Engaging Spanish-Speaking Latinos with Urban Parks in Salt Lake City

Ivis García 1,*, Carlos Santos-Rivera 1, Minerva Jimenez-Garcia 2 and Claudia Loayza 3

1 Landscape Architecture and Urban Planning, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843, USA; csantosrivera25@gmail.com
2 SLC Public Lands Division, Salt Lake City, UT 84104, USA; jimenezminerva134@gmail.com
3 Utah Division of Multicultural Affairs, Salt Lake City, UT 84106, USA; cloayza@utah.gov
* Correspondence: ivis.garcia@tamu.edu

Abstract: This study seeks to deepen our understanding of how Spanish-speaking Latinos interact with and view public lands and parks to shape policies that meet their needs. Employing Salt Lake City as a case study, a focus group was used to gather insights on community experiences with an emphasis on the importance of the proximity, maintenance, and safety of parks. The study supports findings found in existing literature regarding the significance of diversity, accessibility, inclusivity, livability, and cultural vibrancy in parks. However, it also brings attention to challenges that Spanish-speaking Latino communities encounter, such as lower usage rates, less diversity of people, and the necessity for parks to serve as substitutes for limited private outdoor areas. Furthermore, Spanish-speaking Latinos expressed concerns about losing parks to new developments in their community because of gentrification. The study emphasizes that addressing these issues is crucial for public lands and parks that promote stewardship, inclusivity, equity, and community welfare.

Keywords: public lands; parks; stewardship; equity; Latino; accessibility; inclusivity; Spanish speakers

1. Introduction

Throughout centuries, governments have implemented programs and initiatives to facilitate the public interest. These often entailed utilizing taxes to create parks, green areas in cities, as well as setting up programming to promote land conservation [1–3]. To facilitate accessibility, government programs have created initiatives aimed to make parks and natural areas more hospitable for all people, such as those that are low income, have a disability, are experiencing homelessness, are older adults, young, women, ethnic minorities, individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+, and so on [4–8].

The idea of being equitable in lands and parks has been explored across various disciplines, including urban studies, sociology, anthropology, public health, geography, and political science [6,9,10]. This line of research generally aims to understand how park governance, stewardship, and access impact marginalized communities [11–14]. Research shows that equal access to parks, trails, and public lands is linked to improved opportunities, better public health outcomes, and increased community involvement [9,10,15,16]. Studies have examined how limited park access or insufficient resources disproportionately affect marginalized groups, such as people of color or those with low socioeconomic status [17–20]. These studies reveal that communities with less economic resources are more likely to face barriers in accessing parks and trails [16,21]. Furthermore, among those who have access to parks, disparities still exist in terms of available resources within the parks [22]. Nevertheless, literature is scarce on understanding the specific issues that pertain to parks and Latino users in the U.S., and much less is said about Spanish-speaking Latinos.
The U.S. Census defines a Latino or a Hispanic as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South, Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race [23]. This excludes people from Brazil (Portuguese), Haiti (African, French-speaking), and Indigenous areas in South America (those who speak Quechua, Guarani, etc.), as they are not of Spanish culture or origin. Their definition does include people from Spain, even if they are not from Latin America, which the word Latino implies. In other words, the U.S. Census equates the word Latino with the definition of Hispanic, which does imply a person from or a descent from a Spanish-speaking country [24].

However, in the U.S. Census definition, it is important to note that Latinos do not necessarily speak Spanish—maybe they were born in the U.S. and never learned their parents’ language—but they are still from a Spanish culture or origin. The complication with any definition, however, is that people self-identify as Latino, and this might include people from Spain, from Brazil, or that speak primarily an Indigenous language. Furthermore, research shows that most people prefer to be referred not as Latinos or Hispanics but as Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Guatemalan [24]. Despite their diverse national origins, many Spanish-speaking Latinos share cultural similarities, such as language, family-oriented values, and community-centric social structures [25]. These cultural commonalities can influence how they perceive and utilize urban spaces.

What is important for this article is that approximately 70% of Latinos in the U.S. are Spanish speakers [26]. This high percentage underscores the importance of considering language in studies with the objective of engaging Latino communities, particularly in contexts such as urban park accessibility and community involvement. This study includes one focus group in Spanish with 14 participants in order to answer the following questions: (1) How do Spanish-speaking Latino communities in the U.S. perceive and utilize public lands and parks? (2) What are the specific barriers faced by Spanish-speaking Latino communities in accessing and using public lands and parks? (3) How can public lands and parks be made more equitable and accessible to Spanish-speaking Latino communities?

Latinos, but more specifically those that are also Spanish speakers, are a growing community in the U.S., and governments have become more interested in including them in community engagement efforts for the purposes of decision making [27]. For example, governments are interested to learn about how parks might be improved according to the needs of the Latino and Spanish-speaking community. Latinos constitute the most rapidly growing minority group in the country due to two factors: Latinos, mostly immigrants, already in the U.S. are having more children, and many more are immigrating to pursue a better life [28,29].

One might argue that Latinos possess not only linguistic but also cultural and socioeconomic traits that could influence their perception of parks and recreational activities differently [24,30,31]. This article is written from the premise that it is crucial to conduct research on the population’s park usage to inform policies and practices aimed at enhancing park access and experiences. The authors believe that by deepening our understanding of how Spanish-speaking Latinos engage with parks, we can create more equitable and accessible park systems for everyone involved.

Other researchers have also recognized that Latino and Spanish-speaking communities often face institutional exclusion when attempting to access public parks and trails [32,33]. Research shows that Latino communities, those who primarily speak Spanish at home, bear the brunt of park inequality due to their marginalization from these spaces, coupled with a lack of resources [33]. In fact, some studies suggest that first-generation Latino communities with park and trail access experience lower levels of physical fitness and overall health compared to those with unrestricted access [34–37]. Therefore, it is crucial to prioritize addressing park and trail equity for Latino communities, primarily immigrants whose primary language is Spanish, by expanding or creating spaces while also providing resources and activities that cater to their specific needs.
To achieve park access, researchers have identified a number of community engagement strategies. These include involving groups that can advocate for the community’s needs and concerns [38], increasing sensitivity and engagement from park staff [39], establishing public–private partnerships to provide additional resources and programs [40], promoting economic development within parks [41], as well as encouraging the creation of urban farms and gardens [42].

The literature review identified a significant need for increased public participation in the management of lands and parks. It assessed the impact of urban parks on health and the role and importance of public parks and open spaces in increasing access to nature and providing recreation opportunities for people living in urban areas. Additionally, the review explored how varying and complex social and environmental factors, including race, gender, and class, shape access and experience of public lands and parks.

