Gay bars and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States¹

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What was the impact on gay bars of COVID-19 public closure orders? Gay bars were already quite vulnerable, retaining only 63.4% of their business listings from 2007 to 2019. Historic data from printed business guides were supplemented with a national census of online business listings. Results show that gay bar listings retained only 84.9% of their number between 2019 and Spring 2021. This compares, however, to a 85.6% retention rate for 2017 and 2019, indicating a surprisingly stable rate of decline. Among subtypes of gay bars, those serving primarily men had higher retention rates (88.4%) than the total from 2019 to 2021, while bars serving people of color (76.3%) and men cruising for sex (54.1%) were retained at much lower rates. Remarkably, 100% of lesbian bars were retained. Overall, the rate of decline in gay bar listings continued apace during, if not necessarily increasingly because of, the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Keywords

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From March 2020, nearly all U.S. states implemented public closure orders for bars and restaurants to prevent COVID-19 transmission. These included shuttering them or drastically reducing occupancy, policies which fluctuated over time and across jurisdictions through 2021.

Gay bars are more vulnerable to closure than bars in general (Anderson and Knee 2021). Even before coronavirus, a recent study found only 63.4% of gay bar listings were retained from 2007 to 2019, citing trends including the rise of social equality that freed LGBTQ+ people to socialize anywhere and geolocating smartphone apps that permitted LGBTQ+ people to meet each other virtually (Author). This decline is concerning because gay bars are by far the most common LGBTQ+ place and are iconic sites of community and identity development (Author). How have gay bars fared recently given these intersecting trends?

Data come from two sources. Historic data come from counts of the number of gay bars listed in the Damron Travel Guide (Author), the only national and most complete historical listings of LGBTQ+ places (Knopp and Brown 2021).

Data for 2021 come from an online census of gay bars taken from February to May of that year. Using the 2019 Damron Guide as a baseline, a research team verified each of its 860 listings using online business directories and social media activity, also looking for new bars that had opened (see Supplement).

[INSERT FIGURE 1]

Figure 1 shows that only 84.1% of the number of gay bars listed in the 2019 Damron Guide (N=868) were present in online business directories in Spring 2021 (N=730). This compares to a 86.4% retention rate from the 2017 Damron Guide (N=1005) to 2019's. On the

one hand, the number of gay bar listings continues their decline from before the coronavirus pandemic. On the other, this relatively stable rate of decline is surprising, despite the lack of comparable data for bars in general. It may be that the most vulnerable gay bars had already closed before the pandemic, and thus those that remained had some resources, such as the ability to apply for government support or crowdfund (Author). It is also likely that many of the bars coded as existing are themselves quite vulnerable, and that as government programs and public interest wane, more closures may be imminent.

Among subtypes of gay bars serving diverse segments of the LGBTQ+ community, the coronavirus pandemic is associated with the accentuation of two longstanding trends and the reversal of another. Two of the three most vulnerable types of gay bars continued to close at rates greater than the average—bars serving people of color retained only 76.3% of their number and cruisy men's bars only 54%. Lesbian bars which had been among the most vulnerable subtypes of gay bar, however, retained an extraordinary 100% of their number from before the pandemic. This may be because of the intensive media and philanthropic attention they received, such as from the Lesbian Bar Project that raised over \$150,000 for their support (Rose and Street 2020).

Results should be interpreted with caution. The 2021 methodology was different than that used by Damron. Rates of change in *listings* may not reflect actual changes in the number of *establishments*. Until further data become available, however, this study suggests that the rate of decline in gay bar listings continued apace during, if not dramatically increasingly because of, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Works Cited

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Supplementary information file for “Gay bars and the impact of the coronavirus pandemic in the United States” in *Socius* by Author

Figure 1 displays the raw counts of gay bar subtypes by year along with rates of business listing retention in order for all subtypes to be displayed on the same scale as the total. Trend lines reflect the same aesthetic choices in Author, of which this piece is a continuation. Statistics are presented as retention rates to avoid a deficit model of LGBTQ+ community life in this dramatic transition period in its relationship to LGBTQ+-defined places. Table 1 displays the raw counts from which Figure 1 was created:

Table 1. Counts of gay bar subtypes from the Damron Guide and 2021 online census

	2012	2017	2019	2021
Cruisy/Leather	99	76	74	40
Lesbian	26	21	15	15
POC	112	72	59	45
Mixed M/F	599	455	384	333
Mostly/Only Men	520	453	387	342
TOTAL	1234	1005	868	730

