in these systems across time). Raymore (2002) also used Crawford et al.'s (1991) tripartite model of leisure constraints as the basis for formulating similar dimensions of facilitators. Specifically, intrapersonal facilitators include characteristics and skills that encourage participation in a particular activity (e.g., preferences for risk-taking and skill in hiking could facilitate participation in rock climbing), interpersonal facilitators include individuals or groups that enable or enhance participation (e.g., encouragement from or co-participation of family or friends), and structural facilitators include supportive social and physical institutions (e.g., park and recreation agencies, campus recreation facilities) as well as supportive social structures (e.g., higher socioeconomic status or good health) (Raymore, 2002). However, variations in conceptualization and measurement of leisure constraints and facilitators have illustrated the complexity of these constructs (Kim et al., 2011; Son et al., 2022). There is also a dearth of research on the nature of facilitators at the contextual level, including both microsystem-level contexts such as specific recreation programs and exosystem-level contexts such as recreation policies. Therefore, there is a need for research connecting these individual-level theories of leisure constraints, negotiation strategies, and facilitators, with the practices and policies of recreation-providing organizations.

Context-Oriented Research Relevant to Active Recreation Facilitation

Although recreation agencies often explicitly aim to enable physical activity and encourage widespread participation, there is a paucity of literature on how they can specifically act as facilitators for active recreation. Instead, program-oriented research has focused on business strategies and management frameworks to expand membership and increase profit margins (e.g., León-Quismondo et al., 2020) without reference to broader theoretical frameworks. Recreation organizations may adopt a variety of strategies to facilitate increased participation including marketing, needs assessments, establishing multi-sector partnerships, developing meaningful community connections, and offering an array of services that meet varied needs, abilities, and interests (Camarillo et al., 2020; K. J. Lee et al., 2020; Oncescu et al., 2021; Powers et al., 2022). Depending on an organization's sector and funding structure, the need for cost recovery and profit maximization may vary but, at a minimum, most organizations seek to recover their essential operating costs. For example, recreation organizations commonly implement user fees for programs or facilities as a form of cost recovery (Zou &

Pitas, 2022). Thus, recruitment and retention of new users is often an important focus of context-level research. For example, to create and sustain membership growth within nonprofit community sport organizations, Morrison and Misener (2022) found that organizational capacity is the determining factor, and argue that leaders in recreation organizations must therefore use strategic planning to better accommodate clientele and increase memberships. In contrast, Yi and colleagues (2021) argue that retention of existing participants should be prioritized over recruiting new participants via marketing and sales strategies, which can be expensive. They recommend that motivation and commitment should be encouraged early in the membership period, focusing on intangible experiential factors that make customers more likely to see value in their membership.

In addition to financial reasons to increase or sustain participation in general, some organizations also seek to support groups that are currently underrepresented in their programs or facilities. For example, to increase participation of low-income and otherwise disadvantaged community members within their agencies, recreation professionals may mitigate or eliminate costs, utilize marketing via social media or partnerships with schools to promote their programs, increase physical and virtual access, and ensure safety of facilities for people with different needs (Camarillo et al., 2020; Oncescu et al., 2021). Diverse ethnic and racial representation among organization staff can contribute to a sense of belonging for racially diverse participants (Byrne, 2012; Powers et al., 2022), who often must negotiate additional constraints compared to white participants (Stodolska et al., 2019). Education of staff on topics related to weight stigma is also important to promote inclusion among individuals with high bodyweight (Lee et al., 2023), who are often discriminated against in physical activity contexts (Pearl et al., 2021). However, even when organizations value inclusion, these complex systemic equity challenges require multiple approaches and sustained commitments (Powers, 2022; Wilson et al., 2022).

In sum, although much is known about relevant management practices, there is a lack of connection between these practices and leisure theories related to facilitation of physical activity. Instead, for the most part, research has been siloed into either individual-level research aligned with leisure constraints theory (Crawford et al., 1991), or context-oriented research aligned with management frameworks (Morrison & Misener, 2022). More research is therefore needed on the ways in which recreation sites may serve as facilitators of recreational physical activity.

