

The Japanese LGBTQ+ Community in the World: The COVID-19 Pandemic, Challenges, and the Prospects for the Future. Masami Tamagawa. Routledge, 2023. 292 pp.

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In this book, Tamagawa offers a comprehensive exploration into the LGBTQ+ experience of COVID-19 in Japan, through both thoroughly analyzed quantitative data and case study narratives. Despite Japan's reputation as an LGBTQ+-friendly country, it is characterized by "relentless heteronormativity" (p. 59) and a troubling lack of comprehension of both human rights and the difficulties faced by gender and sexual minorities by Japanese society at large. Tamagawa argues that rather than overt hostility to queer individuals, Japan is marked by "passive systemic homophobia" (p. 159). The experiences detailed in this book underscore the urgent need for equal recognition and rights for LGBTQ+ people in Japan.

The first two chapters paint a broad picture of the state of LGBTQ+ affairs in the world and Japan today, setting the stage for the subsequent examination of the experience of the pandemic and the media response to a COVID-19 outbreak in South Korea. Tamagawa first identifies some of the main concerns of the LGBTQ+ community in Japan, including privacy concerns and fear of being outed, tension in family relationships while quarantining, loss of jobs, and loss of social support networks outside of the home. Then, Tamagawa describes the state of LGBTQ+ rights globally, noting that even if a state has protective measures, in practice LGBTQ+ people are often susceptible to violence and discrimination.

Japanese LGBTQ+ people may not often be subjected to overt violence, but discrimination is prevalent, and same-sex marriage is not yet legally recognized despite growing support for it. Many Japanese people struggle to come out to their families, and while some find community in places such as Tokyo's Ni-chōme neighborhood, Tamagawa notes that these places can be unwelcoming to people who do not fit certain aesthetic stereotypes, increasing feelings of rejection and isolation.

Tamagawa collected 358 responses to an online survey conducted between May and June 2021. Respondents represent a variety of LGBTQ+ people who experienced the pandemic in Japan. The vast majority were Japanese nationals living in Japan, followed by non-Japanese nationals also living in Japan. However, some responses also came from Japanese nationals living overseas and non-Japanese nationals living overseas who had experienced some of the pandemic in Japan. Just under half of the participants identified as gay men, with lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, transgender, and other queer identities also represented. Chapters three and four detail the

responses to Tamagawa's qualitative survey through an intersectional lens, focusing on sociodemographic characteristics. Participants were asked about their experiences of COVID-19 in terms of health (including mental health) and financial impact; life disruption; the threat of COVID-19 to self, family, the local community, the elderly, and members of the LGBTQ+ community; the effects of social distancing; their connection to the LGBTQ+ community and their experience of home life during the pandemic. Although many reported difficulties using the healthcare system, overall, about half of respondents said they are happy being LGBTQ+ and many feel connected to the LGBTQ+ community in Japan, despite discrimination by and ignorance from the wider Japanese society.

In chapter 5, Tamagawa presents 12 case studies of non-Japanese respondents. Their narratives are a refreshing break from the vast amounts of quantitative data of the previous two chapters, and these stories give even greater insight to the complex and diverse experiences of the Japanese LGBTQ+ community, which includes non-Japanese (and non-Japanese speaking) residents. Insights into how strict gender norms are perpetuated in schools, for example, may be missed as they fall outside the scope of the original survey. But when given the opportunity to explain their experiences in more depth, non-Japanese residents are able to share their unique perspectives.

Chapters six and seven detail the media coverage of a COVID-19 outbreak that began at a gay club in Itaewon, South Korea. Chapter six presents a cross-cultural analysis of the event, comparing South Korean, Japanese, and Western media reporting. While South Korean media often noted that the outbreak was centered around a gay club, Japanese media by and large avoided any reference to sexuality. Tamagawa argues that this is not out of respect for the privacy of the patrons of such establishments, but an indication that the Japanese media finds mention of sexual minorities unfit for publishing, perpetuating their minoritized status. Generally, South Korean media referenced the club as a gay club, or a club for sexual minorities. Tamagawa takes issue with the latter and insists the club was a gay club, but this erases men who have sex with other men and do not identify as gay, such as bisexual men, who might visit such clubs. This highlights the need for specific yet inclusive language when reporting LGBTQ+ issues. Chapter seven focuses specifically on the diversity of responses found on Japanese social media which illuminate rampant anti-Korean racism and homophobia in Japan.

The book concludes in chapter eight with a summary of the two studies and offers recommendations for activists and policymakers in Japan. Tamagawa emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach to human rights in Japan that includes LGBTQ+ people. This approach includes redefining terminology to fit the Japanese context, addressing discrimination from the

family register system to online interactions, and enacting legal protections to ensure that LGBTQ+ people have equal rights.

Teachers of gender and sexuality studies may find many of the chapters useful, whereas media studies educators might find chapters six and seven to be the most relevant for their fields of work. As an LGBTQ+, non-Japanese national who arrived in Japan before the pandemic began and stayed throughout, I found the case studies in chapter five to be particularly interesting, at times mirroring my experience and others reminding me that my experience was not the only one. Advanced-level university students may also enjoy these narratives as authentic reading material that may challenge their perceptions of how others view and experience Japan.

The book is organized well, with subsections helpfully labelled and numbered. However, there are numerous distracting grammatical errors that should have been caught in editing. The errors are relatively minor, and the intent is often clear, but it is especially frustrating given the importance of the subject matter. Despite these errors, this book is an important contribution to many fields of research, and hopefully the errors will be resolved in future editions.

In conclusion, “The Japanese LGBTQ+ Community in the World: The COVID-19 Pandemic, Challenges, and the Prospects for the Future” offers an insightful exploration of LGBTQ+ life in Japan during the pandemic. Combining thorough analysis of quantitative data with compelling qualitative narratives and case studies, Tamagawa makes a case for increased visibility and protection for Japan’s LGBTQ+ community. This book is a resource for educators, students, academics, and activists alike, and challenges all to consider the broader implications of heteronormativity and passive systemic homophobia in Japan today.

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