

Kyoto University Students' Perceptions towards Sexual and Gender Minorities

By Mingfang Xu and Herath Pathirannahalage Pasindu

ABSTRACT. LGBTQ movements have attracted attention to the rights of sexual and gender minorities across many parts of the world in recent years. Japan holds a middle-of-the-road stance by neither criminalizing nor legalizing same sex sexual acts. However, various sources describe incessant discrimination faced by LGBTQ people in Japan. It is evident that sexual and gender minorities experience hardships in numerous spheres such as employment, accommodation, family life, and education. Discrimination in educational institutions has, in extreme cases, even resulted in the loss of lives. Therefore, LGBTQ-friendliness has drawn a significant amount of attention in Japanese universities. While research about LGBTQ issues have been undertaken at private universities such as Keiwagakuen and Ryukoku, there continues to be a void of research about large, influential, public universities such as Kyoto University. This study examines the perceptions about LGBTQ people amongst students at Kyoto University, a leading center of higher education and research in Japan. A survey questionnaire was conducted to investigate perceptions of students. It found that a vast majority of students are familiar with the term "LGBTQ". Additionally, a large number of respondents showed a positive attitude towards sexual and gender minorities. However, their understanding of transgender issues and familiarity with "Q (questioning)" are still shallow. Furthermore, implicit biases against sexual and gender minorities can be observed among students.

Keywords: LGBTQ, sexual and gender minorities, Kyoto University, discrimination, perception

Introduction

The term LGBTQ is widely used to refer to sexual and gender minorities since 2000s. LGBTQ is an acronym that stands for lesbian (women who are sexually attracted to women), gay (men who are sexually attracted to men), bisexual (people who are sexually attracted to both men and women), transgender (people whose physical sex differs from the sex they perceive), and questioning (people who have not yet determined their gender identity or sexual orientation). Sources reveal that the Japanese LGBTQ community encounters a severe amount of discrimination in a variety of social spheres. Supporters of the LGBTQ movement in Japan have raised their concerns not only via media, but also by organizing parades and associations. A number of municipalities have adopted a system of marriage certificates for same sex couples, but these certificates do not have the same recognition an ordinary marriage certificate has. Several research studies attest that sexual and gender minorities face discrimination in educational institutions (Amnesty International, 2016; Hidaka & Operario, 2006). A number of Japanese universities have considered LGBTQ-friendly measures (Mainichi, 2019). This small-scale study was conducted to examine one important aspect of LGBTQ-friendliness of Kyoto University, students' perceptions. It further examined the basic knowledge of students regarding LGBTQ issues to confirm student awareness.

Review of Related Studies

Japan has a long-standing tradition of same-sex eroticism in their shunga artistic tradition as well as film and television industry, but it is only since the mid-1980s that a voluble discourse linking same-sex sexual activity and human rights has gained mainstream attention (McLelland & Suganuma, 2010). At first glance, one would find it difficult to imagine the severity of discrimination of sexual and gender minorities because same sex sexual acts among consenting adults are not

criminalized in Japan. Nevertheless, sources portraying the acuteness of discrimination faced by the LGBTQ community of Japan are manifold.

In a report published by Amnesty International (2016), several spheres of discrimination have been identified including education, employment, health, detention, family life, accommodation, and emergency services. This report utilizes several surveys to elucidate the derogatory attitude of the working class. For example, J-ALL Survey mentions that transgender individuals encounter difficulties in job interviews as they are asked bigoted questions. According to the JTUC Survey, 38.1% of the transgender people find it challenging to freely dress in line with their gender identity. Likewise, the Amnesty International report (2016) has described how discrimination of sexual and gender minorities is routine among the working class of Japan.

