UNDER PRESSURE AND VOICING UP: JAPANESE YOUTH TACKLING GENDER ISSUES

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During and since the #MeToo Movement in 2017, Japan, especially Tokyo, has experienced a surge in activity from grassroots groups like Voice Up Japan and Chabudai Gaeshi Joshi Action as well as student-driven sexual consent projects at universities such as Waseda. These groups work to tackle the issue of sexual violence on campuses and beyond. The category 'gender issues' (or *gendaa mondai*) encompasses many conversations Japanese youth are having now, particularly regarding changing gender roles and expectations in home, work, and school spaces. This article will examine the current discourse around gender issues contextualised in precarious Japan to examine youth community building and meaning making assigned to spaces of both passive and active participation. I suggest that 'voicing up' in Tokyo is defined not so much by 'loud and proud' or 'post-closet discourses' (Ueno 2022, Seidman 2002), but by local discourses adapted around trending terms and raising initial awareness. This article shows that smaller-scale community involvement, rather than styles of protest activism, is shaped by both institutional and individual narratives. The 'passing on' of such narratives is essential for youth to enact 'survivance' (Vizenor 2008) and find belonging in different groups. In addition to my fieldwork which begun in September 2022 and will end around September 2023, I will engage with existing literature on how precarity in Japan is usually discussed in terms of irregular work (Allison 2013), intimate disconnections (Alexy 2020), and queer narratives. I will use these sources in combination with the personal experiences of my interlocuters to unpack how youth 'voice up' and become involved in groups focused on preventing sexual violence against women, LGBTQ awareness, and anti-discrimination.

Keywords: Gender issues, sexual consent, LGBTQ, youth, social movements, grassroots activism

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Introduction

There is a 'gateless gate' (*mumon no mon*) for visitors, students, faculty, and staff to come and go as they please. Since its founding, the university grounds have been defined by a 'grassroots spirit' (*zaiya seishin*). The social body of Waseda University (more colloquially known as 'Sōdai') has been defined by diversity, inclusivity, and freely embracing alternative ways of thinking. Physical manifestations like the *mumon no mon* are symbols of Waseda as well as of an immaterial *zaiya seishin.* However, in the past few decades, student voices have struggled to recapture and redefine these original founding messages.

In my primary field site at Waseda University in central Tokyo, groups of students aged from their late teens to mid-twenties 'voice up' about issues such as sexual harassment, the lack of awareness of LGBTQ+ people, and discrimination based on gender, race, or ethnicity. Waseda University is a prestigious private institution founded in 1882 by Okuma Shigenobu. It is known for its' high-performing pupils, multiple spacious campuses, and a large student population with an increasing percentage coming from overseas or international backgrounds. Within Japan, Waseda, along with Keio University, University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, and other institutions with a high *hensachi* (standardised rank score), are household names and symbols of educational attainment. Waseda students, undergraduate and postgraduate, are often considered exceptional because of their ability to pass the challenging entrance examinations and later be hired on by influential companies in fields such as politics, banking, journalism, and technology.

From the outside, Waseda might appear to be a bastion of liberalised, internationally minded individuals and of urban higher education. The symbolism within the *mumon no mon* is a perfect example of advertised inclusivity and of an image of progress. But the narratives of individuals and groups here are not representative of Japan, the Kanto region, or even the greater Tokyo area. Other structures are at work in determining the makeup of this university and many others. Roger Goodman and Chinami Oka (2018) point out in their analysis of the *hensachi* system's influence that it 'upholds the ideology of educational meritocracy and consolidates structural inequalities in Japanese society', because access to resources *does* impact the type of support students may receive to study and get into a senior high school or university with an impressive *hensachi* ranking (594). The emphasis on such ideologies is alive and well in the 2020s, sneaking into conversations I've had with faculty, staff, and students who hint at the divisions by social class (and likely gender) that they perpetuate.

Despite Waseda University's privileged positioning in Japanese higher education, I argue that examining the context of student gender-issue based activism which emerges from these elite Japanese universities aiming for a more 'globalised' image provides opportunities for the investigation of Japanese youth grassroots organisations. Contrary to the external messaging of taking consistent steps toward progress, these institutions are struggling with

embedded discourses of patriarchal masculinity and associated political conservatism. Examining these institutions from the bottom-up perspective requires further disentanglements when placing concepts like 'voicing up' and precarity within growing local discourses around sexual consent education and discrimination based on race, gender identity, or sexual orientation. These well-endowed institutions which mobilise conversations around consent and LGBTQ+ rights earlier than some of their neighbours remain a web of contestation, of uncertainty, and of survivance.

Japanese youth I've spoken with at Waseda University, the International Christian University (ICU), and the University of Tsukuba are facing similar problems when attempting to enact change at universities, whether joining hands with external organisations, working alongside like-minded faculty members, or utilising both sorts of connections for social campaigns. In the case of the sexual consent project at Waseda University, student members continue to work with dedicated faculty who can vouch for their project to colleagues as well as providing guidance on the contents of student-produced materials. It is through these collaborative efforts, a form of 'horizontal coordination' across numerous emerging groups (Shibata 2020) like that observed in off-campus protests around youth unemployment and workers' rights, that Waseda students across two circles (the local term for student clubs) have produced their consent handbooks and developed workshops.

The effort is not officially backed by the university administration, including the student activity affairs office who will not advertise one student circle's project over another's to avoid displays of preferential treatment. By virtue of being only loosely affiliated with a university and kept afloat by the action of a small number of full-time students, the sexual consent handbook project faces limitations to visibility. This contrasts with larger-scale social movements in Japan which were founded by students but moved their activities off campuses, such as the Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs) movement from 2015 to 2016 which I will discuss in more detail later.

Speaking about issues like sexual harassment and violence, toxic masculinity, and gender inequality in any country is not easy. Especially because it often involves turning a private matter into a public affair. But the experiences and the narrative storytelling that emerges from encounters with discomfort—whether in the form of unwanted physical contact or an uncomfortable conversation with friends—demonstrate both an uncertain reality and a potential for survival. If we engage with ideas of 'survivance' (Vizenor 2008) the continuity of 'voicing up' about stories of harassment, violence, and the absence of these discussions in public venues is what can bring positive change to Japanese youth. Sharing these narratives allows marginalised groups—like victims of sexual violence (psychological or physical) and members of LGBTQ+ communities, to renounce myths around their own experiences and retell stories as their own. It is therefore a 'renunciation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry' which echoes Gerald Vizenor's idea of native survivance (2008: 1). Ultimately, greater public awareness towards the 'common sense' occurrence and

narrativisation of violence and discrimination can transform activities at the university level and beyond.

