

Promoting Sexual and Gender Diversity through the Portrayal of Sexual and Gender Minority Youths in Media: The Views of College Students in Japan

Yuki Amaki¹

ABSTRACT— As one social phenomenon, television drama series depicting gay male couples' everyday lives have become popular in Japan as well as East Asia. The purpose of this research is to assess how much these TV drama series influence young people to improve their awareness and knowledge of the prejudice and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people in society. My target population for this study was current college students in Japan. 167 students were asked to write comments about whether or not Japanese society appears to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities because of the wave of popular dramas. From the views of college students, the results of this study have revealed the positive and negative aspects of broadcasting romance TV drama series depicting gay male youths. Through this survey, many participants indicated a belief that gay-related romantic dramas could be a catalyst for eliminating prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ+ among young people, while others responded negatively about this idea. The students who gave negative responses stated that the rise in the popularity of dramas about gay male couples among Japanese

¹ Yuki Amaki, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Faculty of Literature at Taisho University in Tokyo, Japan. He teaches his students to foster intercultural understanding and foster communication skills in order to help them become fully engaged members of the global community. He serves on the board of the Japan Association for Global Competency Education and serves as a deputy director of Research Institute of International and Diversity Education at Meiji University in Tokyo, Japan.

people is a temporary phenomenon, and that the tendency can easily change. Romantic drama series about gay male youths may be effective as a supplementary teaching material to encourage youths to respect LGBTQ+ people and appreciate difference.

Keywords : Media, College Student, Gender Diversity, Sexual Minority, Gender Minority

Introduction

With many sexual and gender minorities – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) persons – having experienced discrimination and harassment, many companies in Japan have offered LGBTQ+ friendly workplaces and set up LGBT initiatives to support and promote LGBTQ+ rights. In Japan, people often believe that being gay is a misfortune. Without solving this problem, society cannot expect, much less promote diversity and inclusion for LGBTQ+ people (Fujimoto 2019, 150). Japanese people's attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people have gradually been changing. As one social phenomenon, television drama series depicting sexual minority youths, particularly gay male couples' everyday lives, have become popular in Japan as well as East Asia. The content of these drama series often includes experiences of gay male youths' loneliness and social isolation and depicts how sexual and gender minorities encounter difficulties in coming out about their sexual identities and gender orientations. Most of these drama series have been based on Japanese manga comics depicting gay male couples, manga intended mainly for female consumers (Baudinette 2017, 60; McLelland and Welker 2015, 4). Since 2016, Japan's major private TV networks have broadcasted several romantic drama series about gay male youths. The examples are as follows: Ossan's Love (2016), What Did You Eat Yesterday? (2019), Cherry Magic! Thirty Years of Virginity Can Make You a Wizard?! (2020), Vanishing My First Love (2021), Old-fashioned Cupcake (2022), Minato Shoji Coin Laundry (2022), and so on. Some TV drama series were turned into movies because they were surprise hits in Japan and East Asia, including in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and South Korea. The movie Ossan's

Love: LOVE or DEAD (2019) was released in East Asia, and the movie, What Did You Eat Yesterday? (2021) was released in 2021. Cherry Magic! Thirty Years of Virginity Can Make You a Wizard?! was turned into a movie in April 2022 because of the popularity of the TV drama series in Japan as well as East Asia. These movies have gathered attention and have enjoyed box office success.

Many romantic TV drama series depicting gay male couples' everyday lives have also been produced in Thailand, Taiwan, and South Korea. In Thailand, romantic TV drama series depicting gay male couples' everyday lives, with professional young actors, have been released on virtually a monthly basis, including titles such as SOTUS (2016), Until We Meet Again (2019), He's Coming To Me (2019), 2gether (2020), Not Me (2021), and Lovely Writer The Series (2021). They depict not only gay male couple's romance but also discrimination and prejudice toward gay male youths in their everyday lives. Gerbner (1998) states, "Broadcasting is the most concentrated, homogenized, and globalized medium" (176). These TV drama series have become a global phenomenon. Baudinette (2019) states that Japanese manga comics depicting male-male relationships have been adapted to the local Thai context, and that a new queer genre has been created in Thai popular culture (116). They have been "glocalized" in Thailand to produce popular romantic TV drama series. Many people in East Asia have become addicted to these drama series. One of the more popular TV drama series in Thailand, 2gether, was made into a movie titled 2gether THE MOVIE, and it was released in East Asia. In Japan, the movie was released in major movie theater chains in 2021.

Consciousness and awareness of prejudice and discrimination against sexual and gender minority people may gradually be changing among young people thanks to the increased portrayal of gay male youths in romantic TV drama series. With these drama series gathering attention, how have college students come to see LGBTQ+ people? How does watching these TV dramas affect their attitudes? Has society become more accepting of LGBTQ+ people with the social phenomenon of LGBTQ+-related media?