Sam Shoushi (2008), a writer for the newsletter of the Asia-Pacific Human Rights Information Center, addresses four main scopes of discrimination, namely: accommodation, inheritance, education, and employment. In general, Shoushi (2008) shares a lot of similarities with the Amnesty International report (2016) on the means of prejudice against the LGBTQ community. Both sources highlight the 1997 Fuchuu Youth Hostel case in which a group of LGBT people were denied accommodation at the hostel by its management. The Japan Times also joins Shoushi and Amnesty International in discussing the infringement of marriage rights of the LGBTQ community. In one article, Ikuo Sato, who is gay and HIV positive, argued that the government's ban on same sex marriages deprives rights of same sex couples (Osumi, 2019).

Discrimination against sexual and gender minorities in educational institutions has a long history in Japan. In a survey conducted by Hidaka, Kimura, and Ichikawa in 2005, 3.9% of 6,255 LGBT youth respondents were told that they are abnormal and 10.7% reported having instilled with negative information with regard to sexual and gender minorities at school (Russell & Horn, 2017). The Amnesty International report (2016) illustrates a tragic case of a gay student at the Graduate School of Law, Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo who committed suicide in 2016 after being outed and bullied. In a study conducted in 2006, 1,025 queer Japanese men were asked about their school experiences and mental health (Hidaka & Operario, 2006). Eight hundred fifty-one participants (83%) reported that they had experienced being bullied in school. Six hundred fifty-one (60%) said that they have experienced verbal harassment relating to their sexual orientation. According to a survey in 2013, 84% of transgender youth surveyed had experienced LGBT-related jokes made about them in school and 65% of them have suffered from bullying due to their sexual orientation (Russell & Horn, 2017).

Discrimination has paved the way for LGBTQ issues to be one of the most sensitive topics of recent times. As a result, it has become imperative for authorities of educational institutions to secure a friendly environment for sexual and gender minorities. The Mainichi newspaper (2019) published an article about the efforts of Gon Matsunaka, President of Pride Bridge, a volunteer group made up of supporters of sexual and gender minorities, to create a LGBTQ-friendly environment in Hitotsubashi University. The article also mentions that universities such as Tsukuba, Tokyo, and Ochanomizu are also looking for measures to provide a safer environment for those who identify as LGBTQ.

Medium-sized, private universities such as Keiwagakuen in Niigata prefecture and Ryukoku in Kyoto prefecture conducted research to examine the current situation and needs of sexual and gender minorities in their respective universities. A student awareness survey executed by the LGBT Rights Research Group of Keiwagakuen University brings to light the discrimination of sexual and gender minorities as well as misunderstandings related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Keiwagakuen University, 2016). Seventy-eight (19.2%) acknowledged the existence of discriminatory acts against LGBT individuals in the university. Following that 187 (45.9%) students have not heard of the term "LGBT". Fifty-five respondents (13.5%) answered "yes" to a question

asking whether or not homosexuality is a spiritual disease. Out of the 306 (75.2%) respondents who claimed to have knowledge of homosexuality, 250 (81.7%) believe that sexuality depends on the person's choice and 28 (9.2%) stated that homosexuality is a spiritual disease. Therefore, it is apparent that misconceptions prevail even among students who assumed to know about LGBT issues. Of the 82 (20.1%) respondents who reported knowing someone who was homosexual, 67 (81.7%) of them accept homosexuality. Of the 219 (53.8%) respondents who reported not knowing any homosexual individuals, 161 (73.5%) said they were comfortable with homosexuality. Thus, it is clear that despite ongoing discrimination more than half (56%, 228 out of 407) of the total respondents had no discomfort with homosexuality. The report published by the Human Rights Research Committee of Ryukoku University illustrates that out of 130 LGBT respondents identified in the survey 58 (44.6%) had not exposed their sexuality to anyone in the university (Ryukoku University, 2016). Thus, it is possible to assume that they do not feel safe enough to expose their sexual orientation.