Recognizing the increasing significance of parks and trails in promoting fairness, it is important to address the obstacles when studying their effects on marginalized communities. One major challenge lies in the scarcity of research that investigates ways to modify and adjust existing parks and trails to better cater to the needs of these communities. Additionally, establishing partnerships between private sectors to enhance resources can pose difficulties. Finally, more attention to the needs and concerns of specific marginalized communities, such as Spanish-speaking Latinos, is required so that public lands and parks can be experienced equitably, while addressing the identified needs from a perspective that is attentive to diversity and inclusion.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Case Study Background

The State of Utah (USA) is experiencing significant growth, with a projected population increase of 66% from 3,284,823 in 2020 to 5,450,598 in 2060 [43]. According to the 2020 U.S. Census, 19% of Salt Lake City’s population identified as Latino and, overall, 35% of the City’s population is composed of individuals identifying as Native American, African American, Hispanic, Latinx, Asian, or Pacific Islander [44]. The Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute predicts a 39% increase in Utah’s Hispanic population over the next decade, adding over 180,000 people [45]. By 2065, this population is expected to grow by approximately 850,000, reaching 1.3 million. This growth will constitute half of Utah’s overall population increase and will raise the state’s minority population from 20% to 35%. This study aims to pinpoint the specific needs and desires for public lands and parks through the perspectives of a Latino-focused group.

The west side of Salt Lake City has historically been redlined, where low-income whites, Latino, and other immigrant communities in SLC were marked as hazardous and denied mortgages and investment, leading to long-term socioeconomic consequences [46]. Furthermore, the construction of Interstate 15 (I-15) in the 1970s created a physical barrier, separating these areas from the rest of the city [47].

According to an assessment using a Community Park Audit Tool developed for the Public Lands Master Plan, west side and east side parks had similar numbers, landmass, and investment [48]. Thus, based on these metrics, west side and east side parks were equitable, which would not be necessarily the case in other communities where the presence or the lack of redlining took place [49]. However, west side parks scored lower in park information, wayfinding, access, quality, and activity areas. Meanwhile, east side parks’ safety scored higher, along with park aesthetic features and placemaking. This means that there are geographic differences in the west side—which is about 48% Latino [50].

There is a scarcity of studies focusing on parks and Latino users in the U.S., particularly Spanish-speaking Latinos. There are unique aspects of this demographic and, thus, there is a necessity for targeted research to inform policies—which is the reason that the SLC Public Lands Division commissioned this study. In order to conduct the SLC Public
Lands Master Plan, it was necessary to conduct focus groups in Spanish, as project managers also wanted to capture cultural nuances in park usage and accessibility. As SLC recognized the need for studies that examine the specific barriers faced by Latino communities and suggest strategies for creating more inclusive and equitable park systems, we believe that other cities might be interested in the findings of this unique study for policymaking purposes.

2.2. Focus Groups and Qualitative Research

Focus groups are a data collection technique used to gain insight through small group discussions [51]. Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to produce results that can be consistently reproduced in different settings (replicability), qualitative research aims to provide a deep, contextualized understanding of specific phenomena [52,53]. The emphasis of qualitative research is on exploring variability, understanding nuances, and providing detailed descriptions of participants’ experiences and perspectives [54]. Instead of replicability, qualitative research often aims for transferability, which refers to the extent to which findings can be transferred to other contexts or groups [55]. This means that researchers provide rich, detailed descriptions of the research context and participants, allowing others to determine whether the findings might apply to their own contexts. In the sections below, the authors explain who was invited to participate, data collection procedures, and analysis techniques to ensure transparency and allow readers to understand the research process.

2.3. Research Questions and Script

The research questions that drove this study were as follows: (1) How do Spanish-speaking Latino communities in the U.S. perceive and utilize public lands and parks? (2) What are the specific barriers faced by Spanish-speaking Latino communities in accessing and using public lands and parks? (3) How can public lands and parks be made more equitable and accessible to Spanish-speaking Latino communities? To answer these questions, the authors employed a focus group with the objective of gathering insights on community experiences, with an emphasis on the importance of the proximity, maintenance, and safety of parks. This research aimed to help in shaping future policies that meet the needs of Latino communities, ensuring parks promote stewardship, inclusivity, equity, and community welfare.

Table 1 shows a condensed version of the script and questions asked. The discussion lasted around 60–90 min and demographic data were collected to ensure language access and fairness. This particular focus group followed these guidelines and included four topics with seven questions. Additionally, a mock focus group was used to test the flow of the discussion and language used, which resulted in edits to maximize reception.

Table 1. Condensed version of the script and questions in table format.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Questions and Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>Icebreaker: Discuss parks, trails, and natural areas near home.</td>
<td>1. Satisfaction: What do you enjoy about these places? Prompts: Nature, exercise, socializing, cleanliness. 2. Unsatisfaction: What prevents you from using these places more? Prompts: Lack of places, overcrowding, accessibility, safety. 3. Exit Question: What would improve parks, trails, or natural areas near your home?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20 min)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>Staff/student introduces stewardship. Discuss improvements</td>
<td>1. Improvements: Any areas for improvement near you? Prompts: Renovate amenities, add trash bins, plant trees, acquire natural areas, support community groups, develop ranger programs, host educational events, support active transportation. 2. Volunteering:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(20 min)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and volunteer opportunities. How can you contribute to public lands’ stewardship? Examples: Cleanup days, tree planting.

Discuss equity in public land access and quality. 1. Future Changes: What changes should we make for equitable public lands in 10–20 years? 2. Accessibility: How accessible are these places to you? Prompts: Proximity, transportation methods, accessibility for older adults and people with disabilities, on-site mobility features (e.g., sidewalks, handrails). 3. Programming: How can programming be more inclusive? Examples: Translations, diverse neighborhood events, culturally relevant activities. What else is important for your community?

Closing (15 min) Reflection 1. What resonated the most? 2. Most important element for the master plan? 3. One message for decision-makers?

2.4. Recruitment

To recruit members for the focus groups, a flyer was prepared in Spanish. The flyer contained information about the purpose, platform, day, time, QR code, link to RSVP, compensation for their time (USD 25 gift card), and other pertinent information. The flyers were distributed to community partners, such as the Westside Leadership Institute, University Neighborhood Partners, and the Community Learning Center, to reach Spanish-speaking populations on the west side of Salt Lake City. Participants self-selected to participate, and the only criteria were that they were adults (over 18 years old) and spoke Spanish (since the focus groups was in that language). Additionally, participants were contacted via e-mail, called, and texted regarding the focus group and how they could register.