In this introduction, I explore the notion of a 'precarious Japan' and how it interacts with youth community involvement as well as student grassroots activism, particularly in the case of elite Japanese universities such as Waseda. In the next section, I investigate how social pressures produce narratives among young people, with a focus on constructions of femininity, masculinity, and androgyny. In the third section, I will expand on these themes by using examples of queer experiences from my own and other authors' ethnographic data. And, lastly, I discuss whether intimate community spaces and 'voicing up' will produce new opportunities for minority groups, especially LGBTQ+ individuals, in Japan.[2]

Defining a 'new' precarity in 'voicing up'

The notion of precarity is common in discussions of labour, aspirations, and class. It is often wrapped up in care and support networks, be they provided by the state or by community and family. But states of 'precariousness' typically emerges when these networks and resources fail people and they become 'differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death' (Butler 2009: ii). It can be a slow degradation or a steep decline into instability, such as full-time work turning into irregular employment and delayed pay. Precariousness is by no means unique to Japan, but it gained particular attention following the bursting of the 1990s economic bubble, leading to discussions about a 'society marked by social disparity' (*kakusa shakai*) for the Japanese public. The long-standing social issue covered by media is that Japanese youth who pursue typically corporate white-collar career paths are no longer able to attain the full-time, system of lifetime employment (*nenkō seido*) that their parents and grandparents benefited from. But this isn't the full story. Japanese youth are and continue to mobilise in distinctly different ways from their predecessors.

Nonregular workers, especially the disproportionately affected female temporary workers, are resisting unfair dismissals and transfers (Shibata 2020). Traditional models of protest around labour policies and opposing the passage of legislation are being discarded in favour of utilising fashionable streetwear brands to garner youth interest and by spreading messages on social media like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. Precarious labour has not disappeared, nor has the precarity I will discuss regarding gender issues in student activism,

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[2] I will draw upon both primary and secondary ethnographic research about gender and sexuality in Japan, focusing on discussions around sexual minorities, sexual harassment, and gender inequality across higher education and grassroots spaces. Profiles of individuals and other examples of 'thick description' (Geertz 1973) come from my own fieldwork at university campuses in Tokyo and neighbouring cities like Saitama, Chiba, and Kanagawa. All individuals will be pseudonymised to prevent direct identification. The fieldwork incorporates long-term participant observation along with semi-structured interviews, attending events and workshops, and reading handbooks and SNS posts produced by students and faculty about gender-related issues.

but there have been rapid shifts in discourse around previously silenced topics and muted groups.

When using the term 'voice up', I refer to the use of this phrase by grassroots organisations in recent decades, especially from the late 2010s on. On the opening page of their website, one such organisation, Chabudai Gaeshi Joshi Action (Chabujo), describes their goal to create a world where everyone can live as themselves and express their thoughts freely. Translated from the original Japanese, they write that: 'People who "want to change today's society" are connected to their values by dialogue, and by speaking up and taking action together, we will eliminate the power disparity.'[3] The emphasis on raising one's voice (*koe wo ageru* or *koe wo dasu*) is based in the grassroots organisation's understanding that, for women living in Japan, there is 'difficulty in voicing up' (*koe no dashinikusa*). 'Voice up' could also be translated into speaking up or speaking out, but there is something to be said for the decision by many groups, including Chabujo, to emphasise the presence or absence of a voice for women and other marginalised groups. For the non-profit organisation Voice Up Japan, it has become its name as well as its mission statement. At the end of the group's history page on their website is a clear connection between 'equality', 'inclusivity', and 'safety' when it comes to 'voicing up.'

> Our work has just begun. We will continue to do all that we can to build a more equal and welcoming society in Japan—a society where everyone feels safe to voice up.

Although I will not include the entirety of the original Japanese here, the phrase 'koe wo ageru' (Voice Up) is explicitly used. This may clarify to the reader that the somewhat commonplace Japanese phrase is being adopted by this movement and organisation to serve as a call for action, for societal betterment, and for promoting anti-violence and anti-discrimination in Japan.

The need to recognise and elevate muted thoughts and opinions, to 'voice up', has clear similarities to Vizenor's theories of survivance. Gerald Vizenor describes this as, 'an active sense of presence… the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction' (2008: 1). The stories I've encountered in Japan for and by minority groups. It is a distinct form of survivance from that experienced by Native Americans in the United States. The efforts of Japanese social movements and organisations attest to a similar legacy of resistance and identification which moves beyond tragedy or victimhood. It often leads to finding community and to creating new bonds of friendship and family. Survivance in this Japanese youth context may then be a key to alleviating what we could refer to as gender uncertainty or precarity.

Sharryn Kashmir notes the different debates around precarity, marking distinctions between an ontological discussion and one attributing precarity to neoliberal capitalism.

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[3] Chabujo.com, (accessed 1 Oct 2023), https://perma.cc/4TD5-TFT6

Whereas Butler and Allison are categorised as leaning into the emotional landscape of precarity, Kashmir identifies common themes of 'disenfranchisement, displacement, and uncertainty' and 'anxiety, insecurity, and feelings of un-belonging' in both cultural anthropology and in discussion of Fordism (2018: 3-4). Butler ties gender performativity to precarity, as gender norms designate that 'those who do not live their genders in intelligible ways are at heightened risk for harassment and violence' (2009: ii). This is undoubtedly the case in Japan as it is many other societies where the 'normal' is embraced and the 'deviant' is stigmatised. An important takeaway from these dialogues when looking at precarity for Japanese youth involved in gender issues is the emphasis on *feeling*.

Anne Allison (2013) was one of the first anthropologists of Japan to bring precarity into the idea of an overarching 'precarious Japan.' Allison and others' discussion of precarity ties in with the crisis in labour forces, the increasing normalisation of 'irregular' (*hiseikikoyō*) workers who are temporary, short-term, or contracted (ibid: 46). Interestingly a 'precarious Japan' can be and has been applied to many other debates and cultural phenomena. This includes the demasculinsation and fragmentation attributed to *otaku* (dedicated fans or 'nerds' of popular Japanese media) following the collapse of post-war, bubble economy era Japan, connecting them to individual quirkiness, obsessiveness and even depravity (Toivonen and Imoto 2013). It is not difficult for the authors to then connect the 'youth problem' focus of *otaku* to *hikikomori* and NEET debates.

