Using gay bar listings to infer rates of gay bar closure in the United States, 1977-2017¹

Greggor Mattson

Associate Professor of Sociology

Oberlin College

Version 7/31/2019

Abstract

Widespread alarm over gay bar and lesbian bar closures has occurred in a vacuum of national data to assess trends. This visualization depicts changes in gay bar listings in the United States at five-year intervals by bar subtype for the years 1977-2017. Trends in gay bar listings support perceptions of recent gay bar decline. Gay bar listings declined by 20.6% between 2012 (N=1356) and 2017 (N=1077), their largest 5-year decline. Lesbian bar listings showed a similar 19.2% decline from much smaller numbers (31 to 21 between 2007 and 2017). The largest change in bar types is a phenomenon that has received little attention, the rise of gay bars serving men and women together; they became the largest single category of gay bar from 1997 onwards. Bars most at risk of closure receive the least popular attention, including bars for women, people of color, and men into radical sexualities.

Keywords: gay bars, lesbian bars, LGBT placemaking

¹ I gratefully acknowledge research and development funds from Oberlin College and the labor of undergraduate research assistants Tory Sparks, Wren Fiocco, Jack Spector Bishop, and Will Jacobsen.

These data are from an original database (N=13,882) of gay bar listings created from the Damron Guide (see Appendix). This is a national 6.5” by 3.5” travel guidebook of LGBT places published annually between 1964-2017, making it an unparalleled and formidable national record of LGBT placemaking in the United States. The guide had two editors 1977-1987, and the same editor, Gina Gatta, since 1992, providing considerable editorial consistency.

Trends in gay bar listings support recent popular perceptions of gay bar decline (e.g. Thomas 2011; see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Gay bar listings in Damron guides at 5-year intervals, 1977-2017.

Table 1. Gay bar listings in Damron guides at 5-year intervals, 1977-2017

Change in total listings is disaggregated by subtypes: men into BDSM or sex on the premises (cruisy/leather), lesbian bars, bars serving primarily people of color, bars with mixed-gender

socializing, and gay bars for mostly or only men.² Consistent with popular perceptions, gay bar listings show their largest five-year decline in the period 2012-2017 from 1356 to 1073, a loss of 20.9%. Over the ten-year period 2007-2017, gay bar listings declined by 28.0%.

There were always far fewer lesbian bars (e.g. Wolfe 1992), consistent with longtime differences between gay male and lesbian placemaking (Brown-Saracino 2018). Listings show substantial recent decline, albeit from very small numbers. Between 2012 (N=26) and 2017 (N=21), lesbian bar listings shed 19.2%, and between the decade 2007 (N=31) and 2017 there was a loss of 32.3%. Losing even one lesbian bar when there are under 25 in the entire country represents substantial loss, particularly if it is the only bar serving a large region.

Caution must be exercised in interpreting the apparent larger decline in lesbian bars for the period 1987 (N=204) and 1992 (N=30). In 1987 the Guide was still published by an all-male staff for a male audience. By 1992, lesbian Gina Gatta was Editor-in-Chief and the company's annual Women's Traveler was two years old. There are thus considerable editorial differences in attention to women's spaces between the pre-1992 numbers and those after. Lesbian bar listings rebounded to 60 between 1992 and 1997, losing 45% by 2002 (N=33). In the 2000s there were never more than 33 lesbian bar listings in the United States in the Guide, during which time the Men's and Women's Traveler drew from a common database.

That same time period 1992- marked a dramatic increase in the number of listings that indicated women and gay men were socializing together (the codes are unclear whether the women were lesbians), indicated on Figure 1 as "Mixed M/F." These listings increased from 240 in 1987 to 489 in 1992 under the editorship of Ms. Gatta; they reached 699 at their peak in 2007. The rise of gay bars serving both men and women represents the largest change in market mix

² See notes on Table 1 for data limitations for 1987 and 1992

among gay bar types during any time period observed, and is a trend that has attracted little attention.