The survey presented six focus groups (one of them in Spanish, for which the authors present findings here) with details about the day, time, language, and meeting location. Although data exist for five other focus groups conducted in English, the authors decided to publish only the data for Spanish-speaking Latinos in this article. The survey also gathered information about the participants’ demographics, such as age, ethnicity, income level, gender, and which neighborhood they live in. Additionally, participants were asked to provide their name, phone number, and email address so the authors could reach them for meeting confirmations and reminders. The Spanish focus group was conducted via Zoom, as it took place during the pandemic. Before the day of the focus group, calls were made to all participants with the aim of confirming their attendance, answering questions, and making sure the e-mail provided with the Zoom login information was received.

2.5. Participant Demographics

Participants were asked to fill out a demographic survey. A total of 14 people participated in the focus group. There was 1 male and 13 female participants, all of which reported to be of Latin descent. Table 2 shows that 57% of participants were between the ages of 31 and 40 years old. The focus group did not have any participants below the age of 22. The income seemed to range a bit more, with 35% falling in the category of USD 15,000–24,999 and another 35% within the bracket of USD 25,000–49,999 (Table 3). Table 4 shows the community areas where participants were from.

Table 2. Age of focus group participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Younger than 18</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18–21</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Income of focus group participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household Income (USD)</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$0–$14,999</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000–$24,999</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000–$49,999</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000–$74,999</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000–$100,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$100,000–$150,000</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$150,000+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prefer not to say</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Community areas of participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Area</th>
<th>No. of Participants</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose Park</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairpark</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poplar Grove</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glendale</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Westpointe</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan Meadows</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using Social Explorer (a product that provides hundreds of thousands of data indicators across demographics), the demographics of the focus group were compared to the overall population of the west side to analyze if the participants were representative of the community. It is important to note that 43% of individuals indicated they lived in a neighborhood that was not listed in the survey, while 56% of participants lived in a neighborhood on the west side. Most participants in the focus group had ages that ranged between 31 and 40 years old. The results from Social Explorer revealed that residents on the west side typically fall under the age group between 25 and 34 years old. This indicates that perhaps the authors could have included younger individuals in the sample.

The focus group was also overrepresented in Latinos. This was to be expected since the authors targeted Spanish-speaking residents. The Social Explorer data showed that Latinos make up 51.9% of the population and non-Latino whites are the second largest population, making up 43% of the population. Income levels of the focus group fell between two categories, 35% of the respondents had an annual income between USD 15,000 and 24,999, while another 35% indicated they earned between USD 25,000 and 49,999. In comparison to the results of the Social Explorer data, the median income on the west side is USD 46,066, which would be the approximate average for the focus group as well. Lastly, women were overrepresented in the focus group, with 93% representation and only 7% of males. Based on the Social Explorer data, males make up 50% of the population on the west side, indicating that the authors needed more male participants in the focus group to be representative of the demographics.
2.6. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was based on environmental justice, social equity, and community engagement in urban planning, aiming to understand how Spanish-speaking Latino communities perceive and utilize public parks [56–58]. The theoretical framework incorporated Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine systemic inequities, Social Capital Theory to explore the influence of community networks, and Asset-Based Community Development to identify factors affecting park usage [38,59,60]. Together, these frameworks highlight the need to address language barriers, cultural relevance, and socioeconomic factors to create more inclusive and equitable public spaces.

2.7. Data Analysis

After the focus group, there was a session among the team for debriefing and discussion to talk about the insights, fresh ideas, and any obstacles or problems that came up during the focus group. The research team had a meeting to analyze the feedback gathered from both the focus group and the survey. The team pinpointed any emerging patterns and subjects that were discussed by participants.

The focus group was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy in capturing participants’ responses. The transcriptions were then reviewed and cross-checked by multiple members of the research team to ensure completeness and accuracy. Since the conversation was conducted in Spanish, the transcription was translated into English. This translation was also double-checked by various members of the team to ensure accuracy.

The transcribed data were analyzed using thematic analysis. First, the research team read through the transcriptions multiple times to become familiar with the content. Open coding was used to identify and label significant portions of the text that answered the research questions. Codes were grouped into broader themes based on their similarities and patterns. The themes were refined to ensure they represented the data and make sure they were grounded in the participants’ responses. Each theme was clearly defined and named to reflect its content. Detailed descriptions and representative quotes were selected to illustrate each theme, as presented in Tables 5–9.

Table 5. Community and social interaction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of Quotes</th>
<th>Sample Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Diversity of People | Desire for encountering diverse people when visiting parks | 6                | “…there is a lot of diversity of people in Liberty Park and I don’t know if it is because there may not be so many parks in Glendale”.
| Low User Rates   | Not that many people using parks                          | 8                | “…there needs to be a greater increase in people participating in the parks…” |
| Sense of Community | Instances where participants felt a sense of community in parks | 5                | “They did some Zumba classes in the park and well, they all started to get together. I was even going to one that she (my daughter) asked of me…” |
### Table 6. Accessibility and inclusivity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of Quotes</th>
<th>Sample Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activities for All Ages and Abilities</td>
<td>Need for parks to cater to people of all ages and abilities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>“There are a lot of play areas for young children, but for older children or adolescents, there really is nothing very attractive”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diverse Activities</td>
<td>Interest in cultural and physical activities to strengthen community engagement</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Activities like painting... talking to people, meeting new people outside and learning from other cultures”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximity Principle</td>
<td>Importance of having parks close to home to encourage usage and physical activity</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Sherwood Park is close by. It’s about two minutes away and it is very important, because today I can take my children and we can be there. And well it is very healthy”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language Access</td>
<td>Importance of providing park information in Spanish</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“When you speak to them in their language, they feel included”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 7. Maintenance and safety.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of Quotes</th>
<th>Sample Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diverse Amenities</td>
<td>Different things that can attract people to visit parks</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“…the river in the park”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Living</td>
<td>Importance of parks for promoting physical activity</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Yes, parks and roads are very important to me. Because my husband runs and I walk”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensating for Small Yards</td>
<td>Parks as extensions of personal space</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“I live in the part that is closer to Redwood Road. I can see it from my window. For me it is very important to have green areas in the city…”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 8. Park utilization and participation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of Quotes</th>
<th>Sample Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td>Importance of well-maintained parks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“I think it is very important to have them close and in good condition”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lights for Safety</td>
<td>Lighting as a way to make parks safer</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“As the weather is changing, it gets darker a little bit faster. So when you want to go for a walk with the babies, there is not much lighting”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9. Stewardship and conservation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Number of Quotes</th>
<th>Sample Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing</td>
<td>Desire for increased educational opportunities to engage the community in</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“Community programs give education to the public because there are many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stewardship</td>
<td>park maintenance and improvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>people who abuse the parks, people who destroy them or do not know how</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>to protect it”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinventing</td>
<td>Ideas for rethinking park use and attracting more visitors</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“So many things that can be supported with the parks. In other words, the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>library can be a resource for people to talk”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park Conservation</td>
<td>Concerns about losing parks to urban development and preserving green</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>“I have a park very close to my house, like a 4 min walk, and that park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>spaces</td>
<td></td>
<td>belonged to a school...now they are destroying the park. So, we will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>not have a park near us...”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planting and</td>
<td>Importance of planting and maintaining cultural traditions related to</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>“We love being outside. We love being Mexican, right? [...] In other words,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to</td>
<td>the Land</td>
<td></td>
<td>we come from farm workers, we like the fields, we do not know the plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>and they are extraordinary traditions that we must not lose”.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data analysis was facilitated using ATLAS.ti, 22 which helped code and analyze the data efficiently. This study did not require IRB approval because it was conducted in collaboration with the Salt Lake City Public Lands Division. The study was a collaborative effort with a government entity, which often operates under different ethical oversight compared to academic research. The work followed the city’s public participation standards, ensuring that all ethical guidelines were met. Participants were provided with detailed information about the focus group’s purpose, procedures, potential risks, etc. They were informed of their right to withdraw from the focus group at any time without any consequences, they could also choose to not answer questions. In the end, the Public Lands Division created a Master Plan with the data but did not use the names of participants. By adhering to these ethical practices, we ensured that the study was conducted with respect for participants’ autonomy and well-being, aligning with the ethical standards typically required in public participation processes.

