

Disclaimer:

The following is a class assignment, the final paper for an “Imperialism, Postcolonialism, and Visual Discourse” course. It is a balance between adhering to the requirements of the paper such as being a certain page length, format, and with some inclusion of both history and visual analysis with the request of the Colorado Parks and Recreation Association for information on how recreation (in particular recreation center) marketing can be more inclusive. This should not be mistaken for a fully vetted scholarly article in an official journal, but instead as research done over the span of a few months with limitations in both time and resources.

With this in mind, the value I find in this paper is that it does delve into a few themes we take for granted. Digital forms of marketing, natural landscapes, and families are often considered neutral, safe, inclusive visuals and marketing focuses when in truth each of them carries nuances and problematic points. It provides some research and points to consider that can be used as is, or expanded on depending on the needs of a recreation department. That being said, this paper’s main purpose is to be used as a template to build a webinar from for CPRA, as a webinar is a better tool to communicate the main points presented here as opposed to an academic research paper.

Colorado Recreation Marketing: Themes and Challenges in Equity

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Purpose

The Colorado Parks and Recreation Association (CPRA) is a statewide organization that provides networking, training, and resources to recreation professionals across the state. With around 1,500 members, they have sub-groups dedicated to many different aspects from directors, to aquatics, to facility management, to fitness. Like many organizations and agencies, CPRA is seeking ways to better handle diversity, equity, and inclusion. When approached with the option of having research done on a volunteer basis, their priority was on the equity within recreation center marketing, with special consideration of the greater shift towards online marketing due to COVID-19.

Though CPRA covers a wide range of recreational activities, the recreation center is at the heart of its programming and mission. With recreation centers providing programs, events, and other support for anywhere from neighborhoods (typically in large cities) to larger regions of the state (typically in rural areas), they serve as important anchors to communities. However, despite public recreation centers' intended access to all residents, the question holds whether all residents truly are included and feel included.

This paper aims to provide an overview of recreation center marketing in Colorado, with some inclusion of other, outdoor marketing as well. The paper starts with a brief historical overview and community benefits to provide context to the overall discussion. Using three case studies of prominent visuals of recreation programs well-regarded by CPRA, the paper provides a visual analysis and commentary on important themes captured by each. Finally, the paper makes an argument to how public recreation marketing can engage in more equitable practices under the current circumstances. There are inequities in current recreation marketing practices in Colorado, which can be mitigated.

Historical Overview of Recreation Centers

Recreation is as old as human history. From sports and art in Ancient Egypt (McLean, 68) and onwards, there has been recreation and other forms of leisure as part of all civilizations. Whether attributed to human nature, or society, or both, recreation in and of itself is not a modern phenomenon. However, it has evolved and changed over time.

In the early formation of the American colonies many now normal forms of recreation were restricted by Puritan religious belief such as drunkenness, idleness, gambling, and dancing (McLean, 73). However, these constraints did not last by the time the United States was founded as an independent nation. Lotteries to help fund infrastructure was an early sign of easing restrictions, and by the mid-1700s, the colonies were no longer in a place that required constant, hard work for survival (McLean, 74).

It wasn't until industrialization that recreation took on a more modern form that is recognizable today. During the late-18th century to early-19th century, a growth in urbanization, more free time, and increased economic output due to mechanization gave rise to new demands in recreation (McLean, 75-6). Perhaps no other factor led to our current forms of recreation though than the related variable of the growth of the American Middle Class. "Middle-class Americans turned to parks, gardens, and, ironically, cemeteries, to provide a respite from the urban environments that came increasingly to dominate their lives. As more and more people moved into cities, they adapted to urban conditions by seeking out non-urban spaces." (Miller, et

al, 245). The desire to have the best of all worlds, the productivity of cities, the picturesque of nature, drivability and walkability, are still present today.