Detailed information about the historical data from the Damron Guides can be found in the supplemental information file for (Author). To summarize, Damron is the longest-running and only national guide to LGBTQ+ places, published from 1964 to 2019 (Knopp and Brown 2021). It codes many subtypes of bars, restaurants, cafes and other places by the LGBTQ+ subcultures that patronize them. These codes changed over time, so they may not describe the same phenomena, and is unknown to what degree informants in different regions or at different

times were classifying establishments by similar criteria. Nevertheless, it is the only source of data that is comparable across the entire country, over such a length of time, and with such sensitivity to the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community.

“Gay bar” here refers to the general category of LGBTQ+ establishments as defined by Damron or online business directories. It includes a vast diversity of establishments ranging from large nightclubs to small dive bars to places that otherwise appear to be restaurants. Even places described by owners and patrons as “queer bars” or “lesbian bars” have long been generically known as “gay bars” (e.g. Kennedy and Davis 1993). The Damron Guide was sensitive to the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community and thus allows the identification of bars that served mainly women; bars that served primarily men; those in which men and women socialized together; bars patronized primarily by people of color; and bars patronized by men in search of kink subcultures, sex on the premises, or sex workers, here glossed as “cruisy men’s bars” (see e.g. Orne 2017; Rubin 2000). Bars for people of color received more than one code thus the total of bar subtypes does not equal the N displayed in the total. The Damron guide had no code for bisexual/pansexual patrons and the code for transgender patrons was used only sporadically from its introduction in the late 1990s, so data for these communities are unavailable.

Undergraduate research assistants and I hand tallied the number of gay bars per municipality from printed copies of the Damron Guide that were obtained from archives, libraries, and through private purchase. Second coders checked the results of initial coders and together we resolved discrepancies. It is unclear to what degree counts from Damron corresponded to actual numbers of bars in a particular city and year, but we assume that errors are random, that they are the same across locations, and that they average out over time for aggregate geographic areas (e.g. the entire country).

The 2017 rates of retention come from this historical data for the year 2012. A similar two-year time period for 2015 is not available because I sampled the Damrons at five-year intervals to coincide with the Census of Business data from the United States Economic Census, supplemented with the most recent (and perhaps final) guide to be published, in 2019. The initial 2017 retention rate is thus over a five-year period and only suggestive of what was occurring in the two-year period before the coronavirus pandemic.

To determine the number of gay bars that survived the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted a national census using online business listings. In particular, we used Yelp, which is crowdsourced, and Google Business, which is algorithmic. These had the virtue of being sensitive to detecting bars that had recently closed, whether through patron reports or through artificial intelligence, and for identifying new bars that had opened since 2019 or had been missed by that most recent edition of the Damron Guide. Online business listings also raised the possibility of errors, however, whether from mistaken patron reports of closure, or from algorithmic over-detection: in particular, Google Business seems to have automatically reclassified bars as “closed” if they disconnected their landline phone, something some owners did temporarily to reduce costs while they were involuntarily closed.

To supplement online business listings, we checked the social media accounts on Facebook and Instagram for all 860 bars listed in the 2019 Damron Guide and for any new bars discovered through online business directories. In making our assessments about whether a bar was active we compared recent pandemic activity to pre-pandemic posting. If social media accounts showed any activity in approximately two months before the study period (February to May 2021), bars were classified as “open” whether or not patrons were allowed inside due to local public closure orders. Many of these social media accounts had explicit announcements

about reopenings or permanent closures; others merely ceased activity or had never been particularly active, thus many of our assessments were subjective. Some bars did not have social media accounts and thus may have been coded incorrectly as closed. Other bars that were reported in news media as closed still had active social media accounts so were coded as open; this included bars that had lost their buildings but announced intentions to reopen. We assume that these phenomena cancelled each other out in aggregate.

It was through these social media feeds that we coded the subcultural LGBTQ+ communities for new bars that were not present in the 2019 Damron Guide according its classifications by observing the types of patrons present in most of the photos available. Bars present in the 2019 were assigned the same classifications in 2021, thus this study did not detect transitions within bars from one serving primarily one segment of the LGBTQ+ community to another. This did allow us to make some sort of classification for all 730 bars that we counted in the United States in spring 2021, however, permitting the longitudinal data displayed in the Figure.

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