2.8. Limitations

Qualitative research, such as focus groups, can face challenges, including bias and limited generalizability. Bias may stem from the researchers’ influence or participants’ social desirability responses. To address these issues, the authors did a variety of things. First, the transcriptions were reviewed and coded by multiple researchers to minimize individual bias. Second, efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample representative of the community, though the focus group was overrepresented by women. Third, a trial session was conducted to refine questions and ensure clarity. Fourth, data were analyzed systematically to identify patterns and themes grounded in participants’ responses, ensuring robustness. Finally, translations were double-checked to ensure accuracy and consistency. By implementing these strategies, the study aimed to produce reliable and valid insights while acknowledging inherent limitations. Nonetheless, future research should...
aim to address these limitations by incorporating diverse methodologies, broader geographic scopes (for example, east and west side participants), and comparative analyses with non-Latinos to enhance the robustness and applicability of the findings.

3. Results

Using the context of Salt Lake City, the results of this study provided an understanding of how Latino communities perceive and utilize public lands and parks. Through thematic analysis of the focus group discussion, the following themes and codes were created.

3.1. Community and Social Interaction

Salt Lake City Latino residents tend to favor parks with individuals from different cultures, which are not as prevalent in their own neighborhoods. Findings showed that Latinos believe that the low park usage rates can be attributed to the lack of time—especially for people who work extra jobs. It also can also be attributed to lower-quality parks in Latino neighborhoods or to Latino neighborhoods being more segregated in Salt Lake City. The sample population also reported engaging in cultural activities, such as Zumba classes and kids' soccer games, all of which help create a feeling of community and inclusion in public lands and parks (see Table 6).

3.1.1. Diversity of People

Participants who lived in the majority Latino community (Salt Lake City’s west side) tended to love parks that were on the east side of town more. One of the reasons was the diversity of people:

“Liberty Park (one of the most popular parks in town located in the east side), for example, it is a park that many [visit], well naturally, there is a lot of diversity of people in Liberty Park and I don’t know if it is because there may not be so many parks in Glendale (west side neighborhood)”.

Participants discussed how the parks in the west side were more often visited by Latinos and how they preferred parks with other cultures too. Another participant added that her family went to parks precisely to interact with people from other cultures:

“[My kids] are outside talking with other people, meeting other people, learning about other cultures. Like when you go to the park because you meet another person from another country. It’s good and I like it. Because my son has learned other languages. And sometimes with people who speak Chinese he starts talking”.

These quotes illustrate that Latinos enjoyed interacting with individuals from different cultures, something they felt was missing in their local parks. This exchange of cultures was especially appreciated for its influence on their kids.

3.1.2. Low User Rates

Participants questioned why parks in the area associated with Latinos had less users: “I’m not sure why, but people tend to go to other parks like Liberty Park or Sugar House (other east side parks). For example, I walk every day with my dog, and I go to the park, which is very close to my house. But unfortunately, in the west area there needs to be a greater increase in people participating in the parks. If there is more emphasis on what it is, people can go as a community to a picnic to play volleyball or to many more activities in that community and I think they [Latinos] don’t do it as much, unfortunately”.

A father attributed low participation rates to being far away from parks as well as the lack of time Latino workers have:
“People right now are very hard-working. So, then they have like two, three jobs, working and then the children as we are saying, because the park is far away [...] Children are not so exposed to the parks, or to walks, or to do things together, because their parents have two or three jobs that they need to contribute”.

The authors could attribute the lower participation rates to marginalization and segregation, as well as the fact that diverse people (in more desirable areas) are more likely to be in other parts of town. “People-watching” is an activity that attracts people to parks, as this quote indicates:

“I have here two girls and well, for me it has become the park. We try to visit different parks, they are important. Now, in this situation we have I think we can learn a little more to value the green areas that we have, because it is so that we can have fun, have a moment of distraction for my girls, so that they can watch other people”.

Finally, a woman shared, “Listening to you as you talk makes me very nostalgic to be in Mexico, in the parks of Mexico, where everyone, the families, the people are there, the parks of Mexico are full. I would love for the parks here in Salt Lake City to be like that”. Residents noted that parks in Latino communities have less users than Liberty Park and Sugar House (east side parks). These parks are known to be associated with more affluent and predominately white neighborhoods. They believed this was due to factors such as distance to parks or the busy work schedules of Latinos. Some also mentioned feeling marginalized, as their parks on the west side were not as big or nice (see Tables 6 and 7). They hoped for Salt Lake City parks in Latino neighborhoods to be as lively and bustling as those in their own countries. Participants highlighted the need to incorporate the inherent cultural vibrancy that is currently lacking in the parks and public lands on Salt Lake City’s west side.

3.1.3. Sense of Community

Participants talked about instances where they felt a sense of community in parks. A mother shared, “They did some Zumba classes in the park and well, they all started to get together. I was even going to one that she (my daughter) asked of me. I could not go. But nobody there bothered you. Everyone respects everyone”. Another participant elaborated:

“I have to walk at two in the morning because my puppy wants to go to the bathroom. Well, I walk it because I feel that my community knows me, I know them because they have already seen me walk. I am part of a much larger community because many of them go to the park and the children play, for example soccer, or play a sport. If the parents do programs where soccer is played and there they go to the park and play and then there is a much more community atmosphere”.