The Present Study

This study sought to better understand organizational practices to support participation in active recreation, with the aim of better integrating leisure constraints and facilitators research with professional practice. Our initial research question was "What do recreation providers do to facilitate participation in physically active recreation?" However, we added a secondary research question during data analysis, when it became clear that existing theoretical frameworks of leisure facilitators and leisure constraint negotiation practices did not align with our data in a straightforward way: "To what extent do practices in the recreation industry align with leisure theories related to the facilitation of participation?" We used qualitative focus group data from providers of active recreation to address these questions, to center the perspectives and voices of practitioners in the field, to provide an opportunity for discussion across providers, and to enable inquiry into how they perceive their work in relation to existing theory (i.e., leisure constraints and facilitators).

Method

Participants and Procedures

Participants (*N*=10) in the present study (hereafter referred to as "professionals") were staff and program leaders at organizations providing physical activity to residents of a rural, college town in the northeastern U.S. We contacted every local program for which we could find contact information online, inviting them to have a staff member participate in the study. A total of 78 individuals were invited to participate and of these, 12 provided consent via our online form. Our sample size was therefore determined by eligible individuals' willingness to participate in the study. Individuals who consented to participate were asked to give their availability for a focus group, and focus groups were scheduled when at least two professionals listed overlapping availability. Although we sought to have larger focus groups, this procedure resulted in 10 total participants across four online focus groups of two to three professionals each. The first focus group included a leader in the university campus recreation program and the founder of a local yoga studio, the second focus group included managers of a rock climbing gym and an ice-skating arena, the third focus group included two fitness gym managers (including one who also operated a martial arts studio) and a staff member from a nonprofit soccer program, and the fourth focus group included the leader of a recreation-oriented meetup group and two staff members from the local YMCA (including one who also led programming for a fishing nonprofit). Professionals were not asked to disclose their race or gender, but the majority of the sample presented as female (73%) and white (100%).

Focus groups were held over zoom to facilitate scheduling. Each focus group began with a reminder that the conversation should be kept confidential and then professionals were asked questions about their programming, with opportunities to build on each other's comments. Focus group questions included prompts about how they interact with new (including beginner) participants, their recruitment/advertising and retention strategies, and the demographics of their participants. The interviewer also utilized probes and follow-up questions with the goal of understanding what they were doing to facilitate participation in physical activity for local residents. The average duration of a focus group was 66 minutes (range = 56 minutes – 76 minutes). After each focus group, professionals were emailed a code for a $10 Amazon.com gift card. Focus group transcripts provided by Zoom were corrected by a member of the research team prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

This study used Huberman and Miles's (1994) iterative approach to qualitative data analysis as a guide, which starts with deductive analysis and then moves to inductive analysis, and then implements a repeating process as needed. This model was used because of the existence of theory related to the study topic. As such, the research team read through all transcripts looking for themes related to the constructs of leisure constraints, constraint negotiation, and facilitators, as defined in existing leisure theory (i.e., deductive coding) (e.g., Crawford et al., 1991; Godbey et al., 2010; Raymore, 2002). This effort identified themes that were not related to preexisting theory as well as themes that intersected a priori domains (e.g., themes that could be coded as both constraints and facilitators). We then conducted inductive data analysis to examine text related to program actions, which was identified as a prevalent theme in the data. In alignment with Huberman and Miles's (1994) approach, we engaged in inductive

analysis, using a reflexive and consensus-oriented version of thematic analysis (Braun et al., 2019). The inductive coding process began with three coders working independently to code the text using the Quirkos qualitative coding platform, then meeting to resolve disagreements through consensus based on thorough engagement with the data. A fourth coder then reviewed the coding; as this coder did not disagree with any of the coding, these codes were retained. Next, as part of Huberman and Miles's (1994) iterative process of coding, the team examined the themes in relation to both the literature on leisure constraints, constraint negotiation, and leisure facilitators (e.g., Crawford et al., 1991), and relevant concepts from the field of business (e.g., customer relations, staff training, marketing, brand missions, etc.). We determined that, to better capture the full meaning of recreation facilitation within the data, we needed to expand our coding process to incorporate business practice-related codes as well. For example, we noted that it would be useful to have codes related to strategies professionals used to facilitate staying in business, rather than only focusing on direct facilitators of participation. We recognized that business practices were a necessary, underlying component of the organizations' ability to facilitate participation, and professionals went into considerable detail describing their business operations. The process of identifying possible alignments of the codes to leisure constraints theory and business concepts/theory took place in a meeting between the four coders, using a collaborative online platform (Google Jamboard) to synthesize and illustrate the findings. The full iterative process of thematic analysis undertaken in this study—including deductive-inductive-deductive coding rounds—provided a robust and in-depth qualitative analysis (Huberman & Miles, 1994) and enhanced investigator and theory triangulation (Denzin, 1970).

