

Differences in Determinants of Subjective Well-Being by Sexual Orientation: A Comparison of Heterosexual and Gay Men in Japan

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Abstract

This study investigates whether the determinants of well-being discussed in general well-being research (which does not fully consider sexual minorities) also apply to sexual minorities, and examines the effects of marriage and social support on well-being. We used data from 2,541 men (1,851 heterosexual men and 690 homosexual men), obtained from an online survey of gay and heterosexual men living in Japan conducted by the author in 2020. A multiple regression analysis was conducted. The results of the analysis revealed that gay men had fewer significant variables that enhanced their sense of well-being than heterosexual men did, and that only the support of a significant other had a significant effect. It has been pointed out that it is difficult for sexual minorities to establish intimate relationships due to the concealment of their sexual orientation, and as a result, it is difficult for them to obtain social support. To improve this situation, support by the government and administration as well as a change in people's awareness are necessary. In particular, Japan lags behind other developed countries in the development of laws concerning sexual minorities, and urgent action is needed in this regard.

Keywords

sexual minorities, gay men, subjective well-being, social support, online survey

Studies on happiness have accumulated in a wide range of fields, including philosophy, economics, psychology, sociology, and brain science, mainly in Europe and the United States. As will be discussed later, many studies cite gender as a factor, but in most cases, they assume a binary of “male” or “female,” and the gender of sexual minorities is rarely considered. In Europe and the United States, several studies have shown that sexual minorities tend to have a lower sense of well-being than heterosexuals do (Perales 2016; Office for National Statistics 2017; Crawford and Ridner 2018). To the best of the author's knowledge, there are no well-being-related

studies that consider sexual orientation.

In a discussion focused on overall trends, it may not be productive to point out the poor fit of an argument, or a lack of perspective, in terms of individuality and diversity. Nevertheless, various studies indicate that sexual minorities account for 3–8% of the total population (Gates 2010; Jones and Cox

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2015; Kamano et al. 2019). If this is the case, there may be nearly 10 million persons belonging to the sexual minority in Japan alone, which is not a negligible number. If happiness research aims to propose policies to improve people's happiness, it is problematic not to take into account sexual minorities, especially when they account for such a large number of persons.

Based on the above recognition of the problem, this study tackles the following research question: Do the determinants of happiness that have been discussed in general happiness research (which does not sufficiently consider sexual minorities) also apply to sexual minorities? The study examines this issue using data from Japan. Although the concept of sexual minorities encompasses a wide variety of sexual orientations, this paper discusses the concept with LGB (Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual) in mind.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Findings from General Well-Being Research

What do general happiness studies emphasize as being the determinants of happiness? Richard Layard (2005), based on a comprehensive review of research on happiness, identified the Big Seven determinants of happiness as family relationships, income, employment, community and friends (general trust in others), health, personal freedom, and personal values. Among these factors, family relationships, income, employment, and community and friends are said to decrease when the status of these factors dissolves or deteriorates. Regarding health, the impact of mental health on well-being is particularly important. Layard emphasizes the important role of the government in increasing happiness. Personal values mainly refer to religious beliefs.

The Institute for the Development of Social Intelligence and the Center for the Study of Social Well-being Studies at Senshu

University have been conducting research on happiness in East and Southeast Asia since 2014.

Many of the findings obtained in this research project, which aims to elucidate the characteristics of social well-being in East and Southeast Asia through international comparisons, have much in common with Layard's Big Seven. For example, Masayuki Kanai (2017), in an international comparison of well-being (Japan, Korea, and Vietnam), points out that, in Japan, well-being tends to be higher among women than among men, older persons, married people, those with relatively high levels of education, and those with relatively higher income. Osaki (2018) also identified income, general trust, age (younger), gender (female), marriage (married), presence of children (with children), and length of education as factors that significantly increase happiness. Furthermore, Kobayashi and Aldar (2018), in their comparative study on well-being in East and Southeast Asia, mention that marriage and income significantly enhance well-being in East Asian countries including Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Mongolia. Sudjtmiko et al. (2018), in their analysis of Japan, Korea, Thailand, and Indonesia, point out that religion and happiness are significantly correlated in all countries.