Does the fact that TV broadcasting companies are producing romantic TV drama series depicting gay male youths' personal lives and LGBTQ+ issues mean that LGBTQ+ people need to worry less about suffering rejection by their family members or friends? Has this changed their level of concern about becoming subjects of jokes or slurs? The purpose of this research is to assess how much these TV drama series influence college students to improve their awareness and knowledge of the prejudice and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people in society.

Research Questions

The primary purpose of this research is to explore how college students see the popularity of gay male youths' romantic drama series on Japanese TV and how much these social phenomena affect their recognition of prejudice and discrimination toward LGBTQ+ people. It is to be expected that the wave of popularity of gay male youths' drama series should have significant impact on college students' attitudes and consciousness toward sexual and gender minorities. It is also to be expected that the global phenomenon of popular LGBTQ+ drama series in East Asia should play an important role in advancing understanding of sexual and gender minorities among young people.

Theoretical Perspective

There are many internal and external factors that influence people's attitudes and consciousness toward sexual and gender minorities. Cultivation theory can be used to determine the extent to which repeated exposure of young people to TV programs can influence their attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs about social reality over time. Gerbner (1969) first proposed the idea of cultivation indicators in the 1960s. Gerber (1998) suggests, "Television is the source of the most broadly-shared images and messages in history" (177). Zerebecki et al. (2021) state about the theory, "When a viewer watches multiple programs, mental representations of the televised message accumulate in the mind. These representations become easier to retrieve from memory" (5). The theory yields important benefits in researching how repeated

exposure to messages from media can influence the way people view society. Repeated exposure to media over time shapes people's perceptions, their values, beliefs, and attitudes. Zerebecki et al. (2021) note that "shows that present ethnic or sexual minority members in a positive light have the power to convince viewers that such individuals could be valuable members of society" (5). Based on this theory, Meer and Pollmann (2022) hypothesized that people who watch a lot of Dutch TV programs including portrayals of LGB people will have more positive attitudes toward LGB people than those who do not (644). Repeated viewing of similar messages about homosexuality on TV programs can result in more positive attitudes toward LGB people, and increased positive portrayals and representations of gay people on American TV programs have made viewers more accepting of LGB people (Zerebecki et al. 2021, 6). It is possible that the same could be said of Japan, where people who repeatedly watch romantic dramas featuring gay characters may have more positive attitudes toward gay people than those who do not watch such dramas.

Literature Review

Many researchers have conducted surveys about sexual and gender minorities, but not much research has focused on how romantic TV drama series depicting gay male couples' everyday lives influence young peoples' consciousness and awareness about sexual and gender minorities in Japan. Human Rights Watch (2016) reported that many sexual and gender minority students in Japanese junior high schools and high schools have experienced bullying because many Japanese people still retain negative stereotypes and attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities (16). Broadcasting TV drama series might be a solution to help young people understand loneliness and social isolation among LGBTQ+ people.

Media Representations of Gay Male Youths on Japanese TV Drama Series

One popular LGBTQ+ drama series, Ossan's Love, was a surprise hit in Japan and East Asia, and the drama was turned into

a movie, Ossan's Love: Love or Dead, in 2019. The movie was also a hit in Japan and East Asia. Ossan's Love was accepted by many people of all ages and genders, not only gay people or female fans who typically watch dramas depicting gay male couples' everyday lives. Kawano (2021) notes that Japanese drama series depicting gay male couples as main characters have become popularized amongst many people in Japan regardless of age or gender (197). TV companies now more commonly depict gay male characters in ways comparable to straight characters in drama series (Kawano 2021, 195). Fujimoto (2019) and Kasuga (2022) state that depicting gay male couples' everyday lives filled with happiness, without any kissing or hand-holding on screen in Ossan's Love and What did You Eat Yesterday? helps all viewers understand that being gay is a valid lifestyle. Many people still harbor stereotypes and misconceptions about LGBTQ+ people, and depicting gay male couples' everyday lives in TV dramas should help reduce these stereotypes and misconceptions.

Morikawa (2022) also investigated why many people in Japan were attracted to gay-themed drama series. She found that viewers understood the TV producers' intention of depicting a pure romantic drama without regard to gender and without discrimination against gay characters (17). She states that it is difficult to interest heterosexual men in gay-related dramas, and that many heterosexual men would not watch gay dramas with serious content. It was the fact that the drama in question was portrayed as a normal romantic and comedic drama that attracted so many people. She concluded that, "although the paratexts of Ossan's Love brought heterosexuals and homosexuals together by sharing an ideal society, it is unclear whether this drama promoted society's understanding of LGBTQ communities" (18). There are not many drama series related to LGBTQ+ people in Japan, making it difficult to change people's perceptions of LGTBQ+ people through television programming. Japanese society has not recognized LGBTQ+ people, and Japanese media, such as TV programs, need to send out more powerful messages to change societal perceptions (Morikawa 2022, 18). In addition to Ossan's Love, other gay-related dramas need to be produced with content

that will be of interest to heterosexual men and women. It is also necessary to create an environment where watching gay-related romantic dramas is not something embarrassing or hidden, and where such dramas can be a normal topic of conversation among friends. If such an environment can be created, understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people may be further enhanced.