However, precarious labour and everyday living is also filled with contestations and landscapes of resistance, laid out meticulously by authors such as Saori Shibata (2020). Shibata uses a sociological lens while describing the historical progression of Japan's current political economy and the concurrent shift in protest events by workers, especially 'nonregular' or 'irregular' workers. In a more contemporary volume than Allison's, Shibata demonstrates that the methods and models of protest, from pay-claims to infringements of workers' rights, have changed steadily from the late 1980s through to the early 2000s and even more so during the Abe administration. She argues that the 'increased frequency with which protest events conducted by NPOs and citizen's groups occurred also reflected the changes affecting Japan's political economy' (2020: 57). Such protests, often arranged through horizontal coordination among multiple unions and issue-oriented groups, are clearly a form of 'voicing up.' Though the changed shape from traditional models of 'pay-related claims by organised labour' to ones which are horizontal and community-organised, often by geographical region, emphasises how malleable protests and general activism can be. Notably, Chabujo and Voice Up Japan use 'community organising' as a focus of their campaigns for gender rights.

It is uncommon—but not unheard of, for Japanese university students to set off a large-scale social movement, particularly focused on or around a physical campus. When student movements are created, it is in spite of university cultures which discourage political engagement. There is a widespread belief that such grassroots activism may be distasteful to corporations and decrease students' chances of success during the *shūkatsu* (job-hunting) season (Falch and Hammond 2020: 441-442). But there have been exceptions to this modern

trend. In 2015, Students Emergency Action for Liberal Democracy (SEALDs) movement mobilised against the national defence security policies of then Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). This was an astonishing example of student mobilisation and activism, especially as they used urban, cyber and hybrid spaces to express their opposition against administration policies which would permit the self-defence forces to move more freely abroad (ibid: 437). SEALDs used this diversity of spaces and promotion of inclusivity, including many women in their leadership, to appeal to a greater variety of youth in Japan.

In the end, the group did not prevent the passing of the legislation it was fighting against, but it did increase social consciousness and awareness. SEALDs proved that Japanese youth today are employing new strategies to achieve greater media coverage, appeal to wider audiences, and normalise new brands of activism differentiated from both their predecessors in Japan and movements overseas. Former member of SEALDs, Wakako Fukuda, described the struggles in an interview five years after the group's disbandment as primarily coming from 'the inability of many to understand that they have rights' (Banerjee 2022). But she expressed an understanding for the reason 2020s activism still involves carefully chosen words and that: 'It is not hard to speak in front of a thousand people. It is harder to speak to your neighbour or friend' (Fukuda in Banerjee 2022).

Resistance and rejection—or silence, are common, particularly when they are tied up in an institution's administrative processes. With every success story, there are failed campaigns whether to distribute pamphlets or change a policy. But it is still worth highlighting positive changes that come with the effort and dedication of students, staff, and faculty alike. An example was the establishment of the Gender and Sexuality Center at Waseda University in 2017, the first of its kind at any Japanese university and the by-product of an initial student proposal in 2015. Or the successful petition by students at International Christian University (ICU) to produce and distribute consent handbooks to incoming students. The first batch of pamphlets were handed out to the Autumn 2022 intake of students with the goal to make sexual consent a 'normal' part of first year orientations.

A recipe for gender issues, an opportunity for dialogue

A frequently invoked saying is 'the nail that sticks out is hammered down' (*deru kugi wa utareru*). This is a 'common sense' (*jōshiki*) phrase which is repeated in many conversations and interviews I have with Japanese undergraduate and graduate students as we try to untangle why it is so difficult to bring about change, especially regarding gender issues. Toyomi used this phrase when explaining more broadly why social movements and activism in Japan may struggle to gain popularity. An observation was that 'in other countries, activists are very famous everyone knows [them] and they become very popular'. Whereas, in Japan, even activists playing a big role or putting in a lot of effort are not afforded the same recognition,

or appreciation, perhaps because: 'People don't really care about activism and social issues. They're, like, okay with what we have right now.'

The Lost Decades (1990s-2010s) (*ushinawareta sanjyuunen*) are a prime example of how economic stagnation can lead to not just ten but up to 30 some years of uncertainty in employment, housing, and, indeed, finding a life partner. Japan is sometimes classified as an 'uncertainty avoidance culture' which expresses itself through a lower tolerance for ambiguity as well as for 'people or groups with deviant ideas or behaviour' (Hofstede 1979: 395 in Kobayashi et al 2008: 418). Kobayashi mainly analyses deviance in terms of activities such as gambling, physical violence, drug use, illicit sex, property destruction and theft. Which leads me to ask if my informants at Japanese universities might consider forms of community involvement like anti-harassment campaigns and LGBTQ+ societies a type of 'deviant behaviour'? This could mean that getting involved with anti-discrimination groups such as Voice Up Japan or Chabudai Gaeshi Joshi Action, or educating fellow students about sexual consent, is seen as a risk-taking action.

Voice Up Japan (VUJ) is a non-profit organisation founded in 2019 after a magazine called *Shukan SPA* published an article identifying by university which young women were easy access for sex. VUJ's founder, Kazuna Yamamoto, started a petition on *Change.org* which gathered 40,000 signatures. It was enough to prompt the magazine to issue an apology. Since then, VUJ has organised multiple conferences and seminars to speak out about gender inequality, sexual violence, and misogyny in Japanese society. One of their main methods of doing so is through their many university branches with their work on projects such as sexual consent, anti-harassment, HIV/AIDs awareness and distribution of period products.[4]

Chabudai Gaeshi Joshi Action (Chabujo) is also a non-profit which promotes gender equality and speaks out against sexual violence, especially violence against women. They were founded in July 2015 by Sachiko Osawa and their activities have continued into the present day. The phrase 'let's make a society where we can all live as ourselves' (*jibunrashiku ikiru shakai wo tsukuro*) is an important part of their organisational logo. Made up of different teams instead of the multiple student branches which define VUJ, Chabujo is involved primarily in community organising campaigns. This includes providing educational workshops about topics such as bystander intervention, creating sexual consent handbooks which have been distributed to many schools, and digital outreach through their blog, Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook feeds.[5]

These organisations became more visible following the formation of the #MeToo Movement in Japan in 2017. This began in earnest when journalist Ito Shiori went public about

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[4] This passage is adapted from Voice Up Japan's Japanese and English websites under the 'Who We Are' and 'Our History' pages. To learn more please follow this link: https://www.voiceupjapan.org/en/who-we-are/, (accessed 3 March 2023), https://perma.cc/H7S3-2XZ5.

[5] This description of Chabujo is also adapted from their main website (in Japanese), which is accessible here: https://www.chabujo.com/ (accessed 3 March 2023), https://perma.cc/4TD5-TFT6.

her sexual assault case.[6] Ito's case resulted in a flurry of negative backlash as well as positive support, which have been analysed by media studies specialists Yan Tan and Shih-Diing Liu. Tan and Liu (2022) defined online news comment sections as 'alternative public spaces that allow divergent political views' and identified practices of 'witnessing' in the form of 'victim-blaming', 'feminist' and 'reformist' digital footprints. As might be guessed by the categories' names, 'victim blaming' put the responsibility for the assault on Ito's shoulders, 'feminist' responses said Ito was in the right for speaking up and it was her assailant's fault, while the 'reformists' dissected the incident as a failure of institution, of government, and society (ibid: 6-10). Tan and Liu's analysis of public reaction and conversation is a perfect example of the diversity of opinions on even a single 'scandal' like Ito's. Even as this paper seeks out individual narratives it is still vital to remember that their perspectives are often not representative of broader public opinion. Much of the people I speak with consider themselves in the minority whether due to their educational level, sexual orientation, or involvement with activism.