As these quotes illustrate, Latinos enjoy engaging in park events, such as Zumba (a fitness program that involves cardio and Latin-inspired dance) and kids’ soccer matches (the most popular sport in Latin America). These events that celebrate Latin culture played a role in boosting their feeling of belonging and nurturing community bonds.

3.2. Accessibility and Inclusivity

Park visitors emphasized the importance of ensuring that parks are inclusive for people of all ages and capabilities. Although there were play areas for kids, there was a noticeable absence of activities tailored to older children and teenagers. Furthermore, facilities such as benches and pathways that are accessible are crucial to enable older adults and individuals with disabilities to make the most of their park experience.
3.2.1. Activities for All Ages and Abilities

A middle-aged mother of two shared that, "[t]here are a lot of play areas for young children, but for older children or adolescents, there really is nothing very attractive". She later described that her children found parks fun as younger kids, but that there was a lack of activities for them as adolescents to engage and interact with. A woman working as a caretaker mentioned that:

“One of my jobs is taking care of seniors. Taking them for walks, swimming, or things like that. And we coincide many times and I have seen it because even I get tired. I’m not very good at walking. When there are very long trails, hiking or just walking, there is nowhere to sit in the middle of the trail. So even they told me that that’s why they avoid it a bit, because they get exhausted easily. I have other people with special needs and the same thing happens. I think some benches are needed so that they can take a break and continue and bathrooms”.

In addition to designing public lands for all ages, respondents shared a need to plan for and consider varying abilities as well. A working college student, living at home with her family, mentioned that she lived with two individuals that are disabled. She openly shared that, “they can only walk from here to the post office. It’s half a block from my house...if they do not have a vehicle, if they do not have someone to drive them or do not have a vehicle that fits them, they cannot reach the park”. This comment captured the need for more accessible transportation and proximity to parks. Other respondents also asserted the need for more urban farming opportunities and community gardens, which are lacking on the west side.

3.2.2. Diverse Activities

The authors found that the participants were interested in more cultural and physical activities in which the community could come together to enjoy public parks. For instance, one participant mentioned implementing “activities like painting”. Another person mentioned that activities stimulate, “talking to people, meeting new people outside and learning from other cultures”. Another participant shared:

“I heard that in some parks they tried to do meet-ups for the neighborhood, for example they organized and said people like to do yoga. Then they invited all the people who like to do yoga to be able to do it in the park. And there was a person in charge who was going to be like the instructor or who was going to direct the program, I as well tried to do the program. I believe it would unite the people who live in the neighborhood, whether they are Hispanic and American, Hispanic, or Chinese and from many races, right? It could help to make programs like for example those with children or a program with a children’s theme to be done here”.

Residents showed a desire for cultural and physical events to unite the community in local parks. Participants mentioned being interested in organized activities, in addition to the natural areas, to keep strengthening their community’s social and cultural capital. These initiatives were viewed as means to fortify community ties and enhance connections.

3.2.3. Proximity Principle

Many communicated the importance of parks being nearby, because this would encourage them to walk more and be physically active:

“I like to go to the park, which is closer to my house, which is West Point. I’m walking for about ten minutes. I also have the Riverside nearby. But it is a little further and I think it is very important to have parks and trails to go for a walk, to exercise, to play with the children. And if it is closer to home, it is much better”.
Another participant emphasized that having parks close encouraged use and thus improved health, “Sherwood Park is close by. It’s about two minutes away and it is very important, because today I can take my children and we can be there. And well it is very healthy”. A young mother mentioned that, “it’s important for one to be able to be active, stay fit and also keep a positive attitude”. Another woman shared that, “My husband goes to the canyon to run, and I go to walk. Well, yes, it is very important to have an area, a green area to be able to go out and more in this pandemic that one has to go out to de-stress”.

In these quotes, the responders emphasized the significance of having parks in proximity since it promotes physical health and well-being. For example, they mentioned that being near parks facilitated exercising and engaging in healthy and mindful activities. Nonetheless, the responders acknowledged the role of parks and public lands due to COVID-19, and how they helped them cope with stress and anxiety amidst the pandemic.

3.2.4. Language Access

A participant shared that, “Most of us who live here are Spanish speakers”, to further express that language accommodations need to be employed by the SLC Public Lands Division. A woman added that:

“For me I think public lands have more to do with politics. And only with Hispanics, as there are many Hispanics who do not have the opportunity to vote or are not residents, I do not know if there are other initiatives to be able to listen to these populations”.

Another participant said:

“I don’t know if an inclusion effort could be made in languages, because as you say, there is a diversity of races. For me, personally, I have worked with the community and when you speak to them in their language, they feel included. So, the same with the people of Africa, with the people of China. Yes, see and understand information in their language. I think making people a little more included and to also have more information and they could also be part of the groups to clean up the parks in their community”.

Calling for increased language access and inclusion in terms of community input, another woman said:

“I speak a little bit of English but lack a bit. But finally, I would like there to be more information in Spanish about this, because if we had people who would like to contribute to the community, especially this one, I would sign up to help plant and clean because I would like these green areas to remain green, right? And well, more information in Spanish and for it to be updated would be very good”.

Residents stressed the importance of SLC Public Lands Division offering language support for speakers. They underlined the significance of providing information in different languages to promote inclusivity and inspire community involvement in park events. Improved language accessibility would allow a wider range of residents to take part in projects such as park clean ups and helping preserve the areas.

3.3. Amenities and Features

Parks draw in visitors because they provide a range of activities, such as appreciating elements such as rivers and hiking trails. Participants highlighted the importance of having pathways for walking and biking for kids. Features that cater to families, such as picnic spots and communal gardens, were also praised for offering cheap socializing options and fostering community involvement.
People are attracted to parks because there are a variety of activities. A participant mentioned that she was attracted to “the river in the park”. In addition, people mentioned trails:

“It is important to preserve the trails and give safe paths to children. Because sometimes there are many cars. For example, when one walks or when using for example a bicycle, through the streets. It’s dangerous. If one goes on the trail or paths, because there are many cars, a lot of traffic, but the trails do not always connect. There must be paths for children, for adults too, because it is lacking here. We are always mobilizing by car. More so for the kids”.

A mother mentioned family activities, “Another thing that I also like is that, for example, we can do BBQ as a family, right? Last month we celebrated his birthday with him, we had a BBQ”. Other family activities were also mentioned:

“Include more community gardens to grow vegetables and things because I usually think that all the community gardens that I have seen for now are more like in the center, but in the surrounding areas I have not seen many programs that have to do with community gardens or even explore what are hydroponic gardens and other methods of growing vegetables”.