Media Representations of LGBTQ+ People on Dutch Television

With LGBTQ+ related television programs airing in Europe and the U.S., Meer and Pollmann (2022) investigated how the media in the Netherlands, where LGBTQ+ understanding is more advanced, affects the attitudes that Dutch people hold toward sexual minority people. They examined how stereotypical representations are related to Dutch people's views of sexual minority people. Based on cultivation theory, they formulated two hypotheses. The first is that people who watch more TV programs with stereotypical portrayals of sexual minority people on TV would have more stereotypical views of sexual minority people in the real world. The second is that people who watch more TV programs with portrayals of sexual minority people on TV would have more positive attitudes toward sexual minority people. In the study, 272 participants (93.8% heterosexuals, 1.50% lesbians, 3.70% bisexuals, and 0.7% gays) responded to an online survey measuring to what extent Dutch TV programs related to sexual minority issues influence Dutch people's perceptions and attitudes toward sexual minority people. They found it was clear that watching TV programs with stereotypical representations and depictions was not positively associated with Dutch people's attitudes toward sexual minority people. Those who watched stereotypical depictions of gay men on TV programs were shown to have even more negative attitudes toward sexual minority people. The two hypotheses they mentioned were not confirmed. No association was found between watching sexual minority-related TV programs and attitudes toward sexual minority people. They revealed that people who watch high levels of stereotypical portrayals of sexual minority people do not have more perspectives of sexual minority people. They also found that younger age groups and non-white

people were shown to have a more stereotypical view of gay men than other age and racial groups. Gender, religion, race, and sexuality are important influential factors in attitudes toward sexual minority people, especially among heterosexual men, religious, and non-white people, indicating that they have negative attitudes toward sexual minority people. In the study, they revealed that people who frequently watch stereotypically portrayed TV programs do not have different attitudes toward sexual minorities compared to those who do not watch stereotypically portrayed programs, and the degree of stereotypes about gay men is associated with television viewing. The results of the survey of people in the Netherlands should be used as a reference, and a similar survey should be conducted and compared in Japan. By comparing the survey results from the Netherlands, where understanding and acceptance of sexual minority people are advanced, with survey results from Japan, where many people still have prejudice and discriminatory attitudes toward sexual minority people, I may be able to obtain hints for reducing prejudice and discrimination against sexual minority people.

Taking into consideration my respondents' inputs, I should be able to offer important suggestions about how external factors, such as broadcasting romance TV dramas depicting gay male youths, influences young people's consciousness of negative stereotypes and attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities with the aim of helping to reduce the gap between fiction and gay male people's real lives. The results of this survey will provide direction for further research by revealing the positive and negative aspects of broadcasting romance TV dramas depicting people belonging to sexual and gender minorities in Japanese society.

Research Method

My target population for this study was current college students in two private universities in Tokyo, Japan. The survey on paper was distributed in intercultural studies courses after they discussed the wave of the popularity of romantic drama series depicting gay male couples in class. The survey I administered took approximately 20 minutes to complete, which the college

students did in class. The survey was given to approximately 180 college students. The results of this study reveal similarities and differences of opinion and attitudes toward sexual and gender minorities among college students.

In the background of the questionnaire I distributed, I have included each student's gender and year in university. In the next section of the survey, participants were asked about whether or not sexual and gender minorities continue to face prejudice and discrimination in Japanese society. The survey measured whether or not Japanese society appears to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities due to the wave of the popularity of romance TV drama series depicting the portrayal of gay male youths' everyday lives.

In the last section of the survey, I asked them to write open-ended comments and conducted qualitative analysis through the survey. My question for them was as follows:

What do you think: Do you think that Japanese society appears to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities because of the wave of the popularity of romance TV drama series depicting gay male youths' everyday lives?

All collected quantitative data was analyzed using cross-tabulations in the SPSS system. Also, the open-ended comments on the questionnaire were processed using KH Coder text mining software (Higuchi 2016; Higuchi 2017). Co-occurrence networks are connected by the KH Coder software based on the pattern and frequency of the extracted words in the respondents' comments. As shown in the figures below in the data analysis section, strongly related words are connected by lines. Also, the participants' information was kept confidential within this study. An identification number was given to each participant, and their names do not appear on any data.