Recreation centers were the last kind, the last movement, of urban parks that grew from 1930 to 1965. Whereas earlier types of parks were centered in urban centers, the recreation center had its origins with suburban places and an emphasis on organized recreation such as sports (McLean 80-1). With its ties to suburbia, also holds with it a connection with the inequities that exist historically with early suburban neighborhoods.

Although *Brown v. Board of Education* is credited as the end of segregation, it was only directly linked to school segregation. Other cases in lower courts still upheld segregation in recreation facilities after the 1954 landmark case (Epstein 558-9). Though it certainly was a turning point, likely the most significant turning point, it nevertheless took years after for segregation to be reduced to modern day levels. Less time has passed since segregation's end than is commonly believed.

Desegregation happened more gradually, and for recreational facilities much of it was done during the 1970s and 1980s (McLean, 98). Although this was a time of progress for greater diversity, this coincided with another major shift for recreation; austerity. These decades were also marked by a shift in increased fees due to decreased government spending from lower tax expenditures. Although recreation became more available to people legally, economically there was a shift to private sector organizations and private sector mechanisms including marketing to reach out to the public (McLean, 101-2).

Equity has still not been achieved. As an example, research was done in 2009, described as an "investigation [of] examined experiences about [African-American] visitation to Rocky Mountain National Park... the authors identify the historical and cultural factors that resulted in low use of the park by African-Americans" (Erickson, 529). In this research, one historical anecdotal was that Joel Estes, the man whom Estes Park is named after bordering on Rocky Mountain National Park, was a slave owner (Erickson, 532-3). Even for those not familiar with specific, local historical figures, words like "country" and "woods" have different connotations, tied to slavery, poverty, and lynchings (Erikson, 539) and it's not a stretch to connect outdoor recreation with these terms and meanings.

It's a clear indication of the persistence of inequity in recreation usage beyond desegregation and other noteworthy steps towards equality. That the research was done twelve years ago also points to the fact that the question and concern for how to better reach a greater diversity of clients and participants is not a brand new topic either in recreation or more specifically of recreation in the state of Colorado. To be clear, current Colorado recreation leadership did not commit the sins of the past. However, these sins are not erased because people in privilege decide it is no longer applicable to modern times, and thus people from disenfranchised groups must forgive, forget, and/or move on. The past still affects the present, still shapes recreation use and outreach.

Benefits of Recreation

The benefits of recreation are hard to overstate.

"Park and recreation departments, given their natural connections to community members and general mission of public benefit, are considered by the profession to be well positioned to foster community development. Although some research has indicated park

and recreation settings are exclusionary for diverse members of society these settings also present opportunities to bring people together” (Sklar, 282).

The core elements of recreation such as health, being active, people coming together, are well-loved and uncontroversial benefits. The historical and current inequities do not negate the opportunity for recreation to be an inclusive, positive force for community development. This opportunity has led to different approaches in how best to reach out to communities. This is encompassed by all the different approaches recreation departments and agencies use for outreach from citizen advisory boards, specific outreach to low-income residents, diversity training, and others (Sklar, 289). Even if not fully effective, there are existing attempts to bridge current gaps.

There are also varying levels of recreation planning. From the macro-level of land use and zoning, meso-scale of pedestrian, bike, and other transportation routes, and micro-scale of parks and individual facilities (Haider, 348), communities take intentional steps, with often years of advanced planning, to bring quality and accessible recreation to residents. Such efforts vary in funding, sophistication, and success, what is held in common is the value of recreational opportunities. Recreational opportunity is a professionalized endeavor, comparable to vital needs such as utilities, public safety, and business development.

When these benefits are considered in connection to the historical overview, we see that by denying minority groups access to recreational opportunities intentionally or inadvertently has withheld important and valued social outlets. The benefits are overwhelmingly agreed upon, and historical and current inequities are backed by well-documented evidence and research. When these benefits are considered in connection to recreation marketing, we see the responsibility and gravity that recreation marketing has on the quality of life of residents. Whether certain residents are reached out to, whether they are successfully encouraged to participate, can have deep impacts.