Others emphasized affordable entertainment:

“I love it when on holidays families go to have their BBQ or the family gathers there. I think that also contributes to making social life and having a good time with the family. I think that’s the importance of the parks. It could be the importance of parks nowadays that as many people are so involved in the technological issue and it is the area and the thing that you can use for free, even the poorest of people. If you need to have an activity or a moment of relaxation you can use the parks, you do not need to be taking trips if you do not have money and things like that”.

Visitors were attracted to the parks because of the nature, such as rivers and paths. They also highlighted the significance of having pathways for strolling and cycling for kids. Furthermore, visitors appreciated family-oriented facilities, such as picnic tables and communal gardens, offering chances for affordable socializing with family and others.

3.3.2. Active Living

Active living is an important function of parks, as a participant noted, “Yes, parks and roads are very important to me. Because my husband runs, and I walk”. An older adult expressed, “She ran a marathon, and I ran a marathon too. Parks for me are very, very special”. Another focus group participant added:

“I believe that green spaces and parks are a fundamental part of our life, and more so in these times, because it is the only place where we can still, well, have free time with the family. I have two children, so they are the ones who ask me to be going to parks or green areas for walking”.

A new mother expressed:

“I also live near Glendale, in Poplar Grove, and parks are very important to me, because now that I have a baby, he is right here with me. He loves when I take him out for a walk or in his stroller. That’s why and I also like to hike. Now, not alone, I can’t go hiking alone, so I always have to be accompanied by him and I think that’s why it’s important for one to be able to be active, stay fit and also keep a positive attitude”.

Another mother said, “I have an eleven-year-old girl and it is just a story that we go out to the park for a walk. And it is famous for unplugging them from the cell phone and letting them exercise”. Parks are essential for encouraging a healthy lifestyle, as noted by individuals who utilize them for jogging, strolling, and bonding with loved ones. Natural
areas offer an opportunity for exercise and emotional wellness in difficult circumstances. The value of parks is beneficial for people of all generations, from kids enjoying rides in strollers to older adults preparing for long-distance races.

3.3.3. Compensating for Small Yards

Some participants talked about how parks were used by people in the community that had small yards. A person brought up the example of renters that can use picnic tables or walk their dogs. A quote that captures this sentiment was expressed by a woman that shared:

“I live in the part that is closer to Redwood Road. I can see it from my window. For me it is very important to have green areas in the city, because when I have lived in this house for about 15 years. My mother loves the house, but it has a very small yard. It was one of the newer houses at the time it was bought. It was the one my family could buy. But that’s the only complaint my mom has about the house, which doesn’t have much patio. So, uh, because we have a little dog, we like to take it to the park and since we can’t install a fence to take it out in the yard, we always tend to go to a park when we want to grill meat or be with family or get together with friends. As someone else had mentioned with the pandemic, these green areas have become even more important because since in my house outside in addition to the porch, you cannot be in many places simply because there is no privacy, there is no distance between each other, and little contact with tall trees that there are in a park”.

Local parks play a role in building a community for residents with limited outdoor space or those living in rented accommodations. They offer a setting for picnics and leisurely strolls with pets. One individual emphasized the significance of parks, sharing how her family and pet greatly benefit from these spaces for recreation and socializing. Amid the pandemic, these green havens became more valuable, offering a sense of seclusion and a chance to connect with nature that was lacking in their backyard.

3.4. Maintenance and Safety

3.4.1. Maintenance

Participants also pointed out that it was important not only to have parks near but also well maintained, “I think it is very important to have them close and in good condition”. Participants centered the need for garbage cans and more of them so that users have a place to dispose of trash throughout the area. A middle-aged Latina female from Poplar Grove shared that in her neighborhood park, “There is only one garbage can, but it is the kind that is mobile, but I suggest that there must be some that are fixed”. Overall, the group was emotionally invested in the topic of maintenance because it reflected collective respect not just for the parks and public lands, but for the west side area in general.

Another participant discussed park maintenance over time:

“I have been living in this area of Rose Park for 30 years and before there were not enough parks or they did not tend to them well. I remember how I wanted to have a park near my house. Well, later I discovered that I had one nearby, relatively close to Meadows Park, on Redwood Road, and that park is very nice. It’s all green. I think they have paid a lot of attention to the west side. The parks are much better. Down the river you can walk. I think we have more security now that we can feel freer to take our children to the park”.

Residents highlighted the significance of keeping parks equipped with trash bins to uphold cleanliness and convenience. Maintaining the parks properly was viewed as a demonstration of regard for both the community and its green spaces. Long-term residents mentioned enhancements in park conditions over the years, underscoring the favorable outcomes of security measures on the west side.
3.4.2. Lights for Safety

In addition to personal stewardship, respondents suggested ways to upkeep parks and public lands better on behalf of the city. Safety was a major issue brought up, outlining the lack of lighting in certain parks. A mother with a new baby mentioned that, “Many of the ones I have visited need more lighting. Now that it’s coming, as the weather is changing, then it gets darker a little bit faster. When you want to go for a walk with the babies, there is not much lighting”. Another woman added, “This is the greatest need, as my colleague had mentioned earlier, is the lighting of the parks. Because yes, there are many people who walk at night and there is not much light there”.

There was a lot of agreement in the group regarding safety and lighting, as this other quote demonstrates:

“I think one of the only things I’m looking for, it’s security. I am a single mother of two and there comes a time when going to the park so early is very impossible because of no sun and later there is no lighting. It is very dark, and the truth is that it no longer gives me security and I am alone with my children or that they go alone much less will I let them. I think that an ideal place for just a person, because there are many people who go and walk alone with their children, is therefore a place where it is illuminated, where there is surveillance and obviously where it is clean, where it is cared for. I think these are the only things I look for in these places”.

A respondent elaborated on this, “Not all areas are well lit. I avoid going to certain parts because there is no light, or very early or very late at night. I usually go at night...[A] neighbor puts lights on the side of his house which is right next to the parking lot. If it weren’t for those lights, there wouldn’t be any lights in the parking lot”.

Residents proposed that the city enhance the maintenance of parks and public areas by focusing on safety issues—but specifically lighting. A majority of people highlighted the importance of improved lighting to guarantee safety during early mornings and evening visits.

3.5. Stewardship and Conservation

3.5.1. Developing Stewardship

Participants felt strongly that the parks should be respected and maintained, and most were eager to have more education programs for the community to act as stewards to public lands. A young Latino male shared the following:

“[Community programs give] education to the public because there are many people who abuse the parks, people who destroy them or do not know how to protect it. Like littering, I think it is more about education. People have to understand the purpose of parks and how to keep them clean. Because there are parks that get very dirty. People leave diapers or things on the floor, and it is not good”.