Quantitative Data Analysis

In the study, 167 college students responded to the survey. Of the 167 students, 99 were female students, and 68 were male

students. No one chose “other” or “prefer not to answer” for gender identification. The survey was relatively balanced with regard to gender. The respondents were classified as female students or male students. Also, in the group of female students, 55.6% were freshman, 29.3% were sophomores, 13.1% juniors, and 2.0% seniors. In the group of male students, 58.8% were freshmen, 20.6% were sophomores, 19.1% juniors, and 1.5% seniors. The majority of both groups is freshmen.

The students were asked two questions regarding LGBTQ+ people in Japan. They responded on a 4-point scale (1=totally disagree, 2=somewhat disagree, 3=somewhat agree, 4=totally agree), with 4 representing “totally agree.” When I analyzed college students’ responses on an agree-disagree scale, significant differences did not emerge between female and male students as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Recognitions and Attitudes toward Sexual and Gender Minorities

	Female Student				Male Student			
	N	Mean	SD	CV	N	Mean	SD	CV
1. Do you think that LGBTQ+ people continue to face discrimination in Japanese society?	99	3.02	0.73	24.17	68	2.99	0.82	27.42

	Female Student				Male Student			
	N	Mean	SD	CV	N	Mean	SD	CV
2. Due to the wave of the popularity of romance TV dramas depicting sexual and gender minorities' everyday lives, do you think that Japanese society appears to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities?	99	2.82	0.56	19.86	68	2.84	0.70	24.65

(*CV=Coefficient of Variation)

When I analyzed college students' responses on an agree-disagree scale, no significant differences emerged between these two groups on question 1, as indicated in Table 1. In question 1, the students were asked about whether or not sexual and gender minorities continue to face discrimination in Japanese society. The data show that the majority of respondents think that sexual and gender discrimination still exists in Japanese society. The female students are more likely to think that sexual and gender minorities are indirectly and directly discriminated against, compared with the male students' responses. Also, looking at the coefficient of variation (abbreviated to CV) in Table 1, the CV of the male students is higher than the CV of the female students in question 1. The female students were more likely to be concerned about sexual and gender minority issues and accept sexual and gender minorities than the male students, but not significantly so.

In question 2, the students were asked about whether or not the wave of the popularity of romantic TV drama series

depicting gay male youths has encouraged Japanese people to be more understanding of sexual and gender minority issues in Japan. The data indicates that the majority of students in the two groups gave negative responses about the relevance between social acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and media portrayal of gay male people. Another finding is that, looking at the CVs in question 2, the CV of the male students was higher than the CV of the female students. It seems that male students are more reluctant to understand and accept LGBTQ+ people, compared with the female students' responses, and that most male students are not interested in watching gay male youths' romance drama series. This might be related to the low level of acceptance and understanding of LGBTQ+ people among the male students.

Qualitative Analysis of the Data

Influence of Broadcasting Romance TV Drama Series

1. The View of Female Students

In the survey, 167 students responded to the open-ended questions. All the students were asked to write comments about whether or not Japanese society appears to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities because of the wave of popular dramas. Figure 1 is a co-occurrence network graph based on the collected comments. Characteristic words in the same subgraph are connected by a solid line. When characteristic words co-occur in other subgraphs, words are connected by a broken line. The quantitative data indicates that 77.8% of female students "somewhat" to "totally" agree that Japanese society appears to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities. They believe that broadcasting romance TV dramas has led to positive perceptions of LGBTQ+ people. From the female group of characteristic words extracted using KH Coder software, I extracted the three positive concepts.

The first concept is that the portrayal of gay male couples as leading characters leads viewers to be more open-minded toward LGBTQ+ people. As Figure 5 shows, "drama" is related to

“open-minded,” “broadcast,” and “popular.” The female students wrote comments:

“There are not so many taboos in Japanese culture. Broadcasting LGBT drama series leads people to understand and accept LGBT people. In recent years, globalization in Japanese society has had positive impacts on human rights. Japanese people need to discuss the human rights of LGBT people and improve legal systems for them.”

“In recent years, the portrayals of gay male couples in TV drama series have increased in Japan. This is a recent phenomenon for Japanese mass media, so Japanese people are becoming tolerant toward LGBT people.”

The second concept is that the depiction of young gay male couples in romance TV drama series has been widely introduced among Japanese youths, and they are likely to understand and accept LGBTQ+ people. As Figure 5 shows, “LGBTQ” is related to “many,” “people,” “understand,” “recognize,” “know,” “feature,” “manga (Japanese comics),” and “society.” Female students wrote these comments:

“The romance TV drama series, movies, and manga depicting young gay couples have become increasingly popular among young people, so our public understanding of LGBT has grown.”