Results and Discussion

Results of our iterative analysis are organized into four themes: philosophy/culture, staff/volunteers, marketing, and program actions. Figure 1 displays these themes and their connections to management strategies and leisure theories. The middle column, entitled "organization actions," displays our four themes. The solid arrows represent how the themes connect to both leisure theory and management strategies. In the following sections, we describe the four themes and how they relate to leisure theory, management, and their interconnections. The following sections present both the results of our qualitative analysis and our integration of these results with the literature. This section is followed by a separate section on management implications.

Philosophy/Culture

Organizational philosophy and culture, often stemming from an organization or leader's underlying mission, was a central theme in professionals' descriptions of their efforts to facilitate active recreation. We identified two sub-themes related to mission and values.

Mission-Driven Philosophy

As an overarching theme across focus groups, professionals described the actions their organizations took to engage with new and returning participants in relation to their underlying philosophy as an organization. Professionals commonly noted that their organizations exist to serve the community and expressed a desire to serve all participants, regardless of their prior experience or ability. Across different types of organizations, helping people to better themselves, be active, and spend time outdoors

Figure 1

Relationships Among Study Themes Related to Organization Actions and Theoretical Concepts from Both Leisure and Business Literature
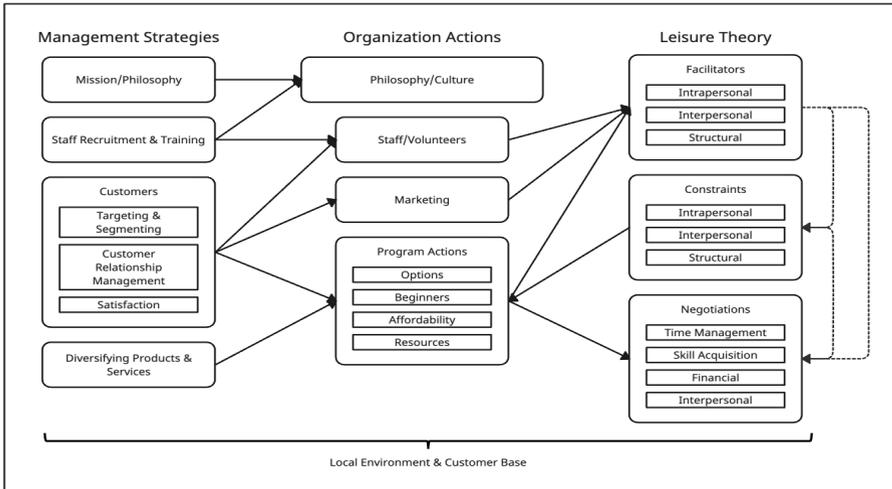
Note: solid arrows are based on current study findings; dashed arrows are based on relationships identified in prior research.

were prominent intentions. Many organizations were not profit-driven, and instead emphasized their desire to make participation more accessible. For example, the representative of a non-profit soccer organization stated: "We need to make [enough] to pay our employees, but that's how we set registration prices. It's not like we're out there to make a buck." Others made similar comments and emphasized how people should not be excluded based on financial constraints, reflecting an established form of structural facilitation (Kim et al., 2011; Son et al., 2022). For instance, a professional from a non-profit community recreation organization said, "at [our organization], nobody is turned away for any reason, and especially, you know, due to inability to pay." Across focus groups, organizations' mission-driven philosophies appeared to drive the efforts they took to encourage participation. As such, additional themes and subthemes were discussed in tandem with the organization's mission.