Similar research was carried out by the Division of Nursing of Tokyo Healthcare University, a private university in Tokyo, Japan, to identify the predictors of LGBT recognition by health sciences university students in Japan (Asazawa et al, 2019). LGBT learning experience (awareness) was one of the predictive factors of LGBT recognition among students. According to the results of the survey, 338 (70.3%) respondents out of 481 have LGBT learning experience. Authors have attributed this high percentage of LGBT awareness to the university being a healthcare university. Furthermore, it has been speculated that LGBT recognition by medical healthcare students is higher than that by non-medical healthcare students. In the same way, results of a web-based survey for medical students of University of Ottawa, a large national university in Canada, have illustrated that among 103 students a significant majority ($\geq 83.5\%$) was comfortable with and capable of providing medical care to LGBT patients (Nama et al, 2017). Furthermore, 87 (84.5%) students were interested in further education about LGBT health issues.

Despite the availability of an array of sources pertinent to the LGBTQ issues in private institutions of higher education in Japan, none of them include the larger, publicly funded national universities such as Kyoto University. Therefore, the authors plan to explore an important aspect of LGBTQ-friendliness of Kyoto University: student perceptions.

Methodology

Kyoto University is one of the leading national universities of Japan with a history of 123 years. Current enrollment of the university is more than 22,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Kyoto University has excelled in the field of research by producing the highest number of Nobel laureates of any university in Asia.

A survey questionnaire was carried out among students of Kyoto University to assess perceptions and knowledge of LGBTQ. Respondents were 108 undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 25. Japanese as well as international students were involved in answering the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was compiled both in Japanese and English (see Appendix for the questionnaire). Depending on respondents' familiarity with the term "LGBTQ", two versions of the questionnaire were drafted. For those who are not familiar with the term "LGBTQ" an explanation was provided at the beginning of the questionnaire. Participants were asked orally whether they had heard of the term "LGBTQ" before being given the relevant questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed in a section of the main library called the 'Learning Commons' where students could speak casually. An online version of the questionnaire was shared among students using Google Forums. Due to the majority being familiar with the term "LGBTQ", the online questionnaire did not contain an explanation of the term. In the questionnaire, respondents had to write what each letter

of “LGBTQ” stands for. There were multiple choice questions to investigate whether students know what exactly “bisexual” and “transgender” mean. Finally, students were asked about their opinions on same-sex couples, a friend or a family member being LGBTQ and same-sex marriage. Quantitative data from the questionnaire was analyzed using Excel to get descriptive statistics.

Results and Discussion

Survey Design. This research was conducted to investigate the climate of acceptance about sexual and gender minorities in the student community of Kyoto University. In this research, a truly accepting environment is defined as an environment in which any form of bias, whether explicit or implicit, is absent. In recent years, with the rise of the LGBTQ movement and the advancement in education against discrimination, explicit biases such as bullying or verbal/physical harassment against LGBTQ individuals in educational institutions have decreased in prevalence. On the other hand, given the fact that the Japanese social system has been built under gender dualism on the premise of heterosexuality, implicit biases are still considered to be prevailing (Showa University, 2017). Considering the limited scale of this research and the limited number of respondents, questions confirming respondents’ sexual and gender identities and those asking about their experience of receiving/witnessing LGBTQ-related discriminatory acts in the university, (explored in Keiwagakuen University’s and Ryukoku University’s questionnaires), were not included in this questionnaire. Instead, this questionnaire focused on surveying students’ implicit biases by investigating their degree of aversion towards homosexual behaviors, their reaction towards “coming-out” events and their attitudes towards LGBTQ issue (same-sex marriage in this case). These questions were designed with reference to the questionnaire of the Japanese national survey on perceptions of sexual and gender minorities in 2015. Additionally, in response to the relationship between people’s knowledge of LGBTQ issues and the climate of acceptance of LGBTQ people emphasized in the research results of the Keiwagakuen University survey, questions aiming to assess students’ knowledge of the LGBTQ community were added to the questionnaire. The following paragraphs elaborate on the results of the questionnaire survey and some of the interesting findings yielded.