In a remote interview in August 2022, Toyomi, a representative of the Voice Up Japan (VUJ) International Christian University (ICU) branch, explained how he personally got involved.[7] He said that it wasn't until he entered university that he began to think more deeply about gender issues. A seminar at ICU and conversations with a current VUJ member are what spurred him to join projects around HIV and sexual consent education. These external opportunities for conversation aligned with internal, more personal, feelings he had about gender, specifically conceptions of masculinity and femininity.

Toyomi identified 'toxic masculinity' as one of his primary concerns, along with joining an HPV vaccination awareness campaign and involvement with VUJ ICU's sexual consent project. Traditional views of masculinity were the personal impetus for him to get involved with gender issues in Japan, as he described a sense of discomfort around the expectations of male behaviour, especially as he entered university. He did not think this feeling was unique, but that most Japanese men are trapped in these patterns of behaviour. For Toyomi and others, acting on that feeling—and against social norms, takes considerable effort.

Kumiko Endo (2019) has examined how contemporary singlehood plays into new gender stereotypes, specifically of the idea of 'herbivore-type' (*sōshoku-kei danshi*) and 'carnivore-type' (*nikushoku-kei danshi*) men. Increasingly, this impacts the dating game and marriage hunting (*konkatsu*) fields in Japan as what heterosexual individuals are looking for in a partner do not match up with what is represented in the dating pool.

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[6] Ito Shiori and her colleagues who started the face of the movement in Japan later rebranded it as #WeToo when the #MeToo model was met with reticence and negativity from even fellow victims of sexual harassment and assault in Japan. Ito and others found it was much easier to garner support as a group rather than use the publicised accounts of individual victims. Typically, overseas models of activism must undergo changes and localisation to fit different cultural frameworks.

[7] All names of individuals have been pseudonymised or anonymised. Even where interlocuters have given permission to have quotes attributed to their real name, I have referred to them by different names or initials. The mention of the organisation, university and gender identity/sexual orientation is still necessary to define the interviewee's social position in the context of this paper.

The young (20s to 30s) single women in Endo's study expressed that 'someone who is not a herbivore' is a suitable person to have as a partner (2019: 175). This is usually women desiring men who would be proactive and take the initiative in a relationship. But many women lament the short supply of such men. Instead, women have had to become 'carnivores' to make up for the 'herbivorous' men who are not pursuing them. This has been in the Japanese dating rhetoric since around 2006 when the terms *sōshoku-kei danshi* and *nikushoku-kei danshi* were first coined by columnist Maki Fukusawa (ibid:174). For social scientists, these newer expressions of masculine norms may be indicative of a paradigm shift, at least in behaviour if not attitude. It may *not* be a shift in cultural attitudes because, as Endo suggests, Japanese women still desire men to perform traditional gender roles, to be assertive and decisive, as well as someone with a stable job. But the social and economic climate of today has made it harder to find such a partner. And, therefore, some Japanese women turn to finding these qualities in a foreign man.

In the notion of otaku sexuality, we see again debates and concerns over what a masculine, mature, even 'normal' young man is. These labels of otaku, NEET, hikikomori, and more recently, *sōshoku-kei danshi*, typically problematise youth through various mainstream discourses. As Toivonen and Imoto phrase it: Youth are frequently viewed as a threat to the established order, as unstable agents, and as insufficiently socialised 'semi-citizens' who need further training and moulding in order to play adult roles (2012: 17). Cultural anthropologist Patrick Galbraith (2014) discusses the association of male otaku as 'failed men' who are not sexually interested in 'normal' women or even in human beings (210-11). Critics of male otaku, and it is important to emphasise that these are critiques levied against men who enjoy two-dimensional characters rather than the women who do the very same, point to these members as being socially immature, selfish, and irresponsible. Their 'deviant desires' are 'taken to be a rejection of socially (re) productive roles and responsibilities' (ibid: 210). And, because they lack the right kind of masculinity they are often described as 'effeminate' or 'like a woman', an unfortunate by-product of patriarchal discourse in not just Japan, but many other countries. The best way to put down a man is to say he is like a woman.

These examples of *sōshoku-kei danshi* and male *otaku*, of alternative masculinities, are important to note because they have and still do contribute to the pressures put upon male Japanese youth. Scholarly and journalistic debates feed into what young people like Toyomi are saying about how there is an overwhelming pressure for men to perform with confidence, with forcefulness. If they do this, they then embody a type of *desirable* masculinity. There exists a need to not only be a masculine man in the eyes of Japanese society, but also what a partner would expect and, presumably, want. The main issue that Toyomi identified had to do with personal image, with the maintenance of the image of a masculine male who is masculine through 'having a girlfriend'. And to get a girlfriend they act a certain way, even if it means 'acting like a different person' (*betsu no hito ni mitai ni*).

Toyomi's comment also implies that young Japanese men change their behaviour between being with their friends and being around a potential romantic or sexual partner. He

mentioned that this mentality also excludes gay men, who are lumped into the category of, paraphrasing Toyomi: 'inexperienced males who have no girlfriends and therefore no sex.' Through just this short breakdown of a masculine image most Japanese men are immediately left out—be they 'herbivore-type men', otaku, or members of the LGBTQ+ community. These excluded groups, especially LGBTQ+ individuals, will be the focus of the rest of this paper.

Connecting, disconnecting and reconnecting

Masculine or feminine norms do not dissolve quickly, but there is a distinct importance placed on 'awareness' in Japanese campaigns for gender equality. To 'raise awareness about the importance of building relationships on mutual respect and the significance of sexual consent' is also the goal of groups like Chabudai Gaeshi Jōshi Action (Kyodo News 2019). Emphasis on 'raising awareness' may resonate with the 'consciousness raising' collectivities of earlier women's movements where women found strength and political purchase in identifying common experiences, particularly in sexual abuse (Burns 2005: 11). Ideas of dispelling dominant ideologies and building and organising community are a foundation for these grassroots organisations. The few consent discussions which occur in Japan stress the idea of personal boundaries and space. Respecting the boundaries of others is an absolute must for consent outlined in the handbooks produced by Chabujo and the Waseda sexual consent project team. An example of this stance is in the sexual consent handbook produced in 2018 by Chabujo which states: 'non-consensual sexual words and actions are sexual violence' (*doui no nai seiteki gendou wa seibōryoku desu*). Chabujo is not the only organisation to turn this statement into a more common refrain. Even with variations in phrasing and word choice, as well as the resources groups have at their disposal, such messages strike a similar chord. In the sexual consent handbook produced by the Waseda student team and which began distribution on campus in March 2022, a key phrase on page 5 is: 'Any sexual words and actions which haven't received sexual consent are sexual violence' (*seiteki doui ga torareteinai, seiteki na gendou wa subete seibōryoku desu*).