Values: Welcoming and Comfortable Atmosphere

In addition to articulating how their mission impacted their work, professionals also described their organizational values, emphasizing the importance of welcoming new users, providing a comfortable atmosphere, and being welcoming and inclusive to everyone regardless of their ability level, body size, or age. For instance, a fitness center professional stated: "We try to make sure that this is a welcoming environment, for a wide range of people, like the Ironman athlete, but also the person that has been thinking about for 8 years, 10 years coming into the [facility]." Others emphasized how they work to be welcoming and create a comfortable environment for everyone, especially those who are more likely to experience discrimination, such as those with larger body sizes (Carter-Francique, 2011; Pearl et al., 2021). For instance, a nonprofit community recreation professional said, "I don't believe in discrimination, you know, of any kind and surely, if somebody is, you know, overweight or bigger, I would hope that they

would come in here and feel welcome." Prior research has also emphasized the importance of organizational values in recreation and physical activity-based contexts (e.g., Wilson et al., 2022), and in our study, values appeared to inform the direct strategies organizations employed to facilitate participation. In other words, values reflected the attitudes that practitioners held, and the actions they took to implement their values in practice are discussed below.

Staff/Volunteers

The staff/volunteers theme encompassed topics of interpersonal support and diverse representation, reflecting deliberate strategies that staff use as a means of both instantiating their mission and values and facilitating customer retention.

Interpersonal Support

Many organizations had training for staff and volunteers to provide better interpersonal support to participants including lesson plans, helping staff learn how to identify beginners, and instilling behaviors such as knowing people's names and faces, being encouraging and accepting, and building relationships which help participants feel comfortable and keep coming back. As one fitness center professional remarked: "That's what I always try to instill in my staff, you know, don't sit behind the desk, on your phone. Address them, talk to them, walk around the floor, get to know them." Further, professionals discussed efforts to support participants' goal attainment, especially beginners. Staff and volunteers were encouraged to check in, provide tips and suggestions, and help encourage participants, ensuring that "nobody gets left behind" (meetup group leader). These interpersonal support strategies reflect ways that organizations can facilitate participants' negotiation of both intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints, including self-perceptions/self-esteem, concern about judgement from others, lack of skill, or not knowing other participants or staff (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Powers et al., 2019; Stankowski et al., 2017). The facilitators described here may also support participants in applying negotiation strategies (Jackson et al., 1993) such as building self-esteem and confidence, skill development, and forming supportive relationships with staff and other participants.

Diverse Representation

The idea that, as stated by a campus recreation professional, "People want to see people who look like them in our facilities" was an important theme which corroborates findings from other recreational contexts (Byrne, 2012; Dorwart et al., 2022). Having diverse representation was discussed as a contributor to a welcoming environment and a way to potentially draw in new participants. For example, the campus recreation professional went on to say: "We will hire people so that [participants] of different ethnic origins can see people who look like them or people of different abilities too and not just people in chairs, people with a prosthetic, people without sight or with limited sight we tried to hire." In some cases, specific staff offered programs targeted towards particular groups, such as a queer yoga program that was offered by an LGBTQIA+ instructor. Such findings align with studies suggesting that diverse representation among staff and leaders, as well as programs which reflect diverse interests and needs, can support greater perceptions of being welcome and belonging (Powers et al., 2022). These equity-oriented facilitators may be especially important for individuals who may be less likely to see people like them represented within recreation organizations.

Marketing

Professionals discussed both generic outreach-based advertising strategies and relational strategies for marketing in their conversations about how to facilitate participation. However, some professionals from non-profit or volunteer-based organizations placed less emphasis on marketing to or recruiting new participants.

General Outreach and Advertising

Professionals advertised using strategies including flyers, email campaigns, social media, newsletters, and advertising on local events calendars. Social media was described as a strategy to advertise beyond current participants, whereas emails and newsletters were used to encourage repeat participation and advertise new offerings. Being well informed about leisure activities was identified by Kim et al. (2011) as a structural facilitator yet we also recognize that it could be considered an intrapersonal facilitator given that it addresses an intrapersonal constraint of lack of knowledge (e.g., mutual inclusivity; Son et al., 2022). The outreach and advertising facilitators described by professionals could help participants navigate constraints related to a lack of information or knowledge about opportunities. However, a lack of diverse representation in marketing materials may serve as a structural constraint for those who do not see individuals who look like them (Powers et al., 2023). Intentional marketing for groups underrepresented in recreation settings has been identified in previous studies as a potential means of facilitating participation (Camarillo et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020), and some professionals discussed their efforts to market toward specific groups of people, such as BIPOC communities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and veterans. However, professionals were not sure how to attract certain populations, such as those with higher body weight. For example, a yoga professional said, "I don't really know how to attract that specific population that would be larger bodied, other than having a teacher that has that image…I don't see them [larger bodied individuals] as often as someone who's maybe just more normal BMI." Successfully marketing recreation services to specific groups of people requires an intentional and equity-minded approach that takes into account the diverse ways that people receive information and the level of trust that an organization has built with a particular community (Camarillo et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Loukaitou-Sideris & Mukhija, 2023).