Other respondents emphatically stood in agreement and suggested improved messaging about volunteer opportunities. One participant explained, “I don’t think there are many community events. And I also think that there are a few programs that currently exist. I don’t know where to get the information to volunteer or to sign up though”. A young, working college student shared:

“I heard from the most recent park cleanup initiatives about a year ago that it was by a group of indigenous people, if I’m not mistaken, they were planting trees and cleaning up the Jordan River. But I did not find out until the day of, and I found out on Facebook. In other words, it seems to me that the announcement of events for cleanup and organizing have to be more visible with the time and date. I can plan for it. I’m busy with school. The truth is that I am doing work during the day, and I do homework all night. If I don’t plan it, it doesn’t
happen. Today we can use the medium of flyers, put it up at the markets, through Facebook and word of mouth as well. And if I find out, I’ll go. But sadly, I don’t really understand what’s going on the day when it’s happening live on Facebook”.

Another shared how to increase park stewardship by having family activities: “Maybe having them from 8 to 10, where we can go as parents and children without distinction of age. Going and cleaning parks or doing some community or some cleaning activity to take care of the environment, recycling that does not have to do all that. Activities for parents and children together. Perhaps you can have a scholarship for children that they do some activity that is related to the environment”.

Attendees stressed the significance of valuing and preserving parks, with several mentioning a wish for increased initiatives to encourage community responsibility. They underscored the importance of improved communication regarding volunteer opportunities and local events to boost involvement in park stewardship efforts. Moreover, arranging activities for families could strengthen park care by nurturing a feeling of community engagement.

3.5.2. Reinventing Parks

An older Latina woman, who has a deep connection to her Mexican heritage and passion for children’s development and education, shared: “Now libraries are reinventing themselves...Parents often leave their children there for their homework to finish it. And we could have those moments with parents and children and have meetings, for example, once a week on some topic of how to support the parks, how to clean, that is...So many things that can be supported with the parks. In other words, the library can be a resource for people to talk. There are places with rooms, right? Where they have access to computers. They can do a lot of things that I don’t think that the west side has taken advantage of with libraries, and it is a loss that we must take advantage of”.

This comment captured the need for increased community partnerships with neighboring organizations and facilities to support park and trails’ programming. The library, in this case, was suggested as a neutral place to gather and share feedback about public lands and learn more about their use.

3.5.3. Park Conservation and Threats of Gentrification

Others were worried about losing the parks that are close to them: “I have a park very close to my house, like a 4 min walk, and that park belonged to a school. The school made their students play baseball and soccer there. And now they destroyed the school and now they are destroying the park. So, we will not have a park near us and the project they have is to make these apartments instead”.

A participant added to this comment by saying, “Yes, it is true, there are many green areas, many parks that are being destroyed and are being replaced by buildings, houses. And I believe that parks nevertheless contribute to the environment, but also to the lives of people and animals”. West siders live in a community that is rapidly gentrifying and there is new development in underutilized spaces.

Another participant was also worried about park conversation, stating: “The parks are very important, right? Also, for conservation, because I think that with the amount of people that are moving to the state, we are losing green areas, and it is becoming a lot... There is too much urbanization and too little preservation. And, with the number of houses that the mountains were built. Animals are being displaced a lot and green areas are being destroyed a lot and
the biodiversity of the surface is being reduced. That is why it is very important that we protect the spaces in different ways, not only for humans, but for the rest of the other beings that live here in the state, like other animals and plants and things that are important to maintain the environment correctly”.

Community members shared worries about loss of parks as a result of new development, underscoring the significance of safeguarding parks and public lands in neighborhoods that are experiencing gentrification. They pointed out that parks play a role in enhancing the surroundings and well-being of residents and wildlife alike. The rise in urban development can then result in a loss of biodiversity if natural areas are not preserved.

3.5.4. Planting and Connection to the Land

A participant shared that, “Like planting more trees or acquiring more land, more space, more land”. A man shared that:

“We love being outside. We love being Mexican, right? […] In other words, we come from farm workers, we like the fields, we do not know the plants and they are extraordinary traditions that we must not lose. In a life more like the United States, all those traditions that are so beautiful are lost. They must be cultivated so that we must not let that be the past, that is the past that continues in the present with us, those beautiful traditions […] I wanted to say there are programs and many programs are being carried out with the youth, where they set up a little place where they can plant, do things. There, for example, here where I am, the little children can make their own garden. You have to start teaching children from a very young age to do their garden, teach them how to plant something, because this way they learn nutrition, they learn the value of food”.

Community members stressed the significance of increasing tree planting and securing spaces for parks to uphold cultural customs and communal beliefs. They underscored the importance of nurturing practices, such as agriculture and horticulture, which hold a place in their legacy. Educating young people on gardening was viewed as a means to uphold these customs while also imparting knowledge on nutrition and foods’ worth.

4. Discussion

This research offered insights into how Latino communities in Salt Lake City perceive and use public lands and parks. The study reinforced findings from existing literature about parks and, most importantly, it also shed light on new challenges unique to this demographic.

4.1. Validation of Existing Studies

4.1.1. Community and Social Interaction

Findings supported research highlighting the role of diversity and social interactions in parks. Past studies have indicated that parks serve as spaces that bring together people from backgrounds fostering community connections [9,17]. Participants showed a preference for parks such as Liberty Park (located on the east side), known for its visitors. This aligns with the idea that diverse park environments enhance interactions, as noted by Loukaitou Sideris et al. (2023) [39].

4.1.2. Accessibility and Inclusivity

The concept of the Proximity Principle highlighted in the study echoes what other researchers have found regarding the importance of parks in promoting activity and better health outcomes [36,37]. Participants stressed the importance of having parks within walking distance, underscoring the value of green spaces in urban areas. Furthermore, this research aligns with existing literature, highlighting the significance of inclusivity in designing parks. The necessity of offering activities for people of all ages and abilities,
along with the call for language accessibility, echoes the insights of García et al. (2017) [22]. Loukaitou Sideris et al. (2023) underscored the importance of inclusive park planning to address the needs of communities [39].

4.1.3. Maintenance and Safety

The emphasis on kept parks and sufficient lighting for safety measures is widely acknowledged in [6,9]. Study participants’ concerns about maintenance and lighting were consistent with these observations, emphasizing the necessity for city authorities to prioritize park upkeep and security to promote increased usage and ensure user well-being.

4.2. New Findings and Unique Challenges

4.2.1. Low User Rates

A revelation from the study was the utilization rates of parks in predominantly Latino neighborhoods despite their proximity. This finding differed from research indicating that proximity alone strongly influences park visitation [17]. Participants associated utilization rates with factors such as marginalization, segregation, and limited activity options, suggesting that mere proximity to parks does not guarantee their use. This emphasizes the importance of implementing strategies to overcome the challenges that Latino communities face.