      Language and semiotics clearly play a role in starting, advancing, and stalling dialogues around social issues like gender. New and popular terms designate categories for types of romantic partners, occupation status, and association with certain hobbies. In Japan, much effort is put into distinguishing the active and the passive, the public and the private, while in-between spaces (and people) slip through the cracks. Occupying a less-recognised space or position or possessing a 'minority' identity is certainly a manifestation of the precarity discussed by Allison, Kashmir, Shibata, and Endo. This typically gendered precarity is characterised by social exclusion and isolation. As it has been for generations, connecting with others appears to be the impetus for finding a place to belong (*ibasho*) and a purpose or cause to call your own.

A shared narrative is that finding these communities involves discovering more about individual identities. Through encounters with VUJ members at ICU, Toyomi questioned his past and current discomfort with the masculinity performed by himself and his friends. By visiting Waseda's Gender and Sexuality Center, or joining an inter-university LGBTQ+ circle, students can safely explore their gender expression, gender identity, and sexual orientation. And, for people who have experienced *chikan* or other forms of harassment, the campaigns of organisations like Voice Up Japan, Spring, Chabudai Gaeshi Jōshi Action, and Human Rights Watch, is an opportunity to know one is not alone. That your doubts, fears, and uncertainties are shared, even mirrored, by many others.

When it comes to gender, there are many ways people have adopted to transgress typical and heteronormative boundaries in a way which is tolerated, if not accepted. In Japan, a female-embodied androgyny (Robertson 1992: 419) witnessed among female players of male roles (*otokoyaku*) in the Takarazuka Revue, a famous all-female theatre troupe, are a prime example. And androgyny is not just accessible for Japanese women but for Japanese men. In fact, it originated with men cross-dressing and performing femininity. Traditionally, this may be expressed through the *onnagata* (male players of female roles) in Kabuki theatre, but it is also easy to see the appeal of androgynous features in Japanese popular music, manga, anime, and fashion. Jennifer Robertson dedicated years of ethnographic research to the interplay of gender, sex, and sexuality in the Takarazuka Revue. But, as Vera Mackie notes in her own work on gendered displays in Japan, such examples of public, open transgression are often restrained to the entertainment industry (2010:116).

To describe what going against gender expectations means off stage, Mackie uses the example of Nōmachi Mineko, who transitioned from male to female while an office worker and wrote an autobiographical account about her experiences (Mackie 2010: 111). Nōmachi is primarily concerned with passing when it come from presenting as one gender to another, but Mackie makes a point in her analysis that 'the narrative of how one individual born in a male body acquired a feminine gender identity can also shed light on more mainstream performances of femininity and masculinity' (2010: 113). Nōmachi rejected the wearing of a necktie and left the life of a salaryman. For Nōmachi, wearing a necktie was an unbearable and detestable experience. Such a rejection of this postwar Japan symbol of hegemonic masculinity could be performed by even a cis-gendered man. But its symbolic association with masculinity is further emphasised by how much Nōmachi wished to feel and present as more feminine. A single article of clothing can hold so much power thanks to the image of a masculine man as one who is the primary breadwinner (*daikokubashira*), working long hours in a corporate environment to provide for his wife and children.

With androgynous gender performance (or practice) it was acceptable if it did not permanently transgress certain boundaries. For example, masculinised females, the *otokoyaku*, in the Takarazuka Revue were described as *chūsei* (being neutral or in-between) or *ryōsei* (being both). Robertson suggests that this assigns performers an asexual state as well as to 'deflect negative attention from both the sexual difference… and the social ramifications of

that difference' (ibid: 429). Such a social ramification might be that the love female fans have for the *otokoyaku* would cross over into 'real-world' same-sex attraction. However, androgyny in the Takarazuka Revue, in youth fashion visible on city streets, or even in 'girls' love' during school years, is not always attached to sexual orientation or gender identity.

In fact, the expectation that androgyny is a fleeting experience not to be taken seriously creates complications for transgender people like Nōmachi and nonbinary or X-gender (a Japanese term designating a more fluid gender identity) youth. Before transitioning and then passing as a typical Japanese OL (office lady), Nōmachi describes presenting and being 'accepted' as an effeminate man in university who could be perceived as androgynous or 'ambiguous' (Mackie 2010: 116). She was able to exist with this identity before entering adult workspaces. Living her university life without being identified or 'outed' as queer was perhaps made easier by more recent narratives of the *sōshoku-kei danshi*, a man who was not an idealised form of 'masculine', at least, not what some young single heterosexual women desired for their potential partners. Instead, the palpability of this persona of Nōmachi's, which was not defiantly queer, seemed dependent on the temporality of the androgynous state.

Queerness, including androgyny that *is* connected to LGBTQ+ identities, remains contested in Japan. It was not the focus of my conversation with Toyomi because he did not indicate he was a member of the community. Although, he did acknowledge the discrimination and exclusion from Japanese masculinity faced by gay men because they did not date women. Automatically, LGBTQ+ males were left on the wayside, not considered in conversations about toxic masculinity and the pressure young Japanese men feel to flirt aggressively with women, especially under the influence of alcohol.

In the gay dating world as well, there are pressures to apply heteronormative ideologies and use stereotypical identities in the form of 'types' (*-kei*). This is especially visible now on gay dating sites and apps, including in Japan. Thomas Baudinette's (2017) insights into Japanese gay dating forums indicate that identities are formed around linguistic registers and labels like that discussed by Endo (2019) in her analysis of heterosexual singles searching for ideal partners. In both papers, the dating pools are primarily of people looking for serious romantic partners and future spouses, which is an important distinction from other dating scenes which are formed around more casual flings. Interestingly the men Baudinette observed using the 'Serious Forum', seemed to prefer less gendered pronouns (the more neutral *watashi* over masculine *boku* or *ore*), while also indicating a preference for traditionally masculine partners (*sawayaka or majime*) over ones viewed as effeminate or cute (*kawaii*) (2017: 249). Being *kawaii* was a less desirable trait for serious relationships and Baudinette's research shows that types embodying more masculine qualities were overwhelmingly popular.