Relational Strategies

Some professionals indicated that certain marketing strategies, such as general advertising, flyers, or social media were not effective for their organizations compared to relationship-building. For example, a campus recreation professional said, "I can pay for [mailed advertisements] all day long. But for some reason in this business, because it deals with the human body, there has to be that trust, and few people trust someone that they have not looked in the eyes." Word of mouth marketing was highly valued, and several professionals described programs or promotions that capitalized on this approach, such as the rock climbing professional: "We offer a lot of free classes, a lot of buy-one-get-ones… if they come in twice after that, it's more than worth our time and energy… We've grown our membership base, and we've gotten more faithful users." In addition to facilitating a no- or low-cost first visit—a structural facilitator, these strategies also may be an interpersonal facilitator whereby individuals encourage their friends to participate (Kim et al., 2011; Son et al., 2022). In turn, providing a new participant the opportunity to experience the facility or program with a friend may

support those constrained by not wanting to participate alone (Stankowski et al., 2017). For example, the rock climbing professional also noted: "climbing is an inherently social thing… it's a lot easier to get over the initial intimidation, or to sort of break the ice with it, if you have a friend to do it with." Additionally, a free class may help establish rapport and trust with the instructor and thereby facilitate further participation (Son et al., 2022).

Program Actions

Professionals discussed a variety of program actions that supported their work in the areas previously described, including providing opportunities for choice, supporting beginners, striving for affordability, and utilizing resources. Some also noted a desire to help address community needs and adjust their offerings accordingly.

Opportunities

All the organizations provided a variety of ways for participants to be involved. Customer retention is an important business strategy (Yi et al., 2021), and professionals viewed having more options as a way to attract different types of participants and keep them involved over time ("It's kind of like a feeder program"—ice-skating professional). Even organizations that only offered one type of activity emphasized the variety of class types they offered, including in-person and online options due to the pandemic, and how they provide "many options in a class so that people have that freedom and feel empowered to make their own choice" (yoga professional). This type of autonomy support has previously been found to support physical activity engagement (Chatzisarantis et al., 2007). In addition, some organizations were invested in ensuring that they had "something for everyone" (fitness gym professional) aligning with theories of leisure constraints, constraint negotiation, and leisure facilitators, in that having a variety of options may help participants choose activities where they feel more confident, activities their friends also enjoy, and/or activities that are held at convenient times (Crawford et al., 1991; Jackson et al., 1993; Raymore, 2002). However, although many professionals wanted opportunities for diverse participants, they faced challenges in how to implement them. For example, a yoga professional noted:

> There's always kind of a caution… like you want to make a space that's welcoming, but then also not make someone feel kind of singled out like oh, this is the class for larger bodied, or curvy (and what language is appropriate for that?), that feels friendly and inviting, rather than something that would, might feel hurtful.

As observed in prior research, and in the struggle of the practitioner quoted above to articulate for whom they wanted to provide programming, most practitioners were not confident in their ability to welcome high bodyweight individuals (Lee et al., 2023; Pearl et al., 2021). Discussions related to race, gender, and sexual orientation were less fraught, and reflected professionals' understanding that they needed to make an effort if they wanted to diversify their participant population (Hudson et al., 2013; Jun & Kyle, 2011; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004; Stodolska et al., 2019), even if they had not yet found successful strategies to do so (Powers et al., 2022). One example of an effort to be more inclusive in yoga was reflected in a training course that one professional's yoga studio offered in response to the limited diversity of yoga instructors: "We have recently targeted people of color…we ran a teaching training online and we gave

full scholarships to LGBTQ and BIPOC just to draw them in because… we wanted to support those groups and we specifically spoke about race and had representatives of color of authors of the books that we use." Practitioners' greater perceived challenges in their ability to welcome individuals with higher bodyweights in comparison to those belonging to other underserved groups may be rooted in more systemic societal issues with weight discrimination and stigma (Zuest et al., 2021), although these issues were not explicitly investigated in the current study. In general, professionals provided options across their programming and/or within their classes to enable their organization to serve the widest range of participants possible, facilitating participation and concurrently enacting a sound business management strategy (e.g., Yi et al., 2021).