First Theme: Digitalization

The first example comes from the City of Westminster, and their Parks & Recreation homepage (refer to Appendix A: Visual Examples). It is a similar color scheme, layout, font, and design with other municipal functions of Westminster, thus making it part of a greater whole, one aspect of public service among several. The page is efficient with clear categorizations of different kinds of recreation interests, different age groups, all with accompanying photographs to both support and promote each sub-category. Although the ordering suggests some level of hierarchy among the nine different options, that they are all the same size, same shape, make all options feel relatively valid and equal. It brings out a sense of professionalism and a wealth of options.

In regards to equity, digitalization of marketing such as Westminster’s webpage offers both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, digital marketing provides for a faster, more direct way for residents to connect so long as they have internet access as well as a computer or other smart device. Not all residents, not all areas in Colorado, have access to reliable and affordable internet services. As time goes on though, it’s expected that broadband will become more universally accessible, and is a current priority by the state. “High capacity broadband is no less an essential service that is vital to our state’s economic success. Colorado’s broadband infrastructure must allow the state to compete in the global economy, ensuring all residents can participate in the digital age regardless of zip code.” (Governor’s Office, 4). This quote from the

most recent Governor's Broadband Report is an indication of continuing funding and other resources to build out broadband infrastructure in the state. As time progresses, digitalization of marketing will become more equitable.

One unique aspect of digital marketing is the ability for customers and consumers to "co-create" (Tiago, 704) their experiences. In this case, residents of Westminster can interact and engage with the webpage in a way that's not possible with a postcard, flier, or even commercial. There's a relationship that is a two-way street. Not everyone has children, therefore they do not need to engage with the recreation aspects involving "preschool and tot" or "youth and teen". So long as the available options truly cater to a diverse audience, meet the needs of residents of different backgrounds, this aspect of digitalization can help Colorado recreation become more welcoming.

The challenge then is to ensure that the available options are sufficient. Whether the example with Westminster is sufficient in this is beyond the scope of the paper. It is at minimum a good start. If upon outreach to minority, low-income, or other traditionally marginalized groups reveal different priorities, it is well within this digital format to add these new recreation amenities to the current webpage.

Another advantage is cost effectiveness, its low-investment compared to other forms of marketing (Tiago, 706). Whereas mailings require materials, printing, postage, potentially staff time to sort, label, fold, and transport, digital marketing can be accomplished more easily. As new technologies and software emerge, it will most likely take less time and effort to create professional, effective marketing tools online. This cost savings, if utilized towards equity, can lead to more spending on either targeted marketing or actual catered programs and activities.

A downside to digital marketing is the lack of originality in most online media. It is not created from scratch (Skaar, 39), but instead from templates, photo and image databases, tend to follow certain patterns. The example of Westminster is a prime example of this. Remove the name and image from the upper left corner and there would be little information to go off of to indicate what city the webpage is for.

If the goal is to better represent diversity, visuals beyond standard cut and paste are likely needed. Whereas developing a webpage can be done fairly easily with sufficient technical support, it can also make it too easy to create material that does not challenge the status quo, that caters to current audiences, which is problematic if Colorado recreation departments are trying to better engage different and new audiences. Visuals that reflect on the experiences and interests of marginalized groups are far less likely to find and certainly will be more sparse in pre-made image databases. This is not an insurmountable obstacle, it's very possible to upload more unique visuals such as art, people, and places that better reflect the residents. It does take an intentional effort to do so.

One other important consideration is that digital media is not one, fixed medium. It's difficult to predict new trends in digital marketing, and there is a lack of information on what is effective and not as it continually changes (Stephen, 19). The examples in this paper are from websites. There are also phone apps, voice-activated electronic assistants, emails, and an array of social media channels each with their own strengths and limitations. To engage only in digital marketing is not necessarily to simplify marketing. Whereas some forms of marketing such as postcards, fliers, banners, and others are more easily understood, their cost-benefits easier to predict, digital marketing is more unknown leading to the potential of not reaching as many residents as intended, in particular groups who aren't already connected to local recreational services.