To simplify the findings of these studies, we can conclude that social and political (legal) stability, such as in terms of income, employment, education, and the political system, and the presence of close relationships with other people, such as family, friends, and through religion, can enhance one's sense of happiness. However, sexual minorities are expected to encounter difficulties in achieving the conditions that can enhance their sense of well-being as proposed by general happiness studies.

Research on Well-Being of Sexual Minorities

In terms of family relations, as of 2021, in Japan, same-sex marriage is not legally recognized. Some local governments

are developing partnership systems, but they do not have the same legal standing as heterosexual marriages (e.g., spousal recognition and inheritance). In Japan, the partnership system has a short history and is not yet generally established, and some people are hesitant to use this system, as it constitutes a public declaration of homosexuality. According to the results of the “Tokyo Rainbow Pride 2017 Visitor Questionnaire,” the most common reason for not using the partnership certificate or declaration was “I don’t feel the need,” which was the highest at 36.8%, followed by “The system is not guaranteed by law” at 26.8%, and “I don’t want people to know my sexual orientation” and “It costs money,” both at 19.1% (Matsunobu Hiromi Laboratory of Sociology, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Letters, Komazawa University 2018).

There are cases of homosexual people married to individuals of the opposite sex, but it is not known whether these marriages enhance happiness as much as heterosexual marriages do. Presumably, the following people are more likely to face stress and conflicts: people who “come out” with their sexual orientation and marry afterward, people who marry without revealing their sexual orientation to their partner, and people who come out with their sexual orientation after marriage.

It is possible for homosexual couples to have a child through sperm donation or surrogacy, but the hurdles they encounter are much higher than those faced by heterosexual couples. Similarly, there exist many legal and social obstacles to their raising a child.

In addition, sexual minorities have complex relationships with their parents, siblings, and relatives. It has been pointed out that sexual minorities tend to avoid close relationships with others in order to conceal their sexual orientation (stigma), which makes it difficult for them to obtain support from the people around them (Pachankis 2007).

Sexual minorities also have to behave more cautiously than heterosexuals have to when establishing intimate relationships, not only within the family, but also in friendships,

workplaces. Kavanaugh et al. (2020) point out that perceived homophobia in people they are close to negatively affects the well-being of sexual minorities. The concealment of such stigma is a negative predictor of well-being (Nouvilas-Pallejà et al. 2018).

Pachankis and Branstrom (2018) point out that the life satisfaction of sexual minorities is affected by the structural stigma of a country (e.g., discriminatory laws, policies, and community attitudes) and the associated demand to conceal their sexual orientation. As previously mentioned, sexual minorities are at a disadvantage because same-sex marriages are not legally recognized in Japan. The results of the “Tokyo Rainbow Pride 2017 Visitor Survey” also suggest that sexual minorities in Japan tend to conceal their sexual orientation.

In light of the preceding discussion, it is expected that sexual minorities in Japan experience difficulties in establishing both socially and politically stable foundations and intimate human relationships. It is expected that the determinants of happiness that have been identified in general happiness research, without taking into consideration sexual orientation, are not entirely applicable to sexual minorities in Japan.

Based on these expectations, this study examines the following four hypotheses regarding the legal system (marriage) and social support for sexual minorities in Japan.

Hypothesis 1: Unlike the case with heterosexuals, marriage (including the issuance of certificates under the partnership system) is not a determinant of sexual minorities’ well-being.

Hypothesis 2: Unlike the case with heterosexuals, family support is not a determinant of sexual minorities’ well-being.

Hypothesis 3: Unlike the case with heterosexuals, support from friends is not a determinant of sexual minorities’ well-being.

Hypothesis 4: Support from significant others is a determinant factor that increases the well-being of sexual

minorities to the same extent as it does of heterosexuals.

Hypotheses 1-3 argue that the factors that are found to enhance well-being in general well-being research do not apply to sexual minorities, while Hypothesis 4 examines the factors that may enhance well-being in sexual minorities. Thomeer and Reczek (2016) found that people who have had only same-sex partners after the age of 18 and those who have had only same-sex partners in the past five years reported similar levels of well-being as those who have had only opposite-sex partners after the age of 18. In contrast to relationships with family and friends, the presence of a partner before whom one does not have to conceal their sexual orientation and intimate relationships may enhance the well-being of sexual minorities.