“I work in a bookstore part-time, and I found out that there are many manga books and novels about young gay couples’ romance and their everyday lives. Many Japanese people know that gay couple’s romance is a literary genre.”

The third concept is that Japan has a big market for manga comics and novels depicting gay male couples’ romances, though many Japanese people still have prejudice toward LGBTQ+ people. As Figure 1 showed, “girl” is related to “rotten,” “recently,” “LGBT,” and “issues.” “Rotten girl” (fujoshi) is a Japanese term for female fans of manga comics, TV drama, and novels depicting the romance between two gay male characters. Female students

wrote these comments:

“Movie production companies have produced many LGBT films and TV drama series. I think that is a good turning point, that people have recognized the social problems and the issues faced by LGBT people, such as bullying at school and discrimination against LGBT. I am called a rotten girl. Rotten girls had a negative image several years ago, but in recent years, I have become very proud of myself for being a rotten girl.”

“LGBT TV drama series have become increasingly popular, and we have large rotten girl communities. I think LGBT drama series play a significant role in deepening the understanding and acceptance of LGBT people.”

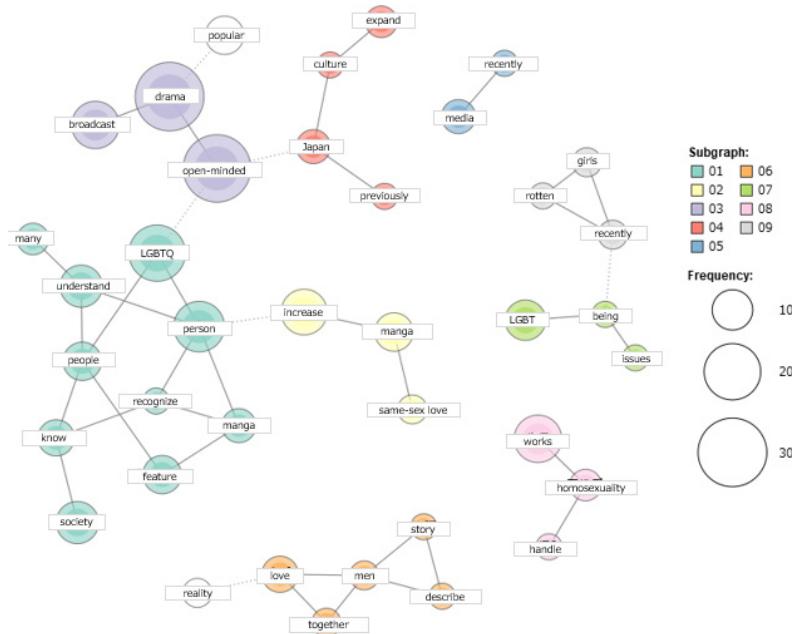


Figure 1: Co-occurrence Network of Female Students' Positive

Responses

But 22.2% of female students “somewhat” to “totally” disagree that Japanese society seems to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities on the popular wave of romance TV drama series. From the female group of extracted characteristic words, two negative concepts were extracted.

The first concept is that gay male couples’ romance stories in TV drama series are fully fictional, not real. The female students note that popular romance stories are glorified and are unrealistic. As Figure 2 showed, “people” is related to “watch,” “fiction,” “many,” and “same sex love” in a group. Another group is that “homosexuality” is related to “drama,” “glorify,” “close to,” and “part.” Female students wrote these comments:

“TV drama series depicting romance between two gay characters are fully fictional, and many scenes are glorified. If my friends were gay male couples in real life, it would be difficult for me to accept them.”

“LGBT films and TV dramas are fictional. While many Japanese people have embraced gender and sexual diversity in recent years, in real-life situations, it is still difficult for many people to understand and accept gay male couples at schools and in workplaces.”

