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## **Queer Spacemaking in Alcohol-Serving Establishments**

Descriptives Research Workshop

### **Introduction**

Centering queer identity at the intersection of community and physical space is one of the keys to queering theories of space-making (Oswin 2008). Previous work has demonstrated the deep ties between physical neighborhoods, collective space-making, and the formation of queer identity (Budge 2017). Alcohol-serving establishments (ASES) are one place closely intertwined with these processes, which are embodied (Buckland 2010), socially constructed in interaction (Giesecking 2020) and embedded in physical space (Giesecking 2016). The embeddedness of ASES endure even when the surrounding community goes through material and social change (Giesecking 2016). ASES have been a safe haven for queer people to freely express themselves and build community since the 19th Century (Higgs 1999) and were pivotal sites for the U.S. queer liberation movement in the 1960s (Pitman 2019). Through dancing and social interaction, ASES give opportunity for queer folks to reinforce a sense of self, make political statements, and dream of a “queer future” (Buckland 2010; Muñoz 2009).

This project seeks to understand how established queer alcohol-serving venues create and maintain community among queer people. We are specifically interested in understanding the intentional mechanisms behind spacemaking practices and what this experience looks like for queer people with intersecting marginalized identities. Through a mix of ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews, we hope to understand how staff priorities, patron

engagement, and venue design contribute to inclusive and fun queer space-making. **Table 1** outlines our research questions.

**Table 1: Research Questions**

Research Questions
What does spacemaking look like for queer people in queer alcohol-serving establishments?
How do these venues work to intentionally offer queer people a safe place to build community?
What does this space-making experience look like for people with intersecting marginalized identities?

## Literature Review

### *Queer bars as sites of sexual and gender liberation*

Queerness was criminalized in the United States until the 1959 Stonewall Riots, so queer people used these bars as a safe space to meet others and freely express themselves (Riemer and Brown 2019). These venues allowed queer people to work towards queer liberation by giving them the space to redefine what gender, sex, and sexuality can look like personally and in relation to the queer and broader community. Gender is often theorized as a performance (Butler 1988) that is tailored to the context of social situations (West and Zimmerman 1987). This dynamism of gender provides a reference to understand the need to create queer community—queer people simply were not able to experience their full self in the general public because they would be considered “deviant.” These establishments not only allowed queer people to embrace their true gender expressions, but also work towards understanding how gender influences sexuality and vice versa. This reinforces how gender acts as a social structure, working simultaneously at the individual, interactional, and institutional levels (Risman 2004).

### ***Queer spacemaking challenges***

Scholars have noted that more cisgendered and heterosexual patrons have entered these spaces as queer identities have become more widely accepted (Adams 2020). Simultaneously, queer ASES have emphasized efforts to brand themselves as fun nightlife experiences for everyone, which has created controversy within these spaces and the discourse surrounding them (Branton, Scott, and Compton 2021; Hartless 2019). Some scholars argue that this compromises the authenticity of queerness in these spaces because they are catering to cis-heteronormative standards that reflect a gender and sexual hierarchy (Ridgeway and Correll 2004).

### ***Intersectional Inclusion in Alcohol-Serving Establishments***

Despite the sense of community that these establishments work to foster, queer venues often are not proactive in creating safe spaces for queer folks with other intersecting marginalized identities. Trans and genderqueer people, especially people of color, and queer people of color are often less welcomed in these spaces (Hartless 2018). This presents an interesting tension in queer spacemaking because this reinforces a matrix of domination (Hamilton et al. 2019) by catering to a specific subset of queer people who hold more privilege than others.

Femme people also have a difficult time feeling accepted in queer alcohol serving establishments. Queer establishments often cater specifically to gay men through the events they offer and venue decor. This creates a less inviting space for femme people, often making them feel like “space invaders” for seemingly interloping into a space not designated for them (Epstein 2018). The research team will be keenly aware of the venues’ inclusivity because both researchers are femme, queer people of color. One identifies as nonbinary, while the other identifies as a cis-woman.

This study aims to ground the intersectional processes of queer space-making in the function and design of ASES. In doing this, we will use intersectionality as a theoretical paradigm to bridge the material and social aspect of queer spacemaking. We ask: What does spacemaking look like for queer people in queer alcohol-serving establishments? How do these venues work to intentionally offer queer people a safe place to build community? What does this space-making experience look like for people with intersecting marginalized identities?

### Data Collection and Analysis

We are hoping to answer these research questions through an ethnography in queer alcohol-serving establishments in Los Angeles. **Table 2** outlines the venues we are considering and the neighborhood they are situated in. We will visit these sites a few times to observe the venue’s intended function, social environment, and design. These are all claimed queer spaces that have a history of fostering a safe and fun nightlife in the Los Angeles area. We also plan to ask patrons and bar workers if they recommend other sites to add to this study.

**Table 2: Potential site names and their neighborhoods**

Venue Name	Neighborhood
The Abbey	West Hollywood
Micky’s	West Hollywood
Heart	West Hollywood
Rocco’s	West Hollywood
The New Jalisco	Downtown Los Angeles
Precinct	Downtown Los Angeles

Our field notes will focus on three details that make up the culture of these establishments: staff priorities, patron engagement, venue design. **Table 3** outlines the questions

we will consider while observing these venues that are specific to staff, patron, and venue dynamics.

**Table 3: Observation questions**

Staff	Patrons	Venue
<p>Does this venue hire queer staff?</p> <p>Is their staff mindful of queerness (ie. correct pronouns)?</p> <p>What does the establishment do to make a queer staff members feel safe?</p>	<p>Who mostly visits these sites (ie. gender, sexuality, race, class)?</p> <p>Is there any specific things these people do/say that they otherwise might not in non-queer ASES? Why?</p>	<p>What makes this place a queer landmark (ie. inclusive decor)?</p> <p>What precautions are in place to keep patrons safe?</p>

In addition to the ethnographic observations, we plan to conduct in-depth interviews with establishment figures, including the venues’ managers, owners, and staff. These will provide valuable insight as to why they established the venue, how they engage with the community, and challenges they face as a queer business. If possible, we might also conduct interviews with patrons, focusing on why they chose to visit the establishment, how they feel visiting this venue, and what they get out of this nightlife experience. This project is currently undergoing IRB approval at both coauthors’ home institutions (University of Southern California and Princeton University).

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