There has been little public discussion about the gay bars most at risk of closure: those serving women, people of color, and cruisy men's bars. While all gay bar listings declined by 28.3% between 2007 and 2017, the number of listings for bars serving people of color declined by 49.7%. Cruisiness men's bar listings declined by 53.9% during the same period; this category includes bars coded as having patronages of men into BDSM or leather, having sex on the premises, or featuring sex workers. Discussions of gay bar closures should attend to those bars serving LGBT communities at greatest risk of losing their places.

Caution must be exercised when inferring change in gay bars and lesbian bars from listings in a travel guidebook. Further research is necessary to assess the degree to which changes in gay bar listings reflects change in the number of physical gay bars, such as through longitudinal case studies of individual cities. If we infer a relationship between listings and establishments, however, these data suggest that there have been recent qualitative changes and quantitative decline in gay bars, consistent with recent changes in gay neighborhoods (Ghaziani 2014, Mattson 2015).

Appendix

The Damron Guide is the most comprehensive and only national listing of LGBT placemaking in existence, including for gay bars. I use the term “gay bars” in this paper to refer to the general category, distinguishing in the text among gay bars patronized primarily by men, those in which women and gay men socialize together, lesbian bars, bars patronized primarily by people of color, and bars for men interested in radical sexual practices. Codes for transgender patrons arose in the 1990s but were rarely applied outside major metropolitan areas; there was never a code indicating bisexual patronage.

First published in 1964 as Bob Damron’s Address Book, it was the Damron Address Book between 1993 and 1998, before becoming the Damron Men’s Travel Guide from 1999-2019. The guide collates user reports of places confirmed by editorial staff, thus making it an early example of a crowdsourced consumer guide, such as Yelp, but with a guiding editorial hand lacking in contemporary internet versions (Damron n.d.). Originally begun by Bob Damron to facilitate sexual encounters for men, the guides broadened their scope in the 1970s to include other LGBT places including lesbian bars, gay-owned restaurants and hotels, and LGBT-friendly religious congregations. The addition of women to the staff in 1989 and a Women’s Traveler edition in 1990 marked the most dramatic change in editorial attention. Damron has been edited by only three people since its founding and by Gina Gatta since 1992, presenting remarkable consistency in the creation and curation of the guide and its listings.

Table 1 shows the raw data from which Figure 1 was made:

Table 1. Gay bar listings in Damron guides by bar type at 5-year intervals, 1977-2017

	1977	1982	1987 ³	1992 ⁴	1997	2002	2007	2012	2017
Cruisy/Leather	115	301	292	109	118	133	141	99	76
Lesbian	162	173	204	30	60	33	31	26	21
POC	122	88	80	36	76	131	145	112	72
Mixed M/F	163	203	240	489	692	697	699	559	455
Mostly/Only Men	1140	1036	950	918	672	599	486	520	453
TOTAL	1702	1801	1748	1582	1587	1543	1490	1356	1073

The TOTAL row does not count bars that appear in more than one category. For example, a bar that is indicated as having lesbian patronage and people of color patronage will not be counted twice; column totals thus do not add up to 100%. In no year do these double-counts exceed N=50 (Year=2002); in other years there are no entries that are double counted (such as 2012).

Using the guides presents many challenges. The guides are hefty—the 2002 guide is 782 pages long. No archive has a full set of all yearly editions, and some volumes are quite scarce. Any one guide is often inaccurate for any particular city and year, reflecting lags between editorial confirmation and physical publication, and the economic vulnerability of LGBT businesses. I thus assume that errors are consistent across places and years, and that they average out over time. This is reasonable especially for the periods 1977-1987 and 1992-2017, given the editorial confirmation of listings and the consistency of the guide's staffing during those discrete periods.

³ Pp 147-155 missing from archive version, thus this is a slight undercount from some cities in Florida.