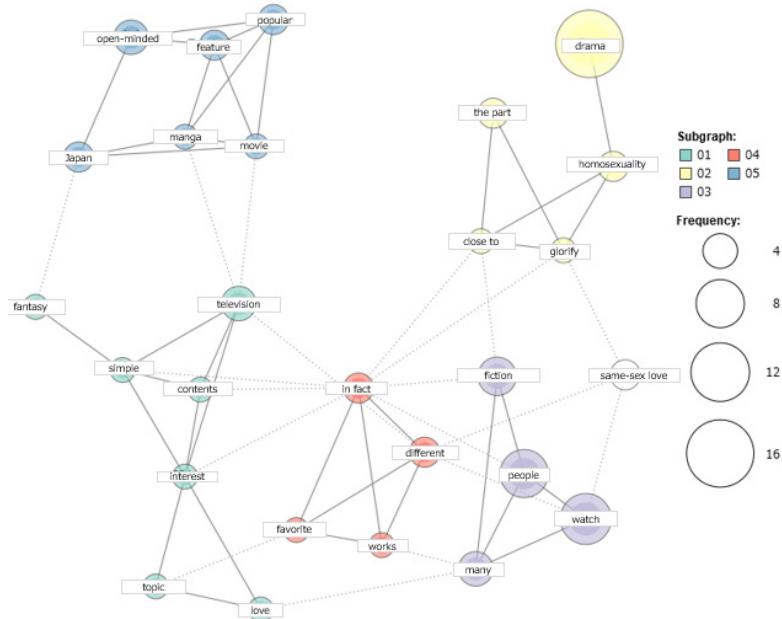


Figure 2: Co-occurrence Network of Female Students' Negative Responses

The second concept is that manga comic books depicting the romance between two gay couples are very popular among Japanese women, so the TV production companies have produced romantic drama series depicting gay male youths. But the popularity of TV dramas has not led Japan's government to recognize same sex marriage, and the drama series have not played a significant role in changing the course of prejudice and discrimination toward LGBTQ+ people. As Figure 6 showed, “television” is related to “content,” “simple,” “fantasy,” “topic,” and “love” in a group. Another group is that “manga (comics)” is related to “movie,” “Japan,” “feature,” “open minded,” and “popular.” Female students wrote these comments:

“True love between two gay men is just fictional in the dramas. If you met a gay couple in real life, you wouldn’t be able to accept them. Japan’s mass media was very con-

servative. In recent years, the media has tended to produce LGBT drama series because many people are concerned about the social problems faced by LGBT people.”

“The television broadcasting companies choose to offer romance drama series depicting young gay male couples and their everyday lives based on Japanese LGBT comic books. I understand that the drama series have become popular in Japan, but this social trend hasn’t led Japanese politicians to recognize same sex marriage. Also, I don’t think that broadcasting these romance drama series helps stop prejudice and discrimination against LGBT people in Japan because many politicians are still very conservative.”

2. The View of Male Students

75% of male students “somewhat” to “totally” agree that Japanese society appears to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities because of the popularity of romance TV drama series. As Figure 3 shows, from the male group of extracted characteristic words, the two positive concepts were extracted.

The first concept is that broadcasting TV drama series depicting young gay male couple’s romance helps reduce prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ+ and helps Japanese people create closer connections with LGBTQ+ people. As Figure 3 showed, “society” is related to “LGBT,” “currently,” “broadcast,” and “do” in a group. Another group is that “open-minded” is related to “works,” “describe,” “recognize,” “men,” “love,” and “together.” Male students wrote these comments:

“Since Japan’s television broadcasting companies have produced LGBT-related drama series, it seems to me that the companies are less likely to take conservative positions. The recent popularity of LGBT-related drama series has led to increasing tolerance and acceptance of LGBT people.”

“Half a century ago, the television broadcasting companies might have refused to produce TV drama series depicting a gay male couple’s romance because many people discriminated against LGBT people and didn’t accept them. In recent years, the companies have produced gay male couples’ romance TV drama series because many people are likely to understand and accept LGBT people.”

The second concept is that broadcasting LGBT-related drama series helps raise some interest in discussion of the issues and problems facing LGBT communities. “People” is related to “LGBTQ,” “many,” “television,” “increase,” and “same sex.” Male students wrote these comments:

“The television broadcasting companies have produced many LGBTQ-related drama series because they want Japanese people to know how LGBTQ people live in our society. Social media provide an opportunity to discuss several issues faced by LGBTQ people.”

“In recent years, the media frequently reports that many countries have legalized same sex marriages, and also same sex partnership systems have spread across Japan. These social phenomena have led the television broadcasting companies to produce many LGBT-related TV programs. Many people have become concerned about the problems LGBT people have faced.”