METHODS

Data from an online survey conducted by the author in January 2020 were used.

The survey was conducted by Macromill, Inc. with the approval of the Ethics Committee for “Research with Human Subjects” of Sophia University. The survey targets were gay, bisexual, and heterosexual men aged 20–69 years and living in Japan (excluding students and foreign nationals). In this study, gay and bisexual men were defined as those whose biological sex (sex on birth certificate) was male, who were comfortable with their current gender identity, and whose sexual orientation (sex of the person they have sexual feelings for) was either male or both male and female. Heterosexual males in this study are those whose biological sex is male, who are comfortable with their current gender identity, and whose sexual orientation is female.

Data were collected from 3,538 men (1,854 heterosexual men and 1,684 gay and bisexual men), and the sample after data cleaning consisted of 1,851 heterosexual men and 1,668 gay and bisexual men. In the analysis, bisexual men were excluded to clarify the difference between same-sex

and heterosexual relationships, and the data of 1,851 heterosexual men and 690 gay men were used.

Variables

The dependent variable is subjective happiness, which is measured on an 11-point scale, where “very unhappy” is 0 and “very happy” is 10. The method of measuring happiness on an 11-point scale has been used in past social surveys (Cabinet Office, Government of Japan 2012; Stratification and Social Psychology (SSP) Project 2021).

The independent variables are marital status (married [1], not married [0]) and social support scale. Regarding marital status, gay men who answered “married to a spouse of the opposite sex (including de facto marriage),” “have received a certificate based on a partnership system in Japan or overseas (including application in process),” or “married to a spouse of the same sex based on a system overseas” were classified as “married,” and those who answered “not married and have not received a certificate based on a partnership system” were classified as “not married.” Heterosexual men were asked to choose between “married (including de facto marriage)” and “not married.”

The Japanese version of the social support scale developed by Zimet et al. (1988) (Iwasa et al. 2007) was used. This scale consists of three subscales (family support, friends’ support, and significant other’s support) with four items each (total of 12 items); respondents were asked to rate their responses on a seven-point scale (maximum of 84 points). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the three subscales were 0.942 for heterosexuals and 0.913 for gay men for “family support,” 0.948 for heterosexuals and 0.946 for gay men for “support of friends,” and 0.942 for heterosexuals and 0.929 for gay men for “support from significant others.”

As for sociodemographic variables, we used age, highest level of education (college degree or higher [1], other [0]), personal income (annual income), occupation (unemployed [1], employed [0]), religious

affiliation (yes or no), and presence of children (yes or no). In addition, while this study focuses on the correlation between relationships and well-being, including marriage, it is known that sexual minorities tend to have poorer mental health than heterosexual people do (Sandfort et al. 2001; Bolton and Sareen 2011; Plöderl and Tremblay 2015; Komorida 2021). Therefore, in order to control for the influence of mental health status and physical health status on well-being, we also included K6 scores in the analysis, which are widely used to measure mental health status and subjective health status.

The variance inflation factor (VIF) values for each variable were calculated to check for multicollinearity, and the independent variables ranged from 2.240 to 6.708 for heterosexual men and from 1.365 to 4.209 for gay men, confirming that multicollinearity was not a problem.

Measures

The dependent variable was subjective happiness, and the independent variables were the social support scale (support of family, support of friends, and support of significant other) and marital status. Statistical software IBM SPSS Ver. 26.0.0.0 was used for the analysis.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of each variable. The mean age of the analyzed subjects was 47.26 years for heterosexual men and 41.69 years for gay men.

The mean value of the dependent variable, subjective happiness, was 6.24 for heterosexual men and 5.63 for gay men, a significant difference ($t(1131.688) = 5.161$, $p < .001$). As in previous studies, sexual minorities tended to have a lower sense of well-being than heterosexuals did (Figures 1 and 2).

Regarding the independent variable of marital status, 62.8% of heterosexual men and 11.9% of gay men were “married.” Of

the latter group, 6.1% were “married to a spouse of the opposite sex (including de facto marriage),” 4.6% were “issued a certificate based on a partnership system in Japan or overseas (including application in process),” and 1.2% were “married to a spouse of the same sex based on a system overseas.”