⁴ Significant change in editorship since 1987; Second archival trip necessary to verify initial coding

Bob Damron developed elaborate codes to indicate bar types and patronages. These codes changed over time, reflecting emic changes in the LGBT community. As Ms. Gatta explained to me in January 2018, the changing codes also reflected the interests of her employees “I had people with disabilities in the office; we’d call and ask if the bathroom is wheelchair accessible... I would have transgender workers so that had to be in the guide, where do they find transgender friendly bars?” These proliferating codes mean that later volumes have more codes than earlier editions, and it is unclear whether those earlier codes represented diverse kinds of establishments that were disaggregated later, changes within the LGBT community, or both.

To address these difficulties, I sampled guides at five-year intervals, starting with the most recent guide that was published, the 2017 edition. Guides for years ending in 7 or 2 were obtained through private purchase, in the Damron Office in San Francisco, and through the holdings of the New York Public Library and the Hart/Gerber Library in Chicago. 1977 was the first guide addressed because that edition assumed a form most consistent with later ones.

The Damron guides include a code for bars that are “gay friendly”; they were excluded from analysis. They are rarely indicated in large cities, perhaps because there were so many gay friendly establishments in them, and thus are indicated almost exclusively in smaller cities and rural areas. It is clear that their informants did not consider them gay bars from the codes they provided, and it is unclear whether anyone else would have.

Gay bar listings in each guide were coded by my research assistants and me according to consistent categories developed by one of them, Tory Sparks. Codes approximating each of these categories were present in each year of the guide sampled here, and differentiated among bars that are dominated by gay men; those for lesbians; those which indicate a mix of men and women (and, in later years, transgender people); bars patronized by numbers of people of color;

and those that indicate men's radical sexual practices such as sex on the premises, sex for sale, leather lifestyles, and/or BDSM clubs (see e.g. Rubin 2000, Orne 2017).

It is worth noting that the documentation of lesbian bars before 1992 in a primarily men's guide in an all-male office is surprising. It is interesting that the period during which lesbian bars increased and collapsed (1977-1992) happened before a woman edited the guide, and during a period when it was mostly an all-male staff. It is reasonable to assume that more care was exhibited towards women's establishments after women staff were hired in 1989, especially because a woman's guide was launched in 1990, increasing the number of women informants to the company.

A final note. The Women's Traveler ceased publication in 2016 and no Damron guides were published for 2018; the 2019 may be the last (Sosin 2019). This means that the time period for which annual printed guides of LGBT places are available to researchers is over. The emergence of internet-based crowdsourced consumer guides such as Yelp mirrors many of the functions of the legacy printed guides and will become an important, and perhaps only, source of data for future research (e.g. Glaeser, Kim and Luca 2018).

Works Cited

- Brown-Saracino, Japonica. (2018). *How Places Make Us: Novel LBQ Identities in Four Small Cities*. University of Chicago Press.
- Damron. n.d. "About Us." <http://damron.com/about-us>, accessed July 31, 2019.
- Ghaziani, Amin. (2014). *There Goes the Gayborhood?* Princeton University Press, 2014.

- Glaeser, Edward L., Hyunjin Kim, and Michael Luca. (2018). "Nowcasting Gentrification: Using Yelp Data to Quantify Neighborhood Change." In *AEA Papers and Proceedings*, vol. 108, pp. 77-82.
- Mattson, Greggor. (2015). Style and the value of gay nightlife: Homonormative placemaking in San Francisco. *Urban Studies*, 52(16), 3144-3159.
- Orne, Jason. 2017. *Boystown: Sex and Community in Chicago*. University of Chicago Press.
- Rubin, Gayle. (2000). Sites, settlements, and urban sex: archaeology and the study of gay leathermen in San Francisco. *Archaeologies of sexuality*, 62-88.
- Sosa, Kate. (2019). "The Damron Address Book, a Green Book for Gays, Kept a Generation of Men in the Know." *Los Angeles Magazine*, Jun. 25.
- Thomas, June. (2011). *The Gay Bar: Its Riotous Past and Uncertain Future*. Washington D.C.: Slate Magazine.
- Wolfe, Maxine. 1992. "Invisible Women in Invisible Places: Lesbians, Lesbian Bars, and the Social Production of People/Environment Relationships." *Architecture & Behavior* 8:2 pp. 137-58.