Meanwhile, the popularity of the *rīman-kei* (businessman type) for gay men on this website seem at odds with the preference of some of the single heterosexual women who, while exaggerating their own gendered roles in house and home, are shifting away from the 'salaryman type'. For those women, a quiet, serious salaryman who does as he is told were often the exact opposite of their desired Other.

`   One of the extracts Baudinette gives is of a *rīman-kei* man looking for a *majime-kei* partner who says the following:

> *Watashi wa tanoshikute, yasashii fun'iki no nonkeppoi rīman-kei desu* (I am a fun
> and straight-acting Businessman Type who has a kind aura (248).

To other gay men on this platform the use of *nonkeppoi* (*nonke* is slang for straight) to say that he 'acts straight' may be a desirable characteristic. It is further evidence that heteronormative identities are assumed not just by heterosexual individuals but by LGBTQ+ individuals, including in spaces which are explicitly queer. These ideal types seem to be familiar, a cultural reference point that can 'cross over' even to communities that occupy separate and marginalised social niches.[8]

        One of the most common themes tied into precarity and uncertainty in modern Japan is that of disconnection. Disconnection comes with the territory of generational changes, of post-bubble economy Japan, and with the rise of the Internet and social networking services (commonly abbreviated as SNS). As social media increased in visibility and popularity between 1990 and 2000, educators and officials realised that the environment around sex education was changing drastically (Nishioka 2018: 179). Adolescents were being exposed to information about sexual acts, relationships, and sexual health earlier, without the mediating presence of parents or of schools. This new reality means that gender, sexuality, and sex are topics which are brought up outside of the control of the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (often abbreviated as MEXT or called Monbusho).

        Though, notably, the ubiquity of social media also offers support networks and safety nets for youth, especially members of LGBTQ+ communities. The grassroots organisations and individuals I have been speaking with about intimate topics like sexual consent all depend on online presences to reach audiences. And connect with people who have similar experiences, ideas, and identities.

        Ayato, a masters' student in education at University of Tsukuba who identifies as gay, first experienced gay communities in Japan through using the online platform Twitter. This contrasted with physical spaces which have strict age requirements and social drinking. '…it's in my generation, I guess, around 20 years old. Like, people just prefer to just be online right? Not to, like, physically communicate in the street or somewhere… So, in that place [Twitter], I can just choose the person that I'm going to reach out to, and I don't have to go clubbing.'

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[8] The perspective I take on this paper and the entirety of my field research is that the conversation about harassment, consent, and sexuality education *should* include *everyone*. I acknowledge that this emerges from a white, middle-class upbringing in the United States and educational background in the United Kingdom. Yet, I have encountered groups and individuals in Japan who stress similar desires for diversity and inclusion—who include all genders, sexualities, and nationalities as part of their quest to gain 'mutual respect'. Their views and voices are yet to reach the majority, but have made admirable progress with local communities from 2015 to 2023.

In his hometown on a small Japanese island, there was not a physical space where he could meet people of other sexualities so it was online where he could learn about various topics, including sexual ones. And, importantly, Ayato began interacting with other gay and bisexual people from junior high school when, even if he had desired to, going to clubs or bars would not have been an option.

Rather than denying or resisting the important role digital spaces now play for Japanese youth in creating identity and cultivating community, grassroots organisations use SNS like Instagram, Twitter and Facebook to encourage discussions of gender, sexuality, and sexual consent. There is clear intention behind these organisational posts, which Toyomi also expressed: 'When I post, I am usually hoping to reach out to the students in my university. But at the same time, I'm also like, wishing to reach out to those who don't really know about gender issues.' For an active student team such as at ICU, posting frequently increases engagement and may fulfil the hopes of individuals like Toyomi who would ideally like everyone to have a chance to know more about gender issues.

For journalists who spurred on the #MeToo Movement in Japan in 2017 like Hachu and Ito Shiori, breaking their silence did start conversations about harassment especially in the fields of advertising, marketing, and news agencies. But whereas media coverage of such cases 'amplified women's voices and the movement in South Korea' the Japanese media did the exact opposite (Hasanuma and Shin 2019: 104). Reporters and commentators online engaged in bullying and outright defamation, criticizing victims' dress and behaviour. In Ito's case as well, other women have been a large part of the backlash, putting the burden of responsibility on Ito and women who have experienced similar harassment.

This disturbing narrative of women leading men on was further perpetuated because men are the gatekeepers in the [Japanese] media industry (ibid). Rebranding the movement as #WeToo or #WithYou has helped the movement's popularity somewhat, but even the initial outrage at scandals such as the Fukuda incident[9] or the incidents of sexism during the 2020 Tokyo Olympics[10] have difficulty progressing to legal change. And in Japan only about 17% of perpetrators are sentenced for rape (ibid: 106). Sexual harassment itself is also not considered a crime but more of a 'private matter.' This is reflected in Yahoo news comment forums (Tan and Liu 2022) and in widely read newspapers such as *The Mainichi* or *The Asahi Shinbun* (Zhang et al 2022).

Neutral or negative reactions to these incidents of harassment often root their arguments in threats to broader social structures, to disrupting peace and perhaps even

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[9] The Fukuda incident in 2018 refers to Junichi Fukuda of the Ministry of Finance resigning and having his retirement payments reduced after a female journalist went public about the sexual harassment she endured while assigned to cover the Ministry press club for TV Asahi. It resulted in a gathering of over 200 people outside the National Diet.

[10] In 2021, ex-Olympics chief Yoshiro Mori was forced to resign after making several sexist comments, implying that women talk too much 'if there are women present, the meeting will take a long time' (*josei ga hairu to kaigi ni jikan ga kakaru*). Creative director Hiroshi Sasaki also resigned after referring to well-known celebrity Naomi Watanabe as an 'Olympig'.

fabricating problems that are best ignored or tolerated. But independence and self-sufficiency rhetoric were and remain difficult to apply in many Japanese contexts.

Embracing uncertainty

If you mention 'gender issues' in Japan, including sexual harassment (*sekuhara*), you might be met with sympathetic sounds of agreement and anecdotes about unwanted groping on trains, bullying in school or work and the like. The responses are uncertain, muddled when it comes to who (or what) is to blame for the commonality of '*sekuhara*'.

Some men, both young and old, may complain about the need to keep both hands up in the train to avoid being accused of '*chikan*' and about the change in times where you can no longer make careless remarks about a female friend or colleague's physical appearance. They may victimise themselves with no prompting from their companions. It can swiftly turn into a light-hearted jab at someone's carelessness rather than a deeper consideration of an existing problem.