4.2.2. Sense of Community and Stewardship

While previous studies highlighted the significance of community involvement and responsibility in managing parks, this research shed light on how connected Latino communities feel to their parks [39]. Participants expressed an interest in educational initiatives to encourage park stewardship and foster community pride, indicating a genuine willingness within these communities to be actively involved in preserving and enhancing their neighborhood parks. This underscored the potential for community-driven efforts to bolster park stewardship.

4.2.3. Compensating for Small Yards

Results also underscored the role of parks in compensating for confined areas for individuals residing in apartments or homes with restricted access to green spaces. This aspect, which has not been extensively explored in existing literature, demonstrated that parks play a role in offering opportunities for activities and social interactions for those lacking private green spaces. This highlighted the significance of parks as shared gathering spots within populated urban settings.

4.2.4. Concerns about Environmental Preservation

The worries expressed by participants regarding the loss of parks due to gentrification and the importance of safeguarding biodiversity contributed a fresh perspective to conversations surrounding park conservation. Previous research has mainly examined the impacts of parks on society and well-being. The study emphasized the importance of parks for nature conservation and how communities value preserving natural environments in urban areas.

Overall, findings of this study underscored the significance of addressing systemic inequities and leveraging community networks to improve park accessibility for Spanish-speaking Latino communities. Consistent with Critical Race Theory (CRT), the study revealed how historical and ongoing inequities shape the experiences of Latino residents in public parks. The importance of culturally relevant programming and language accessibility aligned with Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) principles, highlighting the need to build on community strengths and resources. Additionally, the emphasis on community networks resonated with Social Capital Theory, suggesting that enhancing social ties can lead to increased park engagement and stewardship. These insights can
inform policies and interventions aimed at creating more inclusive and equitable public spaces.

5. Conclusions

While the study focused on the Spanish-speaking Latino community in Salt Lake City, the findings have broader implications for urban planning and policymaking in similar urban environments across the United States. The study highlighted the importance of proximity, maintenance, and safety in public parks, which are universally relevant considerations for urban planners. By ensuring that parks are well maintained, safe, and accessible, cities can promote greater use and engagement from diverse communities. Policymakers can leverage these findings to create more inclusive urban spaces that cater to the needs of various demographic groups.

This research supported findings from existing literature regarding the significance of diversity, accessibility, inclusivity, stewardship, and cultural vibrancy in parks. However, it also brought attention to challenges that Latino communities encounter, such as lower usage rates due to being marginalized and the necessity for parks to serve as substitutes for limited private outdoor areas. Furthermore, the emotional attachment to caring for parks and concerns about losing parks due to gentrification highlighted the benefits that parks offer these communities.

These results indicate that policymakers and park designers should not focus on providing parks but on developing inclusive, well-kept, and secure spaces that meet the varied needs of city dwellers. This involves implementing tailored strategies to encourage park utilization in marginalized areas, supporting community-led preservation initiatives, and safeguarding habitats within these settings.

The focus groups provided an opportunity for populations on the west side to participate in the discussion of how the Public Lands Division can improve parks and public lands. This is important for two reasons. First, it ensures the Public Lands Division is gathering conclusive input from all demographics to create a Master Plan that is representative of the community’s values. Second, focus groups make it easier to interview hard-to-reach populations and provide greater insight to the needs and expectations of a particular demographic.

Based on the results of the focus group, participants expressed how parks and public lands are important for physical activity, mental health, and social cohesion. To many of the participants, parks provide an economically feasible way to entertain their children, gather with friends and family, and exercise. However, the discussion revealed how parks have room for improvement in safety, educational programs, and accessibility. One of the recommendations made by the group was to offer educational programs and activities, such as art, exercise, and environmental awareness classes. Group members also recommended improving safety in parks by adding more lights and offering rehabilitation programs for homeless individuals. Lastly, participants advised the Public Lands Division to make parks more accessible by alternative means of transportation. This could include connecting trails to parks, increasing safety in bike lanes, and placing parks near homes.

Understanding the perceptions of Spanish-speaking Latino users in Salt Lake City is crucial for shaping policies for parks and public lands in Utah and the broader United States. This study elevated the conversation on community engagement in planning practices and the field of community development. It underscored the need to address Latino needs and desires for parks and public lands by promoting stewardship, inclusivity, equity, and community welfare.

With these results and suggestions, the Public Lands Division will need to further explore how they can collaborate with community organizations and individuals to increase educational programs and activities. The focus group also highlighted the need to provide services to homeless individuals, and this will also be an area that will require collaboration from different departments and organizations. Overall, the discussion emphasized how important public lands and parks are to the well-being of a community.
Future research can address this study limitations by exploring the long-term impacts of implemented changes based on these recommendations and investigate additional factors that may influence park usage among Latino communities. Research could explore other case studies sought to capture Latino engagement across public lands and parks in other regions of the United States. Future focus groups could be conducted periodically to capture perceptions on a given Latino sample across time. A mixed-methods approach, which can implement survey responses, could help in elevating quantitative data and in shaping policy through empirical information. Additionally, comparative studies with other minority groups could also provide a broader understanding of the challenges and opportunities in creating inclusive public spaces.

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, I.G., C.S., M.J. and C.L.; methodology, I.G.; software, I.G.; validation, I.G., C.S., M.J. and C.L.; formal analysis, I.G., C.S., M.J. and C.L.; investigation, I.G., C.S., M.J. and C.L.; resources, I.G.; data curation, I.G., C.S., M.J. and C.L.; writing—original draft preparation, C.S., M.J. and C.L.; writing—review and editing, I.G., C.S.; supervision, I.G.; project administration, I.G.; funding acquisition, I.G. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The focus groups were funded by the Public Lands Division of Salt Lake City.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** This study was conducted in collaboration with the Salt Lake City Public Lands Division, a governmental entity, and therefore did not require Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval necessary for academic research. The study adhered to the public participation standards set forth by the city, ensuring compliance with all relevant ethical guidelines of the organization.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are unavailable due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

**References**


47. Mapping Inequality. Available online: https://dsl.richmond.edu/panorama/redlining/ (accessed on 10 June 2024).


49. Overcoming Barriers to Park Equity: How Parks and Recreation Can Address Historical Inequities on Multiple Fronts.—Document—Gale OneFile: Health and Medicine. Available online: https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA769657696&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=00312215&p=HRCA&s=w&userGroupName=anon%7E8328a085&atny=open-web-entry (accessed on 11 June 2024).


Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.