Beginners

Professionals described a mix of strategies for working with beginners, ranging from offering classes specifically marketed toward beginners to fully integrating beginners into all of their programming. The organizations that stratified their offerings typically did so to make sure beginners had a good experience. For example, the meetup group leader said, "I try to be very clear in the description… if you've never hiked before… this might not be the hike for you." Organizations providing more specialized activities also offered specific classes to teach beginners (e.g., the ice-skating professional described "a 6-week session where you come in and if you're a beginner… we teach you to fall and get back up off the ice"). These offerings facilitate the skill acquisition method of constraint negotiation (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001; Jackson et al., 1993). Professionals also described strategies for welcoming new participants, including sending them individualized messages when they first sign up or "giv[ing] them personal attention if they need it without distracting the rest of the class" (fitness gym professional). These strategies may serve as interpersonal facilitators (Raymore, 2002), or may support participants in overcoming intrapersonal constraints such as lack of confidence (Crawford et al., 1991). This theme showed strong alignment with the existing literature, as professionals explicitly sought to facilitate participation by helping beginners negotiate constraints (Crawford et al., 1991; Jackson et al., 1993; Raymore, 2002).

Affordability

Professionals recognized that cost could be prohibitive for some of their potential participants: "They only have so much money to spend. So how are we engaging them, and capturing them, and keeping them informed of what is available, so that they'll decide to spend their dollars here?" (ice-skating professional). Cost is widely recognized as a structural constraint (Crawford et al., 1991) requiring financial negotiation strategies (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001), and context-oriented approaches to recreation management also highlight the importance of carefully considering pricing (León-Quismondo et al., 2020). Many professionals described enacting strategies to make their programming more affordable or accessible, such as giving out discounts or coupons, waiving joiners fees, or offering scholarships to ensure that lower-income community members could participate. However, for the most part, the strategies described were limited to new participants, such as the climbing gym where "The equipment and orientation and everything are always free on your first visit" or the fitness gym where members received an "unlimited number of free first-time guest passes" for

their friends. These methods therefore may not have been effective in making participation affordable in a sustainable way (Stodolska et al., 2019).

Resources

Equipment and other tangible resources were sometimes described as limiting the organizations' ability to effectively serve their participants (i.e., structural constraints; Hubbard & Mannell, 2001). For example, some professionals noted that more/better/different equipment or space would be helpful, such as the ice-skating rink where "[customers] would really like us to build a third [ice] sheet so that there would be more ice time." The climbing gym professional also noted that weight limits on safety devices constrained their ability to serve heavier people, reflecting how structural inequities can be built into exercise equipment, perpetuating the exclusion of people with larger bodies from active recreation (Gordon, 2023). However, the majority of conversations around resources focused on ways they could be used to support participants. For example, professionals helped participants negotiate the structural constraint of lacking equipment (Crawford et al., 1991) by providing equipment including kayaks, ice skates, fishing rods, and yoga props (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001). As stated by the ice-skating professional, "we have the equipment… we try and make it as easy as possible and take the barriers away for you to come in." Some organizations specifically ensured that they had appropriate resources to support a wide variety of potential customers, such as the fishing program where "our chapter has purposely gone out and bought, you know, like, extra-large, extra-long, like, you know, bigger, bigger waders, so that these individuals can be included" and the campus recreation program where utilizing "distributed cardio, [placing equipment in] spaces and corners, have made people feel more safe. It's also helped our trans students and also our female students from other cultures who are not comfortable with people watching them." These efforts to support members of underrepresented populations are necessary and important, although true inclusion depends on more than the supply of adequate resources (Hudson et al., 2013; Jun & Kyle, 2011; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004; Stodolska et al., 2019). In sum, this theme showed strong alignment with the existing literature, as professionals sought to facilitate participation by helping participants negotiate structural constraints (Crawford et al., 1991; Jackson et al., 1993; Raymore, 2002).