Knowledge of LGBTQ Terminology. Knowledge of LGBTQ terminology can affect students’ perceptions towards sexual and gender minorities. Understanding about LGBTQ terminology is the basis of a friendly and inclusive climate for LGBTQ people (Nama et al, 2017). Therefore, questions investigating students’ familiarity with LGBTQ terminology were included in the questionnaire survey. Unlike the questionnaire of Keiwagakuen University, respondents were not simply asked to answer “yes” or “no” to the question “Do you know the meaning of the term LGBTQ?”. Instead, they were asked to write down what each letter in the term “LGBTQ” stands for and choose the most suitable definitions of “bisexual” and “transgender”, two terms which were assumed to be more likely to be misunderstood. The questions were designed this way to allow for the possibility that even respondents who report to know the meaning of the acronym LGBTQ might actually have limited knowledge about the meaning of each letter.

Respondents of paper-based questionnaires in Learning Commons were asked orally if they had heard of the term “LGBTQ” before given the corresponding questionnaire. Among 47 students, 43 (91%) reported that they were familiar with the term. Although respondents of the online questionnaire were not asked whether they had heard of the term or not, their answers to the first question asking what each letter stands for reveal their degree of familiarity with the term. It was found that out of 61 online respondents, 57 (93%) had heard of the term LGBTQ before. Unexpectedly an overwhelming majority of respondents (93%, 100 out of 108) showed familiarity with the term LGBTQ. The percentage of respondents who are not familiar with the term LGBTQ (7%) is significantly lower than what was obtained in Keiwagakuen University (45.9%) in 2016.

However, it is necessary to note that there is a time lapse of four years between these two studies and also a considerable difference in the number of respondents. Also, online respondents of Kyoto University could have looked up meanings on the internet while answering the questionnaire.

In the first question, respondents were asked to write down what each letter represents to investigate their knowledge of LGBTQ terminology. Among the 100 respondents who had heard of this term before, most of them knew what “L”, “G” and “B” stood for (96% for “L” and “G”, 91% for “B”) while fewer (78%) knew the exact meaning of “T”. Fewer than half (45%) had an idea of what “Q” meant. Among them, 28 (26%) believed that “Q” stood for “queer” while 19 (18%) believed “questioning” to be the correct meaning of “Q”. Two of them (2%) answered “queer or questioning”.

It has to be noted that although “Q” is defined as questioning (people who have not yet determined their gender identity or sexual orientation) in this paper, either interpretation may be accepted. According to *JobRainbow*, a Japanese LGBT magazine, the interpretation of “Q” as “questioning” highlights gender and sexual fluidity because the transition state between different sexualities or gender identities is also described as “questioning”. On the other hand, the interpretation as “queer” implies a reopening attitude because of the discrimination significance in this word’s original meaning, which is why radical activists prefer this interpretation—to show the defiant spirit (JobRainbow, 2019).

In the second and the third question, respondents were given multiple choice questions of most appropriate definitions of “bisexual” and “transgender” in order to investigate whether there are any misunderstandings. Among the 91 respondents who correctly answered “bisexual” in the first question, 95% were able to select the most suitable definition of “bisexual”. On the other hand, among the 78 respondents who knew what “T” in LGBTQ stood for, 87% were able to choose the right definition.

In general, results show that the term LGBTQ is well-known among students of Kyoto University and concepts of lesbian, gay and bisexual are well-understood. However, a lack of knowledge about transgender people and those who are unsure of their sexuality or gender identity can be observed. Less awareness of the term questioning can be considered as a result of the term “LGBT” being frequently used when referring to sexual and gender minorities. Nonetheless, the inadequate knowledge about transgender people can mean a less than optimal situation for them at Kyoto University.

Students’ Attitudes and Level of Acceptance of LGBTQ People. According to the results of the questionnaire, a majority of respondents hold relatively positive attitudes towards LGBTQ people and possess a degree of acceptance for them. Out of the overall 108 respondents, 77 (71%) were supportive of same-sex marriage while only 4 (4%) opposed (the rest answered “no opinion”). Resembling the results of the student awareness survey of Keiwagakuen University where 228 respondents (56%) were willing to accept homosexual individuals, 56 (52%) said that they would be supportive if one of their friends had disclosed that he/she/X is LGBTQ. While only 3 (3%) responded having negative reactions, 49 (45%) answered “no opinion”.