Second Theme: Landscape

The second example comes from the Rocky Mountain Recreation Company, highly recommended by CPRA to observe for their strong marketing. Their front-page banner consists of a beautiful scene of nature, with the river at the center, dense forest to the sides and ahead, the rocky mountains overhead, and a dawn or dusk sky make for a compelling narrative. One can imagine themselves on a kayak or on a stretched outcropping to fish. A viewer can choose any or all of the geographical features and feel pulled there. The words “Creating Positive Memories Experience Yours Today” is a simple, direct, and encouraging message. The image leans on one of the state’s greatest features, its diverse and appealing natural scenery.

Images of the Rocky Mountains, parks, and other landscape settings are commonplace not only in Colorado recreation marketing, but the state as a whole. They should be. These places are often the literal sites of recreation being offered, and if not are easily within sight or range of places of recreation. Landscapes have been used to convey a sense of appreciation of nature, and a way to show pride in community that is less tied to a specific demographic of people. Landscape art does however hold roots in American expansionism, and of predominately Caucasian narratives.

Landscape art is often categorized into three categories; the pastoral, picturesque, and sublime (Miller, et al, 243). Pastoral tends to represent nature as controlled by human civilization, to be in harmony. The picturesque portrays nature as untouched, discoverable, gives a sense of the unknown. Sublime in contrast tends to have religious undertones or overtones, nature as something connected to God and far too grand for mere humans. (Miller, et al, 242-3). For recreation marketing, the first two categories are generally used. The pastoral can be a neighborhood park, a paved trail, a developed section of river catering to public use, all images of us being comfortable and safe with nature. The picturesque is tied to more adventurous narratives, to climb a steep mountain, to visit a beautiful place that even if they have been visited by others can feel like a more personal frontier of new discovery.

The banner for the Rocky Mountain Recreation Company achieves both styles. There is an undebatable picturesque quality to the natural scene with no humans or sign of civilization in the picture. However, the image’s words inviting people to participate, and the intentional implied angle that suggests it’s coming from someone’s own sight suggests these natural places are there for people’s use and benefit, in this case for memories and experiences.

“Nationalism, in the New World as in the old, thus sought to particularize identity through race, environment, and history. Americans constructed a national identity through all three, but during the decades of romantic nationalism, environment was preeminent” (Miller, 7). We actively use the land for political and social purposes, as signs of unification, progress, or other weighty themes. Landscapes in American art history stem from the perspective, the story of white settlers, and then white towns, cities, and parks. The pastoral images in American history tend to reflect how Western civilization has conquered and/or worked in harmony with nature. The picturesque did not consider Native American histories and experiences. Mountains, rivers, valleys, plains, and more were painted to reflect their discovery and exploration by Caucasians.

This theme offers a stickier challenge than digitalization. Digitalization is a series of tools and mediums that can be altered. The very image of a sweeping landscape does come with some problematic history in and of itself. Still, it would be an extreme approach to not include any natural environment at all, and would not further equity in any serious way. The way to mitigate

any exclusive messages in landscapes and other natural scenes is to imagine where people are placed.

For example, in our example visual of the river, the forests, and mountains, the person or people are located just behind the image. The people are onlookers either in or by the river. Can a group who belong to a racial minority be the onlookers? Can other marginalized groups be? I would argue in this case yes, but this sentiment may not be shared by someone who is low-income in the middle of the city and does not have any reasonable means of transportation to the mountains. It may not feel as accessible to someone without a fishing pole, a kayak, or other outdoor gear. This is not necessarily a problem, as not everyone is expected to participate with all forms of recreation. Part of marketing is to reach out to specific audiences.