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study used data from a relatively homogeneous sample of recreation providers in a U.S. college town, who serve both local residents and a large population of college students. Our study was also limited by the small size of each focus group and the overall sample size was limited by participant availability and interest within the (already limited in size) target population. As such, this study should be viewed as a preliminary exploration of how recreation providers facilitate participation in physically active recreation. Furthermore, our recruitment procedure focused on leaders and higher-level staff, who may have different perspectives on organizational practices than front-line service delivery professionals or individuals with fewer years of experience in the industry. Additional research drawing on a larger, more diverse population of professionals, including those working in urban areas and outside the U.S., is needed to better understand how leisure facilitation operates at the contextual level. Such research should intentionally involve professionals from underrepresented groups within the industry and involve additional opportunities for study participants to engage with the data (e.g., confirming transcripts or member checking themes).

Management Implications

The present study reveals the extent to which leading theories of leisure participation (i.e., constraints, negotiation, facilitators) are aligned with day-to-day practices in recreation programs while not being explicitly recognized by many recreation program providers. As such, we suggest that programs providing active recreation develop more explicit awareness of how their practices do (or could) serve as leisure facilitators, and align these theories with their overarching philosophies, including mission, vision, and values. In keeping with the original tripartite conceptualization of leisure facilitators (Raymore, 2002), we organize this section into approaches that center intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural facilitators, although as management practices they could all be considered structural facilitators.

In this study, organizations fostered intrapersonal facilitators for participants to develop self-confidence and relevant physical skills via beginner skill level classes, inclusive programs, and individualized attention, as well as helping participants to feel that they belong through strategies such as authentic representation of diversity among staff and leaders. The data indicate that staff should be trained to recognize when participants are struggling to negotiate intrapersonal constraints (e.g., lacking self-confidence) and provide relevant encouragement and support. It may also be useful for recreation providers to consider intrapersonal constraints (in addition to other constraints) when designing their marketing and outreach campaigns, as understanding the barriers to entry could enable more successful advertising for organizations and thus better facilitation of physical activity for community members.

With regard to interpersonal facilitators, our data suggest that organizations should be intentional about creating a welcoming atmosphere where no one gets left behind and forming interpersonal connections with participants, including explicit training for staff to emphasize the value of getting to know participants and building relationships, in addition to providing training to overcome biases (e.g., antiracism training, training to reduce weight stigma). Leveraging current participants as interpersonal facilitators for new participants also emerged as a useful strategy. The fact that professionals understood this approach from a marketing and business perspective highlights the potential synergy between theories of leisure facilitation and successful business management and the potential value of continuing education opportunities for recreation professionals to build awareness of relevant theory and research.

Recreation sites are primed to be structural facilitators, as often explicitly delineated in the missions and organizational philosophies described in the current study. Additional strategies for structural facilitation of physical activity included providing a variety of options for people with different interests, needs, and skill levels, and using effective marketing strategies (word of mouth, bring a friend) to raise awareness of these opportunities. Our data also highlight the importance of recognizing what constraints participants may be trying to negotiate (e.g., financial, interpersonal, skill acquisition, or time management; Jackson et al., 1993) and providing sustainable support such as sliding scale fee structures and loaner equipment (Hubbard & Mannell, 2001). As supported by study themes, practitioners believe that inclusion (and thus facilitation of participation for more people) depends on multi-faceted approaches to create welcoming environments that foster a sense of belonging, have diverse representation, invest time into building interpersonal relationships and trust, and are intentional about both policies and actions.

Conclusion

Findings suggest that although theories of leisure facilitators are framed from an individual rather than an organizational perspective (Raymore, 2002), recreation organizations' actions align with these theories in several ways. Organizational mission, vision, and values play an important role in stimulating an environment where physical activity is welcomed, encouraged, and maintained, and such factors appear to impact the use of additional strategies to facilitate participation (e.g., supportive and representative staff, diverse marketing approaches, intentionally providing a diverse array of opportunities). Professionals supported participation in ways that often aligned with constraint negotiation strategies identified in previous research (addressing intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints, e.g., Choi et al., 2022). This work suggests that researchers should attend more closely to the recreation context when considering leisure constraints and facilitators. Future research should also better integrate leisure theories with organizational management theories, as research on leisure constraints and facilitators is often conducted only from the perspective of the individual. Recreation providers can use the facilitation strategies identified in this study to encourage constraint negotiation and better facilitate engagement in active recreation within their programs and facilities.

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