However, the questionnaire also reveals that implicit biases exist among students. When asked “Would you feel uncomfortable if you see a same-sex couple?”, more than one-third (35%) of the respondents reported a degree of uncomfortableness. Thirty-two (30%) answered “a little uncomfortable” and 6 (6%) responded “yes”. These results can be attributed to the long-standing negative impressions people in Japan have of sexual and gender minorities, given that the portrayal of LGBTQ people as abnormal, having strange hobbies and distinct body language has been perpetuated through the uncomplimentary comments used in both mainstream Japanese society and Japanese media (Russell & Horn, 2017; Showa University, 2017). Moreover, in the questionnaire, respondents were also asked how they would react if one of their family members had disclosed that he/she/X is LGBTQ. The number of respondents (52%) answering “supportive”

was the same as in the question about LGBTQ friends, while the number of respondents answering “negative” rose up to 18 (17%). The potential underlining reason could be their broad awareness of the unfair treatment that LGBTQ people are subjected to.

Overall, these results suggest that explicit biases such as bullying or discrimination against sexual minorities as reported in reports of Keiwagakuen and Ryukoku universities are unlikely to happen within the student community of Kyoto University. However, implicit biases are still buried in minds of students.

Conclusion

A multitude of studies have described discrimination faced by LGBTQ people in various social spheres, including educational institutions. Additionally, several sources provide evidence to LGBTQ-friendly measures taken by universities in Japan. Nonetheless, public universities such as Kyoto University are not mentioned in any of them. Therefore, this small-scale research was carried out to investigate one angle of LGBTQ-friendliness of Kyoto University, to measure how LGBTQ-friendly students are. The findings revealed Kyoto University students’ inadequacy of the understanding of transgender people and those who are questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity, and also disclosed implicit biases that may require a long time to be fully eliminated. Since LGBTQ knowledge increases the recognition of sexual and gender minorities as shown in the research of Tokyo Healthcare University, LGBTQ awareness programmes for students can be recommended in order to mitigate implicit biases and lack of knowledge within the university (Asazawa et al, 2019). The report on sexual minorities of Ryukoku University has also emphasized the importance of awareness programs to deepen the understanding of LGBTQ issues (Ryukoku University, 2016). In the bigger picture, this research consolidates the contemporary idea that nondiscrimination and equality under the policies should not be the ultimate goal of queer liberation, as noted in *Normal Life* (Dean Spade, 2015). To create a truly LGBTQ-friendly society where people sincerely accept LGBTQ people without stereotyping them, such long-standing implicit biases revealed in this research should not be neglected, indicating that education on LGBTQ issues is supposed to be equally valued as law reforms are. However, this research was limited to investigate students’ attitudes towards different LGBTQ issues, yet the dominating reasons for such attitudes were formulated through inference and speculation. Further studies targeting more accurate and detailed reasons are recommended. This research does not entail information about policies implemented by the university to spread awareness of LGBTQ, support LGBTQ people and promote acceptance of the LGBTQ community. Hence, further research is required to understand the bigger picture of national universities in Japan generally, and Kyoto University specifically, in the topic of LGBTQ. Research on sexual and gender minorities of Japanese universities act as a platform for LGBTQ people to raise their concerns to strive for a LGBTQ-friendly environment.

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Appendix

Students' perceptions of LGBTQ in Kyoto University

Department _____ Major _____ Age _____

1. Do you know what each letter stands for?
L: _____ G: _____ B: _____ T: _____ Q: _____
2. Please select the correct definition of B: _____ .
 - A. People who have both male and female reproductive organs.
 - B. People who have sexual interest in both men and women.
 - C. People who are in a transition state between homosexuality and heterosexuality.
3. Please select the correct definition of T: _____ .
 - A. Women who look like men or men who look like women.
 - B. People who have breasts but a male reproductive organ.
 - C. People whose physical sex differs from the sex they perceive themselves are.
4. Would you feel uncomfortable if you see a same-sex couple?
 - A. Yes B. A little uncomfortable C. Not at all
5. How would you react if one of your friends told you that he/she/X is LGBTQ?
 - A. Supportive B. Negative C. No opinion
6. How would you feel if one of your family members told you that he/she/X is LGBTQ?
 - A. Supportive B. Negative C. No opinion
7. What is your attitude towards same-sex marriage?
 - A. Supportive B. Negative C. No opinion
8. (Optional) If you have any other comments regarding this topic, please feel free to mention.