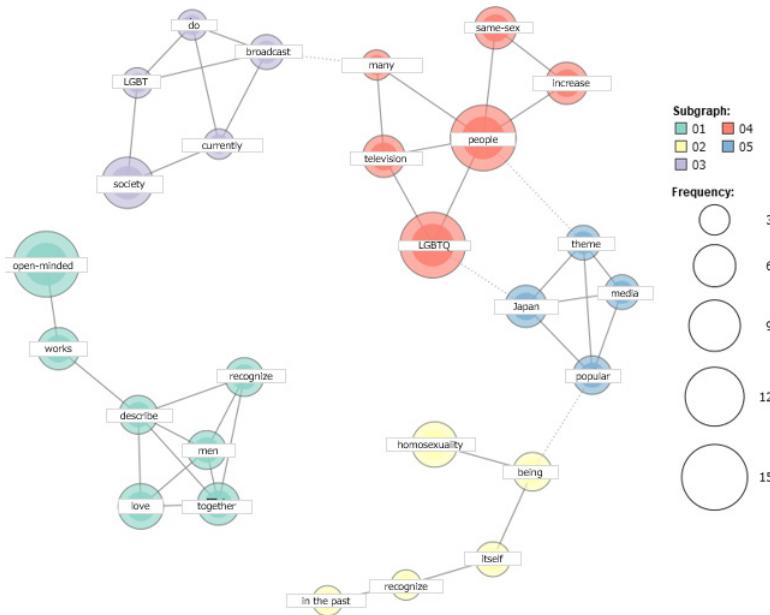


Figure 3: Co-occurrence Network of Male Students' Positive Responses

25% of male students “somewhat” to “totally” disagree that Japanese society appears to be growing increasingly tolerant and accepting of sexual and gender minorities at the peak of the popularity of LGBT-related drama series. As Figure 4 shows, from the male group of extracted characteristic words, two negative concepts were extracted.

The first concept is that the popularity of LGBT drama is a temporary phenomenon and has gone on for a few years. “LGBT” is related to “open-minded” and “many.” Male students wrote these comments:

“Many women are open-minded to LGBT people. Some of them like reading comic books depicting gay male couples and watch LGBT drama series, but many men are not interested in watching LGBT drama. I think the popular-

ity may be a temporary phenomenon among women.”

“I think the popularity of LGBT drama series is a temporary phenomenon. I don’t believe many Japanese people understand and accept LGBT people even at the peak of the popularity of LGBT drama series.”

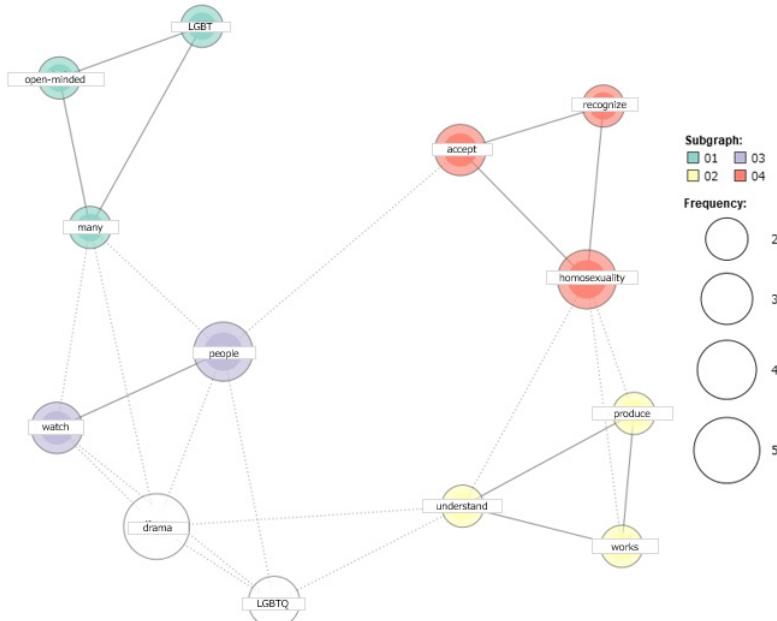


Figure 4: Co-occurrence Network of Male Students' Negative Responses

The second concept is that people accept homosexuality in fiction and dramas, but they don't recognize and accept LGBT people in the real world. In Figure 4, “homosexuality” is related to “accept” and “recognize.” Male students wrote these comments.

“People accept romance among gay male couples in fictional stories on television, but many people reject seeing gay male couple’s hand-holding and kissing in public in

the real world.”

“I don’t think homosexuality has been recognized in our real society even though many people have accepted homosexuality in fictional dramas. Broadcasting LGBT dramas hasn’t become a solution for understanding and accepting LGBT people.”

Discussion and Conclusion

This study has considered how college students have seen the popularity of gay male youths’ romantic drama series and how much these social phenomena have affected their recognition of prejudice and discrimination toward LGBTQ+ people. Zerebecki et al. (2021) state that “TV shows can represent minorities in various ways, both positive and negative, thus affecting their levels of acceptance and diversity attitudes” (11). From the views of college students in the two private universities, the results of this study have revealed the positive and negative aspects of broadcasting romance TV drama series depicting gay male youths. The data show that female college students are likely to be less homophobic than male students. This may be because these drama series have been produced mainly for heterosexual women. The survey results of LGB-related TV viewing in the Netherlands also revealed that young heterosexual men have more negative attitudes toward LGB (Meer and Pollmann 2022, 659). In this study, I did not ask both male and female participants whether or not they have ever watched romantic drama series depicting gay male couples. It is possible that many men are less interested in romantic dramas and less interested in gay-related romantic dramas than women. Men with negative attitudes toward gay people are even less likely to watch such dramas.