If you call out your co-worker's misplaced comment or tell your friend that changing their body language on the train to make it a safer environment for *everyone* is a small sacrifice, then a difficult conversation is initiated. This evokes limited but occasionally useful cultural categories such as *soto* and *uchi* (outside/inside) or *kokyuu* and *kojin* (public/private). Talking about sexual harassment, or even about sexual consent, always elicits *some* reaction. But to talk more deeply and freely, an individual must find the right place, the right community to have this conversation. They move from the outside (*soto*) to the inside (*uchi*). They work to find a group of people who views and questions the world the way they do.

Admitting this casual sexism is a problem is part of the issue. In separate conversations both Toyomi and Ayato raised similar points about lack of awareness—a point which organisations often attribute to insufficient education about gender and sexuality in schools. For Ayato, there were strong distinctions between the attitudes of his peers at his junior high school who he believed might make hurtful comments if he came out as LGBTQ+ and the welcoming spaces he found when he moved to Tokyo for university. These were not necessarily LGBTQ+ communities but spaces and people which made him feel that: *'Oh, I don't need to have, you know, Twitter or digital spaces. Because I have these physical spaces in which people can accept me as well.'* Toyomi earlier observed the exclusion of gay men from perceptions of masculinity among male university students, but also described the struggle with masculinity as one tinged with confusion and fear. He explained that such images of, for example, a masculine man who has sex with women, *'puts pressure on men and they feel uncomfortable, but they don't know why.'* Difficulty in understanding the reason, to Toyomi, meant that they defaulted to more toxic modes of behaviour which they didn't know how to fix. When these discussions continue, the communities which facilitate them cultivate the active sense of presence which Vizenor (2008) assigns to survivance. The concern and

uncertainty Japanese youth possess around 'gender issues' is a powerful foundation for moving beyond victimry, ignorance, and discrimination.

I focus here on two events I attended at Waseda University. Both events, hosted by the university's Gender and Sexuality Center, used in-person discussion groups as the main method for engagement. I view these events as examples of overcoming or embracing uncertainty through survivance. Students, faculty, and staff involved in such gatherings invoked narratives based in feeling 'othered', 'outed', 'ignored' or 'bullied'—which defined the context and purpose of the space.

One of the first Gender and Sexuality Center events I attended was a seminar about defining 'the closet' and what it means to 'come out' in Japan. These terms, commonly used in Western countries like the UK and the US, have been adapted as well for Japan-based LGBTQ+ communities. The guest speaker discussed how the perspective of most of the Japanese public was that same-sex love (*dōseiai*) is something which belonged inside the closet (*uchigawa*) and opposite-sex love (*iseiai)* as something which is already outside (*sotogawa*). The closet, to many Japanese people, represents 'a space where same-sex love should be hidden' (*dōseiai wa kakusu beki kūkan*). The mention of space in this and in other conversations about sexual minorities in Japan is especially important. Finding or carving out a new space represents a concrete method of survivance that LGBTQ+ Japanese youth may choose—if the option is explained as even existing for them.

Often the possibilities for minority groups, specifically LGBTQ+ individuals, are not introduced, much less described in detail. Only in the past decade have some forms of sexuality politics (*sei no seiji*) emerged in Japanese cities, often through public appeals for same-sex marriage rights. But, generally due to strong social reactions when LGBTQ individuals come out in Japan combined with expectations to keep such a personal preference to oneself and even still marry heterosexually, sexuality politics has not emerged in Japan the way it has in the US or the UK. The same applies to the 'post-closet discourse' put forth by Seidman (2002) suggesting LGBTQ+ people in Western countries have now integrated into mainstream society (Ueno 2022:3). Even in Western countries this 'post-closet discourse' ignores continued prejudices. LGBTQ+ people still need to strategise and be careful about which spaces and with which people they share their identities.

I agree with Ueno's discussion that this closet and post-closet discourse is further removed in Japan where both activism and sexuality politics are met with distrust and disdain. The knowledge gap about LGBTQ+ matters is also considerable, be it between the 'marginalised' and the 'majority', or between Japanese youth and their elders. At the 'coming out' discussion people described experiences of 'coming out' to their parents and siblings as opposed to their grandparents. Younger family members were significantly more likely to accept and begin to understand their children's narrative. Grandparents were not as flexible.

Older generations might reject or dismiss the idea of sexuality and gender identity outside traditional gender ideologies. They would often cite the desire for grandchildren to adopt 'typical' or 'normal' (*futsū*) cis heteronormative family structures (i.e., a husband and

wife raising kids together, supporting aging parents when necessary). Japanese, Chinese, and Taiwanese students present all seemed to have similar experiences in this case of 'coming out' to family (if they had done so). There was resignation in their recollections, accepting that there was little to be done about these gaps in generational perspectives. These stories were not necessarily about celebrating difference but learning to live with it.

The idea of 'alternative lifestyles' was emphasised in a different event for students about being asexual or aromantic. Alternative lifestyles or relationships are often a private matter, attached to the idea of remaining single and rejecting marriage. Shared living space differs in these 'relations denying gender boundaries' and which 'concentrate on the internal features of relationships rather than their relation to the outside world' (Lunsing 2001: 176).

The act of sharing personal experiences of realisation that one might be asexual or aromantic was defined by feelings of unease (*fuan*) or uncertainty (*moyamoya*). Not unusually for LGBTQ+ identities, difference or disconnection emerged from what was 'lacking.' In this case, participants expressed the absence of excitement or yearning for the romantic experiences often portrayed in media. One student said that she did not experience any *mune kyun* when watching or reading *renai* (romance) type media. When I asked what she meant by this, many others at the table pitched in with examples of scenarios where other people might feel *mune kyun*—the most memorable being *kabe don* or *yuka don*. Both involve one person pinning another against either a wall (*kabe*) or floor (*yuka*), apparently evoking the excited sensation of *mune kyun,* an anticipation of what would happen next in such a compromising situation. These types of scenarios went viral on social media, even reaching Western audiences in meme formats. But the members of the discussion group all seemed to agree that this type of romantic (or sexual) excitement was specific to Japanese contexts. In the USA or UK, *mune kyun* perhaps would not be expressed in the same way. Romantic or sexual tension was depicted more explicitly in the Western media students had encountered.

The final case I will present when drawing from these descriptions of community spaces is that of career and lifestyle choices as a way of embracing uncertainty and enacting survivance. Much of the journey for Japanese youth through their school years to their entry into the job market is 'predetermined'. For a young person who enters a four-year university programme, the third and fourth years are dedicated to *shūkatsu* (job hunting), as they search for companies which will provide a stable career, taking time off classes and extracurricular activities to do so. University offices provide career guidance in the form of resource pamphlets, language study support, and much more which are often focused on the pipeline from education to employment. At this Gender and Sexuality Center event staff explained that *kyaria* services could help students understand different lifestyles. This would include non-heteronormative lifestyles whereas typical career services might assume young people will eventually get married to someone of the opposite sex and have children. They are like the alternative lifestyles discussed by Wim Lunsing (2001) which often tackled the idea of what was a normal or 'common sense' (*jōshiki*) relationship (5).