Thank you for your cooperation!

Students' perceptions of LGBTQ in Kyoto University

Department_____ Major_____ Age_____

LGBTQ is an acronym that stands for lesbian (women who love women), gay (men who love men), bisexual (people who have sexual interest in both men and women), and transgender (people whose physical sex differs from the sex they perceive themselves are) and questioning (people who have not yet figured out their gender identity or sexual orientation).

1. Would you feel uncomfortable if you see a same-sex couple?
A. Yes B. A little uncomfortable C. Not at all
2. How would you react if one of your friends told you that he/she/X is LGBTQ?
A. Supportive B. Negative C. No opinion
3. How would you feel if one of your family members told you that he/she/X is LGBTQ?
A. Supportive B. Negative C. No opinion
4. What is your attitude towards same-sex marriage?
A. Supportive B. Negative C. No opinion
5. (Optional) If you have any other comments regarding this topic, please feel free to mention.

Thank you for your cooperation!

京都大学における学生のLGBTQに対する意識調査

学部_____ 学科_____ 年齢_____

1、各文字の意味はご存じですか？

L:_____ G:_____ B:_____ T:_____ Q:_____

2、B:_____の正しい定義を選んでください。

- D. 男性の生殖器官と女性の生殖器官の両方を持つ人
- E. 男性と女性の両方に恋愛感情及び性的欲求を持つ人
- F. 異性愛者から同性愛者への転移状態にいる人

3、T:_____の正しい定義を選んでください。

- D. 男子みたいな女子、または女子みたいな男子
- E. 胸と男性の生殖器官の両方を持つ人
- F. 心の性別と体の性別が一致しない人

4、同性カップルに出会う時、「気持ち悪い」と感じますか。

- B. 感じる B. 少し感じる C. 全く感じない

5、友達が突然「自分が性的少数者です。」と告白したとすると、あなたはどのような反応が想像されますか。

- B. 応援する B. 反感を抱く C. 意見なし

6、家族が突然「自分が性的少数者です。」と告白したとすると、あなたはどのような反応が想像されますか。

- A. 応援する B. 消極的に考える C. 意見なし

7、同性結婚に対してどのような意見を持っていますか？

- B. 賛成 B. 反対 C. 意見なし

8、（任意）他には何か言いたいことがあったら、ご自由に書いてください。

ご協力ありがとうございました。

京都大学における学生のLGBTQに対する意識調査

学部 _____ 学科 _____ 年齢 _____

LGBTQとは、性的少数者の総称を言います。「レズビアン(女性同性愛者)」（女性が好きな女性）、「ゲイ(男性同性愛者)」（男性が好きな男性）、「バイセクシュアル(両性愛者)」（男女両性が好きになれる人）、「トランスジェンダー(性別越境、性別違和)」（心の性別と体の性別が一致しない人）、「クエスチョニング」（自己のジェンダーや性同一性、性的指向を探している状態の人）の頭文字をとって名付けられました。

1、同性カップルに出会う時、「気持ち悪い」と感じますか。

A. 感じる B. 少し感じる C. 全く感じない

2、友達が突然「自分が性的少数者です。」と告白したとすると、あなたはどのような反応が想像されますか。

A. 応援する B. 反感を抱く C. 意見なし

3、家族が突然「自分が性的少数者です。」と告白したとすると、あなたはどのような反応が想像されますか。

A. 応援する B. 消極的に考える C. 意見なし

4、同性結婚に対してどのような意見を持っていますか？

A. 賛成 B. 反対 C. 意見なし

5、（任意）他には何か言いたいことがあったら、ご自由に書いてください。

ご協力ありがとうございました。