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‘This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

Gerace, A. (2017, December 12). Is It Last Call for the Gay Bar? Why gay nightclubs and bars still matter for same-sex attracted people. Posted 12 December 2017.

Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/knowing-me-knowing-you/201712/is-it-last-call-the-gay-bar>

which has been published in final form at

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/knowing-me-knowing-you/201712/is-it-last-call-the-gay-bar>

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Is It Last Call for the Gay Bar?

Why gay nightclubs and bars still matter for same-sex attracted people.

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I was saddened when I heard some months ago that The Mars Bar, the only dedicated gay and lesbian nightclub in Adelaide, South Australia, would be closing after 40 years in business. The announcement followed several years of difficulties for the club due to declining patronage.

The problems faced by The Mars Bar are not specific to this one nightclub or the city/state in which it was run. In a 2015 [paper](#), Toby Lea, John de Wit, and Robert Reynolds outlined previous research regarding reasons for changes in socialization and, drawing on previous [work](#), the “structural decline” of lesbian and gay scenes, such as that of Oxford Street in Sydney. Increased use of online dating, changes in neighborhood composition and property values, and costs in attending such venues have been identified as being related to declines in physical spaces and attendance at the venues that remain. The researchers outlined theoretical debate as to whether the gay liberation movement has given way to a *post-gay* era, where sexual orientation is not central to identity, there is decreased stigmatization, and less isolation is felt by same-sex attracted persons; all of which translates to different methods of socialization and relationship formation.

Is there still a place for gay bars?

When I spoke with several friends about The Mars Bar, we differed in our thoughts on the place in 2017 for venues that cater predominantly to LGBTQ clientele. We all had experience with “the scene,” and it was insightful to hear what they had to say. Some of my friends were of the opinion that changing social attitudes meant that there wasn’t

as much of a need for gay nightclubs or bars. They believed same-sex attracted people could go to and show affection at any number of “gay-friendly” venues without fear.

Mobile and online dating apps such as Grindr, Pink Sofa, and OKCupid (which also caters to those identifying as straight) have also diminished the role of clubs and bars as places for initiating sexual and romantic relationships. Indeed, surveys of gay Australian men living in Sydney (published in 2016) and Melbourne (published 2017) reveal that the proportion of men using apps to meet sexual partners significantly increased from 2015 to 2016 and 2016 to 2017, respectively, with a decline over a five-year period in both cities for meeting at gay bars. In Adelaide, similar trends were reported, but with less change over the 2014-16 period. For my own friends, meeting potential partners through friends, work, and social circles, rather than clubs and bars, were cited as ways many of them had met their partners.

I agreed with many of the points my friends raised. However, I believe that there is still an important place for such venues. My argument to them was that these venues allow same-sex attracted people to socialize in a place where they know that a good proportion of patrons are also same-sex attracted. This reduces embarrassment (and even safety issues) that can arise in trying to meet people, but not being sure of whether they are also same-sex attracted.

I also feel that clubs and bars, as opposed to dating apps, allowed patrons to be “on the scene,” and to engage in a physical space with a lifestyle that may be new or foreign, particularly for younger people. Indeed, friends (both same-sex and opposite sex-attracted) have told me that they are discouraged from using dating apps because of a pervasive disposable or hookup culture. The ease of “swiping left” or “swiping right” on Tinder (there are similar rules and conventions on other apps) to indicate

rejection and interest in a potential partner, respectively, is, for them, at odds with wanting to meet people and form what they refer to as a “real connection.”

That’s not to say, of course, that loud nightclubs that serve lots of alcohol are necessarily the best place to meet and form a relationship! Nor is this to suggest that physical spaces or neighborhoods are the only ways in which LGBTQ people experience belonging and pride in the LGBTQ community or perceive community cohesion, with a 2014 study of men in the New York City area stressing the importance of the degree of socialization with LGBTQ peers. However, while many of us feel that we frequent “safe” or “gay-friendly,” spaces, and actively seek out spaces that are simpatico with our interests and preferences, it isn’t the case that all venues are like this or that younger people (and even older people) would feel comfortable and have the agency to find such venues.

Reasons for going to gay bars

In the study conducted by Toby Lea and colleagues, 572 same-sex attracted women and men aged from 18 to 25 and living in Sydney completed an online survey. The researchers found that 50 percent of participants reported at least monthly attendance at lesbian and gay venues. However, 60 percent of participants did not consider the lesbian/gay scene an important part of how they spent their leisure time, and 76 percent of participants reported a weak sense of connection with the lesbian/gay community in their everyday lives.

Reasons for attending lesbian and gay venues included being around other same-sex attracted people (51.9 percent); feeling able to display same-sex affection without worrying (41.5 percent); socializing (36.6 percent) and dancing (33.8 percent); feeling safe and comfortable (33.4 percent), and confident to be oneself (30.9 percent); meeting new people (31.3 percent); and ease in recognizing same-sex attracted

people (25.7 percent). Reported factors that discouraged attendance included judgmental and superficial patrons (50.6 percent), expense (46.8 percent), and that “it’s a ‘meat market’” (21.9 percent). It was also found that regular attendance was associated with participant use of drugs and hazardous alcohol consumption in the previous month.

The researchers posited that caution regarding displays of attraction and intimacy and concerns over safety, which were reflected in the results, may indicate “homophobia is a pervasive force that has not declined at the same rate as social acceptance has increased.” They also felt that “the results point both to the endurance and the diminishing relevance of Sydney’s lesbian and gay scene for different subgroups of same-sex attracted young people.”

Moving forward

I think the challenge for gay and lesbian venues will be how to respond to social and technological changes that motivate and discourage patrons to attend their premises. One criticism of gay bars and clubs is that they are geared to those with one type of music interest or are overly focused on dancing and drinking. It would seem that “one-size fits all” approaches, borne out to some extent by social and historical factors, will need to be replaced by a more diverse approach. It will be interesting to see how the recently-opened OZ, which now occupies the Mars Bar space, as well as other Adelaide venues, such as the popular Mary’s Poppin, opened in April 2016, will trade and evolve within this *evolving* space.

For researchers and psychologists, the research points to the need to focus on same-sex attraction and identity formation in this changing space, as well as how changing patterns of socialization and dating influence an individual’s ability to manage identity and to navigate satisfying, safe sexual and romantic relationships.

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