Lunsing noticed in his interviews with many people who did not commit to *jijitsukon* (or 'common-law' marriage), that they creatively found satisfaction in single life or in life with a partner of the same sex (2001). The 'alternative lifestyle' options introduced by Gender and Sexuality Center staff included living alone in an apartment, in a share house with friends, or adopting a pet for companionship. In short, a lifestyle which did not require having a romantic or sexual partner. When we discussed whether we had thought about our future lifestyles, most of the members in my discussion group did not yet have a clear idea. The students present were mainly first and second years and the job-hunting process for Waseda students begins during the third year of university education.

Ueno looked at LGBTQ+ young adults' career plans in Japan versus previous studies of LGBTQ+ young adults in the US. The focus of his research was on how 'personal narratives align with social discourses' and there were distinct differences between the two groups (2022: 2). In contrast to the earlier study of LGBTQ+ adults in the US, Japanese participants showed a distinct preference for career stability over potentially LGBTQ+ friendly work climates. Individuals like Satoshi described a *komuin* (government employee) or *kaishain* (company employee) career as not just a stable but 'a normal job' 'illustrating that it is the default career choice for many Japanese people' (Ueno 2022: 9). This was the choice instead of a more flexible, possibly more accepting, work environment that would offer little chance for upward mobility.

The term *futsū* (normal) makes an appearance in these dialogues much as they did in Baudinette's study and as they did in discussions facilitated by Waseda's Gender and Sexuality Center. For the students I have spoken with as well as for Ueno's participants, their sexuality was 'a private matter' that they expected would need to be kept secret. Hiding their sexual identities at school or the workplace was a given for many, in stark contrast to the 'coming out' and 'gay pride' discourse in the UK or the USA. The primary reasons given were that revealing their sexuality could affect their ability to remain in full-time secure employment, to be promoted, and even impact the respect afforded to them by co-workers. For most, this desire for stability and financial independence outweighed the wish to reveal or leverage their LGBTQ+ sexuality as a resource.

Even in relatively informal and private settings, including in LGBTQ+ community spaces, I have observed that many young adults, students between 18 and 26, are hesitant to share narratives of 'coming out.' Many cite experiences of being bullied, ignored, or misunderstood by even close friends and family (Ueno 2022: 12). Being able to voice who you are and what you support is much less part of the discourse than in some other countries, notably North American and European countries. Only one Asian country, Taiwan, has recently legalised same-sex marriage in 2019, so we can speculate this is tied to the legal status of LGBTQ+ individuals in a nation.

Awareness (*ninshiki*) or social consciousness (*ishiki*) is often necessary to enact meaningful change at institutional and policy levels. But it is not a realistic platform for all youth identifying or allying with minority groups and speaking out against social issues. Previous

research on social movements and LGBTQ+ experiences in Japan and the early stages of my fieldwork demonstrate that uncertainty around gender issues can be more easily embraced by starting small with a shared identity (even shared secrecy). New relationships and connections can be formed on this common ground.

Conclusions

The struggle to define one's identity, especially in terms of gender and sexuality, is a constant for many people. For youth in Japan, current precarity in the form of unstable employment (Allison 2013), labour immobility (Ueno 2022), and the struggle for recognition, are exacerbated if they also feel pressure to 'come out' as a sexual minority. Rather than a 'loud and proud' narrative, I have observed and participated in 'quieter', more intimate gatherings of like-minded folks about issues of gender, nationality, sexuality, or all the above. Interestingly, the idea that topics involving sex and sexuality should be a 'private matter' pervades even these spaces which are created by and for the exact people who suffer most from structural inequality and violence. However, in these spaces, discussing private and intimate narratives becomes a choice rather than an obligation.

When it comes to issues related to gender inequality and lack of recognition and rights for sexual minorities, Japanese youth who educate themselves about these issues express clear unease (*fuan*) as well as feelings of haziness or uncertainty (*moyamoya*). Japanese youth who are knowledgeable and passionate about gender issues must work hard to get to that point. This barrier to awareness is especially salient if an individual is not part of the communities negatively affected by gender inequality or discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. These discussions often must be started and pushed onward by individuals belonging to minority groups like the LGBTQ+ community.

Community involvement and the creation of spaces for conversation has been a key survivance practice for interlocuters at my field site as well as a desired outcome for many individuals in other studies (Endo 2019; Ueno 2022; Takeyama 2016; Gagné 2016). This practice produces an active presence, the awareness that arises from similar experiences of the world, which brings many Japanese youth together (Vizenor 2008: 11). This is the case whether groups wish to publicly denounce scandals or prefer to privately commiserate over intimate embodied experiences.

These groups are often formed around the conversations and actions of a small, dedicated team of volunteers. A follow-up line of research is required to question how beneficial in-group discussion is for grassroots human rights and gender equality groups in the long-term. It is worth examining whether an intimate group of like-minded individuals hosting public forums or writing educational SNS posts only forms a type of echo chamber unable to connect with or relate to people with different perspectives.

But what is important here is the presence of connection despite panics (Cook 2019, Toivonen and Imoto 2012) and claims that human relationships are fading or fake in contemporary Japan. This paper demonstrates how one-dimensional those fears really are. Individuals will always strive for some form of connection to others. Japanese youth today are finding new reasons to connect, with uncertainty over gender issues being one of their motivations.

Intimacy is complicated and the types of affective landscapes (including cityscapes) (Takeyama 2016) that Japanese youth are navigating are diverse. The move from heteronormative relationships is especially significant, but so are elements of internationalism, as non-Japanese, and mixed-race Japanese live, work, and love in the same spaces. Queer intimacies and international marriages demonstrate how powerfully pervasive the patriarchal and heterosexual constructions of both home and workspaces are in Japan (Cook 2019). Strong, often negative social reactions that come from breaking with the conventions of heterosexual marriages demonstrate the myths and misunderstandings innate in Western views of Japan as a country which is historically LGBTQ+-friendly or LGBTQ+-tolerant. It is risky to base assumptions of current social issues entirely off historical precedents (Finlay 2022).

Even outside of romantic relationships and legal marriages, an intimate model linking people 'through emotional and affective ties rather than highly gendered structures of labour' seems preferred by youth (Alexy 2020:66, 2019). Though unlike in the 'connected independence' pattern Allison Alexy analyses, the discussions produced by youth about gender issues may not require explicit articulation of a feeling as much as spaces where articulation is an option.

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