The mean values of the social support scale were as follows: family support—18.68 for heterosexual men and 16.13 for gay men; friends’ support—15.82 for heterosexual men and 14.90 for gay men; support of a significant other—17.68 for heterosexual men and 16.14 for gay men. Here as well, as in previous studies, sexual minorities are less likely to receive social support than heterosexuals do.

Regression Analysis

We confirm the results of the multiple regression analysis with the variables related to sociodemographic attributes (Table 2).

First, the results for marriage support Hypothesis 1. In other words, marriage had a significant effect on subjective well-being for heterosexual men, but not for gay men, and the direction of the regression coefficient was negative.

Next, looking at the three items of the social support scale, family support had a significant positive effect on subjective well-being for heterosexual men, but not for gay men. Hypothesis 2 was also supported by this result.

The support of friends did not show a significant effect for either heterosexual or gay men. Although the lack of a significant effect in the case of heterosexual men was contrary to the initial assumption, the lack of an effect for sexual minorities was confirmed; thus, Hypothesis 3 can be regarded as supported.

Hypothesis 4 was also supported as a significant positive effect of significant others’ support on subjective well-being was confirmed for both heterosexual and gay men. As for the control variables, both heterosexual and gay men showed significant positive effects for personal income, K6, and

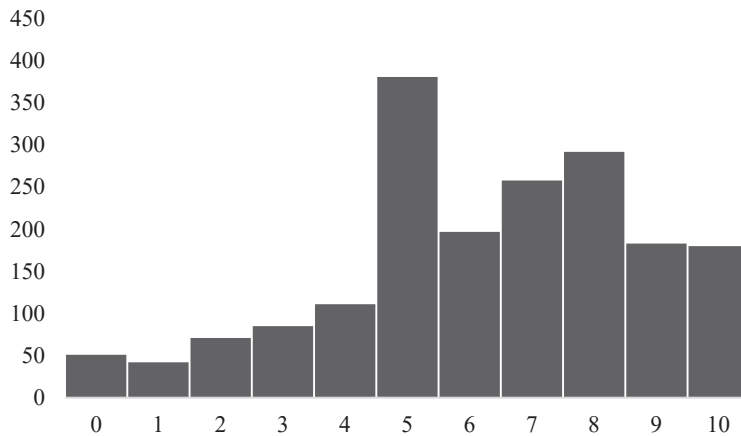


Figure 1. Distribution of Subjective Happiness (Heterosexual Men)

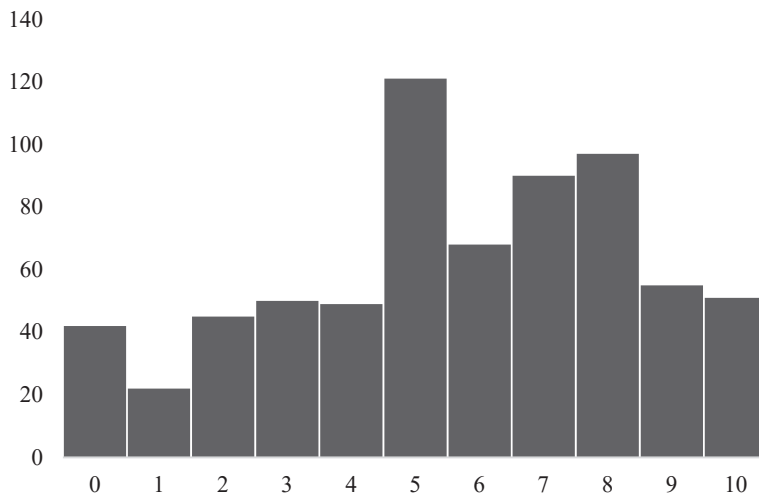


Figure 2. Distribution of Subjective Happiness (Gay Men)

subjective health. The adjusted coefficient of determination in this multiple regression analysis was 0.490 for heterosexual men and 0.446 for gay men.

DISCUSSION

The results of the analysis showed that, among marriage, family support, friends' support, and significant others' support, only a significant effect of significant others' support was found as a determinant of happiness among gay men. The regression coefficient for the support of significant others was higher for gay men than for heterosexual

men. This may indicate that the importance of intimate relationships with one's partner increases in a situation where it is difficult for gay men to achieve intimate relationships with family and friends.