The question for Colorado recreation professionals is when placing individuals and groups in landscape visuals, whether they are directly in the image or implied to be just outside of it, are all intended audiences included? Landscapes and nature are not inherently neutral images. A trail going through a rich suburban neighborhood, and a park name and entrance that historically once barred ethnic minorities, are not images universally interpreted the same way. The natural scenery of Colorado can and should be utilized, only it should be utilized with a more critical eye, a more nuanced understanding. If it is determined that intended audiences are not included, then revisions and changes are warranted.

Third Theme: Family

The third and last example image is taken from the Town of Parker's Park and Recreation website, specifically from their "Safe Return" section. This gets to the heart of recreation marketing during COVID-19, and also is a prime example of a third heavily utilized theme in recreation marketing, the family. In this image is a family actively playing soccer in a field. Potentially not all of the girls are children of the adults, potentially friends or neighbors filling a broader definition of "family". They're active, they're in motion, the sun is hitting on all of them, all things that have been harder to have due to the pandemic. In the distance is a gazebo and children playing on a playground to indicate other options, a density and variety to what other amenities can be safely returned to. As opposed to the Rocky Mountain Recreation Company's visual that places us behind the camera, this image is meant to place us in the shoes of the people within the picture itself.

As before with landscapes and other visuals of nature, recreation marketing can and should commit to targeting families. It is a clear demographic group that can and do make use of recreation facilities and amenities. The challenge comes on how we define the family, and how families are represented.

Families continue to change. "[B]etween 1970 and 2012, the percentage of [American] households including married heterosexual couples with children was cut in half, from 40% to 20%" (Powell, 302). The traditional family unit of a mother, father, and a few children is on steady decline. Although it is still a group that can be marketed to, it is not inclusive nor business-savvy to only market to households that make up a fraction of the overall population.

On the rise are families that are diverse in a number of ways. For example, interracial marriages have grown from 7% of U.S. marriage in 1980 to 15% in 2010, more-than-doubling (Powell, 306). Many parents are older, not having children until later in life (Powell, 308). New legal rights have made increases in same-sex couples and families that continue to be measured (Powell, 312). There are no indications that these trends will slow down let alone reverse. As all

marketing contends with the changes in America's population, recreation marketing is no different.

Racially, Colorado is still predominately Caucasian. The State Demography Office estimates in 2020 of around 5.8 million residents, only 1.9 million are racial or ethnic minorities, less than a third of the overall state population. In its most recent estimations, by 2050 it's anticipated that there will be around 3.6 million residents who are racial or ethnic minorities of a total population of 8 million, about 45% of the state population. Although residents of Hispanic origin are expected to have the most significant increase, there's expected population growth among other minority groups as well. As time progresses the residents of Colorado, including families, will be less white and more diverse.

Racial awareness, representation, and understanding are not only moral considerations, but practical ones as well as a larger amount of the overall population will be of color. This will not be evenly distributed, some recreation jurisdictions will remain predominately Caucasian. Other communities will on the flip side change more rapidly, increasing the need to adapt market visuals and practices. Lack of awareness and perception of welcomeness, cost and transportation, language, fear of crime, and racial and ethnic tensions within the community all present potential barriers to more equitable recreation (Camarillo, 57-60). Marketing is one important aspect of recreation operations that can help mitigate these challenges.

Even within families that still represent the 20% of households with heterosexual parents and children, there is diversity. One important example of this for recreation centers is families with children with disabilities. "Whether due to physical layout, atmospheric, or social norms associated with the consumption space, every informant [within a research study] perceived the marketplace as an environment created for normal families. Viewing themselves as not fitting this "normal" ideal, they made significant adaptations to their practices surrounding the marketplace" (Mason, 1018). Whereas recreation centers and other amenities may be welcome and accommodating to some families, those that have special needs may have to take additional steps to adapt.

"According to informants [of the study], the more engagement with the world outside the home, the more complicated it is for the family [with a child with disabilities]. For example, for typical families going out to dinner or a trip to Hawaii may be a time to "get away from it all" and just relax. However, for our informants, travel, dining, and other excursions were stressful and flung their "differentness" in their faces." (Mason, 1022).