In the study, approximately 75% of female and male students, respectively, believed that broadcasting TV drama series depicting gay male characters would positively influence people to understand gay male people’s feelings of loneliness and social isolation in their everyday lives. Since cultivation theory suggests that repeated exposure to media influences one’s beliefs about the

real world, I believe that repeated viewing of gay-related dramas may help one to accept gay people in the real world with less resistance. The data shows that some students who have negative responses in this study believe that heterosexuality is the only natural sexual orientation. The male college students tended to be reluctant to support sexual gender minorities, so they might not be interested in watching these drama series. The expansion of gay male youths' romantic drama series would be a great way to begin to understand the underground LGBTQ+ communities where many LGBTQ+ people enjoy their lives and live safely, and would move toward heterosexual people's understanding of LGBTQ+ people's experiences. Another way to think about this is that gay-related romantic dramas might not be viewed by heterosexual male students, so including romantic dramas for heterosexual youth that do not focus exclusively on gay relationships could make them more likely to reach these male students as well.

The students who gave negative responses state that the rise in the popularity of gay male couples' dramas among Japanese people is a temporary phenomenon, and that the tendency can easily change. Although the popularity of gay-related romantic dramas is likely to be temporary, a notable number of romantic dramas depicting gay male youths are now being broadcast compared to a few years ago. Kasuga (2022) suggests that the rise in the popularity of Japanese drama series depicting gay male couples' everyday lives helps Japanese people to accept and respect different ways of living, and that it also has led to passage of an anti-discrimination law that prohibits discrimination against sexual and gender minorities (279). Since 2016, romance TV drama series depicting gay male youths as main characters have gradually become popular in Thailand and Japan. Itakura (2020) conducted an interview with Yukari Fujimoto, a professor of Gender and Manga Cultural Studies, in which Fujimoto states that a wide range of romance TV drama series depicting gay male couples have been accepted by Thai people, and have offered a good connection between female fans and gay people in Thailand. Social media has influenced Thai society, and many Thai people have recognized LGBTQ+ people through watching romance TV

drama series depicting gay male couples' everyday lives. Likewise, female fans actively supported the movement to legally recognize same sex marriage in Taiwan, and Asia's first same sex marriage law was officially passed (Fujimoto 2019, 132). It has been proven that the power of female fans and the LGBTQ+ movement has led these societies to promote sexual and gender diversities and equal rights for all people. I believe that this phenomenon can be used as a catalyst for increasing acceptance of gay people without resistance only when gay-specific romantic dramas are produced under conditions like those of other romantic dramas, rather than as something special.

Another point is that these Japanese TV drama series depicting gay male couples do not focus on sexual content, but emphasize gay male couples' everyday lives (Fujimoto 2019, 150). Martin (2012) states, "there is an emphasis on the 'normality' of the characters: they declare explicitly that they are 'not homosexual' but simply in love with a unique individual who 'happens to be' male" (4). It is important to generate a clear message that regardless of people's gender or sexuality, everyone has the right to be in love with someone. Gay male youths' dramas would provide a valuable approach and play an important role in promoting change in college students' mindsets about sexual orientation and gender identity. Gerbner (1998) states, "Television is different from other media also in its centralized mass-production of a coherent set of images and messages produced for total populations, and in its relatively non-selective, almost ritualistic, use by viewers" (178). If many viewers use television in a relatively non-selective, almost ritualistic way, then airing more LGBTQ+ related TV dramas and other programs that include strong and recurring messages could change people's attitudes toward LGBT+ people. One way to perceive the real world, as cultivation theory says, is to repeatedly watch messages from the media, and to try to recognize that it is as natural for men to love men as it is for men to love women.

Implication

Through this survey, many participants expressed belief that gay-related romantic dramas could be a catalyst for eliminating

prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ+ among young people, while others were pessimistic about this idea. Since the survey conducted this time did not confirm whether or not college students actually watched gay-related romantic dramas, the next survey should ask whether and how often they actually watch them to determine whether there is a change in college students' attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people depending on how often they watch such programs. Therefore, it is difficult to compare the results of this study to the changes in attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people among those who watched LGBTQ+-related TV programs in the Netherlands. It is also necessary to investigate the differences in attitudes toward and acceptance of LGBTQ+ people by different genders and age groups, and to analyze both the duration of viewing and the messages taken from the dramas.

In addition, the impact of LGBTQ+ media on young people should be investigated to determine how to incorporate the impact of gay-related romantic dramas on their prejudices and on attitudes toward LGBTQ+ people in the classroom. Gay male youths' romantic drama series may be a supplementary teaching material to encourage youths to respect LGBTQ+ people and appreciate difference. These drama series will likely help young people to accept LGBTQ+ people who have faced bullying, harassment, prejudice, and discrimination in their everyday lives.

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