These results suggest that gay men have fewer factors that enhance their sense of well-being than heterosexual men do, and that the foundation for enhancing their sense of well-being is weak. Based on the results of this analysis, it can be assumed that the difficulty of family formation and the complicated family relationships among sexual minorities contribute to this situation. Although Layard (2005) argued that protecting

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Heterosexual Men					Gay Men				
	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max
Subjective well-being	6.24	6.00	2.49	0	10	5.63	6.00	2.76	0	10
Marriage (including use of partnership system): Yes	62.9%	-	-	-	-	11.9%	-	-	-	-
Social support scale										
Family support	18.68	19.00	5.87	4	28	16.13	16.00	6.08	4	28
Friends' support	15.82	16.00	6.03	4	28	14.90	16.00	6.74	4	28
Support of significant others	17.68	18.00	6.23	4	28	16.14	16.00	6.88	4	28
Age in years	47.26	47.00	10.90	20	69	41.69	42.00	9.35	22	69
Highest educational level: University graduate or higher	58.5%	-	-	-	-	55.2%	-	-	-	-
Personal income (annual income)										
None	2.8%	-	-	-	-	5.2%	-	-	-	-
1 yen to less than 1 million yen	5.9%	-	-	-	-	9.4%	-	-	-	-
1 million yen to less than 2 million yen	8.3%	-	-	-	-	13.3%	-	-	-	-
2 million yen to less than 3 million yen	9.7%	-	-	-	-	15.8%	-	-	-	-
3 million yen to less than 4 million yen	14.6%	-	-	-	-	13.9%	-	-	-	-
4 million yen to less than 5 million yen	16.6%	-	-	-	-	13.2%	-	-	-	-
5 million yen to less than 6 million yen	13.0%	-	-	-	-	9.7%	-	-	-	-
6 million yen to less than 7 million yen	9.0%	-	-	-	-	7.8%	-	-	-	-
7 million yen to less than 8 million yen	6.1%	-	-	-	-	3.5%	-	-	-	-
8 million yen to less than 9 million yen	3.7%	-	-	-	-	3.0%	-	-	-	-
9 million yen to less than 10 million yen	3.3%	-	-	-	-	2.6%	-	-	-	-
10 million yen to less than 15 million yen	5.6%	-	-	-	-	1.7%	-	-	-	-
15 million yen or more	1.5%	-	-	-	-	0.7%	-	-	-	-
Occupation: Unemployed	12.0%	-	-	-	-	14.2%	-	-	-	-
Religious affiliation: Yes	8.5%	-	-	-	-	11.2%	-	-	-	-
Children: Yes	54.1%	-	-	-	-	11.6%	-	-	-	-
Current K6 scores	4.49	2.00	5.35	0	24	7.74	7.00	6.63	0	24
Current subjective health	2.80	3.00	0.96	1	5	2.93	3.00	1.05	1	5
<i>N</i>			1,851					690		

Table 2. Results of Regression Analysis

	Heterosexual Men			Gay Men		
	Coef.	SE	β	Coef.	SE	β
Marriage (including use of partnership system): Yes	.319 *	.128	.062	-.063	.282	-.007
Social support scale						
Family support	.077 ***	.016	.181	.036	.022	.079
Friends' support	-.005	.011	-.011	.000	.020	-.001
Support of significant others	.082 ***	.017	.205	.101 ***	.023	.253
Age in years	-.003	.004	-.013	.004	.009	.014
Highest educational level: University graduate or higher	-.051	.087	-.010	-.239	.169	-.043
Personal income (annual income)	.064 ***	.018	.073	.096 **	.036	.093
Occupation: Unemployed	.183	.146	.024	.056	.247	.007
Religious affiliation: Yes	.258	.149	.029	-.098	.255	-.011
Children: Yes	.062	.119	.012	-.281	.284	-.033
Current K6 scores	-.141 ***	.009	-.303	-.119 ***	.014	-.287
Current subjective health	.543 ***	.049	.209	.692 ***	.086	.264
<i>N</i>		1,851			690	
R^2		.493			.456	
(Adjusted R^2)		.490			.446	

Note: *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

individuals' freedom and rights through a stable government and administrative services is necessary to increase their sense of happiness, sexual minorities in Japan are especially disadvantaged (unequal) in terms of marriage and family formation. For example, Japan is the only country in the G7 that does not recognize same-sex marriage legally (Marriage For All Japan - Freedom of Marriage for All 2020). Laws to prevent discrimination toward the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) community are still not in place in Japan, although progress on related systems has been made in the EU, the United States (i.e., in some states), and Australia (Murakami 2021).