The examples of places to "get away" can extend to recreational facilities as well.

Of course, it does little good to put a picture of a smiling child in a wheelchair if there are not the accommodations to allow such a child to enjoy their experience within a recreation facility. Public facilities have ADA requirements to get inside and around buildings, but don't necessarily extend this to the features inside. Marketing to such families must come with legitimate offerings. In similar fashion, even earlier examples of the growth of multiracial and same-sex families could also be assisted by further organizational training and potentially programmatic changes to match marketing efforts.

Recommendations and Actions Items

The three themes in Colorado recreation marketing; digitalization, landscape, and family, all are well-founded and important to include. Each theme has complications and further considerations in regards to making a more equitable marketing space for residents. This paper

offers three main recommendations, action items, for recreation departments and organizations to begin navigating the challenges and be proactive in better encouraging residents of all backgrounds to utilize available services.

The first is to develop greater awareness. We don't know what we don't know, and only through some level of research can Colorado recreation understand its position. Demographic information is readily available at the county and municipal level through the Colorado State Demographers Office. There are already existing groups from other local government departments, to housing authorities, to even neighborhood groups that can offer more details of community demographics and characteristics.

A review of a community or district's history can offer further insights. This paper included a brief, general history of recreation centers. Recreation organizations have the capacity to dig deeper into more specific, more detailed history of the areas they serve.

In turn, Colorado recreation can both gain and promote more awareness by seeking out visual art, scenes, styles that are unique to their area and use them for marketing. This can be hiring a local artist. It can be using certain sites. It can be determining what does set apart a city or district from neighboring areas.

The second action item is to conduct a more expanded outreach beyond marketing. Marketing is crucial, but it is one piece of a larger puzzle. If there is a digital divide among residents, then digital marketing can be used to complement instead of replace other, older forms of marketing. No single marketing tool, method, or message can be expected to reasonably cater to all diverse peoples in an area. Though it's impossible at this point to make targeted marketing to each individual, it's not unreasonable to develop a half dozen different campaigns to target different groups, if not at once, then staggered out.

Marketing changes must reflect organizational changes. If, as example, there's a marketing push to bring in more Latinx residents, it will be undermined if such residents face either explicit or implicit biases when they come. Much of this can be avoided through community outreach, informal conversations, any number of other means from surveys to consultants to gather information and have potential issues identified. A little extra preparation, a little more double checking can go a long way to avoid unexpected problems.

The third and final action item is to mitigate problematic visuals. The term "mitigate" is used instead of a stronger term like "eliminate" because at this point in time it is not reasonable to erase all memory of past and current hardships face by marginalized people, nor is it recreation marketing's responsibility to do so. Recreation in America does have roots that are not inclusive. Parks, recreation centers, even the mountains themselves have been used in ways that excluded large groups of residents.

Recreation marketing is not necessarily the best nor most appropriate place to bring up heavy matters such as racial intolerance, poverty, segregation, and others. The goal is to bring in residents for fun, healthy, community-building experiences. There are other outlets better suited for these hard conversations than a pamphlet or recreation webpage. Instead, recreation marketing is better positioned to mitigate the worst of inequitable visuals, and potentially to slowly but surely change their meaning to something more positive and welcoming to all.

Mitigation can also be taking extra action to accommodate the largest hurdles to accessing recreation services. This may be affordable transportation. It may be park renovations for the lowest-income neighborhood. It can be to start with better outreach and relationship-building to the largest racial or ethnic minority population. All of these actions will not alone

make Colorado recreation equally accessible to all, each of these actions will help reduce and mitigate current inequities to build and expand from.

Conclusion and Next Steps

There is no easy button to making recreation marketing more equitable. Rather than one clear path with simple step-by-step measures, it is an intricate web of interconnected problems and solutions. It's up to each district, region, and organization to prioritize and implement its marketing in ways that reflects and connects with its community. It is a matter of prioritizing enough time, enough resources, to take the extra steps needed to do better than copy/paste, and instead consider the fuller implications of the visuals we use.