To increase the sense of well-being among sexual minorities, it is necessary to increase social awareness and eliminate institutional inequalities concerning sexual minorities. In contrast to the case with heterosexual men, family support was not a determinant factor in increasing the sense of well-being among gay men. As pointed out in previous studies, sexual minorities have difficulty in establishing intimate relationships due to the concealment of their sexual orientation (stigma) (Pachankis 2007), and this may be a mechanism that deprives them of the required support. If the concealment of sexual orientation is mainly to avoid criticism and discrimination by others, it is necessary to eliminate such discrimination and prejudice against sexual minorities in order to improve the situation. This is a matter of individual awareness.

Although no significant difference was found, the negative effect of marriage on the sense of well-being among gay men needs to be examined in more detail in the future. For example, the relative deprivation may be caused by institutional inequality in relation to heterosexual marriages and same-sex partnerships in Japan. For example, gay men who marry women, without coming out about their sexual orientation, may conceal their sexual orientation, or gay men may continue to be under pressure to conceal their sexual orientation in their daily relationships with others, despite being certified under the

partnership system. However, it is difficult to examine the actual reasons for these results (i.e., the negative impact of marriage on the happiness of gay men) from the data of this study. In the analysis conducted for this study, the following categories of marriage were analyzed: heterosexual marriages (with or without coming out), same-sex marriages based on overseas systems, and the issuance of certificates based on partnership systems (domestic or overseas). However, it cannot be denied that there are different problems in each case. Since it is expected to be difficult to collect sufficient data through a quantitative survey in Japan, an effective alternative would be to discuss these issues through case studies.

Limitations

I would like to make the following three points regarding the limitations and future research avenues related to this paper. First, in this paper, we have discussed the support of significant others in the social support scale by referring to the existence and support of partners, but strictly speaking, we cannot determine whether "significant others" implies only "partners.". However, the other two sub-items of the social support scale used in this study relate to "family" and "friends," and it is highly probable that a "significant other" means someone other than these persons. The fact that the variables concerning "family" and "friends" had no significant effect on the happiness of gay men, while "significant others" had a significant effect, suggests that the respondents viewed these variables differently. In light of this, even if "significant others" included people other than partners, the fact remains that it is important for gay men to have people other than family and friends who understand them.

Second, the analysis in this paper compares heterosexual men and gay men, and does not examine whether these issues apply to all sexual minorities. In future studies, it is necessary to examine this issue using a more diverse sample.

Finally, the data used in the analysis of this

paper were obtained from an online survey targeting monitors of a private research company, and the representativeness of the data is not guaranteed. Therefore, it cannot be determined that the results of the analysis presented thus far correctly reflect the situation of sexual minorities (gay men) in Japan. In recent years, surveys using random sampling have been attempted in Japan to ensure that the data is representative, but responses from sexual minorities are few (Kamano et al. 2019). To improve this situation, it is necessary to collect as much data as possible and to discuss the problems (inequality) surrounding sexual minorities.

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we examined whether the determinants of happiness that have been discussed in general happiness research (which does not take sexual minorities into account) also apply to sexual minorities, using data from an online survey of gay and heterosexual men in Japan. The analysis revealed that gay men have fewer factors that enhance their sense of well-being compared to heterosexual men, and that the foundation for enhancing their sense of well-being is weak; this is the answer to the research question. There are no studies on the well-being of sexual minorities in Japan, and the data are not representative. However, the discussion in this paper is significant in that it clarifies a part of the unfair social situation in which they (sexual minorities) find themselves.

To improve this situation, it is necessary to eliminate inequalities and to change prevalent attitudes toward government and administrative services for sexual minorities in Japan. In particular, in terms of the former, Japan is lagging behind many other countries, and it is not impossible to realize it only in Japan, so it is necessary to take immediate action.

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