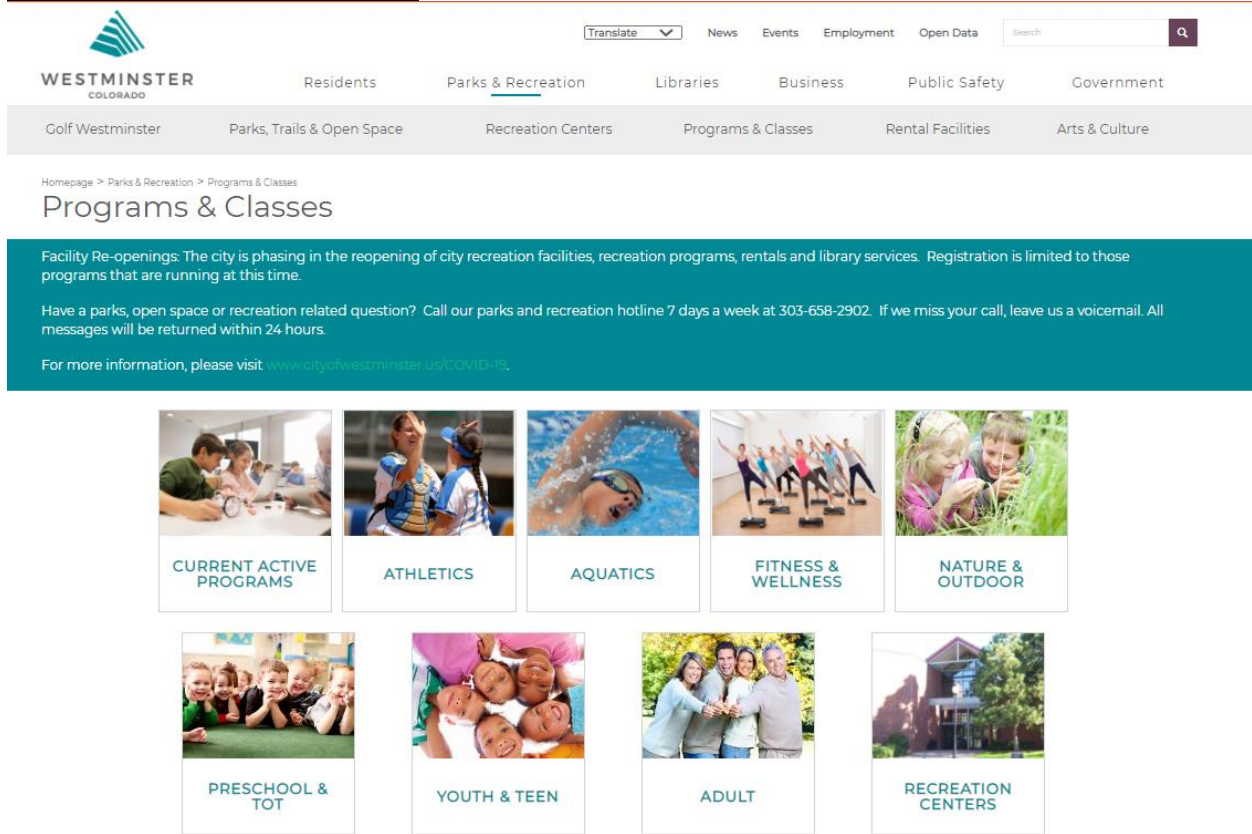
From this paper, a more streamlined webinar will be developed for CPRA to use and share with its membership, capturing the most relevant lessons in a format and structure that is accommodating to recreation professionals. This brings this paper full circle that just as recreation marketing will navigate different means and approaches to connecting with its residents, so too will the effort to train and support them in turn.

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Appendix A: Visual Examples



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